



## what am i doing here?

*david antin*

this poem-talk was improvised at the san francisco poetry center on the occasion of a joint reading by jerome rothenberg and myself in april 1973 we had each been asked by kathy fraser to provide some sort of statement about our own work to provide something of a context for the audience and for kathys introduction i had suggested that i had always had mixed feelings about being considered a poet "if robert lowell is a poet i dont want to be a poet if robert frost was a poet i dont want to be a poet if socrates was a poet i'll consider it" kathy using this and the fact that rothenberg is notably associated with the poetry of "primitive" cultures and that im notoriously associated with avant garde art proposed somewhat lightly that it seemed both appropriate and odd for the two of us to be reading together since jerome always seemed to represent to her the ancient past and i the remote future i took her at her word since i had not the remotest intention of "reading" poetry because i had brought no books that i could have read from i chose to address myself to the question of what i was doing there references to other poets in the talk were more or less direct because they happened to be in the audience

since ive heard jerry before i was prepared to ask myself a somewhat similar question to the question cockboy seems to have asked which is "what am i doing here?" the question has some funny aspects to it one of them is i have no intention whatever of reading and that would seem to put me outside the general scope of the genre but maybe not if im characterized by an odd futureness science fiction like which is a sort of funny pathetic position the future comes relatively unequipped and bare a dream of technology so to speak so i came with a small tape recorder and this is appropriate a tape recorder is probably more of a dream than anything else because they never work very well but the point was that i was going to ask myself what i was doing here in several senses one of these senses is "what am i doing *here*?" in this kind of ambience? but what is "this kind of ambience" i havent really wanted to be considered a poet but i think that takes refining to make clear what i mean i dont want to be considered a poet if a poet is someone who adds art to talking now i know there are several ways that people look at poetry but there is a passage in bacon where bacon says "if you talk about the manner of speaking that poetry is its just a mode of speech and if you talk about its content its merely history at pleasure" which was merely a polite way of saying that poetry was a lie history at pleasure is history the way you happen to want to remember it now the way i want to remember something may very well be the issue of why im here to ask myself "why am i here?" in a context of poetry which is like asking why when i do put a book out in the world it winds up getting classified by the library of congress under the section called poetry and i find that puzzling but logical because what else would they call it? i looked through the library of congress classificational system and was unable to find any classification called talking it seemed to me they didnt have that classification they had belles lettres and they had literature and they had essays and they had geography and they didnt have talking and i thought that something had been left out but maybe it was because talking was not as it were imagined to fit into a book between say telling jokes and doing something else now i kept looking around for a place into which i could put what i do and i asked myself why do i do it in such a place anyway why do i persist in doing it in a place next to old friends who call upon the word poet to some degree and to some degree call upon something that one might call the past though i get very dubious about its past and i say to myself why did we edit a magazine together jerome rothenberg and i i was the future and he was the past and there was nothing in the present we might have published an empty book consistently if i had seen how we came out irregularly as these things do and we seem to have come together again and again at various times though weve

not always been together we've probably known each other longer than we haven't known each other at this point and we obviously split the world rather peculiarly maybe we split ourselves rather peculiarly but i notice that in the kind of work that he's interested in there's a lot of talking because there isn't a lot of writing the past had a lot more talking than it had writing i'll make a bold hypothesis before there was talking before there was writing before there was talking there wasn't talking before there was writing there was talking this may not be an immense hypothesis but it's certainly true and it has consequences there are certainly consequences i can draw from this that before there was writing down and looking up there was remembering when you talked about something that wasn't there you had to remember it and you couldn't write it down and when you talked about something that wasn't there the only way that it was there was somehow it manifested itself in your mouth and before it manifested itself in your mouth it didn't always do that before it manifested itself in your mouth it *may* have manifested itself in your head that's not always true because sometimes or maybe even most of the time a new thing manifests itself in talking before it manifests itself anywhere else at all but when we try to remember what was the past the past is all remembering and if the past is remembering it's talking too now i don't want to say that it is always talking or at least talking is not always spoken but it's a good word to stick with and it's a word that had a grand history there's a word close to talking a word that may finally mean talking but used to have a very grand meaning a word "myth" which has a very grand meaning for most people and i know that robert duncan has given a lot of attention to the word "myth" the one definition he did leave out when he rehearsed the definitions for the middle voice greek verb *mytheomai* is to talk which it was it was a verb "to talk" and "to tell" and it was a verb meaning "to put a rap in the air" when odysseus the great con-man the trickster gets up to talk in council he "myths" and he "myths" regardless of whether he "myths" the way nobody else remembers and i think the word may not be very prejudicial at that point differently now let's say if i were to say of the president "he's been mything for a long time" "he's been mythifying us" you know the word seems to have come down and to have been coming down for a very long time and if i said that he was talking for a long time you might think i was tired of his talking but you wouldn't think that he was lying or that i was accusing him of lying i'd like to offer a suggestion about the word "myth" for a moment let me make a negative suggestion about the word "myth" the word "myth" is the name given to the lies told by little brown men to men in white suits with binocular cases because nobody knows of the myth that the man in the white suit believes there is one important thing about a story told you by a little brown man if the story

sounds as if you could have observed it yourself you being the man in the white suit you wouldnt call it a "myth" youd say "he told me what happened" youd say "he told me a fact" or "he told me a story" now the story might be a true story but whats a true story well a true story is a story something like the one that was told me the other day theres a woman a very hopeful woman works in our office name is candy and she she always has bad luck and shes always trying again it doesnt matter what happens she always gets up off the floor and has another try at it candy came into the office the other day she had had many disasters recently one of her most recent disasters was that her children her kids are always getting picked up on dope charges or for burglarizing or for petty theft or for knocking up somebodys child or for letting the goat loose and it bites someone or eats his flowers and shes getting citations or driving her car off the road or talking back to a cop and she has troubles with her children but she has troubles with other people besides her kids she has troubles with men she mislaid her last husband and she then had a succession of couplings that were temporary and transitional and each one always looked like it was going to be very important and meaningful or had the prospect of being meaningful and each time she would come in with the story that there was a new man in her life and she would say to everybody in the office because she was an irrepressible talker teller of truths that what had happened to her she had met this groovy guy and he was a very distinguished person but he had a mother and two wives whatever it was it never was working out but it appeared at last that she had found someone who she really got on very well with though he was a little old that is she is perhaps in her middle thirties and he was slightly white haired but a very distinguished and elegant guy and they seem to have gotten along together because in spite of the fact that he lived in san diego he hated nixon and they talked about the same things together whatever it was it was very romantic only he hadnt taken her out yet and when he asked her out and he took her to one of those steak houses where its very dark and you cant tell what youre eating and they had dinner together and they had lobster and drank one of those cold duck wines or whatever that she really liked and they went off to his house they went off to his place and she was telling me the story and she told me the story with a kind of irrepressible and fierce energy and i wasnt able to tell what was coming but i knew something was up and she said "then we got to the house and he put a record on and he put on the record and we danced for a while and necked and then we took off our clothes and we started to go to bed and he has three red cherries tattooed on his prick" and i said "candy" "candy what did you do?" she said "i couldnt stop laughing and i went home" i had heard a story and the office people were saying "did you hear

what happened to candy?" "did you hear what happened to candy again"  
and candy was very cheerful she'd managed to shake it off i guess  
and i said to myself "if i have to deal with that story what do i  
have to deal with in that story?" "what kind of talking is that story to  
me? what is that story?" do i have to suppose think of the hor-  
rible issue at stake candy i contemplate the scene the *debacle*  
which i didnt invent i hate inventing and i hate imagination this  
story was told me yesterday i assure you and candy told me this  
story and i said "candy how did it come to pass that he had these damn  
things *tattooed* on his prick?" she said it was in the marines and it was  
on a dare i said "on a dare" i said "oh yeah" and i keep think-  
ing about it if i keep thinking about it that way i keep thinking  
about the way that tattooes are applied and i dont like that image  
i really dont like that image and there is a kind of probability  
distribution for events that i normally inspect when someone says some-  
thing to me but yet there are times when i dont inspect it this is one  
of the times where i inspected it and i thought "tattooed?" "decald?"  
no she said tattooed these were tattooed i dont know what to  
say that is is this a story told by a little brown man to a man in a  
white suit? i was rapidly acquiring a white suit its fairly evident that  
my binoculars were beginning to feel heavy and i thought "well maybe  
this is not the right way to think about it maybe im not considering  
this thing seriously in an appropriate manner what could this mean  
that someone who is really an adult 35 years old what could  
she have on her mind with such a story?" what could it have meant  
that it happened to her? and i realized that this was the major struc-  
ture of her life she had in fact described the existence that she lived  
now either she had found a man by great and amazing magical  
skill who had done this exorbitant thing or she had found a memory  
of a man who had done this amazing and exorbitant thing this was the  
way candy represented her entire life yesterday and then i said  
"well then thats a true story" because thats really very much like candy  
thats very much like the kind of people candy goes out with its very  
much like everything about her entire life her whole career is based upon  
coming together with men with 3 cherries tattooed on their prick  
there is something about candy that will always find such a case it  
is the essence of candy now i dont know if thats history at pleasure  
or whether its somewhat more aristotelian that is when you think  
of aristotle's ideas of poetry his idea was that poetry was essential his-  
tory it was the kind of history that had to happen or the kind of  
history that might have happened or the kind of history that should have  
happened because it was appropriate that it happen and i thought  
candy has told me an aristotelian truth she told me essential history  
now thats a clearcut and you may say poeticized image now  
you may feel and i also i also draw back somewhat i draw back

from poetry and poetic justice i really do draw back from it even though im amused by the truthfulness of candy who told me this story now if i was to take the science myth if i were to imagine that the only way that i could deal with this story was to corroborate it on a spatio-temporal grid in a number of ways that are approved for inspections of this sort i would go about saying well what is the possibility that a man did this? would someone who ran a tattoo parlor do such a thing? how much would you have to pay him? i'd go through the whole number but forget that story forget that story because its the kind of story that science with all its expensive instrumentation and its totalitarian use of language that is science is in a certain sense a kind of poetry of terror it is a very well organized poetry of terror what you do is you bring in a student and i was educated in science you bring in a student at a very early age and you teach him to speak the way you want him to speak and when he doesnt you flunk him and then after a while after years after 4 years of undergraduate school and two years of a masters and 4 years of a doctorate and then you have him practice talking on paper and you call that his thesis by that time he's learned to use the words exactly as all the other people in the same community use the words and this is the hieratic art we call science now science with its sacred art of terror if we were to take this kind of enforced consciousness which is still consciousness and apply it to do the best it could to inspect these events or these supposed events the evidence would in the end be inconclusive we would probably judge this event to fall somewhere outside the line of the probable but to fall somewhere within the domain of the possible and then to pass no judgment except to say we think its got this probability its possible but its very unlikely the confidence limits are perhaps exceeded now thats a rare case forget it how can you forget it? i cant forget it but take another situation suppose i try to exercise upon a past my past not my whimsical past but a past that i try to decode because the only way that i can imagine myself to be my self co-editor of a magazine with a friend or someone who went to some particular place the only way i can imagine my self as being the same person going by that name besides the fact that i answer by reflex when people call me by that name and even in that instance the only way that i can conceive of myself as a personality is by an act of memory by an act of interrogation of my memory which is also talking the self itself is emergent in discourse in some kind of discourse it is probably available but it comes up under dialogue and the dialogue is conducted with it and then the self emerges even though the self may not have been there until you called upon it you were always under something of an assumption that it was available for dis-



course and that it would answer you and if it doesn't answer you they call that forgetting and if you forget very gravely they give that other kinds of names a person who can't interrogate himself and has no impulse to interrogate himself is someone one normally calls a psychopath that is a psychopath might be imagined to be a consciousness distributed always upon some imaginary point of the present one could imagine that the two major historical forms of self interrogation of self discovery and investigation the two polar forms the dark historian and the white historian might be called schizophrenia and paranoia in their old fashioned senses the terms themselves are not terribly meaningful but using the older terminology paranoia inspects history in the form of anxiety and the schizophrenic would inspect history in the form essentially of wish or dream or imagination or desire and naming desire as history for the schizophrenic whatever he wanted happened and naming anxiety as history for the paranoid whatever he feared was history and closing in the paranoid would convert the present in the light of anxiety the schizophrenic would convert it in the light of desire and the psychopath has no history to convert at all he always has projects perhaps somewhere into the future but let us imagine that these polar positions are not the ones i intend to undertake i'm going to ask myself seriously about how i can find my past because if i invoke history every time in a conversation that cannot be held in a particular place then after all the self is a nonliterate society if you think about it the self is a preliterate society because it doesn't proceed by writing and it has no absolute repository for any past event it has no place to which it can come to find its past it has only the memory which is a way of proceeding and not a treasure trove and memory for all we know may be inconstant and changing so let me try to remember a situation and inspect it for a past my past if i think of it i was thinking of a situation that occurred when i was i don't know how many years ago so my memory is already defective an old friend of mine someone i went to college with his name was dick berlinger he was a jazz musician he wasn't a jazz musician professionally he could have been a jazz musician professionally he was a saxophonist he played a baritone sax he'd played with very good people he sat in with parker and other good people at various points but dick berlinger was a kind of person whose life always had a future and never had a present i'm not sure about his past because he always had projects he seemed to be planning always to be doing something that he wasn't doing yet and wasn't ready to do yet without ever doing it except very intermittently and planning always to be doing something without ever doing it is somehow like planning on swimming my little boy plans to learn swimming he's been planning on swimming for several years and each year he goes down to the water



ORBIS TERRAE COMPLETA TABULA  
Quam ex Magna Vniuersali Gerardi Mercatoris Domino Richardo Gautho Geographicæ ac cæterarum bonarum artium



OMPDIOSA DESCRIPTIO  
bonarum artium



and feels the water and then he goes away he hasn't become much of a swimmer yet well dick though capable as a saxophonist was not a jazz musician and dick did that with all of his life and years passed and we lost sight of him and then a friend of mine who had become a painter and was in new haven and had been a close friend of dick's told me that dick had been in an asylum a sanatorium or whatever and had been there for some time and had come out and that was kind of surprising friends of mine had been falling by the wayside for a long time that is there were other friends who had fallen in various places somewhat similarly mainly because their lives only had futures and nothing ever happened to them that ever changed except they got older which meant that the present really was something like an escalator or one of those paths in the los angeles airport that are motorized and you're moving forward though you're not moving and you're being carried forward toward something without your moving at all at any event at this time i was married and i was living in new york as a matter of fact i was living in court street not very far from george oppen who was living over closer to the river in brooklyn the bay and i got a call on the phone and i heard a voice that i vaguely recognized but i didn't quite recognize because it was darker and lower and older and i said "hello" and he said "hello this is dick" and it was that i remember he said it was dick he didn't say who he was and by this time i must have known hundreds of other dick's and forgotten hundreds of dick's i mean it was not very easy and i said "dick who?" and i realized this might be insulting and he said "dick berlinger i've got to see you" and i said "you have to see me? about what?" he said "it's very important" i said "what do you want?" again the urgency was really what was puzzling me and putting me off i remember now i think i remember it i said "well what do you want?" he said "i can't tell you i gotta come down" i said "well i'm busy right now i'm going to be going into the city" elly kept saying to me "don't let him come here he'll kill you" i said "shut up what are you talking about?" she has something of an anxiety history "what are you talking about he's an old friend" and i'm holding my hand over the phone saying "let me find out what he wants" i said "dick what is it that you need?" and he said "i can't tell you i can't tell you now i'll i'll tell you when i see you" i said "all right i'll tell you what i'm going into the city i have to go to a few galleries why don't i meet you in manhattan" and we named a place which was down near n.y.u and we got into the car and we drove to the city where we were going anyway and the car we had was a peculiar car it was the only time i ever had a car that turned out to be an incredible bargain it was like i got it for \$200 from somebody who kept it on blocks for fourteen years it was a 1953 chrysler imperial with electrical win-