Snapshots at a Conference

Poetry and Politics:
Nations of the Mind
Manchester, NH, April 25-26, 2003

by Daisy Fried

THE ROLE OF POETRY

A New Hampshire public TV host has a dozen or so state poet laureates in a semi-circle in front of a camera. The room is cramped; I can only barely poke my head around the door to watch. I can't always tell who's saying what. The host kneels lest he block laureates from the camera's eye. "What About the Role of Poetry?" he asks.

Ellen Kort (Wisconsin) notes that after 9/11 poetry flew across the networks, not prose. "Poetry feeds a hunger."

Someone says "I write a poetry column for the (unintelligible) *Sentinel* and after 9/11 I was absolutely flooded with submissions. Of course the vast majority of the people were not poets at all, but that only goes to show (unintelligible)."

Someone says slam's a very popular poetry form.

Someone says "And rap! Rap's very important."

Larry Woiwode (North Dakota) says "There would have been no anti-Vietnam war movement without Bob Dylan's lyrics."

Maggi Vaughn (Tennessee) puts in a word for Hank Williams Sr. "It doesn't get any better than that."

Samuel Hazo (Pennsylvania) says he got the daily paper in Pittsburgh to put a poem on the op ed page every Saturday.

Jim Irons (Idaho) who might actually be young enough to have been a kid listening to contemporary pop music when "Rapper's Delight" first hit the airwaves 25 years ago, says "look, the problem with rap is, it dissolves on the page. It needs the beats, it needs to be out loud, otherwise there's not much there." He says the problem with teaching poetry is teachers present "The Wasteland" as nothing more than a compendium of erudite references. So of course kids say 'ugh, poetry.' Irons says sure it's that, but it's more. "When I teach Eliot, I teach the emotion, as a human responding emotionally to what's happening around him."

Somebody mentions rap again.

Somebody else says poems sustain us as human beings.

Maggi Vaughn says "I am a poet of the people."

AS FOR LITERATURE IT GIVES NO MAN A SINECURE

We are at the Highlander Inn, Manchester, NH. This is the first ever conference of state poet laureates. Poets laureate, I mean — everyone this weekend carefully says it that way. The conference, produced by the New Hampshire State Writers' Project in association with a whole bunch of sponsors you can look up yourself at www.poetryandpolitics.org, was the brainchild of New Hampshire laureate Marie Harris.

Thirty-one states and Washington D.C. have laureates or state writers. Five of those state posts are vacant. New Jersey's is famously troubled. Some where between 14 and 20 current laureates and emeriti show for the conference. Of 21 state laureate/writers who RSVP they'll come, nine are women, twelve are men. Two are African-American. Of nine other current laureates named on the conference website, five are men and four are women. Of those who attend the conference, none appear to be under 40; a majority are probably over 50. Not that I asked.

Tomorrow the poet laureates will give three public readings each across the state. In two days they'll be addressed by anti-war poet and former New Hampshire poet laureate Maxine Kumin in the morning, and Bush-appointee, National Endowment for the Arts Chairman and Poet Dana Gioia. Between the two addresses, they'll attend panels along with 200 or so other conference-goers called things like "Poetry and Education," "Poetry and the Media" and "The Poet as Citizen."

THE URINAL COMMISSION

Thursday night, the night before the statewide readings, the poets laureate have mostly arrived and are crammed around tables in a little room at the Highlander. The buffet pasta salad is sodden with mayonnaise, discolored by pimiento orts. The sliced bread's gone a little stale, the juice is warm, the coffee lukewarm, the cold cuts huddle in little piles on their tray.

The laureates are talking about a commission that came to them recently out of the blue. A rich guy giving money to the University of Pennsylvania for new construction declared that four urinals at the site be accompanied by plaques inscribed with the phrase *The relief you are experiencing has been brought to you by Michael Zinman.*

"And you know, these universities are such whores, of course they've agreed to it," says Mary Crow (Colorado). "So what he *also* did was send $100 checks to each poet laureate, with a very nice note asking us to consider writing a poem about a urinal."

"I've written one," says David Allen Evans (South Dakota).

So has Maggi Vaughn and so has Fleda Brown (Delaware), who says "Mine's not ready to show anyone yet."

"One older lady laureate sent her check back," says Marie Harris. "She wrote him a note saying it's a delightful idea, but she just didn't think she could."

"That was the intriguing thing," says Fleda Brown. "He said you didn't have to — he said keep the check even if we didn't want to write one."

"I'm still thinking about it," says Mary Crow. "I haven't cashed mine, I haven't written a poem, I haven't sent the check back."

"I was thinking of calling mine 'In-Stall-ation'," quips Marie Harris.

"Villanelle on a Urinelle!" says a small man dressed head to toe in denim. That's Bob Roripaugh, Wyoming. It's the only thing I hear him say all conference.

INTERLUDE

The laureate I noticed first when I walked in the room has bountiful wavy light brown hair, a bountiful wavy light brown beard, a bountiful wavy light brown tweed jacket, light brown jeans. His head's cocked thoughtfully to one side. He's at another table; doesn't join in the urinal conversation. Later I see him in the lobby in a corner by himself, one leg crossed over the other, cheek resting in one hand, two fingers of the other hand tapping out a rhythm on his leg as if he's working out a line of poetry. Iamb, iamb — ooh! trochee substitution! — iamb, iamb.

LAUREATES IN TROUBLE

"So," says one of the laureates around a mouthful of potato chips. "what's the story with Baraka?"

As everyone knows, NJ poet laureate Baraka's in trouble because of a poem which many people, including me, agree is wrong and silly, but not, as has been charged, anti-Semitic. Though Baraka was named laureate *after* he wrote the poem, and after he'd been Baraka for many, many years, the New Jersey state legislature is in the middle of abolishing the position altogether, since there's no provision for firing a laureate in Baraka's contract. Baraka refuses to resign or apologize. NJ hasn't yet paid him the $10,000 it's supposed to for the laureate job. He never shows up for the conference.

Quincy Troupe was California poet laureate till it was discovered he'd claimed on a resume he had a college degree he didn't have. Troupe resigned.

"I was named a pornographic poet by Congress," says Mary Crow, proudly. When Congress was reviewing past NEA grants (Crow got one in 1988) during last decade's culture wars, they apparently pored through recipients' poems for body parts and bad words. "My poem was about death — but it had the word *vagina* in it. It had the word *fucking*."

She says when she re-upped for a second five-year laureate term in 2000, the new republican governor made her fill out a form. "I had to say whether I'd done anything in the past to embarrass him. I thought, well maybe I have, but it *shouldn't* embarrass him, so I said 'no'."

Poet Laureate X (name changed to protect the ingenuous), told an interviewer "George W. Bush is the worst president we've ever had." The quote appeared in a newsletter, but then the newspapers got hold of it. "You would not *believe* the hate mail I got. It was *awful!* They threatened bodily harm. They said I was not a patriot. They said I was a traitor. I am not a political person at all! I don't get involved in that! My poems are about relationships. And childhood."

"Well," says Marie Harris. "I'd rather have poetry controversies than nobody talking about poetry at all."

SHAKESPEARE VERNACULAR

Interviewed in the *Hippo*, Manchester's alternative weekly newspaper, Maggi Vaughn tells a reporter that she is "a poet of the people. Just put me in front of people and let me read." When I sit down with media magnet Vaughn to talk in the lobby of the Highlander after the TV taping, she elaborates: "You see, I am a poet of the people. Everybody can understand my poems. I want to bring poetry to the small crossroads as well as the big city. Shakespeare wrote in the vernacular. He may be hard to understand now, but he wrote in the tongue of the day. I just feel like some poets try to outwrite each other. Well, their message is lost on me."

Some laureates say *po-e-try*. Some say *poy-try*. Vaughn says *po'try*.

IS/CAN/SHOULD

(from the collected statements by the poets laureate)

Poetry is... *basic to our human nature... one of the best therapies... a way into the secret recess of our hearts... beneficial to the health of society... integral to expressions of celebration and grief*

Poetry should... *challenge and invigorate... be an essential part of public events and op-ed pages... help us remember and celebrate... open us up to the wonders of our daily lives...*

Poets are... *rooted in the natural world... spokespersons for the inarticulate in nature and the wordless desires of the common people... able to present their views in a memorable matrix of words... gazing out to sea, searching for the best way to get it said right*

Laureates should... *be advocates for freedom of expression... find creative and unique ways of getting people involved in poetry... be searching for words to explain the need for support for the arts... write anti-war poems... ask students to take the writing of poetry seriously... address the growing microcomputer network potential... go to the small crossroads as well as the big cities... not proselytize, but through language encourage critical thinking and invite open-mindedness...*

raise awareness of the arts and encourage citizen participation... reflect the life, people, and natural and human environment of the state... write poems about their state quarters

BACK IN THE HOTEL ROOM

Blonds with permatans drive Humvee2s over piles of rubble in TV ads. People in Hong Kong and Toronto stare out at the camera over face-masks. Sailors coming home from Iraq bearhug wives, moms, sisters, children, over and over, on CNN.

INTERLUDE

The laureate with the wavy hair is walking solemnly across the Highlander parking lot. I can't swear to it, but I think he's walking in an iambic rhythm, with a little skip every third of five steps for the trochee's heave. I start after him for an interview but he gets in his car and drives away.

ROLE OF POETRY II

Fleda Brown's "a bit pissed off" about the Role of Poetry taping. "I really didn't like the anti-intellectual bias last night. Look, rap and slam poetry and performance poetry are really important. I'm not saying they can't be very good. But to claim the real poetry of the people is out there, that if it's easily understood it's automatically better, that we're a bunch of tight-assed intellectuals? That's reverse snobbery. If we're like "oh, isn't it nice, you go do your slam and your rap" — that's condescending. There's always been poetry of the people, and it's great. It's wonderful. But to claim anyone who does anything else is a pinhead academic? Then you're demeaning the skilled use of language? That is what we care about, isn't it? That's what we should be teaching: skills, thoughtful attention to words."

AMAZING

Amazing how many times rap and slam poetry are cited as examples of the popular resurgence of poetry. Amazing how often it's middle-aged middle-class white people who do the citing. Amazing how many times in the last twenty years, I've heard this, without anyone ever citing a rap artist or slam poet they like and respect, or whose work they regularly consume.

BEGIN AGAIN

The laureate readings I go to Friday are well-attended — better than most readings at home in Philadelphia. At the public library in tiny Plymouth, NH, Mary Crow has maybe four or five dozen in her audience. In fact hers is better attended than Vermont laureate and famous writer Grace Paley's at the State Library in Concord a few hours later. The audience is mostly middle-aged-to-elderly-women and a smattering of middle-to-elderly men, and maybe a dozen high school

kids on, one cynically suspects, enforced English class poetry field trip. Crow reads some political poems, poems of witness. Audience-members make *mmm*-sounds, nod their heads, give admiring conspiratorial glances at one another. One gets the sense that a certain number of the people listening are being introduced to poetry — rather than attending the reading of a well-known favorite. At the Q&A, there's the obligatory "When did you know you wanted to be a poet?" A woman asks "What is a poetry slam and how can we get one here." A young man pipes up. "We have one every week at (unintelligible) cafe!"

Back down I-93 in Concord, NH statues of Millard Fillmore, Daniel Webster and one General Stark sit aplop the State House lawn along with two giant birch trees and a bad replica of the Liberty Bell with the crack painted on with a drool of black paint. Across the street Cheney and Bush grin from posters in the yellow-ribbon festooned windows of the Republican party headquarters. Upstairs in the State Library there's an elegant exhibit of New Hampshire WPA artists. Downstairs Larry Woiwode and Grace Paley read. Leaning on the back of an arm-chair, the tiny 80-year old Paley rapidly reads sui generis personal-political poems from her recent *Begin Again: Collected Poems*. My favorite, the sly "Question," begins:

> Do you think old people should be put away
> the one red rheumy eye the pupil that goes back and
> back
> the hands are scaly
> do you think all that should be hidden
>
> do you think young people should be seen so much on
> Saturday nights
> hunting and singing in packs the way they do
> standing on street corners looking this way and that

The audience — same demographic make-up as up in Plymouth, only no high school kids and a few younger men and women — seems to know her work. They laugh. They listen. No one asks when Paley knew she wanted to be a writer. She delights them.

BACK IN THE HOTEL ROOM

The mini-series *Helen of Troy* is showing. Helen looks like a dental hygienist who liked the updo she got for her cousin's wedding last weekend so much she just keeps spraying more hairspray on it every day to make it last as long as she can. Menelaus asks Paris, "Do you think you deserve her more than I do?" Paris says "Yes." Priam looks botoxed. On CNN, the marines newly docked in San Diego keep kissing their wives, their babies.

"MOST POETS ARE ROOTED IN THE NATURAL WORLD"

"Most poets are rooted in the natural world," says Larry Woiwode, in his website statement.

Ahem.

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Foam flecks the ink-dark Merrimack River running through downtown Manchester's center, where all the old red-brick industrial factories have not entered a state of perpetual crumble as in other old New England factory towns, but instead all seem to have been transformed into discount furniture outlets. In the pale sky, flecks of cloud the same color as the river-foam. Along the highways the pines or cedars or spruces or whatever evergreen they are, are turning the ugliest, deadest brown shade. Still-wintry feeling here, though it's the end of April, though the sun shines all day Friday. Where I live in Philly, we're having a strange fast-forwarding kind of spring, the forsythia blooming at the same time as the magnolias and cherries and dogwoods and apples and pears and even the azaleas; as fast as the trees blossom, the leaves come out and overtake them. Up here in New Hampshire, there are only a few crocuses poking through, the willows in that early-cloud stage of lemon-liming. Is this even cherry tree country? On the outskirts of town, the Highlander Inn is built on a rise. It looks across at an opposite rise all deep dark cedars interrupted by a housing development, ecru colored, and like the Highlander, looking as if it's pumped up as if on steroids: all the buildings seem the exact wrong size and scale. Someone around here's getting rich selling siding! It's supposed to rain tomorrow.

"WELCOME, UNACKNOWLEDGED LEGISLATORS OF THE WORLD"

Saturday, 9 a.m. Two hundred conference-goers sit around big round tables drinking weak coffee in the Highlanders' Conference Center ballroom. Most, again, are middle-aged women.

"Welcome unacknowledged legislators of the world," cries former NH poet laureate Maxine Kumin, paraphrasing Shelley to begin her conference-opening speech. She then names all kinds of poets — neo-formalists, narrative poets, prose-poets, postmodernists, fractalists, language poets — making the poetry tent large and possibly — I wonder — taking a pre-emptive strike at the evening's keynote speaker, Dana Gioia, well-known for his strict pro-formalist, pro-narrative poetry views.

"All poetry is political," Kumin continues. "All politics are personal."

She recounts how she and Carolyn Kizer resigned as chancellors of the board of the Academy of American Poetry refused for the second time to vote Lucille Clifton onto the board. I suddenly notice how few African-Americans or other persons of color there are in the audience. Kumin quotes the poetry critic Adam Kirsch, who said not long ago that [I paraphrase] poetry has resumed its 19th Century role as consolation and retreat from the rigors of the world. Kumin says "I would defend to the death poets' right to turn inward" but says it's also more important than ever to acknowledge poetry's power to make a difference in the world. She quotes Kurt Vonnegut saying that writers "have been allowed to say what we want for 200 years, and politicians are still wholly unafraid of us."

Things, Kumin says, are changing. "Now that Laura Bush has canceled the White House poetry event — we know that politicians are not wholly unafraid anymore."

POETRY AND THE SPIRIT

Lucy Crichton moderates the panel. She's a Doctor of Ministry candidate at something called the University of Creation Spirituality in Oakland, CA. She starts by saying "I went to see Sweet Honey and the Rock last night, and what a healing experience that was."

The first speaker is self-described "certified poetry therapist" John Fox, the kind of guy who says "Good morning!" to his audience, then waits smilingly till we chorus "Good morning"! back. He hands out a packet of poems to illustrate what he wants to talk about in terms of Poetry and Healing. Here are a few lines from his own poem, "When Someone Deeply Listens to You," which he reads out loud to us:

> When someone deeply listens to you
> your barefeet [sic] are on the earth
> and a beloved land that seemed distant
> is now at home within you.

He says "I believe poetry is a larger place... where all the other concerns fall away and we can be together in the richness of that truth." Fox gives poetry workshops to all kinds of people who feel they're in need of healing.

James Autry sits next to Fox. He says "I was a corporate biggie. I had a 500 million dollar operating budget, 900 employees, Lear Jets and what not." Autry says his poetry was "a response to trauma" he experienced as a corporate boss. "I had to shut down a department with four men in it. Of course we were going to do it with financial compensation and giving them the dignity they deserved. When I saw draining from their faces their perception about who they felt themselves to be, it was devastating to me. On my way back in the Lear jet, I wrote a poem."

Autry's poem, "On Firing a Salesman," compares firing someone to committing a murder.

Marilyn Nelson (Connecticut) who planned to wear a peace-sign scarf to the canceled White House poetry event, is the only serious poet on the panel. She's also one of the best-known poets at the conference, the author of six books of poetry. With Baraka a no-show, she's the only African-American laureate at the conference.

Nelson's says she's interested in poetry as contemplative practice. She talks about teaching poetry and meditation at West Point, where cadets are required to memorize poems, "with the idea that poems may actually sustain them in war time, and keep them in contact with other people's humanity.

"In other classes the first thing cadets do is salute. In my class they turn off the lights, loosen their ties, sit on the floor." Nelson had the cadets begin each class with a different kind of meditation. "Two weeks of mantra, two weeks of meditating on pebbles, two weeks counting breaths... They also kept journals of outside-of-class experience of meditation."

I amuse myself by imagining a further mingling of poetry and the military. Why limit poetry training to officers? What if instead of that

'sound off' chant army boot campers sing while running, they chanted poetry instead. Philip Larkin's "The Trees" would be perfect:

Sarge: *The-trees-are-com-ing-in-to-leaf*
Grunts: *Like-some-thing al-most be-ing said.*
S: *The-re-cent-buds-re-lax-and-spread.*
G: *Their-green-ness-is-a-kind-of-grief.*

S: *Sound off:*
G: *Phil-ip*
S: *Sound off:*
G: *Lar-kin...*

But. Is there really any evidence that poetry makes us more humane? are we supposed to think that the U.S. armed forces wouldn't have used cluster bombs on civilian neighborhoods in Iraq if the leaders had gotten more poetry and meditation? what about the sharpshooter who said "the chick got in the way" as an excuse for killing the civilian woman?

Does poetry make us happier? kinder? What about Ezra Pound's pro-fascist anti-Semitic broadcasts? Frost's cruelty to his family? Larkin's generalized misanthropy?

Is it only certain kinds of poetry that make us better people? or all poetry? What does Autry mean when he talks about poetry helping people be better managers? Is a better manager better for workers or for the bottom line? And if poetry heals, why did Anne Sexton — who wrote an awful lot of poetry — kill herself?

While I'm thinking this, the audience seems delighted by what they're hearing.

During the Q&A period I try to say something diplomatic, like "What about poetry of wit, of intellect, of language-play? What about invective? What about poets that are more interested in form than in expression — all the kinds of poetry that don't fit into your idea of poetry for contemplation, for healing, or for management?"

Fox says "could you explain more about what kind of poetry you mean?" Since I've just covered most of western poetry, that's hard, so I just say, off the top of my head, Alexander Pope. Marianne Moore. Fox looks blank. Nelson says that people limit their curriculums all kinds of way; she's interested in this particular area. "Other people can teach Pope, if they're interested in that kind of boxed-off poetry."

Laughter from the audience. I've been put in my box along with Pope.

"Do you want to add anything?" Nelson asks Fox.

"You've said it so beautifully," Fox says. And closes his eyes for a moment.

MEANWHILE

Rain is pouring down.

I see the wavy haired poet down the hall, walking along, beating his index finger in the air, then catching himself, shoving his hand in his pocket.

En route to Manchester, NH, somewhere in the sky, NEA Chairman and poet Dana Gioia is nervous. So says Marie Harris: "He's afraid the press is going to be mean to him."

Back in the hotel room, "on this day in 1937 the Germans bombed the Spanish town of Guernica in an unprovoked attack," reports CNN newscrawl, with no apparent irony about recent current events. On *Helen of Troy* Cassandra stares sweatily, gaspily, chest-heavingly, shriekily, into the fire of the future only she can see.

Out in the lobby, Maggi Vaughn is staying on-message. To Dinitia Smith of the *New York Times*, as I pass by: "I am a poet of the people."

QUOTATIONS FROM CHAIRMAN DANA

1. The Press Conference

Somehow Dana Gioia has become the enemy. All because of Laura Bush.

There's maybe 15 of us in an empty room, two cameras set up. Gioia walks in, buttoned down suit, businessman tie, boyish haircut. He's accompanied by a woman with a starved-down body in a neat navy suit who asks everyone suspiciously *And who are YOU with?* before shoving glossy folders about Gioia's Shakespeare initiative into our hands. Gioia's excited about this: he and the NEA will be bringing Shakespeare to small towns across the United States, using about $3 million of the agency's $116 million budget, and getting Congresspersons to recite Shakespeare at the Capitol. When he finishes describing this, and finishes answering, at length, the New Hampshire public TV host's question, "What is the role of poetry in society, and what should it be," Dinitia Smith — I think it's Dinitia Smith — asks him about Laura Bush's cancellation of the White House poetry event for fear of its being tainted by politics.

Gioia reacts like Donald Rumsfeld: "I have no comment on that *Tired Topic.*"

It's a weird answer at a poet's gathering — even if it's only to the press. After all, we were all pretty thrilled when a poet was named NEA Chair. It was almost like he was our man in the White House. And here he is, at a gathering of his peers, some of whom sent poems or statements to the Poets Against the War project — and he won't comment? The press conference never gets very far away from that topic for the rest of the time.

2. The Gala Dinner

Dana Gioia walks in and gets a standing ovation. Like many CEOs, and poets too, Gioia is far more comfortable with an audience than he is in a press conference where he's not quite in control.

He reads a pleasing poem of his own called "California Hills in August." He quotes a poem by Robert Frost. He talks expansively on poetry, though not much on politics, and says rap, and cowboy poetry, and slam, and spoken word, all indicate a resurgence in popular poetry that's coinciding with a resurgence in the popularity in what he calls, in quotes, "literary" poetry.

He says "This is a moment of marvelous possibility... You poet laureates may be working on little or no budget, with few or no resources. What you have at your disposal may be merely symbolic. But we poets are masters of using symbols." Of course there's no money, nobody has money, he seems to say. "You have the only necessary resource, your voice, and your vision. Working together we can make America what it deserves to be."

The crowd — the same crowd which enthusiastically applauded Maxine Kumin's anti-establishment speech that morning — rises to its feet to give Chairman Dana his second standing ovation.

LAST WORDS

"You know what?" says Jim Irons (Idaho). "My feeling is, if you like poetry fine, if you don't like it fine. I'm really not trying to convert anyone to poetry. I'm happy there's an audience for it. But poetry will take care of itself. It'll be okay. It'll be here. It's part of the human psyche."

LAST SCENE, SUNDAY MORNING, GOING HOME

The poet with the light brown wavy hair and light brown wavy beard, still in his light brown tweed wavy coat and light-brown jeans, is walking through the parking lot at Grace Paley's side. Paley's looking for her car, can't find it. She looks up at the wavy-haired poet, says some quiet little jokey thing. He throws back his head and laughs. All weekend she's been doing that to people.
