

FERLINGHETTI'S  
*A CONEY ISLAND OF THE MIND:*  
IMAGES AND PERSPECTIVES

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Lawrence Ferlinghetti, a poet of the Beat Generation, is a very controversial figure. While one may find comments such as: "Ferlinghetti, however, wrote some of the most sensitive lyrics of the last twenty years":<sup>1</sup> or: "Ferlinghetti is as skilled in controlling the rhetorical movement of the poem as he is in the use of the colloquial word and phrase,"<sup>2</sup> one, on the other hand, reads comments which deny him the qualification of poet: "Ferlinghetti is one of those spiritual panhandlers bred by our age who has been infected by poetry, having the hazy notion that, when respectable, poetry is synonymous with reverie, exempt from construction by the poet but sufficiently fascinating, if within a series of parallel phrases that sound sort of musical . . . I shall resist the most coarse association available and merely note in conclusion that Ferlinghetti's most conspicuous physical qualification as a poet is his wide open mouth."<sup>3</sup>

Whatever critical reception Ferlinghetti has had, I believe that *A Coney Island of the Mind*, first published in 1958, deserves close scrutiny and a critical appraisal.

There seems to be a general division in this collection, under certain themes. The title which, as Ferlinghetti states, is taken from Henry Miller's *Into the Night Life*, is a unifying factor. The author says that these poems are "taken together, a kind of Coney Island of the mind, a kind of circus of the soul."<sup>4</sup> The circus implies fantasy and reality, dreams and concrete perceptions. Coney Island and its circus atmosphere is by extension both New York and the whole United States scrutinized by an ironic, satiric and surrealist eye, that has rendered them naked and revealed their true identity and nature. The thematic approaches are, therefore, varied and they proceed back and forth from images of reality to phantasies and dreams. Poems 1 through 4 deal with existence, society, politics, corruption; 5 and 6 with religion; 7, 8, and 9 with love, sex, growing apart and poetry. Poems 10 through 21 can be called "dream poems" of love, beauty, poetry, dreams and existence. Poems 22 and 23 describe particular characters; 24 through 28 take up again the theme of love.<sup>5</sup> Poem 29 returns to the beginning and it is a summary of everything.

This, then, is the ideal circus of life: people, characters, clowns, acrobats, phantasies, emotions of love, beauty, art, misery, momentary happiness, poetry and behind the mask, sadness.<sup>6</sup> For Ferlinghetti believes that we are squatters (poem 24):

We squat upon the beach of love  
.....  
We squat upon the brink of love  
and are secure as only squatters are  
.....  
And still we laugh  
and still we run  
and still we throw ourselves  
upon love's boats  
but it is deeper  
and much later  
than we think  
and all goes down  
and all our lovebuoys fail us  
And we drink and drown

It would seem that this last line is not the end of the poem, thus resuming with the refrain: "We squat upon the beach of love." Similarly the last poem (29) is the beginning and the end:

..... and loved  
and lost and found upon a riverbank along a  
riverrun right where it all began and so begins again.

The 29th poem represents a review of literature of all time, or the cycle of life and literature under the perspective of the phrase: "And that's the way it always is and that's the way / it always ends . . ." The poem is directly connected to the first one:

In Goya's greatest scenes we seem to see  
the people of the world  
exactly at the moment when  
they first attained the title of  
'suffering humanity.'

It is the completion of that cycle and its beginning. Suffering humanity is the theme that afflicts and concerns him the most. The work of art, Goya's paintings, are a medium to consider and ponder the present misery:

they are so bloody real  
it is as if they really existed  
And they do  
Only the landscape is changed.

The "imagination of disaster," as he denominates the artistic por-

trayal which he has recreated poetically through alliterative images, sounds evoked by the clashing of words, objects, consonants and vowels:

They writhe upon the page  
                                  in a veritable rage  
  of adversity  
Heaped up  
                                  groaning with babies and bayonets  
  under cement skies  
in an abstract landscape of blasted trees  
bent statues bats wings and beaks  
                                  slippery gibbets  
                                  cadavers and carnivorous cocks  
and all the final hollering monsters  
of the  
                                  ‘imagination of disaster’

For Ferlinghetti these people in Goya's paintings are the same as the people in the Bowery or the boardwalk of Coney Island, the crowds of Los Angeles. They are the same but with a difference:

They are the same people  
  only further from home.

Their environment has made them unnatural; it has estranged them from their natural state, subjected them and blinded their eyes with “imbecile illusions of happiness,” while America is being devoured by pollution. Ferlinghetti intends to portray a mirror of our time. Perhaps his stronger image is:

The scene shows fewer tumbrils  
                                  but more maimed citizens  
  in painted cars  
                                  and they have strange licence plates  
and engines  
                                  that devour America.

The tumbrils, carts used to carry French citizens to the guillotine, have been replaced by cancerous agents whose devastating power of death is much superior.

This is the same America that he satirically envisions in poem 2 described through the eyes of a new phantom-like Odysseus and his companion in their quest of freedom:

Sailing through the straits of Demos  
                                  we saw symbolic birds  
  shrieking over us. . .  
and while we lashed ourselves to masts  
                                  and stopt our ears with chewing gum



dying donkeys on high hills  
                                   sang low songs . . .  
                                   and helicopters from Helios  
                                   flew over us  
                                   dropping free railway tickets  
                                   from Lost Angeles to Heaven  
                                   and promising Free Elections

The illusion of the times, the great expectations, the great ideals and dreams of democratic freedom, once having reached the shores, are nullified. "Lost Angeles to Heaven" is another ironic, bitter reference to that illusory, crumbling world as he saw it.

The surrealist picture of poem 3 and 4 are an outgrowth of poem 2 in which through "The poet's eye obscenely seeing," we are given a chaotic representation of this America:

                                  with its ghost towns and empty Ellis Islands  
                                   and its surrealist landscape of  
                                   mindless prairies  
                                   supermarket suburbs  
                                   steamheated cemeteries  
                                   cinerama holy days  
                                   and protesting cathedrals

"The surface of the round world," as he calls it, is a depressing sight of objects, of materialistic values which have dehumanized it, and created a plastic decaying counterpart, relentlessly and mindlessly piling up litter and rubbish. The scene is enlarged and compressed in poem 4 with the addition, however, of the atomic bomb. With his usual precision of alliterative power, the poet recreates before our eyes the surrealist picture of the atomic explosion and the madness of a humanity which does not realize that there will be spring no more. The result of all this is expressed by Ferlinghetti in nine words powerful in their simplicity:

                                  And lost teacups  
                                   full of our ashes  
                                   float by.

Poems 5 and 6 deal with religion and, in particular, with two figures: Jesus and St. Francis. He tells the story of Jesus in a casual, colloquial but direct and meaningful way:

                                  You're hot  
                                   they tell him  
                                   And they cool him  
                                   They stretch him on the Tree to cool.

Ferlinghetti called himself a "Catholique manqué." Contrary to what one may believe, this particular poem is not against religion. It

is, rather, a social satire, a statement of skepticism, as is clearly shown in attributing the notion that God is dead to the "usual unreliable sources" of the "late world news." It is significant that Ferlinghetti attributes this to the media, thus implying that he does not believe it. At the same time it does not mean that he is a believer.

The story told in poem 6 can be better understood if one considers the characters (St. Francis, the birds, the sun, the naked young lady) in light of St. Francis' life and the "Canticle of Brother Sun." Imagine St. Francis, who used to speak to birds while Brother Sun shone in its clarity, yet they are not there:

They were putting up the statue  
of St. Francis  
in front of the church  
of St. Francis  
in the city of San Francisco  
in a little side street  
just off the Avenue  
where no birds sang  
and the sun was coming up on time  
in its usual fashion  
and just beginning to shine  
on the statue of St. Francis

While old Italians and reporters are listening to the young priest lecturing on the life and miracles of St. Francis, a young virgin appears, as Francis appeared at one point in front of the Bishop at Assisi "purely naked," and the virgin "singing to herself" as Francis sang. The reader feels that the absence of the birds and the partial presence of the sun may give a negative connotation to St. Francis in contrast to the young lady:

... wearing only a very small  
bird's nest  
in a very existential place.

It may propose, thus, an image of reality against illusion as in the previous poem, where Jesus has not come down from the Tree. These two poems, which deal with two religious figures, convey the perceptions of a skeptic who, though not insulting or attacking religion, feels that it is an illusory idea. Yet in the actions and images of both Jesus and Francis, Ferlinghetti can feel quite at home as two characters not foreign to the culture of the Beat Generation and that of the sixties. He ridicules what people have made of them. This ambiguity toward religion is reflected in another poem "Christ Climbed Down," in the section entitled "Oral Messages."





as they always are  
in scenes like that  
because it is supposed to be  
a painting of their souls . . . ;

There would be nothing but "fountains of imagination," says Ferlinghetti. That is what Dante did on the poetic level, though, for his *Paradiso* is a unique and imaginative creation which breaks away from tradition. Nevertheless Ferlinghetti's intent is clear for his "fountains of imagination" express the idea of unbridled, free imagination. It is interesting to note that in his "Paradiso" he would not paint

. . . anxious angels telling them  
how heaven is  
the perfect picture of  
a monarchy  
. . . no fires burning  
in the hellish holes below  
in which I might have stepped  
nor any altars in the sky . . .

These are three elements to which he seems to object, in so doing he brings in Hell and adds a personal experience — "in which I might have stepped" — that clarifies what he means by:

Not like Dante  
\* discovering a *commedia*  
upon the slopes of heaven.

This may suggest that the happy ending Dante discovers in the *Paradiso* is useless to him, thus eliminating Hell and Purgatory and creating only a *Paradiso*.

The idea of imagination and freedom of creation is present in poem 14 where Chagall's mother might represent traditional and artistic restrictions, whereas the artist wants absolute freedom:

Don't let that horse  
eat that violin  
cried Chagall's mother  
But he  
kept right on  
painting  
And became famous  
And kept on painting

The Horse With Violin In Mouth<sup>7</sup>

This artistic freedom is reinforced in poem 15 where the poet is likened to an acrobat:

Constantly risking absurdity  
and death

whenever he performs  
 above the heads  
 of his audience  
 the poet like an acrobat  
 climbs on rime  
 to a high wire of his own

It has been pointed out that Ferlinghetti "confuses a high-wire performer with a trapeze performer,"<sup>8</sup> as the poet is on a high-wire and wants to catch Beauty which: "stands and waits / with gravity / to start her death-defying leap." It is possible, however, that the poet wanted to express this paradox exactly because this "death-defying leap" is suicidal, thus justifying "constantly risking absurdity and death . . . in the empty air of existence."

The "Mystery of Existence" and the theme of illusion and reality are preponderant in these poems, including 16 through 21, in which Ferlinghetti truly does not distinguish himself as a poet, except when he engages in clarity and simplicity as in poem 19:

In woods where many rivers run  
   among the unbent hills  
 and fields in our childhood  
   where ricks and rainbows mix in memory  
 although our "fields" were streets  
   I see again those myriad mornings rise  
   when every living thing  
   cast its shadow in eternity  
 all day long in the light  
   like early morning  
 with its sharp shadows shadowing  
   a paradise  
   that I hardly dreamed of  
   nor hardly knew to think  
   of this unshaven today  
   with its derisive rooks  
 the rise above dry trees  
   and crawl and cry  
 and question every other  
   spring and thing

Poems 24 through 28, on the other hand, deal with the theme of love. There is a sense of longing for love, for lost times, recaptured only in recollection through dreams that only crash with reality:

. . . the heart flops over  
   gasping "Love"  
 a foolish fish which tries to draw  
   its breath from flesh of air . . .

or as can be seen in poem 26 "That 'sensual phosphorescence my



youth delighted in',” where perhaps the illumination and the poetic image is best conveyed by the words “and (ah) / bright eyes,” rather than the phantasmagorical recreation of love itself and the women. It is a ritual of birth and death with the overwhelming question: “Dove sta amore,” which the poet does not really pose as a question, rather as a statement that love lies in a “Too sweet painsong” and “In passages of night.”

A note of melancholy, of sadness permeates Ferlinghetti's poems, they reflect disillusion with a world devoid of real values and also with his own private world. He is, therefore, forced to express himself, at times, with phrases, not in complete sentences (as in poem 29). His concerns in these poems are universal: the environment, society, politics, existence, poetry, art, love, religion, the conflict of phantasy and reality. They are all expressed with precision, imagination and alliteration which is one of the most powerful elements of his poetic text. In the section ‘Pictures of the Gone World’ (1955), poem 11, Ferlinghetti expresses in most cogent terms his perception of the reality of this world:

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

.....

Yes

but then right in the middle of it  
comes the smiling  
mortician

<sup>1</sup>Crade D. Hopkins, “The Poetry of Lawrence Ferlinghetti: A Reconsideration,” *Italian Americana*, Autumn 1974, p. 63.

<sup>2</sup>Samuel Charters, “Lawrence Ferlinghetti,” in his *Some Poems / Poets: Studies in American Underground Poetry Since 1945* (Oyez, 1971), p. 82.

<sup>3</sup>Vernon Young in *Parnassus, Poetry in Review*, Spring-Summer 1974, pp. 170-171.

<sup>4</sup>L. Ferlinghetti, *A Coney Island of the Mind* (New York: New Directions 1958), p. 8.

<sup>5</sup>Grade D. Hopkins (op. cit., p. 69) states: "A great deal of Ferlinghetti's poetry deals with that subject in one way or another, and it early involves the question of reality, the ideal versus the actual."

<sup>6</sup>The image of the circus appears similarly in a poem by Ungaretti, "I fiumi": "Mi tengo a quest'albero mutilato / abbandonato in questa dolina / che ha il languore / di un circo / prima o dopo lo spettacolo."

<sup>7</sup>It is significant that Ferlinghetti mentions several painters: Goya, Bosch, Chagall, Picasso, Leonardo (The Last Supper) and the artist Cellini. They are artists who appeal to his imagination and poetic images.

<sup>8</sup>R.P. Dickey (*Sewanee Review*, Fall 1974) states: "He confuses a high-wire performer with a trapeze performer who would attempt to catch a fellow performer leaping from a higher place. If the fellow performer attempted to leap and be caught by someone on a high wire it would be a "death-defying" leap, it would be suicidal. And so is the performance of this well-known poem in its failure of the imagination proper as well as by its reductive presentation of the poet as a pop entertainer critically dependent upon an immediate audience, its revelation of the failure of the moral imagination."