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CANTOS GENERALES: Long Poems from the American Left

Vincent Dussol

Chilean Poet Pablo Neruda published *Canto General* in 1950. In his introduction to the fiftieth anniversary edition, Roberto González Echevarría reminds contemporary readers of the different interwoven foundational stories that the poem contains:

One is the history of Latin America from pre-Columbian days to the present ; another is Neruda's own history, his personal life and emergence as poetic voice ; then, there is what one could call natural history, which he drew from the naturalists' second discovery of America, that is, from the many naturalists who traversed Latin America in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, charting its natural phenomena, establishing its natural uniqueness.

“All these narratives”, adds Echevarría, vie for pre-eminence, each aspires to become the master story that contains all others, by situating itself as the origin or beginning of the American continent”. It has been argued, despite Neruda's claim to the contrary, that these stories do not coalesce: Saúl Yurkiévich maintains that the part of *Canto General* that “wishes to be political action aimed at the future” and consists in rational, political history “cast in time and often in the language of personal testimony” comes into irreparable conflict/ collides with the “irrational, mythic language” in which the natural history of the New World is told. This second narrative strand is largely “a vision of the poet's subconscious that shares the inchoate creativity of the natural world”.

Echevarría has his own take on the matter: in his view, “the foundational story of the *Canto* is one of betrayal”. Chili's president González Videla had been elected thanks to his party's alliance with the Communist Party of which Neruda was a prominent member: as such, the poet had been instrumental in forging a coalition of all progressive groups and was named Videla's campaign manager. “On taking power, González Videla reneged on his promises and the program”. On November 27th, 1947, Neruda's letter entitled “Letter to My Friends in Latin America”, also known as the “Intimate Letter to Millions of Men”, “accusing the president of treason” was published in Caracas's *El Nacional*. Neruda's trial for contempt, following the charges brought against him by the Chilean president, “led to his protracted persecution”, during which he finished his poem.

Section IX of *Canto General*, entitled “Let the Woodcutter Awaken” reaches out to North American friendly forces, singling out Whitman and Lincoln as their luminaries and

sources of inspiration in times when writers, scholars and artists, “must sit to be judged for ‘un-American’ thoughts/ before a tribunal of merchants enriched by the/ war” (260).

Like Pablo Neruda, Thomas McGrath (1916-1990) also was led to writing his pseudo-autobiographical long poem in times of trial. In 1953, he was called before the House Unamerican Activities Committee and refused to answer the committee’s questions about his own beliefs or to betray his friends. He was fired from his teaching job at Los Angeles State College and blacklisted as a result. He set to work on *Letter to an Imaginary Friend*, his own 407-page *Canto General*, in the fall of 1954. The poem’s title, which McGrath said he had before he started working on it, may be an echo of Neruda’s “Letter to My Friends in Latin America”. My first contention is that long poems from the Left are shelters from present adversity and repositories of the past for future inspirational use. “*Double the past from the present, cast it out forward*”, writes Eleni Sikelianos in *The California Poem* (77).

For a definition of the American Left, I turned to Paul and Mari-Jo Buhle and Dan Georgakas’s introduction to their *Encyclopedia of the American Left* : “The American Left [is] [d]efined as that segment of society that has sought fundamental changes in the economic, political, and cultural systems, [therefore] the subject does not include reformers who believe that change can be accommodated to existing capitalist structures, or who believe that an egalitarian society can be attained ultimately within national borders”. The ‘modern American Left,’ is contrasted by the authors with “the predominantly religious communitarianism of earlier times”, by which is meant *ante* 1870 (X).

Is the overthrow of capitalism still on the American Left’s agenda? Are there rallying causes left on the Left or has the question of the Left become senseless in the USA? Can the Democratic Party be said to have a Left-oriented agenda? How many Americans still look to far-Left nation-wide or international organizations for political guidance? What is left of the Left of the American Left?

The three long poems I want to focus on have been published over the past two years. Clearly none of them was written from the Right. Nevertheless, Michael Lally’s *March 18, 2003*, Dale Jacobson’s *Factories and Cities* and Eleni Sikelianos’s *The California Poem* offer very different responses to the challenge posed by the current dominance of the American conservatives. I will try to show how, just as the American Left may be striving to evolve new federalizing causes, American poets from the Left have been deploying long poems in various fashion, searching for the most effective strategy.

Why make *Canto General* the paradigmatic long poem from the American Left then?

The “general” it points to lies at opposite ends from the free-for-all of global capitalism. The question of the intrinsic worth of the general has been addressed by American poets from the Left, most notably George Oppen (1908-1984), who devoted to the discussion of it his longest work, a 32-page sequence comprised of 40 sections entitled “Of Being Numerous” (1968). While it acknowledged the artist’s and the human being’s irreducible singular, the length of the poem mirrored the conclusion that it arrived at : being numerous is what we have to come to terms with for better than for worse.“ ‘Whether”, it was asked, “as the intensity of seeing increases, one’s distance/ from Them, the people, does not also increase”/ but the one asking had asked with foreknowledge of the answer: “ I know, of course I know, I can enter no other place” (9). Which is reasserted again and again: “I cannot even now/ Altogether disengage myself/ From those men/ With whom I stood” [this was during WW2]. “How forget that? How talk/ Distantly of ‘The People”” (14) The figure of Robinson Crusoe is emblematic of mankind’s embrace of the many: “Crusoe/ We say was/ ‘Rescued’/ So we have chosen.// Obsessed, bewildered/ By the shipwreck/ Of the singular/ We have chosen the meaning/ Of being numerous” (6&7). And not only men but larger aggregates of men are to be the norm: “In this nation/ Which is in some sense/ Our home. Covenant!// The covenant is:/ There shall be peoples.” (24). The last word in Oppen’s poem is « curious », which closes the poem on an opening: the assumption behind curiosity rules out withdrawal upon oneself. To make of togetherness and of the definition of being as ‘being among many’ the subject matter of a long poem reflects the use poets from the Left have put the format to. It has been suggested that *Canto General* may have been picked for a title by Neruda “in opposition to Whitman’s *Song of Myself*”. Should the work’s title be translated – which it has not been – Roberto González Echevarría thinks the best option would probably be “The Song of All”. Oppen’s thinking in *Of Being Numerous* also prefigures the tough interrogations and loss of bearings of the Left after the final rupture of the Communist bloc made its even critical sympathisers in the outside world an “inoperative community”, to use Jean-Luc Nancy’s word.

In the 1930s, aesthetics had brought together Ezra Pound and the group of poets – among them George Oppen – who came to be known as the Objectivists. Their paths were eventually to diverge as Pound got involved with Italian fascism while Oppen vanished from the poetry scene to devote himself to political activism on the organized Left. Interestingly, in a note of his *Daybook*, Oppen precisely contrasted Pound with Neruda.: “I cannot accept so broad a figure of the poet – and yet I feel strongly that it would be an excellent occurrence if Neruda should replace Pound – not to mention Eliot and his symbolists – as the centre of the canon of ‘modern’ poetry”. The statement is undated, yet the criticism of the canonization of

Pound and Eliot makes the late 1940s or the 1950s a likely time for the jotting down of this irritated outburst. In other words, rather *Canto General* than *The Cantos*, Ezra Pound's attempt at taking the long view and writing "a poem containing history", to recall his definition of the epic.

No form has a single meaning. Form takes place: its meaning is context-sensitive. Pound's word – "containing" – carries both the senses of "having capacity for" therefore of "comprising" and the one of "keeping under proper control," "preventing or limiting the expansion, influence, success, or advance of a hostile factor, an opposing force." The multilingual, esoteric fabric of cultural references in *The Cantos* can therefore be seen as a stronghold of resistance, even a paranoid walling-in against what Pound saw as the decadent democratic mass-orientated drift of western culture over the course of history. The walls he put up in *The Cantos* are formidable and forbidding. Walls are as much about keepings things in as about keeping things out and a lot of clearly identifiable forces gathered within the poem point Right. Pound had little faith in society as an integrative egalitarian whole. He must have loathed the 'general'. Was this why he could not "make it cohere"?

Neruda certainly made it cohere. Unlike Pound's *Cantos*, Neruda's *Canto General* was brought to completion. Also, although Progressive forces in Latin America have virtually always already been sent back to foundational work, from the undergrounds up, often having to tunnel their way back up from mass-graves, *Canto General* would not be aptly described as a mere archive of defeats – as is the case with famous epics: it also recalls the continent's successful spells within a historical teleology of liberation. The 78 pages of Section IV, "The Liberators", are a paeon to this march.

It therefore comes as no surprise that in the USA, where "that other/ Dream" (McGrath's phrase) never materialized, poets who wrote from the organized Left – like Oppen, McGrath or Dale Jacobson, should have invoked Neruda's figure, a broad and unflagging standard-bearer and senator of the many: "a certain Chilean named Thousand" (132)

At some point in the 1950s, Thomas McGrath came up with a distinction that, looking back, should have brought him much praise rather than the flak he received from some blind-sighted CPUSA cultural *apparatchiki*: there was, he argued, a need for two types of poetry. Immediate events, say, a strike, might call for what he named "tactical poems" keyed to the situation at hand. "On the other hand," Tom McGrath wrote, "we take a poem like Neruda's *Canto General*, a marvellous big poem, but it's not there to help in some immediate kind of situation; it's a *strategic* poem. But anyone who reads it will have his consciousness expanded by the reading of it" (*Festschrift*, 29).

A complementary distinction is made by James Scully in *Line Break* (1988). One should not mistake, he insists, issue-orientated poetry for dissident poetry from the Left, in the stricter sense. Scully defined the latter kind as poetry with clear ideological underpinnings, thereby much to be preferred to the former kind on account of its political staying power. The knee-jerk protest in issue-orientated poetry will peter out the moment its surface cause disappears: it stops at manifest content, when reaching for latent content could have led one to a more sustainable view of the whole picture. Issue-orientated protest poetry is liable to block the bringing to the fore of long-term and far-reaching connections between the issue at hand and other fronts where confrontations with global capitalism took, have been taking and are bound to take place. The long poem, after the fashion of *Canto General*, confers a higher degree of permanence to a commitment that might otherwise have been thought to be only passing, if not faddy engrossment for a cause. Aside from providing a shelter of words, it mimicks the militant's long wait for better days and arduous work to attain them. The long poem is proof and promise of sustainability over the long term for the politically minded poet's commitment. The long poem (or the anthology, another united-we-stand type of book much favoured by the Left) is a coalescing of dissent so that it may be more resilient and resistant. "My organized love", wrote Neruda (182).

When discussing the sources of his song, Neruda placed his work in direct descent from the first epic written in Spanish, Alonso De Ercilla y Zuniga's *La Araucana*. De Ercilla was a young soldier in the Conquistadors' army. Though initially expected to celebrate the conquest of the southernmost lands of the continent, Ercilla ended up inventing a country – Chile was the only country ever invented by a poet, claimed Neruda in a 1970 interview. He gave the former inhabitants a fair deal, showing a humanist's concern for the rights to independence and the future of those being conquered, adroitly slipping his exaltation of the Araucans into the rhetoric expected by the Spanish Crown. Giving Native-Americans a fair deal has since then been a tradition of Chilean literature, said Neruda. This equally goes for writers of long poems on the North American Left.

One may even say that simply allowing for the existence of Latin America, taking it into account in their writings, often actively supporting all struggles against dictators, and especially U.S. imperialist-minded shenanigans in that part of the world has been a fixture of writers of *cantos generales*. Let me just pick – among many – an unaffiliated, uncontrollable but decidedly not-from-the-Right writer of great long poems in the 1960s questioning all manifestations of white America's ruthlessness, Edward Dorn (1929-1999), who edited and co-translated a volume of guerrilla poems from Latin America.

It is time to turn to the three long poems that I proposed to focus on. To what exact extent do they exemplify tensions, conflict and continuity within the American Left and the stream of long poems that it produced? ¹

The thrust of long poems from the American Left often comes from totalising and unifying models outside literature which they project and metonymically emulate. Long poems inevitably invite assessment of their nearness to or distance from the epic: but their author's social and political background may root them in the master-image of a form other than themselves. Typically, Irish-American Tom McGrath's *Letter to an Imaginary Friend* has Noah's Ark and the One Big Union – the *Industrial Workers of the World* – as its dream arch-communities.

Additional backbone is provided by more or less depersonalised fragmented autobiography, a lifeline for both writer and reader. Mallarmé's elocutionary disappearance of the poet is not a primary concern in narrative poems from the Left ², though McGrath's notion

¹ A relatively thorough coverage of the past 130 years of history has been achieved by long poems or book-length poem sequences from the American Left. To give a brief survey of the terrain, one may shortlist the following as representative works:

- Charles Reznikoff's *Testimony: The United States*, over 500 pages quarried from found material in court records, which covers the years 1885-1915 and still provides much food for thought for the progressive-minded. It tells the grim story of the downtrodden, rife with violence, injustice, and discrimination with precious few glimmers of hope.
- Thomas McGrath's 410-page *Letter to an Imaginary Friend*, in turn melancholy, humorous and hortatory, offers a consistent left-winger's revision of what became of the American Dream from the 1930s to the 1960s.
- Muriel Rukeyser's *US. I* (1938) comprised of a 55-page sequence devoted to an industrial scandal in West Virginia followed by two medium-length pieces on the Spanish civil war, and Norman Rosten's *The Fourth Decade* with its eponymous 86-page political cosmorama of a poem shuttling between fronts, domestic and international, Spain also foremost among the latter, complement a Leftist's picture of the decade when America might have taken a sharp turn to the Left, following in blissful ignorance of Stalinism's evil doings, William Carlos Williams's 1928 advice in *The Descent of Winter*: "The United States should be, in effect, a Soviet State. It is a Soviet State decayed away in a misconception of richness. The states, counties, cities, are anemic Soviets" (308).
- Louis Zukofsky's *A* (sections 8 to 10) carry much in them that bears the imprint of a Marxian filter applied to historical events inside and outside America in the first half of the 20th century.
- The narrative poems of the 1940's of Alabama-born John Beecher – "In Aegypt Land", "And I Will Be Heard", "Think It Over, America" "Here I Stand" –, demonstrate the interweaving of the threads of racism, labor exploitation and American imperialism. A very thorough selection of Beecher's work was recently brought out by NewSouth Books.

The closer one gets to the present day, the more names come to mind. Let me mention in passing that Allen Ginsberg was not just a beatnik high on dope and dicks but a searing voice that knew how not to pull his punches in such long poems as *Iron Horse* (1966) or *Wichita Vortex Sutra* (also 1966). At a time when the Democratic Party itself is branded by some an enemy of America, Charles Olson's *The Maximus Poems* can be reclaimed as, among much else, an epic to *homo Americanus laborans* or *faber*, boat-builder, fisherman or post-office worker. This foreshortened summary would not be complete without mention of Edward Dorn.

Only the present indiscriminate attacks levelled at anyone on the Left in America may justify the constructing of a continuity by crowding under one oversimplifying political label – the Left – all the poets mentioned above.

of pseudo-autobiography is worth remembering. It is derived from the belief that not one's personal life as such is what matters. "All of us live twice at the same time – once uniquely and once representatively. I am interested in those moments when my unique personal life intersects with something bigger, when my small brief moment has a part in 'fabricating the legend'" (*NDQ* 50, 4, 25). This ideologically harnessed, purposeful use of one's life-material is indeed common in *cantos generales*.

Among recent long poems from the American Left, D. Jacobson's *Factories and Cities* (2003) has Communism, the commune and the tribe as feeders of its dream while with Eleni Sikelianos's *The California Poem* (2004), it is the Earth that is the dream reference whole. By contrast, Michael Lally's *March 23rd, 2003* (2003) has one main target – former president-candidate running for re-election George W. Bush – but no clear organising principle in the background. The last word in each of the three poems points to a different direction. *Factories and Cities* ends on a capitalized "One", *The California Poem* on our planet's name "Earth", *March 23rd, 2003* on the self-centred "me".

I believe these three long poems reflect the current disarray of the American Left: it is fumbling for, groping for, a unifying strategy. Aren't rallying causes hard to come by these days?

Thus, *Factories and Cities* is basically informed by an Old Left agenda and could be dismissed as a regressive rehashing of new or merely refreshed material written in an almost extinct language, in which the scales are definitely tipped in favour of sense rather than of sound. Primacy of the signified over the signifier is unchallenged. It is as though the critique of language as instrument had never occurred when it was a major issue for what came to be known as Language poetry in the 1970s and the 1980s. Here is how Ron Silliman, a language poet and an activist, was trying to bring home the tensions between generations of poets from the Left:

A friend, a member of the Old Left, challenges my aesthetic. How, he asks, can one write so as not to 'communicate' ? I, in turn, challenge his definitions. It is a more crucial lesson, I argue, to learn how to experience language directly, to tune one's senses to it, than to use it as a mere means to an

² Of course, the self-centred I, me, mine is as old as 19th century romanticism. 19th century American poets were as ego-involved as can be imagined, as Whitman's "Song of Myself" and all those Emily Dickinson poems coming from the 'I' perspective" clearly show. But much 20th century American poetry – starting with Modernists Gertrude Stein, Pound and Eliot – forcibly steered clear of this inclination of their forbears. If progressive poets who wrote long pieces in the course of the past century have not been so radical in their attempt to erase the "I", they have, as McGrath's distancing himself from the autobiographical indicates, used the 'advances' of Modernism and played the ego down, a not infrequent attitude on the Left. "Lenin was one of the most selfless of great men" writes Edmund Wilson (*Finland Station*, 459).

end. Such use, I point out, is, in bourgeois life, common to all things, even the way we ‘use’ our friends. Some artists (Brecht is the obvious example) try to focus such ‘use’ to point up all the alienation, to present a bourgeois discourse ‘hollowed out’. But language, so that it is experienced directly, moves beyond any such exercise in despair, an unalienated language. He wants an example. I give him Grenier³’s

thumpa
thumpa
thumpa
thump

pointing out how it uses so many physical elements of a speech that only borders on language, how it illumines that space. He says “I don’t understand” (from *The Chinese Notebook*, 1986).

Are American poets from the Left currently in a position to say that they do when the Right, with all powers gathered into its hands, is on the rampage against the progressive conspiracy?

The pages of the 168-page *Factories and Cities* are filled with words, explicitly stating the author’s views. Poetic diction is rich in figures of speech that leave little leeway to the reader’s freedom of interpretation. Elaborate as the illuminations are, their purpose is not to distract the reader’s attention from the contents of the message. The poem is inscribed to Old Left Midwestern “Lighthouses” Thomas McGrath and Meridel LeSueur. Epigraphs to the different sections are extracted from Old Left literary figureheads’ writings such as Bertolt Brecht and Paul Eluard. Sections’ titles include: “Motto”, “(workers descend)”, “(what tools tell us)”, “(May Day)”, “(initiation into work)”, “(commune)”. The sciences the poetry summons the most frequently are geology and astronomy: they took over from the netherworld and Heaven respectively and their prominence has therefore been a fixture of long poems from the Left. The book clearly turns toward the past in search of political fuel and inspiration: “all the dark energies of worlds/ calling invention – out of the ruined days” (15). As epics will, it offers its narrative of the dawn of time and of the nation and the tale that is told is one of violence:

In that tribal hour, before the stars were named,
somehow, someone spoke, launched
the verb to flight, carved from need
the weapon of the word, sculpted it
into a pointed stone to command death
like a flying serpent’s tooth

³ To be pronounced « grin ear ».

. Throughout the poem, the part of the human body that elicits the most celebration is the hand, as Man the Maker's (*homo faber*) first tool. The poet is the worker of the word: "words endure as this brick// endures against wind and time, against fatalities,// this brick that gives shelter like words give shelter" (15). In fact, he is shown to have followed in the shaman's footsteps, once the anonymous third-person plural "they" had "put stone upon stone, made their own caves" (8).

Factories and Cities was a long time in the writing but it is probably no accident that it was brought to completion and brought out as if in an emergency during President G.W. Bush's presidency: "Now the old struggles intensify their meanings.../ the terrors come naked as the empire expands!" with "the Great Pretender, Bush the Minor/ declaring perpetual war on U.S. democracy" (113) or in a different version "Bush the Pretender's/ perpetual war against any terrorism not his own" (150). The brick/ word analogy would seem to confirm that the book-length poem stands as a structure of words built to provide shelter and nourishment to the dream commune which the American Dream never approached.

True to the epic genre, long poems from the American Left are rich in catalogues but they have put these to a specific use which one might call 'unforgetting'. America tends to have a short memory of the suffering the nation's sense of its destiny entailed. They do not. Jacobson's hail to "The Many (...) the invisible/ unpropertied workers whose names have no place/ in the records of real estate" echoes Neruda's "I sang for those who had no voice" (CG, 116). Obstinate keeping up faith in the Old Left and propping up one's own faith in its sustainability is what the writing of *Factories and Cities* is about. Like a leitmotiv, the poem reverts to the notion that a potential has been wasted: "a stranger,/ (perhaps yourself?) – faces of a lost child,/ dreams the dream of things that might have been...". It seems that the Old Left's tenets are so clearly spelled out in the poem because they are assumed to be what it would take to fight back the currently overwhelming reach of the Right-wing hydra.

It was the letter C of class I sought to rename with the older
C – sign of the sickle which once cut the Communal grain,
shape of the quarter moon journeying toward
the full hour of harvest, shining like a sliver of knowledge,
the C with the ghost of the circle behind it, with
the community of dead workers watching our world
through its dark portal: the hollow silent ones
in the circular night waiting for the lucid luminous rising
of the past rounding the horizon...

to come home (142).

That is maybe why laughter, play and humour – except of the wry or black kind – have little place in this poem. To that extent, *Factories and Cities* marks a narrowing of range and a retreat from Tom McGrath’s multi-layered *Letter to an Imaginary Friend*, which encompassed Wobbly humour, Irish hyperbole and invective as well as straight Communist sloganeering sarcasm, to name but three voices of its chorus. Not that McGrath was tolerant of the New Left’s fancy tactics. He never reconsidered his severe judgment of what he deemed militant antics. The 1968 Siege of the Pentagon, which he took part in, only elicited scathing sarcasm from him. But the in-earnest tone that pervades Jacobson’s *Factories and Cities* ought not to be dismissed, given today’s hounding of the American Left.

Unlike *Factories and Cities*, Michael Lally’s *March 23rd, 2003* does not present revolution as an alternative. But it certainly shows that it might have. Most of the subjects broached by the poem make up a consistent indictment of past or present American policies. To name but a few : the USA’s unconditional support of Israel’s treatment of Palestinians, which Lally equates with the genocide of Native-Americans ; its deathly compromises with Nazi Germany ; US secret agencies’ anti-democratic – to put it mildly – record ; the *de facto* former US support of Al Qaeda and Iraq as vicarious fighters against the Soviet Union and of then-strongly anti-American Iran ; America’s own ongoing development of chemical weapons ; gratuitous violence at US troops’ hands, strongly reminiscent of the Nazis ; G.W. Bush’s mockery of an environmental agenda. More generally, Lally’s poem levels his attacks at the religious right and at a country that let its current president get away with anything, from a very poor personal record of patriotism to his dubious first election or his cynically manipulative use of the country’s Constitution to serve his imperialistic agenda.

Has the vast right-wing conspiracy triumphed
at last – with an almost complete takeover
by an alcoholic spoiled brat with
a right-wing Christian fundamentalist makeover?
Isn’t their “good and evil”
“you’re either with us or against us” thing –
like a drink to a dry drunk/ on an imperial binge?
In the past, wasn’t the vast right-wing conspiracy
always on the wrong side of history –
for the king, *against* the revolution,
for slavery, *against* the eight hour day,
for child labor and Jim Crow segregation,
against votes for women,
for legal discrimination, *against* immigrants

and Catholics, Hispanics and African Americans,
for treating corporations like privileged
individuals, and individuals like
corporate privileges? (13-14)

It is quite commonplace to hear political poetry posited as prisoner of the paean/
philippic alternative. Michael Lally's *March 18, 2003* is decidedly on the philippic side.

But its start in the form of a warning – "I don't have any answers,/ just some questions" –
precludes any definite commitment to a revolutionary Old-Left-type cause, which demands a
clear agenda. So do the strong doubts he voices about the effectiveness of class-based analysis
of society to respond to racist violence. He shies away from going the whole revolutionary hog,
emphasizing the need for stricter compliance with the American Constitution rather than
challenge the nation's foundations as would long-time CPUSA-member Tom McGrath. "Those
dead don't budge", he wrote about "Iron-jawed George, Jefferson with his flutes and farms/
And radical Madison – all of them deader than mackerel" (*Letter*, 49). Lally's balking at
drawing the logical conclusions from the facts he has collected may be in keeping with his "I"
's high degree of self-absorption. His speaker describes his mood as "cynical" (35) and bows
out of the *agora*. Could it be said that the self-dramatizing quality of Lally's poem characterizes
a not uncommon and understandable inclination on the American Left to cop out?

Lally's "I" spools off a long series of questions. Many of those asked about America are
rhetorical ones, being asked in the negative. An answer is therefore provided. But in this dream
pre-trial of G. W. Bush and America at some international court of justice, the litany rolled off
by the case for the prosecution sometimes ends up in a maze of its own making as it flounders
in metaphysical questions. Rebellion against life as a whole is a no-through road. One is
therefore often left hanging in mid-air as questions confront the aporetic, and the radical fact-
finder's careful heaping of proof, the accusatory tissue of interconnected evidence come undone
and all sense of purpose gets lost in a ragbag of candid existential revolt. The poem's often
explosive contents are weakened, and their consistency undermined when the solipsistic crabby
voice gets the upper hand. One is reminded of the most publicised poems of Ginsbergian
outrage and outcry, minus the mystical flights. Moreover, the circumstances for which the poem
was written – a reading of *Poets Against the War* (in Iraq) – might cause one to fear that this
poet's political commitment will have no tomorrows, as much of the anti-Vietnam war poetry
did not.

Lally's poem openly asks the question of what writing from the American Left means
today. The thrice-repeated interrogation "You call this a poem/ poetry?" indicates awareness of

the limits of prosiness – putting things straight – within a form that projects itself as verse. Unwittingly, with the straightforwardness with which his speaker states the contents flat out at the risk of falling flat, Lally’s diction may typify the ineffectiveness of rational radical political discourse these days. Bombarding the reader with blunt facts with no general line to organise them blunts their edge. His summing-up for a possible prosecution may however stay news for all its topicality – if, in the Poundian dictum, “poetry is news that stays news” – as it leads one to the conclusion that America will repeat itself on any given day through the ages. March 18th, 2003 is just a representative point in time. “The news is never new: ‘peace broke out’ – / fills my skull like a funeral bell” (Jacobson’s words, 24).

Michael Lally’s “I” is a former veteran. His ancestry is Irish, which may explain his coming from “an extended family of cops”. He has “many relatives in uniform” and gives the US armed forces due credit for their role in helping those that were not born with a silver spoon in their mouth to step up the social ladder. But he is a pacifist. What choice did he have as a poet?

He went for the long-winded explanatory option and wrote this long poem, jam-packed with facts, extensively using the run-on line to emphasize purpose, unstoppable conviction, heaping up of evidence to support his case. How could he have written a short poem? In a context that is very adversarial to pacifism, especially of the progressive kind, it is up to the defendant to provide the burden of proof. And he had better come up with an abundance of convincing evidence. Lally certainly does but, reading his poem, one is made to rediscover the limits of mere protest. Long as the poem is, it falls short of solutions. To be fair, it does question the actual absence of real alternatives to those in power: “Why are Democrats who are smart enough and/ tough enough and good enough politicians to play hard ball/ with the right-wing pricks so rare?” (11) But ultimately the long-haul long howl extenuates itself into a diminutive squeak of the ego.

In its own way, *March 23rd, 2003* outlines what a new New Left can and may also be unable to achieve. The anti-war Protest of the 1960s threw a spanner in the works of imperialist America’s war machine and “US went home”. But then, America elected for its next president cold warrior veteran Richard Nixon who could be expected to crack down on radicals and did. Is vehement generosity sufficient?

Isn’t there only one life and one problem and one solution
from the streets to the elite?
Don’t we all have a seat
in this universe we share?

Is ours now at the feet
of the oil oligarchy running
what once was our home?
(36)

The idealistic denial of social classes implicit in the first question begs one of the real questions in G.W. Bush's America where many live below the poverty line. Sharing the universe more equally calls for more politics, not for wool-gathering pleas or self-accusatory navel-gazing. Whenever individuals' generous protest is not objectified in a political party, it will remain a short-run affair, unless of course hotbeds of dissension multiply.

Interestingly, the microcosmic and the macrocosmic are generating more paratactic poetic forms, in imitation of the semantic discontinuity of the outside world. This is the 'third way' exemplified by *The California Poem*, 193 pages in length, which might be described alternately as "dream music with holes in it" and as a "Poem in which the planet takes over" (190). The poem's "Prologue" mentions a "cosmovision". One can certainly tell it was not written from the Right. The Chumash, one of California's ancient tribes, are all over the poem as though to make amends for white America's past wrongdoings. More pointedly, the Terrestrial Paradise which the first Spanish explorers and historiographers thought California was, is now also home to "the black hole/ of Livermore", a laboratory involved in the development of nuclear weapons. The name of John Steinbeck crops up one page before a glimpse of sweated labour: "boxed lemons loaded into truck-backs in the dark by brown-bodiless hands" (18). The voice behind the poem wants "all chola girls (i.e. Mexican gangsta girls) to be set free" (20). On occasion, one may come across remains of plain Left-sounding indictments: "To the south, my beaches have been given over/ to oil-/ drilling companies, cargo/ wharves, factory-built/ blackness by the sea, squatting/ buildings, black smoke/ up to the edge of the water, concrete/ haunches jumbled". This may be why "I" tells us: "My tag is Rotn Red/ Bitch". Her California is no country of the gods. "[B]ut I want my party to be waiting for me wherever I go// At the depot my people, my party/ are not waiting for me. At Union Station, everybody's got a lump/ or a bruise & a limp, & they all need \$5.75 to get/ to Oceanside" (22). By the look of it, they may be her party, as they are gathered in a station: "my rootless people/ just as a bird is homeless/ I am homeless too". (23) The dream of California, the epitome of the American dream, is constantly shown to be ailing: "'By now the dream is falling in on itself.../ Or someone is dismantling it...'" (8). A reworking of the proverb "one in the hand is better than two in the bush" which becomes "death/ in the bush, 2 in the hand" (12) sounds suspiciously like a dig at a presidential dynasty in the making. The task the poem sets for itself

is “to find a world, a word/ we didn’t know” (9). But it takes a much more indirect approach than either *Factories and Cities* or Michael Lally’s long scream. Writes Sikelianos: “up from the Narrating Bay/ reservations lie dusty and secretive in the muddy recesses of the map” (148). Infinitesimal variations in sounds and spelling are shown to matter very much. Thus “ally” spelt “allie” dispels faith in the truth promised to “All ye” [faithful] of the hymn (14). Form taking place, all the instances of context-free vocalic alternations, i.e. apophony, mirror a democratic cosmos-dweller’s concern for “all the dinoflagellates”, those microscopic unicellular protists, to which, along with echinoderms, the poem is inscribed. The Phylum Echinodermata, which includes starfish and sea urchins, is, one endnote to the poem informs us, based on a plan of five, which might well be emblematic of an interest in more complex designs for the world.

As in *Factories and Cities*, there is a Genesis-like section conjuring up visions of the first inhabitants, visualizing the origins of language, and many other fixtures of the epic including the weaving in of quotes from Whitman, Homer, Virgil or Dante. This is no poem containing history, repeatedly dismissed as with the “collision/ between history my enemy/ and the self, as the future rearranges/ the past I walk by the lake, ‘because I think the lake/ is better than me’ (164). This epic is a poem containing geology, geography, biology, and ecology. The poem looks into “other ways to make a world”, epic propositions in which no memory of “shimmering Albion” (23) should be called upon. Instead, the processes should involve “sifting spiritual liquids filled with less than these colors/ into microfine powders & let them drift/ through air, with the words/ red through red/ blue through blue” (23). The poem drifts from community to community, blurring divides between reigns, transgressing affinities: “What do I have in common with my fellow humans?” (160). The shore becomes “Biotic Community”.

24 visuals in black and white (collages, cut ups, paintings, drawings and photographs) complete the hoarding of Californian matter between the book’s covers the better to show how unattainable grasping the whole is, though it is stated “Your job is to/ tell the history of each & every piece” (152).

The final six lines read: “my arm rising/ out of the dead ring/ with rain/ over the/ veering/ Earth” (189). If the politically overdetermined gesture of the arm rising in protest to escape from an encircling w(hole) still makes sense, it is only in connection with the planet.

A true story dating back to 1910 of opossums stopped by La Migra at California’s borders is built upon to finally read as criticism of the state’s immigration policies. It starts “No opossum is opposed to one p”. “Opossum” then leads one to conceive of a potential “oppossum” with two p’s, a portmanteau word of a shortened ‘oppose(d)’ and Latin ‘sum’. This double p’ed opossum is one who says “I am opposed”. Likewise, “Significant Ecological Area” reads “sea”

(“Writer, make us a sea we can believe in” (95). Then if you’re planning on opposing the powers that be, plan it with the planet. The narrativity of *The California Poem* borders on chaos. Through its blanks, its constant shifts in pov, and perfect command of all possible textual strategies to visualize disorder, it enacts the jeopardizing of the Earth’s ecological balance. But what the poem finally suggests is the possible reconciliation of all the Kingdoms, from protists to protest.

This *canto general* by an American progressive brings the battle back to the two infinites.

Yurkiévich thought Neruda’s *Canto General* ultimately failed in its attempt to weave the strands of history and those of personal and natural history. I don’t share this view. In “The Conquistadors” section for example, “The Combatant Land” or “Man and Land Unite” both chronicle Chile’s inhabitants’ fierce resistance to conquest and document the reader’s information on the land in effective vignettes (60). But the divides separating the three views of America, afforded by Sikelianos’s, Lally’s and Jacobson’s long poems, suggest that one may put Yurkiévich’s point to use for fresh insight into new outlines of the history versus nature classical opposition. Does it still exist and if it does, should it?

Dale Jacobson’s neatly structured poem places hopes in redemption occurring over the course of time and history with ultimate reconciliation at their close. “Oneness” is the accomplishment of time, when dialectics has become superfluous, which the shaman-poet verbally performs at the close of his epic. Michael Lally’s long drawn-out ranging of topical, historical data with a small nod at environmental causes finally ends on a non-committal ego-centred side-step. A heap of indignation collapses. Despite her “I” ’s confession that ‘non-knowledge’ engulfs me”, Eleni Sikelianos’s long-poem seems to this speaker the most adept at providing the human *cosmo-polis* with guidelines. Keen awareness of and concern for space and place as Earth and trust in “the consciousness/ the sea comes out of” with “egret” escaping from “regret” are all the more convincing as space and place – this other master-narrative of American poetry that might be construed as evasion of history – are not used as excuses for ignoring conflicts over real issues between social classes, inhabitants of a place and big companies, or El Norte and Latin America. I’d venture to say that the fastidious disorganization of the *California Poem* may be the best incentive to organize:

I think it’s too late
to make this poem
into a specific traffic (pall
of bright melancholy)

to know where I falls
on the inside or outside of time/space

too late — the marked
body
of the land has

submitted its own
dream & question

seize me a city from that pale corridor, the future, travelling headfirst
(73)
