

## “Reinvent America and the World”: How Lawrence Ferlinghetti and City Lights Books Cultivated an International Literature of Dissent

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# "Reinvent America and the World": How Lawrence Ferlinghetti and City Lights Books Cultivated an International Literature of Dissent

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The aim was to publish across the board, avoiding the provincial and the academic.... I had in mind rather an international, dissident, insurgent ferment.

Lawrence Ferlinghetti, *City Lights Pocket Poets Anthology*<sup>1</sup>

- <sup>1</sup> In February, 1965, poet and publisher Lawrence Ferlinghetti received a charming letter. "We know many about you and your insane angels," the letter began. "As our feelings and ideas are similar with ideas of your friends / Kerouac, Ginsberg, Corso, etc. / we should be very glad to be in contact with some of they... we strove to correspond with American youngs, but we haven't luck" ("City Lights" 3:11). Luboš Kostroň and Dušan Vesely, the Czech teens who wrote to Ferlinghetti, went on to explain how they frequently come together with like-minded youth in their home town of Brno to play jazz records and recite poetry. Recently, Kostroň and Vesely wrote, they had been inspired by *Starting from San Francisco*, Ferlinghetti's Whitmanesque, road-trip-informed collection of long free-verse poems published in 1961 by New Directions. Ferlinghetti's poem "Underwear," in which the slightly peeved narrator reflects on the "shocking problems" associated with undergarments, must have had special relevance to Kostroň and Vesely. In the poem, the narrator's musing about the restrictions imposed by underwear lead him to a humorous analogy with totalitarianism:

Underwear controls everything in the end  
Take foundation garments for instance  
They are really fascist forms  
of underground government  
making people believe  
something but the truth  
telling you what you can or can't do. (51)

- 2 Ferlinghetti received a considerable amount of fan mail, but something about this letter inspired him to begin an archival folder that eventually became stuffed with correspondence, news clippings, and poetry related to the Czech Republic, then known as Czechoslovakia. Many of those letters, like the one from Kostoř and Vesely, praised Ferlinghetti's publishing record. Others featured poets inquiring about publishing opportunities with City Lights. Newspaper clippings reported the considerable excitement and havoc Allen Ginsberg met in Prague when he was crowned "Kral Majales," King of May, in 1965.<sup>i</sup> The correspondence collectively expresses the desire to make connections with the vibrant avant-garde literary movement that seemed to have sprung from the bookstore and press Ferlinghetti co-founded at 261 Columbus Avenue in San Francisco's North Beach.
  
- 3 By the mid-1960s, City Lights was recognized worldwide as bookshop, publishing house, host of the West Coast paperback revolution, sponsor of the Beat Movement, home of the Pocket Poets series, torch-bearer for free speech movements, and early promoter of global comparative literature. Ferlinghetti had an international reputation as a staunch defender of free speech thanks to the 1957 obscenity trial over Allen Ginsberg's *Howl*. He regularly declined government funding from arts and humanities organizations in order to retain editorial independence. His disdain for capitalism and consumer culture was well known, as were his public condemnations of war, environmental degradation, and nuclear weapons development. His own verse had come to exemplify the relationship between poetry and progressive politics. Published as a broadside by City Lights in 1958, read publically, and translated widely, *Tentative Description of a Dinner Given to Promote the Impeachment of President Eisenhower* spoke to dissident and anti-totalitarian movements in the United States, Europe, and throughout Latin America. The 1957 LP *Poetry Reading at the Cellar*, which he recorded with Kenneth Rexroth and the Cellar Jazz Quintet of San Francisco, solidified his reputation as a promoter of what he called the "wide-open poetry of engagement" (Woods 66). Ferlinghetti, not even fifteen years after the founding of his iconic bookstore and ten years after the establishment of its publishing arm, had become a global conductor of new literature, exposing American audiences to European expressions of dissent, and introducing European readers to an American counter-cultural tradition. What he was trying to cultivate, as Ferlinghetti explained, was "an international, dissident, insurgent ferment" (*City Lights Pocket Poets Anthology* i).
  
- 4 In his book *Global Revolution and the Rise of Détente*, Jeremi Suri identifies the way Cold War pressures inspired the growth of global revolutionary movements. Global powers, Suri explains, responded to the domestic unrest with détente. This political strategy was designed to maintain order and contain the threat of youth-and-student activism worldwide. It is within this context that Ferlinghetti sought to enhance relationships among those same activists global powers wished to suppress. He did so by promoting a language specific to their concerns, by publishing poetry that exemplified free expression, anti-totalitarianism, and personal liberation. When Allen Ginsberg, City Lights' best-known poet, was crowned Prague's King of May in 1965, he reflected on the growth of dissident feeling: "People asked me what I thought so I told them," Ginsberg told *The New York Times*. "I talked about the greater values, the sense of new consciousness which seems to be going through the youth of all countries—the sexual revolution, the widening of the areas of consciousness, [and] the abhorrence of

ideology" (Kostelanetz, "Ginsberg"). Ferlinghetti's bookstore and press, and the poets like Ginsberg whose work he championed, embodied the voices of the "insane angels."

- 5 Other work Ferlinghetti published during the Cold War—by East German poets, Chilean poets, Soviet poets, French and Spanish poets, and American poets—remains an important archive of his efforts to establish an international, dissident voice. But it tells only half the story. In order to understand how he cultivated relationships in the service of radical literary production, one must consider the rich record provided by his correspondence. Ferlinghetti's correspondence between 1954-1972 provides significant evidence of the precise and purposeful way the publisher searched for international poetry from which to build that "international, dissident ferment." Letters among poets, students, translators, and other publishers reveal the extent to which Ferlinghetti believed that global, avant-garde poetry could critique the structures of political and social power. The list of Pocket Poets and other City Lights titles before 1972 include work that resisted Cold War nationalism, the Red Scare, heteronormativity, and political conformity. The story behind the creation of that list that remains untold. "Besides being essentially dissident," Ferlinghetti explained, the role of the independent press and bookshop is "to discover, to find the new voices and give voice to them" (*City Lights Pocket Poets Anthology* i, my italics). To construct the following narrative of discovery, I rely on a rich body of archived correspondence between Ferlinghetti and a number of poets, translators, and readers from around the world between 1954-1972.<sup>ii</sup>
- 6 Ferlinghetti shared with his friend Kenneth Rexroth the belief that the avant-garde poet must reject the idea that "a poem is an end in itself, an anonymous machine for providing aesthetic experience" and embrace the poem as a radical tool for urgent communication (Rexroth 506). Ferlinghetti turned first to European post-war poetry for that model.

## 1. "Say No to the Teacher": Prévert and *Paroles*

- 7 Ferlinghetti's passion for bringing high-quality translations to the American reading public began with his discovery of French poet Jacques Prévert's verse, scrawled on a paper tablecloth in a St. Brieuc café. Prévert's 1946 collection *Paroles* sold more than 500,000 copies in France; Ferlinghetti explained this almost unheard of market success by arguing that his poetic hero resonated deeply with a disaffiliated generation: "Prévert," Ferlinghetti wrote, "spoke particularly to the French youth immediately after the War, especially to those who grew up during the Occupation and felt totally estranged from Church and State" (Ferlinghetti *Paroles* 4). The poems used simple language, cinematic images, and black humor to confront the dehumanizing effects of authority on individuals. Prévert's successful collection was brought out by Les Editions Minuit, a publishing house founded underground in 1941 in response to the censorship exercised during the Nazi Occupation. In Prévert, Ferlinghetti found a model for his own poetry—the *boulevardier*, the observant, populist, and often satirical "café poet." In Les Editions Minuit, Ferlinghetti found an inspiration for what later would become central to City Lights' mission: innovative book publishing that resisted conservatism and censorship.
- 8 After settling in San Francisco in 1951, Ferlinghetti set about translating selected poems from *Paroles* and seeking a publisher for them. To his dismay, his early efforts to

bring Prévert translations to a North American audience initially met with resistance. In a curt letter from New York literary agent Margaret Christie, for example, Ferlinghetti is thanked for sending recent "beautifully translated" poems of Jacques Prévert. Christie regrets to say, however, she cannot make Ferlinghetti an offer because her firm confines itself "fairly strictly to American poets." "In any case," she went on, "I think readers capable of enjoying these poems would be readers who would much prefer to read them in their original French" ("City Lights" 10:22). Ferlinghetti firmly underlined Christie's assessment in green pen and scribbled under her words "first class assininity." In the margins of that letter, he began to compose an argument that would inform his career as a translator and publisher of international poetry: "Readers capable of enjoying the Iliad would much prefer to read it in its original Greek. Readers capable of enjoying Confucius would much prefer to read him in the original Chinese. Readers capable of enjoying the Bible would much prefer to read it in its original." At the bottom of Christie's letter, he scrawled "These are public poems" ("City Lights" 10:22).

- 9 "Public," for Ferlinghetti, suggested two things: one, the poem had inherent power to speak like no other medium, and two, it should—and must—be available beyond the borders of region, language, and class. Reflecting on his long commitment to bring international voices to an American audience, Ferlinghetti mused, "What has proved most fascinating are the continuing cross-currents and cross-fertilizations between poets widely separated by language or geography, from France to Germany to Italy to America North and South, East and West, coalescing in a truly supra-national poetic voice" (citylights.com). Rendering contemporary poetry accessible to a wide reading audience was central to Ferlinghetti's international publishing concerns. He was unwilling to accept the main-stream assumption that avant-garde poetry was somehow inaccessible or of little interest to the American public. He rejected the notion cultivated by purveyors of modernist poetry that only the highbrow audience would "get it." Ferlinghetti was not after the readers of the *Partisan Review*; he wished to capture the attention of the youth, the underclass, the disenfranchised—all those considered "middle" or "low" brow readers into the 1950s—who would benefit from an exposure to international poetry by coming into solidarity with like-minded dissidents from all over the world. Like Prévert, Ferlinghetti believed the poem was a tool that could help expose and challenge totalitarianism.
- 10 He kept up his efforts to place his translations, and finally, and somewhat auspiciously, he found a home for some of his translations: Peter Martin, editor of *City Lights* magazine, accepted six translations by Lawrence Ferling (as he was still known). In the spring 1953 issue, San Francisco readers got a taste of Prévert's humor and direct language. In "The Dunce," Ferlinghetti rendered a signature Prévert theme—the everyman's resistance to the forces that oppress and control—into language that transcended cultural specificity:

He says no with his head  
but he says yes with his heart  
he says yes to what he loves  
he says no to the teacher  
he stands  
he is questioned  
and all the problems are posed  
sudden giggles grip him  
and he erases all

the figures and the words  
the dates and the names  
the phrases and the traps  
and despite the threats of the master  
to the howls of the infant prodigies  
with chalk of every color  
on the blackboard of misfortune  
he draws the face of happiness. (15)

- 11 The student rejected authority in the form of the teacher and the "figures and the words... the phrases and the traps" and instead made his own joyful statement. In the existentialist terms so prevalent in the 1950s, Prévert and Ferlinghetti here advocated a turning away from the meaning made by the herd, and instead finding a way to make one's own meaning. Surely one reason for transforming City Lights the bookshop into City Lights the publishing house was to provide a venue for Prévert and poets like him.
- 12 In 1953, Ferlinghetti and Martin opened City Lights Bookstore together in San Francisco's North Beach neighborhood; in 1955 Ferlinghetti launched the Pocket Poets series, and in 1958, he received long-awaited permission from the French publisher Gallimard that Prévert had agreed to a City Lights edition of *Paroles*. After working on several poems from *Paroles*, Ferlinghetti asked his French-speaking friend and poet Marie Ponsot to look over his translations. Ponsot was no fan of Prévert; "i'm the only one i know," she writes, "who really reviles him... I've read all prevert and havent found a clean idea or an underived expression of emotion yet. He's got the soul of a Delly News sob sister" ("Lawrence Ferlinghetti Papers" 29:1). Despite her playful disdain for Prévert, she had praise for Ferlinghetti's translations: "you improve prevert in spots by having a less ding-dong tin-pan alley ear than he (and a certain tendency to make his sentimentalities into sentiments for which he shd be dam grateful)." Although Ponsot accused Prévert of being a "vulgar snob" and a "repetitive popularizer," there was little doubt as to Prévert's popularity. By the time City Lights published the first American collection of his poetry, close to half a million copies of *Paroles* were in print in France. In the first draft of the Translator's Note of the City Lights edition, Ferlinghetti called him "the poet of postwar France." Ferlinghetti tried to explain why: Prévert, he wrote, spoke particularly to the French youth who had been radicalized during the Nazi Occupation of their country; he was the voice of the "wise street-urchin—precocious, mocking, irreverent, bitter, dupe of nothing and no one" ("Lawrence Ferlinghetti Papers" 29:1). He also acknowledged Ponsot's criticism: "one American poet has said" Prévert has a "tinpanalley ear for a cadence.... And the cheapest mind this side of Hollywood" (*Paroles* 5). What I find most compelling about the Translator's Note is the way Ferlinghetti used it as both a criticism and a "call to arms" to American readers, who in his opinion, shared some vague feeling of dissent with Prévert's French audience, but who were as yet "an ineffectual Underground made up of the 'disaffiliated,' the hipster, the poet, the bop musician, the semi-literate subterranean." He continued to urge American readers to adopt the kind of poetic observation notable in Prévert poems: the poet "as a seeing-eye dog in the streets" (5).
- 13 Ferlinghetti's translations were published as number nine in the Pocket Poets Series. Margaret Christie, the literary agent who had first declined the Prévert translations six years earlier, felt the need to write. "I really do congratulate you on whatever share you had in this POCKET POET series. I think it's a splendid thing to do something about getting material like this into inexpensive print. I'll tuck in a dollar, and ask you if

you'll be so kind as to send me the PREVERT translated by yourself" ("City Lights" 10:22)

- 14 Translations are notoriously tricky to get just right. Poems prepared by a taxidermist, to quote Robert Lowell's famous injunction, "are likely to be stuffed birds." Scholarly discussions in mid-century around poetry translations tended to focus on what was lost: the nuance, the cultural context, the rhythm and meter. As a translator and publisher, however, Ferlinghetti focused on the potential gains. By depicting the universal expression of dissidence into active, colloquial, "hip" English, he hoped to inspire a critical mass of readers to find the language—and the courage—to snap out of the trance imposed by consumer culture. Introducing American audiences to international poems of protest, and to the beautiful urgency with which protest could be expressed, became a critical goal of Ferlinghetti's international publishing efforts. In his work with the Prévert poems, Ferlinghetti certainly relied upon his excellent command of French, but more important, he had the ear for the rhythm and language of open-form, accessible, poetry. Soon, Ferlinghetti's skill as a translator came to be widely recognized, and his power as a publisher of international poetry came to be sought after. He knew how to reach an audience.
- 15 In his efforts to publish and encourage an "international, dissident, insurgent ferment," he became increasingly involved with new international poetry, cultivating friendships with poets, editors, and other translators who shared his interest in the international avant-garde. Along with Prévert's work, his relationship with Kenneth Rexroth proved to be an extremely important early influence on Ferlinghetti's international publishing efforts. Indeed, Rexroth's celebrated Spanish translations became *Thirty Spanish Poems of Love and Exile* (1956), the second publication in Ferlinghetti's Pocket Poets Series. The Spanish-language poets were celebrated members of the international avant-garde and well-known dissidents: Marxist poet Raphael Alberti and Federico Garcia Lorca were aligned with the Spanish group Generation of '27; Cuban poet Nicolás Guillén, like Chilean poet Pablo Neruda, were political activists. Publishing an anthology that included such a line-up was a major coup for Ferlinghetti; listing Rexroth as a City Lights author was even better.
- 16 Rexroth was first published by James Laughlin in the 1937 annual *New Directions in Poetry and Prose*. In the 1940s he was fluent in several languages and began to cultivate an interest in world literatures and cultures. In the 1950s he was already known as a champion of anti-establishment poetry; he promoted San Francisco Renaissance poets on KPFA and helped establish the link between spoken poetry and jazz music. In the 1960s, Rexroth wrote a weekly column called "Classics Revisited" for the *Saturday Review*. He wrote eighty-nine short, lucid essays celebrating and explaining classics from western and eastern literary traditions. In the 1960s Rexroth became deeply interested in Japanese and Chinese poetry, published several translations, and shared his enthusiasm for Asian culture, religions, and mysticism with many Bay Area poets. Together, Ferlinghetti and Rexroth did more than any other mid-century American poet to call attention to international poetry. In addition to his Chinese and Japanese translations, Rexroth's translated and published poems from Greek, Latin, Italian, French, Spanish, and Swedish.
- 17 *Thirty Poems* was an uncontroversial publication; Rexroth had already made beautiful translations of Raphael Alberti and others. The poets may be communists, or Marxists, or activists, or anarchists, but they were largely lauded as national heroes in their own



countries. And there was no permissions fuss, either. Rexroth simply offered the poems to Ferlinghetti. In a letter from his Sequoia retreat Rexroth indicated he'd just heard from a mutual friend about "the program of booklets" Ferlinghetti was planning to bring out. "If you want something of mine I can let you have a selection of my translations of Spanish... it could be '30 Spanish Poems.'" ("City Lights" 11:11). It wasn't long after, however, that the Pocket Poets publisher experienced political and aesthetic difficulties.

- 18 When Ferlinghetti began working with American poet Jerome Rothenberg in the late 1950s, he was forced to refine his thinking about international avant-garde poetry. Ferlinghetti wanted to capitalize on the success and global popularity of Allen Ginsberg; Rothenberg, on the other hand, insisted on searching for a vernacular avant-garde voice. Rothenberg eventually collected and translated the poems that would become *New Young German Poets* (1959; number 11 in the Pocket Poets Series). Their editorial relationship proved crucial in shaping the way City Lights would continue to publish world poetry.
- 19 In the United States, mid-century avant-garde poetry "talked back" to the restrictions imposed by a culture of conformity. On one front, the poetry resisted the dullness of mass culture, and on the other, it rejected the exclusivity and cool remove of high art. Poets like Allen Ginsberg used the language of "hipness" to portray alternative lifestyles. But what language did Spanish, German, or Soviet poets use to express dissent? As letters and manuscripts piled high on his desk, Ferlinghetti began to understand that avant-garde aesthetics were being powerfully shaped by San Francisco poetry, especially by the global popularity of Ginsberg's *Howl*. The problem became clear: how to celebrate an international avant-garde united by the rhetoric of subculture, but still unique enough, still culturally specific enough, and good enough, to sell books? How to find exciting, hip poetry that was both culturally authentic, and universal?
- 20 While he was wrapping up the Prévert book, Ferlinghetti was exchanging letters with Rothenberg, who was living in New York City and trying to return to writing after serving in the U.S. Army. The spirit of McCarthyism proved particularly repressive for Rothenberg, who felt isolated as a writer until he encountered the Beats. He saw their work as "the first public signal that we weren't alone in the desire to assert or reassert what we thought of as a new revolution-of-the-word and a second awakening of a radical and unfettered modernism" (poetryfoundation.org). Like so many poets, he was undeniably influenced by Ginsberg. He was, however, wary of endless imitation. His letters to Ferlinghetti were astutely critical. Ferlinghetti urged him to find German poets who sounded like Ginsberg; in April, 1958, Rothenberg responded with his reservations:

I've come across number of HOWL-like things more or less, which I'd certainly want included. My only kick is against concentrating on this exclusively, mostly because I think that, apart from saleability, it would tend to get repetitious and would be a falsification of what's going on in Germany in the way of good, new, and dissenting poetry.... I wouldn't want to be a party to drowning out the voice of any real poet because he isn't following some current line or other. Unless perhaps you call the anthology NEW YOUNG GERMAN POETS WHO WRITE LIKE ALLEN GINSBERG. ("City Lights" 11:19)
- 21 Rothenberg goes on to insist on editorial freedom. If, as translator, he discovered "some strikingly original and vocal poets" who only resembled themselves, he hoped



Ferlinghetti would agree that to be a "pretty damn important thing." Rothenberg's forceful argument was in keeping with the dramatic shift in poetic aesthetics, in line with what Daniel Belgrad has termed the "aesthetics of spontaneity." Avant-garde poetry called for wide-scale social change by focusing on individual, metaphysical, and *personal* responses to social ills. As Ginsberg himself wrote describing *Howl*, society is merciless, and the poem "is an affirmative act of mercy and compassion... a private, individual act of mercy" (qtd. in Morgan and Peters, 40).

- 22 Ferlinghetti was apparently moved by Rothenberg's argument. Subsequent letters from Rothenberg did not return to the task of finding poems in German that sounded like *Howl*. Instead, his long letters offered close observations of what German underground poetry looked like during the Cold War. The anthology, wrote Rothenberg in a letter from June, 1958, "is an attempt to illustrate the major tendencies of the younger poetic left wing in Germany." He was still looking for a German poem of "direct political protest" but referred to the ongoing fear German poets-of-protest experienced. Rothenberg blamed the legacy of Hitler, who was infamously against modern "corruptions" in literature and art. Rothenberg described his disappointment at failing to uncover few truly experimental poets, and complained that many so-called protest poems were highly imitative of American protest verse of the thirties—which in general focused on large-scale social change, not on individual experience. What Rothenberg did discover was a thread of concern over atomic fallout, an expressed fear "for all the speechless creatures that would vanish in the atomic dust" ("City Lights" 11:19).
- 23 In January 1959, Rothenberg wrote that he's finally pleased with the selection of poems proposed for the anthology. There was one omission which deeply disturbed both Ferlinghetti and Rothenberg, however: they could not find any young East German poets. Rothenberg speculated that the best "young people's poets are... over in the west," thus not satisfying his desire for *native* dissident poets. The problem continued to vex him, even after the German poet Hans Magnus Enzensberger (who is included in the Pocket Poets anthology) told him that no good, young, East German poet stayed in Eastern Germany. If they did stay, "they would hardly get their work published." While continuing his search, Rothenberg sent Ferlinghetti his nearly final list of "ten individuals who share a distaste for the current state of things in Germany and an adherence to one form of modern writing or another." He made it clear, even as the anthology approached the production phase, that each poet was dissident in his own way. Rothenberg took time to express his admiration at the recently released *Paroles*: "As far as I'm concerned this is what great translation should be, not a phony line in the book and the whole thing coming over straight and clear" ("City Lights" 11:19). In a subsequent note, he indicated his hope that his anthology can take a similar format.
- 24 Just weeks before *Young German Poets* was due to go to press, Rothenberg sent a jubilant note to Ferlinghetti: "Finally I think we've got the E. German you were looking for.... Ernst Jurgen Dreyer." He went on to praise the young poet's work, calling it original and distinctive, not at all derivative. But his praise was weighted with worry: Dreyer's work was written in a police state, and although he "doesn't come right out with a position like 'go fuck yourself with your atom bomb'... he broods with a sense of disaffiliation and revolt... he isn't Pasternak or Brecht protected by friends of personal power, so I'd hesitate about causing him any trouble unless he wanted it that way" ("City Lights" 11:19). In a letter from February 28, 1959, he reiterated his worry,

advising Ferlinghetti to avoid mention of Dreyer's protest or opposition, as it could be extremely dangerous for the poet himself. He went so far as to suggest perhaps covering up the fact Dreyer lived in the DDR. In response, Ferlinghetti suggested listing Dreyer as "Anonymous." In the end, thankfully, there was no need. At the end of April, Rothenberg wrote with relief that he'd received word that Dreyer had fled East Germany, so it was unnecessary to hold back any personal information.

- 25 The process by which *New Young German Poets* came to press reveals a significant amount about the political pressures involved in publishing international poetry during the Cold War. The poetry of resistance in the United States sometimes led to censorship, jail time, and obscenity trials. The obscenity trials in the United States were astutely understood to signify the cultural work literature did in challenging social constraints and norms<sup>iii</sup> (Johnson 90). But behind the Iron Curtain, the publication of incendiary literature was often impossible, and its underground dissemination could prove very dangerous to writers and distributors. Ever mindful of these real dangers, Lawrence Ferlinghetti remained sensitive to these restrictions while continuing to seek out international poetry of dissent. One of his most significant achievements proved to be the 1962 City Lights publication of *Red Cats*, which took its place as number sixteen in the Pocket Poets series.

## 2. The Long Road to Red Cats

- 26 Anselm Hollo was living in London and working for the BBC World Service in 1959. He was an aspiring poet with a passionate interest in the Beats and the poetry of the San Francisco Renaissance. In November, he wrote Ferlinghetti with the idea to publish a collection of young Finnish poets with City Lights he was calling "This Face My Face: Young Finnish Poets 1945-1960." Ferlinghetti invited Hollo to send the manuscript, which he enclosed with a long, enthusiastic letter describing the Finnish scene: "poets and painters and musicians feel that the sixties are going to open up to them, and they are anxious to make contact with all the avant-garde in the world" Hollo eagerly wrote. Of his manuscript, he explained that "The translations are close to the original Finnish, with, now, one exception: my own poems where I've felt free to 'improve' and, above all, improvise—'try to blow' in English" ("City Lights" 6:19). Hollo signed off, "LONG GLOW THE CITY LIGHTS-Yours, hopefully, Anselm H." Despite his keen hopes for a Finnish collection under the City Lights imprint, Ferlinghetti declined the project, suggesting several reasons: Finnish poets perhaps did not share common cause with American poets; they weren't silenced by cultural and aesthetic norms; there was no dissident urgency; the collection lacked a "major" poem. Hollo was deeply disappointed: "Somehow I never felt that Finnish poets were so 'far removed' from their American brethren, but then I believe in 1 reality, 1 language for the World, containing innumerable personal realities... tongues dialects & lingoos." Hollo pressed his point, volubly refuting Ferlinghetti. Finnish poets, he averred,

aren't as oppressed. But they fight, quietly. They have no Allen Ginsberg but then, who else has? They certainly have Corso Levertov Kaufman. Differently, of course. I haven't found out yet what a Major poem is. But I can feel response to the question DO YA HEAR ME TALKING TO YA DOYA HEAR WHAT I SAY? In the beginning blues language can be very hard to understand if you've learnt your English at school. I loved...your DOG [poem] though I didn't have the faintest idea who Congressman

Doyle is, instantly. Oh well: 'Le végétarien n'est pas difficile: tout ce qu'il demande, c'est une salade de trèfles à quatre feuilles.'<sup>iv</sup> ("City Lights" 6:19)

- 27 Hollo had captured Ferlinghetti's attention, perhaps because he appeared to understand so well the publisher's intention: the development of an international, youthful, avant-garde poetry and an audience who shared a desire for cultural change. Over the next several years the two developed a warm and frequent correspondence, and Ferlinghetti became a kind of literary mentor, encouraging Hollo to develop his beat-inflected poetry and praising his publishing and editing work.
- 28 Hollo, who was only twenty-five when he first wrote to Ferlinghetti, was possessed of a remarkable disposition. His letters were energetic, earnest, and often included scribbled self-deprecating drawings and comments. The two became close enough to allow for some personal reflection. In August, 1961, Hollo sent Ferlinghetti letter in which he recalled his earlier impetuosity: "And god, wasn't that a corny letter I wrote you once, embittered by rejection of the Finn-antho. Growing, growing, growing, into what, I don't know" ("City Lights" 6:19). Hollo wrote chatty letters full of news about his growing family, gossip on the international Beat scene, on Gregory Corso (who was living close to Hollo in London in 1961), on his poetic and editorial endeavors, and on his translation work (he translated Ginsberg's "Kaddish" into German, the type of work he confessed in a letter to Ferlinghetti that was "of a kind to give you the shakes sometimes, the sheer intensity and difficulty of it").
- 29 Woven throughout his newsy, cheerful letters, was the constant appeal to Ferlinghetti to publish an international anthology of young, new poetic voices. "I had another of those brilliant ideas I seem to get: an international small anthology, hell, no 'anthology,' more like a gang of poems against the gang of politicians, of boms, of bums—a happy garland of snarls" ("City Lights" 6:19). Ferlinghetti was apparently intrigued by the idea, scribbling in the letter's margin this note, "A Gang of Poems from Europe?" but nothing came of this anthology, either. Soon after, there was another proposed collaboration for an anthology whose working title was "Modern or Young Poets against the War," but that did not get any traction either. Hollo continued sending Ferlinghetti samples of his own original poems and his translation work.
- 30 Despite the difficulties in agreeing on an anthology project, the two men shared an excitement over several contemporary European poets, especially those whose work resisted cultural and political hegemony. After exchanging notes on Siberian poet Yevgeny Yevtushenko, whom Hollo noted had come to the attention of Soviet censors for his dangerous expression of "pro-Western decadent sentiment," Ferlinghetti began pressing Hollo for more information and more poems representative of the Russian and Soviet avant-garde.<sup>v</sup> In February 1962, Hollo complained that "Russian books-of-poetry are almost impossible to obtain, as they are published in very small, almost private editions" but nonetheless, with characteristic optimism, agreed that "POEMS OF THE THAW would be [a] good title" for such an anthology, were it ever to be realized ("City Lights" 6:19).
- 31 "The Thaw" in Soviet arts, as Hollo and Ferlinghetti knew well, began in the early 1950s after Nikita Khrushchev denounced Stalinism. Khrushchev's Thaw, designed to move the country away from Stalinism and toward what he considered a purer communism found in Leninism, resulted in economic and educational reforms, changes in international trade laws, and a loosening of censorship in media and the arts.

- 32 As with *New Younger German Poets*, Ferlinghetti was primarily interested in the "younger intellectuals" from the Soviet Union. Ferlinghetti and Hollo had at last seemed to have landed on an *idea* that would result in a significant anthology. Predictably, however, they went back and forth over which poets to include. They immediately agreed upon Yevgeny Yevtushenko. Hollo suggested Semyon Kirsanov, who did not quite fit Ferlinghetti's vision; he could hardly be "discovered," being an older poet who had published twenty books by 1960. But once Hollo explained his poetic apprenticeship with Vladimir Mayakovsky, the early-twentieth century poet who ushered in a new wave of avant-garde poetry, Ferlinghetti relented.
- 33 Hollo immediately began preparing the manuscript, translating both Kirsanov and Yevtushenko. In March 1962 he suggested adding anti-war poet and Boris Pasternak-mentee Andrei Voznesensky's work to the anthology. Hollo told Ferlinghetti, "I feel a bit bad about Voznesensky; his GOYA is so fine." He went on to describe a sharp insult he overheard at a recent Soviet Party Congress/Writer's Conference: "a man called Kotchetov who is the most dogmatic bastard in Marxistdom called Yevtushenko and him 'these pale-beaked chickens of poetry who would like to appear as fighting cocks'.... But man, there's nothing pale-beaked about that Goya poem" ("City Lights" 6:19). Hollo was referring to an early Voznesensky poem, one that became among his best-known, "I am Goya." In it, Voznesensky expressed his childhood fear of war and created a stark, war-torn landscape using alliterative metaphors in Russian: Goya (after a sketchbook of the painter's his father had given him as a boy), *glaz* (eyes), *gore* (misery), *golos* (voice), *gorod* (cities), *gorlo* (throat). Hollo's translation is the first Voznesensky poem in *Red Cats*:
- I am Goya: my eyes are destroyed  
by enemy beaks.  
Shell-holes stare from the naked field.  
I am misery,  
the Voice of War  
the voice of charred cities' timber  
on the snow of the Year  
Forty-one.  
I am the old woman's throat  
who was hung, whose body sang like a bell  
over the naked townsquare...  
I am Goya.  
Grapes of Wrath! Dust  
I am, raised by the barrage in the West.  
Dust of the intruder...  
And bright stars  
were hammered in the memorial sky  
like nails.  
Yes, I  
am Goya. (Hollo 34-35)
- 34 Hollo campaigned for Voznesensky's inclusion in the anthology based on the power of this poem. And after coming across an English critic describing him as "'characteristic of the Generation of Cosmonauts,'" Hollo wrote, "without question, WE GOTTA HAVE VOZ!" ("City Lights" 6:19).
- 35 By now, Hollo anticipated Ferlinghetti's reluctance to include any poem—or poet—he felt was not truly representative of the international avant-garde. For Ferlinghetti, the poem had to capture the immediacy of postwar struggles against oppression and

conformity; it had to reflect the existentialist rejection of authority; it had to present a *unified*, thematically cohesive international aesthetics of spontaneity. Above all for this project, Ferlinghetti—and Hollo—wanted to speak to the concerns of radical pacifism, certain to appeal to City Lights readers. At one point Hollo complained “none of these new redcats dare to come out as strongly all-out-pacifist as [Mayakovsky] did” (“City Lights” 6:19 72/107). The two men wanted to present a cohesive narrative argument for peace and resolved to organize the collection of three poets—Voznesensky, Kirsanov, and Yevtushenko—as if they were a harmony of voices whose work represented a unified Russian poetic underground. But Hollo often struggled with the translations. It was not just subject matter and theme that posed a challenge for Hollo. As a translator, he walked right into the hot debate over “proper” poetic language. Hollo complained of the current British trend in translation, which downplayed “colloquial language into the usual English-as-spoken-at-Oxbridge currently fashionable in this country’s decadent poetry” (“City Lights” 6:19). Clearly Ferlinghetti agreed. In order to cultivate an international poetry of dissent, it seemed, a new global language for poetic expression had to be created and maintained, one that was sufficiently hip without devolving into cliché.<sup>vi</sup> For this reason, Ferlinghetti was deeply involved in Hollo’s translation choices. In several letters, Hollo detailed potential images, words, and rhyme schemes; Ferlinghetti penciled in an occasional “ok” or “no” over Hollo’s suggestions. In May, Hollo wrote to thank Ferlinghetti for his “suggestions and admonitions. It certainly is just as much ‘your’ book as it’s mine.” The table of contents had finally begun to take shape, and as he continued his translation work, Hollo announced to Ferlinghetti, “I think this will be a real dobra knjiga, a real good tough little book!” (“City Lights” 6:19).

- 36 If Hollo and Ferlinghetti were in agreement over the creation of an international avant-garde language, they disagreed for many months over the anthology’s title. On March 3, 1962, Hollo mentioned a letter he’d recently had from Ginsberg, in which Ginsberg says he finds “Thaw” too pedantic and suggests instead “Red Cats.” “What do you think?” Hollo asked Ferlinghetti. “I think it’s good and funny, conjuring up a double image.” Apparently Ferlinghetti was uneasy with Ginsberg’s proposal, suggesting that “cats” was dead slang. He recommended several alternatives, including Red Heads, Red Scene, Red Birds, Red Sparks, Red Hot, Angry Young Men, and, rather improbably, Angry Red Men. Finally, Hollo replied in frustration against Ferlinghetti’s suggestions, calling them “stone dead—I’d say even deader than ‘cats’—so ABSOLUTELY NOT Angry Red Men—Red Men are Indians? anyway? or aren’t they?” (“City Lights” 6:19).
- 37 *Red Cats* became the title, and in July 1962, Hollo gleefully wrote Ferlinghetti “got my redcats today! Redletterday.” As a book in the Pocket Poets series, it sported the iconic bi-color cover, but rather than the usual black-and-white, the cover of *Red Cats* was a stunning red-and-white. By the end of July, Hollo and Ferlinghetti were already making plans for a second edition. But the volume was not without its critics. Among *Red Cats*’ detractors, Hollo noted in a November 1963 letter, were a group of poets he called the “Hip Re/sistance,” which included Ed Dorn and his “sideswipe at Yevtushenko in recent Kulchur [Magazine].... Seems hard for these good characters to understand Yev is definitely not a poet living in great hip NY & writing for their great hip NY audiences.” “Yev” did not sufficiently indulge in the latest, freshest lingo. Hollo’s complaint underscores an important point, one that began to resonate with Ferlinghetti: although the international avant-garde shared similar concerns and themes, each produced its own culturally specific, vernacular version of dissident poetics. Nonetheless, Hollo

complained again of the naysayers the following month: "it appears that certain hip literary kulchural circles are "gunning for me in Ny and elsewhere, re Yevtushenko, who they don't dig, him being too com-pre-hensi-bell or whatever" ("City Lights" 6:19).

- 38 Hollo's complaint about "hip literary kulchural circles" referred to the writers, editors, artists, and readers who were devotees of the New York magazine, *Kulchur*, which by 1963 yielded considerable critical influence. Marc Shleifer founded the magazine and edited its first two annual issues before leaving for Cuba to become a full-time activist. The magazine's name came from Ezra Pound's 1938 *Guide to Kulchur*, a wide-ranging collection of topical essays. In the essays, Pound described the "matrix" that informed the production of art as a blend of economic and moral interest. He blamed usury—the making of money from money itself, without producing a product—for the desensitized state of culture at large. Pound prompted readers to rely on their gut instinct for matters of intellect, and urged audiences and artists to view culture from new, different angles. A fitting concept for Schleifer's little magazine, which began as a venue for the "new American poetry." After editing two issues of *Kulchur*, Schleifer turned over control to Lita Hornick. Hornick was a Columbia University-educated literary critic who wanted *Kulchur* to become the place for critical conversations about the avant-garde. Schleifer published poetry and prose by LeRoi Jones, Dianne DiPrima, Allen Ginsberg and Charles Olson; Hornick continued sampling the new writing but added a significant and powerful selection of art, literary, and cultural criticism and commentary. In 1961 Hornick established Kulchur Press, where she published books by New York School poets. In 1970 the press became the Kulchur Foundation, an arts funder and grants-giving agency.
- 39 *Kulchur* contributors were keen to usher in the "new" poetry, published variously in little magazines and canonized by Donald Allen's breakthrough anthology *The New American Poetry 1945-1960*. Allen's was a literary landmark, the first to collect together the schools of poetry that made up, according to Allen, the poetic "countertradition." Readers of the new poetry favored spontaneous, experimental, and highly personal language; poetry that smacked of old-school realism left them cold. Hollo cited Yevtushenko's realist style for the lackluster review; Yev is too "com-pre-hensi-bell." One *Kulchur* contributor, however, disagreed with the general reaction to Hollo's *City Light's* anthology: LeRoi Jones wrote Hollo to tell him he personally "dug Red Cats" ("City Lights" 6:38). Hollo later called his own translations in *Red Cats* too simplistic and sentimental; nevertheless, Pocket Poets number 9 helped familiarize American audiences with the Soviet avant-garde, and it launched Andrei Voznesensky's ("we gotta have Voz!") meteoric rise in popularity in the United States.
- 40 By the early 1960s, Andrei Voznesensky's work had been widely translated into several languages. His poetry readings were legendary for the power and passion he communicated. He was a charismatic reader. He wrote poetry designed to be performed, relying on crisp, accessible imagery, alliteration, and repetitive rhythmic structure. His language was hip, colloquial. As a poet of the Thaw, his measured criticism of Soviet bureaucracy was more-or-less tolerated; he carefully and persistently urged Soviet leadership to end literary censorship. Voznesensky did several college reading tours in the United States in the late 1960s, and in 1967 met with Senator Robert F. Kennedy. After Kennedy was assassinated in June, 1968, Voznesensky wrote a tribute to him and passed the poem on to an American journalist to smuggle out of the USSR.



- 41 Voz represented the kind of poet Ferlinghetti most admired. Here, at last, was a poet who was not writing in English, but performing the wide-open poetry of dissent. Ferlinghetti organized a San Francisco poetry event with Voznesensky. On October 22, 1971, City Lights and San Francisco's arts collective Project Artaud sponsored a historic reading. Voznesensky read in Russian, and Ferlinghetti read the carefully prepared translations. In his poem "Dogalypse," Voznesenky addressed the problem of translation itself:

Old Rover, old Fido—  
They understood without translation—  
for the nature of poetry  
is not in the grammar but in the gut.  
They understood without translation,  
No English-Russian dictionary—  
only the language of sky and field  
and the place where music  
hasn't lied. They understood by breathing deeply. (*Dogalypse* 11)

- 42 The year after that reading, Ferlinghetti, along with a team of translators (including poet Robert Bly), "transfigured" the poems and published them as Pocket Poets number 29, *Dogalypse: A San Francisco Poetry Reading*. In the opening poem, Voznesensky describes Ferlinghetti as "a red wolf, in a grey sheep's skin, / A lamb in wolf's clothing."
- 43 Thanks to the *Red Cats* anthology, Ferlinghetti developed a relationship not only with Voznesensky, but with the poet *Kulchur* criticized as too simplistic. In the introductory notes to *Red Cats*, Hollo calls Yevgeni Yevtushenko "the first Soviet poet since Mayakovsky who has the makings of a great public figure" and writes that his poem "Babi Yar" expressed something of the poetic kinship Yevtushenko says he felt with Allen Ginsberg, the American poet he 'loves best': it is a moving indictment of racism in Russia and everywhere, and, by implication, of all forms of oppression and intolerance" (*Red Cats* 6). In "Babi Yar," the poem's narrator is a victim of the 1941 genocide at the Kiev ravine known as Babi Yar. Over the course of two days, more than 33,000 Ukrainian Jews were murdered and buried in a mass grave there. The mass murder was ordered and mostly perpetrated by occupying Nazi forces, but in his 1961 epic poem, Yevtushenko blamed Russian anti-Semitism for the crime. Yevtushenko's poem begins "Babi Yar / has no mausoleum," referring to the Soviet refusal to recognize Babi Yar as a Holocaust site. The poem's narrator stands on the edge of the Babi Yar ravine and assumes various identities of the Jewish victims, thereby offering his own body as a memorial site:

I lie here  
an old man  
snuffed out  
by the machine-gun's  
deadly spout  
a young man  
who had  
a wife  
a young wife  
who had a son....  
They have entered  
my skin, these people  
my veins  
and my bones,  
they have made my body



their catacomb.

- 44 He ultimately concluded that Russian national identity finds its expression in hatred, especially of Jews. "I was not born / a Jew" the poem ends,

but those  
who hated  
and hate  
the blood  
that was shed here  
they hate  
me, as I  
have hated them  
all my life,  
and that  
is what makes me  
a Russian. (63)

- 45 Yevtushenko's poem, published in 1961 in a leading Soviet newspaper, launched him to international fame. His work appealed to Hollo and Ferlinghetti because it called into question the terms of national identity, questions Ferlinghetti himself was famously engaged in. Yev's poetry appealed to westerners because it was studiously critical of Soviet policies, especially the lingering legacy of Stalin. Between 1963-1965, Yevtushenko was banned from travel outside the Soviet Union; after the ban was lifted he traveled and taught extensively in the United States. In the late 1960s, as his international fame grew, Doubleday planned to publish a collection of his poems. In March of 1969, Lawrence Ferlinghetti received a letter from Doubleday explaining their project. Included in the envelope was a letter in Russian from Yevtushenko, along with an English translation of that letter. He had recently written seventy-five new poems, he explained, and wanted very much to bring them to an English-speaking audience. Ferlinghetti, among other noted contemporary poets like Richard Wilbur, John Updike, and Stanley Kunitz, was invited to take part in the translation project. Yevtushenko's letter made a poignant plea for the power of literary cooperation: "You are, I know," he wrote, "a busy man, but, by God, if even we, the poets, won't lend one another a hand, what then will happen to mankind?" ("City Lights" 3:24). Ferlinghetti agreed to be part of Yevtushenko's translation team.
- 46 Yevtushenko's request underscored a dramatic political shift that had occurred after 1968, the *détente* designed by global powers to stabilize unrest in their own countries. One result of *détente* was an increased spirit of cooperation among dissidents everywhere—just the kind of cooperation Ferlinghetti had worked for nearly fifteen years to encourage. After 1968, more people around the world—especially the youth—became disillusioned. Thanks to Ferlinghetti and the steadfast way he cultivated an international, poetic avant-grade, disillusioned youth around the world had a common language of dissent.

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## NOTES

- i. The New York Times reported that 100,000 students gathered to watch Ginsberg accept the King of May crown. Ginsberg told *The New York Times* that he accepted the crown in honor of native son Franz Kafka. After spending nearly a week in the company of students, fans, and poets, Ginsberg lost a personal notebook on the way to a concert. On May 6, police detained him, returned his notebook which they said contained "illegal writings," and put him on a plane to London.
- ii. For this research I relied primarily on editorial and personal correspondence found in two archival collections: *City Lights Books Records 1953-1970*, and *Lawrence Ferlinghetti Papers 1919-2003*. Both collections are housed at the University of California, Berkeley's Bancroft Library. Irregularities in spelling, colloquial language, abbreviations, and erratic capitalization are directly transcribed from the original correspondence.
- iii. Local and national media outlets covered a number of literary obscenity trials after Ferlinghetti was cleared of obscenity for publishing Ginsberg's *Howl* in 1956. High-profile trials included William Burroughs' *Naked Lunch* in 1962, Henry Miller's 1934 novel *The Tropic of Cancer* in 1963, Michael McClure's play *The Beard* in 1965, and the trial over Lenore Kandel's *The Love Book*, a graphic poem about female sexual pleasure, in 1967. Beat playwright Michael McClure regarded obscenity trails as the "liberation of the dramatic and literary arts" (Johnson 90).
- iv. "The vegetarian is not that difficult: all he demands is a salad of four-leaf clovers."
- v. Yevgeny Yevtuschenko, credited with saying "poetry is like a bird, it ignores all frontiers," died on April 1, 2017, at the age of 84.
- vi. Ferlinghetti and his publishing ventures turned international attention to the formation of a hip, new language, as several letters from translators, publishers, and private citizens in Sweden attest. Due to the immense popularity of *Coney Island of the Mind*, Ferlinghetti was regarded as a leader of a significant sea-change in poetic style that took poetry off the page, out of the classroom, and into the streets. Ferlinghetti, and by extension the international poetry he published, mixed the avant-garde with populism. The Swedish translator, in fact, complained that the Swedish poets of 1958 "all write very feebly and use words like *scent* instead of *smell*, colors like *azure*" ("City Lights" 11:34). A Swedish translator wrote in 1966 to ask if he may translate and publish several poems from *Coney Island*, and adding this request: "there is one word that I haven't found any adequate Swedish word for—the word TOOTSIE ROLL; do you think that the name of another sweet would do? If not, would you, please, try to describe this mysterious object?" In the margins Ferlinghetti scrawled "send 1 tootsie roll." ("City Lights" 11:34).

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## ABSTRACTS

American poet and publisher Lawrence Ferlinghetti became a Cold War conduit for the publication and proliferation of postwar avant-garde and dissident poetry. In this essay I tell the story of how Ferlinghetti and his bookstore and press City Lights in San Francisco, California helped popularize international dissident poetry in the United States. This effort, I argue, was contingent upon the relationships Ferlinghetti cultivated with many international poets and translators between 1954-1972. From archival sources such as Ferlinghetti's personal letters and City Lights Books records, I construct a narrative that reveals the perils and pleasures of translating, editing, and publishing dissident poetry during the Cold War.

## INDEX

**Keywords:** City Lights Bookstore, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, dissident poetry, international poetry, Cold War culture, poetry in translation, Anselm Hollo, Andrei Voznesensky, Yevgeni Yevtuschenko