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AUTHOR:

Smith, John Richard

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Gerald Stern**

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Meeting: The Work of Martin Buber and Gerald Stern

by

John Richard Smith

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Contents

Abstract	1
1. Meeting	16
2. Presence	27
3. Attention and Prayer	37
4. Hallowing and Ritual	50
Works Cited	52
Vita	53

Meeting: The Work of Martin Buber and Gerald Stern

This thesis examines the common ground between the Jewish philosopher, Martin Buber, and the contemporary American poet, Gerald Stern. Beginning with Stern's poem, "Sycamore," and Buber's *I and Thou*, I discuss *meeting* and *addressing* the world as essential facets of both their works. I also discuss the writers' views on duality and union, noting, in particular, the progression of thought in both of their works from "mystic union" with the "other" to a relationship that is mutual and reciprocal. The introductory chapter concludes by identifying three aspects of Buber's philosophy and his interpretation of Hasidism that appear in Stern's poetry: presence; attention and prayer; ritual and hallowing.

Using Buber's retelling of a story told by the Baal Shem Tov regarding one's *place* in the world as being "where one stands," the second chapter examines Stern's sense of presence, his incorporation of specific place names that personalize and universalize his meetings; the Divine Presence both Buber and Stern address; and the the concepts of *hitlahavut* or ecstasy and *avoda*, service, as ways in which both writers attend to the world. Although many of Stern's poems are addressed in this chapter, particular attention is paid to "Nice Mountain" from Stern's most-recent collection *Bread Without Sugar*.

The chapter regarding attention and prayer discusses the technical aspects of Stern's poetry that are prayer-like, such as anaphora, but more importantly it is concerned with a way of *being* that is identical in both Buber and Stern. It analyzes the act of releasing the *Shekina*, the "holy sparks" that are encased by the "shells" of things in the world as a path to addressing and meeting the world.

The final chapter regards hallowing and ritual as ways in which Buber and Stern sanctify daily life. Particular attention is paid to the poem "Aspiring to Music" from *Bread Without Sugar* to note the evolution from praying to ecstatic dancing as a way of being in the world and addressing the world within.

Chapter One

Meeting

In his classic work, *I and Thou*, the great Jewish philosopher, Martin Buber, avows: "All real living is meeting" (11). We exist in this world, now. And, as Buber states, the world of our existence is "twofold, in accordance with [our] twofold attitude" (3), the way we relate to the world. That attitude itself is twofold. We either relate to the world with our whole being: *I-Thou*, or with only part of our being: *I-It/He, She*. All living of quality takes place when we enter into relation with the world, into dialogue. When I address a tree, for example, as *Thou*, we meet with our whole beings. This is not a union, not to be confused with the mystical "becoming one with the tree," although this union was a part of Buber's early thought (i.e. *Daniel*). The encounter is a "meeting half way" of sorts. I do not become the tree nor does the tree become me. Each remains with our individual beings whole, the otherness is not absorbed within each other; rather, there is what Buber calls mutuality or reciprocity between us. I think of the child-like wonder, innocent of discrimination, that leads me to find any shell on the shore worth saving, or the lengthy dialogues with the waves and the gulls, or the way a certain melody engulfs me, the strong undertow of a few lines of poetry, and the quiet pools my wife and I share with our eyes. Every time I have been most alive, truly living, has been a meeting, a communion, a prayer.

The work of the contemporary American poet, Gerald Stern, is immersed in such meetings. Anyone who experiences Stern's poetry is familiar with one sense of meeting or another. Certainly, one cannot help but notice the presence

of nature. From Stern's early poems in *Rejoicings*, such as "Turning into a Pond," where he actually becomes a pond and "His Animal Is Finally a Kind of Ape," where he confesses "I lived and I lived constantly on the verge of a true destruction./ Because of these animals I was able to break away./ I am in their debt" (9) to latter poems such as "My First Kinglet," "Another Insane Devotion," and "The Dog" the meeting of man and nature has been the prominent element of both his form and content of his work. For not only are Stern's poems about various meetings but his language is also that of address: he speaks to trees, animals, birds or even fruit, as in the poem "Grapefruit," where he greets and praises the grapefruit saying: "Blessed art Thou oh grapefruit King of the universe" (*Lovesick* 59). These things, in turn, speak to him. Consider the poem "The Dog" in *Lovesick* in which a dead animal on the side of the road pleads with "the lover of dead things"(Stern) to "give me your pity" (35). In *Between Man and Man* Martin Buber defines inclusion as experiencing the other side. He states that in inclusion one person, "without forfeiting anything of the felt reality of his activity, at the same time lives through the common event from the standpoint of the other" (96).

Jonathan Monroe, in his essay "Thirds Worlds: The Poetry of Gerald Stern," makes note of Stern's tendency to directly address the reader in his early books. Monroe states: "The pronoun 'you' occurs frequently in Stern's poetry. It is important to note that in his usage, the referent is quite clear: the tone resulting from the snippets of repeated syntax demands that 'you' be taken as a direct address to the reader" (42). Whether Stern is addressing an animal or speaking as the animal, talking to the reader or a tree, the primary force of his poetry is born of relationship and meeting.

One poem from *Paradise Poems* best exemplifies Stern's relation to Buber's

ideology. In "Sycamore" Stern attempts to convey a meeting he had with a sycamore tree. This poem is exceptionally appropriate for three reasons. First, Buber himself discusses his relationship with a tree in the famous section from *I and Thou* entitled "I Consider A Tree" (7); second, Stern forms a relationship with a sycamore tree as relayed by the poem; and third, Stern provides an exegesis of the poem in an essay from *Poesis* entitled "'Sycamore' Poem and Commentary."

Furthermore, according to Buber "the spheres in which the world of relation arises are three. First, our life with nature.... Second, our life with men.... Third, our life with spiritual beings" (6). These very spheres encompass and are encompassed by the poetry of Gerald Stern. In his own commentary on the poem, " 'Sycamore': Commentary," Stern identifies the work's relationship with nature, man, and spiritual beings. He claims it is "on one level a traditional vernal poem, ... a celebration of spring and rebirth" (5), and notes its relationship to the human situation, the individual creation, each of us struggles with because "It awakens in the reader his own knowledge, and memory, of birth and fear and denial of it" (6). The poem also addresses, indeed, at times it is consumed by a swirling spirituality, an ecumenical conglomeration of mythologies and deities . Before arriving at home, in Judaism, Stern explores Greek deities, Daphne and Apollo, and the Indian, Shiva, as avenues for interpreting his encounter with the sycamore tree.

Once, in a panel discussion on poetry at the Waterloo Poetry Festival, Stern said: "A poem should do two things." Another panelist, whose name I've forgotten said: "Which two?" Gerry laughed. Buber would say that all art is two-fold, a meeting. Indeed: Man's attitude is two-fold (1). Art like any other meeting must take place with one's full being. In a successful poem many meetings take

place: the poet meets the self, the reader meets the poet, and the reader meets self. The successful poem bodies forth these meetings. Art occasions meeting.

In "Pockets of Secrecy, Places of Occasion: On Gerald Stern," Frederick Garber discusses the meetings that Stern's poetry occasions. Garber states: "I want to call these points of stance 'places of occasion.' They are always places where occasions occur--occasions which are always, whatever else they are, moments of the soul" (30).

In one of the most poetic sections of *I and Thou*, Buber elaborates on the two-fold nature of consciousness as well as art, and of all meetings:

Thought, ready with its service and its art paints with its well-known speed one-- no, two rows of pictures, on the right wall and on the left. On the one there is (or rather, there takes place, for the world-pictures of thought are reliable cinematography) the universe. The tiny earth plunges from the whirling stars, tiny man from the teeming earth, and now history bears him further through the ages, to rebuild persistently the ant-hill of the cultures which history crushes underfoot. Beneath the row of pictures is written: 'One and all.' On the other wall there takes place the soul. A spinner is spinning the orbits of all stars and the life of all creation and the history of the universe; everything is woven on one thread, and is no longer called stars and creation and universe, but sensations and imaginings, or even experiences, and conditions of the soul. And beneath the row of pictures is written: 'One and all.'

Thenceforth, if ever the man shudders at the alienation, and the world strikes terror in his heart, he looks up (to the right or left, just as it may chance) and sees a picture. There he sees the *I* is embedded in the world and there is really no *I* at all-- so the world can do nothing to the *I* and he is put at ease; or he sees that the world is embedded in the *I* and there is really no world at all-- so the world can do nothing to the *I*, and he is put at ease. Another time, if the man shudders at the alienation, and the *I* strikes terror in his heart, he looks up and sees a picture; which picture he sees does not matter, the empty *I* is stuffed full with the world or the stream of the world flows over it, and he is put at ease. But a moment comes, and it is near, when the shuddering man looks up and sees both pictures in a flash together. And a deeper shudder seizes him. 71-72

That "deeper shudder" is the very essence of Stern's meeting with the sycamore tree: an enlightenment that unifies the dualities of the world.

Stern himself claims the occasion of the poem, "Sycamore," was an actual realization of, a meeting with a sycamore tree. As he remembers: "What happened was that on Sunday, February 19, 1983, (not March third) I looked out my kitchen window, in Iowa City, Iowa, and to my amazement saw, for the very first time, a large sycamore growing on the little strip of land between sidewalk and curb" (" 'Sycamore': Commentary" 6). Surprisingly little (perhaps, fifteen of the total 103 lines) of the poem has to do with the the actual sycamore tree itself. The bulk of the poem vacillates among Jungian, mythological, religious, spiritual, and psychological complexes.

Critics such as Garber and Siedlecki have noted Stern's "fiercely binary" (Garber 38) world. "Sycamore" is a meeting ground for many of the dualities that inform Stern's work, in general. The opening stanza introduces "two crazy birds going mad with choices/ in the hideous leftover snow and the slippery mud." The poem begins in the past, at a moment between winter and spring, a moment of birth, of renewal, of becoming. Furthermore, dating the occasion of the poem is complicated. Although Stern himself has claimed the incident actually took place on February 19, 1983 (close to his fifty-eighth birthday) not March 3 (a poetic convenience), he makes reference in the first stanza to "crystal sets," which antedates the setting, placing it somewhere in his more-distant past, or more likely, blurring the distinction between past events, illustrating the timelessness of becoming.

In the second stanza the Stern address the tree as being Greek and playfully questions its sexuality. The tree is gay, its left hand "limp." Is this a personal anxiety? Or the anxiety of the age? Then, the tree becomes a "twenty-arm

goddess." The tree's arms reach out "to plead for mercy... to bless us." The goddess is obscene and angry, defiant. Who hasn't come face to face with the issue of sexuality on both a personal and social level? Isn't it our age that has "re-visioned" the gods? Is that Stern's intent when he introduces himself as "Old Shivers" ? One senses a reference to winter, but also something deeper, a fear and trembling. Stern claims in his analysis of the poem that Old Shivers is a "playful male counterpart of Shiva (" 'Sycamore': Commentary" 8). According to the *New Larousse Encyclopedia of Mythology*, Siva (Shiva) is the god whose dance "symbolizes divine activity as the source of movement in the universe, particularly under the aspect of the cosmic functions of creation-conservation, destruction, incarnation, and liberation. Its object is to rid men of illusion" (374). Is the confusion of the deity's gender part of the playfulness or part of the confusion of the issue itself or simply a mistake? In any event, the reader is able to identify with and is caught up in the confusion regarding sexual preferences and roles. Who hasn't wrestled with the right and the left hands of the deities? The feminine and masculine principles of Jungian psychology? Eastern and Western philosophies? Who hasn't teetered on the line between obscenity and self-righteous indignation, between traditional, old-founded beliefs and the plurality of contemporary ways?

And so, in the third stanza, Sterns "opens the windows" and lets "the sun in." He sheds a little cleansing light on the opposite forces that the human heart contends with. The stanza begins with Stern watching the tree "give way" from brown to green to brown again, the dance of the seasons, the path of the ages from the young to the old to the young again. Stern yearns to unravel the mystery of the ages. He uses the archetype of the snake, an ancient symbol of transition and metamorphosis, the ouroboros that has itself undergone various

interpretations. In the early Indian and Egyptian mythologies the snake was benevolent and female. Jewish and Christian mythologies generally depicted the serpent as evil and male. Medieval Hermetists worshiped the Ouroboros, which was both male and female, representing the unity of dualities (Walker 903-909). However, whichever side of the coin chances to land right-side up, the real mystery, Stern's desire and ours, is to unfold the process of becoming: "...to understand what happens/ when the skin falls off."

In *Philosophies of India*, Heinrich Zimmer discusses the act of worshiping a deity requires that one become the deity, that first "the individual transforms him[self] into a servant (dasa) of the divinity, and this state, when brought to perfection, then reveals to him his own fundamental sovereignty as the deity itself" (587). Stern begins his own little dance. He does a "turn to the left, to the right." It is the dance of liberation from either side. It is the dance that encompasses both directions, the dance of unification.

Certainly the meeting with the sycamore tree has initiated a birthing. Stern makes reference to the upcoming Passover being March 31 that year, and he refers to the holiday as a "little passage." He claims that he will howl and sing, the passage being both painful and joyous. It is the process of becoming, and indeed, Stern longs in the poem to "become a tree." I will return to the exact nature of this becoming and how it relates to Buber's understanding of meeting later. For now, let it suffice to say that Stern's meeting with the sycamore tree has changed his life. What took place on that specific occasion is only approximated by the poem; and yet, if the work is successful, the poem can become a place of meeting for the reader as well. Indeed, it is the howling and singing of art that seeks to liberate us from our very skins.

After sidestepping into Indian mythology, Stern returns to the Greek. He

associates himself with Daphne, the goddess who became a tree to elude Apollo. In *The Greek Myths* Robert Graves claims that the Daphne/Apollo myth tells of the patriarchal usurping of the earlier matriarchal, orgiastic and ecstatic cult (I, 81). Again, there surfaces the struggle between dualities, between the masculine and the feminine. Stern's individuation, the subtext of the poem, working its way through a Jungian struggle between his own feminine and masculine principles, parallels the social and universal struggle between the feminine and masculine. The struggle itself is archetypal, transcending individual mythologies, rooted in eternal conflicts between all dualities, the seasons, the eternal liberation of rebirth, growth, the ego branching out from division in the unconscious.

The final stanza begins with Stern's return to his own heritage and to the tree itself, not the tree of ideologies. Stern's liberation, in the end, will be a private matter. In the final stanza Stern muses that next spring, he will return to his seder, his own arguments with the Egyptians, his own adversaries, just as each of us has his or her own demons to contend with.

One must not forget Stern's position (time and place) in the poem. At the time of its writing, he is still inside the tree, his birth upcoming. He predicts: "next March the third I'll struggle out of my skin/like a sleepy girl." To be reborn as a young girl this time. But for now "it is like death, isn't it, living in the tree." As Stern himself reports, it is in this section, or rather, at this stage of the poem, that he realizes "the absurdity and madness of living this way, inside another's body" ("Sycamore": Commentary" 8). One's total immersion in an other is the annihilation of consciousness, the destruction of the self some Eastern religions advocate. But there is time enough to die, to experience death. Any philosophy that attempts to remove one from life is, according to Buber, futile and anti-

productive. The emphasis in both Buber and Stern's work is on this world, the world that is, not one that is to be. And this world is constantly becoming. We can take part in its creation. It isn't fixed or immutable; it requires only our willingness to share in its changing, to be born of its birthing. The birth requires unity, as the poem suggests: Apollo entwined with Daphne "like two great animals." Regardless of mythological or psychological discrepancies and their individual terminologies for dualities, the ultimate goal is to unify them. Stern envisions a time soon to come when he will be a "crooked tree/ leaning far out.../ staggering/ across the desert.../ in New York/ in Pittsburgh, the perfect wilderness." The world of his childhood (Pittsburgh) and that of part of his adult life (New York) become one and the same path he has traveled. They become "The perfect wilderness."

The similarities between Stern and Buber's encounters with a tree are remarkable. Buber describes his meeting in *Daniel* as such:

Look at this stone pine. You may compare its properties with those of other stone pines, other trees, other plants, establish what it has in common, explore what it is composed of, how it grew. That will be useful to you in the useful auxiliary world of names and classifications, of reports about how things arose and how they evolved. You experience nothing of the truth of this being. And now seek to draw near to this stone pine itself. Not with the power of the feeling glance alone-- that can present you only with the fullness of an image, but not all. Rather, with all your direct power, receive the tree, surrender yourself to it. Until you feel its bark as your skin and the springing forth of a branch from the trunk like the striving in your muscles; until your feet cleave and grope like roots and your soul arches itself like a light-heavy crown; until you recognize your children in the soft blue cones; yes, truly until you are transformed. But also in the transformation your direction is with you, and through it you experience the tree so that you attain in it to the unity. For it draws you back into yourself; the transformation clears away like fog; and around your direction a being forms itself, the tree, so that you experience its unity, the unity. Already it is transplanted out of the earth of space into the earth of the soul, already it tells its secret to your heart, already you

perceive the mystery of the real. Was it not a tree among trees.
But now it has become the tree of eternal life. 54

In his study, *Mutuality: The Vision of Martin Buber*, Donald L. Berry calls attention to the progression of Buber's thought from *Daniel* to *I and Thou*. Berry notes that, while Buber's early work (*Daniel*) claims one can "experience the unity," a union with a tree, in the later work (*I and Thou*) "a basic feature of reciprocity/mutuality has now begun to appear for the first time...--the feature of wholeness, in addition to mutual particularity" (19). We cannot, after all, become a tree. It is possible to meet a tree, to stand in relation to the tree, to learn from the life of a tree our own life, but, as Buber says, regarding the limits of our understanding of a tree: "The tree will have consciousness, then, similar to our own? Of that I have no experience.... I encounter no soul or dryad of the tree, but tree itself" (*I and Thou* 8). The emphasis in Buber's later work is on the concrete, the eternally real and present, not on the abstract and theoretical. Stern seems to incorporate both positions in his poem. He desires to become the tree but also notes the distant between the tree and the human conditions: "What does it [the tree] know of liberation..... What does it know of slavery?" In the end Stern becomes a "flowering figure." The meeting with the sycamore has bodied forth a blossoming in Stern, and yet, he remains himself.

Jane Somerville, in her ground-breaking, full-length study of Stern's work, *Making the Light Come*, states that " 'Sycamore' is an intoxicating enactment of mythic intertextuality. A dazzle of transformation, full of gods and goddesses, song and dance, it rushes out in so many directions that it would fly apart were it not reined in by the voice of the speaker" (106). Stern himself address the poem's complexity:

What gives it [the poem's] its tension and complexity, what makes it, in its own way, significant or original, or mysterious, what makes

it moving--if it is that--is the presence of the narrator in the very middle of what is to him an overwhelming and confusing and complicated experience which he can never fully comprehend, which has hold of him in spite of his peaceful and knowledgeable mode and which he can only partially make sense of, and control, through a dutiful and almost domestic use of those myths and rites.
5

Paradoxically, in fact, it is Stern's inability to control the poem that is responsible for its effectiveness and what makes it most closely resembles Buber's concept of the true meeting between *I* and *Thou*. Stern claims that it is "to the degree that I was not able to do that [control the poem] that the poem is mysterious, or at least interesting" (" 'Sycamore': Commentary 6). Stern's poem is a meeting place for poet and reader. As he explains:

What I am saying is that if the reader, (that poor ideal reader), shared with me (the poet) a sense of confusion and lack of control it is only because I shared it with him, and, furthermore, he is not just allowed any bewilderment he wants--he is not an automatic reader--but he must have my bewilderment, and my ambiguity, or something very close to it, and to that degree I am in control. I am creator after all, albeit a blind one. 6

Creating the world, becoming, and communicating the ineffable are the tasks of both Buber and Stern, as well as the task each of them longs to teach us, a challenge so awesome, so futile, that only one who begins by surrendering can hope to even catch a glimpse of the shadow. In *I and Thou* Buber claims:

A man is faced by a form which desires to be made through him into a work. This form is no offspring of his soul, but is an appearance which steps up to it and demands of it the effective power. The man is concerned with an act of his being. If he carries it through, if he speaks the primary word [I-It] out of his being to the form which appears, then the effective power streams out, and the work arises. 9-i0

Often, it is during moments of turmoil and confusion that we are most open to change. Stern's meeting with a sycamore is an occasion of such a transition. There is a subtle but needling sense of anxiety, a hint of fear throughout the poem. As Stern has pointed out, it is his own overwhelming confusion, his inability to fully comprehend the experience on which the poem hinges. He is on the brink of becoming, born of the meeting between himself and a tree. The meeting has triggered a conflict among all the dualities that compose his being. The meeting has bridged his own conflicts with the universal polarities depicted by mythologies and religions. The meeting has unified his own becoming with the world's endless metamorphosis. Like the sycamore tree, Stern too is a "flowering figure." As he says in " 'Sycamore': Poem and Commentary":

I am, in this last section, simultaneously a greedy Talmudist commenting on the the sycamore in all its aspects, and I am the tree itself leaning far out--over a river or a table-- and I am a gigantic Israelite, a sycamore staggering through the wilderness of New York and Pittsburgh, on my way to God knows what promised land. 10

What, then, is to be made of Stern's meeting with the sycamore tree? As he states in his analysis of the poem: "Rebirth, in nature, miraculous in its way, may mean a kind of immortality or permanence, but it does not mean transcendence or escape from bondage" (9). These meetings both he and we encounter will not save us from the sufferings and sorrows of life. So, how does his meeting or, more importantly, how do our own meetings, our own becomings help us? In regard to his meeting with the sycamore tree, Stern asks the same question: "How does it serve as a text for lives that are pinched, or terrified?"

Again, we are confronted with the task of communicating the ineffable. Buber addresses this very question that Stern raises. in the postscript to *I and*

Thou, he admits:

I can as it were point out to you, my reader, the structure of the spirit which has already entered the world; but I cannot point out the other. I can refer you to the structures of the spirit which are 'to hand,' in the world that is common to us, no less than a thing or a being of nature, as to something accessible to you in reality or in potentiality. But I cannot refer to that which has not yet entered the world. If I am asked where the mutuality is to be found here, in this boundary region, then all I can do is indicate indirectly certain events in man's life, which can scarcely be described, which experience spirit as meeting; and in the end, when indirect indication is not enough, there is nothing for me but to appeal, my reader, to the witness of your own mysteries-- buried, perhaps, but still attainable. 127

Whether or not the poem becomes an occasion for a meeting between the poet and the reader, surely the reader can identify to some degree with the act of relationship the poem describes. I am reminded of Paul Valery's essay entitled "Poetry and Abstract Thought" in which he confronts the true task of the writer:

A poet's function-- do not be startled by this remark-- is not to experience the poetic state: that is a private affair. His function is to create it in others. The poet is recognized-- or at least everyone recognizes his own poet-- by the simple fact that he causes his reader to become 'inspired.' Positively speaking, inspiration is a graceful attribute with which the reader endows his poet: the reader sees in us the transcendent virtues and graces that develop in him. He seeks and finds in us the wondrous cause of his own wonder. 144

In the language of Martin Buber, the reader meets the poet, and it is that meeting that is the essence of not only of poetry, but of all the spheres of life as well. Buber claims that God is "the Being that is directly, most nearly, and lastingly, over against us, that may properly only be addressed, not expressed" (*I and Thou* 80-81). If any thing truly "inspires" us, it breathes into us the breath of life, life that is both within and outside of us, it is our own meetings, our own

becomings that are the very essence of our existence. As Stern declares, his poem is ultimately an affirmation of life, of the unity of the dualities inherent to existence. It too, like all the myths and psychological conflicts, is a rope "thrown into dark water" (" 'Sycamore': Commentary" 10). Although the waters are dark, they are familiar to all of us.

How does the poem serve as a text for lives that are pinched, or terrified? I believe that the poem not only affirms the meetings of our lives as essential occasions of becoming, but also that it expresses three paths one may follow in order to meet and address the spheres of existence, and that these paths are common ground in both Buber and Stern. The paths that wind through both Buber and Stern's works are presence, attention and prayer, and hallowing and ritual.

Chapter Two

Presence

In *The Way of Man According to the Teaching of Hasidism*, Martin Buber relates the story of Rabbi Eizik, son of Rabbi Yekel of Cracow. Although Rabbi Eizik was poor for many years, he never abandoned his faith in God. In a recurring dream, he was told to go to Prague and search under a bridge which led to the king's castle. There he would find a treasure. After the third time he had the dream, he traveled to the bridge, but found it heavily guarded and didn't dare to dig for the treasure. He hung around for a few days until the captain of the guards noticed him and asked if he were waiting for someone or looking for something. Rabbi Eizik told the guard of his dream. The guard laughed at the rabbi's faith in dreams. He told the rabbi that years ago he had had a dream that he would find a treasure buried under the stove of a Jew named Eizik, if only he traveled to Cracow. He told the rabbi how foolish it would have been of him to search under the stove of every Jew in Cracow named Eizik. Rabbi Eizik bowed and hurried home. Sure enough, buried under his stove he found a treasure, which he used to build a House of Prayer (*Way of Man* 36). Buber explains the lesson of the story as such: "There is something that can only be found in one place. It is a great treasure, which may be called the fulfillment of existence. The place where this treasure can be found is the place on which one stands" (37).

This philosophy is summed up in the contemporary phrase: Be here now. Buber claims that many religions and philosophies state that there are two worlds, they speak of this world and "the other world." But, according to Buber,

the two worlds are truly one and the same world, and that our purpose in living is to unify them, "to let God in" (41). Buber tells us that we can do this by maintaining "holy intercourse with the little world entrusted to us, [and] if we help the holy spiritual substance to accomplish itself in that section of Creation in which we are living, then we are establishing, in our place, a dwelling for the Divine Presence" (41).

Gerald Stern's poetry commands a powerful and unique sense of presence. It is firmly grounded in many places that are, in essence, all one place: the place where he stands. In the poem "Sycamore" Stern addresses the presence of the tree with his presence and the meeting sparks a development in his being, a becoming. The reader accompanies Stern as he moves from the memory of meeting the sycamore tree in his back yard to taking his "place inside the silver wood," and, finally, as he struggles out of his skin. We join him in the future when he will be here "now in New York" and here "now in Pittsburgh, the perfect wilderness." The poem unites the past, present, and future in the eternal present, in the presence of becoming.

An overwhelming presence of mind dominates Stern's entire body of work. Jane Somerville, in her book *Making the Light Come*, devotes a chapter to Stern's concern with places, with his wanderings, with his intense sense of presence. The chapter is entitled "Here I Am Walking," after Stern's poem of the same title. Somerville claims that "Here [in the poem] and in many other poems, wandering leads to the discovery of the meditative place where the speaker does the 'sitting' identified with Zen and Hasidic tradition" (88). Stern is constantly calling the reader's attention to his location, to his particular place. The poem "Here I Am Walking" begins with the lines: "Here I am walking between Ocean and Neptune, / sinking my feet in mile after mile of wet life."

There is an intriguing juxtaposition between the real places and an otherworldliness. I am familiar with both Ocean and Neptune as towns in New Jersey, but at the same time I am aware that Ocean refers to something vast and swelling, while Neptune is as near or far away as another planet. I am with Stern as he strays "near the benches," while he eats his sandwich "beside the iron Methodist." I go with him as he sits and lets his mind wander between places he has been before, noting how they are different now, and where his future will be. It will be spent as it was, as it is here, now, "getting rid of baggage,/ living in dreams,/ finding a way to change, or sweeten, my clumsy life." Like the old joke: No matter where you go, there you are, it is ourselves we bring to each place we go, and it is within us that we carry all the places we have been and will ever be.

Stern has a unique talent for finding fortuitous and propitious place names, names such as Ocean that are real and archetypal, or Neptune, which is both earthly and stellar. In the poem "No Wind" (*Red Coal* 43) he begins by pinpointing his position:

Today I am sitting outside the Dutch Castle
on Route 30 near Bird in Hand and Blue Ball,
watching the Amish snap their suspenders at the sunglasses.
I am dreaming of my black suit again
and the store in Paradise where I will be fitted out for life.

A small girl and I recognize each other
from our former life together in Cordoba.

The tension between the playfulness of phallic place names juxtaposed against the rigid sense of Amish morality is underscored by the inevitable future death has in store for us and the even more distant place of rebirth that encompasses the past and future in the present. Again, everything that has been and will be

is here and now. Stern is constantly migrating, mitigating between the dreamy past and the future-to-be, a twofold present. In "The-Way-We-Were Lounge" (*Red Coal* 72) he conjures up an old beginning: "This is the kind of place I loved when I walked/ across Italy looking every night for open/ spaces." In "Royal Manor Road" (*Red Coal* 11) he tells the reader: "It would be worth it to go ninety miles out of your way/ to see these cows eat and sleep and nuzzle in the mud." But traveling to find a sacred place is unnecessary. In a poem from his second collection, *Lucky Life*, titled after a coffee shop "This Is It" (again a convenient place name), Stern finds the entire town of Lambertville and everyone in it shares in the same sense of presence he feels for the town. When he notices the coffee shop's name, he suddenly realizes:

Everyone is into my myth! The whole countryside
is studying weeds, collecting sadness, dreaming
of odd connections and no place more than Lambertville
will do for ghosts to go through your body
or people to live out their lives with a blurred vision.

In "Phipps Conservatory" (*Red Coal* 41) Stern states: "Whoever wants to can live a lifetime in this herb garden," or like the "Pole" walk "lightly and sweetly away/ with seeds in his pocket, wrapped in tissue paper,/ ready to burst with life on his rich hillside." It isn't a question of where we go but what we take from each place we visit that is important, and what we take from a place depends on what we bring to it.

Equally important is the realization that all places are united as one and the same place if one is aware of the underlying spirituality that inhabits them. In "Psalms" (*Lucky Life* 58) Stern makes the connection between the "bald hills of Tennessee" and the "rabbis of Brooklyn." In each of them, and anywhere, everywhere as well, "the gigantic lips/ [move] through the five books of ecstasy,

grief and anger." The Divine presence exists wherever one stands.

Stern himself discusses the importance of presence and place in his work. In "The Thing No One Else Wanted" He claims:

If I had to explain my art I would talk about it in terms of staking out a place that no one else wanted, because it was not wanted, because it was not noticed, because it was abandoned or overlooked. I am talking about something of immense importance-- and not just to me-- but most others would not see it that way; they would see something else. On a most literal level, I am talking about weeds, and waste places, and lovely pockets, and in my poems I mean it on a literal level as well as on a psychological and symbolic level. That is, I am writing about actual places and ascribing value to them; but of course, I am thinking also of what those places stand for, and might stand for, in the reader's or listener's mind if I awaken his lost places. In one sense there is a battle-- or at least a dialogue-- going on between light and dark, present and past, city and country, civilization and savagery, power and lack of it, and I would seem to favor the latter. But I don't write from a philosophical point of view; and furthermore I am seized by the contradictions, and I have irony; but most of all I have affection for both sides, if I may call them sides, and move toward reconciliation and forgiveness. I am moved a lot by Jewish mysticism and Chasidism and by the historical idea of the Jew-- from a poetic and mythic point of view. A lot of my poems have as a setting nature, or the garden, But I am in no sense of the word a nature poet; I am equally at home in the city and the country and go where my spirit takes me, whether it be upper Broadway or the Delaware River. 31

Clearly, it is not simply the place where one is, but more importantly, one's presence in that place that is of ultimate importance. In an interview with Stern, Sanford Pinsker and he are discussing a relationship between a line from the poem "At Bickford's" and the "vision" of the title poem, "Lucky Life." The line is: "On lucky afternoons the sun will break through the thick glass/ and rest like a hand on my forehead." Stern comments that "The hand was resting there and in some ways it's God's hand." Pinsker adds: "The sun may go through that window, but unless you're inside, unless you're *there* to receive it, unless you

imagine yourself there completely, it won't hit you" ("The Poetry of Constant Renewal" 66). Stern affirms the truth of Pinsker's statement. Martin Buber would no doubt reflect on the meeting inherent in a "lucky life." Both God and Stern actively encounter each other with their whole beings. This union is mutual. In *Hasidism and Modern Man* Buber defines this union:

Yihud, unio, means not the unification of the soul with God, but unification of God with His glory that dwells in the world. A 'mysticism' that may be called such because it preserves the immediacy of the relation, guards the concreteness of the absolute and demands the involvement of the whole being.... Its true English is perhaps: presentness. 173

To begin to discuss, analyze, or even simply list the poems of Stern's in which this sense of presentness or presence is the very essence of the work would be a full-length work in itself. Perhaps one poem from his most-recent collection of poetry, *Bread Without Sugar*, will serve as an example of presence in his work. That poem is "Nice Mountain." I have selected this poem not only because I feel it is a fitting and typical representation of Stern's work in general, but also because it incorporates attention and hallowing, as well as presence; therefore, it is well-suited for all the aspects of this study. The poem is as follows:

Nice Mountain

Great little berries in the dogwood,
great little *buds*, like purple lights
scattered through the branches, perfect wood
for burning, three great candelabra
with dozens of candles, great open space

for sun and wind, great view, the mountain
making a shadow, the river racing
behind the weeds, great willow, great shoots,
great burning heart of the fields, nice leaves

from last year's crop, nice veins and threads,
nice twigs, mostly red, some green and silky,
nice sky, nice clouds, nice bluish void.

I light my candles, I travel quickly
from twig to twig, I touch the buttons
before I light them--It is my birthday,
two hundred years-- I count the buds,
they come in clusters of four and seven,
some are above me, I gather a bunch
and hold it against my neck; that is
the burning bush to my left, I pick
some flaming berries, I hang them over
my tree, nice God, nice God, the silence
is broken by the flames, the voice
is a kind of tenor--there is a note
of hysteria--I came here first,
I lit the tree myself, I made
a roaring sound, for two or three minutes
I had a hidden voice--I try
to blow the candles out, nice breath,
nice wagon wheel, great maple, great chimes,
great woodpile, great ladder, great mound of tires,
nice crimson berries, nice desert, nice mountain.

As in the poem "Sycamore," it is spring. The setting that occasions the poem is outside. The first stanza begins with a close-up view of a dogwood blossom then moves to a sweeping, panoramic view of the entire setting; then zooms in on the "veins and threads" of some leaves; and finally opens up again on the sky, clouds and "bluish void." The perspective slips back and forth between microcosm and macrocosm, suggesting the interrelationship. Immediately a tension is established between the things of the world and the immense emptiness of the "bluish void," a tension that is resolved by the end of the poem when a Divine Presence fills the gap, uniting the speaker with its presence. The relation is born of the meeting between them; it is the union of *I - Thou*.

The meter of the poem ebbs and flows with the regularity of breathing. With

the exception of the last two lines of the work, the length of the lines averages nine syllables. Each line is broken into shorter breaths (often two-- an inhalation and exhalation) by commas, dashes, or semicolons. The rhythm addresses the content: it is meditative.

The anaphoric use of "nice" is a roll call of the various presences, an invocation, an invitation to meet. The reader is kept close to the narrator's side, made aware not only of every aspect of the setting, but the narrator's every movement as well: "I light my candles," "I travel quickly," "I touch the buttons," "I count the buds," "I gather a bunch," "I hang them over a tree" and so forth. The reader attends every action. The language is simple; the syntax child-like, but not childish, or, rather, it is childish in the best and most often forgotten sense of the word: it hasn't lost the overwhelming simplicity of wonder, the "Wow!" of it all. The reader is caught up in the action, swept along with the current as the narrator begins his strange but familiar ritual, one that combines secular and religious elements. He claims: "It is my birthday,/ two hundred years-" That would be very old, too old for a dogwood, and miraculous for a human. I suspect it is one of Stern's inventions that in one fell swoop destroys time and establishes the timelessness of the present occasion. In any event, the narrator begins lighting the candles, decorating the tree with "flaming berries" which he gathers from the "burning bush" to his left. Stern joins typical birthday ritual with nature, with spring; and combines Biblical allusion ("burning bush") with Christmas tree decorating. The union cues God's entrance. The speaker addresses God: "nice God," and "the silence/ is broken by the flames." It is significant that the narrator notes that he "came there first." He made the effort. He "made a roaring sound." There is a wordless dialogue. The narrator realizes he "had a hidden voice," the one used to address God.

After the meeting, the breathing which has quickened to the point of "hysteria," to the bursting of a "roar," relaxes, and then returns to the even-paced flow that the poem began with: "nice breath." The poem ends with the title: "nice mountain."

I can't help thinking of the Zen proverb that goes something like: Before studying Zen, mountains are mountains. After studying Zen, mountains are still mountains, but different. They are imbued with presence; they stand in God, as does the narrator.

Everything in the poem builds to one moment of awe, one instant of ecstasy or *hitlahavut*, which Buber defines as " 'the inflaming,' the ardor of ecstasy" (*Hasidism and Modern Man* 66). Buber also explains that "in ecstasy all that is past and that is future draws near to the present. Time shrinks, the line between the eternities disappears, only the moment lives, and the moment is eternity... The world is no longer its place: it is the place of the world" (66 & 70). Such a moment is the one encountered in "Nice Mountain."

While *hitlahavut* is union with God beyond time and space (76), "*Avoda* is the service of God in time and space" (76). According to Buber, "All action is bound in one and the infinite life carried into every action; this is *avoda*" (78). Buber claims that the life of a holy man swings between these two poles (76). Certainly, the poem "Nice Mountain" swings between *hitlahavut* and *avoda*. The narrator of the poem performs a ritual service, he decorates the tree. He is the one to act: he "came there first." *Avoda* is the seeking; *hitlahavut* is the discovery. As Buber states: *hitlahavut* is not a sudden sinking into eternity: it is an ascent to the infinite from rung to rung" (68). It is only by seeking that one can find what is sought. The service may be endless, but the reward is also infinite and eternal. Perhaps the "ladder" and the "wagon wheel" mentioned in

the final lines of the poem are meant to represent avoda and hitlahavut. In any event the message is clear: mountains are mountains; but the one who seeks for more, the one who seeks with his entire being, encounters the presence of the mountains in God. The "nice mountains" in the beginning of the poem are the same mountains at the end and are not. "The last wonder is greater than the first" (74).

Buber tells us in *In and Thou* :

"There are moments of silent depth in which you look on the world-order fully present. Then in its very flight the note will be heard; but the ordered world is its indistinguishable score. These moments are immortal, and most transitory of all; no content may be secured from them, but their power invades creation and the knowledge of man, beams of their power stream into the ordered world and dissolve it again and again. This happens in the history both of the individual and of the race. 31

Sterns poetry seeks, affirms, and records the presence of the world in God. Often his work documents the meeting of one presence and another. Poems such as "Sycamore" and "Nice Mountain" attempt what Buber claims is the ultimate purpose of our existence: "to let God in" (*Hasidism and Modern Man* 168). And this can only be done by allowing God to enter into dialogue with us where ever we are, regardless of the "place." Each and every place is holy, and it is our task to present ourselves, our whole beings, to the Divine Presence inherent in each in every place. Buber says we can let the Divine Presence in "only where we really stand, where we live, where we live a true life (168). Buber promises us that "If we maintain holy intercourse with the little world that is entrusted to us, if we help the holy spiritual substance to accomplish itself in that section of Creation in which we are living, then we are establishing, in this our place, a dwelling for the Divine Presence" (168).

Stern's poetry is as dialogue with the Divine Presence, and it is a meeting place where the reader who is willing to come with his or her whole being may encounter the word of the world in God.

Chapter Three

Attention and Prayer

In *Gravity and Grace* Simone Weil states that "absolutely unmixed attention is prayer" (170). It is this aspect of presence, the strict attention to the world, to its intricate, inner workings, to its place in God that presents itself as prayer in the work of Buber and Stern. In an interview with David Hamilton, Gerald Stern noted:

What I have is absolute faith in the particulars, that they will make the poem....I have that feeling of presence, of the poem, that it is there, all I have to do is reach out, all I have to do is describe the things....It's a faith in life. It's a faith in the meaningful presence of things, even if temporarily meaningless. Even if transient, even if they'll not be understood ever again, even if they won't ever reappear in the same order. There was order. There was form. There was love. There was joy. There was meaning. There was life, whether for a minute or a year or a century. And that's enough. 46

One must be careful about what it means to attend to the world; it is not to be confused with scientific scrutiny. One must not impose his or her will on the world. Trying too hard to "get into" an experience, to see the hidden depth below the surface, is not what either Stern or Buber means.

In *Buber on God and the Perfect Man*, Pamela Vermes states that Buber claims according to the Cabalists "true prayer is that which asks for the restoration of the unity of the one God" (166). Vermes explains that "God's Being has fallen into duality, into one part removed from his creatures and one part dwelling in creation. It is in man's power, by means of his worship, to return the indwelling *Presence* to its Source" (166). In *Hasidism and Modern Man*

Buber further defines this Divine duality. He says, "God has fallen into

duality through the created world and its deed: into the Essence of God, Elohim, which is withdrawn from the creatures, and the presence of God, the Shekina, which dwells in things, wandering, straying, scattered" (80). The holy person does not pray for him or herself. True prayer has as its goal the unification of Elohim and Shekina (80-81).

It is this striving for unity coupled with an attentive reverence for the world that composes Stern's poetry and makes of his poems prayers. Critics such as Elizabeth Knight and Sanford Pinsker, among others, have made note of the prayer-like quality of Stern's work. Even the casual reader of a poem such as "Sycamore" can't help but notice the Biblical rhythms of the language, the anaphora. Consider the following selection:

This year when I sit at the table with bitter bread
in my hands I'll stop for one full minute to give
some lonely praise to the sycamore; I'll say
let's stop a minute and think of the sycamore,
let's think of the lovely white branches, let's think of the bark,
let's think of the leaves, the three great maple lobes?
What does it know of liberation? I'll say.
What does it know of slavery, bending over
the streams of America? How does it serve as a text
for lives that are pinched, or terrified?

Stern calls attention not only to the sycamore tree, but to the details of its existence: "the lovely white branches," "the bark," "the leaves"--even their shape. Yet he lets the tree speak for itself. The images are concrete not abstract. In and of itself the tree is sacred. The poet addresses the tree's whole being, its presence, with his whole being. The relationship is *I --Thou*. The language is a chanting, a prayer that restores a creature of the world with God's creation, the Elohim with the Shekina.

Within a meditation on a sycamore tree, the poet composes a prayer to the tree that asks of the tree how it serves "as a text" for our lives. The answer lies exactly in the relation between the poet and the tree, in the very question itself. That we learn to address nature, and each other, and God with our whole beings (*I-Thou*) is essential if we are ever to restore God in the world and the world in God.

Simone Weil claims that "the beautiful poem is one which is composed while the attention is kept directed toward inexpressible inspiration, in so far as it is inexpressible" *Gravity and Grace* 150). This way of thinking is akin to Stern's comment in my first chapter about the poem being at its best when he was least in control. There is a great surrendering at work.

Stern himself addresses the subject of prayer in an interview with Elizabeth Knight titled "A Poet of the Mind." Knight asks Stern if he considers "writing poems like writing prayers" and he replies:

It's a good question, but a hard one to answer... because I don't know how to write a prayer; in a way, I don't know how to pray. But I do know how to write poetry and I often, even consciously, think of poetry as a form of prayer... Yes, there are a lot of Jewish connections in the poems; more than that, there's a rhythm and an incantatorial quality only partly derived from Whitman. I think it derives mostly from my reading of the Old Testament. 33

The Biblical rhythms are abundant in Stern's work. He himself claims that a woman at one of his readings, after hearing the poem "Rose Warehouse," quoted sections from the Bible which incorporated the exact same rhythms ("A Poet of the Mind" 33-35).

Discussing the poem with Knight, Stern observes that "the poem tries to avoid sentimentality by being literal, but it's a prayer... it's a statement of

bereavement... in rhythm and in the ideas and in the tone and the gestures and the attitude, there's a prayer. This poem is a Kaddish" (34). Clearly, it isn't the mechanical aspects of Stern's poetry that are most prayer-like. It is the entire "attitude" of his work as well as his attitude toward life that makes prayers of his poetry.

As early as his first collection of poetry, Stern utilized Biblical rhythms, and more importantly, emphasized the importance of attention to the world around us. In "The Weeds" he points to the importance of this life, even for the elite:

I want a king to go easily into the trees.
I want his sticks to break with horror.
I want the wind to lengthen his muscles.
I want him to despise mortification.
I want him to make a final choice between regulation and affection.
I want the water to come from his eyes.
I want him to be carried with aplomb.
I want him to be alive.

Presence and the sanctity of place are also a concern of Stern's from the very first. In "On the Far Edge of Kilmer" Stern celebrates "a burned out barrack." He incorporates the dualities discussed in the first chapter with the regard for presence discussed in the second, as well as the Biblical rhythms and attention to the details of this world. The poem is a prayer-like eulogy:

I lean against the lilacs.
In my left hand is a bottle of Tango.
In my right hand are the old weeds and power lines.
I am watching the glory go down.
I am taking the thing seriously.
I am standing between the wall and the white sky.
I am holding open the burnt door.

In this poem Stern attempts to draw together the right and the left hands. He holds "open the burnt door" for the Divine Presence.

In "The Unity" where the meeting of opposites is the subject, and "Turning into a Pond" in which the process of individuation and becoming informs the poem, Stern addresses themes which presage "Sycamore" as well as most of his work since.

In "Weeping and Wailing: The Jewish Songs of Gerald Stern," Sanford Pinsker cites both the rhythms and the subject matter of Stern's work in an attempt to claim him as a "Jewish" poet. But I consider Stern to be a spiritual poet, at his best, often a psalmist. Stern's poems are, as Pinsker notes (when he is at his best) "an occasion for reflection, for meditation, for what can only be called "prayer ""(194). But Stern's prayers are not prayers because they incorporate Biblical rhythms or drop Biblical references. They are meeting places for worldly and Divine Presence. They are pleas for the unification of dualities. They are testimonies to the promise and possibilities of individuation and becoming for anyone willing to attend to the world with his or her whole being.

Pinsker is more on target when he generalizes: "No matter how it happens, through nature or a sense of personal history or a meditation about our cultural history, things are being renewed through [Stern]" (192). Stern addresses his poetry with his whole being, and, in turn, the willing reader may encounter the poems with his or her whole being, also. An *I-Thou* relationship is available to anyone willing to address the work.

At times Pinsker seems all too eager to label Stern's work, to choose sides rather than embrace the duality that the poems themselves embrace. For example, Pinsker claims that "Stern's most congenial

place is somewhere firmly within the folds of nature" (193). As if to say that Stern isn't equally at home in Pittsburgh or New York, in the secret pockets of the cities and the fields. As Stern told Mark Hillringhouse in an interview for *The American Poetry Review* regarding the fact that he (Stern) lives in two worlds, the city and the country: "Clearly, I have a dialogue with whatever's going on"(26). And later on in the interview: "I think the *I-Thou* relationship exists for me in both places" (26).

In his analysis of "Behaving Like a Jew," Pinsker states that "Jewish ethics is less concerned with what one believes than it is with what one does" (195). He claims that the "'black whiskers and... little dancing feet' suggest a Romanticism... that felt the essential holiness in all things and that danced and prayed in an effort to release these 'holy sparks' from the vessels in which they were imprisoned" (195). Pinsker says he is referring to the Hasidic movement associated with the Baal Shem Tov and that "in important but not specific ways, Stern can count himself in their number" (195). Pinsker is definitely on the right track. Stern's poems are all about the releasing of the holy sparks, the Shekina, from the shell of the opossum or the shell of a sycamore tree or a dogwood or a mountain or a city. In *Hasidism and Modern Man* Buber explains:

This is the meaning of service. Only the prayer that takes place for the sake of the Shekina lives. Through his [the one who prays] need and his want he knows the want of the Shekina, and he prays that the want of the Shekina will be satisfied and that through him, the praying man, the unification of God with His presence will take place.... Men think they pray before God, but it is not so, for prayer itself is divinity. 80-81

Specifically, Stern can "count himself " among the Hasidism in that it is

not the polarization but the unity of dualities that he seeks, just as one clasps both hands together in prayer.

It isn't difficult to consider "Nice Mountain," as a prayer. The close attention to the various details of the setting are arranged as incantations. The repetition of "nice" followed by three or four syllables lulls the reader in much the same way that a mantra works. The cyclical structure of the form and the return to the mountain at the end, reinforce the themes of renewal and unity. The poem is a birthday celebration, but the "candelabra" and "burning bush" suggest a more sacred ritual of rebirth.

The narrator worships nature and certainly sees himself as a part of it, but nature is accepted on its own terms, as its own being. In fact, each individual aspect of nature is noted as part of the whole but also as a distinct "other." The personification is minimal: "great burning heart of the fields." Even what isn't natural is part of the whole and is celebrated: "a wagon wheel," "ladder," and "mound of tires." The narrator addresses the entire world with his whole being and, in turn, is addressed by the flames he has lit. He finds "a hidden voice" within himself; it is the intimate voice of prayer.

There are many secret places, hidden pockets, in Stern's work. Often poems hinge on the tension between the personal and the universal. In "Weeping and Wailing: The Jewish Songs of Gerald Stern," Stern confesses to Stanford Pinsker:

I do think that in my recent poems the speech may get plainer, but the experience gets more 'secret' or complicated. I suppose the plainness of speech is simply a result of giving more public readings in the last couple years. I don't really know what accounts for the 'secret' part, except that I'm getting older and possibly more *secret*. 192

These hidden pockets, this very secrecy is itself an aspect of the Hasidic way of thought. Buber explains that sometimes one "may stand unmoving in prayer so that none marks his service, but secretly his spirit burns, and he shouts in silence" (*Hasidism and Modern Man* 186). There is an inwardness, a silence that also addresses God.

The poem, "Ukrainian," from *Bread Without Sugar*, is an excellent example of the tension between the personal and the universal, as well as the element of prayer in Stern's poetry. The poem is a pact that is as universal as it is personal. It's the pact each of us makes at one time or another with the unknown. It is the timeless request for time. Stern's make a plea for a longer life, at least "one more year," another renewal, another "spring."

It is replete with the formal trappings of prayer: the anaphora and the incantatorial rhythms. The attention is fixed and detailed. Rooted in the real world, Stern avoids any figurative language. The images are the concrete things themselves, unadorned. The poem is centered around a picnic table, just as the narrator is seated at the table which is "white with age," "splintered," "split and shattered." Although the table maintains its otherness, it is obvious that the narrator too is weathered.

When the narrator claims that "the hole that held/ a grand umbrella is bent, or twisted, nothing/ could fit there. Yet I'm enchanted," he embraces the most personal and universal aspect of the poem. It is his own center, his own being and presence that matters more than anything else. The "grand umbrella," the public success, the showiness, cannot prevent the inevitable downfall, the rain. The poem is about the primal, private fear each of us confronts: our own mortality. But the narrator

doesn't wallow in self-pity. It is the universal aspect that keeps the poem centered. There is an echo of Yeats' "the center cannot hold" that addresses all of us.

Moreover, "hope springs eternal." While the first half of the poem is filled with deterioration, the second offers promise. Given another year, the narrator will settle down, "trim [his] branches," "plant a garden." Like the cardinal that is his "witness," he will rise again, a tiny flame, from the ashes.

Finally, there is one more aspect of tension in the poem. In the beginning, the narrator props up "a rain-drenched tulip." Then he claims: "There is a part of me/ that lives forever." The presence of the world in him will survive him and in a curious sense immortalize him. Yet the cardinal "almost/ shames the tulips." His "carnal cry," the narrator's earthly desire, is somewhat at odds with the tulip and the letting go that lives for ever.

In Hasidism only the prayer that requests the unity of the whole is worthy. As Buber tells us: "Man is part God, and the want that is in the part is in the whole, and the whole suffers the want of the part. Therefore let your prayer be directed to the want of the whole" (*Hasidism and Modern Man* 190). The poem addresses the secret tension²³ in all of us between our physical and spiritual needs, our selfish and selfless desires. Perhaps, given a little more time, we will bridge the two worlds.

Stern's poems are prayers then not only because he incorporates Biblical rhythms and references, but because they are attentive to the things of this world, because they seek to release from these things holy sparks shelled inside of them, because they celebrate the unity of dualities, and the possibilities of becoming, because they hold open doors for the Divine Presence to enter into the world; and for those who

are willing, Stern's poems serve as a meeting ground, where the reader may address the word of the world in God.

The emphasis in Hasidism is on doing, not simply in believing. Stern's work is testimony to a life devoted to being the presence that the poem addresses. In the poem "Making The Light Come" (*Lucky Life* 52), Stern discusses how he spent the early part of his life devoted simply to the literary side of poetry, how it took him a long time to learn that he had to work the earth with a spade as well as a pen, how he had to get his hands into the soil of the world and see the darkness and the light. One of the ways that Stern's poetry serves as a text for us is that it preaches, or rather, exemplifies a life lived as prayer. There is much to be learned here:

I was worshiping
light three dozen years ago, it led me
astray, I never saw it was a flower
and darkness was the seed; I never potted
the dirt and poured the nutriments, I never
waited week after week for the smallest gleam.
I sit in the sun forgiving myself, I know
exactly where to dig. What other poet
is on his knees in the frozen clay with a spade
and a silver fork, fighting the old maples,
scattering handfuls of gypsum and moss, still worshiping?

Chapter Four

Hallowing and Ritual

Presence, attention, and prayer are significant aspects of Stern's poetry and Buber's philosophy; however, the aspect that both of these men share which I find most interesting is hallowing. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines hallow as follows: "to make holy; to sanctify, purify...to consecrate, set apart as sacred to God...to regard or treat with reverence or awe" (1245).

Buber's *I and Thou* opens with an epigraph from Goethe: "So, waiting, I have won from you the end: God's presence in each element" (xiv). It reminded me of a few lines from William Blake's poetry: "To see a World in a Grain of Sand/ And a Heaven in a Wild Flower/ Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand/ And Eternity in an Hour." All three authors share the belief that God is in everything, everywhere.

In Walter Kaufmann's introduction to his translation of *I and Thou*, he makes the same connection between Buber's quotation of Goethe and Blake's poetry that I did (only he makes it 23 years before me), and Kaufmann also notes that "the Hebrew name of God, the tetragrammaton (YHVH), means HE IS PRESENT" (26). Kaufmann also states in his introduction: "It was from Buber's other writings that I learned what could also be found in *I and Thou*: the central commandment to make the secular sacred" (23).

Buber himself discusses Hasidism in *The Way of Man*:

In most systems of belief the believer considers that he can achieve a perfect relationship with God by renouncing the world of the senses and overcoming his own natural being. Not so the hasid. Certainly, 'cleaving' unto God is to him the highest aim of the human person, but to achieve it he is not required to abandon the external and

internal reality of earthly being, but to affirm it in its true, God-oriented essence and thus so to transform it that he can offer it up to God.... Any natural act, if hallowed, leads to God, and nature needs man for what no angel can perform on it, namely, its hallowing. 5, 20

It is precisely this affirmation of the concrete "things" of the world, of the world itself in God, that Buber and Stern share. Stern's poetry is of the commonplace elevated, made holy, charged with spirituality, the holy sparks released. After reading "Sycamore," who can ever look upon that tree again without seeing in the mottled bark, a snake shedding its skin and a poet about to burst forth, or one's own renewal and redemption?

In the chapter titled "The Baal-Shem-Tov's Instructions" in *Hasidism and Modern Man*, Buber relates that "All that man has, his servant, his animals, his tools, all conceal sparks that belong to the roots of his soul and wish to be raised by him to their origin"(180). Stern's poetry is about releasing the holy sparks from their shells. Consider the following lines from "A Garden": " I lived in the kitchen--all day--moving between/ the stove and the sink, between the clock and the door" (*Lovesick* 60). The stove becomes fire, preparation, destruction, light; and the sink: the water is cleansing, rebirth--whatever deep sparks flash across the reader's mind. The clock is time and the door either a way in or out. Stern has often commented on his interest in the deep image of Jungian psychology. Referring to his images in "Sycamore," he states: "They are all ropes thrown into the dark water..."(" 'Sycamore' A Poem and Commentary" 10). Perhaps, when Stern writes in "A Garden": " I lived all summer/ with a crowded windowsill and a dirty window;/ as if I could find a little intelligence there/ and a little comfort, as if I could find some refuge/ between the shells and the coffee can," he is reproaching himself for remaining inside

himself, for being only an observer, watching the world go by from behind a "dirty window." The coffee can will not provide the shells with any great awakening. We cannot sit idly back and observe the world; it isn't enough to be spectators of life; we must take part in it.

It is by way of the things of his life that Stern is renewed. In "When I have Reached the Point of Suffocation" he claims his breath can only be restored if he goes back "to the railroad ties/ and the mound of refuse." The only comfort available is "in the broken glass/ and the old pile of chair legs." He can only find happiness in the remnants of civilization, in the "stone wall," "the dirty ashes," "the old shoes." There is promise in the "daises." We must pay close attention to the objects around us, study them, meditate on them. They hold the sparks that can rekindle our lives. Stern tells us:

It takes years to learn how to look at the destruction
of beautiful things;

to learn how to leave the place
of oppression;

and how to make your own regeneration
out of nothing.

It is important to return Stern's discussion of his writing process as he explained it to David Hamilton: "What I have is an absolute faith in the particulars, that they will make the poem....All I have to do is reach out, all I have to do is describe the things" (46). If Stern makes it sound easy, it is not his intention. His "faith" requires absolute attention.

He is extremely gifted in being able to choose the most effective "thing." I have already discussed his uncanny ability to discover highly-charged place names (i.e. Ocean, Neptune), but the way in which he sparks the ordinary object is also

noteworthy. Part of his technique, although "technique" is far too clinical of a word, has to do with his emphasis on dualities that was discussed earlier. In the poem "Sycamore," for example, the "leftover snow and the slippery mud" suggest much more than simply snow and mud because of their juxtaposition. This coupling of objects to draw our attention to them causes us to re-view our perceptions of them. Suddenly, the union of the two objects produces a third, a fourth; in fact, the multiplicity of any single thing's possibilities is released. Everything becomes more than it was. Its entire being stands before us, addresses us. As early as his first book, Stern has been stockpiling the unwanted, the used, the leftover objects of our lives, meditating on the discarded. In "On the Far Edge of Kilmer," he resurrects the "burned out barracks." He tells us: "I like the broken cinder blocks and the bicycle tires./ I like the exposed fuse system." In three seemingly insignificant objects he captures, he releases, all the pent up energy of the military. The juxtaposition of the "broken cinder blocks" and "the bicycles tires" deflates the permanency of power and renders it immobile, unable to get us anywhere, and child-like. He exposes the inner workings, the psychology of the "fuse system." There is self-pity and sorrow in his left hand, as well as the "bottle of Tango." The destruction has ruined the human dance. In his "right hand," the hand of power, he couples the "old weeds," the natural and eternal determination and regeneration, with "power lines," the man-made and transitory. He stands, as we stand, between "the wall and the white sky." There is a sense of execution, a dead end; there is unlimited room to fly. He is "holding open the burnt door." It, as well as all the other discarded things of our lives, is a way into and out of the world.

The poem "Nice Mountain" relies on the innate power of the concrete details of our lives for its expression of renewal. In the final lines the reader's

awareness has been piqued to the point where the original mountains are much more than what they were. The list in the last three lines is charged with meaning, with being: "nice wagon wheel, great maple, great chimes,/ great woodpile, great ladder, great mound of tires,/ nice crimson berries, nice desert, nice mountain." I think of the wheel of life, church bells, Jacob's ladder, the rungs of hitlahavut, "The Power of Maples," and Jesus in the desert. The juxtaposition of technological imagery: "wagon wheel" and a "great mound of tires" is ironic, and finally, as I've stated before, the mountain itself is elevated.

In "Pockets of Secrecy, Places of Occasion: On Gerald Stern" Frederick Garber discusses the role of "things" in Stern's poetry. Using "I Need Some Help from the Philosophers," and the "things at [Stern's] feet" in the poem, the "capsules," "the lettuce," and "the shells" as examples, Garber points out that it is by "the markings on the things of this world," and Stern's ability to "to read those markings" that he is able to "cure," to "purge" himself, and maintain his "wholeness" (43). This sense of wholeness in Stern's life and our own lives is intricately linked with and dependent on an awareness and understanding of the unity of all things.

Maurice Friedman, in his introduction to *Daniel*, paraphrases Buber's philosophy on the unity among all things when he says:

When I bring a piece of fruit to my mouth, I feel: this is my body; and when I set wine to my lips, I feel: this is my blood. And there often comes to us the desire to put our arms around a young tree and feel the same surge of life as in ourselves or to read our own special mystery in the eyes of a dumb animal. 10

Buber himself notes, in *Hasidism and Modern Man*, that "even in food there dwell holy sparks, and eating can be holier than fasting; the latter is only the preparation for hallowing, the former can be hallowing itself" (25). Stern's poem

"Grapefruit" is such a celebration of holy sparks released through ingestion.

The common ordeal of eating breakfast is elevated to a sacred meal. He pays close attention to the process: "I'm eating breakfast even if it means standing/ in front of the sink and tearing at the grapefruit,/ even if I'm leaning over to keep the juices/ away from my chest and stomach." The act itself is sanctified: "This is the way the saints/ ate...." The grapefruit is made holy: "Blessed art Thou oh Grapefruit King of the universe." Stern addresses the grapefruit with his whole being, the relationship is *I-Thou*. As Friedman states: "Thus the stress of Hasidism is on the actual consummation of religious life-- the inward experience of the presence of God and the actualization of that presence in all one's actions" (6).

In an interview with Mark Hillringhouse, Stern agrees with Hillringhouse's statement that Stern is "wallowing in [his] own ritual" (28) in the poem from *Red Coal*, "Here I Am Walking." In the poem Stern is attentive to his movements throughout an entire day. He follows himself step by step "walking between Ocean and Neptune," "planning my cup of tea," "washing shirts," "writing down words," "living in dreams." Each and every action is significant; there isn't any hierarchy.

In "Rejoicings," the title poem of his first book, Stern celebrates his actions as if he were a deity, as if every thing in the world depends on his attention. Stern pronounces: "I put the sun behind the Marlborough Blenheim/ so I can see the walkers settling down," "I put the clouds in their place and start the ocean/ on its daily journey up the sand." It is his task, indeed, it is our duty to restore sanctity to the world. Stern ends the poem by defining this obligation: "I have come back one more time to the shore,/ like an old prisoner--like a believer--/ to squeeze the last poetry out of the rubbish," to release the holy sparks.

When Buber discusses what our true intentions must be, he says it is the hallowing of the everyday. Every move we make should be toward the unity of God. He proclaims: "Man should unite all things of the world with all his thinking, speaking, doing toward God in truth and simplicity. For no thing of the world is set outside the unity of God. But he who does a thing otherwise than toward God separates it from Him" (*Hasidism and Modern Man* 191).

"Nice Mountain" is an excellent example of how Stern ritualizes every action he takes. At times the significance of his actions are vague, secret; but who among us doesn't perform a private dance? The ritual birthday celebration becomes unified with a celebration of spring; the lighting of candles is both secular and religious. All things are hallowed in God.

So too in "Ukrainian" the ritual itself unites Stern with nature and its hallowing. The poem begins with him telling the reader:

"Before I go out I daub my face
with vinegar. That is Ukrainian. I put
one drop behind my knee and one on my earlobe.
I choose a bush. If there is a flower I scatter
a grain of sugar on the twig to help
the flying worms; I pick a weed; I prop
a rain-drenched tulip. There is a part
of me that lives forever.

His life is consumed in and transformed by ritual. And it is this hallowing of all aspects of being that most informs his poetry and, more importantly, his existence.

Even the unpleasant aspects of life are to be hallowed, ritualized. In "Burying an Animal on the Way to New York," Stern tells the reader not "to flinch when you come across a dead animal on the road;/ you are being shown the secret of life./ Drive slowly over the brown flesh;/ you are helping to bury it." It is only by

close attention to the daily rituals of our lives that we can release the holy sparks from their shells. Only by hallowing the world will we witness "shreds of spirit and little ghost fragments ...spread out.../ above the white highway."

According to Buber, even the evil in the world is a part of the "exiled glory of God." Buber says: "The indwelling Glory embraces all worlds, all creatures, good and evil. And it is the true unity. How can it then bear in itself the opposites of good and evil? But in truth there is no opposite, for the evil is the throne of the good" (*Hasidism and Modern Man* 200). "The Dancing" (*Paradise Poems* 30) combines Stern's happy memories of his family "doing the dance/ of old Ukraine" together with "the other dancing" (in 1945) in "Poland and Germany." Joy and horror dance together in praise of the "God of mercy," the "wild God."

The epitome of hallowing and ritual in Stern's poetry is best exemplified by his use of dance as the purest expression of spirituality and poetry. In his last two books all the chanting, the singing and swaying and clapping his hands in his previous work begins to dance. In "The Dancing" the memory of steps done in his childhood haunts him. In "I Do a Piece from Greece" Stern becomes an "air" violinist, "at last the musician [his] mother wanted." As he says at the end of the poem: "My way was with the soaring and the singing./ Once I heard it I could never stop." But it is in the poem "I Am in Love" that he finally cuts loose.

The poem begins with the dance of the mind as it worships the past and the present. Stern tells the reader:

Everyone who dances understand what I am doing,
standing in front of the card catalog
and walking up and down the black riverbank.
He understands it how I stop and gesture,

that talking to the dead, and how I make
a face for every age, a vile one for ours,
a sweet one for one I half forgot...

This dance is one of learning. It intertwines the library and the river, the mind and the body, just as it does the past and the present. The steps are timeless and involve the whole being.

There is another dance born of the first one. It is, at first, meditative, then expressive:

There is a dance in which I sit for one hour
with warm milk in my hands, the furnace is roaring
and just outside the window one or two cars are driving by in the
darkness.

In it I either find a book, or I find a piece of paper
and a yellow pencil. I sway a little and moan
all to myself...

The "warm milk" and "the furnace" comfort and threaten the poet. They are the beginning and the end. Yet, at least he isn't, like the cars outside, still "driving by in the darkness."

There is "another dance," called climbing the stairs. Like the rungs of a ladder, it is the dance of seeking, of avoda, service. Finally, the dance we all live for is the dance of this life and everything in it: "Sometimes I sit/ like a stone, I do the lines of wind and rain,/ sometimes I do the birch tree searching for the sun,/ sometimes I do Route 30. I am in love." This dance celebrates, embraces the wandering things of the world. This dance is always reaching out. It is its own reward: love.

Stern's most recent dance is a poem in *Bread Without Sugar* titled "Aspiring to Music." The steps are many and complicated. The work is twenty-five stanzas long. Each stanza has six lines of various lengths. Its form would lend

itself well to music, yet the content rants against it. It is a psalm for the "dreck" of New York City, one of Stern's homes. It begins by praising, bringing back to life, and releasing the sparks of the discarded: "a bottle of Bohemia," "the grille of a Mercedes." All in all, Stern claims to have come across "two hundred pieces" on his journey: "some of them monstrous and baffling,/ some of them dropped from the moon,/ all of it oily and dirty." All of them miraculous. These things are juxtaposed with politics and ideology in order to denote the relative temporality of the latter and the greater importance of the former: "Today, kind Lord, the mayor/ was voted out. In a week/ his brilliant ventures in the world/ of Thought will be forgotten/ and we will have our lives back."

While the poem sings praise for the city, there is a sense of regret, or perhaps even guilt, for moving to the country, but the congestion is dangerous: "If I stay too long I'll either/ faint from the fumes or I'll die/ from the noise-- this island is narrow."

Then the dance begins:

I work up a dance-- I always
do that-- paper napkins
and broken glass. Dance
and poetry are the close ones,
and all that shameful talk

about poetry and music
is just a high-pitched raving
from one philosopher
to another, one vile German,
one berserk mayor.

The poem attacks an elite, theoretical poetry; a poetry that is politically correct, abstract. For Stern poetry is more physical than musical, more gut than head. It is written with the whole being. It address the Thou of the world with its I. It is the poetry

of meeting and relationship; it is concrete.

After denouncing the pseudo-poetics of music, Stern points out its shortcomings and asks: "Why is music/ the measure? I have met/ a ravishing dancer-- how/ do you say that with notes?" I am reminded of Yeats: "How can we know the dancer from the dance?" Stern believes poetry isn't a parlor game. It is born of the waste places and the filthy streets.

The next six stanzas map out Stern's journey through the city. They are grounded in reality:

It takes
twenty-seven minutes to walk
from Thompson and Houston to Saint

Mark's place and Avenue A,
the left side of Tompkins, the center
of Bombay, the absolute horror
of the known world. One time I was stuck there
with the other pieces of paper.

The places of the poem progress from the specific to the universal. Stern implicates himself in the rat race of poetry. He was once one of the "pieces of paper" competing, caught up in the politics of it all, "aspiring to music," above and beyond the real world. But he "ended up going west/ instead of east." The east is clinical and removed, without passion: "they didn't even hate the mayor,/ they didn't even hate the mosquitoes,/ they were aspiring to music."

Finally, the poem ends by praising the streets and those who live there, as well as pleading for their survival. In an imaginary ritual, Stern addresses squatters rights; he muses about setting up house in some waste place:

I could have grown
tomatoes-- that is for me
the mark of a habitation;

I would have searched for worms

for an hour each morning; I would have
planted my marigolds
in a perfect circle.

In this section of the poem, Stern is on familiar turf searching for the “worms” that work below the surface; doing his own secret magic, planting “marigolds/ in a perfect circle” to ward off the evil spirits. Yet there is a sense of unrest in the final four stanzas of the poem. Again, he seems to implicate himself. He could “give away three dollars/ a day-- that makes a thousand/ a year” for the poor? But does he? We too are implicated: “will you give a thousand/ a year to the sorrowful?” Will we?

The poem ends with Stern dedicating it “to the woman in blue who preached/ neighborhood mercy,” the ones truly in the trenches. It is also dedicated to “the bloated sunflecked carp.” Himself? Us? Both. The well-fed whose duty it is to live the poetry we believe in, do the dance, not just mouth the words.

There is a certain sadness in this prayer for the discarded, a certain sense of guilt. It is an offering that senses its own inadequacy and yet gives what it has to offer with its whole being knowing full well it may not be enough. I am reminded of Czeslaw Milosz, whose own guilt for having escaped the concentration camps in his homeland cries out: “What is poetry which does not save/ Nations or people?”

How then can Stern’s poetry “serve as a text for lives that are pinched, or terrified?” If nothing else, his work, like Buber’s, calls attention to the infinite Presence of God in the world and the world in God. He offers prayers to restore the sanctity of the discarded and forgotten. He pleads for us to turn our attention to the sacred ritual of our daily lives. He offers his whole being up for those of

us who are willing to meet him. He speaks for the necessity of living in relationship with the Divine Presence that envelops us. Buber has stated that "the fate of man will depend on whether the rehallowing of existence takes place" (*Mutuality* 62). If nothing else, Stern offers his work and his life up for this very task. If it is not enough, it is our duty to attend to what's missing.

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John Smith was born in Newark, New Jersey, on September 17, 1953. His parents, Jack and Margaret Smith, both graduated from Newark State Teachers College. John received his Bachelor of Arts degree in English from William-Paterson College in 1976. Since that time he has been teaching at various schools in New Jersey. Currently he teaches at Hunterdon Central High School.

John has published over two dozen poems in magazines such as *The Literary Review*, *New York Review*, *Berkeley Poets Cooperative*, and *Footwork*. For the past five years, he has been writing poetry for *New Jersey Audubon*. In 1993 he won the *Trenton State Writers Conference* award for poetry.

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