Tracing the Public Surface

An Interview With Lawrence Ferlinghetti

By Ray González

Ezra Pound. James Laughlin. Kenneth Rexroth. When we look at the history of modern poetry and publishing in the 20th century, the list of names cannot be complete without Lawrence Ferlinghetti. This is a roll call of daring artists who gave their lives to poetry with a devotion that changed the course of American literature. Without their vision, sacrifice, and defiance, American poets would not have the freedom they enjoy today, and independent literary presses would not be as influential in bringing some of the best writers of our time to a large readership. From New Directions to City Lights, and to the poet as activist and obtrusive seeker of truth, Ferlinghetti long ago added his legacy to the literary history of this country. He opened the original City Lights Bookstore in the North Beach neighborhood of San Francisco 50 years ago, in June 1953. It was America's first all-paperback bookshop, and before long, Beat writers were hanging out in the basement, about to create a legendary and rebellious literary movement. In 1955, Ferlinghetti started City Lights Books to publish poets such as Allen Ginsberg, Rexroth, and others. Infamy struck in 1956 with the fourth volume in the Pocket Poets Series when Ferlinghetti published Ginsberg's *Howl and Other Poems*. Other volumes in the series were books by William Carlos Williams, Kenneth Patchen, Antonin Artaud, and others.

In these dark days of war and imperialist adventures, Ferlinghetti's poetry is an illuminating light. He once said, "In line with Plato's concept of the poet as 'gadfly of the state,' I use poetry as a bully-pulpit, to be the seldom-heard voice of the people." He also wrote, "They say nothing is new under the moon, but poetry is news, and it's important when it articulates a new vision of reality or an old vision in a surprising way, when it subverts the dominant paradigm." Ferlinghetti is the author of more than 15 books of poetry and prose, including *A Coney Island of the Mind,* which has sold millions of copies all over the world; *A Far Rockaway of the Heart*, winner of a Silver Medal for Poetry from the California Book Awards; *These Are My Rivers: New and Selected Poems;* and the recent *How to Paint Sunlight*. He became San Francisco's first poet laureate in 1998-1999 and received the Before Columbus Foundation's Life-time Achievement Award in 1999 and the 2002 Lifetime Achievement Award from PEN Center West. His reputation grows out of his commitment to literary artists who push the edge of the envelope. He wears many hats and brings to each of his roles an approach that challenges tradition. His unique personality allows him to balance the roles of poet, novelist, playwright, publisher, critic, social activist, and visual artist. Rexroth once wrote that Ferlinghetti's poetry was "a very religious poetry" and that he "could bite the butt of the eternal Colonel Blimp with the quiet tenacity of an unperturbed bulldog." This interview was conducted in October 2002 during the Minnesota Poetry Festival in Minneapolis.

A Partial List of Books by Lawrence Ferlinghetti

A Coney Island of the Mind
(New Directions, 1958)
A Far Rockaway of the Heart (New Directions, 1997)
How to Paint Sunlight: New Poems
(New Directions, 2001)
Starting From San Francisco: Poems
(New Directions, 1967)
These Are My Rivers: New & Selected Poems 1955-1993 (New Directions, 1993)
Tyrannus Nix? (Norton, 1969)
What Is Poetry? (Creative Arts, 2000)

The Bloomsbury Review: *A few years ago, you were critical of Robert Pinsky's appointment as U.S. poet laureate. You have stated that a poet laureate should do more than just tell people to have a nice day by gathering favorite poems. What should a true poet laureate be doing?*

Lawrence Ferlinghetti: The poet laureate of the United States is in an ideal position, as a member of that government, to criticize its policies. The poet is not bound to any part of the government or individuals, which should leave him freer than most to be able to speak out. In our fat, capitalist society we find writers with the luxury to write about private concerns and not worry about anything else. In our free country, we are supposed to be privileged to speak out on any subject, but most writers don't have the courage to do so. The poet laureate would rather tell you to have a nice day, and here is your lovely poem to go with it.

With our present government engaged in murderous policies, the traditional role of the poet as defender of human values should come into play, but it doesn't. As poet laureate, it is more important to jockey for position among the elite. As bearers of eros, the classic definition of a poet, our poet laureates should be the gadflies of the state, to use Plato's term. Plato stated the poet was a danger to the republic, but we certainly don't see that today. No poet laureate appointed today would have the guts to play the true role of poet as enemy of the state.

TBR: *You have written and spoken on political events and U.S. foreign policy for most of your life. "Tyrannus Nix?", your 1985 poem about Richard Nixon, is one of your most famous political texts. Do you feel the need to speak out about the Bush administration as much as you did about earlier rogue presidents?*

LF: *Tyrannus* means "tyrant" and the poem was about the ghoul-like president we had. I do feel more of a need to speak out against the Bush administration because we are in a more desperate time than we were in the days of Nixon. I truly believe that. In the fifties, we attacked Eisenhower, but he looks like an angel compared to politicians today. Nixon still looks scary but, nationally and internationally, the stakes are higher now. He is starting to get overshadowed by the characters we have today. George II usurped the throne illegally after the things that happened in Florida and the Supreme Court. He is occupying the palace illegally and no one is blinking an

eye.

I've been reading a novel by Ignazio Silone called *School for Dictators*. It was written in the thirties and is out of print. We are thinking of publishing it at City Lights. It is the story of an American who wants to become a dictator. He goes to Europe with Professor Sidekick, his buddy, and interviews Fascists and Nazis to find out how they did it. After they interview many famous Nazis, the most common thing they hear from them is "We did it with the complete cooperation of democratic institutions!" This is exactly what happened with George II in Florida and in the Supreme Court. Plus, he had the cooperation of both sides of Congress.

September 11 was the beginning of the Third World War. I don't mean a world war for the third time, but a war against the Third World. American paranoia is as pervasive as ever, and I was reminded of it this morning by just picking up the Minneapolis newspaper. Who owns that newspaper? I don't know if it is Scripps-Howard, but the first thing I learned in journalism school is that you must question the source of the news you get. I bet you must have at least one television station owned by General Electric, one of the biggest manufacturers of nuclear power and probably armaments. A large section of the public gets its news from these sources that keep telling the American people that the Third World is coming. This goes beyond what happened on September 11.

The movie *Wag the Dog* fits this administration. In the movie, that president creates a war to dodge his real problems. These are things poets should be speaking out on. I don't see visual artists speaking out or creating political art. Famous writers and artists are not taking a stand. If you do find crucial political poetry today, it often comes from unknown writers. A lot of the great ones are silent. Many intellectuals are looking for someone to articulate a new paradigm for existence, which is what poets should really be doing.

I was at The Omega Institute in New York last summer and heard a poet read who was introduced as the head of a big writing program. At the end of the reading, I wondered where the passion was in the poetry. There wasn't any, and no indication as to how the poet felt about the subjects he was describing. No connection to reality. We have to get away from American paranoia and do something. Poets need to act.

TBR: *You were appointed San Francisco's poet laureate for 1998-1999 and received criticism for it as well. What was the experience like for you, and what did you accomplish?*

LF: I thought the question might be "Why did you accept such a post when you are so critical of poet laureates?" San Francisco is a different story because it has not engaged in murderous, imperialist policies all around the world. I saw no conflict in becoming poet laureate of the city because it has a rich and wonderful literary tradition that goes way back before the Beats.

My inaugural speech is on the City Lights website and explains how I see the responsibilities of an appointed poet. I came up with many frivolous and serious proposals. One of the frivolous was to tilt Coit Tower like the Leaning Tower of Pisa. Another was to paint the Golden Gate Bridge golden. As an ecologist, I proposed banning all vehicle traffic from the center of the city, around Van Ness, east to the bay. Of course, that was not implemented. I was having fun while seriously promoting poetry throughout the city, with many events held during those two years.

TBR: *Besides witnessing Allen Ginsberg read* Howl *in the infamous Six Gallery reading of 1956 and wanting to publish the manuscript, what made you become a publisher 50 years ago?*

LF: Before I moved to San Francisco, I lived in France for four years on the GI Bill. When I was a kid, I spoke French before English. I grew up reading French and other European paperbacks. When we started City Lights Bookstore, there weren't any paperbacks except for cheap mysteries that fell apart after a year or two. We started the bookstore in June 1953, and I wanted good paperbacks to go along with other books we were selling. The American paperback revolution was just starting, with Doubleday and Vintage bringing them out. It was hard to get them because you might only find them in drugstores. We imported British Penguin books into the store and I wanted to publish books like those. Our first printer was in England because typesetting and paper were of better quality over there. Some of our first books were by Kenneth Patchen, Denise Levertov, Kenneth Rexroth, Gregory Corso, Allen Ginsberg, and myself. Right away, it was important to gather the key poets in the San Francisco area. The books were letterpress, with wonderful printing and binding done by Villiers Press and John Sanke, one of the best in England at the time.

Howl was number four in the Pocket Poets series. It was first seized by U.S. Customs because it was printed in England. The U.S. District Attorney refused to prosecute so Customs had to release the book. We got it into City Lights and the San Francisco Police raided the store and arrested my then-partner, Shigeyoshi Murao. He was busted for selling the book, and I was busted as the publisher. The police also seized *Miscellaneous Man*, a small magazine edited by William Margolis. The case against him was dropped. Thank God for the American Civil Liberties Union, who helped us. We would have gone out of business without them because we had no money to fight the case. We were a one-room bookstore with no money, and we were saved by Albert Bendich, an ACLU lawyer trying his first case. Years later, he went on to defend Lenny Bruce. We had a number of distinguished witnesses, including professors from the University of California and San Francisco State, plus Rexroth testified in our defense. The prosecution had terrible witnesses, and the judge ruled that *Howl* was not obscene because it had redeeming social significance. It was a landmark case for free speech. It also allowed presses in New York to publish banned works like Henry Miller's *Tropic of Cancer*, D.H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, and works by Jean Genet. Our successful case with *Howl* really opened the floodgates toward more freedom of the press.

TBR: *In 50 years of publishing at City Lights Books, has it been difficult to shuffle roles and commitments between writing poetry and being a businessman?*

LF: I was never a businessman. We never considered City Lights a business. It's a way of life. I never understood why more poets didn't make their living working in bookstores or creating books. Of course, wages in bookstores today are bad. You can't live on them in San Francisco, even though we pay better salaries at City Lights than any bookstore in the city.

City Lights is run like a collective, more like The Grateful Dead. The band didn't have a head man, though Jerry Garcia was the most popular member. Their organization did not have a boss dictating business policy. They met as a group and talked about it with group decisions. We are successful running City Lights that way.

I've been lucky at getting good people to work there. They are both business-smart and bibliophiles, people who love books and can handle a busy store operation. We had some early financial disasters, but found ways to survive. Since 1973, I have been blessed with Nancy Peters as the general manager of City Lights. She is married to Philip Lamantia, the surrealist poet. She is one of the best literary editors in the country and is why City Lights Books has grown and done well. We now do between 12 and 18 books a year. I've always wanted to see more poets open their own bookstores because they wouldn't have to take any shit from anybody.

We started City Lights with my original partner, Peter D. Martin. We each had $500. These days, you need a minimum of $100,000. Peter was the son of Carlo Tresca, the Italian anarchist who was assassinated in the streets of New York when Peter was a teenager. Through him, we had an anarchist foundation in the bookstore right away. I was getting my anarchy from Rexroth, who was from the Midwest and got his education in various populist movements. He identified with the labor movement of the Wobblies, though as far as I know, Rexroth never worked one day of labor in his life! He loved to talk big, though he was the most important intellectual influence in San Francisco in the fifties and sixties. His writings in *The Nation*, the old *Saturday Review of Literature*, and the *San Francisco Examiner* were brilliant. Later, his book program on KPFA radio became legendary. Everybody listened to it because he knew what he was talking about. The original station was the first in the Pacifica Radio network, founded by Lewis Hill, a conscientious objector in World War II. He was in the camp in Oregon where the poet William Everson, who later became Brother Antoninus, was also interned. At the camp, Everson printed a book of poems by Kenneth Patchen called *An Astonished Eye Looks Out of the Air*. It was one of the first books of poetry I came upon after World War II. This was in 1951 when I first got to San Francisco, and that kind of atmosphere told me it was the right place to open a bookstore.

TBR: *About the Beats, you have often said that "people should stop resurrecting the dead." Do you ever look back to the days of the Beat writers with nostalgia, or is the literary fascination with that generation something for readers, critics, and imitators only?*

LF: If anyone should be resurrected from the dead, it should be Jerry Garcia. I miss him and wish someone would bring him back.

I resist being called a Beat, because I wasn't. I arrived in San Francisco in 1951 straight from Paris and I was the last of the Bohemian generation. The Beats had not started and no one had heard of them. They were around San Francisco, but were not recognized yet. I was totally straight with a married and conventional family life, then these bums showed up. Some of them became good friends of mine, especially Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac, Gregory Corso, and Peter Orlovsky. I became associated with the Beats by publishing them and was Ginsberg's editor for 40 years. He was bought out by HarperCollins for the last 10 years of his life. I really resist going back and glorifying the Beats and resurrecting dead decades from 40 years ago. That world is gone forever, and it's a new ballgame for writers and publishers today.

TBR: *You stated once that the Beats were just "a phase of dissident and outsider literature." There hasn't been anything in U.S. writing like the Beats since. Do you think that in today's competitive literary world there can be true dissident literature?*

LF: The more competitive and corporate the literary world becomes, the more writers should speak out and not lose the true vision of what they want to say in the midst of this need to succeed and get published. The Beats had no pressure to be successful because they were living their crazy lives, though their writing is alive today and many people argue that fame did Kerouac in.

Recently, I was talking to a poet who spends a great deal of her time doing readings and workshops in universities all over the country. I told her I always avoid workshops because I don't believe in them and she said she can't bite the hand that feeds her. Is that all there is now for many writers, this dependence on institutions? This is a sad state of affairs and it is the U.S. literary world today. They can't turn upon or criticize what feeds them. It reminds me of members of the U.S. Senate and Congress who toe the line behind our murderous administration because they can't be at odds with what supports them. As a poet supported by a university, can you criticize your university if it has invested in South Africa or some other country that still has slavery, or one that props up a repressive regime? No. The writer is the institution now and the institution is the writer, and that is far removed from the crazy world of the Beats in the fifties, a time that had its serious political problems, but a time when the writer had to *write* to live. About half the poets in America today are connected to an academic institution and earn their living from it. This results in what Robert Bly calls the "horizontal landscape." American poetry today has a horizontal tundra with a few peaks sticking up above the flat mass of poets who are not saying anything of universal relevance.

Incredible poets who create in more than one world include Jack Hirschman from San Francisco. Other examples are Anne Waldman at the Naropa Institute in Boulder and Bly on his high hill above the city of Minneapolis. Also, Andre Codrescu in New Orleans and Ed Sanders in Woodstock, New York. Ed is a wonderful documentary poet who writes a great deal about recent American history, like the sixties. He is also editor of *The Woodstock Journal*, an important weekly of the Left. Woodstock was originally an anarchist colony in the

middle of nowhere, and has always attracted political and artistic activists. Bob Dylan had a place there where he did some of his greatest music.

These poets prove over and over that it is possible to be artistic, emotional, and political at the same time. Too many poets in this country are afraid of this. They are fearful of acknowledging the long tradition of the poet against the state. They love ancient poets like Rumi and Hafiz, but modern poets don't follow their example. Hafiz was the total spiritual man, but also a political creature. I've been reading Bly's versions of Hafiz and I call them the Viking versions! You can still create in more than one world as Bly has done. He has become one of our true mystical poets, yet he is one of the most dissident writers in our country. It is one reason he has never been appointed poet laureate of the U.S. Look at Allen Ginsberg. He was never appointed either, and deserved a Pulitzer in his lifetime. We don't honor the messengers of our time, we kill them. They don't bring us the Happy Hour, so we kill them. If you want the happy hour of poetry, look at the poet laureates today.

TBR: *In a 1999 interview with David Meltzer, you said you didn't like William Carlos Williams' famous phrase for poetry, "No ideas but in things." You wished Williams had said, "No ideas but in beings." What did you mean?*

LF: You can't focus on "things" because they are dead. No ideas but in dead objects? What does it really mean besides William Carlos Williams saying you had to have a concrete idea in what you were expressing in a poem? T.S. Eliot had his objective correlative, where the poet has his object and gives it some subjective response. For instance, in *The Waste Land* you overhear a conversation in a pub and that is the objective correlative. The emotions the poet gains from overhearing the conversation make the poem. "No ideas but in beings" says poetry is more alive when it is about living things.

Ginsberg was a big promoter of Williams, who wrote a short preface for the City Lights edition of *Howl.* Ginsberg said Williams was a primary promoter of American diction in poetry. American diction in Williams was more about a doctor in the suburbs of New Jersey than anything else. I found the real American diction coming from the inner city, in poets like Kenneth Patchen, Langston Hughes, e.e. cummings, and Amiri Baraka. I guess since most of America has become suburban, the influence of Williams' diction is there more than the inner city's.

Another strong belief of many poets coming from the Beat tradition, for instance, is something that comes out of Buddhism. It is "first thought, best thought." As poetic practice, this is very practical. The Ginsberg school of poetics is based on first thought, best thought. Kerouac did this, too. Corso did it naturally because he was an American original primitive who spoke off the top of his mind without any critical interference. He didn't care if he didn't please anybody or whether he would get invited back to the university. "First thought, best thought" says you shouldn't censor your immediate response to the world as you write it down. Let it be direct transcription of the subconscious without any of the social censorship many poets are hung up on. This immediacy produces amazing modes of expression and the turning of phrases you can't compose any other way. If you can get it down right away, it is priceless.

On the other hand, as an editor reading thousands of poetry manuscripts over the years, I have concluded that many poets have "first thought, worst thought" on their minds. "First thought, best thought" is good for a poet who has something to say and the poetic ability to go with it. When you teach this to thousands of poetry students, say at the Naropa Institute, you get thousands who do not have great minds, and it shows in the poetry and their attempts to practice first thought, best thought. The general practice is, walk down the street and write down everything you see. The Bolinas poets in California are like this, quite influenced by the New York poets, who were in turn influenced by Ginsberg and others. You get a poem with the poet walking on the beach and capturing everything, trying to be loyal to the first thought, but it often results in not very interesting poetry. Ginsberg had a ravenous mind that absorbed everything in sight, but his sensitivity helped in making something incredible out of so many perceptions. This is rare.

TBR: *In recent years, you have been painting a great deal. Your most recent book,* How to Paint Sunlight, *is full of imagery of light, color, the sun, and the beginning of new things. Do the poems illustrate a more internal, contemplative period in your writing?*

LF: No, it has always been contemplative. From the beginning, I have had a totally different poetic sensibility than the Beats. I believe in the direct expression of the subconscious. The surrealists were doing that in France 30 or 40 years before the Beats. Look at André Breton. I believe every poem should have a public surface, which is a term I invented. Any person with any kind of attention should understand any poem on some level. This should be true for everybody so poetry can remain public. There should be a common "sensual" basis in poetry. Walt Whitman would certainly agree with this. Under that surface, there can be a more complex literary level with allusions and deeper meaning. There also has to be a subjective and subversive level in poetry that is not journalism, but true political art. My ideal poem has always been one that reaches that public surface and leads to other levels. You can find it in the earliest poetry I ever wrote. This is where the visual in poetry comes in because the visual aspect has the closest tie to the public surface. You can find it in *How to Paint Sunlight*.

TBR: *Copper Canyon recently published* The Complete Poems of Kenneth Rexroth *and HarperCollins continues to release different editions of Allen Ginsberg's poetry. Is this a time in American poetry when poets and readers are turning to these writers to find something new, or to be reassured about the past?*

LF: They have always been reading them, though many people claim Rexroth has been forgotten. He is unjustly one of the most underread poets in America. Robert Bly agrees with me on this. Despite being reprinted by Copper Canyon, he has been in print from New Directions for years. I wrote my editor at New Directions objecting to them letting Rexroth go to another publisher. He was immensely influential and important, as I said

earlier, and New Directions should have kept him. Ginsberg's books at City Lights keep selling and selling and we keep them in print. We can't sell enough of him. We have a few Rexroth, but they don't sell like Ginsberg. Gary Snyder's love and mountain poetry comes right out of Rexroth. His influence is enormous, and I think Snyder would be the first to admit it.

Every now and then, the press comes out with a story that people in America are reading poetry again. They claim it is being rediscovered. Some reporter went into a bookstore and spotted some poetry books. He decided there was a resurgence and everybody believed him. Hell, poetry in this country has always been read. It has never gone away. Our poetry room at City Lights is always busy and it is hard to keep track of all the poetry books we sell. It astounds me because our year-end totals for poetry are huge. Today, there are more poets and more poetry books being published than at any other time in the history of the world.

TBR: *"And Lo," one of the last poems in* How to Paint Sunlight, *reads like a prayer to God, and the last word in it is "Amen." After living a long life of poetry, books, and writing, what do you pray for?*

LF: It has been a very short life and I don't pray. "And Lo" was a parody, but perhaps not as much as my parody of the Lord's Prayer, which you can see in the film *The Last Waltz*: "Our father whose art's in heaven, hollow be thy name unless things change. Thy kingdom come and gone. Thy will will be undone on Earth, as it isn't Heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, at least three times a day, and lead us not into temptation too often on weekdays, but deliver us from evil, whose presence remains unexplained in thy kingdom of power and glory. Oh, man!" That remains the unanswered question in all of theology. If God is all-powerful, why does he let evil exist? Poetry is there to help us find out. ■

INTERVIEWER: Besides being nominated for the Pulitzer Prize, **Ray González**' book of poetry, *The Hawk Temple at Tierra Grande* (BOA Editions), received a 2002 National Book Critics Circle Award Notable Book Citation and was a finalist for a 2003 Texas Institute of Letters Award for Best Book of Poetry. His poetry has been selected for the 2003 edition of *Best American Poetry* (Scribner), his third appearance in the series. González' recent book of essays, *The Underground Heart* (University of Arizona Press), received the 2003 Texas Institute of Letters Award for Best Book of Nonfiction; was named one of 10 Best Southwest Books of the Year by the Arizona Humanities Commission and one of the Best Nonfiction Books of the Year by *The Rocky Mountain News*; and was chosen as a Book of the Month by the El Paso Public Library. He received a 2003 Lifetime Achievement Award in Literature from the Border Regional Library Association, and is a full professor of English at the University of Minnesota in Minneapolis.