

Lawrence Ferlinghetti: Tool of War Turned Warrior for Freedom



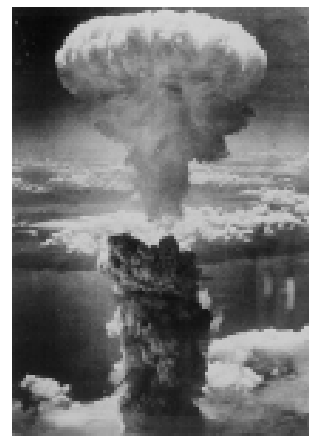
By Karen Pressley
April 20, 2007



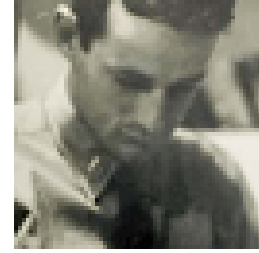
"I saw a giant field of scorched mulch. It sprawled out to the horizon, three square miles looking like someone had worked it over with a huge blowtorch. A few sticks from buildings jutted up like black arms," Ferlinghetti says. "I found a teacup that seemed like it had human flesh fused into it, just melted into the porcelain. In that instant," says Ferlinghetti, "I became a total pacifist."

Lawrence Ferlinghetti

We don't know whether it was strong winds blowing or just the still stench of death that singed the nostrils of Lawrence Ferlinghetti the day he stepped foot into Nagasaki in 1945. We do know that in the mulch of human ash and rubble of what was once a great Japanese city that he could just kick around with his boot, his



discovery of a tea cup with melted human flesh fused into it forever changed his life. It was six weeks after the U.S. dropped the bombs that annihilated the people of Nagasaki and Hiroshima, that Ferlinghetti observed a reality about humanity—that people’s drive for world power and conquest, using war as a tool for control of humankind at all costs—that transformed him from a



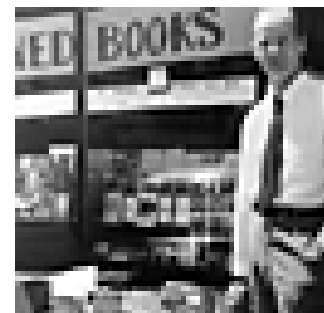
military career man to a pacifist. He turned from being a tool on the battlefields of military war—in his case, the sea—and turned anarchist-literati-warrior. This enemy-submarine



chaser who was on his way to becoming a higher-ranking military officer chucked his uniform and donned his civilian clothes with pen in hand to eventually become San Francisco’s first poet laureate. Poetry, the printed word, published books, and support of the freedom-of-speech-

seeking poets became a far more powerful ammunition to defend his beliefs than the weapons and military equipment he once used to defend and destroy “the enemy.”

There is much to discover about the life of Lawrence Ferlinghetti and the experiences and perceptions which informed his aesthetics. He emerged in his post-war early thirties a poet, publisher, painter, bookseller, anarchist, and spokesman for the Beat generation. As a poet, his collection *A Coney Island of the Mind* is considered a classic of the 20th century and is the greatest selling book of American poetry. As a publisher, his decision to produce Allen Ginsberg's *Howl* challenged the censors and ultimately reaffirmed our First Amendment rights. As a painter, he continues to produce fresh, provocative, sensitively rendered "statements" that convey his message as much as any poem. And as a bookseller, City Lights is America's most famous bookstore—a mecca for book-minded



visitors from around the world and a place of refuge and empowerment for poets since the 1950s.

The dimensions of Ferlinghetti's life are too vast to cover in just these few pages. Here I focus on his military experiences that shaped his perceptions about power, racism, privilege and control, and caused him to withdraw his support from the U.S. military. It will also explore his transformation from being a tool of war to becoming a warrior for freedom of speech, and what informed his aesthetics which led to him writing the most widely read collection of American poetry, *Coney Island of the Mind*.

Ferlinghetti's background

His life began in Yonkers, New York as Larry Monsanto Ferling in 1919. At age two, Larry's parents *gave him away*. His new temporary family transported him around Europe for four years, until he landed in an orphanage at age six. He was retrieved by his family but abandoned again. Finally, a wealthy elderly American couple adopted him, brought him to live on their great estate, and sent him to exclusive schools.

By 1941, in the summer before Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor brought America into World War II, Ferlinghetti was a new college graduate with a degree in journalism from University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. His summer adventures on an island in Casco Bay, Maine, centered around lobster fishing and using motorboats to run harvests of saleable seaweed to Portland. An earlier experience with boats was sketching a hull on a gym floor to learn nautical lingo with the Sea Scouts.

His boating experiences had been enough to make Ferlinghetti decide to enlist in the Navy as a military draft loomed. He reported to midshipman school in Chicago. Ferlinghetti was marching down Michigan Avenue in bell-bottom pants by the time Japanese planes

began dive-bombing the U.S. fleet in Hawaii that December. He joined the U.S. Navy, which deserves exploration because it gives us an interesting study of what his stint in the military taught him and how this shaped his views.

The new ensign's first assignment was laying off the New Jersey shore aboard a 90-foot sailboat belonging to J.P. Morgan III and listening on sonar for U-boats -- which had begun to decimate unprotected commercial ships. Also by that time, shipyards were backlogged with orders for steel warships, everything from destroyers to aircraft carriers. So the Navy gave small boatyards contracts to build wooden sub-chasers, armed with depth charges, a 3-inch cannon and heavy machine guns. 438 of this "splinter fleet" would be launched and 40,000 men would serve on them in both theaters of the war.

Ferlinghetti was assigned to a sub-chaser that was hoisted on a merchant ship and wound up in Scotland. He encountered fishermen from Norway who had made a perilous voyage in open boats across the North Sea to get trained in the use of weapons, explosives - and operating a sub-chaser, in order to defend Norway from the Nazis. Ferlinghetti's team trained the Norwegians in sub-chasing and tactical moves to take on the Nazis and the "axis of evil." The U.S. Office of Strategic Services, a precursor of the CIA, had made these arrangements.

Ferlinghetti became a "Splinter Fleet" commander of a wooden sub-chaser assigned to secure convoys and coasts from U-boat attack. His tour of duty in World War II ranged from Normandy Beach to Nagasaki. At Normandy on June 6, 1944, Ferlinghetti's mission was helping to safeguard the D-Day invasion fleet. He readied guns on his sub-chaser to provide anti-aircraft fire against German planes.

He was transferred to the other theater of war—the Pacific. He told an interviewer that he was sorry to be transferred away from the relaxed, non-regulation Splinter Fleet

crews, with their beards, earrings and casual discipline. "Our sailors were too busy hanging on to salute," he said. It was while serving aboard the troop transport *Selinur*, he had his most transformative experience of the war. Originally, the *Selinur* was supposed to deliver attack troops. But after atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and Japan surrendered, the men aboard were reassigned to occupation duty. They arrived in Sasebo on the Japanese island of Kyushu in September 1945, which is when Ferlinghetti witnessed the aftermath of America's annihilation of Nagasaki. It was in that instant that he became a total pacifist (Silesky, 1990).

Though some have argued that using atomic bombs to compel Japan's unconditional surrender actually saved millions of lives that would have been lost on both sides had the Allies been forced to invade, Ferlinghetti disagreed. "It was a monstrous, racist act, the worst the U.S. ever committed," he said. "Had the Japanese been white-skinned, those bombs would not have been dropped."

Ferlinghetti's military experiences, eye-witness of war horrors, and conclusions formed about the racist facet of the war are significant to consider as we learn about who he became in his post-war life. To read any of his poetry after learning of these life experiences that informed his aesthetics will bring far more meaning and depth of understanding than if his poetry is read as just words on a page with our own interpretation, guiding the way we perceive his poetry.

Creation of Ferlinghetti's new battlefield

His transformative experience at Nagasaki was the defining moment that caused him to terminate his military career. As a war vet, he used the GI Bill to go to Spain and France. He was told that San Francisco was the most European and bohemian city in America,

except for Greenwich Village. While he had no inclination to return to the stone canyons of Manhattan he was attracted by the rumor of San Francisco as the center of the only real wine region in the U.S. (Ferlinghetti, 2007). He earned his doctorate in poetry at the Sorbonne with a dissertation entitled “The City as Symbol in Modern Poetry: In Search of a Metropolitan Tradition” (Asher, 2001). He left Paris for San Francisco in 1951, as if culture's centre of gravity was heading westwards. He found a buzzing art scene in the city's North Beach, stimulated by a mix of poetry, jazz, Zen philosophy and liberal politics. "The returning GIs were a big factor in that - they were all alkie, they played jazz, they had these great drinking parties. Down here on Columbus, the Beats were all into pot - they weren't



really drinkers.” (Ferlinghetti to Troiano, 2007). He set up an artist's studio for himself and started painting, but eventually returned to poetry and books.

Ferlinghetti gravitated to the philosophic anarchy of poets Kenneth Rexroth and Brother Antoninus. As he began to write, this war veteran used the freedom of speech he had fought for to assail the bastions of privilege, power and conventional thinking. In 1955, he copyrighted his first collection of poems, *Coney Island of the Mind*. Many are not individually dated so we don't know exactly when they were each written, but we know he began writing poetry around 1951.

The title of this collection is worthy of exploration. He says the title is taken from Henry Miller's INTO THE NIGHT LIFE. He says, “it is used out of context but expresses the way he felt about these poems when he wrote them—as if they were, taken together, a kind of Coney Island of the mind, a kind of circus of the soul” (Ferlinghetti, 1955). Besides a circus being a series of animal acts and spectacular stunts, a circus is also used as indicative of a frenzied activity or noisy confusion, as well as a public spectacle. His

thoughts, concepts, words, and imagery within these poems can be seen as the emergence of the frenzied state of his own soul, in the aftermath of his horrific war experiences, now that we know about them.

The idea of “Coney Island” is an interesting one, considering that Coney Island on the east coast was the newest form of amusement park at the time, a place people would go to escape, like a setting for a false reality of joy. I recall my own parents going to Coney Island in Brooklyn together after my father returned from the war. Veteran GI’s in uniform would walk arm in arm with their sweethearts, eating cotton candy and shooting at targets to win cupie dolls while clowns in garish makeup would run around entertaining people—all a most bizarre juxtaposition to the reality of the war. While Americans amused themselves at Coney Island, a yellow civilization lay smoldering across the Pacific.

Memories and realities can be covered up but not erased. Poem #12 in this collection is particularly striking in how it suggests his presence in the poem as a man who carries memories that just will not die. While new experiences through time can cover them up, the truth always endures:

12

‘One of those paintings that would not die’
 its warring image
 once conceived
 would not leave
 the leaded ground
 no matter how many times
 he hounded it
 into oblivion
 painting over it did no good
 it kept on coming through
 the wood and canvas
 and as it came it cried at him
 a terrible bedtime song
 wherein each bed a grave
 mined with unearthly alarm clocks
 Hollered horribly

For lovers and sleepers

(Ferlinghetti, 1955)

This poem could have been titled “Pentimento.” His line, “Painting over it did no good it kept on coming through” describes a term “pentimento” used by artists who paint with oils. An artist paints an original idea on a canvas, changes his/her mind, and then uses new paint to cover up the original. But the process of ‘pentimento’ is that the top layer of paint wears thin, and reveals what the artist originally painted on the canvas. It seems that Ferlinghetti sought peace and reconciliation from his past but his memories continued to cry out despite his new life and passing of time.

As he continued to write and form collections of his poetry, he supported others in doing the same. He established what became his own personal battlefield in 1953, City Lights Press, and City Lights Books, which he founded with Peter Martin. City Lights was named after the Charlie Chaplin movie. City Lights was the first paperbound bookstore in the country and ultimately became the most famous bookstore in America. His most notable poetry publications were the Pocket Poets Series, to make poetry books easily affordable to other poets. Since he opened his doors, he’s been defending other poets’ unconditional freedom, such as Allen Ginsberg’s *Howl and Other Poems* which crossed all social boundaries. The content included sexual explicitness, profanity, homosexuality, sexual liberation, dissent with U.S. politics and capitalism. It seems as if Ferlinghetti armed himself with pages of books and millions of printed words as his ammunition, and dozens of poets filled the ranks of his troops to defend their right to dissent. *Howl* was seized by the U.S. customs and the San Francisco police. They were tried on obscenity charges in a long court trial, where Ferlinghetti and other poets and professors persuaded the court that the book was not obscene. Their innocence declared a landmark victory for free speech. *Howl* brought notoriety and solidarity to this new school of American poetry whose credo was “tell

it like it is.”

Though Ferlinghetti had served in two theaters of war—Europe and the Pacific—his new battlefield, City Lights, became the new theater for the Beats as they developed a postwar American aesthetic of unrestrained candor, freshness, spontaneity, and dissention with cold-war bureaucracy. This is reminiscent of the inventive rawness and immediacy of the Expressionist poetry that dominated the German avant-garde in the years between World War I and II. Among the young radicals of Germany in those years, as among Ferlinghetti and the Beats in the years following Hiroshima and Nagasaki, expression was everything and immediacy was all. Old assumptions, rules, and norms like support the bureaucracy were rejected. Ferlinghetti and the Beat poets sought to give shape to what lay dormant within them. A way of life emerged where artists explored extreme psychological states and disorienting emotional excesses in the quest for spiritual transcendence and hidden meaning. Created by people who felt displaced within their own country and their own social order, Beat poetry radiated a sense of mad disorientation and impotent rage. The Beats seemed to search for the hidden meaning of the universe or at least, feasible explanations (Walsh, 2004).

The following poem (#11) is from his first book, *Pictures of the Gone World* (1955) from his City Lights Press Pocket Poet Series. It speaks of his feelings of displacement in life contrasted with attempts to find beauty or happiness that just does not last:

The world is a beautiful place
 To be born into
 If you don't mind happiness
 Not always being
 So very much fun
 If you don't mind a touch of hell
 Now and then
 Just when everything is fine
 Because even in heaven
 They don't sing

All the time
 The world is a beautiful place
 To be born into
 If you don't mind some people dying
 All the time
 Which isn't half so bad
 If it isn't you
 Oh the world is a beautiful place
 To be born into
 If you don't much mind
 A few dead minds
 In the higher places
 Or a bomb or two
 Now and then
 In your upturned faces..."

This says to me that his soul is plagued by war (bombs) and death that will be permanently engraved in his vision and unable to be replaced, or erased. Clearly he is seeking balance through poetry and hoping for answers or at least reconciliation.

He continues to write and speak his views against the war, and today is actively speaking against the war in Iraq. The following excerpt from the poem, "Speak Out!" first appeared on the City Lights website, and then CounterPunch published it in 2003:

And a vast paranoia sweeps across the land
 And America turns the attack on its Twin Towers
 Into the beginning of the Third World War
 The war with the Third World
 And the terrorists in Washington
 Are drafting all the young men
 And no one speaks
 And they are rousting out
 All the ones with turbans
 And they are flushing out
 All the strange immigrants
 And they are shipping all the young men
 To the killing fields again
 And no one speaks
 And when they come to round up
 All the great writers and poets and painters
 The National Endowment of the Arts of Complacency
 Will not speak

While all the young men
 Will be killing all the young men
 In the killing fields again
 So now is the time for you to speak
 All you lovers of liberty
 All you lovers of the pursuit of happiness
 All you lovers and sleepers
 Deep in your private dreams
 Now is the time for you to speak
 O silent majority
 Before they come for you

One punch from this poem is the point of America endlessly involved on the killing fields of war, going after third world nations to annihilate yet another culture as is our history. The real punch in the gut is, "Now is the time for you to speak O silent majority before they come for you." He appeals to my conscience and asks me what I am doing about what I see in this country. My conscience asks, am I a part of the silent majority, or am I challenging the posed realities from my government and the media?

His theme of "third world war" and "war against the third world" is repeated in a new poem of May 6, 2004, *Totalitarian Democracy*. It is three pages long so here is an excerpt:

The first find dawn of life on earth
 The first light of the first morning
 The first evening star
 The first man on the moon seen from afar
 The first fence on the last frontier
 The first tick of the atomic clock of fear
 The first Home Sweet Home so dear
 The sweet smell of honeysuckle at midnight
 The first free black man free of fright
 The sweet taste of freedom...
 The last cry of Mark Twain on the Mississippi
 The First and Last Chance Saloon...
 The last Nazi
 The first brought vote in the first election...
 The last bald eagle with nothing to fear
 The last firefly flickering in the night

The first plane to hit the first Twin Tower
 The last plane to hit the last Twin Tower
 The only plane to ever hit the Pentagon

The birth of a vast national paranoia
 The beginning of the Third World War
 (The War Against the Third World)...
 The end of the old New Deal
 The new Committee on Unamerican Activities
 The last politician with honest proclivities
 The last independent newspaper
 Printing the news and raising hell
 The last word and the last laugh and Last Hurrah...
 The last independent bookstore with its own mind...
 The birth of a nation of sheep
 The deep deep sleep of the booboisie
 The underground wave of feel-good fascism
 The uneasy rule of the super-rich
 The total triumph of imperial America
 The final proof of our Manifest Destiny
 Echoing in freedom's allies
 The last lament for lost democracy
 The total triumph of
 Totalitarian plutocracy...

Ferlinghetti wrote *Totalitarian Democracy* at age 85. It is included in his newest collection, *Americus* (New Directions Publishing, 2004). He reminds us of the wonders and beauty of creation (the first fine dawn of life on earth), the wondrous potential of mankind's spirit (the first man on the moon seen from afar), simple joys of existence (the sweet smell of honeysuckle at midnight), the sweet joy of liberation (the first free black man free of fright). He juxtaposes them with how we are threatened to extinction by the aberration of war and terrorism (the first plane to hit the Twin Tower) and the paranoia that our government breeds through its war. He speaks of the Beginning and because of America's totalitarianism, he is envisioning the End.

A second refuge

Parallel to his *City Lights* battlefield, Ferlinghetti also offered a second place of refuge in his life for his poet friends, a place where personal battles were fought. He owned an isolated cabin by the ocean in Bixby Canyon, Big Sur, 14 miles outside of Monterrey,

California, which served as a base for Kerouac's late writings. Ferlinghetti appears in the book as the sensible Lorenzo Monsanto, who urges the drunken celebrity author to go on a nature retreat to stop drinking, though with terrible results. *Big Sur*, one of Kerouac's last novels, is about breakdown, disintegration, the actual fulfillment of the "everything is collapsing" message in *On the Road*. It begins with an attempt at rejuvenation after the three-year bout of hopelessness after *On the Road* was published. Kerouac retreated to Ferlinghetti's cabin, but the solitude proved unendurable for him. He goes back and forth from Bixby Canyon to San Francisco in his late years, struggling with his alcoholism and inability to be alone in nature with himself (Tytell, 1976).

Ferlinghetti's cabin seems significant in numerous ways—the peace and solitude of its location stands in stark contrast to the chaos of his military experiences. It's a place where he can retreat from the culture he had come to disdain. And, it's a place that he made available to other poets to help them regain their own balance and hopefully find peace and quiet in which to write. It is the opposite of a battlefield of war, and so, it exemplifies an aesthetic of balance and freedom.

It's easy to imagine that Ferlinghetti shared stories upon stories of his eye-witness war experiences, particularly the horrors he observed from the bombs, while spending time in Bixby Canyon with Kerouac, Ginsberg, Cassady, and other friends. Ginsberg had been training as a merchant seaman in 1945, but once the US dropped the bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, human history was changed, the war ended, and the merchant seaman training center was closed. Neither Ginsberg nor Kerouac had been eyewitnesses to the atomic horror as was Ferlinghetti. Ferlinghetti seemed to serve as a spokesman for the horrors of war that informed Ginsberg and Kerouac of these experiences that they themselves had not seen but experienced vicariously through Ferlinghetti's stories.

We can see that the subject of his dissertation, “The City as Symbol in Modern Poetry: In Search of a Metropolitan Tradition” ran like a theme through his life, with his search for answers and stability throughout his life in San Francisco.

I can’t help but believe that his eyewitness to the annihilation of the life within two great Japanese cities served as the basis for his attempt to find meaningful tradition somewhere in our existence.



From the early fifties we saw Ferlinghetti become a catalyst at the center of the explosive activity of the Beats—literary and political dissention—to anti-war protests of today. Lawrence Ferlinghetti continues to run City Lights which is selling more poetry than ever. He has long since established the City Lights Foundation, a non-profit organization to ensure the continuity of the store and its publishing ventures after his passing (Asher, 2001). He has proven through his lifestyle that his dissention was not part of a passing fad of the 1950s or 60s, but is true to who he is. He is still storming the battlefield of freedom of speech. Throughout so much of his poetry he continues to ask us, do we want to be a tool for war, a part of the silent majority, or a tool for peace?

References

Asher, L. (2002). Lawrence Ferlinghetti. *Literary Kicks*. Accessed 4/2/2007 at <http://www.litkicks.com/BeatPages/page.jsp?what=LawrenceFerlinghetti>

Ferlinghetti, L. The Poetic City that Was. *Exquisite Corpse: A Journal of Letters and Life*. Issue 9. Accessed 4/2/2007 at http://www.corpse.org/issue_9/critiques/ferling.htm.

Ferlinghetti, L. (2004). Totalitarian Democracy. *CounterPunch*. Accessed 4/2/2007 at <http://www.counterpunch.org/ferlinghetti05062004.html>.

Ferlinghetti, L. (1958). *A Coney Island of the Mind*. New Directions Paperbook No. 74. pp. 27, 88.

Ginsberg, A. (1956). *Howl and Other Poems*. San Francisco: City Lights Books

Silesky, B. (1990). *FERLINGHETTI. The Artist in his Time*. New York: Warner Books. 1990. First edition; 8vo, pp. viii, 294.

Tytell, J. (1976). *Naked Angels*. New York: McGraw Hill Publishers. Pp. 104, 206-207.

Walsh, P. (2004). *Beats Go On: The Enigmatic Poetic Aesthetic of The Black Rider*. Accessed 4/2/2007

Troiano, J. (2007). *Interview with Lawrence Ferlinghetti*. San Francisco Reader. Accessed April 15, 2007