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A Conversation with Gerald Stern February 11, 2005

Kate Daniels has described Gerald Stern as a “post-nuclear, multicultural Whitman for the millennium—the United States’ one and only truly global poet.” He may have had little choice in the matter. Born in 1925 to Jewish immigrants from the Ukraine and Poland, he grew up in an ethnically diverse Pittsburgh, where he became friends with the poets Jack Gilbert and Richard Hazley. After World War II, Stern spent time in Western Europe before taking his first teaching job in the mid-1950s.

In the five decades since, Stern has published fourteen volumes of poetry, including Everything is Burning (2005), American Sonnets (2003), and This Time: New and Selected Poems, which won the National Book Award in 1998. His other honors include the Lamont Prize, a Guggenheim fellowship, three NEA awards, a fellowship from the Academy of Arts and Letters, and the Ruth Lilly Prize. He is also the author of a memoir, What I Can't Bear Losing (2003). He has taught at Temple University, Columbia University, Sarah Lawrence College, and, before retiring in 1995, the Writer's Workshop at the University of Iowa.

“You read between the lines,” Stern says, “and discover what the character and personality of another writer is.” Reading between the conventional rhythms and understated images of his own lines, we find a poet who examines justice and injustice, cruelty and tenderness, conformity and freedom, as well as the vibrancy of memory. His work derides provincialism and points to a world of experiences beyond American borders and transcendent of temporal limits. Stern has lived in this rich world, and his poetry calls attention to its failures, beauties, and curiosities without fear, shame, or sentimentality. His is an unapologetically cosmopolitan voice, speaking to a world in need of softer dividing lines.

It is that world, the international and intellectually imagined, that we agreed to discuss on a sunny Friday afternoon. Mr. Stern was gracious enough to be interviewed in his room at the Ridpath Hotel, in downtown Spokane, Washington.

JEFF DODD

Many of the poets you refer to in *What I Can't Bear Losing* share an understanding of having a communal experience while also feeling their own “foreignness.” Nazim Hikmet, Miklós Radnóti, Hugh MacDiarmid—none of their books get much airtime, even among Americans who know a lot about poetry. Which other poets do you believe deserve more attention in America?

GERALD STERN

Foreign poets that we customarily read, the main one's Rilke. But most people who read Rilke don't know he was a Czech Jew, not German. Of course, he was very much taken with the Slavic spirit, spent some time in Russia, flirting not with the political movement but with the emotional side of the Slavic syndrome. Then the second echelon of people we read are some French poets, like Apollinaire, 19th-century poets like Lautréamont, though more for the specialist. Then down on the third level, particularly in the past thirty or forty years, South Americans, some Spanish poets like Lorca, Neruda, and so on. So, we don't know Portuguese poets. Occasionally, a person from Bulgaria or Portugal or even Africa will win a Nobel Prize and for a minute or two we'll read their novels or their poems. America is not to be condemned for this; it's so huge, it's a world unto itself—there's no time, and there's no space, and it's not part of our education.

The book I'm reading now, by Alexander Wat, a Polish poet, is an extended 400-page interview he did with Czesław Miłosz. Wat grew up in Poland, in Warsaw, and he was a Polish-Jewish intellectual. He had an education like most of us here—a humane, cosmopolitan, European education. But to be Polish and have this is very different than having grown up in Kansas City. His first language was Polish, but he also knew Yiddish, though he probably didn't think it was a foreign language nor a complete language; it was just what was spoken in the house. How could it be a complete language? But it is another language. And Germany's right on the border, so he knew German. Yiddish is merely a version of 12th-century German. Mix in some Hebrew, some Slavic words. He knew Russian, French, Italian, and Spanish. And the distinction between Russian and Ukrainian—they're literally separate languages. Much closer, say, than Italian and Spanish. But we don't have that equivalent closeness in languages in Western Europe and the United States. So he knew eight languages. And when he was in prison—and he was in prison most of his adult years—a Russian would be in his cell, and he would know if

the person was from Belarus, or White Russia, or Odessa, and he would know Ukrainian, and he would know if the person was a Jew—there are a thousand different forms, replicas, shadows, shades to pick from; it's a little bit more boring here. We have our McDonalds.

We don't have shades to pick from; things are more uniform. So a writer reflects this, reflects the complications. If you're Dutch, you don't just read Dutch literature. How about Danish literature—you're not going to learn Danish? You're not going to learn Swedish? You're not going to learn English? French? Most American poets don't know other languages, not well enough to, say, speak them or read them. Phil Levine knows Spanish. Bly knows Spanish and some German, a little Swedish. But I can name many well-known American poets who don't know any foreign languages, let alone classical languages, because we didn't have that kind of education. So this is part of our problem, if it is a problem.

Pound was born in 1885, I think, and was deeply aware of this. When he was in his late teens, early twenties, he saw America as a desert. One of his fairly early poems, in *Personae*, which preceded *Cantos*—the poem went something like this: “What would it be like if America read the Classics?” But Pound was a blowhard and an asshole, also a great poet, and an autodidact, and pushed his crazy ideas. He's very American. He acted like he was the only one who *ever* studied Chinese, who *ever* read Provençal poetry, he's going to teach everyone what to do and how to do it. That's another kind of American provincialism. Pound was a provincialist. And it was Gertrude Stein who said the most wonderful thing of Pound. She called him the village—not idiot—the village...I can't remember the word. She was aware that he was somewhat of a provincial, at the same time that he preached universalism. And he knew German and French and he lived in France and England. But he was always self-conscious of it. You see, Wat would not be self-conscious. He would just assume—of course you know Russian and Ukrainian and Lithuanian and Bulgarian and French; what else is there? But Pound would be conscious of the fact that he had read the Provençal poets. Proud of it. And he was a great student, particularly of the Spanish, Italian—Romance languages. So he had that. But his influence on that score was not long-lasting. Because most people didn't listen to him at all. It's a hard culture to change.

DODD

Is there a comparison between Pound's early career and Hugh

MacDiarmid's, leading up to this sort of political willfulness, that in some ways destroyed their careers?

STERN

Of course, MacDiarmid didn't have the recognition. I knew MacDiarmid; I met him in Scotland. I lived for a year there. I met him by accident, because my former wife, Pat, and I were living in an apartment owned by some Scottish communists. So, we got introduced to the group of Scottish Marxists. Most of them were painters, a few poets. The leader of them was Hugh MacDiarmid, whose real name was Christopher Grieve. And on May Day we marched down the main streets of Glasgow. I visited him several times in his little farmhouse, which was halfway between Glasgow and Edinburgh. He complained a lot—Pound got all the attention and he didn't. They both were strongly interested in politics; they were on different sides. They were both weird, crazy. Although MacDiarmid was not a racist. MacDiarmid's strangeness was that he was both a nationalist and a cosmopolitan at the same time. How could you be a communist, and thus believe in internationalism, and, at the same time, try to promote a new, local, language that was spoken in southwestern Scotland and be a Scottish nationalist? Because those were the particulars of his life; there's no logic or reasonableness to it. They wrote in Lallans and they made up their own words. Presumably, these words had some root or connection with the area of Scotland called Ayreshire, which is where Robert Burns was from. When you read some of the poems produced by those poets, you have to read the footnotes. They were communists, but this was not a people's poetry. They were intellectuals, learned intellectuals.

One of the things I learned over there is that Scotland is a totally different country than England. We used to go to the movies in Scotland, and at the end of the movie, when they played "God Save the Queen," the Scots all walked out, because Queen Elizabeth II was not Queen Elizabeth II of Scotland. Because Queen Elizabeth I was a bastard Queen; she was not Scottish. She usurped Mary. The Scots speak a different language, really think differently than the English. And they have bad press by the English who are the dominant party—they say Scots are tight, when Scots are liberal, generous, lovely, beautiful people. And MacDiarmid, I love his poetry. It has a good spirit; he had a good spirit. Pound didn't have a good spirit.

The problem with Pound lovers is that they either ignore or make excuses for his politics. They make a mystery, even a mysticism, a kind

of priestly religion, out of his cultural and realistic views, and they hold him up as the great exemplar. But the spirit of the man was not kind. He was not a kind or loving human being. There's no reason a poet has to be a kind, loving human being, but I like kind and loving people. I like generous, kind, loving, decent, honest, authentic people, and I believe those qualities willy-nilly show up or don't show up in a poet. Some things in Pound are marvelous. I learned from him, as all my contemporaries did, about the efficiency of language, how to use language efficiently and sharply, to make poetry as efficient as prose. Not to be decorative, poetic, learning who to read to do that. Learning to read differently. Learning to read Chaucer, and not to trust the Romantics as much as we did. I learned a lot from him.

But I didn't learn kindness, generosity.

When they talk about the *Cantos*, they generally say it's a failed poem, but Pound didn't intend for it to be a failed poem. He spent forty to fifty years at it. So, he's a failed poet. Do you say *The Canterbury Tales* is a failed poem? Or the *Comedia* is a failed poem? And so Pound lovers, such as my friend Jack Gilbert, will say that in the *Cantos*, there are perfect lyrics interspersed among the other crap. And I don't read the crap—newspaper articles from 1906, statements overheard in a bar in 1912, memoirs of Confucius, letters of Madison or Adams, whatever else the *Cantos* are made of—I read those beautiful little lyrics, forty lines here, twenty lines on paradise, 200 lines on suffering. Pound lovers go on to say the most beautiful section of the *Cantos* is the *Pisan Cantos*, written when Pound was incarcerated by the American army and didn't have any books with him—I think he had one book, Confucius, to read. Well, first of all, reading Confucius was idiotic. I mean, the idea that this guy, Pound—from where, Idaho?—was preaching Confucius when he was sixty to seventy years old is so weird. Confucius was a Chinese Puritan who believed in order. I'm not interested in Confucius. I mean, fuck Confucius. I'm much more interested in how the Chinese produced Zen, or Lao Tse. Why Confucius—“To have order in the state you must have order in the family?” Where did Pound have order in his family? What is this craziness he was talking about? Where's the order in the state? Or in the city? Was there order in his city? Order in his state? There were a bunch of Nazis over the border, right? It's totally crazy to preach that—Bob Hass and Jack Gilbert and whoever else sitting there, going, “Great poet. Preaches Confucius.” Assholes! Preaching Confucius, number one. Number two, the *Pisan Cantos* are highly sentimental, self-pitying poems. “What thou lovest well remains, the rest is dross...” There's a

beautiful lyric, but I don't trust it; I don't trust a voice if it's extremely sentimental. At one point, Pound had a phrase, "Oh, let an old man die," and he was sixty-two years old, plenty of life ahead of him. That was sentimental, self-pitying. I think we should've shot him as a traitor. That would have been the appropriate thing—we should've shot him. It was a mistake not to shoot him. And we should've shot some other poets while we were at it. Now, I still read Pound. I enjoy reading Pound. I love the crazy stuff. Because I'm the kind of person who reads *The New York Times* cover-to-cover—crossword puzzles, ads. In Pound, I like the Madison, the Monroe. Of course, I don't like the Confucius. And Chinese scholars say Pound's Chinese was terrible. And he was a rotten anti-Semite son of a bitch, and that's unforgivable. It's just stupid, goddamn dumb. You can't be a great poet and be dumb. Period.

O'CONNOR RODRÍGUEZ

Another poet controversial in his home country, Nazim Hikmet, came up several times in your autobiography. Do you feel a special connection to him?

STERN

I do feel a special connection with Hikmet. I don't know how I would like him as a person. I think I would like him. You know, you read between the lines and discover what the character and personality of another writer is, and say "I like that guy. He's human. He's on the same wavelength." He has a poem, he's a quivering old man, he's sixty-three, and he's in a railroad station, in a restaurant, and the waitress comes to him, and he's writing in the waitress' voice: "This old man's sitting there, looking sick, I'd love to help him order, talk to him, he looks lonely." Hikmet was so pure, so available. That was one thing I liked so much about him. And I like the humanity he expresses while in jail. He was in jail for years and years. He was a prisoner of the Turkish government, he was a communist. That's a problem for me: I hate communism. I don't hate it for the same reason the stupid Republicans do or the stupid Democrats. I hate it because it's senseless—a kind of fake utopia that preaches one thing, then ends up utterly repressive. Certainly, all the communist systems we've seen have been incredibly insecure and oppressive. Yet Hikmet remained a stubborn communist until the end. But maybe his experience in Turkey was even worse than it might have been, in his imagination, in Russia, and he certainly got special treatment there. So what he saw was not the inside of the prison, but a hall

where he was glorified and given medals. It's his humanity that I love. He remains one of the great European poets of the 20th century.

The more I read the Eastern European poets, the more I relate to them. I'm not really an internationalist, I don't know that much about them, but the more I read German poets after the war, Polish poets, Russian poets before the breakup of the Iron Curtain, the more I connect with them. And actually, when I look at my own life, I'm still an Eastern European. My family's only been here for 100 years. Exactly 100 years. And I grew up in Pittsburgh, American-raised, whatever the hell that means—to be American. But I realize now I'm somewhat of a foreigner. The fact is I'm a Jew. But I didn't grow up in a Jewish world; I grew up at the beginning of the Midwest, Pittsburgh, where the Jew is an oddball, by and large. I was kicked in the ass daily.

ELISE GREGORY

If you had published *American Sonnets* outside the United States, how do you think it may have been received?

STERN

I have no idea. The whole issue of publishing outside the United States—we're such a huge country. There are so many English-speaking countries—Australia, England, Canada—we forget they're there. We dominate. I was in Canada, nominated for a prize a couple of years ago, and I've been exposed to a lot of Canadian poets and it's a whole beautiful world up there, some good and some bad poets. I was nominated for a prize for that book, *American Sonnets*. It was very well received there. But, you know, Canada's so much like the United States. I've discovered over the years how significant the local is in poetry. We're such a large country, I might write about fauna in New Jersey or streets or customs there, and you in Spokane, Washington might not understand it or vice versa, let alone the world at large. It also depends on the issue of what kind of poetry one writes. Unlike Yeats, Seamus Heaney, a marvelous poet, is more of a "local" poet. Yeats was more of a "general" poet. Yeats was more *English*. And during his life, maybe his Irishness was a little bit ignored. It came more to the forefront later. But he's more of a—not generic—but general poet. There's nothing about, say, "Sailing to Byzantium" that is not as relevant to someone living in Chicago as it would be to someone living in Dublin. But, when Seamus Heaney writes about fence posts, or gates, or vehicles in Northern Ireland somewhere, he uses the local dialect, the language for it; it doesn't resonate—or as

George W. Bush would say, “resignate”—the same way as it might if he used a more general language. And it may be that Seamus Heaney, as an illustration, is deliberately using a language like that in opposition to the universal providence that has come through as a result of technology. My language tends to be, among these two, more local maybe, if you were to appraise me. So that someone in England might read it but would maybe have a more complicated time reading it. But yet, to tell you the truth, my poetry is not unavailable. On one level, it’s very available. So I find people, surprisingly enough, in Israel, Germany, Ireland, who respond very strongly to it.

DODD

You speak of Pound certainly in a different tone than I’ve heard you discuss W. S. Merwin. One thing they have in common, however, is an early love of the Provençal poets, and Merwin has described how he came to love the Provençal poets through a visit with Pound. You say also, in *What I Can’t Bear Losing*, that you have an affection for the Provençal poets. Could you talk more about older European poetic traditions and how they influence contemporary poets?

STERN

Yeah, Merwin knows that poetry from the inside. He has a house in France. He knows French like he knows English. He knows it inside out. It’s a whole separate culture, Cathar culture. I wrote a poem a number of years ago about the city of Albi, where the Albigensian Crusades happened, when the northern French descended on the southern French and destroyed their culture, their Protestantism. That’s the culture, generally speaking, that produced the Provençal poets. It was a great and beautiful literature. Dante considered writing the *Comedia* in Provençal. One of Dante’s *Cantos* is in Provençal. I was in that area of southern France twelve or thirteen years ago, traveling with my son. We went to some town, the wind was blowing among some oak trees, I took a little nap in the grass, my son woke me up and said, “Dad, these signs are in Italian.” I said, “That isn’t Italian; take a closer look.” It’s Provençal, which is close to Italian, it’s close to French, close to Latin. I’ve read the poets, tried to read them in Provençal. I’ve never studied it the way Merwin has. I had a student at Iowa who really got into that stuff, who knew Provençal poetry. It was wonderful. It’s a complicated, lovely culture. The physical world they lived in was just so beautiful, the weather was lovely—it remains a kind of happy, sweet poetry. It was a

blessed time. Of course, they had more complications than you'd think. But their devotion to love, what it stood for, their special vocabulary, particular rhyme forms. It was a big influence on Italian literature and the literature of Spain and all of Europe.

GREGORY

Earlier, you spoke of several modernist poets. Most of the modernists were interested in epics and spent much of their lives completing these great epics—

STERN

Would-be great epics. Are you thinking of H.D.?

GREGORY

Williams' *Paterson*—

STERN

If we were really getting into it, we'd have to make a distinction between the long poem and the epic. Then we would have to talk about what an epic is, or has been at least—just because an epic had to be one thing 1,000 years ago doesn't mean it has to be the same thing today. And it used to be that a poet, all through his career, take Keats, felt he had to write his long poem, his epic. That was a poet's challenge—whether he was Spenser, Chaucer, Tennyson—he had to write his long poem. Keats wrote some long poems, they're wonderful to read. *Endymion*. But the ones we know most of all are the *Odes*. And some letters, some sonnets.

I was interested in writing an epic from the word "go." When I was in France in my early twenties, I was working on a very long poem, a ridiculously long poem, called *Ishmael's Dream*—Ishmael, the lost soul, the exile's dreams. It was a total failure. Then, during my early thirties, I wrote a long poem called *The Pineys*, which goes on for almost 100 pages. It's a study of the White House, a study of the presidency, a study of our culture. The Pineys is the name of a group of people who lived in southern New Jersey during the 18th, 19th, and part of the 20th centuries, at a distance from what we call "civilization." America is in love with this kind of living, whether it be in Kentucky or northwestern New Jersey. Except that the Pineys are not an ethnic group. It was a mixture of Indian, Irish, African-American, and English, and they happened to be remnants of the industrial culture that existed in southern New

Jersey in the 18th and 19th centuries, where iron ore was first produced and boats were made. It was America's first West. People fled the major cities, particularly Philadelphia, and went off into the woods and lived there in squalor. So my poem was about the Pineys running the White House. But it just went on and on forever. It was a madness. I sort of threw that poem away. In 1965, I started to get into the poems that are now "my poems," starting with *Rejoicings*, the first book in my selected poems.

In more recent years, I wrote a long poem called "Hot Dog." Is that an epic? What's an epic? Does it have to have a hero that reflects the beliefs of a culture? Or a heroine? Does it have to have a tragic quality? It would have that if this were a course in the epic. We describe what an epic is by describing what they were and making generalizations about them. But that doesn't describe the epic of the future. Hot Dog was a woman, an actual person, probably dead now, a beautiful thirty-two year-old African-American woman who lived on the streets. She should've been in an institution, but she was out sleeping on the cold sidewalks. She was the "hero." Right now, though, I'm interested in the short poem. You're familiar with my last book of poetry, *American Sonnets*, but I've written another book called *Everything is Burning*, coming out in a month or so, and I'm now writing another one; I've got twenty or so poems toward whatever that will be called. One is a long poem called "The Preacher." A crazy long poem based on Ecclesiastes.

Many of my contemporaries are interested in the long poem: Merwin is interested in the long poem; Phil Levine has written some very interesting long poems; Ashbery has; Olson. Jack Gilbert has never written a long poem, he's not interested in that. O'Hara hasn't. I don't know how to talk about it; I'm not qualified. Somebody in some English Department in Albuquerque should talk about the distinction between the long poem and the epic. Make connections with American Indian hymns, Vedic hymns.

O'CONNOR RODRÍGUEZ

You said Pound was an autodidact, as you also were, as far as writing—

STERN

I'm a follower of Pound. A Pounder.

O'CONNOR RODRÍGUEZ

Clearly. But do you think a writer can still self-educate?

STERN

Yeah, why not. There are too many writing schools, too much conformism. Too much everybody acting like everybody else. Make some mistakes, waste ten years. I wasted twenty-five years. I have regrets about it. I wasted a lot of time. When I was twenty-two, I could've gone to Iowa, Stanford, Bennington, like many of my contemporaries. Phil Levine went to Iowa, Donald Justice. Some did, some didn't. Later on, everyone went to school. It just struck me and my friends—Jack Gilbert and Richard Hazley, who was the third one among us, and by the way, the best poet, though he didn't have the will, the stubbornness to make it, which is really what counts, forget about being gifted—that Iowa was ridiculous—God gave us this talent, the muse. What, we're going to submit to a group of idiots who say, "Take out the second line and make a different ending there, don't make that rhyme?" What's that got to do with the price of tea in China? But that reticence comes out of shyness and arrogance. Pure arrogance. I think I should've studied up here in Washington with Theodore Roethke, whom I really loved. I should've done that. Jack Gilbert finally did that, but he did it by accident. Jack went from Pittsburgh to the West Coast because his girlfriend got a job at Mills College, in Oakland, so he settled in San Francisco, in Berkeley. There were a bunch of other poets around—a guy named Allen Ginsberg, guy named Robert Creeley, a guy named Robert Duncan. Gilbert was educated there by them. And I maybe should've gone. I have some regrets I didn't do that. But, then I think, maybe I wouldn't have had what I did have. It depends on my mood, whether I regret or don't regret.

DODD

You mentioned poetry schools, MFA programs, in the United States. I don't think many people consider that a major trend of education in Europe—

STERN

It's started. They're imitating America now. In England and Ireland, particularly. Of course the French think we're insane to study poetry-writing in school. I see the problem as simple: the problem with MFA programs is not MFA programs, it's that they're located in universities.

And a university is an institution that is always conformist, conservative, rule-driven. So, if you are studying in Montana, or Alabama, or Iowa, or Arizona, or Massachusetts, and you're in an MFA program, you're at a university, or you're a person who works for the university.... What in the hell's a poet doing in a university? I got my first university job in Philadelphia, at Temple University, when I was thirty years old—I had squandered my twenties—and I decided, well, I'm going to settle down and get a real job. I remember I was exiled from the main campus to a satellite campus. It was the art school. I was the one-man English Department at the Temple University Art School, which is now called Tyler School of Fine Art, one of the leading art schools in the country. My colleagues were painters, sculptors, printmakers. My students smelled of paint and turpentine. There was a freedom there that I loved. They weren't wearing three-piece suits. I remember one guy saying to me, a mentor of mine, he wanted me to be successful, get tenure, finish my Ph.D., go to MLA, smile at the annual picnic, and spend my life writing ridiculous little articles on Matthew Arnold. He said to me—I was wearing a pair of corduroy pants I'd bought in Italy, I loved them; they were wide-wale—"You can't dress like that." Now, you understand, in the 1960s, ten years later, you *could* dress like that. You had a different oppression then. He was quite serious. I couldn't understand what he was saying. Finally, I learned I had to wear a suit or a jacket and a nice shirt and a briefcase. Oppression takes different forms. Some are more subtle. You might get a provost or a dean or a president of a college who's hip. He might even say "fuck." He might like rap music. God knows what. But let us not kid ourselves. [Sings: "Let us not kid ourselves...."] That is a problem. And I don't know the solution.

The problem is you get a degree. Most schools use creative writing students as cash cows. They *use* writers, make them study theory, or whatever you study in English Departments, take written exams, do various other compromising things they consider appropriate. There can't be such general rules for a poet. There's nothing wrong with learning two foreign languages, but what if you don't want to learn any and be that kind of a poet? Or you don't want to be a critic, or a teacher? There's nothing wrong with being a critic or a teacher. It's kind of nice. But what if you choose to go a different route? What if you don't know what route you're going to take? This is part of the problem. Maybe it's not the major problem, maybe it's the conformism. You know, before I went to Iowa, I kept getting phone calls. They asked, "Why aren't you applying for this job?" And I said, "Well, for two reasons: one, you're

too far from New York; and, two, I don't know yet if I really believe in teaching writing." (Although I had taught it at Columbia; Sarah Lawrence) But I don't know to this day if it's a good thing. It's nice to have a community. That's the best thing about MFA programs: a community of more or less young people who exchange books and tears. That's great! And it's good to be exposed to someone a few years older than you who has a few books published who can tell you about his or her experiences. That can't hurt you. That's the general model, and in our day and age, the form it takes is the MFA. Maybe that will change.

O'CONNOR RODRÍGUEZ

In the essay, "Some Secrets," you say you admire the relationship that can form between an older writer and a younger writer. Did you write *What I Can't Bear Losing* in part to connect to younger writers?

STERN

Absolutely. Because I'm writing out of a knowledge of something that's gone forever. You're talking about memory, and I just want to give away what I've accumulated, my treasure trove. And isn't that what you do with poetry, give away your treasure trove? I guess I also just wanted to write it all down. I've been going through my papers recently, and I discovered so many essays I had written and didn't publish. Twenty or so. They're very political.

DODD

In the introduction to *Passing Through*, Stanley Kunitz addresses the question of politics in poetry, when someone asks him, "Why aren't your poems more political?" He says the very act of writing poetry is political. To what extent do you believe writing poetry is political?

STERN

He does say that. But Stanley Kunitz does not address political issues the way that Bly did in the 1960s, or Levertov, or Sam Hamill, who organized *Poets Against the War*, as a kind of industry. I mean, Stanley was a conscientious objector. Stanley took enormous political stances—he came from an urban environment, but he lived on a farm and raised his own food. That's a political act. It says something about rejectionism, says something about consumerism. That's a really strong political statement. He's essentially a beautiful lyric poet, a tragic poet, who celebrates certain accidents of his life: loneliness, lots of grief. I guess all the major poets today celebrate grief.

DODD

Do we have a choice?

STERN

We don't have much of a choice. Anger and grief. I think we can identify poets we can say shouldn't be political, or aren't so.

DODD

In the most recent edition of *Poetry*, Clare Cavanagh has sort of a remembrance of Milosz, and writes that when she was going through his papers shortly after he died, she found a copy of the latest *Harry Potter* book on his desk. What's on your desk that might surprise us?

STERN

I don't read light literature. A lot of my friends read murder mysteries, do crossword puzzles. I'm totally a bore. I don't play games. I just get bored. That's a wonderful question, just let me think. I do a lot of drawings. They're crazy, they're pornographic, erotic, wild drawings, drawings everywhere. I collect little objects, my house is full of objects. Pottery. Putting them in juxtaposition, creating a collection.

GREGORY

Yesterday, you said you were a "language poet." I wonder if you could expand on that?

STERN

What I'm really saying is that I can't stand Charles Bernstein and others of his ilk, claiming the word "language" to describe what they do. It's so banal, absurd, and we accept it. What the fuck is going on? Language? We're doing language now. I know that term has a special meaning that's difficult to explain, but the reason it's hung on so long, the reason people still talk about it, is that no one can explain it, because it doesn't really exist! I'm responding to that, saying, "I am the language poet." But I'm also saying that I begin with language. I don't begin with ideas, I don't begin with images. I begin with words. I let the words transform me, carry me, literally, to places and experiences. Occasionally, I'll actually think of an experience, relive an experience. You'll read a poem that might describe an experience, but it starts with language. Language is everything.

DODD

Do you find techniques used by language poets, or elliptical poets, or whatever label we put on them, dishonest?

STERN

In a certain sense, all poetry is trickery. Dylan Thomas said, “In my craft or sullen art....” It’s a craft as well as an art. It’s an artifice. It’s a weird thing. On the one hand, it’s an artifice, a very artificial construct, and on the other hand it’s that which is holy and profound and for which Stalin throws you in prison. How can it be both things at the same time? Well that’s the mystery. It can be a prayer, it can be used in a religious service. And at the same time, it can be a carefully constructed exercise in egotism, some Japanese poet, sitting crosslegged with his quill. It’s all those things at once. And there’s a reason poets should be kept out of the state, by Plato and Stalin and others: poets make people very nervous. They’re finally not just subversive, they’re frightening.

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