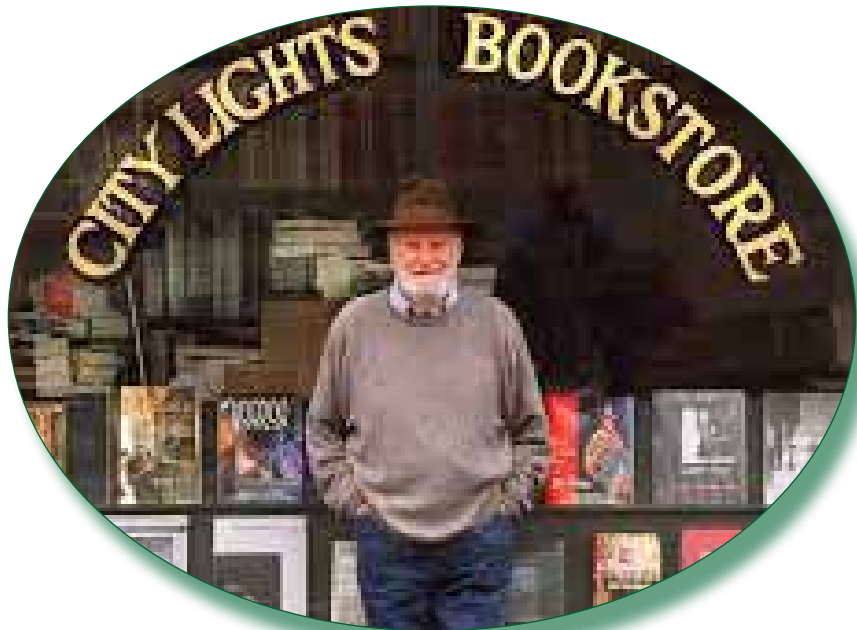


LAWRENCE FERLINGHETTI
(1919-)

This month's essay is a repeat essay that was originally published in the May, 2012 Bulletin. In honor of Lawrence Ferlinghetti's 100th birthday in March, I thought it would be interesting to take another look at the life of this man who has so shaped San Francisco culture since the 1950's.



Lawrence Monsanto Ferlinghetti was born in Yonkers, New York on March 24, 1919. He is an American poet, painter, liberal activist, and the co-founder of City Lights Booksellers & Publishers on Columbus Ave. in North Beach. Author of poetry, translations, fiction, theatre, art criticism, and film narration, he is best known for a collection of poems entitled *A Coney Island of the Mind* (New York: New Directions, 1958), which has been translated into nine languages.

His mother, Albertine Mendes-Monsanto Lyons, was of French, Portuguese, and Sephardic Jewish heritage. His father, Carlo Ferlinghetti, was born in Brescia, Italy on March 14, 1872. He immigrated to the United States in 1892, and was naturalized in 1896, and worked as an auctioneer in Little Italy in New York. At some unknown point, Carlo Ferlinghetti shortened the family name to "Ferling," and Lawrence wouldn't learn of his original name until 1942, when he had to provide a birth certificate to join the US Navy. Though he used "Ferling" for his earliest published work, he reverted to the original Italian "Ferlinghetti" in 1955, when he published his first book of poems, *Pictures of the Gone World*.

Ferlinghetti's father died six months before he was born, and his mother was committed to an asylum shortly after his birth. He was raised by his French aunt, Emily. She took Ferlinghetti to Strasbourg, France where they lived during his first five years. Thus, French became his first language.

After their return to the United States, Ferlinghetti was placed in an orphanage in Chappaqua, New York, while Emily looked for employment. She was eventually hired as a French governess for the daughter of Presley Eugene Bisland and his wife Anna Lawrence Bisland (the daughter of the founder of Sarah Lawrence College) in Bronxville, New York. In 1926, young Ferlinghetti was left in the care of the Bislands. After attending various schools in Bronxville, he went to the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill, where he earned a BA in journalism in 1941. He began his career in journalism by writing sports articles for *The Daily Tar Heel*, and he published his first short stories in *Carolina Magazine*, a publication for which Thomas Wolfe had written.

In the summer of 1941, he lived with two college friends on Little Whale Boat Island in Casco Bay, Maine, lobster fishing and raking moss from rocks to be sold in Portland, Maine, for pharmaceutical use. This experience gave him a love of the sea, a theme that runs through much of his poetry. After the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, Ferlinghetti enrolled in Midshipmen's school in Chicago, and in 1942 shipped out as a junior officer on JP Morgan III's yacht, which had been refitted to patrol for submarines off the East Coast.

He was next assigned to the Ambrose Lightship outside New York harbor in order to identify all incoming ships. In 1943 and 1944 he served as an officer on three U.S. Navy sub-chasers



used as convoy escorts. As commander of the sub-chaser USS SC1308, he was at the Normandy invasion as part of the anti-submarine screen around the Normandy beaches. After VE Day, the Navy transferred him to the Pacific Theater, where he served as navigator of the troopship USS Selinur (*left*). Six weeks after the atomic bomb fell on Nagasaki, he visited the ruins of the city, an experience that turned him into a life-long pacifist.

After the war, he worked briefly in the mailroom of *Time Magazine* in Manhattan. The GI Bill enabled him to enroll in Columbia University graduate school. Among his professors there were Babette Deutsch, Lionel Trilling, Jacques Barzun, and Mark Van Doren. In those years he was reading modern literature, and he has

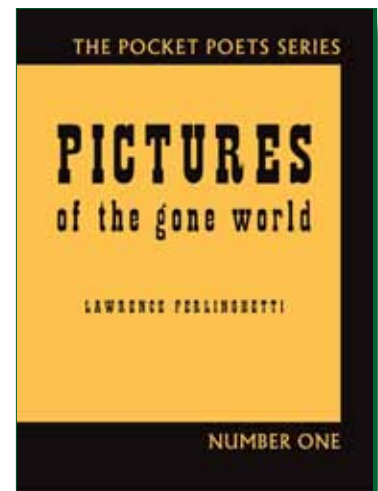
said that he was influenced by Shakespeare, Marlowe, the Romantic poets, Gerard Manley Hopkins, and James Joyce, as well as American poets Whitman, TS Eliot, Ezra Pound, Carl Sandburg, Vachel Lindsay, Marianne Moore, EE Cummings, and American novelists Thomas Wolfe, Ernest Hemingway, and John Dos Passos. He earned an MA degree in English literature in 1947 with a thesis on John Ruskin and the British painter JMW Turner. From Columbia, he went to Paris to continue his studies, and lived there from 1947-1951, earning a Doctorat de l'Université de Paris, with a "mention très honorable." His two theses were on the city as a symbol in modern poetry and on the nature of Gothic.



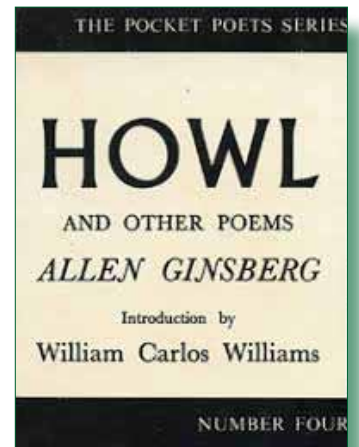
Returning to the US, he married Selden Kirby-Smith in 1951 in Duval County, Florida (portrait at left by the French-Moroccan painter Claude Ponsot, 1948). They settled in San Francisco in 1953, where he taught French in an adult education program, painted, and wrote art criticism. His first translations were of poems by the French surrealist Jacques Prévert, and were published by Peter D. Martin in his popular culture magazine *City Lights*.

In 1953, Ferlinghetti and Martin founded City Lights Bookstore, the first all-paperbound bookshop in the country. Two years later, after the departure of Martin, he launched the publishing wing of City Lights with his own first book of poems, *Pictures of the Gone World*, (below) the first number in the "Pocket Poets Series." This volume was followed by books by Kenneth Rexroth, Kenneth Patchen, Marie Ponsot, Allen Ginsberg, Denise Levertov, Robert Duncan, William Carlos Williams, and Gregory Corso. Although City Lights Publishers is best known for its publication of Beat Generation writers, Ferlinghetti never intended to publish the Beats exclusively, and the press has always maintained a strong international list.

City Lights Publishers expanded its list from poetry to include prose, including novels, biographies, memoirs, essays and cultural studies. Some of the prose works included Neal Cassady's memoir *The First Third*, Edie Kerouac-Parker's memoir of her life with Jack Kerouac, and William S. Burroughs's "Yage Letters" to Allen Ginsberg. It also published political books by prominent authors, including Noam Chomsky, Tom Hayden, and Howard Zinn. Books published in translation include such authors as Georges Bataille, Bertolt Brecht, and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe.



The fourth number in the “Pocket Poets Series” was Allen Ginsberg’s *Howl*. Ferlinghetti was in attendance at the now-famous Six Gallery reading where Ginsberg first performed *Howl* publicly. The next day Ferlinghetti telegraphed Ginsberg: “I greet you at the beginning of a great literary career,” subsequently offering to publish his work.



The book was seized in 1956 by the San Francisco police. Ferlinghetti and Shig Muraio, the bookstore manager who had sold the book to the police, were arrested on obscenity charges. After charges against Muraio were dropped, Ferlinghetti, defended by Jake Ehrlich and the American Civil Liberties Union, stood trial in San Francisco Municipal court. The publicity generated by the trial drew national attention to the San Francisco Renaissance and Beat movement writers. Ferlinghetti had the support of prestigious literary and academic figures, and, at the end of a long trial, Judge Clayton W. Horn found *Howl* not obscene and acquitted him in October 1957. The landmark First Amendment case established a key legal precedent for the publication of other controversial literary works with redeeming social importance.

Although in style and theme Ferlinghetti’s own writing is very unlike that of the original New York Beat circle, he had important associations with the Beat writers, who made City Lights Bookstore their headquarters when they were in San Francisco. He often claimed that he was not a Beat, but a Bohemian of an earlier generation. A married war veteran and a bookstore proprietor, he didn’t share the high (or low) life of the Beats on the road. Kerouac wrote Ferlinghetti into the character “Lorenzo Monsanto” in his autobiographical novel *Big Sur* (1962), the story of Jack’s stay (with the Cassadys, the McClures, Lenore Kandel, Lew Welch, and Philip Whalen) at Ferlinghetti’s cabin in the wild coastal region of Big Sur. Kerouac depicts the Ferlinghetti figure as a generous and good-humored host, in the midst of Dionysian revels and breakdowns.

Over the years Ferlinghetti published works by many of the Beats, including Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac, Gregory Corso, William S. Burroughs, Diane diPrima, Michael McClure, Philip Lamantia, Bob Kaufman, and Gary Snyder. He was Ginsberg’s publisher for over thirty years.

Soon after settling in San Francisco in the early 1950s, Ferlinghetti met the poet Kenneth Rexroth whose concepts of philosophical anarchism influenced his political development. He self-identifies as a philosophical anarchist, regularly associated with other anarchists in North Beach, and sold Italian anarchist newspapers at the City Lights Bookstore. A critic of United States foreign policy, Ferlinghetti has taken a stand against totalitarianism and war.

While Ferlinghetti has expressed that he is “an anarchist at heart,” he concedes that the world would need to be populated by “saints” in order for pure anarchism to be lived practically. Hence, he espouses what can be achieved by Scandinavian-style democratic socialism.

Though imbued with the commonplace, Ferlinghetti’s poetry is grounded in lyric and narrative traditions. Among his themes are the beauty of the natural world, the tragicomic life of the common man, the plight of the individual in mass society, and the dream and betrayal of democracy. His work challenges the definition of art and the artist’s role in the world. He often has urged poets to be engaged in the political and cultural life of the country. He counts among his influences TS Eliot, Ezra Pound, EE Cummings, HD, Marcel Proust, Charles Baudelaire, Jacques Prévert, Guillaume Apollinaire, and Blaise Cendrars.

Ferlinghetti was instrumental in bringing poetry out of the academy and back into the public sphere with public poetry readings. With Ginsberg and other progressive writers, he took part in events that focused on such political issues as the Cuban revolution, the nuclear arms race, farmworker organizing, the murder of Salvador Allende, the Vietnam War, May ’68 in Paris, the Sandinistas in Nicaragua, and the Zapatista Army of National Liberation in Mexico. He read not only to audiences in the United States but widely in Europe and Latin America. Many of his writings grew from travels in France, Italy, the Soviet Union, Cuba, Mexico, Chile, Nicaragua, and the Czech Republic.



*Ginsberg and Ferlinghetti
in City Lights Bookstore*

In 1988, he was the initiator of the transformation of Jack Kerouac Alley, located at the side of his shop. He presented his idea to the San Francisco Board of Supervisors calling for repavement and renewal. Since 1991, young volunteers from the Adopt-An-Alleyway Youth Empowerment Project—a program run by the Chinatown Community Development Center—have maintained the good condition of the alley, which is a bridge between Chinatown and North Beach.

PAINTING

Ferlinghetti began painting in Paris in 1948. In San Francisco, he occupied a studio at 9 Mission Street on the Embarcadero in the 1950s that he inherited from Hassel Smith. He admired the New York abstract expressionists, and his first work exhibits their influence.

A more figurative style is apparent in his later work. Ferlinghetti's paintings have been shown at various museums around the world, from the Butler Museum of American Painting to Il Palazzo delle Esposizioni in Rome. He has been associated with the international Fluxus movement through the Archivio Francesco Conz in Verona. In San Francisco, his work can regularly be seen at the George Krevsky Gallery.

Since 2009 he has been in the Honour Committee of Immagine & Poesia, the artistic literary movement founded in Turin, Italy, with the patronage of Aeronwy Thomas (Dylan Thomas's daughter). "Sixty Years of Painting," the exhibition held in Italy in 2010 was a creative journey through the twentieth century, reflecting on social and political issues and on the role of the artist nowadays.



Lawrence Ferlinghetti,
*"Before the Revolution" (1979),
oil and acrylic on canvas, 40"x 36"*
(Courtesy Rena Bransten Gallery)



AWARDS

Ferlinghetti has received numerous awards, including the Los Angeles Times' Robert Kirsch Award, the BABRA Award for Lifetime Achievement, the National Book Critics Circle Ivan Sandrof Award for Contribution to American Arts and Letters, and the ACLU's Earl Warren Civil Liberties Award. He won the Premio Taormino in 1973, and since then has been awarded the Premio Camaione, the Premio Flaiano, the Premio Cavour, among other honors in Italy. He was named San Francisco's Poet Laureate in August 1998 and served for two years. In 2003 he was awarded the Robert Frost Memorial Medal, the Author's Guild Lifetime Achievement Award, and he was elected to the American Academy of Arts and Letters in 2003. The National Book Foundation made him the recipient of its first Literarian Award (2005), given for outstanding service to the American literary community. In 2007 he was named Commandeur, French Order of Arts and Letters.

In 2011 Ferlinghetti contributed two of his poems to the celebration of the 150th Anniversary of Italian Unification (The Risorgimento)—"Song of the Third World War" and "Old Italians Dying." These inspired the artists of the exhibition "Lawrence Ferlinghetti and Italy 150" held in Turin, Italy in 2011.

Adapted by James J. Boitano, PhD from Wikipedia.



“I am awaiting
perpetually and forever
a renaissance of wonder”

Lawrence Ferlinghetti