

A Coney Island of the Mind: Special 50th Anniversary Edition.

Lawrence Ferlinghetti.

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Poetry as Insurgent Art.

Lawrence Ferlinghetti.

\$12.95

In two hundred years of freedom

We have invented

The permanent alienation of the

Subjective.

--Lawrence Ferlinghetti, from "Populist Manifesto #2"

When *A Coney Island of the Mind* was published in 1958 it received quite divergent reviews. Many of the criticisms were less revealing of sound aesthetic judgment, a judgment arising from understanding harmonized with the art object under consideration, than of defending an entrenched viewpoint concerning poetic decorum which extended to one's place and behavior in society. In a review appearing in *Time* (September 7, 1959), Ferlinghetti and all "those unwashed minstrels of the West," the "shirtless ones . . . mendicants of marijuana and mad verse" are chided more for their perceived anti-social behavior than for their poetic acumen such that the reviewer was stunned that "Ferlinghetti's only slightly offbeat *A Coney Island of the Mind* (New Directions) has sold a surprising 15,000 copies". Would the reviewer still be surprised fifty years later when the volume is not only still in print, but also the largest selling single volume of poetry in America?

Yet, *A Coney Island of the Mind* was also acknowledged to be an important volume of poetry. G. D. McDonald, writing his review in *Library Journal* (June 15, 1958), echoed Gilbert Millstein's now famous review of *On the Road* when McDonald observes that "the book has something of the importance 'The Wasteland' had in 1922." The question remains then as now: What is "the importance" of this book? In addition to the now familiar themes of Ferlinghetti's work—making the European aesthetic inflections of Modernism distinctly American, subverting ideology with imagination and humor, reminding us all of what is indomitable in the human spirit, and slaying all sacred cows—*A Coney Island of the Mind* reminds us again to "live the true blue simple life / of wisdom and wonderment."

New Directions has also published *Poetry as Insurgent Art*, a small collection of two aphoristic style essays, "Poetry as Insurgent Art" and "What is Poetry?" and ending with "Forethoughts" that read as do many of Ferlinghetti's poems. The two works together form an implicit and explicit communiqué on the subject matter of poetry, poetic voice, and the socio-political responsibilities of the poet and his/her poetry: "What are poets for, in such an age? / What is the use of poetry?" Two questions that steer us toward the heart of the matter both then and now. It is eminently helpful to have all of Ferlinghetti's aphorisms on poetry and the poetic voice together in one small hard cover edition not only to inspire those of us who read them when initially published, but also to give younger generations a larger view of what his work is both concerned with and directed toward. If one doesn't pick up on the important social and political philosophy inscribed in the poetry, then one can come to this volume and hear the direct saying:

“Poetry deconstructs power. Absolute poetry deconstructs absolutely.” In this multi-aphoristic manifesto, “a (r)evolutionary book still a work-in-progress,” we are reminded of Ferlinghetti’s project of uniting the romantic Parnassian poet with Socratic questioning of power: “the poet by definition is the bearer of Eros and love and freedom and thus the natural-born *non-violent* enemy of the State.” It is especially helpful in an era of preemptive war, unilateral mischief-making, and the anti-democratic infiltration of the citizenry by jack-booted thugs posing as agents of the nation to have these words showing us the importance of using our creativity and freedom to “be the conscience of the race” by voicing tragicomic hope.

Then as now, formulaic sterility pervades the well-wrought urns fashioned in the Hallowed Halls of Academe where positivist and analytic formalism continues to descry the wonder, mystery, and enigmas of expressionistic poetic language as disturbance and malfunction. Add to this situation the contemporary fashion of cookie-cutter workshops that produce poems appearing in establishment periodicals like *Poetry* and *The American Poetry Review* and it quickly becomes apparent that American literature, once more, stands in need of the revelatory and prophetic expressionism Ferlinghetti and others in Post War America saw as the voice and place of poetry. As the surrealists also understood, poetry that expresses the unsayable arises from and forms an awareness immanent in dream state, sexual attractions, and the free play of thought that can open new vistas for the arts and help solve the principle problems of life. Ferlinghetti and the West Coast Beats/San Francisco Poetry Renaissance practitioners thereby announced a fundamental break with existing modes of communication and the conventional manner in which one perceives and accepts the exterior world.

Ferlinghetti also embodies in his art the political voice of the ancient pre-Christian European bard calling the wayward state back to humanity. We are all of us “waiting / for the American Eagle / to really spread its wings / and straighten up and fly right.” This is still the case. In many of the same and even some new ways, America embodies an “imagination of disaster” expressed by Goya in his war drawings. It has often been remarked that when Kerouac et al. hit the west coast they learned something about political art and commitment. Ferlinghetti’s scathing political jabs tempered by wit (the use of humor is not lost on several early reviewers of *Coney*) marks a significant development in the Beat appropriation of European expressionism and surrealism. Certainly the influence has since extended to an entire generation. Indeed, on December 12, 1999, at the ACLU of Northern California’s Bill of Rights Celebration Ferlinghetti was presented with the Earl Warren Civil Liberties Award for his longstanding commitment to the freedom of speech.

Crucial to the Beat expressionist aesthetic is performance in which the body, not just techniques learned by and habituated to the body, is voice. In this, they all followed, intentionally or not, Olson: *the HEAD, by way of the EAR, to the Syllable / the HEART, by way of the BREATH, to the LINE*. This was the era of the return to what Kerouac called “the origins of joy in poetry . . . wham wham the true blue song of man.” What Lawrence Lipton termed “bel canto,” or jazzpoetry, was the work of not only giving jazz music stronger lyrics, but also reviving in poetry what Snyder calls “the singing voice.” It was Ruth Weiss, Ferlinghetti, and Kenneth Rexroth who led the way in merging poetry and jazz at places like the Cellar. Thus, I am surprised to read Hayden Carruth’s review of *A Coney Island of the Mind* in *Poetry* (November 1958): “The first requirement of any poetry is a respect for the capacities of language, the negative capacities, too, if you like, and a sensitivity to its sounds and speeds. *I detect no trace of these in*

Mr. Ferlinghetti's verse" (my emphasis). Instead of effecting "the sounds and speeds" of language in conventional patterns, Ferlinghetti is sensitive to the soundscape, the rhythmic irregularities of the open music system that constitutes life as we live it. Life is a cut-up, as William Burroughs explained.

The jazzpoetry of *A Coney Island of the Mind* is doubly accessible in this new edition because the editors have included a newly recorded cd of the poet reading the poems in the volume. Listening to Ferlinghetti perform the poems brings out the living voice of the soundscape. In addition, like listening to e.e. cummings read his work, one hears the humor and heteronomy pervading the poems. The inclusion of the cd and a new cover are the only differences from previous editions. In the case of the cd, this is definitely a worthwhile difference: *a difference that makes a difference*. The new cover art emphasizes in a more abstract way the carnivalesque pervading the volume—"a kind of circus of the soul;" however, I am not so sure it *adds* anything more to the book than did the original cover's black and white photograph of a city alight in the carnival night.