

A Fling with Ferlinghetti

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IT has rarely been easy to plan a lively and stimulating approach to the teaching of poetry. It has caused many English teachers extra hours of planning, originating creative approaches, and perhaps hoping that their students will like the unit. Often overlooked in presenting American poetry to high school students is the contemporary verse which has appeared in recent years, what some might even call beatnik poetry. Poetry should be an experience for students, not a study, much less a boring one. Contemporary poetry, I believe, can give students an experience that no other verse can. It can spark life into a seemingly dead thing, and one of the most stirring American poets of recent years is Lawrence Ferlinghetti.

I have used Ferlinghetti's *A Coney Island of the Mind*¹ for the past two years in junior English classes with all boys. The reactions have varied from excited enthusiasm to strong protest. But the important thing is that there

have been reactions. Though many teachers, perhaps, would find Ferlinghetti's poems offensive and even crude, I am convinced that they speak to the students as no other poems that I have seen do. Today's teen-agers can easily associate with Ferlinghetti's style. Yet, this author has a definite discipline of form. But he takes basic American speech and makes it sing in a way that no other American poet that I know of has done. His poems reflect simplicity amid complexity.

The force that students find dominant in Ferlinghetti's work is social criticism. He speaks in their language, he criticizes what they themselves might criticize, he often criticizes them. This criticism perhaps characterizes the emotion in his poetry. It is strong, it wastes no words whatsoever, it is deeply thought-provoking. In "Autobiography" he writes:

I am leading a quiet life
in Mike's Place every day
reading the Classified columns,
I have read the Reader's Digest
from cover to cover
and noted the close identification
of the United States and
the Promised Land

¹Lawrence Ferlinghetti, *A Coney Island of the Mind*. Copyright © 1955, 1958 by Lawrence Ferlinghetti. Poems reprinted by permission of New Directions Publishing Corporation.

where every coin is marked
 In God We Trust
 but the dollar bills do not have it
 being gods unto themselves.
 I read the Want Ads daily
 looking for a stone a leaf
 an unfound door.
 I hear America singing
 in the Yellow Pages.

Ferlinghetti speaks of things that are important to today's teen-agers, from apathy to war, from commercialism to religion, from tyranny to freedom. In one poem, "The world is a beautiful place," that we have spent as long as three days discussing, he says, in part:

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
 or maybe only starving
 some of the time
 which isn't half so bad
 if it isn't you

In the last stanza of poem #4 of the first part of the collection, "In a sur- realist year . . ." the author reflects on the use of the bomb. He concludes:

O it was a spring
 of fur leaves and cobalt flowers
 when cadillacs fell thru the trees like rain
 drowning meadows with madness
 while out of every imitation cloud
 dropped myriad wingless crowds
 of nutless nagasaki survivors
 And lost teacups
 full of our ashes
 floated by

Ferlinghetti concludes a stirring poem about the Christ of Calvary, "Sometime during eternity," with this stanza:

Him just hang there
 on His Tree
 looking real Petered out
 and real cool
 and also
 according to a roundup
 of late world news
 from the usual unreliable sources
 real dead

LAWRENCE Ferlinghetti is highly imaginative, powerfully descriptive, and unusually free. He strikes me as an intensely spiritual man, perhaps not in the traditional connotation of the phrase, but perhaps in a realistic meaning. He thinks; he looks at man; many of his poems have a prayerful quality about them. I am convinced that time spent by my students in experiencing and discussing these poems is time well spent.

I use *Coney Island of the Mind* to begin our experience of American poetry. It opens the eyes of many students who thought poetry was out of their world. It draws the students into the poetry and creates a new experience for them. In two years now, my students have had a variety of reactions to Ferlinghetti. Some of them herald him as their new-found champion of keen poetic views of life. They are stirred by his poems. They see that a poem can be exciting, interesting, meaningful, and modern. Many say that Ferlinghetti exposes many problems in the world society and pricks their minds to analyze the problems and perhaps arrive at some solutions. They find his language to be "in," strong, and much like their own.

Other students react against Ferlinghetti. Some claim that his lines cannot possibly be poetry, much less good poetry. "He just splatters words on a page," they say. "There's no rhyme or rhythm. It's not a poem at all." Some of these students feel that Ferlinghetti is too negative in his approach to life, that everything is bad or even dirty.

Some of our most lively discussions took place when some students accused

his poems of being pornographic. That proved to be a heated and interesting battle. Students on one side claimed that his numerable references to such things as semen, intercourse, constipation, and nudity are simply disgusting and revolting. "It's not art," they claim; "anyone can write about these things." Most students, however, defend Ferlinghetti against these attacks. They see these references as part of his realistic approach to life. "The poems do not stimulate or arouse anyone physically," one student declared, "so we can hardly classify them as pornographic." I suppose both sides left the room with their opinions and convictions unchanged.

The important point in all this is, however, that the poems did stir the students to think and react. Hardly any student was able to read and experience *Coney Island* without having reactions. The boys agreed on very little, which just might be very good. Some of the finest and most interesting and well done compositions that these students did all year were written on their reaction to Ferlinghetti. The majority of the papers showed deep thought and, in some cases, profound insight. But they all had something to say and they *wanted* to say it. Some of the poems that were often commented upon in these papers were "The world is a beautiful place," "Christ Climbed Down," "Autobiography," "Junkman's Obbligato," and "I Am Waiting."

For a comparative media experience, the poetry of Ferlinghetti can be experienced along with some of the im-

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- DuBois' "Litant of Atlanta" (poem)
 Selections from "Revolution" (essay)
 McKay's "If We Must Die" (poem)
 "The Harlem Dancer" (poem)
 Locke's "Negro in American Culture" (essay)
 Cullen's "Heritage" (poem)
 Wright's "Almos' a Man" (short story)

For James Weldon Johnson I prefer Harold Scott's interpretations of *God's Trombones* (United Artists recording). Langston Hughes' offerings are almost unlimited, but I always include "The Negro Speaks of Rivers," "I, Too," "Mother to Son," "Lenox Avenue Mural," and "I Dream a World" (poems). I also play two recordings, *The Best of Simple*, read by Melvin Stuart, and Hughes' musical play, *Jericho-Jim Crow* (Folkways). Baldwin receives special treatment as each student is asked to purchase and read a copy of *Go Tell It on the Mountain*. Adequate discussions and quizzes are also used for that novel. And, of course, the students will want to hear excerpts read from Cleaver's *Soul on*

Ice, and maybe even one of LeRoi Jones' *Tales*, although many English teachers will likely omit them. Dorson's *American Negro Folktales* (Fawcett) is also sometimes used. The unit is concluded with a discussion of Redding's article, "The Negro Writer and American Literature," from the book, *Anger and Beyond* (Harper). That chapter contains an account of three times that Negro literature was almost "killed" in the United States. Too, we read a few poems from black nationalist mimeographed publications; and, of course, black students spend some time writing new creations.

One may question the necessity of this broad coverage, or the wisdom of such a lengthy unit. But I am convinced that whoever first comes up with a whole year's program of Negro literature, interwoven with other aspects of communications, will also solve many motivational problems in English classes in ghetto schools. The enthusiasm I have met in this unit overwhelmingly buttresses my contention. So I, for one, am heralding the arrival of black literature studies as a key component of Black Power.

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pressionistic films in the Lipsett Style such as "Free Fall," "Very Nice, Very Nice," and "21-87." Most of Ferlinghetti's poetry, I believe, attempts to convey the same things as do the Lipsett films.

With the initial experience of Lawrence Ferlinghetti under their belts, most of the students, I found, were anxious to delve into other American verse. We kept our experience to twentieth century poetry, and time and time again the stu-

dents made references to Ferlinghetti when discussing other poetry. The experience with his poetry was valuable for these students and it generated in them a greater excitement for poetry. As one boy wrote, "Lawrence Ferlinghetti's exceptional versatility provides him with the ability to write provocative poetry, which thoroughly penetrates the subject matter and still manages to leave the reader pondering the poem's full impact."