

# Writing, Social Change & Revolution —a Talk with Poetry and Music

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Keynote Address, New York College English Association Spring Conference  
SUNY New Paltz, April 13, 2007

I'm happy and honored to be here. What an exciting era! The very structure of the nation seems at risk, yet somehow we take resolve and rise up to protect the Bill of Rights, personal freedoms, and are more determined than ever to create a world without war.

My subject is Writing, Social Change and Revolution, and if I say anything that seems *outré* or what they call beyond the pale, I hope that you will receive it as coming from a long time activist who is determined not to allow a great nation to sail into a right wing quagmire. These war-mad, fear-drenched anguished times require all of us to stay alert, get into action, and put our shoulders to the wheel.

I will try not only to be theoretical, but also very practical, and I'll bring some poetry and music to the presentation also.

One of the main points of my beliefs comes from a quote from a poem by Allen Ginsberg written after his friend Jack Kerouac passed away in 1969:

*Well, while I'm here I'll  
do the work—  
and what's the Work?  
To ease the pain of living  
Everything else, drunken  
dumbshow*

(from "Memory Gardens" Oct. 22-29, 1969)

One of the biggest problems in an era of senseless warfare, erosion of rights, global warming, lack of health care, polluted water, the mania of privatization, plus thousands, literally thousands of other pressing issues, is the lack of time.

How can we, as activists, find the time to face the right wing onslaught that threatens the very core of a great nation?

How can we carry on our regular work, in our homes, in our jobs, as scholars and teachers, keep up our friendships, while at the same time doing effective work to forge a new direction for America, and a new direction for Gaia, the small planet on a small arm of a

small spiral galaxy upon when we briefly dwell?

## **The Scholar-Activist**

One possible answer is to become what I would call the Scholar-Activist. It's a concept that occurred to me while reading Matthew Arnold's "The Scholar-Gypsy." A Scholar-Activist follows a pattern that is common to writers— that is, spending weeks and weeks, or months and months, in front of a computer, typewriter or even yellow pads, writing and rewriting and editing, over and over and over, like a monk in a small stone cell, till a book is done, and the writer can emerge into the real world and face all its interactions.

The Scholar-Activist has a similar life path of private research and public action. The point for the Scholar-Activist is always to be carefully studying the issues on which you are active. In a social cause, knowing the new facts early, and knowing all the facts is extremely useful in building up bonds of trust in the public arena. The Scholar-Activist is always creating alphabetical and chronological files, and memorizing details, in order to come up with programs and ideas for a Better World. The formula is know your stuff then strut your stuff.

Finding time is always a problem. But it is totally and absolutely necessary for you to take the calm time to thoroughly study issues. Try to find an hour a day for the scholarly side of Scholar-Activism.

## **Multi-Decade Projects**

And it's a long lasting flow of time, this being a Scholar-Activist; for, just as a career in writing, art, music or teaching is, say, 60 years long, so too your life as an Scholar-Activists is a sixty year path. Also, keep neat and usable files, because the files and researches and studies you put together in one decade may be of use, even great use, thirty years later.

## **Shaw and Time-Tithing**

Being alive today is like being a sunflower surrounded by a million suns, there are so many distractions! How do you keep from getting overwhelmed? Engulfed in the absolute sea of human warfare, injustice and misery? People sometimes comment on how tired anti-war or environmental activists appear, with their eyes ringed like bruised apples.

One solution, in part, is the concept of time-tithing. To give regular amounts of time, time-tithing to social causes. A great example of this is found in the career of the playwright George Bernard Shaw, who lived from 1856 through most of 1950. Even though George Bernard Shaw was a world famous playwright and critic, he nevertheless regularly worked for the cause of Fabian socialism, setting aside time weekly, giving speeches for the cause, writing the text of pamphlets and newspapers, doing the down and dirty daily routines of spreading the word, however exalted his position as a playwright was.

Time-tithing, part of the path to prevent becoming overwhelmed.

### **The Saturation Job**

My mentor, the poet Charles Olson, first showed me the important concept of the Saturation Job. “Best thing to do,” he wrote to the poet Edward Dorn, “is to dig one thing or place or man or woman until you yourself know more abt that than is possible to any other man. It doesn’t matter whether it’s Barbed Wire or Pemican or Paterson or Iowa. But exhaust it. Saturate it. Beat it. And then U KNOW everything else very fast: one saturation job (it might take 14 years). And you’re in, forever.”

My own saturation job was the research and data system I put together during several years writing my book *The Family*, a history of the Charles Manson group.

The enormous and extended research that one of you might do, for example, studying a creek or a wetlands you want to protect over the course of months or years, might be YOUR Saturation Job.

Once you do your Saturation Job, then you’re prepared as you can be for the eery thrill of being an activist in the Bush era.

One more word about research files; don’t have it all on a computer; but put it into folders, alphabetical and chronological, because there’s nothing quite like spiffing through actual files— that tactile feeling— to give you ideas for position papers, ideas for further research, thoughts for leaflets, stories, poems, ads on issues, and the like.

### **Overcoming Despair, Defeat, Self-Doubt**

It’s important not to be down-toned all the time, important not to freeze-dry frown wrinkles and cracks of despair into your long-term face.

You have to keep smiling. Eat meals with your cohorts. Sing together. In my youth going on peace walks and civil rights marches, many people carried a guitar and we sang all the time. If our church was surrounded by the klan, we would softly sing together.

So, it’s very very important to laugh into the smiling lips of defeat and doubt. There are always those in any cause who are horrified when you party or have a good time now and then. Many of them won’t change this attitude; it’s just part of the hefty mix of making a better world. Don’t forget to smile and party.

### **You have to be Ready for Ridicule**

It pays to study the life of the great American Rachel Carson, who overcome great cascades of putdown and ridicule from the chemical polluters when *Silent Spring* was published in 1962; or what happened to Daniel Ellsberg when he heroically released the Pentagon Papers in 1971; or what happened to Native Americans at Pine Ridge— to understand how you have to be prepared for ridicule.

The establishment loves to use ridicule and dismissiveness as a weapon.

### The Mead Quote

Sometimes a Scholar-Activist can feel SO ALONE, and feel as if no one is listening or paying attention. It's a subtle phenomenon, however; the fact is that you may be having a greater impact than you can ever know. And sometimes it's not what you stop now, but what you prevent in the future. The huge Moratorium demonstrations in Washington in 1969 prevented Richard Nixon from expanding the war.

In this regard people sometimes quote Margaret Mead: "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it's the only thing that ever has."

### Factionalism.

Those on the center-left are sometimes accused of being riven with factional strife, with putting slight modulations of personal advance, or sectarian power, in front of the overall goal of promoting commonweal and the relief of suffering.

Some people seem naturally inclined to create shit-lists, sometimes more lengthy than Nixon's famous enemies list; and than tick off vast arrays of transgressions of colleagues in the campaign to prevent a WalMart or to protect an aquifer.

Others seem excessively bitter, bitter beyond reason, even when, say, they have a safe gig at a college, and can spend their summers studying communal tendencies among skateboarders in Norway. However the merit, bitterness is a malady too often felt among writers and better worlders, especially given American history the last few years.

Factions sometimes quarrel over ideological purity, and minute differences in outlook. A writer sometimes is caught inside a rather grim falafel of ideology, as I noted in my book, *1968, a History in Verse*:

There is never any answer  
to the snarl  
"You don't care about  
the suffering of the people.  
You only care about pleasure."

or the anger that crunches  
the dry twigs  
left and right  
A writer is never right enough  
for the right  
left enough for the left  
pure enough for the pure  
nor poor enough  
for the poor of heart.

A story comes is told now and then  
how once at Stanford in the '60s  
a student heckled  
the socialist Irving Howe  
(one of the founders of Dissent )  
over his lack of commitment  
to the rev  
That his fingers were sooty with Moloch's boot polish

Howe glanced over at the youth and replied,  
"You know what you're going to be?  
You're going to be a dentist."

### **The issue is not the Issue**

In Berkeley around the time that Governor Ronald Reagan ordered helicopters to spray pepper gas on protestors at People's Park in Berkeley, there was a saying, "The Issue is not the Issue." The issue is not the issue.

Which means that the real issue is the kind of fundamental change, consistent with our great Bill of Rights, that will banish poverty, provide us French-style national healthcare, and give all workers, of all paylevels, paid vacations of at least a month, and an old age where a person doesn't have to sell their house, eat up all savings, and in effect become a pauper just for the honor of passing away.

### **Keeping the Issues Alive**

One of our great tasks, of course, is "keeping the issues alive." A writer can be very useful at keeping an issue alive, by thinking of fresh new written approaches, say, to focus on an injustice or something that needs to happen. One example is the many brilliant poets and writers who stood up and opposed slavery. It wasn't easy to do. And a few decades of keeping the issues alive raises the risk of what they call burn-out

### **The Question of Burn-Out**

It's important to refuse to be burnt-out; to take your files and researches forth, and take to the public with freshness and vigor. One way, in Latin, to say "Refuse to Be Burnt-Out," is *Noli in spiritu combueri* which is the title of a poem of mine on the subject.

## Refuse to Be Burnt-Out

Noli in spiritu combueri  
Refuse to be Burnt-Out

Some people slip  
on that ladder  
hang by the rungs  
for twenty years

Some people turn their backs  
on their Dreams  
become a Tory  
like Robert Southey

Refuse to be Burnt-out

Some people fake a burn-out  
rubbing themselves with charcoal  
bitterly bickering bitter-shitters  
cursing fate  
when lunch is late

And the saddest are not the burn-outs  
but the burn-ups—  
a stomach full of blood  
an overburdened liver  
a street without names  
and fifty years of pain and grief  
for those who loved them in the flames

Noli in spiritu combueri  
Refuse to be burnt-out

What can we do  
with the world on fire  
and the Bill of Rights  
dipped in the mire

Be defiant

move to the Left  
while the right wing writhes  
in its nightmare cleft

Stay strong on your path  
in spite of distraction  
put bread and roses  
in your every action

The greatest thing to do  
across the left  
is protect the ballot box  
from right wing theft

The answer is

not to be laid back  
not to be cynical  
not to be hesitant  
not to be shy  
not to be uninformed  
not to be beaten down  
not to be isolated  
not to be frightened  
not to be threatened  
not to be coopted  
not to be lied to

Noli in spiritu combueri

Refuse to be burnt-out

Refuse to be burnt-out

Refuse to be burnt-out

### **The Long Term View for Bread and Roses**

There was a famous strike in the cold January of 1912 at the American Woolen Company in Lawrence, Massachusetts. The company, with no warning or consultation, suddenly reduced the pay of all the employees, most of them women of a number of nationalities. The women went out on strike and soon other nearby plants joined in, so that soon 50,000 were on strike. Women of many countries joined one another across language and ethnic barriers. The Wobbly songwriter Joe Hill wrote his famous tune, "Rebel Girl," about a strike leader, Elizabeth Gurley Flynn.

In one of the demonstrations some women carried a famous banner "We want bread and roses too." Bread and Roses!— it is a catch-phrase that has energized activists for almost

a hundred years.

It is a phrase that like a miracle sums up what we all want— a life there there is no poverty, no class divisions, everyone has a home, and there is also the Rosa Mundi, the rose of the world, that guarantees fun and leisure for all, and how about a 5 week paid vacation for every human?

This was the sort of thinking that animated the life of the brilliant French composer Erik Satie, who lived from 1866 till 1925.

When he was a young man, in the late 1900s, Satie moved to a suburb of Paris, where he joined what one biographer called a “local Radical-Socialist Committee,” and wrote articles for a radical newspaper. In 1895, he wrote the 7-part *Messe des Pauvres*, or Mass for the Poor. During his youth he composed his famous Gnessiennes, exquisite solo piano compositions. My favorite Gnessienne is number 5, a truly beautiful piano piece, which will accompany the following poem, dedicated to all the articles for a better world this excellent composer wrote. I will play a tape of the Gnessienne while I read.

## **Poem to a Gnessienne of Erik Satie**

(to be read while listening to Gnessienne # 5)

The issue of the rose  
so vital to our youth  
shall rise again

It always has  
it always  
will

And it's  
our dance of  
our lives  
to grow the rose

It always was  
It always will

Ink on paper told me that  
& the rose agrees

It always has  
it always  
will

There comes a time

when all the  
          petals have to fall  
& yet there's  
          such a place  
where petals  
          never fall

You know, my Erik—  
they're the same same place!

Everyone  
has a right  
to food, a decent place to live, health

& fun, my Erik,  
fun & fun & fun!

The rose haunts  
          all of time  
it always has  
it always will

Meanwhile  
all of us fade  
to the same  
same  
anarcho-determinist  
post-marxist  
place of the sun

in our  
furry pajamas

And the rose haunts  
all of time

it always has  
it always will

## **Revolution and Violence**

The word Revolution is tossed around quite a bit. They talk about a revolution of this and a revolution of that. It's often a revolution in publishing. In music. In flower arranging.

But, what about a revolution that guaranteed an equal share of the resources and largess of a civilization to everyone. That set up a national health care system like in many European countries.

That's the kind of revolution that interested me and many of the companions of my youth. The generation of the Beats, the Flower Children, Psychedelia, Chicago, the Exorcism of the Pentagon, the great Moratoriums that caused Nixon to pull back from war expansion, and the great advances in music and recording, including the invention of the 8, then 16, then 24 track recording machine, and, of course, the invention of the wah wah pedal.

When I travel to Europe, and do interviews, I'm sometimes called to task for American foreign policy and all the wars and violence our country conducts. I say that no country that invented the wah wah pedal and came up with the great song, "We Shall Overcome," can be totally evil.

As for Revolution, it's this: if you have enough multi-millions demanding near-term social change with insistence and mass resolve— that's called Revolution.

And then there's the issue violence. The question of violence sometimes arises, at least in discussions, in an era of gross injustice.

My opinion is that violence is rarely required, if at all. However, what if a kind of surveillance-batty techno-fascism should arise in our great nation? What then? It depends on the degree. In any case, I think it's useful for Scholar-Activists to contemplate how they could exist in a secret cell, if they had to, how they could communicate and not get intercepted, how they could spread around resources and money without detection in a time of rising oppression. It's useful to think along those lines.

But, remember, they have the cluster bombs, they have the bomb-drones, they have the Delta Force and Special Operations. They have precision guided bombs. They have crowd-control gases of a number of types, not just teargas and CS. They have enormous packages of violence-creating weapons of many kinds. And they have the precision.

So, unearned suffering, the suffering of Selma, Birmingham, Martin Luther King, Robert Kennedy— taking risks, without violence, to change the world— that's the path.

### **The Question: Should We Risk Jail?**

It's difficult now, in these rat race time, to take time off to to jail. Who will mist the orchids? Who will walk the dog? Pay the phone bill? Everybody seems overworked, and it would be prohibitively expensive for most to spend time in jail. That's one of the tragedies of the Rat Race.

I think that maybe we should start pooling money— to set up funding sources, to pay for the expenses of those who commit civil disobedience, say the group that struggles against the re-named School of the Americas; or those who may get arrested regarding military recruitment in high schools or on campuses.

Especially if our nation drifts more and more into what we might call the Dick Cheney shadows, where war is peace, and freedom is obedience, and public opinion be damned. Then we will likely have to help pay the jail and prison expenses of friends and loved ones.

Let's pray the drift toward an authoritarian surveillance state never goes that far.

Next, I'll recite a poem which some of you may not totally agree with, but I'm sure you'll be happy to allow my recitation. And even though you may not agree with the message, I invited you to chant along on the repeating one-line chorus, "Send George Bush to Jail."

## **The Impeachment of George Bush —a World Wide Party**

Today they impeached George Bush  
and the world began to party

Flowers bloomed spontaneously  
Trombones came out of attics by themselves  
and began to play the "Celebration Waltz"

(all chant, with emphasis)  
*Send George Bush to jail!*

Out in Des Moines the birds in the pet shops  
suddenly knew "All you need is love"  
and every single puppy could hold a D minor yowl!

In Italy they turned on all the ancient fountains  
and the ghosts of Roman poets wrote encomia!

*Send George Bush to jail!*

Through the Arc de Triomphe  
400,000 lily-carrying children sang  
the two words of impeachment  
"Égalité..... Liberté"

It was '45 all over again

*Send George Bush to jail!*

In Bohemia the state glass works  
produced a million blue plates of Absolute Joy!  
to be given out free to the tourists of Prague!

654,000 tapdancers were seen in Santiago  
surging past the house of Pablo Neruda  
while the stolen books of '73 were repaired

*Send George Bush to jail!*

Petrarch and Laura appeared holding hands  
and watching the boat races along the Arno  
beneath the bridge of sighs

Out of the mound of Troy  
came the mother of Patroclus  
with a basket of pomegranates  
to heal the soul-wounds of Bush's many killings

*Send George Bush to jail!*

On the cliffs of Leucadia  
ancient Sappho sang  
"There'll be freedom to live as we love now  
that he is gone"

The voice of Thomas Jefferson  
came across Virginia to ask that all citizens' debts  
to banks be forgiven

*Send George Bush to jail!*

Anita Ekberg swam naked and alone in the Trevi Fountain  
she was so excited at George's barring  
and Catullus wrote three poems at the marvel

500,000 legless humans from U.S. and Chinese land mines  
clicked their crutches to the beat as  
Stevie Wonder's "Superstition" played from giant helicopters  
to lift the millions of unexploded land mines  
out of the blood fields  
& into U.N. casks

*Send George Bush to jail!*

Paul Bowles sent a waterpipe from Tangier  
to Corso, Ginsberg and Orlovksy  
in room 27 of the Beat Hotel on rue Git le Coeur  
to celebrate the good news

Cassandra stands on Pennsylvania Avenue  
and weeps this time with surprise  
because the world at last is listening to her words,  
“Goodbye George, your house has fallen without ashes!”

*Party yay! party say!  
Time to dance all day!  
and Send George Bush to jail!*

### **Dare to be Part of the History of Your Era**

It's important, as a Scholar-Activist to dare to be a part of the history of your era. You might want to keep a chronology of your activities, even your letters to the editor, maybe a journal or diary specifically devoted to keeping track of your researches and activities. It's important to be a part of your public generation.

Keeping a neat personal history of your involvement in causes will help to prevent alienation, and help to recall later the fun, the fury, the intensity of your lives on the front lines.

### **Not to be Boxed into a Corner**

It's also important that, no matter how controversial you find your stances, that you not allow yourself to feel cut off from the world, boxed into a corner, isolated, trapped in loneliness, and feeling like a puppy in a shoe box on an alien porch.

I'm going to do a song now, dedicated to a great American poet, who, even though at times he was very very controversial, never allowed himself to be boxed into a corner.

He always reached out to the world, and around the world, with his enormous skills as a poet, but also as a poet who performed at literally hundreds upon hundreds of benefits for a wide variety of causes. I'm talking about my friend, the author of “Howl,” “America,” the great threnody for his mother, “Kaddish” and many other beautiful poems.

His name of course is Allen Ginsberg, the great Beat Era sage and bard who helped bring great social change to America. The freedom now enjoyed in the arts and on the screen and TV came about in good part from the demands for greater personal freedom from Allen Ginsberg and his generation.

It doesn't seem possible that he's been gone for ten years, this April. Om.

## For Allen Ginsberg

He was one of my heroes  
Where the river of freedom flows  
and the blossom of peace grows  
Allen Allen Allen has fallen

What a huge and giant brain!  
with its hundreds of Blake lines memorized  
10,000 vowels of Yeats,  
a Catullus or two, 50 pages of Whitman  
Milton's "Lycidas," samples of  
Sapphic stanzas, vast memories  
of his youth & family, gigabytes  
upon infinitudinabytes of naked truth  
above the burning fields of the earth

Ah Allen  
your skyrocket mind  
up there w/ Sappho & Keats  
exploding  
with such a wide, wild corona  
out o'er our Little Part of the Milky Way

He was one of my heroes  
Where the river of freedom flows  
and the blossom of peace grows  
Allen Allen Allen has fallen

Well, while I'm here I'll  
do the work--  
and what's the Work?  
To ease the pain of living.  
Everything else, drunken  
dumbshow  
(from "Memory Gardens" Oct. 22-29, 1969)

He was one of my heroes  
Where the river of freedom flows  
and the blossom of peace grows  
Allen Allen Allen has fallen

No time to recycle  
No time to read the mail  
No time to look at the comet  
No time to go to the meeting  
No time for fabulous images  
No time to think  
No time to study Egyptian  
No time to listen to Berg  
No time to go to the rock shop  
No time to relive that moment  
No time to sort-out cosmology  
No time to buy a new oar  
No time to decipher the glyphs  
No time to sort the papers  
No time to measure the moonlight  
No time to grow the peppers  
No time to argue for freedom  
No time to dismantle the fear  
No time to savor the visions  
No time no time no time no time

He was one of my heroes  
Where the river of freedom flows  
and the blossom of peace grows  
Allen Allen Allen has fallen

—Woodstock-Venice-Florence-Rome  
1997-1998

## The Theory and Practice of Fun and Laughter

As I noted earlier, we need to party and have fun, in spite of the war. Even if we were each equipped with 10,000 parallel lives and each parallel life went to meetings 15 hours a day, we could not call a halt to human suffering and transgression.

So, in the midst of the struggle, we need to slow down, tend to our gardens, read through all the novels of Dickens we've neglected, learn enough Russian to sight read Pasternak, etc.

I've read that Laughter Therapy is very au courant. So, I will close this talk on Writing, Social Change and Revolution, with a musical setting of William Blake's "Laughing Song," from the *Songs of Innocence*.

You are invited and encouraged to sing along on the choruses, which features rambunc-

tious laughter. You'll get the idea.

Before we laugh together, I'd like to thank Professor Thomas Olsen and Professor Renny Scott-Childress for inviting me, and also to thank the New York College English Association. I am very grateful.

Now, for William Blake's "Laughing Song," with a music track on a Yamaha QY100 sequencer.

## The Laughing Song

—William Blake

When the green woods laugh with the voice of joy,  
And the dimpling stream runs laughing by;  
When the air does laugh with our merry wit,  
And the green hill laughs with the noise of it;

Ha Ha Hee Ha Ha Hee  
Ha Ha Hee

When the meadows laugh with lively green,  
And the grasshopper laughs in the merry scene;  
When Mary and Susan and Emily  
With their sweet round mouths sing  
Ha Ha Hee

Ha Ha Hee Ha Ha Hee  
Ha Ha Hee

When the painted birds laugh in the shade,  
Where our table with cherries and nuts is spread:  
Come live, and be merry, and join with me,  
To sing the sweet chorus of  
Ha Ha Hee

Ha Ha Hee Ha Ha Hee  
Ha Ha Hee

Thank you.

