Event title: Unraveling the Prophetic: Gerald Stern’s Oeuvre Revisited

Event description: In October 2022, the National Book Award–winning Jewish poet Gerald Stern passed away at the age of 97. This panel of Stern’s friends and students will reflect on the impact of his work—from his breakout book Lucky Life to his last book I., a mischievous refraction of the biblical book and figure of Isaiah. The conversation will celebrate his life, delve into the Jewish valences of his work, and explore what his troubling of the prophetic mode reveals about his intertwined politics and poetics.

Event category: Tributes

Event organizer

Event moderator: Mihaela Moscaliuc

Event participants and short biographies:

Chase Berggrun is a trans woman poet and the author of R E D (Birds, LLC, 2018). Her work has appeared in Poetry, APR, Jubilat, and elsewhere. She received her MFA from New York University.

Kimiko Hahn finds material from disparate sources: identity, current events/history, nature, science, the Japanese zuihitsu. In her tenth book she explores iterations of Foreign Bodies. Awards include a Guggenheim. She teaches in MFA Program in Creative Writing and Translation, Queens College-CUNY.

Mihaela Moscaluic is the author of Cemetery Ink, Immigrant Model, and Father Dirt, translator of Liliana Ursu's Clay and Star and Carmelia Leonte’s The Hiss of the Viper, and co-editor of Border Lines: Poems of Migration. She is associate professor of English at Monmouth University (NJ).

Alessandra Lynch is the author of four books of poetry. Her fifth book, Wish Ave, will be published by Alice James Books in October 2024. She has received fellowships from the Vermont Studio Center, MacDowell, Yaddo, and the Lannan Foundation.

Matthew Rohrer is the author of 10 books of poetry, including A Hummock In The Malookas (National Poetry Series), Destroyer and Preserver, A Green Light (shortlisted for the 2005 Griffin International Poetry Prize) and The Others (Believer Book Award Winner). He teaches at NYU.

OPENING MODERATOR REMARKS AND HOUSEKEEPING ANNOUNCEMENTS

Welcome to “Unraveling the Prophetic: Gerald Stern’s Oeuvre Revisited.”

A few reminders before we begin:

• For those needing or wishing to follow along to a written text, please let the moderator of the panel, Mihaela Moscaliuc, know, and a printed copy will be delivered to you.

• Please make sure that spaces marked for wheelchairs remain clear of chairs or other barriers.

• Treat service animals as working animals and do not attempt to distract or pet them.

• Be aware of those with chemical sensitivities and refrain from wearing scented products.
• Please be aware that your fellow attendees may have invisible disabilities. Do not question anyone’s use of an accommodation while at the conference, including for chairs reserved for those with disabilities.

Structure:

Moderator will make some brief opening remarks on Stern’s place in our pantheon, introduce his last book, *I* (Ayin Press, 2023), and welcome Ayin Managing Editor Penina Eilberg-Schwartz and Ayin Co-founder Tom Haviv.

Moderator will introduce the four panelists, who will then each speak for 5-6 minutes about their connection to Stern and his work.

Moderator will initiate a 30-minute discussion on the impact of Stern’s oeuvre, the significance of his commitment to inverting the prophetic tradition, most notably in his last, posthumous book *I*, and the intricate relation between his politics and poetics.

Moderator will open the discussion to the audience and invite questions and comments.

PARTICIPANT OPENING REMARKS and INITIAL THOUGHTS

*Chase Berggrun:* I'll speak about the genesis of *I* --the poem and *I*, the book, describing how the poem was penned and the process of turning it into the beautiful object it became—as well as the urgency of Jerry’s politics which pervade both this work and his entire corpus of poetry. Stern’s sense of justice—uncompromising, mischievous, rude, and informed by a long life of attention paid to the conditions of the world that produce injustice—is inseparable from his poetics, and offers a model toward a future.

*Alessandra Lynch:* Grounded Electricity: The Urgency & Agency of Gerald Stern's Poems

I'd like to address how blood, dogs, possum, birds, porcupine, mutton, veal, chicken, and other animal figures or aspects—both dead and living—as well as specific physical locales (Steubenville, Mayflower Hotel, Plaza Caribe, Cosmos Diner, et al)—through Stern’s ecstatic syntax—shake us awake to our present, enlivening us with mortal and spiritual urgency, reminding us again and again that we are animals on a planet, a particular place, grievous and joyous as that is.

I will read several Stern poems to illustrate and elaborate on his grounded electricity.

*Matthew Rohrer:* The Continuous Poem/Advice for the Young

I believe it is possible to read almost all of Stern’s poems as entries in one Continuous Poem. Not literally, in the sense that they comprise a serial poem, but in the sense that for his whole life Stern’s work returned to key moments and themes. And it’s in the way the poems tend to begin that bolsters this reading. I will look at a few examples of these recurrent themes and ideas, and in particular the strategies he used to enter this Continuous Poem that flowed like an underground stream beneath everything he wrote.

I plan to end my comments by discussing how I use his work as an example to the young. Particularly to the young who want to write poems but are too beholden to a preconceived idea. The
student writer who has a plan for their poem before they even sit down to write can learn a lot from the way Stern’s poems seem to stumble into their subject. Federico Garcia Lorca said, “I do not believe in creation, but discovery, and I do not believe in the seated artist but the artist walking down the road,” and I think this aligns perfectly with Stern’s poetics.

Kimiko Hahn: Hectic Brilliance/Advice for the Old

I love Matt's fabulous description and would like to parallel his aim in my own comments: "advice." Not only did Stern continue his writing practice to the end, but also his brilliance. How can we all learn to maintain the energy of one's earlier writing? What more than companionship, reading, and riotous laughter?

In my comments will refer to two of Stern's books: Blessed as We Were: Late Selected and New Poems and I. His late new poems read like monostichs on proverbial steroids. They feel like a master releasing a thought that defies restraint and runs amok, and yet, the poems finally do have the constraints required by craft. I will close read a new poem to exhibit the velocity. We can observe that there is nothing diminished in Stern's signature hectic pace and keen brilliance.

QUESTIONS

1) Penina Eilberg-Schwartz mentions that Stern “inverts the prophetic genre to bring essential doubt and liberatory absurdity into the public imagination.” Can we expound on that, and on what else Stern might be doing with/within the prophetic, with specific references to I. and other poems?

2) Stern’s prophetic rages and rants come from a commitment to love, to lifting the world, which is no easy job: “it’s no easy thing forgiving bastards/ and loving lowness”—“Lowness” (In Beauty Bright); “I will live completely for the flowering,/my neck like a swan’s,/my fingers clawing the air/looking for justice”—“Hidden Justice”). “If civilized humanity has a future,” Alicia Ostriker mentions in an essay, then “Stern will be present in it.” Can we talk, along these lines, about Stern’s legacy—the kind of work it invites or demands of us?