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**POETRY'S REVIVAL: KENNETH REXROTH AND THE SAN FRANCISCO
RENAISSANCE**

By

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ABSTRACT

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This dissertation examines Kenneth Rexroth's cultural vision, a vision that included the idea of a poetry renaissance, but that also saw an enlivened poetry scene as the foundation of a new, alternative culture in the post-World War II era. Rexroth saw the poetry reading as an avenue for reintegrating the "religious experience" of humanity into a moribund culture, and it is the comprehensiveness of his vision that sets him apart from the Beats and the philosophies their writings would seem to espouse.

I would like to dedicate this dissertation with gratitude to Dr. David T. Bailey, my intellectual mentor; to my parents, Thomas and Mary Van Dyke, who never ceased to encourage me; to my in-laws, Gary and Betsy Clark, who opened their home to us when we needed it; and finally to Beth, Caleb and Emma, who endured too many lonely evenings.

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INTRODUCTION

"We have met to preserve the minimum conditions under which creative work is possible. We have not met to form a literary school or to persuade each other of the advisability of our individual techniques. We have not met to discuss Proletarian art, Surrealism, or heroic couplets. As writers we can make a significant gesture of defiance in the faces of those who are trying to remove America from the civilized world. But alone we cannot do very much else."
(Kenneth Rexroth, "The Function of Poetry and the Place of the Poet in Society," Address to the Conference of Western Writers in San Francisco, November, 1936)

"As an art, literature is the organization of words to give pleasure; through them it elevates and transforms experience; through them it functions in society as a continuing symbolic criticism of values." (Rexroth, "The Art of Literature," *The Encyclopedia Britannica*, 15th Edition, 1974)

In the 1940's and 1950's, Kenneth Rexroth served as the intellectual and social facilitator of the San Francisco Poetry Renaissance. This fact has often been acknowledged, but never fully explored [1]. Without Rexroth's presence in the Bay area from the late 1920's onward, the ground would never have been prepared for any sort of literary and cultural flowering in the post-World War II era. Moreover, the Renaissance cannot be fully understood if not seen as largely the result of his careful nurturing of a cultural agenda through writing, organization, and intellectual mentorship. Yet the Renaissance itself did not fulfill the full scope of Rexroth's enduring cultural vision. In fact, in many ways it fell far short.

This study is an exploration of that cultural vision; the way in which it was aligned with certain long-standing currents within American culture; and the way in which it both prompted, and served as a critique of, what eventually happened in San Francisco in the mid-1950's. Though I see Rexroth as on a par with Ralph Waldo

Emerson and Ezra Pound as a shaper of literary conscience and consciousness within a community of writers, and as a model for the conjunction of literary values and social concerns, I also acknowledge that I am in the minority in that judgment, since he has been comparatively overlooked by historians of American literature and culture [2].

Indeed, twenty years after his death, only a handful of critical studies regarding Rexroth's life and work exist, despite numerous contemporary testimonials to his formative presence. Reasons for this neglect include a growing critical fascination for the Beat movement as opposed to the long-standing history of literary experimentalism and social radicalism in the San Francisco area, the difficulty of categorizing Rexroth's own writings, and the crusty personality of the man himself.

Nevertheless, Rexroth's contributions to West Coast, indeed to American and world culture, cannot be so easily overlooked. As I hope this study will show, he shaped the literary and social environment of which the Beats were benefactors, and kept alive a vision of humane civilization based on deep learning and pragmatic intelligence. He was in the "American grain," yet talked constantly about the dangers of American provincialism. He considered himself at various times either a Catholic or a Buddhist (even while working for the Communist Party), yet was ecumenical in his emphasis on the religious *experience* as primary. He embraced ideals that bridged the cultural chasm between Asia and "the west," and propagated a social philosophy of organic "communalism," even while he lived the life, indeed almost the archetype, of the rugged American individualist.

The contradictions are sometimes glaring, and the failings not a few, but the exhilarating vision of a good society kept alive through the primacy of poetry is Rexroth's enduring and original contribution to a culture that is still struggling to live up to the visions of its prophets and teachers. And although much of this study will focus on how Rexroth attempted to flow within what he perceived to be the revolutionary and revitalizing currents of his time, his will to invest himself in the furtherance of those currents made him into one of the few, unique intellectuals in American history who actually made a difference.

*

When Kenneth Rexroth was twelve years old in 1918, he read H.G. Wells's novel, *The Research Magnificent*. The book itself has largely passed from the memory of even the most well-read literary critics, but its effect upon a highly precocious, midwestern American boy who was less than a year away from orphanhood was lasting and profound. In his old age, Rexroth was to list *The Research Magnificent* as one of the ten books that most influenced the course of his life [3], and in his poem "The Bad Old Days," he associates it with one of the determinative crossroads of his life.

The summer of nineteen eighteen
I read *The Jungle* and *The*
Research Magnificent. That fall
My father died and my aunt
Took me to Chicago to live.

The novel describes the exploits and mental life of its hero, William Porphyry Benham, a character in the classic mold of the nineteenth century British gentleman-adventurer. What sets Benham apart is that he is both a romantic and a rationalist to the

nth degree, someone who has strongly assimilated the ongoing spirit of the Enlightenment, and who deliberately and systematically puts its various implications and extremities to the test.

Wells does not portray Benham as a mere abstraction, though, or as a test-case by which he explores his own pet theories about the state of British or western culture. Neither is Benham, precisely, a microcosmic model or cypher. Instead, the author draws him as a fully incarnated intellectual force within the world of his travels and travails.

In the novel, Benham seeks out adventure in order to develop his character, will, and intellect to their keenest potential. He is driven to question all boundaries and confront every limitation that either culture or nature has imposed. For example, while on safari in Africa, he walks out one night into the pitch-black forest and stays there until morning so that he might confront his fear of the unknown. He finds

“...It is in the lonely places, in jungles and mountains, in snows and fires, in the still observatories and the silent laboratories, in those secret and dangerous places where life probes into life, it is there that the masters of the world, the lords of the beast, the rebel sons of Fate come to their own...” [4]

By the end of the novel, Benham has improved himself to the point where he is able to look upon himself as a “spiritual aristocrat”— someone who stands apart not on the basis of lineage, wealth or class, but on the basis of experience, and of the stock of inward resources, particularly courage, that have been forged through that experience.

Again, for a bookish and adventurous boy like the young Rexroth, with no outward claims to nobility, yet nurtured on classic American, midwestern democratic ideals, and the idea that one’s station in life is not inherited but earned, the urge to emulate Benham must have been irresistible. And whereas Upton Sinclair’s *The Jungle*

was probably fundamentally important in the development of Rexroth's social conscience, it was the impact of *The Research Magnificent* that most accurately predicted the unique place he would eventually hold within the history of twentieth century American culture.

This study of Kenneth Rexroth's influence upon one of the most significant cultural and literary phenomena of the post-World War II world proceeds upon the assumption that he saw himself as a "spiritual aristocrat" within a profoundly democratic cultural landscape, and that the clashing and attempted assimilation of these ideals fueled the energy, and formed the symbolic strength, of his peculiar career as American *provocateur* and man of letters.

Rexroth's original sense of "apartness" was probably instilled by his mother Delia, who alternately gave herself over to bohemian-artistic and aristocratic pretensions, though she and her husband Charles were, in their lifestyle, closer to the aspiring bourgeoisie who filled the mid-sized towns of upper Indiana and lower Michigan around the turn of the century. Until her premature death in 1916, Delia took the young Kenneth's education upon herself, reading to him

"from books on history, the natural sciences, and the lives of great artists and writers. She felt a great urgency to instill in her... son a sense of independence, and implanted in him the idea of the moral value of knowledge, or as Rexroth would later express it, that epistemology is moral. She wanted him to be a writer and an artist, but urged him to make sure, above all else, to think things through for himself." [5]

Delia also taught him not to be ashamed of things Edwardian, early twentieth-century America was ashamed of, like sex. She believed that shame about natural things caused people to transform the natural into something perverted and truly shameful. In one

of the most intimately revealing sections of *An Autobiographical Novel*, Rexroth relates a childhood episode in which a little girl whose family had just come north confided in him her desire for an assortment of sexual experiments that "puzzled and exasperated him." Though he didn't lose his virginity with her, the whole experience left him feeling guilty, primarily because of the stealthy and overly mature demeanor of the little girl. When he told his mother about it she brought out a blackboard and diagrammed for him the basics of human sexual behavior, as accurately and forthrightly as she could. What she told him at the time, and his response to it, deserves to be quoted in full. He writes that she said:

"You must learn now that there are two kinds of people in the world – people like us, and 'common' people. The word for them is 'vulgar,' and one of the things that makes vulgar people vulgar is that they are dishonest about life and about themselves. They pretend that many of the things we do with our bodies don't exist, and if they talk about them they talk about them in very funny ways. Things like this make these vulgar people sick and crazy, and that's what is the matter with that little girl."

Rexroth reminisces,

"What I learned from this first experience was rather the opposite of what I might be supposed to have learned. I learned that other people were not as we were, but slightly demented, and demented in such a way that they could easily become dangerous. And I learned that we, as more responsible members of society who knew better, had to take care of them as though they were sick. In fact, I gained the impression then that the society which lay over against my family – *les autres*, as the French say – was a helpless and dangerous beast that we had to tend and save from its own irrationality. I rather doubt if anything in life has ever caused me to give up this attitude."
[6]

After the move to Chicago referred to in "The Bad Old Days," the already independent-thinking Rexroth found himself bereft of close supervision, and at odds with the enforced conformity of the public school system. Thus, he began to explore the city on his own at a time when the post-World War I Chicago literary renaissance was

reaching its peak. A whole range of artistic and intellectual activities, from jazz clubs to little poetry magazines to the literary journalism of Ben Hecht and others, was beginning to define Chicago as a cultural center apart from New York City.

The teenage Rexroth managed to gain access to a literary and artistic group that met at the house of insurance broker Jake Loeb. Here he was exposed to the type of cultural patronage he later imitated in his Friday evening get-togethers in San Francisco. Through the conduit to culture that the Loeb family provided, Rexroth was also exposed to the primary works of modernism, and to such figures as Clarence Darrow, Sherwood Anderson, Carl Sandburg, Vachel Lindsay, Eugene Debs, Ben Hecht, Margaret Anderson, Eleanor Duse, Bertrand Russell, Isadora Duncan, Sergey Prokofiev, Big Bill Haywood, Carlo Tresca, and John L. Lewis, all of whom passed through the Loeb house at one time or another. [7]

He rounded out his education by participating in the club and soapbox culture that grew up in places such as Bughouse Square, the Pickle and the Green Mask (where poetry was read to jazz for perhaps the first time ever. Langston Hughes read there, and Rexroth himself was accompanied by the new musical rhythms as he read from Whitman and Apollinaire [8]. This type of cultural landscape, supported by dozens of bohemian/working-class neighborhoods, had taken form during the labor agitations of the previous forty years, and bohemian Chicago made the incipient anarchist aware of all sorts of unorthodox socio-political and sexual theories. He learned these, gaining inspiration along the way, from some of the most prodigious auto-didacts in the city, primarily ultra-radicals who had disassociated themselves from organized labor.

In 1924 and 1925 Rexroth traveled to the West coast and to France, where the aged anarchist Alexander Berkman told him that his place was in the American West [9]. This confirmation seemed to settle within Rexroth the question over his his future home. In the West he was drawn to the mountains and to the lack of Anglo-dominance, feeling that he found a certain peace and spiritual center for his soul there. [10] It was also less of a hothouse environment for an aspiring artist and writer [11].

In 1927 Rexroth and his first wife Andree, an epileptic who gained strength from the activities afforded by Northern California's natural surroundings, settled permanently in San Francisco and quickly acclimated themselves. Rexroth soon began to publish his poems in small magazines, and to establish some connections with the San Francisco leftist community.

It was also around this time that he began to develop and refine his organic philosophy of culture and history. Greatly influenced by the philosopher Alfred North Whitehead, and even by medieval scholastic theologians like Duns Scotus, Rexroth came to believe that human society, relationships, and meanings were best forged and managed within a "religious" recognition of reality [12]. This sense of reality did not necessarily emanate from a belief in a transcendent deity, but rather could be found as immanent within the natural world and the most fundamental acts of human interaction. He came to believe that all sustaining meanings and values arose out of experience and interaction, and that these meanings and values contributed to an organic structure which the most sensitive individuals could ascertain.

Rexroth illustrates this organic sensibility in his early poem, "Toward an Organic Philosophy," which records the poet's perceptions of nature's changes, dissolutions, and underlying constancies, made during camping trips in the Sierra Nevada mountains. At the beginning of the poem the camper/poet leaves the relative safety of his fire to wade out, not unlike Wells's William Porphyry Benham, into the night's unknown offerings.

The glow of my campfire is dark red and flameless,
The circle of white ash widens around it.
I get up and walk off in the moonlight and each time
I look back the red is deeper and the light smaller. [13]

He notices the scattered remains of a family farm that had once encompassed his campsite, and finds that parts of it are already being put to new uses.

Now there is nothing left but the foundations
Hidden in poison oak, and above on the ridge,
Six lonely, ominous fenceposts;
The redwood beams of the barn make a footbridge
Over the deep waterless creek bed;
The hills are covered with wild oats
Dry and white by midsummer.
I walk in the random survivals of the orchard. [14]

On the horizon, the moon and constellations maintain their coordinated places in the heavens, while also seeming to add sympathetic comment to the poet's own recognition of immanent loss, rebirth, and fecundity.

Orion walks waist deep in the fog coming in from the ocean;
Leo crouches under the zenith.
There are tiny hard fruits already on the plum trees.
The purity of the apple blossoms is incredible.
As the wind dies down their fragrance
Clusters around them like thick smoke.
All the day they roared with bees, in the moonlight
They are silent and immaculate. [15]

The second part of the poem serves as a meditation on nature's reluctance to allow swift permutations within its order; seeming variations are only minor, albeit evocative, discrepancies in relation to the deeper, nurturing processes (e.g. the hydration cycle). And despite having his senses exercised to a preternatural degree, all of this produces in the poet a serenity into which he can trustfully descend.

Once more golden Scorpio glows over the col
Above Deadman Canyon, orderly and brilliant,
Like an inspiration in the brain of Archimides.
I have seen its light over the warm sea,
Over the coconut beaches, phosphorescent and pulsing;
And the living light in the water
Shivering away from the swimming hand,
Creeping against the lips, filling the floating hair.
Here where the glaciers have been and the snow stays late,
The stone is clean as light, the light steady as stone.
The relationship of stone, ice and stars is systematic and enduring
Novelty emerges after centuries, a rock spalls from the cliffs,
The glacier contracts and turns grayer,
The stream cuts new sinuosities in the meadow,
The sun moves through space and the earth with it,
The stars change places.

The snow has lasted longer this year
Than anyone can remember. The lowest meadow is a lake,
The next two are snowfields, the pass is covered with snow,
Only the steepest rocks are bare. Between the pass
And the last meadow the snowfield gapes for a hundred feet,
In a narrow blue chasm through which a waterfall drops,
Spangled with sunset at the top, black and muscular
Where it disappears again in the snow.
The world is filled with hidden running water
That pounds in the ears like ether,
The granite needles rise from the snow, pale as steel;
Above the copper mine the cliff is blood red,
The white snow breaks at the edge of it;
The sky comes close to my eyes like the blue eyes
Of someone kissed in sleep.

I descend to camp,
To the young, sticky, wrinkled aspen leaves,
To the first violets and wild cyclamen,

And cook supper in the blue twilight.
All night deer pass over the snow on sharp hooves,
In the darkness their cold muzzles find the new grass
At the edge of the snow. [16]

The final section begins with the camper/poet at breakfast, noticing that his usual companion, a hermit thrush, is absent, but that “His place is taken by a family of chickadees.” The scope of his observation swiftly widens to include the landscape as it recedes in every direction, the constellations and planets as they are spread across the sky, and the approach of a storm from the east. Yet the signs of disturbance in the distance only serve to clarify the contemplative calm of the poet’s immediate surroundings, and his own deep connectedness to its “wonderful mathematics in silence.” The poet’s lot cannot be extracted from his organic involvement in a vast set of meaningful relationships for which he himself provides only one possible loci.

He ends the poem with a summation of the resultant idea.

In the morning the trail will look like a sheep driveway,
All the tracks will point down to the lower canyon.
“Thus,” says Tyndall, “the concerns of this little place
Are changed and fashioned by the obliquity of the earth’s
axis,
The chain of dependence which runs through creation,
And links the roll of a planet alike with the interests
Of marmots and of men.” [17]

By extension, drawing on the basic historiographical models of such historians as Arnold Toynbee and Oswald Spengler, Rexroth gradually accepted the idea that whole cultures were organic phenomena, that they lived or died dependant on the connection between their ways of living and the essentially religious apprehension of reality described above. Though Toynbee and Spengler can be taken to task for certain

inaccuracies in their use of evidence, intellectuals like Rexroth found their fundamental intuition to be necessary for the maintenance of any sort of cultural hope in an age of world war [18]. If culture was not an organic phenomenon, then mankind was truly without hope.

As Depression loomed, Rexroth was already fully aware that Capitalism did not nurture the religious sensibility required for cultural health, and he had a notion that Communism also would fail in this regard. Throughout the 1930's, even as he worked for the Communist Party (1930-38), Rexroth maintained a basically non-ideological view of culture and history. As shown in a series of letters to the poet Louis Zukofsky, he was also beginning to throw off the romance of the proletariat and to regard poets as the true forces for creating and maintaining organic health within a culture or community, since they were more likely than anyone else to recognize organic connections and find values within the immanence of that reality [19]. Then, if poets could somehow capture the public sphere, they could also maintain a religious sensibility which allowed life's meanings to cohere. For Rexroth, the alternative was the growth of a superstructure of values that would ultimately disintegrate all life-sustaining relationships.

As America became involved in the war against Hitler's Germany in the late 1930's, Rexroth cut his ties with the Communist Party and became more of an explicit pacifist and anarchist, seeing the war as the final evidence that states were inevitably imperialistic, war-like, and unconcerned about the fate of the masses.

It was also at this time that his own poetry gained its maturity, leaving behind cubist, Objectivist and surrealistic tenets to become more clearly a poetry of direct

expression, the lucid communication of his own sensibility and experience. In 1940 he published his first book of poems, *In What Hour*, which proved to be a major contribution, along with the works of Robinson Jeffers and Henry Miller, to the developing idea of a West Coast literary aesthetic. In fact, in 1984 poet Robert Hass acknowledged Rexroth's influence on his own work and made the spectacular claim that *In What Hour* "invented the culture of the West Coast." [20]

I disagree with critic Michael Davidson's assessment that Rexroth's poetry after World War II was primarily a poetry of elegy [21]. An elegaic tone perhaps gauzes the bulk of it, yet that tone is counter-balanced by a spark of optimism and hope for the future arising out of the consistent reference to nature's immutable and organic "orders of being." As seen in his long poem, *The Phoenix and the Tortoise*, Rexroth considered poetry to be the preeminent expression of experience, the assimilator of past and present in a form that allowed sensibility to be the ultimate arbiter of reality. This poem links together lyrics that are in turn imagistic/narrative, with those that are almost purely philosophical/abstract, a form in which Rexroth presents his own personality, alternatively relating his experience, and then his formulation of that experience, within a general philosophy of life.

The effect, when successful, is a fusion of philosophy and experience into the ideal integration of insight and action, thought and life. Additionally, he creates a meta-narrative concerning the possibilities of poetry for having a transformative effect upon history. The following fragment can serve as a condensation of the entire work's structure and tone.

And I,
Walking by the viscid, menacing
Water, turn with my heavy heart
In my baffled brain, Plutarch's page—
The falling light of the Spartan
Heroes in the late Hellenic dusk—
Agis, Cleomenes—this poem
Of the phoenix and the tortoise—
Of what survives and what perishes,
And how, of the fall of history
And waste of fact—on the crumbling
Edge of a ruined polity
That washes away in an ocean
Whose shores are all washing into death.

A group of terrified children
Has just discovered the body
Of a Japanese sailor bumping
In a snarl of kelp in a tidepool.
While the crowd collects, I stand, mute
As he, watching his smashed ribs breathe
Of the life of the ocean, his white
Torn bowels braid themselves with the kelp;
And, out of his drained grey flesh, he
Watches me with open hard eyes
Like small, indestructable animals—
Me—who stand here on the edge of death,
Seeking the continuity,
The germ plasm, of history,
The epic's lyric absolute.

What happened, and what is remembered—
Or—history is the description
Of those forms of man's activity
Where value survives at the lowest
Level necessary to insure
Temporal continuity.
Or "as the Philosopher says,"
The historian differs from
The poet in this: the historian
Presents what did happen, the poet,
What might happen. For this reason
Poetry is more philosophic
Than history, and less trivial.

Poetry presents generalities,
History merely particulars.
So action is generalized
Into what an essential person
Must do by virtue of his essence—
Acting in an imaginary
Order of being, where existence
And essence, as in the Deity
Of Aquinas, fuse in pure act.
What happens in the mere occasion
To human beings is recorded
As an occurrence in the gulf
Between essence and existence—
An event of marginal content. [22]

During the war, Rexroth used his accumulated associations in the Bay area to serve the cause of conscientious objectors. He himself applied as a C.O., stating in a letter to the local draft board that

“I am opposed to conscription on moral grounds. It is a violation of what, very likely, is the sole important contribution of western civilization to the human race, the freedom of the individual, to use the words of Kropotkin or Voltaire, [or] the inviolability of the individual soul, to use the words of Christian theology.” [23]

He went to work at a psychiatric hospital, and also began to form anarchist/pacifist discussion groups in the city while harboring draft dodgers. Along with numerous anarchist texts, Rexroth read the works of Christian and Buddhist mystics in greater depth during this time, and was very impressed by the work of religiously based pacifist groups, especially the Quakers, who strengthened his bias towards communal models that grew out of a religious sense of reality. The Quakers he knew echoed his own organicism in their belief that every manifestation of life had a sacramental, irreducible meaning and value in relation to every other manifestation, and that to kill a

fellow human being was to inject an element of murder throughout a myriad of social relationships [24].

Many of the later participants in the San Francisco renaissance came out of the CO camps scattered throughout the Pacific Northwest. Several, including poet William Everson, had met Rexroth during furlough trips to the city and were taken with his air of cultural authority. Despite several fallings-out, Everson always claimed that Rexroth was the crucial figure in the coalescing of San Francisco's cultural mix into a significant cultural movement [25].

After the war Rexroth's own literary reputation finally solidified, also. He went on reading trips to the East Coast, and won Guggenheim Fellowships that allowed him to travel extensively throughout Europe for the first time. These travels would later become the subject and substance of his long poem "The Dragon and the Unicorn." But from the standpoint of his effect on San Francisco culture, the most important activities Rexroth undertook in the post-war period happened on Friday nights at his home on Scott Street.

Rexroth's Friday night at-homes occurred in 1946-47, and again in the early to mid-1950's. These primarily were events that gave the host the opportunity to give lengthy monologues on poetry, anarcho-pacifism, religion, or whatever else happened to pass through his mind. But there were also occasional reading lists that invitation-only participants were expected to be able to discuss. Some of the more prominent Bay area citizens who attended these get-togethers were Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Philip Lamantia, Ruth Witt-Diamant, Robert Duncan, William Everson, Thomas Parkinson, and later, Gary Snyder and Allen Ginsberg. Duncan was to later say, "We were all brought up on

Daddy Rexroth's reading list," [26] pointing to the unique experience Rexroth provided, since Duncan and Jack Spicer occasionally conducted similar discussion groups in Berkeley. Linda Hamalian, who has interviewed all concerned, has written that

"Rexroth's 'salon,' however, had a distinctive edge noticeably absent in Berkeley: a personality and charisma that were formidable. He dominated the discussions and steered them in directions where he could assume authority. He espoused the avant-garde and reinterpreted the classical writers. He vigorously and relentlessly reiterated his opposition to the Eastern establishment, thus clearing the way for the counterculture that would break out in the next decade." [27]

Cotemporaneously, Rexroth took a leading part in a more politically-oriented group that met on Wednesday nights. Those who attended considered themselves philosophical anarchists and called their clique the Libertarian Circle. As a group, they devoted themselves to the formulating and enacting of a viable anarchism, one that would support a communal, non-coercive value-system [28]. Hamalian again reports

"... the group would discuss a single topic or author based on a reading list that Rexroth had developed... There were works by fifty philosophers, political theorists, psychiatrists, poets, and historians. On the list were six books about Kropotkin, the leading theorist of anarchism, and three about the French Socialist and anarchist Pierre-Joseph Proudhon. Some of the better-known writers whose names appeared were Alexander Berkman, Emma Goldman, William Godwin, Bakunin, McTaggart, and Wilhelm Reich. Engels, Lenin, Tolstoy, Lao-tzu, Plato, Aristotle, Bacon, Plutarch, and St. Simon were also included. This group may have sensed a great chasm between themselves and the administration in Washington D.C., but felt connected to like-minded groups in Britain, Europe, and Asia. The meetings created an ambiance that would later help to foster the San Francisco Renaissance." [29]

The theme around which these two discussion groups coalesced was the moral function of the writer. Contrary to certain aesthetes of the emerging avant-garde, Rexroth consistently held out for the notion that writers could exercise a moral, value-forming

function in society [30]. To think otherwise was to succumb to a decadent mood of despair. The writers that Rexroth promoted, whether classic or contemporary, hardly ever were characterized by this mood, or at least not in Rexroth's eyes. [31]

Rexroth exercised another direct intellectual influence in the immediate post-war years that must be mentioned. In 1951 he began broadcasting book reviews over KPFA radio out of Berkeley. Lewis Hill, a former C.O. and Libertarian Circle-acquaintance of Rexroth, had launched KPFA in 1946 as a listener-sponsored FM station that could provide a larger forum for the exchange of views on cultural and political topics throughout the entire Bay area [32].

Rexroth's idiosyncratic reviews, many of which have been collected in two volumes: *Classics Revisited* and *More Classics Revisited*, revitalized "academicized" texts by making them relevant to the concerns of a post-war generation that was witnessing the breakdown of social relations on all fronts, and beginning to reject the values of past. For example, his review of *Gulliver's Travels* asserts that the book has always been perfectly understood by children and "common" people, while consistently misunderstood by professional critics, since the former groups understand the position of the Outsider, and are able to easily identify the absurdities of those in power [33].

Taken as a whole, Rexroth's activities in the ten years following World War II had a pronounced effect upon the intellectual, social, and artistic climate of San Francisco's nascent bohemian, radical and artistic communities. He advanced the notion that an alternative culture must come to fruition, not through mere random acts of disaffiliation, but through a consistent recognition of, and adherence to, alternative

cultural values inherent in the organic structure of reality. The fact that he saw poets as the primary agents in the dissemination of these values is explicitly evident in much of his prose throughout the middle of this century. That is why much of my argumentation in this study will rely on Rexroth's views as expressed in his essays, but hopefully not to the entire exclusion of his poetic oeuvre.

The 6 Gallery reading in 1955 is generally considered to have been the catalyst of the San Francisco renaissance. Allen Ginsberg's reciting of "Howl" ultimately brought national attention to the San Francisco literary scene and to the "new poetry" that was rising to contest the authority of New Critical standards. Events surrounding the reading, such as his refusal of hospitality one night to a drunken Kerouac and Ginsberg, have caused some critics to see Rexroth as merely a jealous, cranky, even "square," holdover from an earlier era [34]. Part of the motivation for this study is to subvert that assumption and to propose, at least by inference, a revisionary reading of the 6 Gallery reading's cultural importance.

By the 1950's, Rexroth's cultural vision included the contention that organized religion had failed to provide a way out of cultural disintegration, being dominated by either the claustrophobic sensibility described above, or by a shallow, compromised and self-serving reaction to it; that philosophy had foundered upon the same epistemological skepticism, losing its ability to speak to people about the practical problems of life in meaningful terms; and that ideological politics had proven equally bankrupt on an even more massive scale. For Rexroth in the post-war period, the only hope for a revival of

essential values and experience lay with poetry, and with a poetry that could build upon what happened at the Six Gallery on the night of October 13, 1955. It would be a poetry that was capable of invoking more than protest, and even more than prophecy; a poetry that in its highest manifestations would also be the intense communication of an integrated and fully conscious personality, talking to others who were becoming so.

In the subsequent chapters I attempt to elucidate the various vectors that fed into Rexroth's vision of a revolutionary and integrative cultural renaissance. His advocacy of "jazz poetry" readings revealed his hope for creating an avant-garde art form that would be accessible to both the academy and the masses, while still promoting the values of the alternative culture. His grand historical vision allowed him to see the flow of time in terms of "spiritual epochs," the waxing and waning of organic cultures. His sense of place allowed him to imagine why San Francisco was the only possible place for this poetry renaissance to occur in the post-war world. His religious anarchism fueled a political vision that was not tied to twentieth century ideologies. And his relationship to the Beat movement, the movement that became the central emblem of the San Francisco renaissance, reveals the true scope of his radical vision.

INTRODUCTION NOTES

1. Some of the better studies on Rexroth are Linda Hamalian's biography, which leaves a bitter taste in the mouth on account of its detailing of Rexroth's treatment of the women in his life; Lee Bartlett's early general study of Rexroth's poetry; Donald Gutierrez's more recent analysis of the short poems; and Morgan Gibson's *Revolutionary Rexroth, Poet of East-West Wisdom*, which provides a good introduction to the philosophical concerns of Rexroth's work.
2. Even historians of the San Francisco Renaissance have treated Rexroth in a cursory, obligatory manner. The most outstanding example of this is Warren G. French's *The San Francisco Renaissance, 1955-1960*. French treats Rexroth as if he were a mere nuisance to the larger cultural goals of the Beats.
3. In the December 12, 1962 edition of *The Christian Century* responded to the editors' request for a list of the 10 most influential books in his life. His list included *The Research Magnificent* by H.G. Wells, *Mutual Aid* by Petr Kropotkin, *Tao Te Ching*, by Lao-Tzu, *Science and the Modern World* by Alfred North Whitehead, *Paideia* by Werner Jaeger, *The Iliad* by Homer, *Ethics* by Aristotle, the writings of Frederick von Hugel, the poems of Tu Fu, and the writings of Michel de Montaigne.
4. H.G. Wells, *The Research Magnificent*, (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1915), 51.
5. Linda Hamalian, *A Life of Kenneth Rexroth*, (New York: W.W. Norton, 1992), 6.
6. Kenneth Rexroth, *An Autobiographical Novel*, (Santa Barbara: Ross-Erikson, Inc., Publishers, 1982), 35-37.
7. Hamalian, 14.
8. Ibid., 18.
9. Ibid., 39.
10. Ibid., 35-40.
11. Ibid., 44.
12. Ibid., 58-59.
13. Rexroth, *Kenneth Rexroth: Selected Poems*, (New York: New Directions Books, 1984), 7.
14. Ibid., 8.
15. Ibid., 8.
16. Ibid., 8-9.
17. Ibid., 10.
18. Some of the most disparate intellectuals turned to Spengler and Toynbee for insights that led to creative breakthroughs. For example, Ludwig Wittgenstein was inspired by the organicist approach of the historians to clarify his approach to the history of linguistics (see Art Monk, *Ludwig Wittgenstein: The Duty of Genius* (Penguin, 1991).
19. Rexroth's 1931 letters to Zukovsky; Kenneth Rexroth Papers, ca. 1925-1979. (Collection 175). Department of Special Collections, University Research Library, University of California, Los Angeles.
20. Quoted in Hamalian, 106.

21. Michael Davidson, *The San Francisco Renaissance: Poetics and Community at Mid-Century*, (Cambridge University Press, 1991). Davidson's first chapter is "The Elegaic Mode: Rhetoric and Poetics in the 1940s." He uses Rexroth as a key figure to argue that poets could respond only with elegy to the devastations of World War II.
22. Rexroth, *Selected Poems*, 16-17.
23. From letter dated July 11, 1940 (UCLA Special Collections)
24. In a review of *The Journal of John Woolman*, collected in *More Classics Revisited*, Rexroth interestingly links together the legacy of Woolman with a Buddhist ideal, stating, "Nirvana originally seems to have meant 'unruffled,' as the surface of a pool, and those whose minds have achieved that vision of peace are unable to violate it by violence or the exploitation of other living creatures. Conversely, the way to contemplative calm is by the path of kindness and love and respect for the integrity of other creatures." The Quaker ideal of the contemplative community thus logically entailed a rejection of all violence.
25. In an interview with John Tritica in *American Poetry* (Fall 1989), Everson stated, regarding Rexroth, "Politically, he put California on the map. He was the first one to take the Western archetype and make an aesthetic movement out of it and organize it... Kenneth had the political acumen in the historical moment – together, he made it believable so that people could rally around it, and come for miles to participate in it. If it hadn't been for him, I don't think there would have been a San Francisco Renaissance, not anything like it was. He's the one who attracted Ginsberg. He liberated Ginsberg, you might say."
26. Steven Watson, *The Birth of the Beat Generation: Visionaries, Rebels and Hipsters, 1944-1960*, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1998), 200.
27. Quoted in Hamalian, 148.
28. Hamalian, 150.
29. quoted in Hamalian, 149.
30. On July 11, 1964 Rexroth led a taped discussion among other intellectuals, broadcast on KPFK radio, entitled "The Artist and his Social And Personal Morality." This discussion revealed Rexroth to be somewhat hesitant about where he stood on the issue of how art and morality were intertwined.
31. In a January 14, 1961 review of Robert Duncan's *The Opening of the Field*, Rexroth places special emphasis on Duncan's mature personalism and liveliness in contrast to the poets of what he called the "reactionary generation."
32. Hamalian, 156.
33. Rexroth, *More Classics Revisited*, (New York: New Directions Books, 1989), 69-72.
34. Again, French is the best example, but even a more recent study like Louis Ellingham's and Kevin Killian's *Poet Be Like God: Jack Spicer and the San Francisco*, makes jabs at Rexroth in order to assert Spicer's influence on the scene.

CHAPTER 1: KENNETH REXROTH'S "POPULIST AVANT-GARDE: JAZZ, EMERSON, AND CULTURAL RENEWAL IN THE POST-WORLD WAR II ERA

"All that we call sacred history attests that the birth of a poet is the principal event in chronology. Man, never so often deceived, still watches for the arrival of a brother who can hold him steady to a truth, until he has made it his own. With what joy I begin to read a poem, which I confide in as an inspiration! And now my chains are to be broken; I shall mount above these clouds and opaque airs in which I live, – opaque, though they seem transparent, – and from the heaven of truth I shall see and comprehend my relations. That will reconcile me to life, and renovate nature, to see trifles animated by a tendency, and to know what I am doing. Life will no more be a noise; now I shall see men and women, and know the signs by which they may be discerned from fools and satans. This day shall be better than my birthday: then I became an animal; now I am invited into the science of the real." (Ralph Waldo Emerson, "The Poet")

For Kenneth Rexroth, San Francisco's preeminent man of letters in the post-World War II period, poetry was the lifeblood of the viable alternative culture he hoped to nurture in the Bay area. His early essays about the San Francisco scene, especially following the Six Gallery reading at which Allen Ginsberg recited "Howl," emphasized the place of poetry in the process of cultural dissent and rejuvenation. For example, in 1957's "Disengagement: The Art of the Beat Generation," an essay he wrote to explain what was happening in San Francisco to a national audience, he claimed,

"...poetry has become an actual social force – something that has always sounded hitherto like a Utopian dream of the William Morris sort. It is a very thrilling experience to hear an audience of more than three hundred people stand and cheer and clap, as they invariably do at a reading by Allen Ginsberg, certainly a poet of revolt if there ever was one." [1]

It was significant that of all the art forms, poetry was the one that became identified with San Francisco culture more than any other in the 1940's and 50's. There were several painters in the Bay area at that time, including Clyfford Still, Richard Diebenkorn and Morris Graves, who were to attain international recognition. Musicians like Dave Beck, along with a burgeoning theatrical movement, also helped to enrich the cultural mix. Jack Kerouac was primarily a novelist, and late-comer Richard Brautigan wrote experimental prose, but fiction was not the primary ambition of most of the literary artists who were part of the Bay area cultural scene in the middle of the century. Instead, poetry sat at the hub of cultural activity in San Francisco. It had a hold over the culture in that geographical area that was similar to the preeminence of poetry in the area around Concord, Massachusetts in the mid-nineteenth century, a time when American literature was first trying to assert itself on the world stage. In the 1840's, Transcendentalists like Ralph Waldo Emerson and Bronson Alcott were conduits for a European romanticism that prioritized "inspired" poetry among the literary forms. Poetry was the voice of the gods, or of god-like men. It was the elite art that would lead the consciousness of the new nation into self-recognition.

But in San Francisco one hundred years later, the reasons for its prioritization were more complex. First, it was the art form that could attract a working class culture possessing limited time for cultural consumption. Poetry was convenient for those who had to fit their reading and writing around their jobs as carpenters and dockworkers. Second, the strong Buddhist sub-culture in the area also had a bias towards the shorter, more meditative forms of literary expression. For many, the haiku was the ultimate form of literary expression. Third, a groundswell of new poetic energies across the country in the postwar period fed

into San Francisco through the direct and indirect influence of poets like Robert Duncan, Robert Creeley, Allen Ginsberg, Charles Olson and Frank O'Hara. And finally, something has to be said for the element of chance; that it might have been a cosmic coincidence for so many good poets to converge upon one area at one time.

Yet the factor that may be overlooked is that Kenneth Rexroth, drawing from his experience of the previous thirty years, helped to inculcate, within his sphere of influence, a vision of the poet as the mediator of new and integrative cultural ideals, ideals that could restore and build a living culture within the husk of the old and dying one of the past. As opposed to most of his confreres, he did not envision merely a new literary or artistic culture, but rather an incipient new culture in the widest sense of the word, encompassing entirely new ways of living. In his "San Francisco Letter" of 1957, Rexroth emphasized the need for creative intellectuals, especially artists and poets, to take the lead in forming the sensibility of the alternative culture, asserting that

"No literature of the past two hundred years is of the slightest importance unless it is 'disaffiliated.' Only our modern industrial and commercial civilization has produced an elite which has consistently rejected all the reigning values of the society... Capitalism cannot produce from within itself... any system of values which is not in essence of itself... Artist, poet, physicist, astronomer, dancer, musician, mathematician are captives stolen from an older time, a different kind of society, in which, ultimately, *they* were the creators of all primary values." [2, WOW, 58-59]

He nurtured this vision of a new culture by placing himself within the Emersonian critical tradition, by testing the limits of the poetry reading as the progenitor of a new "populist avant-garde," and by promoting a sense of poetry as the facilitator of religious experience, or as that which worked within a culture to restore the values arising out of direct interpersonal experience.

To be generous, American culture as a whole has always had an ambiguous relationship with its poets. As shapers of cultural vision, poets, when not entirely ignored, have been resisted to a much greater degree than have preachers, politicians, or more recently, pundits. Most have simply accepted this state of affairs and have quietly gone about their business, retaining hopes that someday their poems would be embraced by a fervent cadre. Mass popularity has always seemed like a pipe dream for serious writers. The greatest of American poets have indeed embraced their singularity and outsidership to an extraordinary degree. Think of Dickinson, Whitman to a certain extent, Eliot (who was so outside he became British), and Robert Lowell (whose mental illness ironically helped to establish his greatness as an "American" poet). On the other hand, there has been a strong undercurrent in the history of American poetry in which poets and critics have attempted to create an affiliation with the common people and the common elements of American culture in a sort of populist urge. In this context think of Philip Freneau, Carl Sandburg, Whitman again (he was large, and contained multitudes), the proletarian poets of the 1930s, and in a special sense, the Beatnik poets of the late 1950s and early 1960s.

In the way that Rexroth hoped the San Francisco Renaissance might mediate, or transcend, the two tendencies described above, borrowing from or continuing the strengths of each, he revealed his affinity for the Emersonian notion of the poet as the spiritual visionary of the culture. In an era in which men were truly "never so often deceived," Rexroth placed his hope in poetry and the poetry reading for initiating and sustaining a sort of populist avant-garde, not only in the realm of literature, but embodied in a radically

integrated counter-culture. It would be a culture that could, through the medium of poetry, sustain a perspective from which individuals would "see" and "comprehend" their true relations. This is why he initially placed so much importance on the Six Gallery reading.

Rexroth was perhaps the only one of the participants to see the Six Gallery reading as a potential point of "turning" in the culture, the catalyst and harbinger of a new cultural (and "spiritual") epoch in which previous antipodes (authority and anarchism, classicism and organicism, Orient and Occident) would coalesce around a new consciousness of organic social realities. Though he has often been labelled (and sometimes dismissed) as a poet of eroticism, Rexroth's role as cultural prophet and critic, which will be stressed in this study, has been largely ignored. It was Rexroth's essentially historical viewpoint that led him to look for such catalysts as described above within the flow of history, and for various reasons that will be explored, by the 1950's he saw any new catalyst as necessarily revolving around the phenomenon of the poetry reading.

To Rexroth, all else had failed to accomplish any significant measure of cultural renewal by the post-World War II period. Both politicians and preachers had had their chance, and while contributing certain fruitful aspects to American culture, had failed to maintain and propagate truly sustaining and life-affirming values. Society-wide institutional revolution on the Marxist, Leninist, Trotskyite, or socialist-utopian models had also revealed their severe practical limitations within the American context; yet again, not without making their important contributions to the "science of the real."

What set poetry apart for Rexroth was that he considered it to be the most intense mode of person-to-person communication invented by human beings, capable of producing

and supporting a heightened sense of responsibility between persons. As he wrote in his disengagement essay,

No avant-garde American poet accepts the I.A. Richards-Valery thesis that a poem is an end in itself, an anonymous machine for providing esthetic experiences. All believe in poetry as communication, statement from one person to another. [3]

The new social atmosphere produced by the omnipresence of poetry would cut through all ideologies, mystifications, and rigid theological principles. It would, Rexroth also hoped, preserve a pervasive sense of "the tribe" among a society in dissolution. In "Back to the Sources of Literature," he wrote,

"As in the days before the city and the alphabet, poetry has become once again an art of direct communication, one person speaking or dinging directly to others. Along with this change has come, in the words of the poems themselves, a constant, relentless, thoroughgoing criticism of all the values of industrial commercial civilization. Poetry today is people poetry as it was in tribal society and it performs the same function in a world-wide counter-culture. It is the most important single factor in the unity of that counter-culture and takes the place of ideologies and constitutions, even of religious principles." [4]

Rexroth was not inferring that counter-cultural cohesion could be produced by merely rallying around protest slogans in the form of poetry or "poetic" lyrics. In fact, he recognized all too clearly how simple it was to co-opt and commercialize such blatant rebellion. The type of poetry he envisioned was a poetry of *implicit* critique, a poetry that was not necessarily outrageous on the surface (or only on the surface), but that, in arising out of the poet's individual vision, posited alternative values grounded in a mature and consistent sense of what natural, organic relationships required. It would be a poetry in which the vision is subsumed in the craft and the craft is at the service of the vision. [5]

It was not rebellion for the sake of rebellion that Rexroth sought, but rather an utter disaffiliation from a culture that promoted alienation and artificial human relationships. This disaffiliation was to be effected through highly purposive, carefully constructed communication from one person (the poet) to another (the receptive sensibility). The poetry would be populist in its underlying democratic faith in the potentialities of the "common" man or woman, and avant-garde in its implicit assumption that only formal experimentation and freedom could express individual sensibility as formed within a modern environment. The ideal result was the attainment of the transformative "I-Thou" relationship described by Jewish Hasidic thinker Martin Buber in his classic text of that title. Buber's main thesis was that the primary experience of being human involved overcoming reification of personality and creativity in a love relationship. And, according to Buber, when reification is overcome, it effects every other perspective one has towards reality. He wrote:

"Persons appear by entering into relation to other persons...The purpose of relation is the relation itself -- touching the You. For as soon as we touch a You, we are touched by a breath of eternal life. Whoever stands in relation, participates in an actuality; that is, in a being that is neither merely a part of him nor merely outside him. All actuality is an activity in which I participate without being able to appropriate it. Where there is no participation, there is no actuality. Where there is self-appropriation, there is no actuality. The more directly the You is touched, the more perfect is the participation." [6]

Rexroth wrote an extensive essay on Buber in 1959 in which he stated that *I and Thou* was "one of the determinative books of [his] life." One of the goals of Rexroth's essay was to deny the grouping of Buber with the existentialist philosophers who were so popular on college campuses at that time. For Rexroth, Buber was not an existentialist, since he did not share their particular frame of mind.

"For people who do not know the maximum state of insecurity bred in most men caught in our disintegrating social fabric as in a thicket of fire, its dilemmas, like the epistemological dilemma that bothered the British for three centuries, simply do not exist. The dilemma does not exist for Buber."
[7]

Instead, Rexroth said that the Jewish philosopher was fully at home in the world, and that he was really a communist (small "c"), not an existentialist. According to Rexroth, Buber did not believe that human beings could experience any sort of meaningful reality while nurturing a solipsistic sense of self and withdrawing from the Other (people, culture, social possibilities, etc.). Yet neither was Buber advocating a sort of chic "togetherness."

As Rexroth wrote, for Buber

"...the reciprocal response I and Thou is the only mode of realization of the fullest potential of each party. The one realizes itself by realizing the other. *The ego is by definition the capacity to respond.* It does not lie in some inner recess of the person, but is 'out there,' it is built in the fullness of our intercourse with others. We respond to a person, we react to things. True, a great deal of our relations with other men is systems of reaction, but *morality is the art of substituting response for reaction.* In so far as another human being is treated as a thing he is dehumanized." [8]

For Rexroth, the sense of organic reality that the poet must express in order to open him or herself up to transformative reciprocity with others is only attained through what he called the "religious experience." This, he explained, is not some esoteric state that is only available to religious ascetics. In fact, exclusivist attitudes about ecstatic experience were part of the romanticist trap embraced by certain mid-century literary circles, creating a literary ideology of the poet as the existentialist hero of consciousness. Lionel Trilling's essay on John Keats, "The Poet as Hero: John Keats in His Letters," was one of the seminal texts of this ideology. According to this view, the true poet provides vatic utterances, but

only to a select audience that is capable of understanding the poet's sense of his or her own imaginative/prophetic powers.

As one interpreter of Rexroth put it, the religious experience is more truly a sense of the "holiness of the real," available to every human being through an imaginative leap and prompted by a simple openness to experience, or the "You," that poetry is especially equipped to convey, if not enact [9]. To Rexroth, ideologies, constitutions and theologies, though useful at times to a certain extent, too often allowed one to indefinitely retreat from an honest consideration, or even a recognition, of one's own particular human experience among other persons and things. They rigidified relationship, instead of seeing it in terms of the constant flow of interrelated perspectives. At the beginning of his poem "The Signature of All Things," Rexroth attempted to show how this "I-Thou" openness to experience allows the transformative to occur.

My head and shoulders, and my book
In the cool shade, and my body
Stretched bathing in the sun, I lie
Reading beside the waterfall --
Boehme's "Signature of All Things."
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 saint saw the world as streaming
In the electrolysis of love.
I put him by and gaze through shade
Folded into shade of slender
Laurel trunks and leaves filled with sun.
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.
I think of those who have loved me,
Of all the mountains I have climbed,
Of all the seas I have swum in.
The evil of the world sinks.
My own sin and trouble fall away
Like Christian's bundle, and I watch
My forty summers fall like falling
Leaves and falling water held
Eternally in summer air. [10]

Rexroth is not conveying here a description of an epiphany. Instead, it is meant to be a reflection of the poet's own developing sensibility to the reality that surrounds him. It is a presentation, and revelation, of his own personality; not a detached analysis of it, which characterized too much contemporary poetry.

The great Mexican modernist, Octavio Paz, once formulated the dichotomy between natural relationship and codified viewpoints in terms of what he called the *religious word* and the *poetic word*. The religious word is an *interpretation* of experience which arises out of, and is thus dependent upon, the poetic word. The poetic word is that which is essentially a *revelation* of experience, or of the real. When the religious word is allowed to be taken as self-sustaining and of a higher order than that which gave it birth, a reification of principles takes place and space is created for rigid ideologies, constitutions and theologies to be born. A spurious and potentially oppressive abstraction then takes precedence over human realities in the interconnected political, religious and economic spheres [11].

The substance of Rexroth's sensibility, a sensibility forged of equal parts religious mysticism and political anarchism, was his absolute conscious resistance to the growth of

these artificial abstractions in culture. And – in what seems like an amazing conjunction within an American context – he believed that poetry, for some of the reasons listed above, provided the most direct resistance to them in the post-war period. Poetry was that which could, by continuous infusion within the culture, sustain values, develop sensibilities, and maintain the vision of meaningful human relationships apart from artificial institutionalization and codification. And herein lies Rexroth's affinity for the Emersonian idea of the Poet.

Emerson's "Poet" was also the agent of a type of religious anarchism, even if Emerson didn't use that particular term. For example, the "Divinity School Address" was, in essence, a call for ministers to become Poets if they wanted to become true ministers of the gospel, a call which the good doctors of Harvard rightly recognized as dangerous to their hegemony. In his well-known, but surprisingly much misunderstood distinction between the mystic and the poet, Emerson's describes the mystic characterizes him in terms largely synonymous with Paz's description of the theologian who takes a private (or privied) revelation to be universally and eternally true, and thus lives, in a spiritual sense, continually in the past.

"The religions of the world are the ejaculations of a few imaginative men. But the quality of the imagination is to flow, and not to freeze...Here is the difference betwixt the poet and the mystic, that the last nails a symbol to one sense, which was a true sense for a moment, but soon becomes old and false...Mysticism consists in the mistake of an accidental and individual symbol for an universal one." [12]

Thus, translating Emerson into Marxist terms, mysticism is never far from mystification. The poet is distinguished by his continual accessibility to what the "symbols" of nature might convey to him within the shifting currents of time and circumstance.

Symbol, in this sense, becomes opposed to principle, or law, which in the western cultural tradition has usually been assumed to be the sustainer of a meaningful, enlightened existence over time.

In the end, whatever "symbols" are for Emerson, they are indivisible from experience itself, operating as intense participants and shapers in all that can be called reality. They are living, and thus organic, terms of existence; never static, in which case they would become mere encrustations upon whatever truths might be taken from them and expressed. They are also upsetting to all presumptive and reifying orderings of human experience. I believe this is what Emerson was alluding to when he wrote:

"The history of hierarchies seems to show, that all religious error consisted in making the symbol too stark and solid, and, at last, nothing but an excess of the organ of language." [13]

The emergence of the Poet is thus the essential aspect of "sacred history" in its affirmation of *sensibility* over human convention. Convention always refers back to a certain understanding of past conditions and experiences, but may be, and usually is, insufficient to the varied demands of the present hour. It is only a temporary mechanism for social adhesion which easily gives a false sense of personal and cultural security, while ultimately creating disintegrative conditions due to its increasing inapplicability. The true poet, according to Emerson, acts to realign each generation with its own peculiar experience.

"The poet has a new thought: he has a whole new experience to unfold; he will tell us how it was with him, and all men will be the richer in his fortune. For, the experience of each new age requires a new confession, and the world seems always waiting for its poet." [14]

Such a formulation posits *sensibility*, rather than convention, as the basis for a culture's continuity. Sensibility is the opposite, or alternative to, convention in that it

requires a continual attention to the organic realities of the present time, which are only understood within the context the past provides, and are only enlivened by an energetic, and potentially radical, hope for the future. In his somewhat "wild" speaking, the poet may initially create the impression of a dangerous radicality, but if he has spoken truly, i.e., has correctly evoked the organic realities and needs of the present, he will enter into that transformative relationship with his audience in which they enact not only a type of cultural unity, but also an existential unity within themselves as individuals -- a unity of action and vision.

"He is isolated among his contemporaries, by truth and by his art, but with this consolation in his pursuits, that they will draw all men sooner or later. For all men live by truth, and stand in need of expression. In love, in art, in avarice, in politics, in labor, in games, we study to utter our painful secret. The man is only half himself, the other half is his expression." [15]

The poet performs an integrative function in society, then, not by falling back upon conventions, but by trusting in his sensibility to govern both himself, and through his expression, raise others up to self-governance. Hence, the political function of the poet in an Emersonian sense, a sense that found strong echoes in Rexroth.

*

"The beauty of the fable proves the importance of the sense; to the poet, and to all others; or, if you please, every man is so far a poet as to be susceptible of these enchantments of nature." (The Poet)

Mid-nineteenth century American Transcendentalism has primarily been viewed as a literary and philosophical phenomenon. The Transcendentalists' broad cultural concerns, which constituted their commonality, have accordingly been largely overlooked. Yet, as especially seen in Emerson, they were men and women who agonized over the fate of their

culture in the wake of increasing industrialization and technologization. They worried incessantly about what would later be called alienation, or the existential separation they felt had crept into relationships between people, nature, and the divine. Indeed, without these concerns, their movement makes little sense.

Emerson centered, as Rexroth would later do likewise, on the poet, or poetry, as the prime agent or agency by which the culture might be reinvigorated towards an integrated condition, defined as that condition in which each member of society is contributing towards the enrichment of the whole through free and intrinsically rewarding labor that is consonant with his or her personal needs and inclinations.

This integrated condition is undergirt by the intense appropriation of certain common ideals functioning organically to, first, heal divisions within the individual concerning belief and practice, word and deed, and then in the arena of social relations. Such an organic, integrative view of culture goes beyond simple anarchism in several ways. It implies the necessity of a spectrum of ideals to be manifested in every area of culture, and it assumes that individual freedom is not an end in itself, but instead a prerequisite for the attainment of "natural" and mutually sustaining human relationships. One primary metaphor for this might be that of the marriage of lovers, a metaphor used extensively by Rexroth in his poetry.

Perhaps not surprisingly, Rexroth expressed himself most strongly regarding the ideal of marriage when his own marriages were not at their strongest, as if he were calling back the ideal in order to give himself hope in the midst of dissolution, a situation that mirrored his relationship to the culture as a whole. "She Is Away" shows very clearly his

idealism towards marriage, as a union of free individuals resulting in the awakening to a
integral truth.

All night I lay awake beside you,
Leaning on my elbow, watching your
Sleeping face, that face whose purity
Never ceases to astonish me.
I could not sleep. But I did not want
Sleep nor miss it. Against my body,
Your body lay like a warm soft star.
How many nights I have waked and watched
You, in how many places. Who knows?
This night might be the last one of all.
As on so many nights, once more I
Drank from your sleeping flesh the deep still
Communion I am not always strong
Enough to take from you waking, the peace of love.
Foggy lights moved over the ceiling
Of our room, so like the rooms of France
And Italy, rooms of honeymoon,
And gave your face an ever changing
Speech, the secret communication
Of untellable love. I knew then,
As your secret spoke, my secret self,
The blind bird, hardly visible in
An endless web of lies. And I knew
The web too, its every knot and strand,
The hidden crippled bird, the terrible web.
Towards the end of night, as trucks rumbled
In the streets, you stirred, cuddled to me,
And spoke my name. Your voice was the voice
Of a girl who had never known loss
Of love, betrayal, mistrust, or lie.
And later you turned again and clutched
My hand and pressed it to your body.
Now I know surely and forever,
However much I have blotted out
Waking love, its memory is still
There. And I know the web, the net,
The blind and crippled bird. For then, for
One brief instant it was not blind, nor
Trapped, nor crippled. For one heart beat the
Heart was free and moved itself. O love,

I who am lost and damned with words,
Whose words are a business and an art,
I have no words. These words, this poem, this
Is all confusion and ignorance.
But I know that coached by your sweet heart,
My heart beat one free beat and sent
Through all my flesh the blood of truth. [16]

One might interpret the last part of this poem to be implying that poetry is useless for creating the freedom and love that might join together to create a mutually sustaining organic truth. Yet such an interpretation begs the question of why the poem was written in the first place. The poem itself does not create the merging of love and freedom, but communicates it in terms of personal experience. The poem feeds vision. It crystalizes one perspective on the ever-changing face of the relationship. It provides a map of the transcendent by synthesizing the experience into its essential elements and revelations. It also reinforces the truth that relationships of whatever sort are shaped by negotiations between inward selves and masks.

The individual must, though, arise out of the contemplation of his lover (the beatific vision) at a certain point and recognize his enduring responsibility to the vision. One aspect of the poet's responsibility is to communicate it to others, that they might find correspondences within their own experience and thus grow in their sensibility to how their experiences create organic values within their lives. In other words, the poet cannot just create. He or she must communicate.

*

As Lawrence Ferlinghetti has pointed out, the atmosphere engendered by the Six Gallery reading restored the vocal aspect of poetry to the culture [17]. But Rexroth thought

that this development could be taken even further. Indeed, it was necessary to take it as far as possible away from the dominant model, since the poetry of the established literary quarterlies had taken on an unassimilable academicism in the post-war period that was rejected not only by the poets of the San Francisco renaissance, but by American culture as a whole. Poetry in its legitimized forms had become something that was unattractive to even the generally educated populace by the 1950's.

In the years immediately following the Six Gallery reading, Rexroth poured his energies into the attempt to legitimize the combination of jazz and poetry into a rigorous, hybrid art form. He was driven by the hope that it would be the primary aesthetic contribution of the San Francisco renaissance to the history of art. He also felt that it was a logical progression in the history of the arts and the organic artistic expression of a new society. He believed it was a form that allowed both jazz, as the most indigenous of American art forms, and poetry, as intrinsically the most intense mode of personal communication, to reach their respective heights of cultural significance [18].

But even more importantly for Rexroth, it was potentially the art form in which poetry, possessing the attributes listed above, could become available to a larger audience than ever before, and do the deep work of cultural integration he believed it was equipped to do.

1958 was a pivotal year in the history of this project. The initial commotion surrounding the beats – especially Ginsberg, Kerouac and Ferlinghetti – was reaching its apex, with most literary academics situating themselves within an evolving spectrum of negative responses. Anything new coming out of San Francisco was bound to be

categorized, and thus blithely dismissed, as part of the Beat phenomenon, signifying its lack of refinement and discipline.

Yet in that year Rexroth decided to undertake a cross-country trip that was primarily devoted to the propagation of what he would call "jazz poetry." Undoubtedly his escalating marital problems had something to do with his decision to leave the Bay area at that time, but as a serious intellectual in his early fifties he also wanted to take the opportunity to distance his own project from the more spurious aspects of the Beat movement. He had not yet proclaimed his own disaffiliation from the Beats, but this trip was a sign that he was moving in that direction.

Rexroth spent three weeks in St. Louis, giving readings at the Crystal Palace that were very well-received by primarily bohemian crowds. Then he went on to New York to read at the Five Spot, make the rounds of a few television interview shows, and meet up with poets Louise Bogan and John Ciardi, with whom he got along very well. Before returning to San Francisco, he rounded out his trip with his only college appearances, readings at Bard and Dartmouth.

Rexroth was actually eager to present his jazz poetry to academic crowds, in part because he was becoming sick of the "infatuation with the hipster" that was starting to dominate the club scene, but also because he felt he was doing something important in the history of culture, something that should have been recognized by academics as such.

In fact, far from conceding that the broader groundswell of jazz poetry performances had its foundation in ignorance and artistic sloth, he attempted to present it as a validly unique and aesthetically rigorous art form that called for a high degree of understanding and

innovative skill in both literature and music. It was a tremendous challenge, though, to convince the country that jazz poetry was not merely another in a long line of post-World War II cultural fads. Thus, while he was in New York he contributed an article to *The Nation*, subsequently republished in *Esquire*, detailing his theoretical justifications for the form, while also touching on his worries and hopes for it.

At the beginning of the essay, Rexroth acknowledged the possibility of jazz poetry *turning into* a fad, but confidently asserted that it "has permanent value or I would not have undertaken it." He then outlined the tradition of which he believed jazz poetry was an extension, connecting it to the "talking blues" of African-American folk song, the *cafe chantant* tradition in France, and to certain sermon techniques found in "store front churches and Negro revival meetings." [19]

More particularly, he recalled his and Langston Hughes' recitations of poetry to jazz in Chicago in the 1920's, and the efforts of Kenneth Patchen, Jack Spicer, Lawrence Lipton and Charlie Mingus within the form from the mid-1940's onward. His judgment upon these near-contemporary manifestations of jazz poetry was that either the music or the texts seemed to predominate, thus causing the performances to fall short of his integrative ideal.

Then he went on to explain exactly what jazz poetry was. His basic definition was that "it is the reciting of suitable poetry with the music of a jazz band, usually small and comparatively quiet." He takes care to differentiate it from mere recitation to "background" music, explaining that

"the voice is integrally wedded to the music and, although it does not sing notes, is treated as another instrument, with its own solos and ensemble passages, and with solo and ensemble work by the band alone. It comes and

goes, following the logic of the presentation, just like a saxophone or a piano." [20]

He then began to answer the logical question as to why jazz and poetry should be combined in the first place. What was the point? And how were they better together than apart?

He admitted that jazz and vocalization were usually uneasy bedfellows, and that "jazz vocalists, especially white vocalists and especially in the idiom of the most advanced jazz, are not very common." He singled out Frank Sinatra and Ella Fitzgerald for their accomplishments in the ballad and popular forms, but while he did not consider their efforts trivial, he distinguished them from "the musical world of modern jazz" on account of their lack of intellectual content and their "limited emotional honesty." "The best jazz," Rexroth asserted, "is above all characterized by its *absolute emotional honesty*" (italics mine), which is followed by the implication that, just as sentimental lyricists had given words to popular ballads, serious poets were equipped to give jazz "a richer verbal content." Moreover, he argued that poetry "reinforces and expands its [modern jazz's] musical meaning and, at the same time, provides material of the greatest flexibility." [21]

Rexroth's assumption throughout the essay is that neither poetry nor jazz were compromised as serious art forms when they were integrated. There is no laxness nor lack of structure involved, and the improvisation is free only to the extent that the musicians and poets understood how to exploit the inherent formal properties of their art. Such an attitude put him at odds with certain then-current stances towards jazz, though, and Rexroth may have been referring to Jack Kerouac's romanticization of the African-American jazz musician in *On the Road* when he wrote,

"I would like to mention that jazz, contrary to lay opinion, is not just spontaneously 'blown' out of the musicians' heads. Behind even the freest improvisation lies a fund of accepted patterns, chord changes, riffs, melodic figures, variations of tempo and dynamics, all understood by the musicians."
[22]

Rexroth saw ignorance and pretentiousness as the primary dangers to the development of the new art form, since those who were not "serious musicians and poets who mean business" only furthered its faddist elements and cast doubt on the artistic integrity of the form.

Yet Rexroth did not hope to establish just another elite art form. On the contrary, he believed that in skillfull combination, both the jazz and the poetry would be more accessible, attracting a wider public than had ever before paid attention to them. It would be a synthesis not only of two different art forms, but a form potentially capable of transcending the dichotomy between "high" and "low" artistic expression in American culture. At this point in the essay, Rexroth broached his central thesis regarding jazz poetry.

"I think that it is a development of considerable potential significance for both jazz and poetry. It reaches an audience many times as large as that commonly reached by poetry, and an audience free of some of the serious vices of the typical poetry lover. It returns poetry to music and to public entertainment as it was in the days of Homer or the troubadors. It forces poetry to deal with aspects of life which it has tended to avoid in the recent past. It demands of poetry something of a public surface – meanings which can be grasped by ordinary people – just as the plays of Shakespeare had something for both the pit and the intellectuals in Elizabethan times, and still have today. And, as I have said, it gives jazz a flexible verbal content, an adjunct which matches the seriousness and artistic integrity of the music."
[23]

In the liner notes to an album he recorded at the Blackhawk in San Francisco, Rexroth especially emphasized how he hoped jazz poetry would effect a reversal in the tendency of poetry to become the cloistered preserve of academics and intellectuals, a

situation in which it could not become a mode of dialogue between normal, interested persons. He plainly stated that

"...the combination of poetry and jazz, with the poet reciting, gives the poet a new kind of audience. Not necessarily a bigger one [though he stressed the probability of this in the other essay], but a more normal one – ordinary people out for the evening, looking for civilized entertainment. It takes the poet out of the bookish academic world and forces him to compete with 'acrobats, trained dogs, and Singer's Midgets' as they used to say in the days of vaudeville." [24]

Rexroth always stuck to his guns in proclaiming that Allen Ginsberg's declamation of "Howl" in October of 1955 was the final death knell for the English baroque literary tradition, and all the useless cultural baggage attached to it. And when, in the late 1960's, he took a position on the English faculty at the University of California-Santa Barbara, he was merciless in his derision of those professors who were still enthralled to that tradition.

Poetry would live on by self-consciously enacting its function within the "great turn" of culture that Rexroth believed was occurring in the post-war world, in which "the meanings of life change and human relationships undergo far-reaching reorganization." [25] Even a poet and critic like John Crowe Ransom had acknowledged, in the mid-1920's, that poetry as it was then being practiced had reached the end of the road. At a time when modernism was still near its zenith, Ransom observed that it ironically seemed to be killing poetry "because too much is demanded by the critic, attempted by the poet." [26] In other words, the modernist movement's self-conscious extensions of itself were causing it to, in fact, over-extend itself, going beyond what poetry, as an art form possessing certain constitutive limits, was able to bear.

Certain groups of poets that would inevitably be labelled "post-modernist," such as those who latched on to Charles Olson's "projective" poetics, or those of the "New York School," extended the modernist experiment in ways that allowed for new content, or stances of attention, but they produced poetries that were not any more *social* in their implications than those poems of the modernist masters. Rexroth's ambitions for poetry emphasized the social significance and meaning of the Emersonian ideal of poetic vocation, rather than the individualist mental heroics it could also encourage.

But if poetry were to become a social force without degenerating into ideological posturing, it would have to be able to present itself as a public, and potentially communal, experience. It would also have to do so without relinquishing any of the qualities that were peculiar to it as poetry. Additionally, it would have to stand outside the manipulative strategies of most popular art forms. Only then could it become the manifestation of a truly "populist avant-garde."

For Rexroth, all of this was to be best fulfilled in the wedding of poetry and jazz.

NOTES

1. Kenneth Rexroth, "Disengagement: The Art of the Beat Generation," in *World Outside the Window: The Selected Essays of Kenneth Rexroth*, (New York: New Directions Books, 1987), 54-55.
2. Rexroth, "San Francisco Letter," in *World Outside the Window*, 58-59.
3. Rexroth, "Disengagement..", 54.
4. Kenneth Rexroth, "Back to the Sources of Literature," *The Alternative Society: Essays from the Other World* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1970), 148.
5. Rexroth, "Poetry, Regeneration, and D.H. Lawrence," in *World Outside the Window*, 19.
6. Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. by Walter Kaufmann (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1970), 112-113.
7. Rexroth, "The Hasidism of Martin Buber," in *World Outside the Window*, 77,82.
8. Ibid., 93.
9. This is a major theme of Donald Gutierrez's fine study, "*The Holiness of the Real*": *The Short Verse of Kenneth Rexroth* (Madison, N.J.: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1996).
10. Rexroth, *The Collected Shorter Poems of Kenneth Rexroth* (New York: New Directions, 1966), 177.
11. Octavio Paz, *The Bow and the Lyre*, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1973), 131-132.
12. Ralph Waldo Emerson, "The Poet," *Essays: First and Second Series* (Vintage Books: The Library of America, 1990), 233.
13. Ibid., 234.
14. Ibid., 220.
15. Ibid., 218.
16. Rexroth, *The Collected Shorter Poems*, 228-229.
17. "Note on Poetry in San Francisco," in *Casebook on the Beat*, Thomas Parkinson, ed. (Thomas Y. Crowell, 1961), 124.
18. Rexroth, "Jazz Poetry," *World Outside the Window*, 71.
19. Ibid., 68.
20. Ibid., 69.
21. Ibid., 69.
22. Ibid., 70.
23. Ibid., 71.
24. Barry Wallenstein, "Poetry and Jazz: A Twentieth-Century Wedding," *Black American Literature Forum*, Vol.25, No. 3, (Fall 1991), 609.
25. Rexroth, "Back to the Sources of Literature," *The Alternative Society*, 147.
26. John Crowe Ransom, *Selected Essays of John Crowe Ransom*, T.D. Young and John Hindle, eds. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1984), 27.

CHAPTER 2 – THE POETICS OF HISTORY: SOME INFLUENCES ON KENNETH REXROTH'S HISTORICAL VIEW OF CULTURE

There are periods in the life of human society when revolution becomes an imperative necessity, when it proclaims itself as inevitable. New ideas generate everywhere, seeking to force their way into the light, to find an application in life; everywhere they are opposed by the inertia of those whose interest it is to maintain the old order; they suffocate in the stifling atmosphere of prejudice and traditions. The accepted ideas of the constitution of the State, of the laws of social equilibrium, of the political and economic interrelationships of citizens, can hold out no longer against the implacable criticism which is daily undermining them whenever occasion arises, -- in drawing room as in cabaret, in the writings of philosophers as in daily conversation. Political, economic and social institutions are crumbling; the social structure, having become uninhabitable, is hindering, even preventing the development of the seeds which are being propagated within its damaged walls and being brought forth around them...The need for a new life becomes apparent."

(Petr Kropotkin, "The Spirit of Revolt")

"Times came to the point where his radical nature and radical program had their historical moment. I don't think we would have heard too much of Kenneth if that hadn't happened." (William Everson)

By 1955, Kenneth Rexroth knew that any hope for a revolution in the social structure had to be nourished from broader views of history and culture than his 1930s generation had possessed. The dropping of the A-Bomb, followed by the escalation of the Cold War, showed him that the values of Western culture were now entirely oriented towards violence and mutual destruction. If a new culture, with new values, could not arise out of this civilization of death, the end of history was immanent. Yet, even while recognizing the ways in which Western culture endorsed life-threatening values in every

realm of human activity, he was indeed hopeful about the possibilities for the organic renewal of human, even humane, culture.

In the post-war period, San Francisco became one mecca for sensitive young people who wanted to explore alternative life-styles. For instance, Michael McClure had come to San Francisco from Nebraska in the early 1950's, hoping, like Rexroth twenty-five years earlier, to find an agreeable bohemian atmosphere. And thanks in part to Rexroth's influence in the area, McClure was successful in discovering this atmosphere in the North Beach section of the city. He later remembered,

"It was as if North Beach had a kind of dome over it. There you could mix with the old bohemians and the old anarchists and the young kids wearing sandals and growing beards for the first time. There would be little bars where you could sip wine and see people writing poems and playing chess and talking mysteriously about peyote. A touch of the anarchist, of the philosopher, a kind of romance of narrow streets leading into Chinatown -- all that was North Beach." [1]

This quote from McClure also hints at the meeting of old and new, practical and spiritual, wild and civilized that was going on in San Francisco at the time, and of which the Six Gallery reading would be emblematic. It was an event that brought a measure of definition to the post-war cultural flux.

Rexroth himself was reduced to tears by Allen Ginsberg's reading of "Howl" on that October night in 1955. Though he had been conducting, or participating in, poetry readings that were tied to political causes since the 1930s, he had never experienced a reading in which the political, social and cultural implications were so dramatic and clear (at least to him). He saw it as a sign of hope on a bleak twentieth century horizon, he heard it as a beacon of spiritual vision within a culture of advanced alienation. In the

interaction between poet and audience, he also saw the potential rebirth of what was most relevant to him in the traditions of world religions -- the experience of organic community within a contemplative nexus, or what he usually just called "the religious experience."

The precise dynamics of group experience that occurred at the Six Gallery in 1955 were not entirely unprecedented in the history of American culture, though. A close analogue to what Watson describes would be the popular religious revivals of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In contrast to the planned and highly organized revival services that characterize twentieth century popular religion, the most marked feature of the earlier revivals, at least until Charles Finney's peculiar standardization of them, was the surprising nature of their manifestations, especially to those who stumbled into them without having any particular expectations. They were planned, but not choreographed. There were expectations, but of what was unclear.

Many participants in the earlier religious revivals also remarked in various ways that a tremendous clarification of "reality" resulted from their experience. Jonathan Edwards alludes to this in a 1735 letter to Benjamin Colman, pastor of the Brattle Street Church in Boston.

"It was very wonderful to see after what manner persons' affections were sometimes moved and wrought upon, when God did suddenly open their eyes and let into their minds a sense of his grace, and the fullness of Christ and his readiness to save; who before were broken with apprehensions of divine wrath, and sunk as into an abyss with a sense of guilt, which they were ready to think was beyond the mercy of God. Their joyful surprise has caused their hearts as it were to leap; tears issuing like a flood, intermingled with their joy; and sometimes they have not been able to forbear expressing with a loud voice their great admiration, and sometimes ready to faint.

"The converting influences of God's Spirit very commonly bring an extraordinary conviction of the reality and certainty of the great things of religion. They have that sight and taste of the divinity and divine excellency of the things of the Gospel, that is more to convince them than reading of hundreds of volumes of arguments without it. It seems to me, in many instances amongst us, they have at such times been as far from doubting of the truth of them, as from doubting whether there be a sun, when their eyes behold it in a clear hemisphere." [2]

In both the revivals, and the central energy represented by the Six Gallery reading, a potent combination of forces: economic, social, environmental, historical, intellectual, psychological, and [possibly] spiritual converged to create a combustible group dynamics that had revolutionary overtones and, in some cases, eschatological meaning for the participants. Time seemed to be swinging on a hinge, in which "old things were passing away, behold, all things are become new."

Similarly, Kenneth Rexroth saw post-World War II America as experiencing something much more than an ordinary generational crisis. He believed, to a greater extent than nearly any other intellectual of the era, that it was experiencing a catalyzing eschatological moment in the history of its culture. Over and over again in his essays and addresses he described the disjunction as nothing less than an attempt by the young to usher in civilization on an entirely new basis, not merely through attitudes and acts of rebellion, but through a complete disaffiliation from the values and accompanying norms of a war culture, arising from a new sense of reality that left no room for wavering.

Thus, the hopefulness of Rexroth's cultural vision was based on a view of history that was neither utopian nor progressive. Neither did he see the horrors of the post-war world as revealing history to be an abstract force propelling events along a doomed path.

All such views were tied too strongly to contemporary ideologies for him to give them much credence.

Instead, his view of history was an outgrowth of his general organic view of reality. Societies were either living or dying, as they had been since primitive times. The direction of their development was internally determined, not thrust upon them by abstractions such as God, spirit, or human nature. In other words, they created their own teleologies. Sometimes the vitality of a society was determined by the decisions of influential individuals, but on a deeper level a society was healthy if its members were living lives that were an integration of action and contemplation, work and prayer. A society was diseased if its members felt disconnected from one another by forces that originated outside of any sort of responsible love relationship. War was such a force, and world war signalled the general disease of world culture on all fronts.

Yet the possibilities for the emergence of a new society were inherent in the basic human desire for what Rexroth called "interpersonal communication" and for what the Buddhists call sunyata, or emptiness of self, acquired in the simple recognition of one's organic relationship to the Other. Although the outward forms of historical cultures may have been different, the underlying interpersonal dynamics creating the possibilities for health or disease were constant, a part of the human condition. One of the primary motivations for studying history, then, was to discover the varied ways in which societies maintained their organic health in the face of differing environmental circumstances, and to become more aware of the consequences of dehumanization as a cultural characteristic.

Such a view of history caused Rexroth to celebrate works of historical scholarship that perhaps would not have been much remarked upon in a radical literary environment otherwise. His praise for Joseph Needham's massive *Science and Civilization in China* revealed a distancing of himself from Western attitudes towards scientific progress and the meaning of technology. He believed that Needham described an historical society that was integrative in a sense that most Westerners would have had difficulty recognizing. He writes,

"This book is about what the Chinese did, rather than about what they thought...Cultures are different. People do think differently. For seven hundred pages we can watch Chinese locksmiths, wheelwrights, harness makers, well drillers, pump makers, millwrights, clock makers, the designers of mechanical toys, especially flying toys, kites and balloons, all meet their problems and solve them in characteristic fashion, subtly, but obviously different from the ways we have tackled them in the west. As we watch Chinese civilization -- not an abstraction, but living Chinese individuals -- use brains and muscles to cope with the land of China, the relation of work and the most remote speculation is revealed, and so simply and undogmatically. There is a unity of mind and practice that binds together Confucianism, Taoism, Chinese Buddhism, and Chinese ways of using water, wind and horse power." [3]

In such cultures, religion does not have a practical value. It is manifested in, and expands upon, practical values, thereby deepening its core meditative function. Religion only becomes a historical problem when it is an abstract force not organically connected to the daily life and struggles of the people. Thus, by its very nature as an encapsulation of a view of life, religion can either be the primary locus of healthy values, or the prime disintegrative force in a culture's historical demise. In either case, religion is a central metaphor, even a template, for revealing the culture as a whole.

Although Needham turned himself into a historian, by training and profession he was a biologist. His primary research involved finding a union of the areas of biochemistry and morphogenesis, which involved solving "the central problem of developmental biology, that of form and pattern." He focused on discovering the chemical nature of the "organizer," that agency within organic forms that regulated their developmental process. His findings caused him to remain "that structure and function, form and chemical composition, were inseparable and could be dealt with experimentally without the old dichotomies." [4]

The old dichotomies may have conformed to certain long-bred tendencies in the structure of human logic, but were insufficient to explain the deeper realities of process. In transposing these terms into the study of cultures, as Needham was fully inclined to do, religion, as defined above, could be seen as the "organizer" of a culture.

Only historical views that took into account a culture's susceptibility to be being understood through organic metaphors, and that were willing to view them as integrated (or potentially integrated) processes meant anything to Rexroth. Specialized studies that traced the fall of Rome to the machinations of a few greedy Senators were simply unrealistic. Historians of "unbridled expansiveness" (Needham review) attracted him most, because even if they were wrong, their attempts to capture the reality of cultures as organic structures showed a recognition that this was where the real problems lay, as well as the real possibilities for the future. Finally, such historians as I will now turn to saw history as prophecy --not as determinative, but as suggestive for what could be realistically hoped for. For Rexroth, who scattered their names throughout his writings,

they provided a basic historical justification for the emergence of a healthy alternative culture.

SPENGLER AND TOYNBEE ON THE ECLIPSE OF CULTURE

The German Oswald Spengler and the Englishman Arnold Toynbee represented in the twentieth century the apparent culmination of a long historiographical tradition. As epic historians of culture they are perhaps better known for their ambitions rather than their accomplishments, yet they were still part of a line that stretched back to Thucydides and Herodotus. Each participant in this line, whether it has been Gibbon, Hegel, or even Francis Parkman, has conceived of their place in time as having reached an apex, or at least a very crucial determinative point, in the development of human culture. Implicitly or not, to highlight this juncture of history and fate was the primary motive behind their projects.

I say that Spengler and Toynbee represented an apparent culmination of this tradition because, unlike most of the others, they wrote not about the resources within Western culture that were developed through a time of crisis and opportunity, but about the eclipse of the culture itself. In their studies they provided analyses of history that were diacritical in their underlying assumption of the need for Western culture's absolute transformation into a new society based on new values and new heroic possibilities.

As historians, they were not linear or progressive in any conventional sense. They assumed that they were writing for an audience that was disillusioned with millennial promises. Instead, they saw history as a function of "the waxing and waning of organic" civilizations, people-groups not necessarily defined by nation or language but by underlying assumptions, values, and world views. They both owed a great debt to Hegel in their conceptions of a non-materialistic impetus to long-term change, and both, like Wittgenstein, became increasingly mystical in their outlooks as they grew older.

Not surprisingly, more conventional historians have taken them to task for playing fast and loose with certain historical facts, but whether fastidiousness alone would undercut their theses is questionable. Their methods were attempts to uphold intuitions that both possessed regarding the precariousness of civilization in the West in the twentieth century, and while their conclusions may often have been questionable, their intuitions struck a chord with many post-World War II writers, intellectuals and artists.

It is also pretty safe to say that neither would have become very famous had not two world wars focused attention on the issues they were concerned with. Both began writing their massive studies under the waning smoke of the first war, and events as they played out, from the Depression to the concentration camps to the shock of the atomic bomb, seemed to confirm their contentions that a great cataclysmic shift was taking place in the history of civilizations. For those who had not become thoroughly skeptical towards grand systematizations of history, including all who were too young to be disgruntled Communists, Spengler and Toynbee were looked to for prescriptions

concerning the future. In fact, it was in this role of historian-as-prophet that they acquired much of their allure.

The novelist William Burroughs was probably the most famous counter-cultural proponent of Spengler in the post-war period (Toynbee was too Christian, too British, and perhaps too pretentious for most of the younger writers). In *On the Road*, Jack Kerouac alludes to the fact that Burroughs pushed Spengler on everyone within his circle of influence, and some of the historical or cultural themes that *On the Road* seems to contain are Spenglerian in tone, such as the obvious portrayal of African-Americans as the creative *fellaheen* who are crucial to the salvation, or reinvigoration, of the American soul.

Kenneth Rexroth never explicitly admitted to a captivation for such historians of dark (or in Toynbee's case, semi-dark) apocalypse and renewal, but many of his essays and poems strongly imply that he considered these historians' general approach to the history of culture as but statements of the obvious. In an interview with Linda Hamalian, Robert Duncan relayed his impression that

"...Kenneth had a strong historical imagination, and could get very excited, for example, about Toynbee. He liked to see history in terms of cycles, and he had a strong identification with certain periods, the Hellenistic in particular, which I also have. This is what I have in common with Gary Snyder and Kenneth Rexroth, this business of relating to history in terms of spiritual epochs that we relate to and other ones that we are antagonistic to. It's all very post-Spenglerian." [5]

The idea of history being divided into "spiritual epochs," with the possibility that they could be a part of ushering in a more habitable one than they were presently living in, energized cultural radicals like Snyder, Duncan and Rexroth. This is the only

explanation for why anarchists and pacifists would be favorable to such historicans, since Spengler's Neitzschian overtones can potentially be used to justify militarism, and Toynbee's laws of the growth of civilizations could justify imperialism in the way similar to that in which Marx could be charged with justifying the historical emergence of the bourgeoisie. These are perhaps the unavoidable dangers of trying to discern cycles of recurrence in a history filled with militarism and imperialism, though, which is not in itself a wrong-headed or immoral project [6].

Another deep attraction of Spengler and Toynbee for intellectuals with broad cultural concerns was that their formulations seemed to resonate in an analogous way with modern developments in philosophy and science. In most cases, a transposition of terms across disciplines and cultural expressions is even possible, showing underlying connections that speak to the existence of a cultural *Weltanschauung*. For example, in the introduction to his *Decline of the West*, Spengler writes:

"Civilization is the inevitable *destiny* of the Culture, and in this principle we obtain the viewpoint from which the deepest and gravest problems of historical morphology become capable of solution. Civilizations are the most external and artificial states of which a species of developed humanity is capable. They are a conclusion, the thing-become succeeding the thing-becoming, death following life, petrifying world-city following mother-earth and the spiritual childhood of Doric and Gothic. They are an end, irrevocable, yet by inward necessity reached again and again." [7]

I have already touched upon how Joseph Needham, along with such prominent theorists as Ross Harrison and Paul Weiss, were revolutionizing biological assumptions with their organicist views, but even more remarkable was the way in which these experimental findings in biology were finding resonance with certain developments within speculative philosophy.

For example, Spengler's basic formulation, stated above, positing civilizations as behaving according to organic laws of process, is a rough transposition of Alfred North Whitehead's general philosophical terms. Interestingly, Whitehead was one of the few philosophers Rexroth pronounced an affinity for as a thinker, possibly because of the way in which Whitehead collapsed metaphysics and science into a general view of reality that supported both radicalism and spirituality.

In *Science and the Modern World*, Whitehead challenged the fundamental assumptions concerning matter, space and time as handed down to the twentieth century from Plato, Aristotle, Newton, Locke, Descartes and Kant. But he challenged these assumptions without radically disparaging the results of the science which was based on them. He said that science had advanced by being based on these presuppositions, but that for it to advance any further it must modify or discard them, since in reality it has moved beyond the "common sense" implied in them and has pointed out their inherent fallacies. [8]

For an example of how theory was outrunning common sense, according to Whitehead, the notion of "position in space" as indicating a stable and enduring quality of matter (and the presuppositions about existence and motion contained in this notion) is undermined by the revelations of quantum physics, in which the behavior of electrons requires for its explanation "some theory of discontinuous existence." [9] Philosophy began to point to this dilemma in the doctrine of materialism with Hume's skepticism. If one begins to doubt the common-sense relationship between cause and effect, one must also begin to doubt the methods and reasoning involved in traditional science. Science

encountered a further threat with the idealism of Berkeley and the European Romantics, in which matter was etherealized. Whitehead acknowledged both the importance and the limitations of these developments in philosophy as he developed his own theory of process.

When process replaces traditional materialism as the basis of scientific thought, cause and effect is retained but within a much more complex paradigm. In fact, under Whitehead's theory, to account for every explanatory factor in even the simplest event would be infinitely complex, yet by acknowledging this complexity one is able to retain both the matter-of-fact existence materialism gives and the values idealism enables to exist. Traditional science side-stepped this complexity by assuming that "the essence of matter is spatial extension," and by assuming a mind/body dualism that set out fundamental principles "as to presuppose independently existing substances with simple location in the community of temporal durations, and in the case of bodies, with simple location in the community of spatial extensions. Those principles lead straight to the theory of a materialistic, mechanistic nature, surveyed by cogitating minds." [10]

To Whitehead, these presuppositions predict the systems of Berkeley, Hume and Kant, along with modern philosophy's preoccupation with epistemology, as these are indicative of a limited grasp of the interrelationships between knowledge and experience, mind and nature. Ultimately, these interrelationships are so complex and complete that the dualistic distinctions are, at best, merely convenient, and in most cases, dangerously misleading. Whitehead has appealed to poets because of his fluid and trans-formative sense of reality, but his greatest appeal to Rexroth lay in his indictment of Western

culture's "epistemological problem," its tendency to know things in terms of their discrete object-ness instead of in fluid relational terms. This problem infected every area of the culture, including its historical sense, and part of the ambitions of Spengler and Toynbee involved a radical critique of traditional historiographical presuppositions in order to clear away misleading distinctions.

Whitehead said that philosophy's role was to help us to critically revise our "modes of abstraction," our logical ways of thinking about our experience. We cannot think without abstracting, but there are ways of thinking, taught to us by philosophy, that can help us come closer to reality in our presuppositions.

"In the analogy with Spinoza, his one substance [the monad] is for me the one underlying activity of realization individualizing itself in an interlocked plurality of modes. Thus, concrete fact is process. Its primary analysis is into [the] underlying activity of prehension, and into realized prehensive events. Each event is an individual matter of fact issuing from an individualization of the substrate activity. But individualization does not mean substantial independence...A prehension is a process of unifying. Accordingly nature is a process of expansive development, necessarily transitional from prehension to prehension. What is achieved is thereby passed beyond, but it is also retained as having aspects of itself present to prehensions which lie beyond it. Thus nature is a structure of evolving processes. The reality is the process." [11]

Similarly, when transposed into the terms of history and culture, Spengler and Toynbee saw the study of history as needing to evolve beyond specific concerns over nation-states, ethnicities, or even empires, in order to understand and identify the deeper reality about its processes. The traditional historiography was useful, but based on presuppositions that a broader world-historical outlook shows to be insufficient. In a sense, the traditional historiographical methods were operating under presuppositions just

as philosophically fallacious as absolute position in space, especially when the narrowness of their purview was considered.

The primary problem, though, with the traditional methods were that they bred a skepticism about the possibilities of deep cultural renewal, resulting in revolutions that are misunderstood by those who enact them and that are, most often, surface phenomena that either don't really change anything about the basic cultural worldview, or mask the deeper cultural tendencies that are in the process of realizing themselves. Similar to Whitehead's view of philosophy, Spengler and Toynbee saw their histories as ways of critically revising the abstractions we use when thinking about culture.

Being neither a professional historian or philosopher, Rexroth never gave rigid technical meanings to such terms as Civilization and Culture, as Spengler does, yet the general view of these historians that societies gradually become wedded to institutions that forsake the incipient values they were once based upon, causing an organic counter-reaction against these institutions, was an assumption upon which many of Rexroth's works were based. By the post-war period, he believed that a counter-reaction would have to be based on absolute disaffiliation and, in order to prove itself valid, would have to be much more than merely political. It must be the "prehension" of a new culture realizing itself organically, or, in other words, the manifestation of a new world view in every area of cultural activity. As he wrote in an essay entitled "The Students Take Over,"

"For the Bolsheviks, the good society would come automatically if the right power were applied to the right program. But 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.

Today the brutal fact is that society cannot endure without this realization of humane content. The only way to realize it is directly, personally, in the immediate context. Anything else is not just too expensive; it is wrecking the machinery. Modern society is too complex and too delicate to afford social and political Darwinism any more. This means personal moral action. I suppose, if you wish to call it that, it means a spiritual revolution. Prophets and seers have been preaching the necessity for spiritual revolution for at least three thousand years and mankind has yet to come up with a bona fide one. But it is that kind of action and that kind of change that young people are demanding today." [12]

As stated before, both Spengler and Toynbee advance the metaphor of an organism to describe world-history "as a picture of endless formations and transformations,...the marvelous waxing and waning of organic forms." The statement of this metaphor in somewhat fluid terms leaves open the possibility that the decline and rise of civilizations, even within the same geographic area, might overlap. In retrospect this might be easy to identify. But what about the possibilities for contemporaneously identifying where one is within the process? Whitehead brings in a conception of deity to provide a directional consciousness, and thus a purposefulness, to nature's processes, but Spengler and Toynbee began their projects convinced that such an identification concerning culture can be generally, if not specifically, made by less-than-divine observers.

Their desire to make such a judgment required their texts to be as bulky as they are. In all of their descriptions of cultures throughout world history, they gradually build an analysis of the general characteristics of cultures in their various stages of development and decline. Yet, at the end of their respective analyses, what they have to say about these accumulated characteristics is necessarily vague. Generally stated, they find that the birth, development and death of cultures are functions of fluctuations in their

vitality, a plotting of their tendency towards dynamism against their tendency towards stasis.

We are left with questions about whether we need to look at a culture's economic expansion, innovations in technology, or at its literary and artistic production in order to judge its vitality? Or do we look at them in combination? What takes precedence? At the end of thousands of pages, no clear answer is forthcoming. One of the only things the reader can say is that it seems that "creativity," broadly conceived, is an important variable. Yet the question still lingers as to whether, in judging the stage at which a civilization might be in its organic life cycle, the emphasis is to be placed primarily on quantitative or qualitative factors.

Both historians also lack a definitive answer to this latter question, leaving us with a sense that a living, or developing, culture is that which is best characterized by a sense of vitality, vigor, creative flexibility, and revolutionary energy in the face of universal cultural problems of survival, no matter what the form and content of these reactions may be. To be fair, they also may not provide an answer to such questions because they are questions regarding secondary effects, the material manifestations of more abstract forces at work. The primal sources of these qualities I have just listed would be left out of the analysis precisely because of their mysterious quality and unquantifiable existence.

Rexroth approached this issue in his one extended attempt to define his organic cultural vision in historical terms. *Communalism: From Its Origins to the Twentieth Century*, a study of communal societies, was more specific as to a community's actual sources of vitality, yet was narrower in scope than Spengler's and Toynbee's studies

because it did not attempt to define and analyze entire "spiritual epochs." Nonetheless, in describing Essenes, Anabaptists, Diggers, Shakers, Owenites, Brook Farmers, and Fourierists, among others, he attempted to show that what all of them had in common was

"a primary emphasis on man as a member of an organic community, a biota, in creative, non-exploitative relationship with his fellows and his environment." [13]

Yet his significant historical insight is that these communities, though small, were usually predictive of wider social changes to come within the larger societies that they inhabited. They were pressure points upon the overblown husk of the larger society and, at times, initiated wider social and institutional change.

"The demand for change in the way of life [as embodied in the communal societies] presses continuously against the blockage of obsolete social structures and, in cases where the power structure can permit it, overthrows and breaks through them." [14]

Religious attitudes and practices were usually the "organizer" within such communities because they provided non-coercive structures within which the "largely inchoate and instinctive...demand for freedom, community, life significance," and a non-alienative environment could be best fulfilled and maintained. Twentieth century bohemianism was an apocalyptic variant on this phenomenon and signified either the death, or the birth of culture, "depending on how the [present] is resolved." [15] In all respects, this seems to be a condensation and specification of the Spenglerian and Toynbeeian schemes.

Religious, or theological terms, similarly come closest to conveying the true sense of what Spengler and Toynbee were trying to illustrate. The life and death of

civilizations are not to be considered in only physical terms -- an expanding empire could be "dead" and not know it. It is rather to be considered in similar terms to those the Biblical writer is employing when he talks about "...you also, as living stones, are being built up [into a] a spiritual house." [16] It is a sense of activity and stasis that transcends purely physical significations, one which makes it possible to conceive of contemplation as an action, or a determining factor in the history of a culture. But the issue is confused, at times, by the historians' inability to talk about such things except in terms of material cause-and-effect, in terms of more ordinary questions that historians are prone to involve themselves with. Toynbee even uses Marxist terms to refer to a very un-Marxian process.

"Starting with the initiation of primitive societies into civilizations we have found that this consists in a transition from a static condition to a dynamic activity; and we shall find that the same formula holds good for the emergence of civilizations through the secessions of internal proletariats from the dominant minorities of pre-existent civilizations which have lost their creative power. Such dominant minorities are static by definition; for to say that the creative minority of a civilization in growth has degenerated or atrophied into the dominant minority of a civilization in disintegration is only another way of saying that the society in question has lapsed from a dynamic activity into a static condition. Against this static condition the secession of a proletariat is a dynamic reaction; and in this light we can see that , in the secession of a proletariat from a dominant minority, a new civilization is generated through the transition of a society from a static condition to a dynamic activity, just as it is in the mutation which produces a civilization out of a primitive society." [17]

Rexroth is much more explicit, or explicit as one can be, in describing his sense of this organic and mystical process. In fact, he rightly places the responsibility for the health or vitality of a culture with the mystics when he states that

"the interrelatedness of contemplatives is a skeleton or web which holds the social body. There is a critical point when there isn't enough of this web. We have long since reached that and passed it in America, and the society goes completely to pieces, however healthy it may seem. And of course the participants in the society violently deny that this is happening." [18]

Yet both the historians and Rexroth would agree that the few remaining contemplatives in the society would be an exception to this general denial. They are those who recognize their own disconnection from a community, and who by their very existence embody a judgment of the society's continuance apart from any interconnected experience, apart from any connection to reality's vast web of interconnected meanings and values. And as the civilization drifts further from its sustaining root system of primary values and experiences, it becomes gauzed over with a skepticism that disintegrates all values and meanings, except those that are thoroughly centered on the lonely self.

All values are bureaucratized and take on objective, rather than human, meanings; or as Rexroth says, all values are transmuted into their opposites. The longer this process continues, the more radical and energetic must be any movement to reestablish social relationships that are, at least from the organicist's point of view, entirely natural. Thus, Rexroth's radicalism was not utopian, but grounded in an organic view of reality, a view which provided him with a prophetic stance from which to judge the perversion of the natural impetus towards sustaining relationships, and which allowed him to conceive of a non-artificial hierarchy of values.

But at this point of recognition, according to the historians, two diverging and competing phenomena begin to occur in the society that is perpetuating itself on the basis

of custom, and through the tenacity of besieged, individual selves. Those members of the culture, usually of at least a semi-mystical temperament, who feel most deeply the culture's malaise, look for models of re-integration in one of two places. Toynbee employs the term *mimesis* in his description of the development of what are, in reality, two competing societies; one is reactionary, the other radical and creative. He writes,

"In a society where mimesis is thus directed backward towards the past, custom rules and society remains static. On the other hand, in societies in process of civilization, mimesis is directed towards creative personalities who command a following because they are pioneers. In such societies, 'the cake of custom,' as Walter Bagehot called it in his *Physics and Politics*, is broken and society is in dynamic motion along a course of change and growth." [19]

The society that reacts by attempting to reenact the social, intellectual and political milieu of the past effects an artificial, rather than organic, re-integration of values and experience. The society that looks towards "creative personalities," those who seem to be living out the culture's inherent potentialities, regains and builds upon its culture's spiritual vitality. Thus, in a seeming paradox, it can appear to be both conservative and radical at the same time. Consequently, the society that ignorantly rejects its conservative (as opposed to reactionary) function, only increases the fragility of its already tenuous existence by failing to build on the dynamic possibilities that past civilizations have opened up for them. Their primitivism, albeit radical, is static, not replenishing or dialectic in a useful way.

Much of the motivation for Rexroth's "Classics Revisited" series on KPFA in Berkeley had to do with his desire to reinvest the "creative personalities" of the past with

an immediacy for the post-war generation. It was an effort in "radical conservatism" that held up such diverse figures as Euripides, Lucretius, Tu Fu, Thomas More, John Bunyan, Lao Tzu, St. Thomas Aquinas, Daniel Defoe, John Woolman and Leo Tolstoy as expressive of ideas and ideals that could be put into action in 1950's America.

Toynbee thought that the resources for an integration of a new world civilization could be found partly within the culture's Christian heritage of mystical practice and critical self-awareness. As one of the "higher religions" (to be distinguished from paganism) he saw the essence of Christianity (and presumably of Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam) as a promotion of social harmony and development through the spiritual devotion of individuals. In contradicting J.G. Frazer's *The Golden Bough*, which posited an antimony between the search for individual salvation and the maintenance of social cohesion, Toynbee, the man of faith, boldly declares that the saints of history

"...in insulating themselves from their fellow men,...were entering into a far more active relation with a far wider circle than any that would have centered around them if they had remained 'in the World' and had spent their lives in some secular occupation. They swayed the World from their retreats to greater effect than the Emperor in his capital, because their personal pursuit of holiness through seeking communion with God was a form of social action that moved men more powerfully than any secular social service in the political plane." [20]

Rexroth, both as an American and as a potential "creative personality," by the post-war period communicated and embodied in himself both the necessary conservative functions, and the prospective radical functions, of an integrative new society. In his cultural vision he appropriated what was useful in the heritage of "Christian civilization," such as the Catholic Church's tradition of contemplative life, but also recognized the incipient skepticism that had infected it at its roots. That skepticism allowed so often the

transmutation of love into hatred (yet in the name of love) and of prayer into the rigidity of law.

He also saw that the tradition of religious experience that could be traced through the history of Western culture, considered essentially, found many analogues, complementarities, and correctives in other world traditions, especially those of Asia. The religions that sprang from these experiential traditions may have developed along strikingly different lines due to other cultural factors, but Rexroth asserted that, in essence, the experiences (of the Real, of the Beatific vision, of Nirvana, etc) could not be significantly differentiated, neither in quality, nor in immediate effects upon the psychology of group experience.

In an essay Rexroth wrote while the controversy over Kennedy's Catholicism was still alive, he asserted,

"Of course religious differences matter. But it is important to understand why they matter. Religions are not ends in themselves, they are all means to an end. That end is an experience. Christians usually call that experience the knowledge and love of God. Even these terms are only means, inadequate symbols which represent an experience which is admitted by everyone to transcend all symbols and the very process of representation itself. Disputes about religion are necessarily disputes about the efficiency of means...the religious experience is not a logical concept. It is not even a *fact* in the sense of a bit of information...these are total experiences, not, for the individual himself, matters of statement. Ultimately religion, and religions, are all focused on a total experience of this kind." [21]

The religious nature of the San Francisco Renaissance will be considered much more fully in a subsequent chapter, but it is worth noting that San Francisco, even in the mid-twentieth century, was perhaps the only city in America that supported an atmosphere for what Linda Hamalian has called Rexroth's "homegrown ecumenism," a

primary emphasis on the fundamental religious experience rather than on the niceties of creeds that excluded that experience. It is a large part of why Rexroth felt so strongly about San Francisco's potential to be the center, not only of an alternative American culture, but of a new and emerging world culture.

AN ESCHATOLOGY OF HOPE

I have suggested that Toynbee and Spengler were more important on a symbolic level than they were on the analytical, that they were more important for what they suggested than for what they tried to confirm. Perhaps their most important contribution is that they made heroic attempts to give a historical shape and meaning to a growing eschatological undercurrent in Western culture that groped toward apotheosis in the post-World War II period.

Their studies, sometimes just by the suggestiveness of a title such as *Decline of the West*, stood out as prophetic documents to a restless generation that was increasingly in search of prophets, of whatever stripe, to break through the complacency. If Spengler and Toynbee had provided only variations on the jeremiad, though, only pronouncements of woe and destruction, they would not have been nearly so suggestive. In assuming apocalypse under a non-linear paradigm, they also intimated the rising of a new society out of the still-warm ashes of the old.

Again the terms are vague, and in the case of Spengler must be discerned negatively, but generally, the new society that both of them pointed to would be characterized by the breaking down of artificial geographical barriers, the absence of a

militaristic state in the modern sense, and the prioritization of the free and historically shaped human will over abstract systems for ordering human relationships. Toynbee is much more optimistic in his analysis than Spengler, and his encompassing of both the negative and the positive aspects of prophecy possibly reveals Rexroth's preference for him over the German historian, whose excessive vagueness allowed him to be seen as providing an apologetic for Nazism.

Toynbee, though dissatisfying on account of his inconsistencies as an analyst of the particulars of history, provided Rexroth with a paradigm for thinking about the emerging counter-culture in the post-war years. Would it be all revolt and no renewal? Would it contain a pedagogy within its prophecy? And would it be the new breath of a rising culture, or merely the last bitter cry of a dead one?

Rexroth many times buried his tremendous historical optimism under a crankiness that was alienating, yet that optimism was the ground of his entire world-view. He believed that the history of culture contained the seeds of its own continuance, and those seeds must be conserved in the consciousness of the counter-culture, a counter-culture that would carry on vocations that had sprung up in healthier cultures in order to give meaning to life.

"Artist, poet, physicist, astronomer, dancer, musician, mathematician are captives stolen from an older time, a different kind of society, in which, ultimately, *they* were the creators of all primary values." [22]

To simply revolt against the past in all its forms and manifestations was cultural suicide. Rather, the vocations listed above had to regain their central, culturally responsible, originative functions in order for society to maintain life-sustaining values.

Nevertheless, revolt was a necessary first step in that it gave the lines of dissent a tone of absoluteness, a breaking away from all forms of liberal compromise and authoritarianism.

The sustaining values of the new culture had to be discerned within the past, brought forward uncorroded by the historical stains of skepticism and alienation by critical consciousnesses, and made relevant to contemporary living conditions through the various vocations. Then they would be truly *sacramental* values, based on inward spiritual realities, and able to bind together individuals in the transcendence to be found in the real, a transcendence that, according to Rexroth, poetry was peculiarly able to express and disseminate.

CHAPTER 2 NOTES

1. Thomas Albright, *Art in the San Francisco Bay Area, 1945-1980: An Illustrated History*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 86.
2. Jonathan Edwards, "Benjamin Colman's Abridgement, November 1736," *The Great Awakening*, ed. by C.C. Goen, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972), 125.
3. Kenneth Rexroth, review of *Science and Civilization in China*, vol. IV:2, by Joseph Needham.
4. Donna J. Haraway, *Crystals, Fabrics, and Fields: Metaphors of Organicism in Twentieth Century Developmental Biology* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976), 14.
5. Linda Hamalian, "Robert Duncan on Kenneth Rexroth," in *Conjunctions* 4, 91.
6. Spengler and Toynbee did not help their cause by either retreating from public scrutiny (Spengler) or changing their mind (Toynbee).
7. Oswald Spengler, *The Decline of the West*, ed. by Arthur Helps (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 24.
8. Alfred North Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World: Lowell Lectures, 1925* (The MacMillan Company, 10th ed., 1960), 106-107.
9. Ibid., 124.
10. Ibid., 131.
11. Ibid., 68, 70.
12. Rexroth, "The Students Take Over," *World Outside the Window: The Selected Essays of Kenneth Rexroth* (New York: New Directions, 1987), 116.
13. Rexroth, *Communalism: From Its Origins to the Twentieth Century* (New York: Seabury Press, 1974), xiii.
14. Ibid., xvi.
15. Ibid., xviii.
16. I Peter 2:5
17. Arnold Toynbee, *A Study of History*, Abridgement of Volumes I-VI by D.C. Somervell, (Oxford University Press, 1946), 50-51.
18. L.S. Dembo and Cyrena Pondrom, eds., *The Contemporary Writer: Interviews with Sixteen Novelists and Poets* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1972), 164.
19. Toynbee, 49.
20. Toynbee, Abridgement of Volumes VII-X by D.C. Somervell, (Oxford University Press, 1957), 81.
21. Kenneth Rexroth, "Religion: Unifying or Dividing?" (UCLA Special Collections)
22. Rexroth, "San Francisco Letter," *World Outside the Window*, 59.

CHAPTER 3: "THE MEASURE OF THE DEFECT OF VISION IS VISIONS": THE RELIGIOUS ANARCHISM OF KENNETH REXROTH AND THE SAN FRANCISCO RENAISSANCE

"The mercy of the West has been social revolution; the mercy of the East has been individual insight into the basic self/void. We need both." (Gary Snyder, "Buddhism and the Coming Revolution")

"Every day all states do things which, if they were the acts of individuals, would lead to summary arrest and often execution." (Kenneth Rexroth)

By the 1950s, the San Francisco area was heir to long and still vital traditions of both religious mysticism and political radicalism. Almost all of the poets of the San Francisco renaissance were united around a distaste for the State in its modern form and a general respect for, or adoption of, a religiously mystical view of reality. It was in the San Francisco renaissance and Kenneth Rexroth's influence upon it, though, that these two traditions merged in a culturally meaningful way. And the fact that most of the poets of the renaissance could be broadly described as "religious anarchists" enabled them to produce poetries that were widely resistant to assimilation by the dominant commercial culture, and that had the potential to provide the impetus for a viable counter-culture.

RELIGIOUS DYNAMICS IN POST-WAR AMERICA

Post-World War II America is usually not seen as a period marked by great religious depth. Writers such as Peter Berger, Will Herberg have argued that the nation was dominated throughout the period by a common cultural religion, usually cloaked in Protestant forms, that by and large affirmed the values of technological "efficiencies" and of

unbounded economic prosperity over traditional spiritual values. It was a religious culture that seemed to preach "adjustment" to a society that was "fundamentally good" [1], but that, according to Berger and others, had also abdicated an independent prophetic function and that had denied, in a psychological sense, the more grisly realities of American life. Herberg explains this lack of opposition by contending that

"...the religion which actually prevails among Americans today has lost much of its authentic Christian (or Jewish) content...American religion and American society would seem to be so closely interrelated as to make it virtually impossible to understand either without reference to the other." [2]

Thus for Herberg, American religion was just one more (probably necessary) prop to American and personal identity. Contrarily, Berger asserted that this "cultural religion"

"...provides the individual with the means by which he can hide from himself the true nature of his existence. Religion reassures and strengthens him in his social roles, however 'inauthentic' these may be. Religion thus tends to be an obstacle in the progress towards 'authenticity' as a person. In a word, religion prevents ecstasy." [3]

The final sentence above would have struck Rexroth and most of the San Francisco poets as ironic, since their view of religion was that it was one of the primary vehicles of ecstatic experience, not necessarily in a Reichian sense, but in the deeper sense of transcending the self in the Other through love. Unlike Berger, though, they would not have articulated their critique in the such doctrinaire existential terms, since existentialism as a formal philosophy was, in many cases, another impediment to the kind of ecstasy they were seeking. For Rexroth, existentialism was a logical outgrowth of the dualistic Augustinian and Cartesian philosophies that had dominated Western thought for so many centuries. It posited the Self within an ultimately impenetrable aloneness. Rexroth and Robert Duncan, if they would have bothered to use such terms, would have argued that existentialism was

itself an impediment to authenticity, since it created artificial psychological barriers to intense interpersonal experience.

Instead of adopting existentialist rationales for the relevance of religion, they found religion as religion to be valid on its own grounds. When used as a prop to social, cultural or philosophical identity, it was always perverted, made into less than it actually was. They saw religious modes of thought and action as providing the most significant ways of confronting and mitigating the accumulated ills of mankind. And, like Jesus or Sakyamuni, they found that their reinterpretations of older traditions put them into a position of advocating a non-violent anarchy towards temporal institutions, while stressing the virtues of personal responsibility and counter-cultural wisdom. On this nakedly historical and simple approach hinged much of the alternativity of the San Francisco literary community.

This alternativity takes its part within one of the strongest historical dichotomies that religion in the Western world has experienced. Historians have used various terms to describe this conflict: "Law" versus "Spirit," tradition versus innovation, institutional authority versus individualism, etc. Whatever terms one uses, from the Puritan suppression of dissenters like Roger Williams and Anne Hutchinson, through the Charles Chauncy-led subversion of Jonathan Edwards at Northampton, the Unitarian response to the Transcendentalists, up to the varieties of anti-modernism that arose in the early twentieth century and still exist today, this dynamic has occurred intensely and regularly in the American religious experience.

The San Francisco renaissance undoubtedly contributed to a continuation of the "Spirit" aspect of this dichotomy, but Kenneth Rexroth's vision was unique within this

milieu in that he desired to create a contemplative community that transcended the duality entirely. Individual revolt, followed by a seeking after new terms and forms of personal responsibility, was Rexroth's ideal formula for counter-cultural formation and integration.

San Francisco culture in the 1950s revealed a growing awareness of its own cultural meaning, of its pivotal geographical status between the dominant political structures of Western culture and the soon-to-be pervasive religious modes of Southeast Asia. Thus, to a certain extent it became the testing ground for both the continuing validity of these structures and modes within a new internationalist perspective, and for the possibilities of legitimately blurring the boundaries between even such fundamental cultural categories as religion and politics.

Kenneth Rexroth was possibly more conscious than anybody of this junction of cultural meanings and opportunities that San Francisco represented following the war, and out of this understanding he developed his ideas about the religious and communal functions of poetry that would allow it to provoke and maintain the existence of an alternative culture there. For Rexroth, poetry had the potential to maintain the community of freedom and love that mystics and anarchists had always talked about. It was, potentially, both a mode of disaffiliation and a remedy to cultural nihilism.

REXROTH AND THE ANARCHISTS

Kenneth Rexroth is usually characterized as someone who began his literary life as a radical activist but who mellowed into more of a contemplative recluse as he grew older. This view is supported by a consideration of his hyperkinetic activities on behalf of the left during the thirties, juxtaposed against his relatively low-key existence during the similarly charged years of the 1960s and early 1970s. This standard profile is accurate as far as it goes, but ignores several salient facts about his life, for example, that he voluntarily entered a Catholic monastery for a time while still a teenager, that he was a fairly energetic participant in the Vietnam-era ecology movement, and that a contemplative temperament always underlay his political commitments.

In a 1931 letter to Louis Zukofsky, Rexroth explained that his immanent attachment to the Communist Party grew out of a religious and aesthetic view of life that was more comprehensive than the Marxist system [4], and he never embraced Marxism with the religious fervor of many of his contemporaries, partly because he did not need to fill the same sort of existential void the others seemed to feel. He never threw himself into the Communist cause with the radical zealotry of so many others, as if it were a divine prophetic truth to be accepted at face value and blindly trusted because it was the only description of reality. He also did not accept the mythological underpinnings that were psychologically attractive to many who became militant Communists during the thirties. Arthur Koestler describes the parallelism between Communist and religious militancies in this way:

"From the psychologist's point of view, there is little difference between a revolutionary and a traditionalist faith. All true faith is uncompromising, radical, purist; hence the true traditionalist is always a revolutionary zealot in conflict with pharasaian society, with the lukewarm corrupters of the creed.

And vice-versa: the revolutionary's Utopia, which in appearance represents a complete break with the past, is always modeled on some image of the lost Paradise, of a legendary Golden age. The classless Communist society, according to Marx and Engels, was to be a revival, at the end of the dialectical spiral, of the primitive Communist society which stood at its beginning. Thus all true faith involves a revolt against the believer's social environment, and the projection into the future of an ideal derived from the remote past. All Utopias are fed from the sources of mythology; the social engineer's blueprints are merely revised editions of the ancient text." [5]

Rather than falling into this sort of bi-polar thinking, Rexroth's Marxism was, as seen retrospectively, simply a theoretical aid to comprehending the dynamics of social relations while also serving as an adjunct to his view of history. It was never, to him, "the god that failed." He accepted it during the thirties as the most radical, yet practical, means for improving the relations of production and consumption on a large scale. He saw it in its ideal form as a much more humane way of organizing society than capitalism, and saw it as conforming to primitive religious virtues more than any other system, yet when methods were dictated to him he was not willing to sacrifice to the Party his identity as an independent artist or his personal integrity as an intellectual.

By the mid-1930s he had already been disillusioned by the way the national party in America was willing to subsume the full reality of persons to an abstract cause and to arbitrary decrees. When the revelations about Stalin's regime came out in the next few years, it was too late for him to be surprised. By then, he was well on his way towards moving into a full-fledged anarchism, a political (or a-political) stance that complemented, with less contradictions, his basic identity as a poet and religious mystic.

If Rexroth can be credited with fanning the flames of anarchism in mid-century San Francisco, as I think he can be, it would be on account of his dissemination of the primary

international anarchist writers like Emma Goldman, Alexander Berkman (post-prison writings), and Peter Kropotkin in the various anarchist meetings he was involved with, and even through his KPFA "Classics Revisited" broadcasts. In these writers he found an anarchism that was rooted in human personality, a practical theory for direct action in the interests of an integrated society, and somewhat surprisingly, a radical stance that did not disallow his mystical leanings. They provided theoretical fundamentals for a modern anarchist movement, not programs to be systematically carried out.

The anarchists named above were motivated by a radical humanism. In their writings they seem to be truly possessed by an esteem for the inherent powers of the human intellect and action. They were not all Rousseauian idealists, but felt that the whole question of human nature, as usually posed by philosophers and theologians, was based on bogus a priori assumptions that admitted very little connection between human nature and the social environment that effected it. As Emma Goldman wrote,

"Poor human nature, what horrible crimes have been committed in thy name? Every fool, from king to policeman, from the flat-headed parson to the visionless dabbler in science, presumes to speak authoritatively of human nature. The greater the mental charlatan, the more definite his insistence on the wickedness and weaknesses of human nature. Yet, how can anyone speak of it today, with every soul in a prison, with every heart fettered, wounded, and maimed? John Burroughs has stated that experimental study of animals in captivity is absolutely useless. Their character, their habits, their appetites undergo a complete transformation when torn from their soil in field and forest. With human nature caged in a narrow space, whipped daily into submission, how can we speak of its potentialities? Freedom, expansion, opportunity, and, above all, peace and repose, alone can teach us the real dominant factors of human nature and all its wonderful possibilities."
[6]

In *Mutual Aid*, Petr Kropotkin explicated a theory of human sociability that directly subverted most of the major political ideas of western culture, and that provided anarchists

with a historical justification for their optimism about an institution-less human society. He wrote,

"Sociability and need of mutual aid and support are such inherent parts of human nature that at no time of history can we discover men living in small isolated families, fighting each other for the means of subsistence. On the contrary, modern research...proves that since the very beginning of their prehistoric life men used to agglomerate into *gentes*, clans, or tribes, maintained by an idea of common descent and by worship of common ancestors. For thousands and thousands of years this organization has kept men together, even though there was no authority to impose it. It has deeply impressed all subsequent development of mankind; and when the bonds of common descent had been loosened by migrations on a grand scale, while the development of the separated family within the clan itself had destroyed the old unity of the clan, a new form of union, territorial in its principle – the village community – was called into existence by the social genius of man. This institution, again, kept men together for a number of centuries, permitting them to further develop their social institutions and to pass through some of the darkest periods of history, without being dissolved into loose aggregations of families and individuals, to make a further step in their evolution, and to work out a number of secondary social institutions, several of which have survived down to the present time. We have now to follow the further developments of the same ever-living tendency for mutual aid."
[7]

The anarchists contradicted the Darwinian notion of "survival of the fittest" and never really allowed for the possibility that in the last analysis, after all the chains upon it had been loosed, that human nature wouldn't turn out to be basically benevolent. Instead, as Alexander Berkman writes, they had seen enough, had caught sufficient glimpses, of the potentialities of the strictly human (within inhuman conditions) to make grand generalizations about what an anarchist future would be like.

"Life in freedom, in anarchy, will do more than liberate man merely from his present political and economic bondage. That will be only the first step, the preliminary to a truly human existence. Far greater and more significant will be the *results* of such liberty, its effects upon man's mind, upon his personality. The abolition of the coercive external will, and with it the fear of authority, will loosen the bonds of moral compulsion no less than of

economic and political. Man's spirit will breathe freely, and that mental emancipation will be the birth of a new culture, of a new humanity...Instead of "thou shalt not," the public conscience will say "thou mayest, taking full responsibility"...Life will mean the striving for finer cultural values, the penetration of nature's mysteries, the attainment of higher truth. Free to exercise the limitless possibilities of his mind, to pursue his love of knowledge, to apply his inventive genius, to create, and to soar on the wings of imagination, man will reach his full stature and become man indeed...He will scorn uniformity, and human diversity will give him increased interest in, and a more satisfying sense of, the richness of being;...he will attain...freedom in joy." [8]

In keeping with its non-ideological impulse, anarchism, for these thinkers, was also not a program that could be definitively and universally stated in a manifesto, like the multiple pronouncements of the Italian Futurists. Where Marx condemned ideologies because they masked the true sources of economic oppression, the anarchists went further in condemning every single restriction upon human freedom and the human spirit, except in cases where communities create uncoerced conditions of mutual reciprocity. Emma Goldman writes on the "anarchist method,"

"Anarchism is not, as some may suppose, a theory of the future to be realized through divine inspiration. It is a living force in the affairs of our life, constantly creating new conditions. The methods of Anarchism therefore do not comprise an iron-clad program to be carried out under all circumstances. Methods must grow out of the economic needs of each place and clime, and of the individual and temperamental requirements of the individual. The serene, calm character of a Tolstoy will wish different methods for social reconstruction than the intense, over-flowing personality of a Michael Bakunin or a Peter Kropotkin. Equally so it must be apparent that the economic and political needs of Russia will dictate more drastic measures than would England or America. Anarchism does not stand for military drill and uniformity; it does, however, stand for the spirit of revolt, in whatever form, against everything that hinders human growth. All Anarchists agree in that, as they also agree in their opposition to the political machinery as a means of bringing about the great social change." [9]

The means for social change is instead phrased in terms of "direct action." Even Kropotkin and Tolstoy, the most pacifistic of the radical anarchists, believed in a type of direct action that took place outside sanctioned channels of social action. Anarchists could point to nearly every social change in modern history that brought about greater individual freedom and fulfillment and assert that only direct and courageous personal action broke down the claims of custom and the moral foggiess of the "political machinery." In many ways, the anarchist ideal of direct action was more fitted to the American environment than any other, since the Declaration of Independence and the Revolution were strikes at one very ingrained type of "political superstition." As Goldman writes again:

"The political superstition is still holding sway over the hearts and minds of the masses, but the true lovers of liberty will have no more to do with it. Instead, they believe...that man has as much liberty as he is willing to take. Anarchism therefore stands for direct action, the open defiance of, and resistance to, all laws and restrictions, which lead to economic, social, and moral degradation. But defiance and resistance to them are illegal. Therein lies the salvation of man. Everything illegal necessitates integrity, self-reliance, and courage...Direct action, having proven effective along economic lines, is equally potent in the environment of the individual. There a hundred forces encroach upon his being, and only persistent resistance to them will finally set him free. Direct action against the wrongful authority in the shop, direct action against the authority of the lawless law, direct action against the invasive, meddlesome authority of our moral code, is the logical, consistent method of Anarchism." [10]

Just as was the case with religious anarchists who historically preceded him, Rexroth's mystical religious leanings did not conflict with his endorsement of anarchist virtues, since the anarchist rejection of the church as an institution was based on its historic role as an exterior controlling force upon the lives of individuals. In this role it was rendered equivalent to the State and the Capitalist system. Anarchists believed that these institutions imposed order through physical, economic, or psychological force and justified themselves

by claiming to be the necessary safeguards of freedom. The standard anarchist response has been that "liberty is the mother (and not the daughter) of order."

Rexroth would add a further subtlety to this argument by pointing to the fact that most individuals are already on the very edge of a practical anarchism in their daily lives. Most individuals, he claimed, strived to live in such a way that left them as free as possible from institutional control. Whether true or not, the "anarchist method" aligned itself very well in America with a dominant pragmatic mood. This pragmatism directed American citizens to cast a wary eye upon the few who take it upon themselves to lord it over the many.

To Rexroth, what amounted to a practical escape from institutional control was quite simple, requiring, though, a measure of courage, integrity and self-reliance. In the tradition of Thoreau, one could carry out the firm decision to step outside the system in a personal act of autonomy, or, in the language that many of the churches degraded, one can *sanctify* oneself. One could do this in a religious sense by opting out of the degraded religious value systems of the dominant cultural religion and returning to the simple doctrines and experiences of the primary texts and communities. Such a return to the type of religion revealed in the primary texts, though, would do much to undermine the bases upon which institutional churches have justified themselves. As Rexroth writes,

"The great churches have indisputably compromised the simple ethics of the Gospels, and yet, Protestant and Catholic, they have always represented the Christian ethic as extraordinarily difficult and even unpleasant. It is nothing of the sort." [11]

Rexroth claimed that the ethics of the Gospels are not difficult or unpleasant, because they are the ethics that arise out of a community attempting to live together in

illuminated harmony, or even, more simply, those of a social group which values its own survival. In a review of Leo Tolstoy's *The Kingdom of God is Within You*, Rexroth brushes aside as ironic the criticisms that have labeled Tolstoy a crank, since, as he writes, the religion of Tolstoy

"...in the final analysis...is not cranky or odd at all. It is common. The significant thing is that, by and large, give and take a few pathetic sins, men do not behave in their daily relations with one another as states and churches and even abstractions like classes behave on the stage of history. If they had, we wouldn't be here." [12]

World War II did much to cement the fusion between Rexroth's anarchism, his mystical temperament and his aesthetic vision. It first of all left no doubt as to the potential for evil inherent in the modern state. It revealed to him that the primary function of the modern state was to wage war, or as the old anarchist adage put it, "War is the health of the state." Also, as a conscientious objector himself, and as someone who actively came to the aid of other CO's, he greatly admired religious groups, primarily Quakers, who during the war resisted the government with a sense of purpose that obviously emanated from a core of mystical piety. Finally, he became linked up with artists and poets of a religious temperament, many of whom, like William Everson, resided in CO camps all over the Pacific Northwest. Many of these sought him out when they were released and took a large role in the broad cultural activities that made up the San Francisco renaissance.

All of this led to a crystallization and focusing of Rexroth's activities after the war. No longer would there be attempts to be a part of a larger national radical organization, or to compromise in a sort of "united front" mentality. In a 1969 interview, he described how this focused activity grew out of, but also constituted a break from, his earlier activities.

"All during those years [1930s] we always had poetry readings and discussions and then during the war we set up a thing called the Randolph Bourne Council in which we gathered up the radical intellectuals in town that were not Stalinist. We tried to gather the Trotskyites, which was hopeless. Immediately after the war we simply organized an open and aboveboard Anarchist Circle. We used to have bigger meetings than any other radical group." [13]

I've written elsewhere that this "Anarchist Circle" gradually developed into regular Friday evening soirees at Rexroth's house where he exercised an intense cultural influence; in the intervening years it was known most regularly as the "Libertarian Circle." At these meetings there was, in reaction to the habits of orthodox Bolshevism, neither hierarchy nor agenda. Most of the time was spent working out "new techniques of group relationships" [14] which proved fundamental to anchoring a pervasive anarchist sentiment within San Francisco culture by the time of the Six Gallery reading. About this evolution in the cultural atmosphere, Rexroth observed,

"Between 1950 and 1955, the necessity for organization began to die out because other people could become activist. It was no longer necessary to educate somebody to make an anarchist poet out of him. He had a milieu in which he could naturally become such a thing. But for years, it was a slow process of breaking down rigid ideologies and then creating a different thing." [15]

That "different thing" was a cultural atmosphere in which all ideological political and social orders which did not grow out of the organic experience of the local community were viewed with suspicion. They were seen as imposing an artificial order, and thus artificial values, upon a community whose shared daily life did not reinforce the legitimacy of those values. The end of such an imposition was an atmosphere of social alienation and cultural fragmentation, if not actual death. The alternative was to, ideally, live as if the

community existed in a state pre-existent to all ideological systems. Yet as the quote above attests, this was no easy process.

Herbert Read, the English anarchist and art critic, has pointed out that anarchy means "without ruler," not "without order" [16]. Though some San Francisco writers of the time may have subscribed to the extremism of the latter definition, most, including Rexroth, viewed anarchism as an existential mode wherein the debris of "consumerized" political stances was gradually cleared away so that social values and orderings could arise out of intense and deeply shared experiences, and not just by reverting to "natural law." As will be discussed in the next chapter, the poetry reading (sometimes to jazz) came to be seen as an opportunity for the poet to enter into a type of communion with the audience based upon how he or she valued and imaginatively ordered a realm of shared experiences.

But to Rexroth and those he influenced, anarchism was, most fundamentally, a means to a religious end, especially when combined with the practice of poetry. Anarchism, as a social practice and community ideal, allowed, and was in turn supported by, the attainment of sacramental vision, or, as Rexroth liked to call it, the "religious experience."

LITERARY-RELIGIOUS STYLES OF ANARCHISM

Rexroth's emphasis on how the "religious experience" helped to maintain an organically healthy community and culture serves to highlight his divergence from other literary sensibilities and groupings that were at least tinged with an anarchist flavor in the post-war period.

Geoffrey Ostergaard, in a contemporary analysis of the beat movement, lumped beats, beatniks, and hipsters together as "latter-day anarchists," as individuals who are not simply rebels lacking a political party to focus their energies, but who are concerned primarily with present and immediate personal relationships, and who are eschatological, rather than utopian, in outlook. He said that they were individuals who, primarily through the practice of Zen, sought a type of existential salvation.

This salvation, though, could only be found deeply within the self and its individual resources, since Ostergaard characterizes Zen as "an intensely personal, subjective religion...and one which discounts logic, intellect, memories of the past and present, and fear of the future, relying instead on flash-like moments of intuition" [17]. In the way that Ostergaard described it, it was a type of salvation that has become a cliché of both Hollywood and the self-help industry – "look deep inside yourself to find the key to happiness and success." The question arises, though, as to whether what Ostergaard really was describing were the characteristics of individuals who functioned as popular mediators, and inevitably dilutors, of the primary vision, which offered a more profound salvation and was significantly more subversive of the dominant American culture.

Ostergaard's description of Zen as a religious mode of expression that was primarily irrational, uncommitted and centered on the self explains why it was easily popularized within certain segments of American culture, but on this basis its true alternativity, especially according to Rexroth's ideas, must be questioned. The possibility remains that it was merely the (Jungian) shadow of the dominant culture expressing itself through a dramatization of the self's plight under institutional control.

In order to be truly alternative under the Rexrothian model the beats would have had to disaffiliate not only from those dominant forms of religiosity in post-war America that resisted creativity, individuality, and all that was potentially ecstatic about life, but also those lingering forms of romanticism that ultimately rejected all social values as illusory because of the illusory nature of those embodied in the present society. In their failure to disaffiliate in this regard, they fell short of being true religious anarchists, and were merely literary and cultural romantics that were caught within the vicissitudes of the lonely self within a static society.

Lionel Trilling saw John Keats as helping to create this particular romantic archetype, and strangely celebrated it in his essay "The Poet as Hero...". Trilling claimed that Keats found in Shakespeare's dramas a suggestion of the only salvation possible, which is a "tragic salvation, the soul accepting the fate that defines it" [18]. This is essentially salvation through withdrawal, a stoic casting of the creative Self ever deeper into the Self to escape outside forces of disintegration. This withdrawal leaves open no avenue for entering into social (or spiritual) unity with the Other, in whatever guise it may present itself.

The only meaningful reality that becomes an heroic elaboration of the Self within an ultimate aloneness, since that is what is recognized as the defining fate. It is inevitable that such a tragic romanticism would conflate art and religion in an equation of values, since a religion that carried with it values of a more comprehensive order than aesthetic values would be impossible to conceive. So religion as religion is lost, along with its potentially life-affirming social values.

Ironically, Keats found descendents not only in the beat movement, but in the seemingly anti-romantic and unheroic inhabitants of what has already been described as the East Coast literary establishment. One of the most remarkable phenomena to hit English Departments and literary quarterlies in mid-twentieth century America was a massive so-called "return to religion." In some ways this was related to the general swelling of the church rolls in the post-war period, but in other important ways it was similar to the type of withdrawal from creative interaction with the Other that Keats exemplified. In this case, though, it was not a falling back on the semi-divine Self that occurred; rather, it was the investment of religion with a role as literature's keeper, as literature had already been invested with the role of maintaining a certain kind of civilized ideal.

Since most of English literature had been written within a Christian milieu, Christianity became an essential link to a past, or tradition, that was now accorded semi-divine status in a world of chaos. Partisan Review editor Philip Rahv was one of the most perceptive observers of this subtle intermingling, or even equation, of the values of literature and religion. In a 1950 essay entitled, "Religion and the Intellectuals," he explained that post-war writers and critics were embracing traditionalism, not belief in God; that "the center of gravity of traditionalism *is seldom in religious experience* (italics mine). Its center, clearly, is in the attachment to the social and cultural order of some past age in which religion, in a highly developed and institutionalized form, played an integral part" [19]. Thus, religion became one more means of social control, not a mode of existence in which life became centered around the multi-faceted experience of transcendence. The core of such a "bloodless religion" (Rahv) was inherently alienating, in that the Self continually

attempted to re-enact the past in the midst of present realities that called for creative attention. This is accomplished by a type of measured withdrawal from experience in the name of authority.

As described earlier, variations on this type of paranoid religious mode have occurred throughout the history of American culture. It is a mode that prefers a codified order over a more spontaneous openness to experience and new meanings; it finds its identity within long or successfully established institutions; and it prefers to maintain a sort of aura around specialized social roles and activities that have perhaps outlived their original meanings. Almost by definition, those who seek to exist within alternative, but possibly more truly traditional, religious modes are seen to be propagating a dangerous anarchism.

It is also ironic that it was the academic keepers of literature in the post-war period who looked to the artist to fulfill the autonomous and semi-divine role of savior of society, whereas the avant-garde writers of the San Francisco Bay area usually saw themselves operating within a community of artists (in which the poetry reading functioned as a sort of metaphor). They also saw the artist as much more of a contributing member within, instead of outside, society, and they allowed art and religion to occupy their separate, yet complementary, spheres of activity. By tapping into much more enduring traditions and conceptions of the artist in society, the San Francisco poets were, in a sense, the true traditionalists. As Rexroth put it,

"...modern literary and artistic society tends to substitute art for religion. Much modern criticism places a burden on the artist that he was never designed to bear. On the other hand, modern social practice, rather than theory, has led to a radical divorce between the professional practice of religion and the practice of the arts. This is just part of the over-specialization of modern life. There is no reason why a saint or a theologian

should not be a very great poet...It would be very nice if this sort of thing were to come back into fashion" [20]

As one of the bases of an anarchist philosophy is an emphasis on giving human beings the freedom to explore multiple roles and potentials, anarchism seeks to allow the enhancement of an organic social reality in which differing roles are acknowledged within society, but more fluidity is allowed to occur between them than is allowed within a static hierarchical society. Rexroth himself was an example of the merging of different social roles within one person. As a poet, journalist, painter, labor agitator, teacher, outdoorsman, and community leader, to name only the most prominent, his personality was a merging of many roles and perspectives. This openness to a fluidity between artistic and political roles can also be seen in the careers of Gary Snyder, William Everson, Allen Ginsberg, and Michael McClure.

THE PRACTICE OF RELIGIOUS ANARCHISM

Kenneth Rexroth fundamentally agreed with Herbert Read, contra Marxist materialism and anarchists like Michael Bakunin and Emma Goldman, that a healthy society rested upon an irrational religious or mystical base. In *Anarchy and Order*, Read wrote that "there has never been a civilization without its corresponding religion, and the appearance of rationalism and skepticism is always a symptom of decadence" [21]. "Communist" anarchism, like that of the writers mentioned above, was useful as a practical revolutionary method and one that was available to creative individuals, either alone or in community, apart from political organizations.

Yet, despite the warm-blooded pragmatism it ideally exercised, Rexroth observed that it was also liable to fall into ideological obfuscations, non-relevance, and organizational wrangling in its actual practice. George Woodcock, an old anarchist friend of Rexroth's, gives some reasons why Rexroth could have been no longer be considered a "pure" Communist-Anarchist, part of an international anarchist movement, by the turn of the half-century.

"...there was indeed a doctrinaire aridity about anarchism in the later 1940s that made it almost qualify as one of George Orwell's 'smelly little orthodoxies.' The old movement of Kropotkin and Malatesta was virtually moribund, and the new movement of the late 1960s had not yet risen from the cooling ashes. The atmosphere of petty intolerance drove me out of the movement, and I suspect this was what repelled Rexroth — this and an absense of passion, which had breathed out of the British movement when Marie Louise Bernieri died in 1949." [22]

Toynbee and Spengler had postulated that religion was a key factor in social upheaval and reconstruction. It was the force that caused the downfall of a civilization's inert institutions. Whereas anarchism was logically the end of the road in political disaffiliation, it also showed that it was insufficient by itself to repel, or even practically resist, the subtle forces of disintegration that had corrupted every ideological movement and party in the history of Western culture. It was a necessary stance in the economic, social and institutional realms of American life for the San Francisco poets of the post-war era, but it had to be sustained by something much more comprehensive, or direct, in its apprehension of reality.

For Rexroth, that reality had to be conceived of as encompassing both social vision and quotidian detail. It had to be conceived of as the same type of reality religion had always attempted to speak to in its ideality. Yet when religion failed to be relevant to both

vision and the physically real, when it failed to somehow equate them in a transcendence of the real through the real," it was religion in stasis, a religion that had also lost touch with its connection to poetry.

The Mexican modernist poet Octavio Paz has written extensively about the relation between the "poetic word" and the "religious word." He observes that they both reflect experiences we have of our constitutive "otherness," our strangeness to what is real, and our attempt to bridge the gap. According to Paz, religion is that which depends on theological formulations for its identity, theology being fundamentally an *interpretation* of our condition. Poetry, on the other hand, is a *revelation* of our condition, and serves to open up possibilities of being [23]. Both theology (as a type of criticism) and poetry are necessary to our self-understanding and self-integration, yet poetry, in this modernist analysis, takes primacy, for without it, theology loses its conduit to revelation, whereas poetry without theology still exists as potential. Additionally, a theology that rejects the revelations of poetry is open to all sorts of artificialities and, moreover, encourages a wariness of the Other, which is now seen as a threat rather than a means to a more nuanced sense of both self and reality.

When Rexroth spoke of religion in the sense of being the basis for the genuine anarchism which ushers in the new organic society, he was referring to an experience of religion that, in terms of theology, is not estranged from its sense in the poetic word. It is also a religion that is highly applicable to normal, everyday life. When philosophers and theologians view reality, or our condition in reality, as something abstracted from quotidian existence and the struggle for physical survival and culture, they are guilty of over-

spiritualization, according to Rexroth. Additionally, when physical reality is seen as possessing absolute contingency within an abstract framework built around beliefs about some higher, trans-mundane reality, religion, poetry and even vision, have parted ways. With echoes of William James in the air, Rexroth wrote, in an article about Lafcadio Hearn's experience of Buddhism in Japan, that

"for Hearn, Buddhism is a way of life, and he is interested in the effects of its doctrine upon the daily actions and common beliefs of ordinary people. Like the Japanese themselves, he thinks of religion as something one does, not merely as something one believes..." [24]

And in the same article, he went on to observe,

"Nothing could be less like the life of Jesus than that of the typical Christian, clerical or lay,"

a statement which defines the basis of his view that San Francisco could most fundamentally provide an alternative, living culture in its contrast to the religious culture of the rest of America in the post-war period.

That religious culture, exemplified in the Protestant Church in America, had been a "general failure," according to Rexroth, in terms of halting the erosion of ultimate values in society. [25] Peter Berger has said that the churches of the post-war period were more intent on propping up the "American way of life," than on proclaiming spiritual values that opposed what America was coming to stand for. Berger writes,

"The new Protestantism validates the values of an industrial society that has become mature and settles down to consume happily what its huge economic machine restlessly produces. The churches function in this new society as the integrators and propagators of a common cultural religion." [26]

According to Berger, this cultural religion mirrored the culture's denial of death and "all visible signs of suffering and degradation" in order to "look upon the bright, daylight

side of things" [27]. It was a culture of conformity and denial that possessed, for all practical purposes, an establishment of religion in the post-war period that served as a psychological support to the pursuit of leisure and wealth. It was a religion that never challenged the individual ultimate relationship to the mystery of the Other, and thus never produced deep experiences of the traditional religious type.

Such a psychological, cultural religion that merely affirmed individuals in their social roles and positions was not likely to satisfy the insurgent spirituality that has historically risen up among the youth of each American generation. It was also not likely to maintain even its function of providing a broad social cohesion through consensus, since it denied the validity of transcendent experience as a social value. Thus, it was ultimately self-defeating. In the Lafcadio Hearn article, Rexroth asserted,

"Philosophies and theologies come and go, but the group experience of transcendence is embedded in human nature, and when it is abandoned, theology, philosophy, and eventually culture, perish." [28]

The logical alternative to cultural Protestantism, and an alternative which indeed sprang up in the 1950s and 1960s among large numbers of young people, was Zen Buddhism, which was fed from three sources: the returning G.I.'s who had experienced Asian culture while serving in the Pacific theater, the writings of such Zen populizers as Daisetz Suzuki and Alan Watts, and the growing Asian-American population, especially on the West coast, that had brought with them, or carried down, inherited religious sensibilities.

Yet Rexroth also rejected most manifestations of American Zen, because of his observation that it was often used as an excuse for social irresponsibility, and promoted a

spurious emphasis on visions (to be distinguished from "vision," which is always referred to in the singular).

"They're trips that don't go anywhere. The measure of the defect of vision is visions. And no Buddhist said that, St. John of the Cross said that. And the more trips we have, the further away we're getting." [29]

In other words, the primary contemplative traditions merge around the claim that the transcendent vision is ultimately an alternative way of looking at reality, not a way of escaping it. It is a realization that existing conditions are subject to dissolution by being part of the organic process of the universe. To hold on to a static and inevitably despairing view of reality reveals one's psychological dependency on it, and means one is held by illusion and suffering, the very thing Buddhist practice was supposed to mitigate.

Therefore, as Zen in America many times reflected an existential despair in the face of social realities, it was really only the mirror image of the dominant American religiosity, which blithely accepted social reality as the summum bonum. The logical political stance to accompany Zen was a political anarchism that was based on a nihilism towards the value of all institutions, and ultimately even of all social relationships. Yet this is again neither alternative, nor truly religious in any traditional sense. Instead it is the mirror image of a conformity that also despairs of creative individual acts of love within a social environment, and seeks to avoid the contemplative vision that feeds such individuality along with its extreme concomitant of social responsibility.

Contrary to both reactions towards an environment of despair was Rexroth's belief, based on longer-standing Buddhist traditions that reach back to the personality of Sakyamuni,

"...that there is a community in the world, a community of love. It is a community of contemplators. And the only reality is a perspective, but the perspectives are infinite because the contemplators are infinite." [30]

The contemplators are not infinite in number, but in the scope of their vision. Vision operates autonomously from all external authority, yet is the highest form of authority in and of itself. It goes beyond anarchism in its political implications, since it offers freedom within a heightened sense of social responsibility. And in the end, Rexroth believed, it offered the only hope for the continuance of human culture apart from its destructive elements, which are nonetheless ineradicable on any large scale.

"So the idea that a community of illumination and insight, can *change* the world is an illusion. But it can probably save it. Because when the contemplative life dies out the civilization dies with great rapidity... When the flame goes out, then there's nothing but darkness. But I don't think that this can reform the world." [31]

So in contradistinction to both the dominant cultural religion in America, and its supposed antidote in Zen, Rexroth again pointed towards deeper historical realities that could be found within widely diverse cultures. The deepest thing that cultures have in common, according to Rexroth's view, is that their health is directly related to the vitality of the group experience of transcendence within the culture, not just on an occasional basis, but as the store from which the culture draws its perspectives on the reality it has to live within on a daily basis. The force that drained this contemplative life out of the society was the State in its modern form.

Thus an anarchism based on contemplation was the only real alternative to cultural religion and Zen nihilism. They were both wrapped around and dependent on what Rexroth called "the social lie," the consciousness of contingency when there was no contingency, the

feeling of powerlessness when there was really no relevant power under which you were held in bondage.

"A person who lives the Buddha life to the best of his ability does not need the State and does not need law. That's a different thing from being a political anarchist...Buddhism really isn't even passive resistance; it's ignoring the state, in all of its ways. It's ignoring the social lie." [32]

In the 1950s, Rexroth believed that the poetry reading, communicating a poetry of sacramental vision, and reinforcing individual values within a communal setting, was the most powerful force in creating the cohesive relationships that could allow an alternative culture to thrive, utterly detached from the destructive dynamics of the social lie.

CHAPTER 3 NOTES

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CHAPTER 4: KENNETH REXROTH AND THE "REGIONAL IMPERATIVES" OF THE SAN FRANCISCO RENAISSANCE

"In Rexroth the tenets of Modernism and Experimentalism are much more crucially employed than in Steinbeck or Saroyan. An awesome erudition, a powerful nostalgic sense of history which infuses much of his mood with a tragic classicism, it is nevertheless always the Californian earth and sky and sea that form the vital imagery infusing his verse with its power. In him the Western expansion casts over history as well as space."
(William Everson, *Archetype West*, pp. 103-104)

In his autobiographical writings, Kenneth Rexroth nurtured a personal mythology in which he saw himself as the catalyst for the merging of San Francisco's history of radicalism with a modernist aesthetic sensibility. He portrayed San Francisco in the 1920s as a fervent labor town, one that was possibly even sympathetic to communalist forms of social organization, but still a city that found no support for these progressive sentiments in its artists and writers, who were largely extenuating a nineteenth century cultural sensibility with its accompanying models of literary expression.

Whether Rexroth was alone, or even dominant, in the process that culminated in the Six Gallery reading is difficult to ascertain. Jack London's stories can be interpreted as fables of a new modern reality emerging in the West, while Dashiell Hammett's Sam Spade also could be seen as emblematic of San Francisco as a modern city of fragmented hopes and unsentimental expression. Yet, as this chapter will illustrate, it is difficult to see how Rexroth was not a primary factor in creating the atmosphere in which an audience half-comprised of carpenters and dockworkers would attend a free-wheeling poetry reading on an October night in 1955.

As Kevin Starr ably demonstrates in his study of Depression-era California, the Bay area had, from the time of the Gold Rush, been a starkly polarized region politically. There were radicals and reactionaries, and very little in between. And by the mid-1930s, less than a decade after Rexroth's arrival, it was pretty clear that radicalism had gained the ascendent position [1]. Both homegrown, and arriviste, writers from the East found much to be attracted to in San Francisco's dramatic legacy of radical action and courageous polemic. And in a city that glorified its Wobbly martyrs and General Strikers, there was little to attract those who sympathized with moderation and a politics of the status quo.

To envision literature, and even something seemingly so benign as a poetry reading, as contributing to the furtherance of that radical legacy required a peculiar type of West-coast modernism. Kenneth Rexroth supplied the vision and cultural experience that would enable that modernism to emerge.

REXROTH AND THE WESTERN ARCHETYPE

In his eccentric critical study of the emergence of a Western archetype in the literature of California, and especially of the San Francisco area from Richard Henry Dana onward, poet William Everson centers on Rexroth as the key Western literary figure of the mid-twentieth century due to his "focus [of] the archetype, now definitely constellated, into an explicable formulated literary movement." Everson identifies the five aspects of this archetype as (1) pantheism as *the* characteristic American religious and aesthetic feeling, (2) a democratic state of existence, (3) cultural apotheosis, (4)

violence as a positive value, and (5) the encounter with nature (or Emersonian Nature) in its vastness. [2]

Eventually Everson adds that the San Francisco renaissance helped to concretize a sixth element of the archetype -- a *participation mystique* in which the ubiquitous poetry reading was the latest symbol. In an interview with John Tritica, Everson went on to claim that Rexroth's timely synthesis of the archetype into an organized aesthetic movement was the substance of his role as a "father figure" to the San Francisco renaissance. [3]

As a mystic, anarchist, radical, nature poet, and theoretician of the poetry and jazz movement, Rexroth would certainly seem to embody at least one possible synthesis of the archetype, but one more element was needed to allow him to become the energizing force behind the movement. This element has to do with the fact that Rexroth was not a native Californian himself.

According to Everson's historical mythologizing of the San Francisco renaissance, the key event which pointed towards its eventuality was Rexroth's decision to go west instead remaining in Chicago or going east in 1927. Rexroth biographer, Linda Hamalian, tentatively concurs when she writes that

"...Rexroth was untempted by the magic of Gotham. For all his sophistication and savoir-faire, he did not want to settle in a city dominated by European culture and tradition, no matter how well he had learned that literature and art. Chicago would remain a special place for him because it was the prototypical 'American' city; and he was always ready to talk about his days at the Green Mask and the Dill Pickle [places where he first read poetry to jazz with Langston Hughes], or soapboxing in Bug House Square and West Madison Street. But Rexroth saw no future for himself in Chicago and persuaded Andree [his first wife] that the West Coast would provide them with a better opportunity to succeed

as artists. He had already discovered that he was most at peace in the mountains of the Northwest. His decision to move west instead of east would have far-reaching consequences: for his poetry, his push for recognition, his politics, and his influence on the American literary conscience." [4]

Though it may feed into a personal mythology just as intricate as Everson's archetypal sense of region, Rexroth himself supplied a folksy version of his motives for both coming to, and remaining in, San Francisco. As he told David Meltzer in the late 1960's,

"We just didn't have any competition. It was like Picasso dropping back into the world of Trollope. The leading painter in town, Maynard Dixon, came over to see me and looked at my paintings on the wall and said, 'Hmmm, I see you have been experimentin' with abstract form, like Matisse and Picasso!' So, it was a great place, you know, because there wasn't any sweat. That's why we came to San Francisco." [5]

In this quotation one gains a clue to Rexroth's sense of himself as someone who introduced an avant-garde, or modernist, consciousness (comparing himself to Picasso) into a provincial, in-grown environment (the "world of Trollope"). In the same interview with Meltzer, he claimed that by 1969 (the year after he broke his forty-year residence in the city to take a teaching position in Santa Barbara) San Francisco had undeniably become the center of world culture. [6] His role in that grand transformation was not so subtly implied.

Though I suppose there could be an element of projection in Everson's narrative regarding Rexroth's role, since he often indicated his personal indebtedness to Rexroth for bringing him to San Francisco from the Waldport conscientious-objectors camp in 1945 and fostering his development as a young poet, his perspective may in fact confirm Rexroth's seemingly self-dramatizing account on a deeper level.

Everson reveals his sense of the mechanism by which Rexroth became central by characterizing him as both a Modernist intellectual and a true westerner in his sense of unity with the landscape and the region's radical history. His centrality was due not simply to the fact that Rexroth presented the city's artists and writers with an antitype to its own provincialism and lack of intellectual energy. It was that he integrated his avant-garde consciousness, indeed found its proper subject, in the geography and history of northern California. In other words, as an initial outsider, Rexroth recognized more clearly than any of its native citizens that San Francisco had the potential to nurture an internationally significant literary movement and a social environment based on humane values and geographical factors. An American sensitivity to nature, along with traditions of cultural plurality and radical democracy, could find their apotheosis there, creating new American meanings and expressions, while breaking down inherited provincial attitudes. Like Paris in the 1920's, San Francisco could become a truly international city, only more so because of the Asian cultural element and because of America's new centrality on the world stage.

He brought to the fore the fact that experimentalism in the arts occurred within neither a cultural nor geographic vacuum. Even, or especially, avant-gardism in the arts had to grow out of the artist's consciousness of his organic involvement in the place of his life's daily rhythms. This did not imply the negation of imagination, only the necessity for it to be disciplined within a consciousness of how history's problems and the limitations of nature coalesced within the artist's own life. Correlatively, this was the only basis for a relevant literary radicalism. Anything else, by virtue of being

disconnected from a sense of dailiness and geographical fixedness, was liable to transmogrify into an easy universalism, a dogma, an ideology, which of necessity were always at least somewhat false to every particular occasion.

The force of the clash between potential and history, imagination and nature, fate and will, played out again and again throughout the history of American culture, was to reach a culminating intensity in Rexroth's San Francisco. The most important historical question that hung in the balance was whether, as had happened in other locales, the clash between sustaining traditions and insurgent radicalisms would disintegrate all creative tendencies, or whether in this "end of the trail" place, a culture could be formed in the fusion, integration or possible transcendence of these forces. Needless to say, it was a tall order. Only a social consciousness steeped in historical traditions and archetypes, yet open to genuine experimentation in all areas of culture, could hope to pull it off. This was in fact the central meaning of Rexroth's modernism, a modernism that, in its motive of clearing away the encrustations of custom and commercial values that had overlaid and choked off the vital potentials of the culture, was an antidote to existential despair.

As a rebel against the extremisms of Puritan-Yankee values, Rexroth naturally acceded to Thoreau's dictum that America's future lay in "wild-ness," but tempered that observation (as Thoreau also did upon confronting Mt. Katahdin) by not denying the value of the specifically human, or even of the classically cultured sensibility, as the crucial mediator of that wildness. The alternative was to be overwhelmed and silenced, or to turn away from reality through interiorizing metaphysical stances or various disconnections of the self from history. On the other hand, if civilized social values were

not mediated by a sense of their connection to a vast, yet organic, wildness, they quickly turned artificial and coercive. Rexroth believed it was the poet's function to model this dual mediation both in his life and work, and the most likely place for the poet to be able to do this would be where the sense of wildness, freedom and radical energy had not been diluted by over-civilization. A section of the poem "Past and Future Turn About" reveal his sense that redemption towards love and life-sustaining values are not to be found in the Apollonian ideal.

It is easy to read or write
In a book, "Self-realization
Is responsible self-sacrifice."
"The will to power, the will to live,
Are fulfilled by transfiguration."
"The person is the final value;
Value is responsibility."
As the world sinks in a marsh of blood,
You won't raise yourself by your bootstraps,
However pious and profound.
Christ was not born of Socrates,
But to a disorderly people,
In an evil time, in the flesh
Of innocence and humility. [7]

William Everson, who more than anyone else consciously attempted to be the quintessential modern poet of the American west, recognized that while Robinson Jeffers with his "inhumanist" aesthetic could represent for him the "pure" utilization of the western muse, Rexroth provided a way for the poet to, in a sense, center the will outside the landscape and integrate a Modernist aesthetic stance and a radical political commitment with a mediating sense of historical, social, and intellectual responsibility [8]. Although Jeffers may have been justified in conflating California's topography and sheer physical awesomeness with a metaphysical negation of the human self, Rexroth

was equally justified in conflating the metaphysical suggestiveness of the geography with the possibility of a deep and heroic renewal, not just of literature, but of Western culture's promise. Each perspective simply located the opposite poles on the spectrum of possible futures.

Everson hinted at this distinction in a reference to the Irish critic Denis Donoghue's observation that "in one of the recurrent *moments* of American literature the imagination confronts reality in the guise of a poet gazing at the sea." Everson comments that "Jeffers made that *moment* his abiding stance, but Rexroth assimilate(d) to it the wealth of intellectual preoccupations deriving from our European heritage." [9] In other words, Rexroth continually tried to plant that moment within a continuing historical context. Poem after poem illustrates this, but "Gentlemen, I Address You Publicly" very chillingly depicts the ultimate flowing out of the absurd human drama into the vast ebbs and flow of nature, unchecked in a sort of quiet and serene brutality, if not woken up to through a flash of recognition, which the end of the poem sees as still possible, even probable. He is saying that human and inhuman nature, though in organic relationship to one another, do not have to necessarily only meet on the plane of death and dissolution. They will one day get there, but that day can be delayed if only someone would wake up.

They said no one would ever care
They said it would never make any difference
And after the years of waiting
I didn't it hadn't mattered originally
It didn't matter then
But why do they stand so
Why do they never go
What are they waiting for
What monstrous new planet
Glowing in a cloud of omen

Must appear poised on their red-hot alps
And now bolting from sleep
And unbelieving hearing
In the night echoing and reechoing
The glaciers walking on the midnight
Recurrent smashing of a train wreck
But nobody knows now
They said there were many
Before the wars
Now nobody cares
This knife is guaranteed to float on water
It's made for you take it it's yours
As you lie under the rocking stars on the organic
Vertiginous lift of the ocean
It will float out chill and sly
Creeping under the sternum in an inexplicable
Shiver nothing much will happen
The eyes half-open the hair floating
The starlight glittering on the moist teeth
They will remain the same
Only the heart and lungs will stop
But the breast will go on rising
Falling with the undulant ocean
Each night thereafter the corpuscular
Animation of the sea will shine more thickly
Until at last
Aureate and upright
Walking waist deep on the breaking combers
Some one screaming sees it from a boat [10]

To reiterate, for Rexroth, California meant a place where inhuman wildness and human (or humane) civilization would not have to participate in a zero-sum game, but could finally enter into a fruitful dialectic, the human and the inhuman achieving their higher organic relations. According to the mythology of place Rexroth developed, if it couldn't happen in California, it couldn't happen in America and, moreover, would not be passed on to subsequent generations. Yet the sense of permanence he found in the California landscape and elements, an enduring solidity to nature's organic expression of

itself through a place in contrast to the vertiginous changes in the personal history of a man, filled Rexroth with a deep hopefulness, rather than a sense of elegaic loss -- even in the face of personal mortality and ruin.

His poem, "A Living Pearl," [11] expresses this complex hope that was fed by his life as a westerner. He begins the poem with a description of his crucial adolescent entrance into the workaday rhythms of the archetypal west.

At sixteen I came West, riding
Freights on the Chicago, Milwaukee
And St. Paul, the Great Northern,
The Northern Pacific. I got
A job as helper to a man
Who gathered wild horses in the
Mass drives in the Okanogan
And Horse Heaven country. The best
We culled out as part profit from
The drive, the rest went for chicken
And dog feed. We took thirty head
Up the Methow, up the Twisp,
Across the headwaters of Lake
Chelan, down the Skagit to
The Puget Sound country. I
Did the cooking and camp work.
In a couple of weeks I
Could handle the stock pretty well.
Every day we saddled and rode
A new horse. Next day we put a
Packsaddle on him. By the
Time we reached Marblemount
We considered them well broken.
The scissorbills who bought them
Considered them untamed mustangs
Of the desert. In a few weeks
They were peacefully pulling
Milk wagons in Sedro-Wooley.
We made three trips a season
And did well enough for the
Post-war depression.

Then he jumps to the present, musing on how the essential experience of the west is as unchanging, and as fruitful of meditation, as a sun-forged diamond, because the experience itself is coiled within the organic realities of the place. It is a continual archetypal journey.

Tonight,
Thirty years later, I walk
Out of the deserted miner's
Cabin in Mono Pass, under
The full moon and the few large stars.
The sidehills are piebald with snow.
The midnight air is suffused
With moonlight. As Dante says,
"It is though a cloud enclosed
Me, lucid, dense, solid, polished,
Like a diamond forged by the sun.
We entered the eternal pearl,
Which took us as water takes
A ray of light, itself uncleft."
Fifteen years ago, in this place,
I wrote a poem called "Toward
An Organic Philosophy."
Everything is still the same,
And it differs very little
From the first mountain pass I
Crossed so long ago with the
Pintos and zebra duns and
Gunmetal roans and buckskins,
And splattered lallapaloosas,
The stocky wild ponies whose
Ancestors came with Coronado.
There are no horse bells tonight,
Only the singing of frogs
In the snow-wet meadows, the shrill
Single bark of a mountain
Fox, high in the rocks where the
Wild sheep move silently through the
Crystal moonlight.

And then in an epiphany that helps to explain why William Everson said that San Francisco was not ready for a renaissance until it realized itself as "opposition" [12], rather than extension, Rexroth explores the source of the West's alternative spatial (and thus conceptual) enduring realities, knowing that it can only be carried forward on the human plane through the replenishment that comes as the fruit of human relationships. It is here that finiteness grasps its relation to the infinite.

The same feelings
Come back. Once more all the awe
Of a boy from the prairies where
Lanterns move through the comfortable
Dark, along a fence, through a field,
Home; all the thrill of youth
Suddenly come from the flat
Geometrical streets of
Chicago, into the illimitable
And inhuman waste places
Of the Far West, where the mind finds
Again the forms Pythagoras
Sought, the organic relations
Of stone and cloud and flower
And moving planet and falling
Water. Marthe and Mary sleep
In their down bags, cocoons of
Mutual love. Half my life has
Been passed in the West, much of it
On the ground beside lonely fires
Under the summer stars, and in
Cabins where the snow drifted through
The pines and over the roof.
I will not camp here as often
As I have before. Thirty years
Will never come for me again.
"Our campfire dies out in the
Lonely mountains. The transparent
Moonlight stretches a thousand miles.
The clear peace is without end."
My daughter's deep blue eyes sleep
In the moon shadow. Next week

She will be one year old.

Human culture was an anomaly if it did not somehow comprehend itself as part of this organic process. No strain need be involved, only simple recognition. Yet in seeming obeisance to the archetype (and perhaps out of sense of Buddhist realism), Rexroth felt that the process of cultural renewal would involve conflict, personal risk, and perhaps even hinge on who was the "quickest draw" in the polemical battle over the new literature and its cultural meaning.

Californians themselves had historically been both willing to embrace the suggestions of utopia their region furnished, while simultaneously leaving themselves open to charges of childishness and irresponsibility. Historian Keven Starr has made the observation:

"At its most compelling, California could be a moral premise, a prescription for what America could and should be. At its most trivial it was a cluster of shallow dreams, venial hankerings which mistook laziness for leisure, selfishness for individualism, laxity for liberation, evasion and cheap escape for redemption and a solid second chance. All of it -- ideality and possible disaster -- was set in motion in the early travel literature, because from the first it was fundamental to the experience, somehow part of the region's imperatives. Good or bad, California never came easy -- or without divided meaning." [13]

In a later chapter on Rexroth and the Beats, I will explore how this distinctly Californian co-existence of what might be called "moral avant-gardism" with an individualism bordering on self-delusion would threaten to blow apart the San Francisco renaissance, but in the context of "regional imperatives" I would like to examine Rexroth's strategies as an intellectual and regional icon in creating a certain oppositional identity for San Francisco's literary community. That identity would draw on Modernism

and the region's physical exuberance to obviate delusions about the self and reality, and to push the movement beyond triviality or nostalgia. For Rexroth, and Everson, survival meant apotheosis, or it wasn't the West.

Along with infusing a Modernist sensibility into San Francisco culture, and performing one possible synthesis of the historical archetype, Rexroth's strategies involved an intensification of regional consciousness by bringing polemics to bear on what he saw as the elite academicism, reactionary provincialism, and political obscurantism of the Eastern literary culture. He gave the renaissance an anarchistic, rhetorically violent western face through his historically peculiar, yet highly sophisticated, critique of what he began to call the "Literary Establishment," a term which acquired many of its present American connotations within this Rexrothian milieu.

POLEMICS AND STRATEGIES

In the 1950s it was still possible for Kenneth Rexroth to envision San Francisco as a place where a truly alternative culture could grow and thrive. At a time when technological efficiency had not yet rendered geography relatively meaningless, it was over three thousand miles from New York City, which at the time represented the apex of what America was beginning to symbolize to the rest of the world – power, wealth, and an arrogant naivete. To borrow a term from the Marxist critic Raymond Williams, if New York City represented cultural hegemony, than to Rexroth San Francisco represented the last outpost of resistance, the last place where alternative values and experiences could be communicated and find innocent embodiment. It was also possibly

the last place where a literary movement might be financially subsistent apart from what Richard Kostelanetz has called the "nationalizing effect" [14] of New York's mainstream publishing industry, while also entering significantly into the international literary avant-garde.

Though Rexroth sometimes envied the powers of cultural dissemination New York employed, there could be no compromise, at least in the realm of polemics, with an industry that was enthralled to a small literary elite, that was largely blind to its own provincialism, and that was increasingly encouraging towards a politics of accommodation. To Rexroth, who saw it as a simple empirical fact that the literature and literary criticism of a culture mirrored its spectrum of values, all of these factors contributed to the cultural disintegration of mainstream American culture, and implied the rejection of truly sustaining human values.

The alternative values that Rexroth invoked as the basis for an alternative west coast literary establishment involved the attitude that knowledge was a form both of love and responsibility between persons, that potential human interrelationships ran deeper than national or racial distinctions, and that the "Social Lie"— the "American Way of Life" and the pervasive illusion that those in power worked for the ultimate good of others and not themselves — had to be resisted absolutely.

These convictions gave emotional substance to his symbolic critique of the East Coast literary establishment, and led towards his laying upon poetry the cultural burden of being the basis for the alternative culture's identity. It led also towards the corollary

conviction that a poetry renaissance would be, almost by definition, a cultural renaissance in the broadest sense.

William Everson has surmised that if the San Francisco poets of the post-war period can truly be seen as a group, the only thing that held them together was their struggle with the "East Coast Literary Establishment" [15]. Of course this did not mean that San Francisco poets were anti-intellectual or that they did not have a firm grasp of literary history. There were few, if any, poets in America in 1950 who were as well-read as Kenneth Rexroth and his Berkeley counterpart, Robert Duncan. In fact, a large part of Rexroth's critique of the "Eastern Establishment," and especially of the New Critics who idolized T.S. Eliot, was directed towards the narrowness of their literary purview, a narrowness that made them vulnerable to the romance of right-wing ideologies and to various forms of sentimental cultural conservatisms.

In this he saw them as failing to advance beyond the intellectual horizons of Eliot, and also, to a certain extent, Ezra Pound. Whether fair or not, Rexroth said that his primary problem with Eliot was that he simply did not read enough books. Of course, the real charge was, more specifically, that Eliot did not read from a sufficiently wide variety of literatures and was especially ethnocentric towards the Asian classics. James Laughlin used to tell the story of how he relayed to Eliot Rexroth's concerns about two Chinese characters in the *Cantos* that were upside down. Eliot laughed it off, saying nobody cared about such things. To be sure, Eliot never lived near Chinatown.

As far as Pound, an elderly Rexroth once dressed down an interviewer who complained about the excessive esotericism of Pound's reading list in *ABC of Reading* by

saying that he had read and assimilated all those books by the time he was fifteen years old. [16] The important point is not whether Rexroth was exaggerating, but that he considered the mastery of such works to be basic, rather than esoteric. Keeping in mind the comparable literary and cultural knowledge of such poets as Robert Duncan and Gary Snyder, the more convincing charge to level against the major San Francisco poets might be that they were overly bookish, rather than anti-intellectual.

Hence, the critique made principally by Rexroth in regards to the New Critics, Agrarians, and New York Jewish intellectuals like Lionel Trilling and Leslie Fiedler was not, in substance, a critique of intellectualism per se, but of a perceived "ethocentric", "self-important" and "despairing" intellectualism that found its expression in a self-enclosed academic elitism and a narrow canonical literary criticism that sometimes seemed like no more than a variation on New England ecclesiasticalism. Stanley Burnshaw foreshadowed this aspect of the cultural critique, and revealed its basis in a radical social mentality, in a poem published in *The New Masses* in 1934, entitled "Mr. Tubbe's Morning Service."

The priceless Mr. Waldo Tubbe
And all his little Tubbes now dare
Approach the world they long to snub,
Well insulated with despair.

.....

Their ancient sage prepares to speak
In holy numbers presto-pronto:
Fused Hindu-Latin-Chinese-Greek
The special Tubbey esperanto.

Whereon each pupil makes a wish.
And Bishop Tubbe prepares to drool
A priceless strain of gibberish
Concocted in the learned school.

While all the little Tubbes let pass
Secretions of orgasmic glee.
Tubbe father empties out a glass
of quintessential poesy

Compounded by rare formulae
Of liquid siftings, while Laforgue's
And ghosts of other live men die
Once more in the scholastic morgues....

....

For he will find them magic toys --
This wizard of the cult, Despair --
Blinders for all his tender boys,
Protective from what's in the air. [17]

This parodic homage to T.S. Eliot is not anti-intellectual, but is particularly American, and especially western, in its ridicule of self-importance, artificial ritual, over-refinement, and lack of spirit. It is not primarily a parody of a particular type of literature, or even of T.S. Eliot as a writer. Instead, it is ridiculing a literary culture that declared its indebtedness to Eliot while producing a literature of unalloyed pretentiousness and cloistered sensibility rather than of insurgent avant-gardism and personal conviction.

Not that anyone could produce a *Wasteland*, but the writers and critics that Burnshaw had in mind fell short of even operating in the same mode; instead of following in Eliot's footsteps by producing a literature that in some way implied risk in confrontation between the writer's consciousness and the world, it was a literature that did not do anything besides present itself as an object of analysis, and of a very specialized and carefully nurtured type of analysis, one that could be learned only in the classroom of the New Critic professor-poet. Rexroth indicates the disconnection of such

narrow specialization from the outside world, and from the traditions it claims to continue, when he writes,

"I am, amongst other things, a poet. My poetry is work. I write it to lay hands on an obdurate world, to make love to women and to overthrow the State, the Church and the Capitalist System. I do not write it to get it analyzed in a seminar and neither did John Donne or Arthur Rimbaud."
[18]

Conversely, in restricting themselves to a self-enclosed literary universe, the Eliot disciples revealed their complicity with a culture that Rexroth also saw as aberrant by virtue of its pervasive artificiality. Though the New Critics, neo-Agrarians, and New York intellectuals ultimately saw themselves as embodying a moral opposition to the dominant American culture through stances of intellectual objectivity, Rexroth saw them as existing in an otherworldly symbiotic relationship mirroring the intricately controlled, yet portentously sinister, worlds of contemporary science fiction. Solely because of its increasing dominance in the culture and potential danger to poetry's real development going on elsewhere did it inevitably bring about wide-spread counter-reaction. Rexroth had a great faith in poetry's ability to survive in and through even the darkest of cultural epochs.

"...in periods when the culture values artificiality, the lyric becomes stereotyped. Then, after awhile, the poets revolt and, usually turning to folk origins, restore to lyric poetry at least the appearance of naturalness and spontaneity." [19]

In his introduction to the anthology he edited, *Revolution of the Word*, Jerome Rothenberg presents an "un-official" history of American poetry in the twentieth century, showing how a vital tradition of experimentation lived on despite the seeming hegemony of the T.S. Eliot-criticism school of "responsible modernism" [20]. He also touches on

the interplay between American and European avant-gardes during this period, implying that the discourse went on entirely outside the experience of the "responsible Modernists." David Antin, a San Francisco-based poet, has agreed by pointing out that it is a curious state of affairs when a poet like W.D. Snodgrass can see himself in the Eliotic line and writing in the idiom of Pound, with lines that reek of artificiality like

The green catalpa tree has turned
All white; the cherry blooms once more.
In one whole year I haven't learned
A blessed thing they pay you for. [21]

Obviously, something strange had happened to the modernist legacy, or at least in one development of it. But to get a closer understanding of Rexroth's modernism, and how it became linked to an ecological consciousness in California, it is necessary to return, if possible, to a common point of departure for those poets who belonged to a later generation than the primary modernists who would increasingly become critically linked with a new *post*-modern American poetry. I believe that point of departure, though, may be found in an examination of the common debt they all felt they owed to the primary American modernists.

Thomas Parkinson has observed that Rexroth was of the generation that followed on the heels of the great modernist experiments of Stevens, Eliot, Pound and Williams. In terms of influence on the development of American poetry, these are the figures named most prominently in the essays of post-World War II poets. Robert Frost, Marianne Moore, E.E. Cummings and Hart Crane are generally accorded a secondary position of influence, though of course there were certain poets, such as Randall Jarrell with his prioritization of Frost, who expressed a deep debt to one of these in preference to

any of the four. And Walt Whitman in some ways stands in the background of all subsequent American poetry, though it would be a stretch to call him a modernist because of the different world he was a part of. It is also clear that many important post-war poets valiantly attempted to conceptualize their work as a direct contradiction to Whitman's influence.

Rexroth, though, is most accurately considered as an intergenerational writer, not only in age but in the way he conceived his identity as a writer and critic. By age, he was more specifically of the critically maligned generation that was swallowed up in radical causes and New Deal policies during their most important years of poetic development, who came out of the thirties politicized yet left with little hope for establishing a true reciprocal relationship between literature and politics. This caused there to be more of a direct aesthetic line of influence between the post-World War I modernists and the post-World War II "post-modernists," than between the proletarian generation and the post-war youth.

The primary New Critics like John Crowe Ransom, Cleanth Brooks, and Donald Davidson, along with certain New York intellectuals like Lionel Trilling and Philip Rahv, must also be placed chronologically within this inter-war generation, following the seminal early work of the modernists, yet, in retrospect, creating works that are defined by the social and political agendas of the thirties in a way that separated them from the comparatively apolitical post-war youth.

Those who were a part of this interwar generation were partly contemporaneous with the modernists and were able to respond to them before they were accorded

canonical status; thus they were able to effect the process of literary assimilation to a certain extent. In their reading of the great works of the modernist period as they came out, and not initially in the classroom, their reactions were fresh and were shaped by similar experiences to those of the writers themselves. In other words, the future of these works was more malleable then, and their initial influence was largely left in the hands of young writers like Rexroth, Allen Tate, Philip Rahv, and a fairly small number of others who would try to discern their importance within rapidly changing cultural circumstances.

One of the crucial experiences of this generation seems to have been an encounter with T.S. Eliot's *The Wasteland* at an impressionable age. It was virtually impossible for any budding literary artist who was born around the turn of the century to avoid its influence. Pound's *Cantos* would have a powerful incremental effect over time, and Hart Crane's *The Bridge* had its own particular fervent audience, but *The Wasteland* was unique. Perhaps to even a greater extent than Ginsberg's *Howl*, it was received as the representative voice of a literary epoch, whether the poem was understood or not. But the inability to be precise about its meanings was, of course, a large part of its charm.

Rexroth describes his own reaction in his *Autobiographical Novel*:

"About this time *The Waste Land* came out. Just prior to its appearance Ruth (his girlfriend of the time) had been taking a course from Edward Sapir, and we were full of *The Golden Bough* and Jessie Weston and Jane Harrison and Comford and Gilbert Murray and all the rest of them. One day I stopped in at Marshall Field's and bought a copy of *The Dial* and met Ruth at Washington Park and we walked across to the Midway and over to the University. We stopped off in the park near a bed of tulips -- I can see them very clearly, yellow tulips with red stripes -- and we sat down on the grass and I opened *The Dial*, and there was *The Waste Land*. For the rest of the trip across the park we were only half-conscious. It's hard to

convey to anyone today the impact of that poem on someone young and full of ideas when it came out. Everyone reads it today prepared for it--it's *The Waste Land*, you've heard about it in grammar school and even once in awhile in the newspapers -- but this was just another issue of *The Dial*. There was no preparation for it whatsoever. Now, the remarkable thing about *The Waste Land* was that we all thought it was a revolutionary poem. Either in *The Dial* or in the notes that came out a couple of years later, Eliot speaks of the moral collapse of civilization in Eastern Europe. We thought this was a typographical error for Western Europe. The dissociative style, borrowed from Apollinaire, seemed to us revolutionary, and the picture of decay -- of course, it *was* Western Civilization -- was so overpowering that it seemed to be a revolutionary rather than a reactionary indictment." [22]

Soon thereafter, Rexroth would write "Phronesis," which is, on the surface, a spoof of *The Wasteland*. But the poem can also be seen to have the serious purpose of allowing Rexroth to situate himself within the literary atmosphere Eliot's poem created. As such, the ultimate intent of the poem is highly ambiguous. Even the title is taken from a Greek word that can mean either arrogance or thoughtfulness, depending on the context. It is written in a seeming parody of the Eliot idiom,

And now old mammal, gall
He asked a question
He near and far asking
He said I must start at a place I remember and
try and recall
Fill that tube with blood and hold it to the light
you will speedily see what was intended.
And what was discovered.
Of course certain rays won't penetrate.
Running a knife along the white edge of this cloister
avoiding the crevices avoiding the results.
Void and void. [23]

Yet the poem also could be intending to give a tone of obviousness to the Eliotic cultural diagnosis (it is what thinking people think about when they think), while negating through parody a tone that had allowed a response of spiritual nihilism and

historical pessimism to seem appropriate. Despite *The Wasteland's* somewhat scholarly reference to vegetative cycles, it falls short of representing a fully organic view of history of the type that Rexroth was slowly developing at this time. It was still tied to simplistic assumptions of progressive linearity, and it implicitly required an heroic return to the vital pre-technological sources in the past for a reinvigoration of the present.

As explained in the previous chapter, Rexroth came to view eras of the past as essentially indivisible from all the factors that created them in their totality. Past societies thrived and died over time, and although values contributing to their health and disease were carried over into subsequent civilizations, these elements could not be arbitrarily abstracted from the past and applied, almost medicinally, to present crises. The separation between thought and action, between spiritual and social realities implied in this assumption of applicability was itself a symptom of the larger problem.

In this sense, Rexroth's developing "philosophy" (or anti-philosophy) of history attempted to embrace a more comprehensive, meta-critical view that saw both the virtues and the problems of the past still integrally existing in the present within forms that are shaped by contemporary exigencies. It is simply wishful – and ultimately nihilistic – thinking to see the history of culture as a series of boxes out of which one can pick and choose to produce a more satisfying cultural arrangement in the present.

It must be admitted that Eliot himself, at the time, was a bit ambiguous in his own thinking in regards to how those factors creating spiritual (or in Rexroth's terms, organic) health in the past could be appropriated within a modern context.

Indeed, that ambiguity was one of the *raison d'etres* of modernism. But without descending into determinism, Rexroth preferred to realistically and unsentimentally consider the way in which the present situation has been inalterably shaped by the past, how present fragmentation was born in the seedbeds of past philosophies, technologies, economies and political decisions. He agreed with Marx that there seemed to be a form to this flow of history that could be analyzed in a scientific way, yet he transcended both the Marxist analytic and the fragmented Modernist aesthetic sense of reality by viewing the history of cultures as ultimately a single organism which nonetheless can be seen to be in flux due to the almost infinite multiplicity of cultural forms.

Thus, out of a merged realism and mysticism, Rexroth sets the basis for a poetic of both diagnosis and prognosis. Eliot remained important in that, in one of the most fruitful uses of Pound's imagism, he showed that a presentation of present cultural realities could be made within an avant-garde idiom, that that could be one of the primary functions of the avant-garde. Yet Eliot's poem represented the accomplishment of a lesser ideal for poetry than Rexroth envisioned, and by falling short it really was distasteful to him in its ultimate effect. Not only did it, through a rigid logic, feed into reactionary social and political visions, but it failed to even point towards the possibility of cultural reintegration that a fully organic view entailed. Rexroth concluded "Phronesis" with a rather prosaic summation of this organic view, conceptualized through the metaphor of a "celestial sphere."

"Here one must apply a different standard. These forms are not measured by time, for time is the clocking of motion, the comparison of one motion with another, but by the aeon, *aeonum*, which is the form of their relation, extraperipetal, to the celestial sphere. The internal relations of the

celestial sphere are, viewed as a whole, simultaneous. From unique points within its manifold motion arises from the reference of any one point or finite system of points to the sum of their relations." [24]

The foregoing analysis of Rexroth's reaction to Eliot's *The Wasteland* shows that Rexroth's relationship to the symbols of Eastern civilization and mentality began in an intense ambiguity that was rich enough to continue to effect his identity as a western literary figure. In the 1930s this ambiguity was maintained in his relations with the Communist Party, and his life-long friendship with James Laughlin of New Directions even contained in microcosm some of the conflicting attitudes he held toward East Coast power, wealth and culture.

William Everson saw the opposition between the San Francisco renaissance/beat movement in terms of conflicting Dionysian and Apollonian tendencies within the culture. And many times Rexroth seems to imitate this distinction, especially in a poem like "Vitamins and Roughage."

Strong ankled, sun burned, almost naked,
The daughters of California
Educate reluctant humanists;
Drive into their skulls with tennis balls
The unhappy realization
That nature is still stronger than man.
The special Hellenic privilege
Of the special intellect seeps out
At last in this irrigated soil.
Sweat of athletes and juice of lovers
Are stronger than Socrates' hemlock;
And the games of scrupulous Euclid
Vanish in the gymnopaedia. [25]

But Rexroth was not an easy fit into such a clear distinction. He, in many ways, always admired the cultural apogees of learning and sophistication that the East

represented, yet as time went on he also felt that they were increasingly relics, and not replenishing deposits, from the past. His organic view of reality, a view that was increasingly supported by findings in science and by his observations of the western landscape, led him to embrace place, or geography, as the primary factor in whether an alternative culture could thrive. If a culture was organic, it could not be separated from its place and the whole spectrum of that place's meanings and potentials.

Thus, in the end it was a place and counter-culture standing on its own, not defining itself against, and thus subordinating itself to, the East that would determine the long-term relevance of the renaissance. And what gave the West its most distinctive and enduring meaning was not its politics, its history, or its aesthetic preferences. Apart from the "regional imperatives" that were somehow linked to sea, mountains, and vast distances, the rest lost its alternative flavor. These were the elements of the West Rexroth always returned to for his own personal sense of literary identity, as numerous poems attest, including "Hiking on the Coast Range":

The skirl of the kingfisher was never
More clear than now, nor the scream of the jay,
As the deer shifts her covert at a footfall;
Nor the butterfly tulip ever brighter
In the white spent wheat; nor the pain
Of a wasp stab ever an omen more sure;
The blood alternately dark and brilliant
On the blue and white bandana pattern.
This is the source of evaluation,
This minimal prince rupert's drop of blood;
The patellae suspended within it,
Leucocytes swimming freely between them,
The strands of fibrin, the mysterious
Chemistry of the serum; is alone
The measure of time, the measure of space,
The measure of achievement.

Other source than this. [26]

There is no

CHAPTER 4 NOTES

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12. Meltzer, 91.
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15. Everson, 107.
16. Rexroth, L.A. *Vanguard* (No. 16, July 16-23, 1975), 16.
17. Stanley Burnshaw, in *New Masses: An Anthology of the Rebel Thirties*, ed. by Joseph North (New York: International Publishers, 1969), 58.
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22. Rexroth, *Autobiographical Novel* (Santa Barbara: Ross-Erikson, Inc., Publishers, 1982), 257.
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24. Ibid., 40.
25. Ibid., 150.
26. Ibid., 84.

CHAPTER 5: THE HALF-WAY REVOLUTION: REXROTH, THE BEATS AND BEYOND

"The essence of revolt is comprehension, the essence of disconformity is understanding, and their second essence is purposeful action." (Kenneth Rexroth, "Revolt: True and False")

In the introduction I referred to fact that Rexroth cannot be understood clearly unless one recognizes that he saw himself as a type of "spiritual aristocrat." This sense of himself is revealed in many aspects of Rexroth's biography. It is one explanation for the apparent splits in his personality, namely that he could be both a snob and a proletarian, both a teacher and a prophet; he presented himself as an avant-garde artist and scholar who wished to speak to the masses, and in aesthetic terms he was both a Dionysian and an Apollonian. It was the cause of both his deep influence and ambiguous status within the communities he effected. In a slightly different context, William Everson explained Rexroth's archetypal role as San Francisco's "father" poet in these terms.

"The split in him between objectivist precisionism and dionysian orgiastic-celebration is awesome. This is why he was able to weld together the precisionist-derived Pound-Williams-Olson side of the attack on the formalists (the attack on stasis), and the Whitmanesque-Lawrentian-Reichian side of the same confrontation." [1]

The attempt (ultimately unsuccessful) to contain within his own project all of the rising energies from disparate camps of literary activity caused Rexroth, ironically, to be a poet without a home. His attempts to create communities many times only heightened the aura of discrete individuality around him, distancing him from those he sought to nourish.

Though he believed such communities had existed throughout history, Rexroth found no real communities within his lifetime that could sustain and balance the necessary elements of his organic ideal. In the Communist Party of the 1930s, ideology got in the way of human relationships. In the Beat movement of the late 1950s, an unbridled romanticism made it an individualistic phenomenon, not the herald of a new social consciousness. The first was, in its own way, too aristocratic. The second was too spiritual. Neither embodied what Rexroth himself symbolized, the integration of the two.

As I have stated several times throughout this study, the 1955 reading at 6 Gallery represented for Kenneth Rexroth the potential point of cultural turning, the extra touch applied to the fulcrum of spiritual history, for which he had working all his life. The most durable cultural result of the 6 Gallery reading and all that led up to it was the public, national emergence of the Beat movement in American culture, a phenomenon that roughly spanned the years 1955-1965.

In tracing Rexroth's reactions to the developments and permutations of the beat movement in the late 1950s and early 1960s, it is evident that he very quickly came to see it as a counterfeit for the true spiritual revolution he hoped would emerge from the sense of apocalypse in the younger generation following World War II. It fell short for him because it generally lacked sufficient historical self-consciousness to realize a full disaffiliation from the dominant society, and because it failed to embrace the sustaining values of communal experience.

For the purposes of this chapter, when I use the term "beat movement" or "beat generation" I am referring to the development of a certain identifiable aesthetic and lifestyle during those years that can be traced, primarily, to the influences of Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, and William Burroughs. The aesthetic is marked by a radically subjective view of the literary/artistic process, in which texts are considered to be the unmediated flow of the writer's consciousness, culminating in forms that have some direct relationship to the writer's idiosyncratic personality, or even physiology. The lifestyle is undergirt by an openness to sexual experimentation, the cultivation of a gnomic persona, and the adoption of what are perceived to be Asian attitudes towards the material world. Writers like Gregory Corso or Gary Snyder fulfill certain roles that the movement cultivated, but are not proto-beats since, in the case of Corso, his talent and imagination were subordinate to the writers mentioned above, or, in the case of Snyder, his ultimate significance cannot be contained within the cultural symbols that the beat movement fostered. These aspects of the movement left it open to a vacuous ideology of individualism, and inevitably to cultural nihilism.

When various youth movements of the sixties drew back from the direction that had been set by the initial beatniks and hipsters and promoted communal consciousness and living patterns, Rexroth was quick to praise them. Yet he continued to distance himself from what he called the "upper hippoisie," those who "confused transcendence with sensationalism," [2] and who eventually revealed themselves as bourgeois egoists in their primary concern for self-perpetuation.

"The real far-out hippie is the person who is actually engaged in a personal revolt against the very evil family, a corrupt society and so forth. It is not a

massive social phenomenon, except it is a social phenomenon reflecting the collapse of this society...There's not the slightest bit of difference between Rasputin's circle and upper-middle-class hippie life." [3]

In Chapter One I alluded to how Rexroth was moved to tears by Allen Ginsberg's reading of "Howl" at the Six Gallery in 1955, and how it represented to him the breaking upon history of the voice of a new, seceding culture in America, a culture of alternative values that he hoped would spawn a wider spiritual revolution.

Yet he also saw this new poetic energy as the entry of American poetry into the discourse of the international avant-garde. In a sense, he recognized it as the sign of America's literary coming of age, the fulfillment of the prophecy voiced by Walt Whitman one hundred years earlier. But where Whitman could be interpreted as advocating a sort of American spiritual supremacy, Rexroth hoped to subvert this idea by viewing the new poetry and subculture of dissent as America's opportunity to attain to ideals that were not merely national in character, but that had to do with a spiritual consciousness handed down cross-culturally and without respect to the abstract notions of modern international relations.

So, in its initial energy, the beat movement that burst into fruition at the 6 Gallery represented for Rexroth the spirit of human revolt against all the dehumanizing and inorganic tendencies in the dominant, provincial culture. It was the howl that revealed an undercurrent of desperate dissent within an entire generation. Yet he soon recognized that its energy was not directed towards anything that could sustain alternative cultural ideals. The beat writings became the sign of spiritual revolution, but for Rexroth they contained hardly any traces of a spiritual constitution.

They did not point the path towards either true personhood or true community, which for him were the primary components of the alternative society. His view was that truly revolutionary activity always serves interrelated human ends, since it is in fact humanity fully reasserting itself against dehumanizing forces. And for Rexroth, the intellect has a large role to play in mediating the experiences of the poet who is forming and reinforcing alternative values. The beats lacked either the will or the ability to perform this intellectual function.

To reiterate, Rexroth saw the beat movement in its initial energy as one possible form in which the initial disengagement of the alternative society might take place. It embodied a restless, destabilizing energy that pressed against the icy cake of custom. But as he was to recognize, it did not contain the truly alternate values of a new society, or even promote them, except in very select cases. Though it initially seemed to signal a resocialization of poetry, and the restoration of a communal folklore element to literature, the dominant urge in the most representative writers was towards expressions of narrow subjectivity, works that advanced neither an awareness of social possibilities, nor a true disaffiliation from the dominant cultural forms.

Rexroth recognized this even in his 1957 essay, "Disengagement: The Art of the Beat Generation," which was largely celebratory of the Beats, among whom he included the whole group of indigenous younger West Coast poets. At the end of the essay, though, he prophetically appended a warning in regard to the direction the beat movement was already beginning to follow, stating,

"The disengagement of the creator, who, as creator, is necessarily judge, is one thing, but the utter nihilism of the emptied-out hipster is another. What

is going to come of an attitude like this? It is impossible to go on indefinitely saying: 'I am proud to be a delinquent,' without destroying all civilized values. Between such persons no true enduring interpersonal relationships can be built, and of course, nothing resembling a true 'culture' - an at-homeness of men with each other, their work, their loves, their environment. The end result must be the desperation of shipwreck - the despair, the orgies, ultimately the cannibalism of a lost lifeboat. I believe that most of an entire generation will go to ruin - the ruin of Celine, Artaud, Rimbaud, voluntarily, even enthusiastically." [4]

It must have pained Rexroth to write such words, since it was a recognition that the present generation was falling into the opposite trap of the one his 1930's generation had stumbled into. Whereas the pre-war generation had abandoned the virtues of individual inviolability and true human culture for the dictates of collectivism, the post-war generation, while containing so much more revolutionary promise, seemed destined to stress the value and frontiers of individual experience to such an extreme that it would destroy the values of human community from the other direction.

From Rexroth's point of view, both generations fell victim to a very American, or more specifically Calvinist, duality and historical dialectic that he recognized and hoped to transcend through a poetry renaissance.

According to Rexroth, writing that implied energy, but not enduring human values, was just as incomplete as writing that was programmatic and susceptible to Party review. While the latter type of writing deadened the individual sensibility, which is the initial source of all social change, the former type of writing courted a nihilistic solipsism that was the antithesis of the type of mysticism that "kept the light of civilization alive," the type of mysticism that revealed the deep organic relations of which reality was constituted.

In *American Poetry in the Twentieth Century*, Rexroth said that one of the reasons he was so attracted to San Francisco was that it, unlike every other major American city, seemed untainted by a New England Calvinist consciousness. There was a lack of sexual uptightness and religiously-justified capitalism, but there was also less of a stigma attached to the resulting underclass of "under-achievers," especially those who sought spiritual fulfillment outside the parameters of capitalist success.

Perry Miller has described the Puritan consciousness as a continuing dialectic in the evolution of American culture between the two sides of an essential Calvinist nature. In his essay, "From Edwards to Emerson," he writes,

"...there was in Puritanism a piety, a religious passion, the sense of an inward communication and of the divine symbolism of nature. One side of the Puritan nature hungered for these excitements; certain of its appetites desired these satisfactions and therefore found delight and ecstasy in the doctrines of regeneration and providence. But in Puritanism there was also another side, an ideal of social conformity, of law and order, of regulation and control. At the core of the theology there was an indestructible element which was mystical, and a feeling for the universe which was almost pantheistic; but there was also a social code demanding obedience to external law, a code to which good people voluntarily conformed and to which bad people should be made to conform. It aimed at propriety and decency, the virtues of middle-class respectability, self-control, thrift, and dignity, at a discipline of the emotions." [5]

Miller explains that the development of American culture throughout the 18th and 19th centuries was marked by a historical dialectic of dominance between these Puritan characteristics in the culture. For example, in a general sense, New Light Congregationalism spawned Unitarianism, which spawned Transcendentalism. And with the Transcendentalists, this essentially religious dialectic within the culture entered and helped to form one strand of the American literary tradition.

From Rexroth's point of view, the beats' literature and influence preserved this dialectic within American culture rather than transcending it in a new vision of the human personality in community. They preserved it by embodying its pantheistic side, which alone can do no more than stand as a reverse-mirror image of the culture of conformity. They defined themselves in terms that made no sense apart from the presence of what they were in conflict with. There's was primarily a negative revolt, its virtues defined by their oppositional character.

The beats' involvement in this dialectic, and Rexroth's possible transcendence of it, is perhaps best shown in their respective attitudes towards sex. Because I wanted to stress Rexroth's broad social and cultural ideas, I have not examined his ideas about sex, although readers of his poetry would probably consider that to be his central concern. Interestingly, though, Rexroth never wrote an expository essay on the subject, and mention of sex is rare in his prose works as a whole.

Certainly an openness towards, and glorification of, sexuality is implied in Rexroth's organic ideal, even apart from the poetry. In this regard Rexroth is heir of earlier Romantic writers. Yet in his poetry sex is almost always described as a sacramental act within the context of marriage. It is the vehicle for a man and a woman to enter into a mystical synthesis on a higher plane of knowledge. In some aspects his language is absolutely biblical in its connotations. Yet in post-war Christian America it was also absolutely subversive. The poetry's depiction of unashamed sensuality being blessed and sanctified by the forces of nature into which the lovers merged pointed towards values that were incomprehensible to a generation that was shocked by Elvis Presley's gyrating hips.

The Beats, though, proved themselves to be just as far removed from the sexual values expressed in Rexroth's poetry as the rest of America was. In breathlessly opposing the sexual rules of the era, by being casual to the point of flippancy about sex, or by recording every nuance of homosexual lovemaking in their journals, they made sex into a thoroughly political, rather than sacramental, act. The beats never allowed sex to become an emblem of enduring values and the sacredness of relationship. It did not even become a subjective experience of the Other. As presaged in Allen Ginsberg's description of his poetic calling, sex, and poetry for the beats were always some form of elaboration on masturbation, the ultimate taboo in 1950s America.

For Rexroth, though, alternativity meant transcendence in every area of culture, not mere opposition; according to his vision of the alternate, organic society it was possible to preserve a type of natural social discipline and harmony while not trampling on the meaningfulness and creativity of lives in their individuality. Yet this required a truly alternative paradigm. The Beats never really embraced such a paradigm, embracing instead the somewhat solitary "religious passion" of the heretical Puritan. The initial, primary texts of the Beats reveal this affinity, especially when read in the light of a sympathetic contemporaneous interpretation of what the Beats represented.

In a series of essays written in the late 1950's and early 1960's, John Clellon Holmes described the beats and their acolytes as a generation obsessed with a religious quest, and with the exploration of new frontiers, experiences and states of consciousness. It was a generation that was caught in a metaphysical crisis, knowing they lacked something, but not

knowing exactly what it was. This provoked an endless curiosity as to what experiences might be able to connect them to something real. The dominant conformity disallowed this search and thus led the Beats to rely on what Holmes called an "instinctive individuality." [6]

Arising out of their utter lack of personal and cultural moorings, the Beat generation was driven not by a nostalgic sense of a faith discarded, but rather by an intense preoccupation with the need for a new and authentic faith.

"It is a *will* to believe, even in the face of an inability to do so in conventional terms. And that is bound to lead to excesses in one direction or another." [7]

Holmes went on to assert that both the Beat and the Young Republican knew that "the valueless abyss of modern life is unbearable," and they both had "had enough homelessness, valuelessness, faithlessness," [8]; they simply responded to it in different ways, only one of which was comprehensible within the conventions of society. Holmes observed that

"...parents, civic leaders, law-enforcement officers, and even literary critics...see no signs of a search for spiritual values in a generation whose diverse tragic heroes have included jazzman Charlie Parker, actor Dean, and poet Dylan Thomas; and whose interests have ranged all the way from bebop to rock and roll; from hipsterism to Zen Buddhism; from vision-inducing drugs to Method acting. To be told that this is a generation whose almost exclusive concern is the discovery of something in which to believe seems to them to fly directly in the face of all the evidence....," [9]

which begs the question of whether a never-ending search is qualitatively different than a never-ending flight. But Holmes does admit that "it is a generation with a greater facility for entertaining ideas than for believing in them." Still, in a positive sense, he discerned that the beat movement was fundamentally a declaration of the value of the

human, and an outcry against de-humanization in an apparently valueless age. Their icons bore this out --

"It was exactly as if Brando were saying in scene after scene; 'Man is not merely a social animal, a victim, a product. At the bottom, man is a spirit...'," [10]

spirit evidently being defined as that which imparts essential value and worthiness to receive love. The solitary cry of the hidden, autonomous, and undetermined spirit is thus the prototypical mode of beat expression, which explains their romantic fascination with jazz, since, as Holmes claims,

"...jazz is primarily the music of inner freedom, of improvisation, of the creative individual rather than the interpretive group. It is the music of a submerged people, who *feel* free, and this is precisely how young people feel today." [11]

It also explains their poetics of spontaneity.

"All of them believe that only that which cries to be said, no matter how 'unpoetic' it may seem; only that which is unalterably true to the sayer, and bursts out of him in a flood, finding its own form as it comes, is worth the saying in the first place." [12]

And finally, Holmes explained that the basic intellectual stance of the beats was one defined by opposition to all historical modes of thought that tried to organize the world outside the self -- an upsetting stance to critics as diverse as Paul Goodman and Norman Podhoretz. In Goodman's case, Holmes writes that the beats' "spiritual preoccupation...made him impatient," since as a good materialist

"He doesn't really believe there *is* a 'metaphysical crisis'; it is only that work has been made meaningless, interpersonal relations are beset by moralistic shibboleths, and most of our values are unrelated to reality. But all this, he says, can be *fixed*." [13]

On the other hand, Podhoretz the traditionalist was angered by attitudes that he perceived to be "apolitical, asocial, and amoral," and by the beats' primary preoccupation with "intuitions, soul states, and affirmations of Being." [14] Holmes admits that "given [Podhoretz's] values, his charges are all understandable," but he says that, in the end, the budding neo-conservative criticized the Beats for not looking at things coherently, rationally, and responsibly, which was their point – that old modes of thought had failed. [15] There are points of agreement between Goodman, Podhoretz, and Rexroth, primarily because they were all self-conscious intellectuals confronted with a seeming anti-intellectualism, yet Rexroth, as will be seen, was the only one who didn't charge the Beats with any essential error of viewpoint, except that they were unable to extend their spiritual protest into the broader terms of human culture.

Holmes, the most prominent early chronicler of the beats, was ultimately ambiguous about the lasting contributions of the generation. He said that it was primarily a literary, not a social movement, but that it nevertheless influenced the culture of politics, shaped the subsequent social movements of the 1960's, and made the avant-garde chic, in a not altogether commodified way [16].

Not all of the beats necessarily accepted Holmes's formulations wholeheartedly, but their most famous early writings largely confirmed them.

Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* is probably the ultimate aesthetic expression of the emerging Beat Generation, and illustrates much of John Clellon Holmes' commentary. It was first published in 1957 by The Viking Press, under the sponsorship of literary critic

Malcolm Cowley, at exactly the right time to catch the surging wave of attention that the beats were starting to receive.

The story itself is a semi-fictional account of the cross-country travels and adventures of a Don Quixote-type character, Dean Moriarity, and his narrating Sancho Panza, Sal Paradise. It is also not so loosely based on the actual experiences of Neal Cassady (Dean), and Kerouac himself (Sal).

The prose style is meant to exemplify the first-thought-best-thought aesthetics of spontaneity, in which the writing finds its own unmediated form as it gushes from the writer's consciousness. Kerouac did nothing to squelch, and indeed promoted, the myth that *On the Road* was composed entirely in a single, unstinting marathon session at the typewriter, when in fact, at most, only the final draft was produced in this way. An initial draft had been composed as early as 1948.

The implicit anti-intellectualism in this romantic stance, and the cultivation of an irrational prose style, is figured in the character of Dean Moriarity himself. Dean, who is also meant to personify pure sexual energy, seems, at the beginning of the novel, to be possessing the rudiments of a new poetics – the interspersing of clichéd phrases or sayings within a constant refrain of monosyllables, representing a type of Dionysian overwhelming of the Apollonian. Yet by the end, when the phrases drop out and only the monosyllabics remain, an elegaic tone has taken over the prose, giving one the idea that perhaps Kerouac (Sal) is uneasy about the road Dean is taking him down.

Nevertheless, the overall prose style remains fairly consistent to the end; at times eloquent, at times manic, but always pushing against the appearance of control and linguistic

discipline. It is meant to flow, flow, flow, creating the precise emblem of the writer's immediate access to the constant flow of his own mental impressions.

"So in America when the sun goes down and I sit on the old broken-down river pier watching the long, long skies over New Jersey and sense all that raw land that rolls in one unbelievable huge bulge over to the West Coast, and all that road going, all the people dreaming in the immensity of it, and in Iowa I know by now the children must be crying in the land where they let the children cry, and tonight the stars'll be out, and don't you know that God is Pooh Bear? the evening star must be drooping and shedding her sparkler dims on the prairie, which is just before the coming of complete night that blesses the earth, darkens all rivers, cups the peaks and folds the final shore in, and nobody, nobody knows what's going to happen to anybody besides the forlorn rags of growing old, I think of Dean Moriarity, I even think of Old Dean Moriarity the father we never found, I think of Dean Moriarity."
[17]

The only question left at the end of the novel pertains to whether Sal is any closer to Paradise than he was at the beginning, whether hope has been negated and consumed by the very energy that he thought was his salvation. Having placed all his bets on energy, or "going," and having considered ideas (like Dean) to be completely transient, Lockean flashes resulting from a myriad of sense impressions, he is left with only nostalgia as an impetus to any further action. The construction of anything socially meaningful, which for Rexroth required some familiarity with the international discourse regarding social ideas, is undermined by the extremely Modernist impulse to immediately destroy, or move beyond, what has been created.

Even though *On the Road's* plot revolves partly around Sal Paradise's attempts to find and maintain friendships, this thematic aspect of the novel is repeatedly undercut by the pantheistical, or more accurately, monist character of the mystical experience Sal is questing after. At times he approaches this state while listening to jazz in a club, but the supreme

mystical moment in his adventure occurs in a jungle in Mexico, when, lying on top of their rapidly deteriorating jalopy, he realizes

"[f]or the first time in my life the weather was not something that touched me, that caressed me, froze or sweated me, but *became me*. The atmosphere and I became the same. Soft infinitesimal showers of microscopic bugs fanned down on my face as I slept, and they were extremely pleasant and soothing. The sky was starless, utterly unseen and heavy. I could lie there all night long with my face exposed to the heavens, and it would do me no more harm than a velvet drape drawn over me." (italics mine) [18]

This is actually a very traditional mysticism -- the merging of all into the One -- but Kerouac juxtaposes this scene with the drug-affected failures of communication and responsibility that also occur during their Mexican sojourn. Kerouac describes an experience that many mystics have sought, but it is framed as a reality that is entirely unrelated to the world of relationships and mundane (dailiness). In fact, it is a denial of the reality of that world. Thus, in terms that Arthur Schlesinger used regarding the Transcendentalists, it was a desertion of democracy (or the concern about social relations) for pure philosophy (or mysticism).

Or, as Rexroth said in a review of the writings of Lafcadio Hearn, it had nothing to do with the rhythms of daily living. Its subjectivism was related to the non-conformism of Anne Hutchinson and Henry Thoreau, who, while bearing witness to the essential inviolability of the individual, were unable to integrate that individual inviolability into an organic and enduring human community.

Where Kerouac's *On the Road* epitomized John Clellon Holmes' characterization of the Beats as spiritual questers who act out of a sense of "instinctive individuality," Allen

Ginsberg's *Howl* was the ultimate expression of what Rexroth would call "the emotional apprehension of alienation," which is close to what Holmes meant when he talked about "beat-ness" itself.

In a social sense, Ginsberg's poem is descriptive, rather than prescriptive or proscriptive. As Rexroth recognized, it crystallized in aesthetic form the spiritual condition of western culture at that particular moment in history. Not that Ginsberg's description did not have precedents in Baudelaire, Artaud, and even Villon, but what was significant for Rexroth was that Ginsberg seemed to speak for an entire generational consciousness, and that he presented this consciousness vocally, communicated within a communal environment, potentially setting into play an entirely unprecedented set of cultural dynamics. It did not quite work out the way Rexroth hoped, but the energy was there in lines that were surreally descriptive of that generation's "metaphysical crisis," as Holmes described it.

The opening lines about "the best minds of my generation" are well known, along with the nearly invariable use of "who" to begin in each breath-phrase.

"who disappeared into the volcanoes of Mexico leaving behind nothing but / the shadow of dungarees and the lava and ash of poetry scattered in / fireplace Chicago,

who reappeared on the West Coast investigating the FBI in beards and shorts / with big pacifist eyes sexy in their dark skin passing out incompre- / hensible leaflets

who burned cigarette holes in their arms protesting the narcotic tobacco haze / of Capitalism,

who distributed Supercommunist pamphlets in Union Square weeping and / undressing while the sirens of Los Alamos wailed them down, and / wailed down Wall, and the Staten Island ferry also wailed,

who broke down crying in white gymnasiums naked and trembling before / the machinery of other skeletons,..." [19]

In a letter to the poet Richard Eberhart, which Eberhart later published, Ginsberg described *Howl* as an "affirmation..." I would argue from this representative fragment that it is an affirmation of only a limited, though not unimportant type. What is more obvious is the building of a grand trope around the theme of despair and nihilistic protest/revolt. The profound effect of the poem, for those who were at the 6 Gallery, and for many of those who read it subsequently, was that it acted as an affirmation of identity and existence, rather than of relevant values. It was an affirmation of the "human," as Holmes asserted was true of the entire Beat Generation. It was also a historical moment of definition and self-recognition.

For Rexroth that moment of self-recognition was a necessary feat of consciousness, similar or analogous to the entry into self-consciousness of the proletariat that Marx prophesied as a part of his historical dialectic, yet Rexroth hoped that the new post-war consciousness would not be followed by the assertion of a counter-ideology. He hoped that it would be a moment of cultural clarification, a sort of prologue to a manifesto, without the manifesto. Rexroth never wanted to write a manifesto of the alternative culture, not even in his own poetry, because it would have been artificial.

At the 6 Gallery he was simply "blown away" by the sudden display of physical and literary evidence that the incipient alternative culture was aware of its own existence. It was up to them to build upon this self-consciousness, but Rexroth felt that he could be an intellectual guide and resource throughout the integrative process.

The second, "Moloch" section of Ginsberg's poem is an even more explicit statement of protest and revolt, characterizing the dominant, military-industrial, and commercial society in demonic terms and bearing witness to the degree of his own possession by this demon.

"Moloch whose mind is pure machinery! Moloch whose blood is running / money! Moloch whose fingers are ten armies! Moloch whose breast / is a cannibal dynamo!

....

Moloch who entered my soul early! Moloch in whom I am a consciousness / without a body! Moloch who frightened me out of my natural ec- / stasy! [20]

The religious diction and passion here is subtly reminiscent of camp-meeting rhetoric during the First and Second Great Awakenings, yet as with the case of the Puritan heretics, there is an implicit denial of original sin ("who frightened me out of my *natural* ecstasy!"), without the denial of the existence of real evil, which is usually cloaked in the representative forms of the dominant hierarchy. This sort of social indictment could have possibly been explicitly extended into a formulation of interrelated social ideals, yet of course that was not Ginsberg's primary purpose or impetus throughout the poem.

The third, "Carl Solomon" section of the poem, which was written later, is on the surface a declaration of social identity between Ginsberg and Solomon, but which is more clearly a romanticization of the institutionalized Solomon on the order of Lionel Trilling's description of John Keats as a hero of the individual consciousness. Thus, by inferral through the diachronically repeated phrase of identification, it is also Ginsberg's self-romanticization as a "Hebrew socialist" revolutionist of the spirit.

"I'm with you in Rockland

where you bang on the catatonic piano the soul is innocent and

immortal it should never die ungodly in an armed madhouse
I'm with you in Rockland
where fifty more shocks will never return your soul to its body again / from its
pilgrimage to a cross in the void
I'm with you in Rockland
where you accuse your doctors of insanity and plot the Hebrew
socialist revolution against the fascist national Golgotha
I'm with you in Rockland
where you will split the heavens of Long Island and resurrect your / living human
Jesus from the superhuman tomb [21]

For Rexroth, *Howl* was an important marker of the potential disaffiliation from society of that society's future. Its potential communal significance was shown by the crowd's reaction and the various witnesses to its effect on their consciousnesses.

"What happened in San Francisco first and spread from there across the world was public poetry, the return of a tribal, preliterate relationship between poet and audience." [22]

Yet the poem affirmed the value of the human primarily through its "howl" against "the valueless abyss of modern life, and not through the reflection or implicit mediation of constructive alternative values. It was a howl that found resonance among many younger writers and artists, and was not a wrong-headed affirmation; it was simply a necessarily limited one.

While the beats became a national sensation, they were easily assimilated into the culture they opposed because adhered to one side of the historical dialectic that defined its development. They simply did not know enough to become a true cultural avant-garde, in Rexroth's eyes. They were not adequately informed about the historical foundations of culture and the possibilities regarding a transcendence of their present culture's entire value system.

Rexroth's project, from the *Classics Revisited* reviews he gave over the radio to the Friday evening "discussions" in his home, had been meant to equip a cultural avant-garde that would be able to do this. Rather than seeing Rexroth as a jealous old man who resented the invasion of his turf by the young bohemians, which is the view of most critics, I would like to advance the notion that he was more than willing to accept the beats, if only they had proved themselves worthy to accomplish something lasting in the culture.

As the months and years went by after the Six Gallery reading, Rexroth felt more and more constrained to point out the limitations not only of the beats, but of modern American poetry as a whole. Thus, in 1963 he wrote his most penetrating, and, in some cases, outrageous assessment. Published in *Arts in Society*, his essay "Why is American Poetry Culturally Deprived," made the broad assertion that American poets, since the beginning of the century and up through the Beats, had shown a severe lack of intellectual awareness and rigor. Even those who professed to write from a position of broad social awareness, and had become famous for doing so, fell short of transcending a particular type of American provincialism.

"I have known the leading exponents of all the movements in American poetry which presumed ideological motivation, that at least attempted to assume the language of those general ideas which were part of the storm and stress of international thought. *Without exception* (italics mine), these ideas came to their poet exponents only through the most superficial literary journalism, were never comprehended, either the simple elements or their consequences, and were never in fact acted upon." [23]

Then he gets down to brass tacks. I quote liberally to show how Rexroth's Menckenesque polemicism comes into full-blown power over things that have long

disturbed him. And, as with Mencken, one must always read between the lines, conscious of the writer's life-long project, to understand the real message.

Of Carl Sandburg, a poet for whom he had often expressed admiration, Rexroth wrote,

"His attitude towards 'the people' was a compound of Chicago police-court reporter sentimentality, Midwest smalltown Populist oratory, and Hull House maidenly magnanimity. The picture of the young Sandburg breathlessly following the debates in the international socialist movement over Bernstein's Revisionism, the Millerand crisis, Luxemburg and Kautsky disputing the questions of imperialism and the falling rate of profit is so ridiculous it is not even laughable." [24]

Of American Modernism, he called it "a movement of technical reform of syntax and a cleaning up of the vocabulary of poetry." As for its intellectual importance:

"The profound revolutions of the sensibility, the climactic changes in the soul of modern man, so-called, which began with Baudelaire, Kierkegaard, Newman, Dostoevsky, and Nietzsche and which represent in fact a systematic destructive criticism of the foundations of humanism and humanitarianism, and which have thrown up in the course of their ever-accelerating liquidation all the anti-humane art movements and philosophies of our time, were, to judge from the evidence, totally incomprehensible to the American imitators of their stylistic innovations – even at the remove of fifty years." [25]

Humanitarianism in this essay Rexroth is not. Carrying out more fully his assault on the intellects of the American modernists, he wrote that Eliot and Pound turned fascist

"...simply because fascism is so much more easily assimilated by simple and emotionally unstable minds – you don't have to read so many books." [26]

Yet Rexroth is not entirely vicious. He has some mixed praise for poets such as Paul Goodman, Conrad Aiken, Hart Crane, Wallace Stevens, and Allen Ginsberg with his "emotional consciousness of the fact of apocalypse." He doesn't praise their poetry

necessarily for the intellectual content they implied, except in Stevens to a certain extent, but rather because

"It serves society as [poetry] always has, as a symbolic criticism of value, but the values it concerns itself with are not those of philosophy or a metaphysics of the conscience." [27]

And he finishes with an assessment of someone he truly considered to be a friend.

"So with William Carlos Williams, who for contemporary taste is the best of the generation of Classic Modernists. As a handler of general ideas, Williams is pathetic. As either aesthetic or epistemology, his favorite phrase, 'No ideas but in things,' is infantile. He thought of his great poem *Paterson* as a philosophic epic preaching precisely that profound philosophy. What it is, of course, is a profound organization of the life experience of a small-town doctor with all of a small-town doctor's infinite roots into a community into which he was born, practiced medicine, and never left except for vacations." [28]

This essay signaled an admission of defeat by Rexroth of his long-standing vision of bringing about a cultural renaissance in America through the enlivening and sustaining effect of poetry. He does not abandon the essentials of the vision, but he does become more open to other avenues of counter-cultural integration, and personally, he begins to withdraw from the activities that had characterized his earlier life. After 1963, as expressed through his poetry and style of life, he began to retreat into a spiritual isolation that was partly a repudiation of his organic vision, but also a late reinstatement of his early sense of belonging to an elite spiritual aristocracy.

Earlier I mentioned that Rexroth tried to help enact a poetry renaissance that would have the social effect of transcending the Calvinist cultural dialectic, a dialectic consisting of a pantheistic religious enthusiasm and, its other side, an ideal of social conformity. This

transcendence, he believed, would be rooted in poetry's ability to mediate values that were neither individualistic (in both a hedonistic and existentialist sense) nor collective, but that grew out of the organic interchange between the individual and society. The great British anarchist and aesthete Herbert Read, a great influence on Rexroth, described this interchange as the only basis for an enduring art, asserting that

"the work of art, by processes which we have so far failed to understand, is a product of the relationship which exists between an individual and a society, and no great art is possible unless you have as corresponding and contemporary activities the spontaneous freedom of the individual and the passive coherence of a society. To escape from society (if that were possible) is to escape from the only soil fertile enough to nourish art." [29]

When Jack Kerouac wrote a letter to Rexroth in 1958 as an attempt at conciliation, but that also cautioned the older writer to "IGNORE WAR," he was advocating an impossibility, for to ignore the atmosphere of war that shrouded the post-war world was to banish from consciousness a large part of what that society meant. [30] It was expressing the view that writing was the embellishment of a narrowed subjectivity, and the courting of a supposedly "higher" consciousness, rather than the full and mature subjectivity that Leo Hamalian has stated was Rexroth's distinctive attainment. Kerouac's was an attitude and attendant literary output that valued vision to the exclusion of reality, while paradoxically resulting in impotent submission to an other-directed reality. The fact that Kerouac became a very popular writer meant something significant, and sinister, to Rexroth as he entered the twilight of his life. Hamalian observes that Rexroth's poetry, contrarily, grew "out of the tensions and similarities between the world of his visions and the world of reality." [31]

This sort of poetics is best expressed in some of Rexroth's long poems, which have garnered little critical discussion. In "The Dragon and the Unicorn," which critic Thomas

Parkinson has called a twentieth century masterpiece, Rexroth presents a poem that fluctuates between the narration of experience and philosophical commentary, gradually effecting, in the sympathetic reader, a merging of these two realms; life and thought, act and idea -- a merging he had once hoped to effect throughout the entire culture in the final dispelling of alienation as the culture's dominant characteristic.

The heart's mirror hangs in the void.
Vision blossoms in the night
Like stars opening in the brain.
Jehovah created the world
In six days. The Bible does not
Mention the nights. He holds the
Creation of the night in
Concealment for His own ends.
There is no reality
Except that of experience
And experience is the
Conversation of persons.

The next day, up the river
Through the hills, through Llangadfyn
And the high moors of the Border.
I stop in a fisherman's inn
Just this side of Welshpool. Cold mutton
And black beer for supper. The guests
Are English, decent people, but
Too much like drawings in *Punch*.
I go into the pub, full of
Peasants singing and drinking beer.
No one speaks English except
To me, but they are all very
Friendly and buy me drinks and
Ask wistfully if I think
America plans to go to war.
Not having been in the habit
Of using "we" when I mean the
State Department, it takes time
To explain that America
Is several different persons,
Some of them like Welsh peasants.

They are curious about John
L. Lewis, who is to Wales what
Giannini is to Italy.
The room reeks very pleasantly
Of the Welsh smell. I shall never
Know what it is, you can't ask,
"I say, what makes you smell so odd?"
Later when I tried to get some
Information on the subject
From Dylan Thomas, he was quite
Put out. But my hiking guides,
Shropshire and the Border, North Wales,
Still smell in California.
In the morning, loud with birds,
Wales drops behind me. Never
Will I find better people
Or a more beautiful country.

All things, all entities of
Whatsoever nature are
Only perspectives on persons.
Each moment of the universe
Is a moment of choice, chosen
Out of the infinite system
Of possibility which forms
The content of experience,
The continuously shifting
And flowing organism
Of relationships, its form
Determined by the character
Of the willing agent, its
Contents the evaluative
Strands and strains, the perspectives
Connecting with all other persons.
Each moment of the universe
And all the universes
Are reflected in each other
And in all their parts and
Thence again in themselves. [32]

*

THE SIXTIES AS AFTERMATH

In the 1960's the beat movement transmogrified into the hippie craze, and San Francisco became the scene of intense ideological debate (under cover of aesthetics) concerning the future of poetry. One direction the avant-garde took was toward the formulation of a poetics based largely on Ludwig Wittgenstein's insights into the nature of language -- the so-called "L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E" poets. Other poets became much more ideological in their work, especially with the onset of the Vietnam War and the growth of a new protest movement to speak out against U.S. involvement. At the same time, Berkeley became the the cultural and media focal point of the Bay area, as students resisted Administration discipline to an unprecedented degree.

The 1960s also saw the departure of Kenneth Rexroth from San Francisco for good. In 1966 he travelled with Carol Tinker and his daughter Mary to Germany and Scandinavia, and in 1967 he visited Brussels, Paris, Barcelona, Singapore, Thailand, China and Japan. In 1968 he accepted a position on the English faculty at the University of California-Santa Barbara and nestled into a small home in Montecito, where he pretty much kept to himself, not mingling with a faculty who, as he said, "think Montessori is something with cheese and tomato sauce." [33] Yet he was hardly sentimental towards San Francisco at that time either, calling it a "typical mafia run town, like Chicago when I left in 1927." [34]

How much of this is to be chalked up to pure crankiness is difficult to tell. He was entering his sixties himself, and still felt himself to be useful. But almost everyone was viewing him as a museum piece from an earlier time. Perhaps this is why Rexroth published his autobiographical novel in 1964 and ended its narrative in 1929 -- it revealed

him as a precocious young radical who was involved in the same issues as those the 1960s presented. Yet if this was the strategy, it backfired, since most reviews talked about how Rexroth was from a "simpler" era in American history. It seemed that it was impossible for him to make the most obvious things about himself understood.

In the same context he said that he had not made a true friend in San Francisco, except for his second wife Marie, in the forty years he lived there. This is of course an exaggeration, since the book that Geoffrey Gardner put together in 1980, entitled simply, *For Rexroth*, showed that he always had more friends than he was perhaps aware of. [35] But considering the disarray of the culture, and San Francisco in particular, in comparison to the actual simplicity of his cultural vision, it is probably safe to say that a little bitterness lurked beneath the surface of his writing.

While at Santa Barbara Rexroth was primarily employed by the university in teaching a class of his own invention, "Poetry and Performance." In this class the only requirement was that each student devise some sort of creative performance to be put on in front of the class. As an example of Rexroth's laxity towards the students' "creativity," one student of a minimalist sensibility merely shot an arrow across the stage.

Needless to say, a majority of students claimed on their class evaluations that the course was their all-time favorite. Surprisingly, though, several also said that they had *learned more* in "Poetry and Performance" than in any other class, and made reference to the rambling soliloquies Rexroth gave during most class periods. At the least, Rexroth was a tremendous potential resource while at the Santa Barbara campus, yet one that went largely unused by the suspicious English Department faculty.

On one hand, Rexroth's conduct as a professor at U.C.- Santa Barbara was brilliantly subversive of the established university regimen. It was difficult for the department to phase out the course, since it was the most popular one on campus at a time when the news from Berkeley made administrators and faculty more sensitive, if not to the desires of students, at least to the dynamics of student rebellion. And parents were also probably pleased with the A's that every student who put on a performance received.

On the other hand, the experience at UC-Santa Barbara could serve as an emblem for the gradual retreat of Rexroth from the fervor of his earlier, pre-Beat idealism. In the 1960's and 1970's he became more of a reclusive contemplative and an iconic, misunderstood figure for the counter-culture. He swam in the ocean and tended to a simple garden, while writing or translating short lyrics that were Asian in tone and diction.

In fact, though, the pace of societal change was probably outpacing the relevance of his vision of a poetry renaissance. He did not let go of it, but grew even more willing to let his views be communicated through the standard, somewhat tame form of books, Encyclopedia Britannica entries, and university lectures.

As sort of an ironic coda to his entire career as a poet and intellectual, Rexroth's biographer, Linda Hamalian, describes an event that happened in the spring of 1973, after Rexroth was denied tenure at UCSB.

"In May [sic], a poetry reading was held at Campbell Hall in honor of Rexroth, and to protest the action taken by the university. Among the poets who participated were Allen Ginsberg, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, and Gary Snyder. Snyder talked about the first time he read Rexroth's poems, how impressed he was by Rexroth's ability to evoke life in the Sierras. He also spoke about how Rexroth's political awareness and understanding of Asian culture had influenced his own work. Ferlinghetti reminisced about the days when he first met Rexroth, before there was such a thing as the 'San

Francisco Literary Renaissance.' Accompanied by flautists and a guitar player, Rexroth read some original poems and translations from the Chinese, for which he received a standing ovation. The three-hour reading, which drew a huge crowd – people had to sit on stage and in the aisles – was covered as an important event by the *San Francisco Examiner* (March 11, 1973)." [36]

CHAPTER 5 NOTES

1. William Everson, *Dionysius and the Beat: Four Letters on the Archetype*, (Sparrow 63, Santa Barbara: Black Sparrow Press, 1977)
2. Kenneth Rexroth, "The Spiritual Alchemy of Thomas Vaughan," *World Outside the Window: The Selected Essays of Kenneth Rexroth*, (New York: New Directions, 1987), 251.
3. quoted in David Meltzer, *Golden Gate: Interviews with 5 San Francisco Poets* (Berkeley: Wingbow Press, 1976), 56.
4. Rexroth, "Disengagement: The Art of the Beat Generation," *World Outside the Window*, 55-56.
5. Perry Miller, "From Edwards to Emerson," in *American Transcendentalism: An Anthology of Criticism* (University of Notre Dame Press, 1973), 70.
6. John Clellon Holmes, "This is the Beat Generation," *Passionate Opinions: The Cultural Essays* (Fayetteville: The University of Arkansas Press, 1988), 59.
7. *Ibid.*, 61.
8. *Ibid.*, 62-63.
9. Holmes, "The Philosophy of the Beat Generation," *Passionate Opinions*, 67-68.
10. *Ibid.*, 71.
11. *Ibid.*, 74.
12. *Ibid.*, 75.
13. Holmes, "The Game of the Name," *Passionate Opinions*, 86.
14. *Ibid.*, 83.
15. *Ibid.*, 89.
16. *Ibid.*, 91.
17. Jack Kerouac, *On the Road* (New York: Penguin Books, 1991), 309-310.
18. *Ibid.*, 294.
19. Allen Ginsberg, *Collected Poems, 1947-1980* (New York: Harper & Row, 1984), 127.
20. *Ibid.*, 131.
21. *Ibid.*, 133.
22. Rexroth, *American Poetry in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1971), 141.
23. Rexroth, "Why is American Poetry Culturally Deprived?", *World Outside the Window*, 209.
24. *Ibid.*, 210.
25. *Ibid.*, 210.
26. *Ibid.*, 211.
27. *Ibid.*, 217.
28. *Ibid.*, 217.
29. Herbert Read, *Anarchy and Order: Essays in Politics* (London: Faber and Faber, 1954), 61.
30. Jack Kerouac, January 14, 1958 letter to Rexroth (UCLA Special Collections).

31. Leo Hamalian, "Scanning the Self: The Influence of Emerson on Rexroth," *South Dakota Review* 27:2, (Summer 1989), 5.
32. Rexroth, *The Collected Longer Poems of Kenneth Rexroth* (New York: New Directions, 1968), 106-108.
33. Rexroth, "A Crystal Out of Time and Space: The Poet's Diary," *Conjunctions* 8, 79.
34. *Ibid.*, 76.
35. Among the friends who contributed to the volume were George Woodcock, Helen Adam, John Ciardi, Richard Eberhart, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, William Everson, John Haines, Sam Hamill, Denise Levertov, Richmond Lattimore, Josephine Miles, Czeslaw Milosz, Gloria Oden, Carl Rakosi, Edouard Roditi, Muriel Rukeyser, Eliot Weinberger, and Theodore Weiss.
36. Linda Hamalian, *A Life of Kenneth Rexroth* (New York, London: W.W. Norton, 1991), 338.

CONCLUSION

As the phenomenon of the San Francisco Renaissance became engulfed in the turmoils and movements of the 1960's, the Bay area became an incubus and testing ground for many of the styles of political or social radicalism now associated with that era. Perhaps more than anywhere else, San Francisco had a continuously vital radical tradition to consult and find reinforcement. And in providing a living link between the days of the Longshoremen's' strike of 1933 and the free speech confrontations of 1968, Kenneth Rexroth may have been one of the primary factors in keeping that radical legacy alive.

With his emphasis on anarchical pacifism, Rexroth was predictive of the most effective mode of protest in the sixties, that of passive non-resistance; and his persistence within the libertarian crowd to keep alive the ideal of a non-hierarchical structure of organization was predictive of similar concerns about "participatory democracy" among the New Left. In many ways, Rexroth and the San Francisco radical community were working through models of political activity and social protest that groups in the sixties, from Students for a Democratic Society to the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, later worked through themselves. And if there had been direct channels of influence, the later radicals could have learned much from the former's activities.

Nevertheless, the San Francisco Renaissance was primarily concerned with the reinvigoration of culture through literary and artistic means. Indeed, some of the primary figures were relatively uninvolved in political activity, narrowly construed. Most of them

were only desirous of working as free and independent artists, able to produce and circulate their wares within a non-repressive, non-ideological environment. This caused them to agitate for reforms that would make this possible; still, it would be a stretch to call them all revolutionaries.

Kenneth Rexroth, on the other hand, was deeply revolutionary both in feeling and in motive. He may have always been tinted (or tainted) by his intense involvement in 1930's-style radicalism, but he also recognized the weaknesses of that type of overt radicalism and was always alert to ideological ways of reasoning. Instead, he turned towards the possibility of changing "sensibilities," or the way people lived their lives as effected by their world-views. In the 1950's he came to believe that if this could be accomplished, society's forms would also be transformed. Hence, his promotion of the communal poetry reading as act of cultural integration.

In the 1960's, the purity and stringency of Rexroth's revolutionary ideals were also revealed. As he saw the radical minority becoming co-opted, deintellectualized, and unconscious of alienation as the primary danger to the culture, he tried to redefine terms in order to stem the tide. Three essays from the period illustrate his diagnosis of the times that were a'changin.' Taken together, they constitute one of the most concise, unrelenting and tragic indictments of American society I have ever read.

1963's "The Institutionalization of Revolt, The Domestication of Dissent," first published in *Arts in Society*, picks up on and develops the theme of his 1958 essay, "Revolt: True and False," that theme being societal co-optation or assimilation of dissent. In the five intervening years, though, Rexroth had become, from his point of view, much

less incredulous towards “Society’s” ability to turn radicalism into a fad. He had also become much more pessimistic about the possibility of retaining the life-patterns of a viable alternative culture, since most radicals succumbed to society’s image of the radical. In 1958 he had sounded the warning note,

“Be very careful you don’t become what Madison Avenue wants every artist to be – a wild man.” [1]

and in 1963 he looks back,

“I doubt if anybody was prepared for what happened. No one was expecting a new kind of meretriciousness, the kitsch of pseudo-alienation, to become the popular culture of the next decade. I thought I was. I gave talks and wrote articles mentioning such a possibility. But I always spoke in terms of precedents – comic tricksters like Dali, nihilists of the good thing like Hemingway country house weekend revolutionaries and later disillusioned revolutionaries like Auden and Spender, Kierkegaard at PR-Time cocktail parties, all the factitiousness of the compromised... It is this nihilistic total rejection of modern society which is relatively new – new at least in its intensity, pervasiveness and almost immediate acceptance as a fad by the very people against whom it was directed. Dope, Dadaism, and destruction are domesticated today and part of all well-appointed middle-class décor...” [2]

This is an amplification of the point made in 1958, that revolt in itself, if not directed by an alternative, humane value-system, can be turned towards very reactionary and dangerous ends. But in 1958 he was not yet aware of the utter thoroughness of the co-optation process, how even the extremes of disaffiliation could not only be transformed into a commodity, but could actually serve as a positive support to the very system one was condemning by acting as a sort of counter-balance or pressure valve. As Rexroth writes, .

“... the immoralism of the new alienees is the immoralism of any country club...” [3]

I have already touched on the substance of 1963's "Why is American Poetry Culturally Deprived?" in an previous chapter, but in the context of the essay described above, it can also be seen as part of Rexroth's revisionist view of the American avant-garde in the twentieth century. Whereas in the 1930's he was part of the vanguard who resisted the idea that the avant-garde was dead, in the 1960's he reconsidered his earlier position. He pointed to the bourgeois provincialism of most American avant-gardists and thus called into question their presiding values. He also raised again an issue that he was never able to fully resolve – the issue of the relationship between the artist or writer's personal life and his or her art. Was the artist's work compromised by a compromised life-style, or did the work stand apart, disengaged from the artist or writer's personal failings.

Rexroth usually leaned towards the former proposition, but tended to push the question into the realm of personality, i.e., that actions had to be interpreted within the context of the writer's general personality – yet a personality that could still be largely discerned within the work. Perhaps in light of the multiple infidelities Linda Hamalian describes in her biography, Rexroth never wanted to come down firm on this issue in his theoretical statements, even though he constantly emphasized its relevance in his polemics.

In 1967 Rexroth wrote the essay, "Who Is Alienated From What?," which is the most problematic of the three essays discussed here in terms of expressing a coherent argument. There is an undercurrent of ennui in the essay, a sort of despairing that is unique within Rexroth's oeuvre.

Yet this essay is also the most withering polemic of them all. It proved to be his last prolonged argumentative essay on the subject of alienation, and its conclusion was that America's capitalist, "predatory" system had produced by the mid-1960's a society of almost complete alienation. Rexroth deemed the situation so deep and widespread that even intellectuals, professional Leftists, and workers had no idea what had happened to them. The artists of the supposed avant-garde, like Andy Warhol, produced only for the well-to-do white population, while

"...millions of mute inglorious people, surfeited with commodities and commodity relationships, become ever more divorced from their work, their fellows, their spouses and children, their lives and themselves." [4]

The essay fails to end on a hopeful note, standing merely as a diagnosis of an unendurable cultural condition. It leaves us with a Rexroth who is a bit different from the Rexroth I have wanted to describe in this study, since I hoped to describe him as one of America's last great religious romantics, someone who, almost genetically, believed in the redemption of society through, first, a clear recognition of the enemies of cultural health, and secondly, through the communication of life-sustaining social values by those who were best qualified to discern them, the poets.

Whether his diagnosis was ultimately correct or not, his vision was more clearheaded, consistent and influential than most. And if we allow that the etymological root of the word *religion* is "to connect" or "bring together," Rexroth's life and work, centered on the quest to create an organic society through the re-intimization of poetry, constituted a grand religious drama in which he played the part of neither saint nor sinner, but rather, in every sense of the word, that of seeker.

CONCLUSION NOTES

1. Kenneth Rexroth, "Revolt: True and False," in *World Outside the Window: The Selected Essays of Kenneth Rexroth* (New York: New Directions Books, 1987), 76.
2. Rexroth, "The Institutionalization of Revolt, The Domestication of Dissent," in *World Outside the Window*, 197,202.
3. Ibid., 205.
4. Rexroth, "Who is Alienated From What?," in *World Outside the Window*, 265.

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