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*Lucy Biederman*

## "And I Go On and On": Gerald Stern's Poetics of Protest

When the qualities of Gerald Stern's poetry are enumerated, political engagement typically makes the list, along with Jewish American themes, dark humor, long lines, irony, and ambivalent nostalgia. In interviews, Stern tends to mention his having made room in his poetry both for the political and for what he calls the aesthetic. For example, in a 2006 interview in the *Bellingham Review*, Stern explains that his attention to politics dates from his childhood. However, he continues,

When I got to be nineteen or so I started to get interested in something crazy called poetry. There were no books in my house, I never took an English course, I had no community. I moved away from the political and into the aesthetic, as I've talked about from time to time. And I put politics on the shelf for awhile while I pursued aesthetics, but then I came back to politics and I merged the two actually, and that's where I am now.

What has that merging yielded? Or, to put it another way, where, exactly, has Stern's merging of politics and aesthetics taken him—and his readers?

Stern's political activism has included organizing civil rights marches in Pennsylvania during the 1960s, serving as president and chief negotiator of a New Jersey teachers' union, and leading protests that led the Iowa state colleges to divest from South Africa during apartheid. Stern's pursuit of this work alongside and within the poetic places him at a unique position in relation to the poetry being written and

published in response to the current “political disaster” of Donald Trump’s presidency, as the title of a chapbook published in January 2017 by the *Boston Review* puts it. An April feature in *The New York Times Book Review* highlights an “emerging body of brash political poetry” and includes five poems “that speak to this moment in American politics and history.”

The influence of Stern’s approaches to poetry and politics can be read in much of this poetry. For example, the first of the protest poems in the *Times* feature, Alex Dimitrov’s “The Moon After Election Day,” begins, “I’m looking at the moon tonight, / the closest it’s been to Earth since 1948...” Dimitrov recalls Stern in his use of the continuous present tense (“I’m looking”), which suggests the beginning, or perhaps the middle, of a conversation more than it does the opening of a poem. Dimitrov, a younger poet whose second book was released in early 2017, echoes a poem from Stern’s first book, *Rejoicings*, “On the Far Edge of Kilmer,” which begins, “I am sitting again on the steps of the burned out barrack. / I come here, like Proust or Adam Kadmon, every night to watch the sun leave.” Both poems introduce their readers to an “I” who oscillates between specificity (1948, Proust) and generality (Earth, Adam Kadmon). Dimitrov cites 1948 not, I think, because of world or lunar events of that year, but to cast a shadow of nostalgia over the poem; Stern likewise peppers his poems with specific years; the titles alone of Stern’s 2005 *American Sonnets*, for instance, conjure “Aberdeen Proving Grounds, 1946,” “September, 1999,” and “1940 LaSalle” (Stern’s attention to car makes and models probably deserves an essay of its own).

Despite his influence, Stern is not mentioned in the *Times* feature where Dimitrov’s poem appears, nor is he among the 50 poets anthologized in *Resistance, Rebellion, Life* or in *Resist Much / Obey Little*, which is 356 poets strong. Stern’s oeuvre is both of the new era and against it, influential to the new poets “of resistance” while also offering an implicit argument against this moment as unique in history. For Stern, that is, the political emergency is old news—it’s been

going on for nearly a century. In choosing texts with which to describe Stern's poetics of protest, I have cast my net widely; my goal here is to show how political protest has motivated and shaped Stern's writing across decades and genres. Stern's poetics of protest is evident from the six volumes included in his *Early Collected Poems*, to his most recent poems in *Galaxy Love*; in interviews; in what Laura McCullough has called the "burning hybrid" lyric essay form of *Stealing History* and *Death Watch*; and in "Notes from the River," the column Stern wrote for his *American Poetry Review* from the late 1970s through the 1980s, a form he later dubbed "politico-cultural-literary-personal fusion."

I observe Stern's ongoing engagement with a poetics of protest in order to identify *ongoingness* as a central quality of his work. Edward Hirsch has written that in Stern's poems, "Frank O'Hara's characteristic formula or strategy of 'I do this, I do that' becomes 'Here I am doing this, there I was doing that.'" When compared with O'Hara's almost obsessively present-oriented speaker, Stern's loquacious "I," set in continuous presents and pasts, loudly announces its difference.<sup>1</sup> The "here I am doing this, there I was doing that" construction of many of the opening lines of Stern's poems places time periods and versions of the self alongside each other. The poem "Thieves and Murderers" in Stern's *Galaxy Love*, for example, begins, "That was when I was reading Villon"—presenting the reader with unanswered questions from the poem's first

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1 In a 2001 interview in *The Iowa Review*, Stern finds other bases for comparison between himself and O'Hara. Stern distinguishes his own post-World War II circumstances from those of O'Hara and O'Hara's New York School cohorts, as described in Brad Gooch's *City Poet: The Life and Times of Frank O'Hara*. Stern considers Gooch's account of a star-studded party at a young John Ashbery's Manhattan apartment. "Of course O'Hara was there," Stern says. "And where was I? In Pittsburgh, the other side of the Allegheny mountains. Pre-television. No connection, no access to information. Living in dirt, filth, darkness, ignorance. Maybe it was a blessing. Whatever it was, it was different, what I had." For Stern, O'Hara's Manhattan allowed "connection" and "access," from which Stern, caught on the side of the mountain, was excluded.

word. *What* was when “I” was reading Villon? *When* did this happen? Beginning “Thieves and Murderers” in the continuous past tense makes the poem feel caught up in its memorializing; this is a speaker who cannot or will not stop what is already *ongoing* to furnish the poem with contextualizing details. The unsolved-for “That” with which the poem begins establishes an ironic contract: the poem will continue with the understanding that it need not be understood. That the poem uses the freedom of this contract to move efficiently to the political seems no accident. By the poem’s sixth line, before its first stanza is up, Stern writes, “I didn’t want to become too Eisenhowerish, / he who fell under his desk / at the first sign of a bomb.” The sense of ongoingness in this poem is, in part, in its open-endedness, its looseness of tone, which is established from the first word, the never-defined “That.” For Stern, ongoingness is a way of being political in poetry—an assertion of a self that is political, that was political before the poem began, and that will continue being so after the poem is over.

An interesting example of Stern’s attention to and use of ongoingness in a different context can be found in a lyrical statement of belief that concludes his essay “Demystification,” in *Stealing History*. Even more interesting, in examining and articulating Stern’s poetics of protest, is the way Stern annotates the essay in a 2013 interview with Dean Young. Stern reads directly from “Demystification” during the interview:

“I believe human beings should pay very close attention to each other. They should reach out beyond the family and help the oppressed, the trapped, and the sick. They should insist on security for and from the larger society. They should pay attention to the past, live with grief, make charity personal, teach without end, share food, listen patiently to the young and honor their music, turn their backs on corporations, advertising, and public lying, hate liars, undermine bullies, love June 21, and, on that day, kiss every

plant and tree they see." And I go on, "They should love two-lane highways, old cars and old songs. They should eat with relish, and study insects." And I go on and on...

Presenting his essay to Young, Stern twice interrupts his own reading to emphasize that, in the essay, he "go[es] on"—"and on." It is the *ongoing* quality of the piece that Stern underscores to Young, and by extension, to readers of the interview. One of the methods by which Stern goes on and on here is in his placement of political protest alongside, or as indistinguishable from, personal life. Exemplary of this are the edicts to "hate liars, undermine bullies." The discourse Stern uses evokes the schoolyard, but the two clauses follow on the heels of the belief that people should "turn their backs on corporations, advertising, and public lying"—suggesting that the essay is concerned with liars and bullies of public rather than private life. However, the images that follow, with their celebration of the summer solstice, pull those liars and bullies further toward the personal, away from the public and political. By going "on and on," Stern blurs distinctions other writers might make between the personal and the political, the private and the public. After concluding his reading of the essay, Stern tells Young, "It's something to be relished. Not to be proud of, but to be delighted in, to be able to say, 'I found a place to say what I believe in' or 'I finally found a way to say what I believe in.'" As he suggests in the interview, the "way" Stern expresses his beliefs is inseparable from those beliefs themselves.

Stern's blurring of personal and political themes leads me to the second feature I want to highlight in Stern's poetics of protest: the recognition but ultimate refusal of conventions in both form and content. Stern's poems are rife with images and enactments of boundaries and divisions challenged, troubled, and refused. The dark yet lilting couplets of "One Foot in the River" from Stern's 1977 *Lucky Life* (reprinted in *Early Collected Poems*) end with the lines "I lie there for hours watching the blood come, / one foot on 72<sup>nd</sup> Street, one

foot in the river.” Forty years later, Stern ends the title poem in *Galaxy Love* with these lines: “I turn the light off with the right / hand and gather you in close with the wrong.” Reading these two excerpts in the company of one another, one gets the sense that what results from Stern’s refusal of boundaries—the boundaries of the body, in both these poems—is expansiveness. In these lines, Stern’s refusal of boundaries is embodied: a country foot and a city foot, a right hand and a wrong hand, across the distance of four decades. Refusing conventions, Stern often finds more, rather than less—a longer sentence or poem; a reach long enough to stretch from “right” to “wrong” without leaving the bed or the stanza.

Stern’s writing tends to walk right up to the conventions, examine them, consider them from all angles, and *then* refuse them. For this reason, Stern’s poems sometimes resemble—and are sometimes confused with—the conventional work they critique. One example of this is the poem “Paris.” In a commentary on the poem, Stern writes, “I may have written ‘Paris’ in ironic opposition to the dozens of other ‘Paris’ poems, written over the course of the last eighty or so years, that celebrate the wonder of being there and the special grace of having been chosen as a witness.” Stern uses the space from the title to the poem’s first line to recognize the convention of the “Paris” poem—which he then undermines in the poem’s unromantic first line: “As I recall the meal I ate was liver.” The poem centers on an exchange between the speaker and a Holocaust survivor, drawing from a comparison of their lives and of where those lives led after their brief exchange. In his statement about the poem and in the poem itself, Stern subtly emphasizes the haziness of his memory: phrases like “I may have” and “As I recall” scaffold the poem; the phrase “by my reckoning” is used twice within less than a dozen lines. He is remembering, he seems to be saying, but he cannot guarantee that he is telling the truth. Stern’s deployment of the language of inexactitude cuts against the poem’s attestation to his having “been there”—pulling the rug out from under “the wonder” and “special grace” that one might expect from a poem titled “Paris.” The text of the poem protests the cultural

meaning of its title's signifier.

It might be that same impulse of protestation by which American political figures, like Lyndon B. Johnson, Richard Nixon, and Henry Kissinger, show up in Stern's work. It is surprising to encounter these names in contemporary American poems, especially in poems with titles such as, respectively, "The Thought of Heaven" (in *Bread Without Sugar*; reprinted in *This Time*), "Lorca" (in *Save the Last Dance*), and "Dream IV" (in *In Beauty Bright*). Below such titles, a reader might be forgiven for expecting, say, lyric "celebrat[ion] of the wonder of being there," as opposed to "the election of Lyndon Johnson." Eliciting that surprise is, perhaps, Stern's point: who said lyric was the opposite of political, anyway? "The Thought of Heaven," for instance, a long, meditative poem, *does* celebrate the wonder of being there; it does so on Stern's own terms, however, and those terms are expansive enough to include LBJ. The poem's long sentences, held together by commas and semi-colons, both mimic and oblige the poet's coursing, interconnected reveries:

...in my blue jacket once I found twenty years  
of thought—more than that—the election  
of Lyndon Johnson, the death of Eleanor Roosevelt—  
look how they are political—Americans  
in Lebanon, in Hispaniola; I sit there  
like a tailor, cleaning out lint, whatever  
lint is, holding a stem in the air, rubbing  
a golden flower through my fingers, catching  
the spots of light.

The presence, in poetry, of political touchstones like Johnson and Eleanor Roosevelt, signifiers whose meanings have long since been determined, speaks to the democratizing work of Stern's poetics. By surrounding these fixed signs with rich sensual details of his own life—say, "rubbing a golden flower through my fingers"—Stern protests the wonder and special grace by which such political figures are often neatly separated, at least in our collective cultural imagination, from the



details of daily life. And he asserts the wonder and special grace by which daily life really is lived.

Stern's use of phrases like "by my reckoning" and "I don't know" help to introduce such texture into flat political-historical record—and also contribute to the tones of Stern's poems, which can sometimes be so conversational that they might be called anti-poetical. In the "ironic opposition" between the content of "Paris" and the expectations driven by its title, Stern acknowledges and resists "dozens of other 'Paris' poems." Stern's prose, meanwhile, is literary in ways that his poems often resist. McCullough suggests that, rather than strictly adhering to generic conventions, Stern's "poems and essays have always been some hybrid of both." The opening of the essay "Mother's Day," a lyric meditation on Stern's life as a political activist, shares literary tactics with another essay from the collection, *What I Can't Bear Losing*, titled "Blessed," which recounts Stern's run-ins with the police and considers issues of racial profiling, police brutality, and imprisonment. "Mother's Day" begins, "I haven't, to any significant degree, written about my political—my agitated—activities over the years; nor have I tried to understand what it was that motivated my action." "Blessed" begins, "I have always wanted to write about my relationship with the police." At the beginning of both these essays, Stern draws attention to what Jacques Derrida calls *literariness*: this is writing, Stern reminds us. The utterances "I have always wanted to write" and "I haven't written" are ironic written testimonies to Stern's *not* writing. Rather than charging forward at the start of these two politically engaged pieces, Stern pauses, noting the disjunction between the goings-on of his political life and the writing of that life: his writing has not matched his life; he has not yet written what he intended. I think that disjunction is essential to Stern's poetics of protest, too, because writing about politics makes visible in new ways both the writing and the politics.

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Gerald Stern, for whom there is no stamp (as Stern himself plaintively notes of Emma Goldman), was born in 1925. At 92, Stern is extraordinarily prolific. Since 2012, he has published two essay collections, *Stealing History* and *Death Watch*; a book of comic drawings, *Dancing with Tears in My Eyes*; and three books of poetry, *In Beauty Bright*, *Divine Nothingness*, and *Galaxy Love*—"plus the one after that," as he writes in *Death Watch*, "which already contains thirty or so poems and whose shape I am thinking about or at least waiting for the words and music to come to me since we poets control our writing destiny much less than we think we do." In another of that volume's short essays, Stern writes of his admiration for Goldman, who "had many affairs, each a repetition of the former, almost a religious devotion to sexual passion. And she deeply connected it with politics. Love was the essence of both. Anarchic love. She is the spine of this book." In Stern's Goldman, for whom love, sex, and politics were inextricably linked, I see a way of understanding Stern. What does it mean that Goldman is *Death Watch*'s "spine"? The spine is that which gives a book or a body its shape, its form; one depends on it completely, without looking at it (when reading) or seeing it (in a body). By revealing the book's metaphorical spine, Stern reveals something about himself, too: he, like, Goldman, makes visible the connections between politics and the rest of life.

At a moment in which resistance itself is *de rigueur*, Stern's writing testifies to endurance and creativity in protest across a career. In his essay "What I Have to Defend, What I Can't Bear Losing," Stern examines how utopian ideals gleaned from his readings of religious prophets and anarchists of the 1930s, like Goldman, combined with "the shock and sadness of my own life—my sister's untimely death, the violent anti-Semitism, the stupidity" were translated from politics into his unique poetry, where Stern has wrestled, for decades, in form and content, with the painful discord between the ideal and the actual. Stern quotes Whitman at the end of the essay: "Let us stand up, it is time to explain

myself.” And then Stern answers the call: “I have never for a second lost sight of my own explanation. It’s as if I always knew what I had to do.”