

Is Poetry Enough? Poetry in a Time of Crisis

Readings from the event at UC Santa Cruz, April 2004

Hi, I'm a poet. (I mean we all are) and I find I am very sensitive to language especially in the public sector. I love to watch a new piece of language float onto the scene and get used like crazy. The piece I've been noticing lately is—the very suggestion that someone or something is “not in step with the mainstream.”

Now what the hell does *that* mean? I mean what's most troubling is that there's something that obviously precedes the accusation. A given. Which is the mighty stream. A mighty flow. Something huge, torrential and essential. Almost godlike in its force and the public person is being urged to get over themselves and damn it just get on (it, the mighty flow) or be an obstructionist. It's kind of like being a bad sport to *not* be in step with this thing. To body surf on where the flow of “the culture” is going.

I want to think about this thing a little bit. Cause it seems to me “the mainstream” is at least a twenty year old concept. I first noticed it—I mean noticed it in a way that truly aggravated me as it started to move into *my* world, the poetry world. I remember on the occasion of Harper Collins publishing the big fat red *Collected Poems of Allen Ginsberg* I think in 1984 *Newsweek* printed more of an article than a review and they boldly titled that article **Mainstreaming Allen Ginsberg**.

It was meant to be generous. Kind of a makeover. Taking this weird guy everyone already knew and making him large. Of course the lie in this is what's really troubling. I'm thinking of Allen's incredible perspective always. Which began with the tiny, a flower or an electric plug, an unimportant personal life, his own or his mother's and how he followed the dots making that tiny thing slowly connect up to the conditions of cold war America or hippy America or stockpiling plutonium America. Allen had a genius for making the small large and seeing exactly how they were literally holding everything these shuttling perspectives and he had the knack for making the personal man grand. Grand as the cosmos. And Allen of course was a genius of publicity. Was the first poet to send out press releases and in many ways had masterminded the beat generation. So he really didn't need *Newsweek* making him large. He was just being published by corporate culture for the first time which *was* a very interesting moment but the mainstreaming language so slippery had a way of simplifying all this, i.e. not looking at who they, *Newsweek* or Harper Collins, were at all and suggesting instead that they in their mainstreaming were doing something nice for old Allen. This phenomenon, Allen, still, at that time, was the biggest representative globally of the dissenting other culture. I mean he regularly served as a kind of a bellwether for how the mainstream was viewing or dealing with us.

I mean that *us*. Allen was my representative for a long time. In my neighborhood or nation, in the world and so I thought of myself for a long time as an *us* he was marking.

By the time he died (nine years later) the New

York Times glibly described him as “avuncular.” No, let me quote a larger piece of the eulogizing article by Charles McGrath, the then editor of the New York Times Book Review section so you'll see just what I mean:

“He [Allen] was a cultural busybody—an inspired *yenta*—turning up at protests, rallies, rock concerts, love-ins; but he brought to these occasions not rage or dogma so much as a kind of *avuncular* concern. In the end, his most enduring contribution to our culture may be less such works as “Howl” and “Kaddish” than the way that, humming and chanting and clicking away on his finger cymbals, he transformed the American avant-garde, and the angry alienation of the Beats, into something altogether more cheerful and benign.”

Now I would call that a little castrating wouldn't you? Or feminized in a way that not even women want to be. Allen was ultimately innocuous and cheerily irrelevant if McGrath has his way. What McGrath says is maybe the worst thing you could do to a man—of considerable power, like Allen. Even or especially a man who sang about his own asshole and his little penis—he did the job of humbling and exposing himself so cheerily that the eventuality that he would nonetheless be rendered foolishly after his death in the Times—seems willfully obliterating. To the man, but to a culture too.

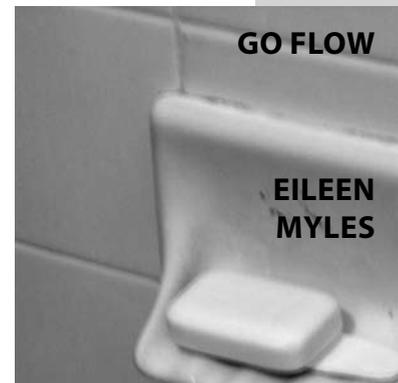
Because to get reviewed, mentioned in the Times is some sort of survival. Your book will be bought by librarians, you'll get the job. Your peers will think, wow she's getting attention and then you'll get even more readings, a general sense will stick to you that you are a poet with “a career.” Who's known. Which is not what any of us—in our “us”—aspire to, but it's nice, right. And it doesn't just happen. You did it somehow. Like Allen did.

But interestingly in this same world of ours that overlaps with that, of the Times, we would never describe I think our friends who *only* abhor the mainstream as out of step.

Which is simply to say that's the difference. The extreme of us—the ones who really *don't* want it—the attention of that—I don't want to say...larger, well, corporate thing. We don't describe them as out of step. We never would publicly anyhow and that's the difference. It's an entirely defensible position in our world to *not* want that.

Because I think there's a life here and we're in it, and within it there are many positions to hold. I was at dinner last night and we were all putting forward stories. Political ones. Like how in California since Arnold took office there's been a lot of defunding going on in the UC System. There's a labor museum that has been deemed “unnecessary,” irrelevant, and a photography museum that tends to show political work is also getting junked. Continuing education is going away. So that finally you are either inside or out. And nationally there's a lot of murmuring about upcoming attacks on the 501C3s of non-profit art spaces that show political work. The spaces that show us and our friends.

We're always, always talking about this stuff now. I remember certain dinners in New York after the World Trade Towers when we were all trying to wrap our minds



around the world we now occupied—we were trying to fathom the media and the government’s response to the attacks on towers. Horrifying and mind boggling —and then in those same dinners we always looked at ourselves and asked—this always came up: Do you think this is how people felt in Nazi Germany? Are we in history yet?

And it’s occurring to me now that our self-conscious question is not wide enough. We should ask if this is how artists and intellectuals felt in Chile, in Afghanistan, Iran, Rwanda. And the concern doesn’t refer to just one type of thing—an attack, but a growing awareness that the conditions we are living are changing radically. There’s stories at dinner, there’s messages in your email, there’s millions of illustrations. We read them all the time now.

It’s so easy to forget where we came from. How it at least used to *seem* that the opposite conditions ruled in this country. Only thirty years ago the main distributor of not just art, but avant garde art, experimental art was the government—through arts organizations and both PBS and NPR were once upon a time liberal even lefty institutions that disseminated both information and culture. I think the understanding was that the government and the big media would always be more conservative than these small approaches and that to have a whole culture we *needed* them. I was educated by these non profit institutions and media outlets. Reagan changed the landscape when he both changed leadership of the NEA and the Literature division of it and basically defunded the smaller public art institutions that used to thrive in America.

Then the academy became increasingly the institution that protected those impulses. And now that’s getting attacked, the academy is, in terms of what can be taught. State legislatures are looking at curriculum and questioning. Talk show hosts are screaming at the irrelevancy of cultural studies, queer studies etc. Basically anything that’s not science. Alumni groups are having lots of say in private schools about the kind of profile a given university is developing. So first it was public money, then it was corporate money and now it’s university money that is drying up. Stop the money, stop the culture. Something is happening and so we now have to do something else. Not resistance but inundating.

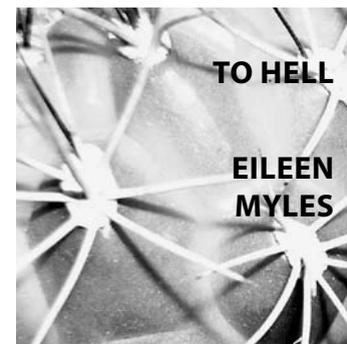
We have to mobilize our own flow. Not just political action. I’m talking about literal optimism. If you have friends, family who have money point them towards a situation where they can help. If you have friends in the media tell them about things that matter. Not just political things but poetry readings, stuff in galleries.

I’ve been noticing that in the artworld there are a lot of cultural activity collectives making work that includes distribution plans. There’s an awareness from the ground up that things must change. Zines and events that create community, that are much wider than “art world.” Neighbors, neighborhoods and stores. I’m crazy about a new lesbian collective in New York called LTTR. It means lesbians to the rescue. I guess it’s meant other things too. It’s a shifting acronym which is pretty cool. So it’s not like Cathy Opie has an opening and every lesbian on the west coast comes to her show. I think it’s more about a show about a show. A show about who comes to the show. In honor of gathering I think which is a new move. We’ve all got to do it. We’ve got to start investing and investigating. Like our project today is intrinsically virtual (or it will fail.) We are decorating, inundating, re-routing all meetings, all work places all encounters.

It seems like reimagining collective action, being a poet, a student, a teacher, a voter has to occur.

So that no one can be accused of being out of step because the world we want to be in is constantly seeping into all the other worlds. We make ourselves powerful and safe by being beyond categories. Spilling the way a message travels on the web. I think to end the lock step we have to rethink being poets and who it’s for and constantly challenge the room we are in to be brighter and cozier, braver and more alive. To be more sexual and dangerous and solipsistic and wasteful and beside the point, putting tiny statues in cracks, jamming

in notes, talking deliberately to people older and younger than yourself. So that changing the biggest thing, the president, can be incidental and yet overwhelming. It has to happen now.



for J.

I’m not sure who I walk with in America today.

I miss you, my imagined accomplice, while we’re
moving among men

One man stands up and says his daughter’s gay

Like we didn’t know that she says, he thinks it’s so great

We can’t think it’s so wonderful, being lied to for years

We’ve accomplished bright cynicism, then struggle for love

We flounder, we fail, the elephant eliminates the con-
fusions of love.

Love probably didn’t need a war, couldn’t eat, is rolling
on waves today

The city is emptying. The elephants have been planning
their party for years.

I’m heading into it. New York my home bursting with men.

Conservative women, heading downtown to see a cross made
of girders: “Great!”

Jesus marked this city, threw planes at it, face it those
pilots were gay

We’re gonna make a constitutional amendment against em
for being gay.

Gay to hit buildings, to want to meet in great numbers,
being no one Love

Moving like an angry sunflower, wanting bandages, space,
something great

I want to live here feeling celebrated for breathing open
today.

I want to show you complicated dyke love, construct a poem
about women and men

In my country there’s a basic responsibility to struggle
and not for years.

To walk away, to turn around seeing you and progress and be
loving your smile for years

Sometimes I think there’s complication with men but I’m
probably gay

Gay to be glad to keep expressing and knowing the im-
possible hopes of women and men

I would want to learn more, be firmer, open up,
revolutionize love streaming

A house on a hill is pretty but there's something
rhapsodically fine today

Stay here while the American ship is moving and rocking,
vincible, great.

My moment alone in front of everyone is hopelessly great

I don't have to wonder where I'm going this time or this
year

I don't have to wonder whose group I'm in today.

Certainly the people who always think the public problem is
theirs are gay

When the moment comes to move like trees to free the city I
love

I don't know John Kerry and we can name that feeling Bud-
dhist for the next four years

The pond reflects the sky, if the highway curls it's gay.

A public moment, a political moment is what's possible
today

We trust more than men, something's eating our years

The uneven horizon's great and of course she's gay

The buildings are falling in love, and we opened its eye
today

1. **THE** title of this panel comes from an MLA panel of 2001. Although this MLA panel does not show up in the MLA program. The panel was a last moment response by Charles Bernstein to a crisis that was brought on by the poet Charles Tomlinson being unable to attend.

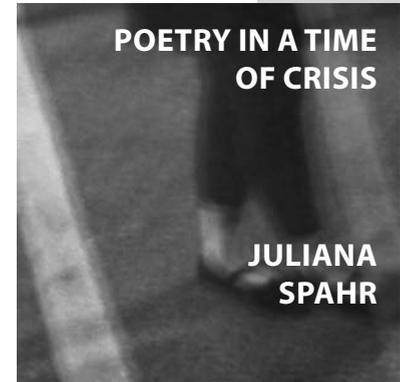
I just used the title of the panel for my paper. And then Roxi et al approached me about this panel. I just want to point out that I can't take credit for the title. But, I began that paper at the MLA like this:

Shortly after I finished *Everybody's Autonomy*, my critical book, I got to thinking, as I'm sure many have, about how many years it had taken me to write. Then I started thinking about all the things that had happened in those years. Some of these things were personal, the death of my father for instance. But I also realized I could chart my progress through this

book through various U.S. military actions. I began the book during the Gulf War because I remember watching the coverage to avoid beginning writing. I finished rewriting it while we were bombing Belgrade. When I realized this, I felt a momentary hope that I had been writing during unique times, that I was writing in a time of crisis. But as I thought it over, I realized I had done no writing at any point in my career when the U.S. was not bombing someone. I wrote this paper, for instance, during the bombing of Afghanistan and the continued bombing of Iraq. Even my sometimes home was being bombed: as I wrote this as the U.S. military was practicing their bombing skills on the Makua valley on the North Shore of Oahu. I could go on. I'm living in New York City this year. Somewhere around 3,000 people died in the World Trade Center while I watched from a street corner in Brooklyn. But that is nothing. Some 72,000 have died from AIDS in New York City since 1981. There is, thus, constantly crisis. We cannot say that unique, or interesting, times arrived on September 11.

Nothing has changed since then. It is all crisis all the time. And a great deal of it caused by the United States. I rewrote this paper during the post-Iraq-war war.

2. When I was in graduate school in the 90s, a lot of time in graduate seminars was spent arguing about that Auden line "poetry makes nothing happen." The truth or untruth of this line was something we debated as if our lives depended on it. We never really looked at the poem. We didn't mention Yeats. We refused to complicate the line, to wonder if poetry makes something happen by making nothing happen. We read with a sledgehammer because to some extent, our critical and poetic lives did depend on whether poetry makes things happen or not. The truth or untruth of this line would impact our writing and how we saw other's writings, would privilege a different set of works, would require us to direct our attention differently.



I think many people left those seminars agreeing with Auden. I just left them confused. I left with those questions about does poetry matter; is poetry enough; what is it about poetry and crisis unanswered except on a personal level. I could tell a personal story about how poetry mattered to me, how it had dramatically changed my thinking about things and how it had reshaped my brain in ways that I couldn't have done on my own or even with the help of various psychoactive drugs. It was clear to me that poetry changed my social life very profoundly (the huge number of poets that I count as friends) and changed my intellectual life also (how, say Ginsberg's *Howl* blew my mind in high school starting off a whole chain of events where I realized I didn't have to follow my peers down the path of right wing bigotry and narrow mindedness because my thinking that wasn't the way to go had a whole literature that supported me). I was changed. My mind was changed.

But somehow, for reasons that I still can't fathom, despite the intensity and urgency and endlessness of these graduate school debates, poetry's role in various political movements was never mentioned. We were in Buffalo but we never mentioned that a few miles down the road a mere thirty years ago the prisoners of Attica prepared to fight for showers and education by circulating copies of Claude McKay's "If We Must Die." At least one of us had a boyfriend who owned a copy of *Poetry and Militancy in Latin America* but we never quoted from this essay where Dalton states that "the poet must acquaint all his comrades with Nazim Hikmet or Pablo Neruda, and give them a clear concept of cultural work within the context of general revolutionary activity" (22). We didn't even mention William Carlos Williams's famous statement that "It is difficult / to get the news from poems / yet men die miserably every day / for lack / of what is found there" even while we often talked about Williams. One of us wore a Che t-shirt but we didn't discuss why he might see the "new impulse" of "artistic inquiry" a crucial part of the new man (132). We didn't turn to Zapata and quote him saying "It is not only by shooting bullets in the battlefields that tyranny is overthrown, but also by hurling ideas of redemption, words of freedom and terrible anathemas against the hangman that people bring down dictators and empires." We didn't think about what Haunani Kay Trask might mean when she describes her poetry as "both de-colonization and re-creation"; and as "expose and celebration at one and the same time"; as "a furious, but nurturing aloha for Hawai'i" (55). We didn't mention Mao's two fronts of the pen and the gun. Or Mayakovsky's claim that one must begin poetic work only after one first has "the presence of a problem in society, the solution of which is conceivable only in poetical terms" (49). We never once mentioned the attention Fanon and Ngugi and Gramsci and Lenin and Cabral and others give to art and literature's role in political education.

Our main concern with this Auden line was how to make our own story of our mind being changed—our political education—matter. We tried to write out of being white and articulate and privileged even as we tried to write against this—both as critics and as poets. In many ways we were not typical graduate students, if there is such a thing. We saw community as more crucial than professional development. We spent more time editing and publishing small journals and books than researching our dissertations. We met in bars late at night and had fights about form's politics when we should have been in bed and sober. Most of us were skeptical about conventional ways of writing poems, which we saw as part of the, some, "system," and also of the institution of graduate study which we saw as training us mainly in critique and alienation. We knew that poets in the United States risked writing for the poetry wing of the Hollywood/military industrial complex and we didn't want to do that. Most of us preferred Brecht over Adorno. But we didn't have many good models about how to take on what it means to be white and articulate and privileged and see it as in any way related to something such as the crisis of anticolonial struggles. We could see we were a part of the most powerful nation

who abused its power and we could see how there was much poetry that was complaining about this abuse of power in the world, but we couldn't see any possibility of alliance with these poetries. And we missed a lot because of this.

I have a certain forgiveness for our narrow focus. In the late 90s, the more radical discussions of canon had been dismissed as being "identity politics." The term, even for those of us who refused to use it because of its reactionary connotations, was symbolic though of how we were led to believe there were a series of rules about identity to be followed and thus a series of divisions between cultures to be respected. While we acknowledged the importance of and taught from a multicultural curriculum, some with devotion and some with resignation, we felt a certain nervousness about appropriation. And instead of thinking hard about how to get rid of this nervousness or how taking on and responding to this nervousness might shape our work and make it better with its hard questions, we just avoided work by people who were not in the same category or who did not write from similar amounts of privilege as ourselves when we talked about things that were relevant or important to our thinking and our writing. We would not have turned to anticolonial nationalists such as Ngugi for support in these debates about the Auden line because we were generally not involved in anticolonial movements and had not been to Africa or wherever and did not see our writing as having to take a stand on colonization. This was naive on our parts. No writing escapes being a part of anything. And the Mohawk Nation was right down the road if we needed any close to home evidence of colonization. I think for the most part we respected the concerns of these communities. And the form that our respect took was a dismissal even as we said it was a refusal to belittle their goals with a claim of alliance on our part.

Basically, we were having, as Walter Lew pointed out in a recent email, a contemporary discussion that has a short history. One that, as he wrote, happens "only in modernity's (and imperialism's) unprecedented states of alienation and cultural frenzy/morbidity"; one that is "very historically/culturally circumscribed." This question of does poetry matter to crisis was one that was only possible right now at this very moment but we for some reason did not mention this, did not bother to wonder why we were having this discussion right now, a discussion that so many others from other times would have found absurd.

And we were missing other issues as we had this debate. Of course poetry matters. Of course poetry cannot be anything but political (for even to be apolitical is also a sort of politics). It should have been obvious.

Here is my argument, such as it is: this debate was for us a sort of blinder. The debate about if poetry matters or not was one that kept us from harder, bigger issues, that let us off from having to discuss how it did matter and then now what, what we had to DO in other words. It let us not have to move on to consider weightier issues—like who we wrote with and on and why or who we read with and on and why or even who we talk with and on and why. We avoided the now what. Now what, who do we respect. Now what, who do we publish in our journal. Now what, who do we invite to read in our series. Now what, where do we put our bodies, our time, our commitments. But we couldn't figure out the now what because the question about whether poetry matters or not somehow so occupied us that we couldn't get to the next stage of wondering what uses of poetry in other parts of the world are instructive. The question led us somewhere, it led us to think that we could fracture English's power by fracturing its syntaxes, by stuttering through its words but then it stranded us there. It didn't lead us to alliance. It let us think that we could do it alone, just with words.

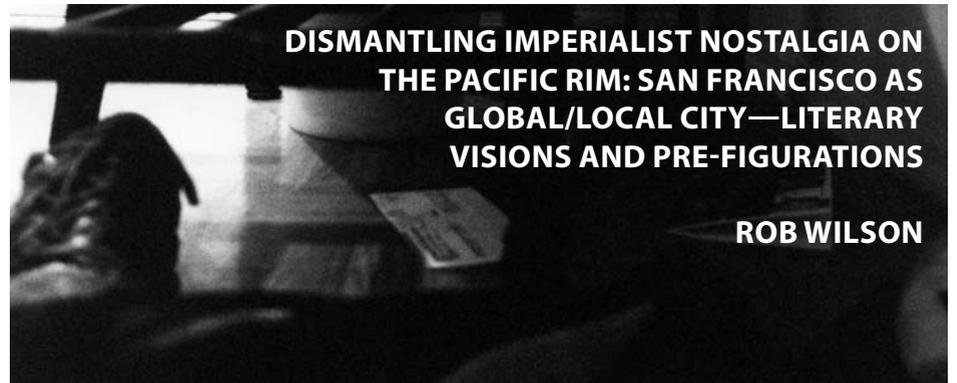
Today our world erupts and poetry is one of the tools that get used in this eruption. When Osama bin Laden wanted to talk about the bombing of the U.S.S. Cole at his son's wedding he did it in poetry. None of my years of poetry study and late night talks about the politics of form gave me the tools to understand this moment. I turned

to Steven Caton's study of poetry in Yemen to try and understand "the way in which poetry helps constitute tribal identity" (264). That began to help.

One could say that I am just talking about cross cultural difficulties. But I think not exclusively. Because our dominant poetry paradigms don't help that much to explain a number of the most popular poems of our own culture, such as the poem "American Bad Ass" by Kid Rock that the U.S.S. Cole blasted as it limped out of Yemen. It might very well be that poetry swaggers and provokes and constitutes tribal identity as much as it calms or comforts or counters any darkness and perhaps the scary rebel yell of "American Bad Ass" is the best reply right now to the discussion of whether poetry matters. I guess I am asking for a model of study that acknowledges poetry as intimate with crisis. A model that might help explain Timothy McVeigh turning to Victorian poet Henley's "Invictus" before he gets executed. A model that might help explain the intensity of my own relation with poetry which I almost never find a comfort and almost always find provocative. And I guess I'm calling for an embrace of the poetry is political assumption so as to begin to move the debate to these issues of now what.

3. But now to the question, is poetry enough? And the answer is of course not. Poetry is only one part of enough. The part that changes the brain. In an email the other day New York poet Allison Cobb claimed she was paraphrasing Charles Bernstein as she wrote "the fact that poetry won't stop violence is not a reason not to try." I want to tweak her paraphrase a little to something like the fact that poetry hasn't led all that many poets into action doesn't mean we shouldn't ask where our poetry leads us finally. If poetry changes our head, and I think this is irrefutable, how does it also change our feet? It is the feet that Auden denies when at the beginning of the "poetry makes nothing happen" stanza he says that Ireland is unchanged and at the end when he says poetry survives as a mouth. But in reply, one could point to poet Rigoberto Lopez Perez after all who shot and killed Somoza in 1956. And it is feet that Dalton, Guevara, Zapata, Trask, Mao, and Mayakovsky want changed.

SINCE its frontier-days eruption into Pacific Rim global city, San Francisco has long served as the center of a vast urban periphery or "contado" providing material resources (water, timber, stone, agriculture, shipping and so on) as well as huge labor needs and input to build up the wealth and splendor of an "imperial city" a la Rome or some west-coast Constantinople at Golden Gate.^a But San Francisco is also the site of a countercultural vision long propagated in literature, film, and social community. This vision of California-regionality and San Francisco as global city of cultural-political newness and promissory



queerness, thus, will not only assume an abiding openness to "transpacific" forces of Asia/Pacific becoming and Hispanic transculturation, it will also tap into some high-visionary sources from literature and popular culture (from Lenny Bruce and Maxine Hong Kingston to Jack Spicer, Bob Kaufman, and Gloria Anzaldua) and a demanding configuration of cultural vocation and expansive urban "contado." These are forces of will and imagination that William Blake troped as "Jesus-the-Imagination" opposed to the reactionary hegemony of world capital and a kind of dead empiricism of matter-turned-commodity as "the fallen world of illusion." Against market odds only grown stronger, I will be holding out for the vocation *in extremis* of the poet/ culture maker in coastal California, as a figure of theory-making and situated will plugged into worlding-energies on the left-coast of experimental poetics and geopolitics. This is the cultural worker's calling to high contrarian vision in William Everson's sense, as outlined in his "Santa Cruz Meditations," a vocation aiming to "throw off this malaise, this evasion, this attitudinizing and sickliness of urbanity" and, instead, "[To] Shamanize! Shamanize! The American destiny is in your hands."^b

In a time of war and civilization/race othered against civilization/race, as Juliana Spahr has warned in "Poetry in a Time of Crisis," it is not enough for US poetry (or related modes of cultural production like film, comedy, or theater) to sooth, relieve, twitter, or console the soul with the sound of iambic bromides and the banalities of faux-universalism befitting the Fireside Poets of long ago.

Given this time of political crisis and global stalemate, we might turn to the imagination-endorsing power—and wry figural politics—of the Italian film-maker Federico Fellini, to proclaim wildly: "The visionary is the only true realism."^d These poetic-mentor figures would variously preserve the confrontational power of poetics/aesthetics in counter-revolutionary times like these and work in the politics and poetics of place and across the borders of language-community and bad empiricism. For the larger social context of poetry we confront is an oddly