

EDITOR'S NOTE

Ferlinghetti: Canonized, but not co-opted

Stephen Kessler

It was inevitable. Just as Bob Dylan has been turned into a marketing opportunity, and Jack Kerouac into a vehicle for beatnik kitsch, and the communist Frida Kahlo into an industry of tchotchkes, Lawrence Ferlinghetti the iconoclast has lasted long enough to have become canonical. The Pete Seeger of poetry, Ferlinghetti continues to fight valiantly for his own brand of anarcho-imaginative utopia in an America where even the cultural revolutionaries are routinely appropriated to promote capitalism.

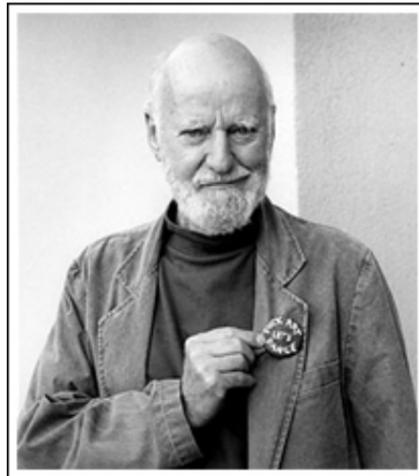
Ferlinghetti is after all, and first of all, a successful businessman who has used his considerable skills in the marketplace to support his poetic and political passions. City Lights Books, both the landmark San Francisco store and the radical vanguard publishing imprint, has managed to endure despite the corporate consolidation of literature and bookselling, a beacon of uppity independence. Banners hang on the side of its North Beach building calling for the president's impeachment, denouncing the war (and war in general) and invoking the voice of Pablo Neruda, another inspirational emblem of resistance and poet of the people. Ferlinghetti knows how to play with the big boys and, like Neruda, is a master propagandist, but always with the charm and imagination and goofy dignity of the carnival barker: Step right up, folks, and get a load of this way-out poetry.

That Ferlinghetti has become an icon is ironic not least for the reverence increasingly accorded a poet whose own irreverence has been one of his signature qualities. The wry lightness of his style, its open opposition to the status quo, its impatience with hypocrisy and with the stupidities and brutalities of the powerful, its satiric wit and romantic vision of a more humane social order have been sustained over more than five decades of labor on the front lines of the culture wars. Now in his high eighties, he has

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proved that if you live long enough and keep on doing what you do well enough, even the most incorrigible rebel can become respectable. His survival itself is an accomplishment worthy of admiration, and when it's tied so closely to a continuing career as a poet, painter, publisher, bookseller and political agitator, the sustained energy of such an epic performance is awe-inspiring. Internationally adored as one of the few remaining stalwarts of a true counterculture, traveling frequently to book fairs and poetry festivals around the globe, garlanded with enough awards to burden even the staunchest spirit, Ferlinghetti presses on relentlessly with his campaign of questioning and protest and creation and celebration.

To San Francisco residents or frequenters of North Beach, the great man is a familiar sight, strolling down Columbus Avenue or sitting in the back of some neighborhood café reading a newspaper or even (as I witnessed summer before last) riding his bicycle along the Embarcadero on the way to a ballgame at SBC Park. The intimacy of the city is somehow embodied in the everyday presence of this practically mythic figure as just another local character. Not that he is particularly approachable: what may at first seem like a cool aloofness is, I've learned over the years, really just the reserve of a shy person. In my encounters with him, as someone in Bay Area poetry circles and a sometime City Lights author (they've published translations of mine), I've always found him low-key, abstractly friendly, courteous, sometimes engaged and forthcoming and sometimes detached or distracted, his mind on other things. But when working as the editor of his Pocket Poets Series, he is a no-nonsense



CHRISTOPHER FELVER

Lawrence Ferlinghetti

hands-on professional, a tough negotiator of details, precise in his insights and forceful in his opinions.

His political opinions where poetry is concerned have sometimes struck me as simplistic, as when he claims that poets who don't actively in their writing oppose the crimes of the current administration are somehow complicit in them. This notion seems to me dangerously akin to the dubious idea that one is either "with us" or "with the terrorists." Such moral certainty is not typically characteristic of the greatest antiwar poets, from Wilfred Owen to Mahmoud Darwish, to name just two outstanding examples of witnesses who don't exempt themselves from what they're describing. Two of the twentieth century's most eloquent chroniclers of atrocity, Paul Celan and Czeslaw Milosz, assume a certain shame in humanity's crimes, and their poetry gains in power and resonance what it may lose in righteousness.

But in the United States, publishing any book of poems, as Ferlinghetti himself has said, is like rolling a boulder over a cliff. However heroic the effort, hardly anyone is likely to notice, and any response at all is a near miracle. Even his own latest, Northern California Book Award-winning epic poem, *Americus*,

Book I, has not received the kind of critical attention routinely given to a new volume from John Ashbery or Jorie Graham or Robert Pinsky or Sharon Olds or any number of other well-known bards. Still, his stamina and consistency have brought on a blizzard of prizes and honors in the last few years—from the Author's Guild, the National Book Critics Circle, the ACLU, the Poetry Society of America, the American Academy of Arts and Letters, and most recently the National Book Awards. As one of the best-selling U.S. poets ever, whose *A Coney Island of the Mind* has sold nearly a million copies in nine languages, he has managed to build a bridge between the high Modernism of T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound and William Carlos Williams and the popular appeal and easy access of Bruce Springsteen and John Lennon and Hank Williams.

I've always found Ferlinghetti's poems engaging and enjoyable, certainly more fully alive on the page than 90 percent of what's published in most magazines, if not hypnotically compelling or profound in the sense of a vision that draws you deeper into its subtlety, strangeness or mystery. Almost everything is on the surface—it means exactly what it says—and that is no doubt part of its staying power with a great range of nonspecialist readers. His "Populist Manifesto" of the mid-1970s was a call to arms for poets to shun obscurity and to lay out language in a way that anyone can *get it*. "I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by boredom at poetry readings" is a line that echoes endlessly in the psyches of those of us who know all too well what he's talking about. The great challenge is to make poems that are easily comprehensible and yet not prosaic or flat or cliché or pedestrian—poems that can walk and sing at the same time. Ferlinghetti's genius has been to sustain for over half a century the creative ingenuity to do just this, lifting the obvious into the extraordinary. Without taking himself too seriously, he engages the disturbed world with prophetic fervor, moving with a light step and a Whitmanic yawp through the dark truths of our time.

THE REDWOOD COAST REVIEW

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FABLE

Toward the end of the 20th century humans were so used to transforming everything into something lucrative that in the end they discovered how to make a profit even of the last remnant of uselessness: pure being. Until then, they had lived for thousands of years as all other creatures did, content simply to be, with no other purpose than the experience of living itself, joyful or tragic, as the case may have been. But at some point before the end of the millennium they realized that living itself could be converted into something they could squeeze into money or at least into a moment of glory that would justify the otherwise useless existence they had been living and give it a new, useful meaning. Whatever life bestowed upon them—be it a tragic love story, the death of a child, the loss of a limb or of their eyesight or even the past long-forgotten lives of their ancestors—everything, they realized, could be material for a monument incarnating the experience of life itself, and this material could be offered to millions of souls for consumption, like a magical formula that would tell them how to live. Life stopped being a disinterested passage of time and became the pursuit of the formula's perfect fulfillment.

The new institution that made official the bestowal of meaning upon their empty lives was called "the book contract." It was no accident, of course, that this institution appeared at a historical moment when the book was living its last moments. Humans had known other types of contracts during their long existence as a species, but it was the first time in their

DOUBLE LIVES

history that the contract became the primary term in the equation, while their lives, without which the contract wouldn't have been possible, were secondary. Little by little they learned how to live according to a contract that was maybe unwritten but which told them that if they had a certain experience, the official book contract would soon follow, and their experience could be duplicated into something exterior, something they could see from a distance as a reflection

They learned to live according to a contract that told them that if they had a certain experience, the official book contract would soon follow.

of themselves that would be the unquestionable proof that they were alive.

They began to take trips not for the pure sensation of being there but with the idea that a *useful* experience might come out of it, and eventually, a book contract. They went to dangerous places, to wars even, so that they could write books about what they called their "experience"; yet, their experience was but the prelude to the only thing they were now capable of experiencing, that is, exchanging the image of what they had attempted to live in order to have an "experience," for a book contract. No matter how devastating

life's trials might have been for them—wars, tortures, rapes, prison—whether they had been the victim or the butcher, everything was cleansed and transformed into something higher if they signed the book contract. Thus, experiencing horror—the dark face of life itself—became a commodity everyone was chasing because it was one of the last things that hadn't been on the market yet. Poverty was also sought after: the rich were trading days of their lives with the poor so that they could each have the "experience" of the other's life. Everyone was playing a role, afraid that the next-door neighbor might have already acquired the rights to the only unemployed role that was left. Life became a mimicry of itself, a mimicry everyone called "experience."

Yet what exactly they were experiencing wasn't clear. Was it the dim memory of a time when people still lived without the need to *see* themselves living? Was the "experience" the only proof they now had that they were still part of the kingdom of living creatures? Did they need the contract to prove to themselves and to everyone else that they were alive? That they were not the only species in the history of the planet that was dead, dead but bursting with energy like their multiple-task, marvelously smooth hollow machines?

—ALTA IFLAND

Alta Ifland, whose fables have appeared in various magazines, lives a double life on the California coast.