

# Escapees in paradise: literary life in San Francisco

*by Stephen Schwartz*

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The San Francisco Bay Area has long enjoyed a reputation for experimental behavior on the part of its intellectuals—a confusion of art and life, if you will. But unlike Paris, Berlin, and Leningrad in the Twenties, or New York in the Forties, San Francisco has been much less a laboratory of the avant-garde than a cheering section. No significant intellectual movement has begun here; the “Beat” excitement of the Fifties proved in large part barren, having produced writers who were, in the end, undistinguished when not downright banal. Even the stars of the Beats—Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg—can now be seen to have owed most of their output to the New York environment from which they sprang. The sad truth seems to be that the only achievement to be properly claimed by a tradition of “San Francisco writers”—as opposed to writers who happen to live in San Francisco—is the ostentatious exhibition of new clichés.

I love San Francisco. It has been my home for nearly all my life. But it must be said that San Francisco has never been much more than a backwater intellectually. Ideas or fashions arrive late, bedraggled, emaciated, stunted. They are then transformed into the cynosures of enthusiasts, who flourish the faded and tattered banners of distant revolutions with an extreme and ugly fervor. Never were the Surrealists of Paris so fanatical, intolerant, and violent as their San Francisco imitators a half century later; never were the Marxist intellectuals of Ber-

lin, or even of Moscow, more bigoted, rigid, and Jesuitical.

Many San Francisco intellectuals are not actually intellectuals at all, but escapees of one sort or another. Not from jail or mental treatment, but from the harsh realities of life on the East Coast—from marriage, debts, snow, or the shame of failure in the New York literary world. In San Francisco, there is no failure; all is permitted, if not encouraged. When a conversation comes to the question “What do you do?” and you answer “I am a writer,” there is no progress to the logical next step: “What have you published?” It is as if the interlocutor knows too well the dangers of that particular swamp. A similar silence normally surrounds the subject of what one reads. Most of the local inhabitants read little or nothing of significance.

There is, then, no avant-garde in San Francisco worthy of the title. Is there even something that can be called an intelligentsia? We have a tired clique of old Beats and their squalid groupies, picking over their own detritus. Among the young, there are cults: the followers of neo Surrealism and “language poetry,” and various kinds of mostly unserious Marxists. Indeed, a kind of leftist miasma covers the entire literary terrain; it seems to be taken for granted that to be involved with letters is to be on the Left. Of course, there are the prophets of Blackness, Hispanianness, womanness, and homosexuality, but none of them makes a

serious attempt to associate himself with something intrinsically new. The literary products of such movements are mostly composed of enervating repetition: of street-talk reminiscences, Latin American historical revisionism, expressions of cloying man-hatred, or memories of bath-house sex—as if each recounting redeemed, rather than emphasized, the nullity of the matters addressed.

The Beats deserve nothing other than burial, with a minimum of public grief. Their “aging caudillo”—as one used to hear General Franco described—is Lawrence Ferlinghetti, whose publishing house, City Lights, has seemed to establish as its standard: “When you cannot, after much effort, find something bad to publish, then you might as well publish something good.” Few people ever took Ferlinghetti seriously as a poet or translator. His horizons as a poet ended with his recycling the justifiably forgotten verse forms of Kenneth Fearing; as a translator, he has managed to bring out only English versions of Jacques Prévert, the ex-Surrealist turned nightclubbish clown. By his own admission Ferlinghetti refused to publish some erotic works of Guillaume Apollinaire because he feared the censorious reaction of feminists, who might object to Apollinaire’s humorously explicit use of anatomical language; and he has turned down projects to translate other important foreign writers (for example, Raymond Roussel, André Breton, Julien Gracq, and Lacenaire) because they are not yet sufficiently known in the United States.

Like Prévert, Ferlinghetti always preferred clowning to writing. Typically, he won his earliest distinction as a practitioner of “jazz poetry” at reading sessions in San Francisco dives. But clowning offends nobody and involves no risks; it is the San Francisco literary mode par excellence. Today nearly all the poetry readings in the city are dominated by displays of rhetoric influenced far less by any of the recognized poets in the English language than by Lenny Bruce and Bob Dylan.

Ferlinghetti hovers over the city’s literary affairs like a ghost—Scrooge’s rather than Marley’s. The man seems to have exhausted any capacity he might have once had for generosity or magnanimity toward younger writers. He now dedicates himself to the defense of Stalinist censorship in Nicaragua, using arguments that can only be described as ingenuous. Ingenuous is, indeed, the description applied to him by the Nicaraguan poet Pablo Antonio Cuadra, and supported by the Mexican writer Octavio Paz, once Ferlinghetti’s mentor and friend. Does Ferlinghetti care that his current stance on censorship clashes so starkly with his libertarian antics in the late Fifties, during the obscenity trail of Allen Ginsberg’s *Howl*? He seems not to. Nor does anybody else, here in paradise.

The conformist leftism that makes the pro-censorship declamations of Ferlinghetti acceptable has set a peculiar tone for the city’s literary life. In many poetry bookstores anyone who is not a devotee of Lenin feels uneasy. It is more than a matter of the absurdly limited (politically “correct”) selection of books. There is almost an air of physical intimidation. One quails at the thought of what might happen should one enter one of these places and ask for a title by William F. Buckley. In a sense they are not so much bookstores as shrines guarded by initiates.

In San Francisco, cultishness and sectarianism are the order of the day. The most prevalent of the literary cults is that of the “mysterious foreigner,” usually a leftist extolled as the greatest writer of all time. There is a cult of the Chilean poet Pablo Neruda, for example, the purveyor of illimitable mawkishness who was incidentally an agent of the Soviet secret police; after committing a number of crimes during the Spanish Civil War, he went to Mexico to serve in the conspiracy to murder Trotsky, for which he was expelled from the Chilean diplomatic service. Needless to say, Neruda’s gringo acolytes are largely innocent of any real knowledge of the Spanish language. Similarly, the many worshipers at the shrine of the Russian writer Viktor Shklovsky—who

survived by accommodating Stalin—usually know nothing of the Russian language. There is also, sadly, a cult of Breton. Because his admirers cannot read French they have not yet learned that the theoretician of Surrealism, far from staying faithful to his youthful Trotskyism, became a kind of neo-conservative *avant la lettre* after 1945.

Naturally, as befits a populace that spawns chiliastic factions, San Francisco also possesses a stratum of literary functionaries—individuals who, without distinction in the craft of writing, have gained a bureaucratic sinecure by working their way through the “Poetry in the Schools” program and similar make-work projects. These types generally comport themselves like Soviet commissars; most of them have no idea what a poem might be, but they know the value of a regular paycheck.

The streams of ignorance, cultism, and bureaucracy come together to form the only current phenomenon in San Francisco’s literary life that earnestly attempts to attach itself to the avant-garde tradition: something called “language poetry,” featuring the usual disjointed, self-referential mucking about with grammar. Language poets are remarkably like the new bane of the campus, “Marxist scholars”; that is, their professional incapacity is made more offensive by the emptiness of their posturing. The most egregious puffer among the language poets is a seemingly pleasant fellow named Barrett Watten (at least he appears pleasant in his photographs), who recently saw a book of his ostensibly critical writings published by a university publisher.<sup>1</sup> Most of the book is not critical in the conventional sense of the word, since Watten’s main object is to boost the members of his language poetry club. Mostly it displays a coy dancing about with terminology appropriated from serious linguistics. Nevertheless, thanks to the miracle of there being an actual hardbound volume in print that celebrates language poetry—

and thanks to the assiduous cultivation of the poetry *apparatchiki* with leftism and hot air—the language poets have attained a status on the San Francisco scene only slightly less advantageous, at least in the short term, than that of the favored poet of the Nicaraguan dictators, the dreadful Ernesto Cardenal.

When Tom Clark, the accomplished poet and critic, sent a few humorous shafts in Watten’s direction recently in the pages of *The San Francisco Chronicle*, the outraged forces of the new dispensation replied in a manner so absurd that it merits recording in the annals of literary buffoonery. The friends of Watten enlisted George Lakoff, a linguistics professor at Berkeley who originally mainly concerned himself with topics derived from mathematical logic. He declared Watten a fine fellow and a great writer, although he neglected to cite any good poems by Watten, and he carefully avoided giving the impression that he takes Watten seriously as a scholarly colleague.

Lakoff’s performance as an intellectual arbiter was about as graceful as that of an old-fashioned circus fat man attempting *Swan Lake*. This is not to say, however, that a cross-fertilization between poetry and linguistics is necessarily a bad thing. Indeed, such a cross-fertilization was the impetus behind the major literary developments associated with the “Prague Circle” of the 1930s, that gathering of exiled Russian critics and scholars—like Roman Jakobson, the great phonologist—and Czech poets and scholars. Likewise, something valuable came out of Jakobson’s dialogues with Claude Lévi-Strauss, Jacques Lacan, and Breton in New York during the Second World War.

But Lakoff, with all his fine qualities (and he certainly has them), is no Jakobson. Jakobson was a product, rather than an observer, of literary life in Russian during the period of war and revolution. Nor by a grant of mercy can Watten be compared with the Czech poets, whose number includes the Nobel Laureate Jaroslav Seifert. Both the linguists and the poets of that time were disciplined thinkers first and manda-

<sup>1</sup> *Total Syntax*, by Barrett Watten. Southern Illinois University Press, 241 pages, \$13.95.

rins second. Like many another contestant in today's intellectual arena, Watten has the order of things confused.

What, the reader will ask, does language poetry consist of? Probably the most representative example is a long poem by Watten entitled "Progress," which was published in book form this year.<sup>2</sup> The work consists of well over a hundred pages of poetry, each with five stanzas. It begins as follows:

Relax,  
stand at attention, and  
Purple snake stands out on  
Porcelain tiles. The idea  
IS the thing. Skewed by design . . . .

One way contradictory use is to  
Specify empty.  
Basis, its  
Cover operates under insist on,  
Delineate. Stalin as a linguist . . . .

In addition to the poem's familiar narcissism and labored artiness, so common to this kind of undergraduate experimentalism, it is worth noting the callously neutral reference to Stalin, the notorious murderer of poets. Stalin was not a linguist—most Westerners would be amused by the very idea. Nevertheless, the "great sun of socialism," unsatisfied with his many military and political distinctions, chose this particular field of endeavor as the one in which to ordain himself a great scientific investigator. In the last demented years before his death, having purged and killed a number of distinguished researchers, he ordered the composition of a ghost-written work, to be signed by himself, on the subject of comparative linguistics. It is hard to imagine a more extreme example of the corruption of intellectual life in the service of totalitarian power. But as we all have come to know, many brilliant exemplars of the contemporary school of dictatorial statesmanship are failed scholars and writers. Pol Pot is a graduate of the Sor-

bonne; Bernard Coard, murderer of Grenadian schoolchildren in the purge preceding the American rescue mission, was trained as an economist; Abimael Guzman ("Gonzalo"), the crazed founder of the terrorist Sendero Luminoso in Peru, wrote his graduate thesis on the theory of space in Kant.

It should be no surprise, then, that in the controversy that took place in *The Chronicle* (and elsewhere) between Tom Clark and the Watten-Lakoff alliance the latter attempted to characterize their critics in political terms, as "Reaganites" and "counterrevolutionaries." All this playing about can be humorous, but one is saddened to realize that the amateurs of such rhetoric have yet to understand the consequences of such political labeling in Russia, Cuba, etc. But perhaps that can be overlooked: leftist insults have become an inevitable part of our country's public discourse. Without doubt the most ridiculous moment in the whole fiasco came when Professor Lakoff compared the language poets' attempt at an intellectual coup d'état with "workers taking over a factory." The pathos here is inherent in the obsolescence of the conceit. Leftism long ago forgot about workers and factories; that's too much like Poland, a "Reaganite" concern. A better comparison might be the purge and murder of the Salvadoran leftist poet Roque Dalton, in 1975, by members of a guerrilla movement he founded.

Of course, as within every group dedicated to creative enterprises (no matter how questionable their value), there are some good elements even among the language poets. Lyn Hejinian, one of their number, will probably some day find a way to real attainment. Most of the rest, however, fit in with the general panorama of trendiness and "types." Indeed, "characters" of a rare preciousness abound in the environment of San Francisco, and they are not limited to language-poetry circles. There is the defrocked Ivy League professor who, having convinced himself in a transport of lysergic acid that having no knowledge of a language is no impediment to translating it, has embarked on a career of pretending to translate ob-

<sup>2</sup> *Progress*, by Barrett Watten. Ruth Books, 125 pages, \$7.50.

scure languages—from Albanian to Zulu—entirely in the manner of Communist slogan-poetry. His appearance in the espresso houses with a new dictionary under his arm is a favorite occasion for many. There is the female near-prep-school graduate who, thanks to an accident of pigmentation, has had herself anointed a Third World advocate, penning endless and unreadable rhapsodies to gang violence and heroin. There is the bewigged septuagenarian who carries around snapshots of Tennessee Williams and Marlon Brando, whom he claims to have debauched, the better to claim his right to the title “hot gay poet.” There is the producer of New Wave music who set up a business producing outstandingly turgid critical books on such writer pop-stars as William Burroughs and J.G. Ballard. Ballard, incidentally, a former science-fiction writer of marginal cleverness, has recently turned to a more old-fashioned, descriptive mode of novel writing; but the San Francisco New Waver in question remains undisturbed by the sudden irrelevance of his unsellable critical tomes. Finally, there is a type unto itself: the unspeakable, long-wearing crony of Allen Ginsberg, Gregory Corso, a one-man war on all civilization.

Enough of types, enough of cults, of commissars, of fakery! Is there nothing of value on the San Francisco scene that could, even remotely, be called avant-garde? No city so beautiful, so wealthy, so populated with educated people, can remain unfruitful forever. After all, there are some good things happening in more traditional aspects of the Bay Area’s cultural life: we have Evan S. Connell, Jr., a fine professional writer; we have magnificent scholars at Berkeley and Stanford; we have Larry Liebert, Thomas Sowell, and other political journalists of a high order; we have a respectable opera

company; and God knows we have successful rock bands. Why should we not have at least one or two good avant-garde writers?

Perhaps we do. The San Francisco-born poet Philip Lamantia, the only genuine Surrealist poet in America, continues to produce meaningful work. Lamantia had the bad luck to be mobbed by a group of spectacularly untalented sycophants in the middle Seventies, but he has shaken them off. Like all good poets, he has turned to nature for his subject: specifically, regional bird life. It is a wise choice, for the intellectual landscape is uninspiring. The poet Robert Duncan maintains his estimable efforts. Another poet of Lamantia’s generation, Howard Hart, has also continued to write well, using the unstructured lines of Fifties’ verse with wit and restraint. A young poet too long tainted by association with the Ferlinghetti party, Neeli Cherkovski, has, after many tries, finished a good, technically inventive, publishable novel about California called *Angels’ Flight*. Another young poet, Jim Brook, an unorthodox fan of French Surrealism, has, in the best tradition of Breton, bravely challenged the regional chorus of praise for the Sandinistas by publishing articles that decry the cultural policy of the current Nicaraguan regime—its censorship, its brutality, its lies, its loud Stalinist echoes. I have mentioned Lyn Hejinian; there is also Eric Walker, a young poet who shows real promise. A few others, like Tom Clark, cannot really be labeled San Franciscans yet.

Perhaps in the end it will be better for them if they are not. For even the most distinguished literary efforts here seem destined for neglect, surrounded as they are by that notorious atmosphere of mediocrity and trendiness of which those truly on the “San Francisco scene” appear so inordinately proud.