

# CONVERSATIONS WITH THE MUSE



NEIL ELLMAN



# *Conversations with the Muse*

Neil Ellman



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## *Flying Geese*

*(after the painting by Max Ernst)*

*Flying in a disorderly line*

*(clutter of feathers)*

*(ungathered skein)*

*(lost in migration)*

*on their way to their somewhere  
nest*

*where they were born  
take flight*

*(confused appetite)*

*(obscure yearning on the wing)*

*(futility against the wind)*

*home in the distance  
somewhere in ever-will  
beyond Orion's belt*

*home  
to be born(e) again  
by light again  
& again*

& again.

*& again*

*Icarus*

*(after the painting by Richard Pousette-Dart)*

*Having come too close to the center of the universe*

*(not ours)*

*having entered its cosmic eye*

*(not his or hers)*

*having touched the hem of eternity*

*(not yours or mine)*

*having spoken in tongues with god*

*(not its)*

*buffeted*

*battered*

*bewildered*

*with incredulous wings on fire*

*Icarus plunges head-long head-strong*

*through indifferent space*

*into a contemptuous sea.*



*Badeswanne für eine Heldin*

*(after the sculpture by Joseph Beuys)*

*For she who is held in bondage  
in bronze manacles  
peeling potatoes  
scrubbing the floor  
cursing the light  
and the children's obstinence  
she as a witch  
burning at the stake  
(no St. Joan)  
her soul's ashes  
scattered with the wind  
a hound of hell  
howling at the moon  
she who drowns in a tub  
electrocuted  
with a household cord  
her life  
like an organ grinder's monkey  
on a leash  
seeks release.*

*Quintet of Remembrance*

*(after the video installation by Bill Viola)*

*Five people projected  
on a screen  
full-color  
52" diagonal  
lifescape of faces  
gestures and gesticulations  
          televised  
still-life eyes and mouths  
hands/arms/heaving chests  
remember  
tortured lives  
twisted together  
knotted like rope  
garbled remembrance  
          televised  
images wrenched  
from light  
from sound  
the voice of mother  
touch of god  
          televised—  
how shall we remember them*

*know their pain  
and ours  
except as images  
          televised  
on a flickering screen.*

*Empyrean*

*(after the painting by Kenneth Noland)*

*The living*

*resist*

*desist*

*persist*

*blood of the sun*

*cleanses earth*

*through the rings of flame*

*the tiger springs*

*through the mouth of the mouth*

*o sun*

*speak limitless tongues*

*in an orbit of its own*

*there is no other circle*

*but*

*itself*

## *Self-Imposed Misery*

*(after the sculpture and installation by  
Tim Noble and Sue Webster)*

*That I am the most miserable  
of the miserable  
the most despicable  
of the despicable  
the most loathsome  
of the loathed  
that even my shadow  
follows me with disdain  
and the moon makes  
malicious remarks  
behind my back  
like a lady at tea  
that I am worthy of such  
          ingratitude  
alone among the debris  
of the man I never was  
or meant to be  
I am my own creation  
          not yours  
          not his  
my agony is mine*

*alone*  
*and I will die*  
*alone*  
*among the trash.*

## *Target*

*(after the painting by Jasper Johns)*

*Practice makes perfect  
aspirations of circles  
hold still, ready,  
aim, neither high nor low  
you may miss  
in the crosshairs  
of your resolve  
the bull's contemptuous eye  
glaring back  
daring you to shoot  
don't miss  
kill or yourself be killed  
by one distracted move  
the menace  
in its concentric gaze  
squeeze the trigger gently  
sight fixed  
fire—  
practice makes perfect  
perhaps  
but this your only chance.*

## *The Mood of Now*

*(after the painting by Yves Tanguy)*

*Toothless tigers now  
and here  
and when  
leopards without their spots  
trunkless elephants  
antelopes ratcheted  
to the ground  
as if trees  
without their leaves  
birds of a feather  
flock apart  
in other skies  
as zebras shed their stripes  
caw and crow  
and hippos  
are unable to laze  
in dry river beds—  
this desolate land  
where  
even the lions  
have forgotten  
how to fly.*



*La Premier Disque*

*(after the painting by Robert Dalauney)*

*First of all circles  
face of creation  
first face*

*chaos catches light  
turns to symmetry  
certainty of pi*

*first among deities  
delusions  
confusive dreams*

*ragged lines  
straight & angular  
bent to mean*

*arcs  
mean creation  
singularities*

*of time  
it of all circles  
always has*

## *Second Message III*

*(after the painting by Yves Tanguy)*

I

### *First Message*

*First words*

*unfound*

*scribbled on scraps of debris*

*messages in bottles floating among*

*flotsam and jetsam*

*in a now-dead world*

*where old men memorized*

*and sermonized*

*on worn-down mountain tops*

*and the young*

*played with eternity.*

II

### *Second Message*

*And again*

*prophetic words on walls*

*waiting to be read*

*disregarded and erased*

*unread:*

*“Thou shall not . . . .”*

*“Thou shall not . . . “*

*“Thou shall not . . . “*

*Homage to the Square:  
Dissolving/Vanishing*

*(after the painting by Joseph Albers)*

*Lords of astronomy  
of sanguine squares  
measure motion  
angles*

*by degrees*

*of red*

*redder*

*reddest*

*shift*

*imperceptibly*

*improbably*

*to the edge*

*where red*

*in space*

*dissolves beyond*

*the never-ever-was*

*and hope-to-be*

*of timeless energy.*

## *NeOrizon*

*(after the urban art iinteractive installation,  
in Shanghai, by Maurice Benayoun)*

*Callosciurus quinquestriatus giantus*

*a giant squirrel*

*(as squirrels go)*

*manufactured of steel*

*rods and sheets*

*in melanistic red*

*tail (not) wagging*

*in the wind*

*(almost) sitting*

*in the public square*

*as if it were alive*

*a video screen in its cheeks*

*(not) storing acorns*

*for the long winter ahead*

*yet more alive*

*than the passersby.*

*Rotary Demisphere (Precision Optics)*

*(after the optical machine sculpture by  
Marcel Duchamp)*

*Spiraling inside the eye  
of an eye of an eye of an eye  
in an eye  
in a gyre  
(your eye or mine?)  
looping orbits around the mind  
of a mind of a mind of a mind  
inside the mind of an eye  
in a gyre  
(but whose?)  
optical illusions confusions delusions  
confound my eye and mind  
--(not yours?)*

*Eggs at the Beginning of Time*

*(after the painting by Alice Baber)*

*A billion hatching eggs  
generations cracking  
boundless night  
of Easter shells:  
pinks and greens explode  
reds and blues multiply  
each other's shape  
their sound  
the jagged hesitations  
insinuations  
of their glow—  
at the beginning  
as at the end  
the eggs came first  
before their souls could fly.*

*Lightning with Stag in Its Glare*

*(after the installation by Joseph Beuys)*

*What lightning sees  
on a deserted road  
in the glare of its approach  
coming unsuspected  
suddenly on electric wheels  
like an automobile  
with its skin on fire  
seeing a stag with a beam of fear  
in its eyes  
standing motionless  
waiting to burst into flame  
as it was meant to die  
as it was prophesied  
a savage glow and glare  
in its eyes  
its future told  
in a life ablaze  
its world in flames.*





## ABOUT THE POET

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*Twice nominated for Best of the Net, Neil Ellman, a retired educator, lives and writes in New Jersey. More than 600 of his poems, many of which are ekphrastic and based on works of modern and contemporary art, appear in print and online journals throughout the world: Alba, Anastomoo, Anemone Sidecar, Bone Orchard Poetry, The Camel Saloon, Counterexample Poetics, ditch, Pyrokinecton, The New Ulster, The Screech Owl, Synchronized Chaos and vox poetica, among many others. His nine chapbooks include collections devoted to Abstract Expressionism, Surrealism, Salvador Dalí and Joan Miró.*



