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## **A Brief Guide to the Beat Poets**

I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness, starving hysterical  
naked,  
dragging themselves through the negro streets at dawn looking for an angry fix,  
angelheaded hipsters burning for the ancient heavenly connection to the starry  
dynamo in the machinery of night . . .  
--Allen Ginsberg, "Howl"

Beat poetry evolved during the 1940s in both New York City and on the west coast, although San Francisco became the heart of the movement in the early 1950s. The end of World War II left poets like Allen Ginsberg, Gary Snyder, Lawrence Ferlinghetti and Gregory Corso questioning mainstream politics and culture. These poets would become known as the Beat generation, a group of writers interested in changing consciousness and defying conventional writing. The Beats were also closely intertwined with poets of the San Francisco Renaissance movement, such as Kenneth Rexroth and Robert Duncan.

The battle against social conformity and literary tradition was central to the work of the Beats. Among this group of poets, hallucinogenic drugs were used to achieve higher consciousness, as was meditation and Eastern religion. Buddhism especially was important to many of the Beat poets; Gary Snyder and Allen Ginsberg both intensely studied this religion and it figured into much of their work.

Allen Ginsberg's first book, *Howl and Other Poems*, is often considered representative of the Beat poets. In 1956 Lawrence Ferlinghetti's press City Lights published *Howl* and Ferlinghetti was brought to trial the next year on charges of obscenity. In a hugely publicized case, the judge ruled that *Howl* was not obscene and brought national attention to Ginsberg and the Beat poets.

Besides publishing the Pocket Poets Series, Ferlinghetti also founded the legendary San Francisco bookstore City Lights. Still in operation today, City Lights is an important landmark of Beat generation history. Several of the surrounding streets have been renamed after Beat poets as well, commemorating their important contribution to the cultural landscape of San Francisco.

Other Beat poets included Diane di Prima, Neal Cassady, Anne Waldman and Michael McClure. Although William S. Burroughs and Jack Kerouac are often best remembered for works of fiction such as *Naked Lunch* and *On the Road*, respectively, they also wrote poetry and were very much part of the Beats as well; Kerouac is said to have coined the term "Beat generation," describing the down-and-out status of himself and his peers during the post-war years.

For further information, read "This is the Beat Generation" by John Clellon Holmes from *The New York Times*, *The Beat Book* edited by Anne Waldman, and *The Portable Beat Reader* by Ann Charters.

<http://www.poets.org/poet.php/prmPID/367>

### **BIO: Lawrence Ferlinghetti**

Lawrence Ferlinghetti was born in Yonkers, New York, in 1919. After spending his early childhood in France, he received his B.A. from the University of North Carolina, an M.A. from Columbia University, and a Ph.D. from the Sorbonne. During World War II he served in the US Naval Reserve and was sent to Nagasaki shortly after it was bombed. He married in 1951 and has one daughter and one son.

In 1953, Ferlinghetti and Peter Martin began to publish City Lights magazine. They also opened the City Lights Books Shop in San Francisco to help support the magazine. In 1955, they launched City Light Publishing, a book-publishing venture. City Lights became known as the heart of the "Beat" movement, which included writers such as Kenneth Rexroth, Gary Snyder, Allen Ginsberg, and Jack Kerouac.

Ferlinghetti is the author of more than thirty books of poetry, including *Americus, Book I* (New Directions, 2004), *San Francisco Poems* (2002), *How to Paint Sunlight* (2001), *A Far Rockaway of the Heart* (1997), *These Are My Rivers: New & Selected Poems, 1955-1993* (1993), *Over All the Obscene Boundaries: European Poems & Transitions* (1984), *Who Are We Now?* (1976), *The Secret Meaning of Things* (1969), and *A Coney Island of the Mind* (1958). He has translated the work of a number of poets including Nicanor Parra, Jacques Prevert, and Pier Paolo Pasolini. Ferlinghetti is also the author more than eight plays and of the novels *Love in the Days of Rage* (1988) and *Her* (1966).

In 1994, San Francisco renamed a street in his honor. He was also named the first Poet Laureate of San Francisco in 1998. In 2000, he received the lifetime achievement award from the National Book Critics Circle. Currently, Ferlinghetti writes a weekly column for the San Francisco Chronicle. He also continues to operate the City Lights bookstore, and he travels frequently to participate in literary conferences and poetry readings.

## A Selected Bibliography

### Poetry

A Coney Island of the Mind (1958)

Back Roads to Far Places (1971)

Her (1960)

Open Eye, Open Heart (1973)

Pictures of the Gone World (1955)

Routines (1964)

Starting from San Francisco (1961)

The Mexican Night (1970)

The Secret Meaning of Things (1969)

Tyrannus Nix? (1969)

Unfair Arguments with Existence (1963)

**Thus Spake Ferlinghetti**

**by Lawrence Ferlinghetti**

**Toward a New Lyricism (The Irish Have a Word for It)**

Pure lyricism is not dead. Except in America. The Irish still have a word for it. This past spring in San Francisco there was a Festival of Irish Writers at Golden Gate University (with an introductory day at Stanford) in which twenty-two poets and novelists from Ireland north and south raised their voices to an enthralled audience who hadn't heard anything like it in this country in many a year. It was also a great stroke for peace at last in Ireland, as writers from both sides joined minds and voices.

Modern poetry has suffered from a kind of exhausted or "defeated" romanticism. We heard it in the 1920s in T.S. Eliot's *Waste Land* (especially in "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock"), in Ezra Pound's *Cantos* that couldn't possibly be sung, and in the increasing stoicism, if not cynicism, of many who came of age during the war or returned from it with radically changed perspectives. It was also a period credited with America's "loss of innocence," which affected all American art and writing.

Politically, it all started with the disillusionment of intellectuals with the Communist dream in the 1930s (as tellingly articulated in Arthur Koestler's *The God that Failed*). In the postwar years, this led to increasing resistance to commitment of any kind, in literature as well as in politics. And it was a part of a growing alienation of artists and writers from mainstream society and government in general.

This eventually led to the romantic rebellion of Beat writers. And today we have the electronic revolution that favors pragmatic, technocratic, materialist consciousness at the expense of the subjective. In poetry we have the still greater estrangement of new generations of rappers and slammers who are much more alienated from society than the Beats ever were, though with less commitment, politically or otherwise.

It would seem that lyricism in poetry around the world has suffered least when modern city culture least impinged upon it. The further we get from nature, the less lyrical our poetry becomes. The postmodern world seems to destroy lyricism in life and especially in poetry. The great lyric period of English Romanticism grew out of a nineteenth-century culture that was largely rural, if not pastoral. But with the early twentieth century, the absolute staccato of machines began to drum upon people's consciousness, destroying the old pastoral lyricism, so that the great Irish dreamer, William Butler Yeats, could cry "The woods of Arcady are dead / And over is their antique joy. . . ."

In our time great lyric poets are few and far away. Perhaps the last great lyric voice was that of Welsh poet Dylan Thomas, and Edna St. Vincent Millay the finest of American lyric voices. Today there is much fine nature poetry by some living on the fringes of nature like Mary Oliver. And we have had great urban poets like Kenneth Rexroth, whose nature poetry and love poetry have a lyric sublimity equal to the greatest. On the other hand, we have poets living very close to nature like Gary Snyder, whose lyricism is grounded in stoic Buddhism.

Yet Irish poetry has somehow managed to stay close to its lyric roots, maybe because its culture as a whole has remained closer to the soil.

Thus it was that the Irish invaded San Francisco this past spring and turned on an audience used to nonlyrical poetry that doesn't sing. (With one or two exceptions, local poets were notable for their absence at this festival, and it was also obvious that this was an all-white affair.) The program was called "Finnegans Awake," and it was as if Yeats and Maud Gonne, J.M. Synge, Sean O'Casey, and

James Joyce were all still very much with us. The rich voices of the women poets at the festival were the most lyrical of all, almost as if they were all varied tones of an archetypal Irish woman's voice, embodied--at least for me--by James Joyce's Molly Bloom. There still may be swans on the Liffey. But still the least lyric poets at this festival were those who had grown furthest from their roots.

We read poetry for its beauty, for its muted music, for its promise of liberation, its promise of transcendence, for its "lyric escape." There is a need for lyricism in daily life, but we get very little of it in poetry today. The age does not demand it. Other drugs, like Ecstasy, are used for turn-ons. But perhaps some new lyricism will arise to fill what some have called the spiritual emptiness of our world. Nature abhors a vacuum. We still need the lyric escape. It is still the bird singing that makes us happy.

#### It's Time for a Populist Laureate

It was a dubious pleasure to read that Stanley Kunitz, the much-loved 95-year-old poet of Provincetown and Greenwich Village, is the new U.S. poet laureate starting this November, succeeding the not-so-loved Robert Pinsky. A pleasure, that is, to see this "poet's poet" get the big-daddy laurel, for no nicer fellow could be found anywhere.

A little illustration of his gentility will make the point. This is the second time around for Kunitz. Back when the post was still called "poetry consultant to the Library of Congress," Kunitz was it from 1974 to 1976. During his reign he invited me to record my poetry for the Library of Congress.

But I, full of righteous anger and alienation, published a rude reply to Kunitz's genteel invitation, saying I would not "participate in any way (whether it is at the Library or in the National Endowment of the Arts) with a government that conducted such a disgusting war in Vietnam and financed among other duplicities the overthrow of the Allende regime in Chile." To which Kunitz

very courteously replied that the poetry program was not financed by the government but was privately funded. (I never did record for him.)

He has a new Collected Poems to go with his new laureateship, and he certainly deserves it by old Ivy League standards. Aye, but that's the rub. The center of gravity in the world of poetry long ago left the hallowed precincts of the East Coast establishment, even though news of this evidently never reached the hairy ears of the Librarian of Congress, who annually appoints the laureate. Anyone who's read poetry issued by the big Eastern publishers during Kunitz's long career and compared it with poetry published in the West can see the raw difference.

Of course, there were exceptions, but generally poetry in the West has been raunchier, wilder, and woollier, less domesticated and more experimental in form and content. The divide at the Great Divide began shortly after World War II, when the whole continent was tilting westward, demographically speaking. And it was obvious by the late 1950s that something profound and radical was happening, even though Mr. Jones, the librarian back East, didn't know it.

Pablo Neruda said in 1959 that he loved our "wide-open poetry." And he wasn't talking about poetry in the New Yorker or journals like the Hudson Review or Partisan Review (which San Francisco poet and critic Kenneth Rexroth referred to as the Vaticide Review). Rexroth also referred to Eastern academies as "munching and belching societies." In fact, he maintained that we had all fled West to escape the dead hand of the East Coast literary world, even though the best of us were published by that New York avant-garde maverick, New Directions.

This huge continental drift, this literary red shift, seemed so crucial to our literary existence in the West, until the very recent electronic globalization of our consciousness. Just as regional accents are being wiped out by air travel and television, the Internet may eventually wipe out regionalism in literature and every other kind of provincialism. In a symbolic sense, geography will no longer exist. For better or worse, and perhaps for much worse, our literary intercourse will be literally "up in the

air," our literary cafes and kaffeeklatsches replaced by chat rooms, with communications satellites for waiters.

So it's now also irrelevant whether the U.S. poet laureate comes from the East or the West. Now the choice of the laureate can be a pure choice between the traditional "have a nice day" poets and committed activist poets such as June Jordan, who's been presenting a "poets of the people" series at San Francisco's Intersection for the Arts. We have hardly had a major bard since Walt Whitman, who aspired to speak for the people en masse, except perhaps Carl Sandburg and certain agitprop Marxists. Nor will we find such populist poetry in Stanley Kunitz's books, any more than we found it in his predecessor, Pinsky.

"Who will speak for the simple and dumb?" asked Eugene Ruggles in an early poem. Perhaps some time soon a great young voice of the people will emerge. And perhaps some new U.S. laureate will seize the day "to burst the petty bonds of art" (as Whitman put it) and become an activist poetic voice in the nation's capital, a true conscience of the people, an uncompromised and uncompromising critic of life in these States--to rock the ship of state when it really needs rocking. Which is now.