Literary Legend

An enduring icon of the Beat Generation, 90-year-old poet, artist and City Lights co-founder Lawrence Ferlinghetti reflects on literary uprisings—past, present and future.

BY ZACHARY PETIT
There's a certain way Lawrence Ferlinghetti says the word *poem*, the word that has largely come to define his writing career. A hint at a different time and place, it dances off his tongue and into the San Francisco morning, perhaps harking back to the 90-year-old writer, artist, activist and publisher's globe-trotting life: *poh-eem*.

“I was in France for most of my first five years, and when I got separated from my French aunt I used to write her long letters in French,” he says. “She considered herself a poet, so I considered myself a poet when I wrote her, and I felt I had to equal her poetry. So that was really the first writing I did.”

What can you really say in an introduction about Lawrence Ferlinghetti?

The most you can do is make a list: Born in Yonkers, N.Y., in 1919, Ferlinghetti is one of the critical figures of the Beat Generation of writers. He served in WWII. He earned a doctorate on the GI Bill in Paris, settled in San Francisco, taught French and in 1953 co-founded City Lights Bookstore, the iconic hub of the Beat writers (and the first store in the nation focused exclusively on paperbacks). There he began the City Lights imprint and published the likes of Jack Kerouac, William S. Burroughs and Charles Bukowski. Upon the release of Allen Ginsberg's *Howl and Other Poems* in the mid-1950s, Ferlinghetti was arrested on obscenity charges. He prevailed in a legal victory for writers that stands to this day, and a precedent was established that a book can't be censored if there is any “redeeming social value” in the text. The author’s own *A Coney Island of the Mind* has frequently been cited as one of the most popular poetry books of all time, and he’s also written novels, theater, criticism, translations and essays. His visual art has been exhibited around the world. He has won a slew of awards and recognitions, and is a member of the revered American Academy of Arts and Letters. He’s an activist, and many paths of conversation lead to a political destination. Recent works include *Americus, Book 1; Life Studies, Life Stories; and Poetry as Insurgent Art*.

The list goes on—but lists rarely convey a sense of authenticity, of who someone really is. What can you really say about Lawrence Ferlinghetti? In the craft of writing, everything. And, as in a discussion about 90 years of anything, never enough. With the simple poetry and hints of history heard in a single word like *poh-eem*—not to mention his lifetime of experience—the most we can really do is listen.

What’s day-to-day life like these days? Are you still involved at City Lights?

I’ve more or less retired from active participation. … I’m about 10 blocks from the bookstore and I show up there about once a week. My blog is signs that I paint and put in the second-floor windows of City Lights. Mostly political.

Are you still writing consistently?

I’m still writing, but I was painting long before I had anything published as a writer. I started painting in Paris when I was on the GI Bill there in the 1940s. I’ve had a big studio here for the last 35 years in the shipyard—in the Navy shipyard. I’ve been spending a lot of time there. I have a big retrospective of six decades of painting in Rome in February, in the Museo di Roma.

How do you think time changes a writer?

Time wears down the pencil.

In terms of the painting and writing, is there any one creative outlet that entrances you more than the others? I have the same perception of the world, or the perception of reality, as a painter. If you’ll notice, in practically any poem of mine that you may have at hand, you’ll see it’s very visual. A poem is usually a visual turn-on to begin with, and the idea is to make it into something more than a visual perception.

You’ve expressed a dislike about discussing the writing process. Why is that, and what do you think is important in a discussion about the craft of writing?

I often get invited to universities, and the English professor or the writing professor or the writing workshop professor always wants to know my routine and do I start at a certain time every day, etc., do I brush my teeth first, etc., and do you write on the computer or pencil or what, and I always say, “It’s a trade secret.” So I’m really not interested in “craft”—I think it’s a miserable word to be applied to poetry. Do you think Keats and Shelley thought
about “craft”? In fact, can you imagine Keats, Shelley, Wordsworth or any of the other great poets, let’s say Dante, can you imagine them going to a poetry workshop? So why is there this rash—it’s more than a rash—why is this plenitude of poetry workshops all over the country?

What do you think is the best way to pick up the art of writing?

If you’re going to be a writer you should sit down and write in the morning, and keep it up all day, every day. Charles Bukowski, no matter how drunk he got the night before or no matter how hungover he was, the next morning he was at his typewriter. Every morning. Holidays, too. He’d have a bottle of whiskey with him to wake up with, and that’s what he believed. That’s the way you became a writer: by writing. When you weren’t writing, you weren’t a writer.

What do you think makes great writing?

The word great is really overused these days because the English language seems to have a paucity of adjectives. I mean, great writing is anything that gives you a view of reality that you never had before. For instance, when I first read Allen Ginsberg’s Howl, I said, “Gosh, I’ve never seen the world like this before.” And that’s what great writers do. You could say that with Don Quixote, or you could say it with Shakespeare, or Whitman.

A Coney Island of the Mind?

Well, I hope so.

It’s been said that your work can’t be judged by conventional literary standards. How do you sum up your style and approach?

The poetry is figurative poetry. In other words, it’s not abstract and it’s not nonobjective. In painting I make a distinction between nonobjective and abstract. But it’s neither of those. My poetry is definitely figurative. In other words, it’s a description of what’s actually before you in the visual world. Or that’s the way the poem begins. I think it may be in my book Poetry as Insurgent Art: The poem should have a public surface, by which I mean anybody who hasn’t had any education could still understand the poem. Then below that it should have a subjective or subversive level, which would make the poem more important than just a surface lyric that’s just giving you a nice picture.

What was the writing world like when you started, and how is it different now, in a broad view?

It seems to me the poetry world is in a sad state these days. It seems to me it’s gotten back to somewhat the way it was before Allen Ginsberg’s Howl was published, which really was a watershed moment in the 1950s. After Howl was published, poetry was different. It was a whole new world in poetry. … You didn’t hear any more—well, there was plenty of it still—but academic poetry took a backseat. And so the Beats changed all that, and now today it seems like the Beat revolution never happened. We’ve got more poetry published, more poetry written and more poetry workshops today than ever in the history of the world. But it seems to me it’s pretty tame; not only politically, but generally in experimental avant-garde directions, I don’t see any great new vision.

Do you think that’ll change with time?

I don’t know; it depends what happens to the world. They say that great art is made by hunger and passion. I think the population may get very hungry in the next 50 years. The ecological disaster that’s descending on us, everyone is still mostly ignoring it.
How do you think written freedom of expression has fared in the years since the *Howl* court ruling? [The court] ruled that a work could not be judged obscene if it had the slightest redeeming social importance. Even though it was only in municipal court, that precedent has held up all these years and it really opened the floodgates on publishing, especially with a press like Grove Press, which shortly thereafter published Henry Miller’s *Tropic of Cancer* and *Tropic of Capricorn*.

Why didn’t you ever view yourself as a Beat? I was a generation before the Beats. When I arrived in San Francisco for the first time in 1951, I was still wearing my French beret and we were *bohemians*. Bohemians were what they called a dissident artist before the Beats. The Beats didn’t make a name for themselves until the ’50s. I lived in Greenwich Village in the ’40s and we were bohemians. The Beats were a younger generation than myself and I got associated with them through City Lights Bookstore, as their publisher.

Do you ever get tired of talking about them? Well, yeah, I mean [laughs], it’s as if nothing else exciting has happened in the poetry world in the last 50 years. There must be other subjects to talk about.

Who do you miss most of the Beat Generation writers? I miss them personally. Like Allen Ginsberg—I think one of his most enduring traits was his compassion for everyone. It was really a Buddhist compassion. I really miss him, and I miss Charles Bukowski, the old roustabout. Of course I didn’t hang out with him because he didn’t hang out in bookstores, he didn’t hang out in writers circles; after he made it, he would stack his Mercedes with a couple of cases of beer and go to the racetrack and he’d play the ponies. So I really didn’t see much of him even though we were the publisher that really got him national attention.

What was it about the Beat Generation’s writing that had such a power that took hold? Simply we were saying things that no one else had said. Either saying it in a new way or what they were saying was new. Sometimes both. But if you read mine closely you’ll see it’s not a new way of writing poetry—I stole many techniques, especially from people like E.E. Cummings, and the whole avant-garde tradition; James Joyce. In poetry and in painting both, you’re constantly stealing from the past. I mean, Picasso stole from everyone. You could say that we’re summarizing the past by theft and allusion. … Those are the first two lines of my book *Americus*.

What writing do you personally find exciting right now? For quite awhile now, it seems the most interesting writing is coming from third-world writers and from women writers, both in America and elsewhere, because, you could say, whitey had his revolution, and the third world is still having its, and so are women.

Have you been tempted to retire? I didn’t know that painters and writers retired. They’re like soldiers—they just fade away. *WD*

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