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The High and Palmy State of Poetry: An
In-depth Review of *Visions and Affiliations: a
California Literary Timeline, Poets and
Poetry 1940 -2005* by Jack Foley

The best part of a lifetime ago, while attempting to learn English history at school and university, young students like me were introduced to the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, a year-by-year record, compiled in various monasteries, of events in England from soon after the Romans left through to the year 1000 and beyond. It is thanks to this chronicle that we now know the heroic story of King Alfred the Great, his battles to resist the invading Vikings and to foster law, learning and culture in his kingdom. This chronicle has always been fundamental to our knowledge of Anglo-Saxon England, and without it the so-called Dark Ages in England would be darker still—so dark as to be almost invisible.

What has this to do with Jack Foley's magisterial survey of modern poets and poetry in California? Simply this: that if the reading and study of poetry has a future, then in the years and even the centuries to come I believe that these volumes will remain a fundamental source for anyone thinking and writing about poetry in the twentieth century, not only in California but in America as a whole, and even in world terms. It is a local study that has resonances which spread far beyond California and America too, showing how poetry may relate to far-reaching changes in social and cultural life, and it

shows how terribly wrong the idea is that poetry no longer matters in the modern world. This is a two-volume work running to well over 1200 pages, but it is not an academic history, not shaped into a synthetic or critical narrative; if it were it would surely be an exhausting read. Instead Foley calls it a timeline, a year-by-year survey of books, authors and events which takes us directly into the poetry scene and into the surrounding society; it builds into a panoramic picture of a literary community.

On the page the timeline falls into yearly sections, within which a simple bullet point indicates the next entry. These entries can range from a single line, for example in 1959 we read “Auerhahn publishes Michael McClure’s first book, *Hymns to St Geryon and Other Poems*,” to a major entry in 1985 that devotes ten pages to Robert Duncan’s meditations on poetry, his own and other people’s, transcribed from interviews he gave a few years before his death. Such entries may include extended poetry quotations, especially valuable in the case of lesser-known poets.

There are also first-hand reports of many poetry-reading events, some of them sensational and famous. Some of the entries turn into substantial essays by Foley on individual poets or poetic schools, or theories and movements. There is no way of knowing what is coming up as you turn the pages: you feel you are being carried along on a river of books, ideas and events, which in turn is part of the river of time during which all this was happening. Personally I have never seen anything like this before, and I found it immensely enjoyable to dive into this river. I was constantly penciling notes in the margins to look up more information on the many writers I had never heard of. It should be explained that these volumes grew out of an earlier, far shorter book which Foley published in the year 2000 entitled, *O Powerful Western Star*. This was a more conventional study of the California literary scene which focused on a number of people and themes, but whose last 50 pages took the form of a timeline. This feature aroused a great deal of interest, and it led to the decision to create a hugely expanded version of it, on which Foley worked for a decade, and which we have before us now. By 2010 Foley had lived in the Bay area for more than 40 years, and had been deeply involved in the poetry scene as a writer himself, as an editor, as an event coordinator, and as a radio broadcaster with KPFA. He got to know everybody (apparently), he read every book (apparently), and he knew

everything (apparently): he was clearly the ideal man to undertake this unique, new-style chronicle of modern poetry, and he is to be saluted for carrying it through magnificently. Whether you agree with everything he says doesn't matter; whether you admire all the writers he admires doesn't matter; all that matters is that he has created this vital record of an era in poetic history, he has given us his portraits of the leading figures who made it happen, and he has shared with us his vision of what it all meant. And I believe he has done all this with immense fidelity to his sources – he has let them speak for themselves.

Running through these volumes are some half dozen major themes, cultural, intellectual, literary and personal. Generally speaking, Foley does not expound on the interrelations between these themes; instead he gives us the evidence through the timeline, in the form of - so to speak - dispatches from the front line, and he leaves it to us to make the connections, to build up in our own minds something approaching a total picture of the creative arts scene in California.

The first of these themes is the nature of California itself, a global settlement on the edge of North America, a place people have moved into for almost two centuries. They have come over the sea from Asia, as well as overland from the east, from America proper, and of course from the Spanish south. They came seeking money and freedom in equal measure, but perhaps the second even more than the first. Paradoxically, California thus became a centre in its own right, not merely an edge, a centre with its own energy, purpose and authenticity. In poetic terms this Californian centre, this identity, took shape in conscious opposition to the literary culture of the Eastern United States, where, from the 1930s onwards, significant poetry had been centred in the universities, in the creative writing classes run by influential figures such as Ransom, Tate, Penn Warren and Yvor Winters. The presiding genius behind this academic brand of poetry was Eliot, but, rather strangely, the theoretical Eliot of the critical essays rather than the living Eliot of the poetry itself. In this view, a poem was something made with craft and intelligence, wit and irony, and the methodology of creating such poems could be taught and learned. Pushed to its extreme, this view of poetry could be seen—and criticized—as encouraging verbal games, since it seemed that

in the last analysis the purpose of writing poetry was to demonstrate the poet's cleverness.

Such a dry, self-regarding orthodoxy was bound to be challenged and rejected at some point, and in the California of the 1950s it was about to crumble into dust. "From about 1930 on, a conspiracy of bad poetry has been as carefully organised as the Communist Party, and today controls most of the channels of publication except the littlest of the little magazines... We disaffiliate." This radical declaration by Kenneth Rexroth provides Jack Foley with the title and the basic premise of his work, namely that by the 1950s the time of affiliation to a rigid orthodoxy was over, and that only the rediscovery of the visionary could lead to a rebirth of true poetry. Jack Spicer would write: "Pure poetry bores everybody. It is even a bore to the poet. The only real contribution of the New Critics is that they have demonstrated this so well. They have taken poetry (already removed from its main source of interest—the human voice) and have completed the job of denuding it of any remaining connection with person, place and time. What is left is profoundly exhibited in their essays: the dull horror of naked, pure poetry."

What would happen in California was the emergence of poetry as a transforming social force, a force for liberation from the stupefied, grey, conformist, materialism of Eisenhower's America. Great sections of the population formerly voiceless would find their voice and make themselves heard: the young, the women, the black, the homosexual, the pacifist, the Asian, the native American, the disinherited and the rebellious. Poetry played a major role in defining the identities of these groups: it became an act of resistance to a world people were no longer willing to accept passively.

Poetry was not of course the sole agent in this transformation: music was hugely important too, and music joined hands with poetry in the jazz lyrics and the rock songs. Moving into the 1960s, the social and political conflicts springing from drug-use and the Vietnam War became merged into a full-scale cultural revolution, in which California was evidently a major epicentre. This revolution was built not on political abstractions but on artistic creativity and friendship. Michael McClure recalled: "The outlaw-gypsy San Francisco community believed in art. They did what they did because they were artists. They never believed

they would sell a poem. They never believed they would have a book published unless they published it themselves. They never believed they would have a car other than the one with the door tied shut with a rope. They were set on creating their own – it’s a bit like Gary Snyder’s idea – wildness. In the city you create an airy, uncrowded, aesthetic field that you live in; you’re creating space by creating art.” These were not the big-name artists or the distinguished men of letters of New York: they were amateurs, changing their lives, moving back into a new innocence of being.

And it was not only their own lives that they changed: when Richard Eberhart wrote enthusiastically in the *New York Times* about what was happening in San Francisco in 1957, he hit the target first time, saying that “Poetry here has become a tangible social force, moving and unifying its audience, releasing the energies of the audience through the spoken, even shouted verse, in a way at present unique to this region.” A couple of years later *Life* magazine ran a piece on the Beats, calling them “social rebels first and poets only second”; this piece catapulted the Beat movement into the American national consciousness. Likewise just inside a decade later the summer of 1967 became the summer of love, when the baton was passed from the Beat generation to the hippy generation, and this time it was an emotional earthquake rather than a real one in San Francisco which made news around the whole world.

From my own perspective in England, it sounds very strange to say that poetry could have been a central part in a seismic social movement of this kind, and perhaps it would sound almost as strange in the American East Coast environment. The explanation is that poetry in the Californian context had become a performance art, and this is one of the great underlying messages of Foley’s book: poetry was taken off the page and out of the private world of the silent reader and transformed into a shared experience. An individual poem would be written as an act of self-exploration or self-liberation, but when read aloud, even perhaps performed as a miniature drama, that sense of liberation became public and communal, exactly as the emotion conjured by live music is no longer a solitary perception, but a collective experience. This conviction is central to Foley’s own understanding of what poetry should be, and a fair proportion of the book is given to accounts of live poetry events through the years. Some of these events became legendary, but even those that

did not were still able to send out ripples through a community, the story of these happenings being relayed by those who had been there to those who had missed it.

And of course these readings, events, and festivals did not diminish the demand for printed poetry, on the contrary they stimulated it, as works by new writers were sought out, often in editions issued by small presses, or in little magazines, both of these forms flourishing in profusion in California. In fact one of the minor delights of this book is the galaxy of weirdly-named small publishers: Runcible Spoon, Event Horizon, Liquid Paper, Cherrythumb, Beatitude, Mother's Hen, Deserted X, Shameless Hussy, Jukebox, Tough Titty, Tombouctou, Blue Millennium, First Intensity, Coyote, Cloud Marauder, Sombre Reptiles, Pickpocket, Boneset, Moving Parts, Weaselsleeves, Panjandrum—and that's just a random sample. The history of many of these presses is a matter of conjecture: the Tough Titty Press claimed to be proud to select Floyd Salas to be the first of the Tough Titty writers, but as far as Salas recalls, after him there were no others.

All this is history, the literary history and the general history of the United States; but these things came into being through the lives and the creative work of individual people, and Foley's book is brought to life and given its power through his cast of characters. A few of these are of national importance, but most of them were frankly unknown to me, so that discovering something of their work was one of the chief pleasures of the book. Some of these writers were native-born Californians, but most were not: they had come to California looking for something they hadn't found elsewhere in America, thus underlining the nature of the state as a magnetic field, attracting people from outside to share its imagined freedoms.

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Naturally enough, Foley places Kenneth Rexroth at the beginning of his story and keeps him there as the pivotal figure throughout the first volume. Rexroth was a very fine poet: he had a considerable range of moods, he could be lyrical or he could be gritty, and his imagination was married to a sharp intelligence. He had a clear vision of what poetry could do to liberate and enrich the life of individuals and

society, and he set out to realise his aims. After settling in California in 1930, he became a kind of impresario, working ceaselessly to foster the cause of poetry, in publication naturally, but still more through live readings and events. Some of these events were accompanied by jazz, about which Rexroth was passionate, seeing in its free improvising energy a possible model for a new and stronger kind of poetry. In addition to his original writing, he became an outstanding translator, especially of ancient Chinese and Japanese poetry, sending his personality out into those purer settings in order to refresh his vision and his language. Buddhism became a force in his life and work, but his personal creed was anarchism, believing that organisations and societies function by lies and deceit to control and repress people's spirit, and that the central purpose of the creative arts was to free and heal people's lives. In all this, he was clearly developing the blueprint for what would later be called the San Francisco Renaissance, and indeed for the counterculture project as a whole.

Another powerful presence throughout the first volume, and on into the second, is Robert Duncan, a native Californian who exercised a huge influence on the regional scene but also achieved national status. Yet Duncan was a much more elusive poet than Rexroth: his work is endlessly suggestive, but his core message is hard to pin down. Essentially, he taught that we live in a world of mystery, symbol and the magic that can be found in myth. For him the poet's role is a vatic one, to act as a priest who can open and interpret that world to us. As a child he was raised by foster-parents who were committed to theosophy and hermetic wisdom, and Duncan never detached himself from that occult tradition. His intuition told him that the self is a focus of multiple ambiguities and mysteries, and poetry was a means of bringing them to expression. Many of his poems are difficult to follow through rationally, but he was capable of lines that were radiant with his personal vision, such as, "The borderlines of sense in the morning light are naked as a line of poetry in a war." Duncan's explorations of the mysteries of the self-made him a hero of the counterculture, in which he played a very public part. He was one of the first writers to discuss homosexuality, and stating openly that he was talking about his own life. Writing in 1966, Duncan made a profoundly personal statement about his self-understanding

as a man and as a poet, a statement which reveals very powerfully the cast of his quasi-religious, mythical thought:

“I am unbaptised, uninitiated, ungraduated, unanalysed. I had in mind that my worship belonged to no church, that my mysteries belonged to no cult, that my learning belonged to no institution, that my imagination of my self belonged to no philosophic system. My thought must be without sanction. Yet to be a poet is to be reborn – to be baptised, initiated, graduated, analysed. The Muses – for me in my adolescent days these women, my teachers and my companions – admit the poet to their company. But we are drawn to them, as if in the beginning we were of their kind, kin of Poetry with them.”

Another important San Francisco native was Gary Snyder, who shared Duncan’s conception of the poet as priest, or perhaps shaman, but Snyder found a more accessible framework of symbols in the natural wilderness of the American west - the mountains, forests and rivers. Snyder was also significant as one of those who introduced Buddhism into the Californian equation, and many of his poems explore the balance between energy and stillness in nature and in mankind. Snyder became a strong link between California and the Beat movement when the great Beat figures – Ginsberg, Kerouac, Ferlinghetti, and Corso – all visited or migrated from New York. Ginsberg’s legendary reading of part of *Howl* in 1955 receives full attention as a landmark in the history of poetry, and Foley argues persuasively that this event was the equivalent of publication; the poem did not reach the printed page until 1956.

Ferlinghetti’s lifetime achievements as poet, bookseller and publisher made him the equal of Rexroth as a focal-point of the San Francisco Renaissance. After *On the Road*, Kerouac located several follow-up books in California, building up the sense that the West Coast was the natural home of the Beats. Freedom, protest, self-discovery, Buddhism, music, drugs and the fragrance of insanity – these hallmarks of Beat entered deep into the psyche of Californian culture. It’s essential too to remember that Lowell himself changed poetic strategy and his writing style as a direct result of visiting California and attending live readings. Michael McClure said that Ginsberg had changed things for everyone:

“A human voice and body had been hurled against the harsh wall of America.”

Other visitors from the east, short- or long-term, included Robert Creeley, Denise Levertov and Kenneth Patchen. Creeley and Levertov were both associated with the Black Mountain group, and were influenced by the anti-academic, mould-breaking experiments of Charles Olson. Creeley went on to develop his cool, apparently effortless, autobiographical, stream-of-consciousness technique which made him a modern American master. Levertov took a different path into deeper psychological waters, seeing herself as a fragile but mythic figure confronting a menacing and largely hostile world. The fascination of her career is to see her transforming her life and her self-understanding, leaving behind her near-Victorian background in England to become an American, a feminist, an anti-war protester, and, like Robert Duncan, a kind of priest of the buried powers of the personality and the spirit. Patchen was a very different kind of poet from these, prolific and wildly inventive, his mind seemed able to move around in various regions of chaos as he assailed the conventions and repressions of American life. His poetry sets out to shake us and wake us with its attacking energy; yet in other moods he is a lyrical romantic able to conjure up worlds of innocence and beauty. The victim of prolonged physical suffering for much of his life, it is easy to see these two conflicting aspects of his work as directly mirroring the pain of his life and the longing for release from it.

Robinson Jeffers lived in California for almost the whole of his life, but he did not belong in any strictly definable sense to the movement that Foley is describing. An archetypal loner, uninterested in modernist experiments with language, Jeffers developed his own Spartan, stoical philosophy of life which was so radical that he christened it “inhumanism”, and embodied it in spare, powerful nature poems and in elemental tragic dramas of human violence and suffering. In both types of work the coast of northern California symbolised the flight from civilisation, the return to nature, which he advocated. Jeffers’s reputation rose and fell drastically over time, but his work is now the subject of renewed interest, for he seems to have prophesied a deep form of ecology, years before the word came into general use.

As far as I know, Jeffers was never part of the poetry reading revival, but his disciple, William Everson, certainly was. A modern pantheist, Everson later entered the Roman Catholic Church and became a Dominican monk, without however turning away from his original themes, his Lawrentian evocations of nature and of human passion. Everson was reputedly a stunning performer of his own work, in fact he felt he needed above all to read his poems aloud, not merely see them in print. A world away from Jeffers and Everson was George Oppen, a native Californian who honed a spare, highly personal linguistic style, aimed at cutting poetry to the bare bone in the service of his political and social cause, which was communism. This sounds forbidding, but Oppen was just as much a lyricist, who aimed to convey a vision of what humanity might be if the rotten debris of civilisation could be cut away, if people could just be allowed to live. To this extent he too shared the core agenda of Californian poetry – that personal freedom be cherished and encouraged to grow in a hostile, corrupted world.

A much later writer to achieve major status is Robert Hass, who is both an academic and a populist, having become the first Californian to be chosen as Poet Laureate of the United States. In this role Hass has travelled tirelessly to promote the cause of poetry, especially in connection with ecological issues. Hass writes mainly in a loose conversational sounding free-verse building up poems that are lucid and accessible: they are poems with a message, from a writer who studied with Yvor Winters and evidently absorbed his teachings about language and rationality. There are times when he sounds almost Frostian in his tone of a man quietly seeking wisdom in what he sees, and principally in nature, although Hass explores a wider range of subjects and references. Hass wrote: “I like poems for the peace involved in reading and writing them. I began writing seriously when I found that I could write about myself and the world I knew... For a long time I felt a compulsion to direct myself to large issues; this was mainly due to the cant I acquired around universities about alienation. About the time that the Vietnam war broke out, it became clear to me that alienation was a state approaching to sanity, a way of being human in a monstrously inhuman world, and that feeling human was a useful form of political subversion.” Hass believes that poetry, and indeed all art, somehow “announces the existence of a different world”, although if the art is

successful, it can lead us to recognise that that other world is in fact this one.

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These are a dozen or so figures who became major, national poets, but there were scores of others who may never have hit the bigtime, but who provided the revolutionary energy that was the lifeblood of the poetry scene. Their number and variety is staggering, and their appearance in Foley's volumes keeps one turning the pages in amazement, and sometimes in bafflement, as each new poet rises up to pull, push, twist, coax, caress or torture poetry into a new direction, a new form of life.

If Kenneth Rexroth was the founding father of the modern Californian poetry scene, Madeline Gleason was the founding mother. She was in her forties when in 1947 she organised the first poetry festival in modern America, at San Francisco's Labaudt Gallery, pre-dating the more famous poetry events of the 1950s. Gleason herself was not a prolific writer, and her own work—usually rhymed—has a traditional sound. But she was a key figure on the San Francisco scene through her promotional activities and through her encouragement of other writers. Among her successors as both poet and impresario was Jack Spicer, in whose Six Gallery the legendary "Howl" reading took place in 1955. Spicer was a theorist of language, and evolved some startling ideas, especially that poetry could be a transmission from outside mankind. He published little, but his small body of surviving poems are usually brief, intense, surreal or deeply enigmatic, many of them are about poetry itself as a mysterious elusive ideal in a fragmented world. Spicer did not believe a poet should publish his works in the mainstream market-place – they should be privately circulated among friends; the result was that Spicer remained more or less unknown for many years, while his friend Robert Duncan became very famous, a difference of view that caused a rift in their relationship.

Sharing this transcendent sense of poetry, something that was way outside the literary market-place, was Michael McClure, who wrote poems that were incandescent, as if drunk with their own power and ambition. His themes were the archetypal Californian ones: freedom, sex, nature, vision,

mostly written in long uneven Pindaric forms. Always prone to incoherence, McClure was a major presence in the Beat and Hippy eras, and one of those magic few who participated in the “Howl” reading. McClure gave us one of the best one-line summaries of what the San Francisco Renaissance was all about: “I hear the music of myself and write it down...”

Also there, and as far out as McLure, if not further, was Philip Lamantia, perhaps the archetypal Californian voyager of the spirit, whose work has been aptly compared to the paintings of Bosch. Lamantia’s name is inseparably connected with the disordered visionworld of narcotics, indeed his wife, Nancy Peters, beautifully summed up the element of danger in his early life when she wrote, “He found in the narcotic night-world a kind of modern counterpart to the gothic castle – a zone of peril to be symbolically or existentially crossed.” He spent long periods of time with native American peoples, sharing their hallucinatory rituals; much later he returned to the Catholicism of his childhood. Very different was Neeli Cherkovski, a true lyricist with a superb imaginative range, who remained somehow rooted in reality, his poems are “earthed” to life by some instinctive lightning conductor. He possessed a high degree of integrity, driving him to write what he felt and what he saw, except that everything he felt and saw was different from the normal.

Cherkovski would write a book on modern American poets entitled *Whitman’s Wild Children*, and one of the truly wild makers of San Francisco poetry was Bob Kaufman. A native of New Orleans, Kaufman was half black and half Jewish, which may have predestined him to his role as a lifelong outsider. He took poetry into the realm of improvisation, like the jazz which he loved, and he created his own unique form of anarchic music for live performance, often not bothering to write his work down. He was the original street poet, living chaotically, harassed by the authorities, a semi-vagrant and an addict. In reaction to the assassination of J.F. Kennedy, he took a ten-year vow of silence, which he is reported to have kept. Kaufman invented his own anarchic creed of Abomunism, of which he was the arch-priest, teasing the reader with such lines as “If I were a crime I’d want to be committed.” The second great street poet and performer was Jack Micheline, whose wild, crazy lyrics are full of the exhilaration and pain of his role as rebel and visionary. But Micheline could rise from verbal jazz to considerable grandeur:

“There is something deeper than the earth,
There is something deeper than the stone cities,
There is something deeper than our existence,
Deeper than all the robes of power.”

What was that something? The poet’s vision, offered to anyone who wanted to listen.

A great survivor during the sixty years since the Beat era’s heyday is Jerome Rothenberg, New York Jewish by birth but a major presence in California. An academic and a prolific author, Rothenberg’s learning is formidable, and he has put it to great imaginative use. One of his passions is the study of traditional and ethnic poetry from all over the world, and his landmark collection of such material, *Technicians of the Sacred*, praised the existential strength and spirituality of this unacademic, unselfconscious, unliterary, and often unwritten forms of expression. His own poetry is eclectic, sometimes surreal, sometimes visionary and Blake-like.

Rothenberg’s respect for a lost past was very precisely reflected in Richard Silberg’s first book, not a book of poetry but a cultural analysis entitled *The Devolution of the People*, from 1967, where he wrote: “It is axiomatic to the writing of this book, that the structure of contemporary society is becoming inhuman, that it no longer provides the satisfactions, the psychic nutrients of societies of the past. It has become an ocean of technology upon which modern men are becalmed...Social life comes to answer the demands of rational systems, bureaucratic, economic, mechanical, rather than the irrational needs of the human mind...For men dreamed once, in bright daylight, after the hunt, in dance and song, in the wedded groups that encircled their dreams. They were the People. Described in the stars, the sun and the moon, echoed in winds, in the earth, veined in the animals and their brethren spirits. Theirs was the primitive unity, the banding together of pre-urban men. But the dancing circles are gone...Culture is dying, and the divine spark of the gods, the flame that Prometheus stole, recedes from us...”

The nexus of ideas grouped around this feeling, and the longing to return to some pure, idealised state of humanity, was powerful throughout the Californian school of poetry. It rings out loud and clear in Richard Denner’s famous

incantation-poem “Flower Star”:

“In the
beginning
it was
done on
a blank
page
white
on
white
on the
day of
creation
hear
here
is a bird
in the
window
is a bee
a flower
a garden
in the
mind....”

Here the words and phrases seem to emerge freely, falling and falling down the page like a slender waterfall, each small drop of sound and beauty sinking into the pool of the mind. Denner, a Buddhist, was part of the “Berkeley Daze”, of which one writer recalled: “What can I say about Berkeley, San Francisco and the Bay area in the 1960s? How to convey the giddy sense of infinite possibility that hung in the air? You didn’t need pot, hash or acid to get high. There was a feeling of weightlessness permeating the air. Every day was sunny, everybody smiled, students at UC Berkeley almost danced down the street to the class. The air was cleaner, purer, sweeter.” Buddhism was certainly one of the forces tangible in that air, and it formed a bridge from the Beat years to the hippy years. Buddhism is a path to peace and acceptance, offering self-transformation without surrendering to some mysterious or threatening god. It enabled a number of poets and writers to approach the ideal of transcendence without accepting religious doctrines that seemed irrational and unprovable.

The Berkeley Daze was ten years or more after the founding days of Rexroth, Spicer and McClure, and a number of poets did not make it through from the Beat to the Hippy era. One of the most interesting who didn't was Weldon Kees, a very atypical Californian poet born into a wealthy mid-western family who became a multi-talented artist, filmmaker and musician as well as a poet. His work is intensely emotional but tightly controlled, and his work achieved a rare formal perfection, a reined-in power, sounding at times almost like Robert Lowell:

“Heart, heart, I do not live. The lie of peace
Echoes to no end; the clocks are dead.
What we have had we will not have again.”

Kees is famous for his disappearance in 1955, leaving his car parked near the Golden Gate Bridge; he is presumed to have ended his own life in the waters of the Bay. A similar fate overtook Lew Welch, an early associate of the Beats, who built up a body of poems that were short, witty, hard-hitting and always shot through with a biting honesty. His later years veered between mental torment and Buddhism, and one of his last poems has the refrain, “This is the last place. There is nowhere else to go.” In 1971 Lew walked out into the hills of Nevada and disappeared; no body was ever found. To me that seems a proud, a transcendent way for a poet to die: alone in wild beautiful country, to turn your back on this life and enter another unknown realm, leaving behind you a few dozen pages of passionate, hard-won words, and a sense of mystery.

Welch's pain however must have been less than Larry Eigner's, for Eigner lived all his life with severe physical disability, and yet developed a stunningly original voice. His brief, concentrated poems are impressionistic, in an oriental or imagist manner; they don't develop, they simply exist. They are somehow both bleak and beautiful, clearly conveying something of his loneliness, but also something of magic. A similar judgement could be made of the work of Gerald Vizenor, with his short, visionary lyrics. He was a leading figure in what might be called the American Indian Renaissance and wrote more prose than poetry, but he was drawn to the haiku, finding in its stripped-down discipline an equivalent to the virtues of strength and simplicity in the

culture that he sprang from; yet at its heart the successful haiku always contains an act of magic.

Magic became a dreamed-of pathway too for Diane di Prima, an immigrant from New York, who in the late 70's seized on the esoteric figure of Paracelsus to express again the transcendent longings of the hippy years: "Today we stand at the brink of a new era. Science has failed us as the Church failed the man of Paracelsus' day. In five or ten years the science bubble will burst... To be born again, to make the world anew, will be no easy task. We shall have increasingly to have recourse to the wisdom of other times, to the philosophies of the East, to the mystics and masters of the occult, to those adepts for whom there was no dualism, for whom spirit and matter, man and cosmos, were one. Paracelsus stands at the gateway of the old knowledge. He beckons to us, he leads us in by the hand."

If all this sounds rather grandiose and pretentious, we have to remember just how subversive and fun-loving the West Coast poets could be, and none more so than Floyd Salas, whose hilarious juvenileerotic confession, "Pussy, Pussy Everywhere", Foley gives in its entirety. All these poets, and dozens more whom Foley evokes for us, different as they were in so many ways, seemed to be striving to break down the decorum of poetry, as Philip Whalen put it; to bring poetry down from the ivory tower, out of the aesthete's flower-garden, and free it from the academy. Each one gave the reader, or the audience, what Ron Silliman called "the onslaught of disconnected and often horrifying details that make up our experience of contemporary life." Most of the writers mentioned above were white and male, but of course the ideal of liberation inspired black and female writers still more intensely. Al Young and Ishmael Reed, Judy Grahn and Lynn Lonidier, and many others were driven to find a new language to express their encounter with what to them was a deeply hostile world, a language for their pain and for their vision of a different future.

The generous quotations from the many lesser-known poets make Foley's book virtually an anthology of this whole poetry scene, giving me personally many pieces that I would never otherwise become aware of. To give just a few examples, all from Volume Two, I found Karen Brodine's poem on the Green River murders, and Jack Hirschman's attack on Pound both immensely powerful; while Robert Nathan's poem on old age was touching and whimsical in

exactly the same way that his novels are. Perhaps his best-known work is *A Portrait of Jennie*, a beautiful evocation of old-time New York, which was made into a magical film about the springs of artistic creation. Likewise many poets emerge from the sketches which Foley gives us as deeply fascinating human beings, and often matchless critics of their own work and that of others. These sketches are sometimes funny and gossipy, sometimes deeply serious. I love Jack Spicer's response to praise for his work, "That poem is beautiful Jack." Spicer: "I *know* it's beautiful, but what does it *mean*?" And then there is Tom Parkinson's poem reflecting on his lost cat:

"Our cat has been gone three weeks.
He came to us from nowhere
And has gone back to nowhere,
And I return to my poems
And observe the same process."

And all these writers, famous and not-so-famous, were in their different ways building something enormously powerful and yet endlessly fragile: nothing less than the dream that a new era of human freedom could be dawning. This was to be not merely freedom *from* something, from the gods of twentieth century America – the money, the consumerism, the military, the paranoia, the racism, the violence – but freedom *into* something: into a renewed closeness with nature, creative art instead of wage-slavery, the cultivation of spiritual wonder, authentic personal relationships, compassion for those in pain or want, simplicity in our daily lives, social justice and end to victimisation, and the promotion of peace between individuals and nations; out of all this would come a reconstruction of the self, a redemption from the evils of the past, and the chance of a life transfigured by freedom and love.

* * * *

It seems undeniable that these ideals did succeed in releasing a surge of psychic energy in the late 1960s. But since we are dealing here with several million human beings all differing in their personalities and their life situations, it's clear that things could go wrong, that the great apotheosis of

selfhood might indeed be positive and liberating, but it might also be destructive because many people would be unable to handle it. A few writers, such as Joan Didion, offered bleakly powerful pictures of the California where this new American dream was taking shape; but she stands out as the dark all-seeing Cassandra of this particular drama. Contemporary life, Didion argued, was becoming a sinister social void where agreed values had crumbled, where radical selfishness ruled, and potential violence and even madness were just below the surface. Didion was not alone in interpreting the Manson murders as the symbolic end of the dream-time, revealing the dark side of the ideal of unbridled individual freedom. However, the interesting thing about her cold, merciless observations of California in the 50s and 60s is that they pre-date those murders by a long way. She wrote about the Santa Ana winds as if they were omens of the destructive, death-bringing forces waiting in the deserts and the mountains, ready at any time to attack the cities and their inhabitants. Recalling the day that the news broke about the murders, when people were phoning each other, she wrote the chilling words, "No one was surprised." She drew attention to an earlier Hollywood murder, that of the early screen star, Ramon Novarro. Didion was certainly not a detached observer, for almost everything she wrote is permeated by a sense of disenchantment and loss. She sought for and she found the material she wanted in the troubled community around her, in the themes of love and death in this supposedly golden land, so in a way she too was a poet of California. The psychic energy set free had somehow become infected with loathing, later perhaps abetted by the social conflicts unleashed by the Vietnam War. Then would come the national trauma of Watergate, and above all the AIDS epidemic, which appeared to be a retribution inflicted by some malevolent god on this freedom-seeking generation.

As far back as the mid-1950s people were already beginning to speak about the damage wrought by all this freedom, about losing control, or "flipping" as it came to be called. In the words of one who lived through that drama, Suzan Perkoff, "How was a mortal supposed to experience numinous enlightenment, nirvana, satori, except by going far out? How could you know these other ways of knowing unless you explored your unconscious, disassociated, broke up, and through and beyond, beyond, far out, through pain, through sex, Benzedrine, anything, everything." Much later

Kathy Acker would speak of moving into a new way of life that meant giving up all normal structures of living, and rejecting “that specific, controlling, imprisoning “I”. This sounds like a prescription for Burroughs’s *The Naked Lunch*, while an early death from drink, drugs or suicide was the fate of a number of *poètes maudits*.

The killings at the Altamont music festival in 1969 form another symbol of the dark side of the Californian dream. Then there were the riots that broke out across the nation, actually starting in Los Angeles in the summer of 1965, underlining the fact that while “the dream” was real to some people, others, above all black people, had no escape from a much meaner and harsher reality. From today’s perspective it’s striking to note that ecology was then almost completely absent as an issue in the minds of poets or of anyone else, nor does it really make any appearance before the end of Foley’s book. Perhaps the forest fires that have ravaged parts of California over the years could be seen as the natural counterparts to the man-made destruction of the riots.

At its best however, the cultural community in California was fired by a sense that the participants were involved in an experiment in collective creativity, they were all actors together in a wild, unscripted drama. But in the late 1970s a new literary movement emerged which broke up that sense of community rather badly, an event which Foley describes vividly as the “Language Wars”. Language poetry is notoriously difficult to define, although easier to recognise when seen. Its central thrust was a rejection of the expressionism, the emotionalism, and the psychology and transcendent ideals of bardic poetry as it had taken shape in California in the entire post-war period. The Beats, The Buddhists, The Hippies, The Myth-Makers and the Mystics were, from this new perspective, all trapped in primitive ideas about poetry’s emotional power, its service to the self.

Language poetry sought to refine all that away and replace it with hard, cool, impersonal structures that seemed to be collages of strange, unrelated material which challenged logical understanding. Perhaps even we can say that it handled language as if it were a plastic medium which could be moulded, rather than a denotive medium that is governed by social and syntactical laws. The parallel that comes to mind is abstract painting, where its practitioners claimed to be liberating colour and form from the tyranny of visual

reality. Language poetry was theoretical and cerebral, claiming to liberate words from the pull of emotion, narrative and myth-making. It was a kind of alienation technique, cutting out the “I”-based landscape of so much poetry, traditional and modernist. A poem, it was claimed, did not have to rise or fall, flow, develop or resolve, as a poem traditionally does; it should confront you, like a locked iron gate that you could partly see through but never open.

One secondary but very important effect was that language poetry did not sit well with oral performance, since it was often very difficult to follow and grasp when heard; it was really intended to be studied on the page, to yield itself to the eye and the mind, and this became a further motive for battle in the performance-orientated community of Californian poetry. The “Language Wars” were animated, divisive, confused and bad-tempered, and they polarised the poetry community for two decades. Robert Duncan was incandescent with anger at what he saw as a betrayal of the profoundly mythic and psychic functions of poetry, which he had championed all his life. Dana Gioia returned to metrics and rhyme in his own poetry in reaction to the cerebral abstraction of language poetry, and he argued that the total rejection of poetic form and recognisable meaning had alienated the reading public, leaving poetry the pursuit of an academic minority. Gioia was correct in so far as language poetry was, above all and undeniably, difficult; and difficulty will always attract the attention of an elite, intellectual readership. Gioia lamented the possibility that poetry could die into a specialist, cerebral art, as detached from real life as the clues in a cross-word puzzle.

Language poetry was by definition not friendly to the revolutionary causes, personal and social, which many poets were seeking to advance: the cause of liberation for black people, women, gay people and other minorities. In this sense it represented a major shift away from the project of personal liberation which had been the distinctive fire within Californian poetry. It could even be said that language poetry worked by deliberately emptying itself of any clear message – emotional, spiritual or social – and replacing these with an abstract collage of words. It did not escape the attention of its critics that it was largely a male preserve. Like many highly theoretical movements, language poetry has sent out influential waves into poetry at large, but it no longer has the clear and powerful identity it possessed in the 1980s. I feel

sure that Carolyn Kizer was thinking of language poetry when she wrote, tongue in cheek:

“No one explains me because
There’s nothing to explain:
It’s all right here, very clear.
O for my reputation’s sake
To be difficult, to be opaque.”

Although Kizer was not among the group of Babarian poets (centred on the Café Babar) which included David Lerner and Kathleen Wood, her little rhyme could apply to their let-it-all-hang style, their apotheosis of the subjective, confessional “I”.

Foley’s book continues the story down to 2005. There is no lessening of the variety and excitement of the poetry or of Foley’s comments on it. On almost the last page, he quotes Kate Braverman’s deep reflections on a hundred years of San Francisco literature:

“We are the American capital of a conceptual region. It’s a terrain of sensibility, drawing the restless, agitated, eccentric and explosively creative. We are the city of yes, and pirates and storytellers, from Jack London through Ginsberg, Kerouac and Burroughs, they all moored here. Our legacy is an assemblage of writers who were not born in this geography [n.b. Jack London was] and often did not stay, but passed through. The tide comes and goes as it always does...As America squanders its accidental empire, consigns its most fearless stylists to marketplace burial, and engineers a conspiracy of collective amnesia, San Francisco is the city that remembers. As this nation stalls like a mastripped ship, passengers succumbing to manufactured official fictions of delusionary proportions, the drowned wash in and we greet them by name...Yes we remember the names of our dead. And we will never forget the eras they represent, the distinct decades of vivid and unlimited promise, the roads that could have been taken, but weren’t, even at the juncture where body bags and caskets filled fields like rows of April hyacinths. In this city we don’t say amen. We say yes.”

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Looked at in its entirety, what does this extraordinary book mean to us collectively, and to me personally? Does it

advance our understanding of what poetry is or may be? My answer to that question is, like Kate Braverman's, a resounding Yes, and I'd like to end this review with some personal reflections. This book has certainly changed and enlarged my understanding of modern poetry, but in other ways it has reinforced some long-held beliefs which I have developed alone, in the solitary chamber of my own mind.

What is new to me is the idea of a community of poets, with their supporters and friends, forming poetry into a social reality. I have grown up with the concept or picture of poetry as the solitary occupation of the mind and senses as the poet tries to grasp in words the mystery of his own being. This is clearly a romantic image of the man alone, the man outside civilisation, the man seen against the sky, whom Wordsworth placed centre-stage in the poetic drama. After Wordsworth, it was the self *viv-à-vis* the world that became the great theme of the man or woman whom we called poet, and perhaps it was no accident that the birth of romanticism occurred during the century which saw also the birth of science, industry and technology, re-shaping our physical environment and our mental world. Poetry in this view became a realm of mystery and beauty of language, which could flourish because it represented the inner sanctum of the human heart, the realm of emotion, wonder, fear, loneliness and love.

And still today I see the poet as working alone exploring these realms and sending back reports of them: the poet as the guardian of the private, the subjective, the human, in a world dehumanised, made desolate by the grinding social structures in which we have condemned ourselves to live. Still today as the poet pursues his vocation, he can say with Milton, "Let my lamp at midnight hour/ Be seen in some high lonely tower,"- the classic "ivory tower"presumably. Solitude was the cloak that enwrapped the poet during his creative work, and it was only marginally loosened in his public life. As far as I know there is almost no record of Wordsworth, Shelley, Tennyson, the Brownings, Emerson, Poe, Whitman, Yeats, Eliot or any of the great figures sharing their poetry with an audience. Tennyson, it's true, would sometimes read aloud to a very small group of friends, and there are recordings of both Yeats and Eliot reading - quite lifelessly - into a microphone. Poetry in traditional English literary culture lived only on the page. It was a message from writer to reader, to be pondered in private, and perhaps criticised in print. Even someone like Louis MacNeice, who worked for

years in BBC radio as a script-writer and producer, never made a broadcast of his own work. To go further back, for many years the whole of Europe rang with Byron's name as the archetypal romantic poet-hero, and yet I don't remember reading that he ever once read his poems in public.

So the stories of the men and women in Foley's book living publicly as poets is a revelation to me: reading together at poetry and music events, meeting in informal discussions at each other's houses, performing in cafes and on radio, making recordings, selling poetry in the streets, giving classes in colleges, demonstrating for or against political causes, forming small presses to publish work, issuing poetry magazines, going into drama to take their work on stage—all this is a radically different model of poetry. It is of course inseparable from its social and historical context, in that it was provoked by the materialistic, conformist, repressive, and often malign character of American society: poetry became a criticism, an act of revolt against the governments and the corporations which were ruling and poisoning people's lives, a dehumanising culture for which the superb expression "moneytheism" was coined by Lawrence Lipton in 1959.

Jazz, folk and rock music were parallel protests which influenced this poetry in its growing confidence, its public face. And the great message was freedom: freedom from social tyranny, freedom for people to ask what life was, and to proclaim that it was more than money, more than consumerism, more than military power; that people must be free to search for and find deeper personal and spiritual meaning in their lives, and make their own ethical choices about how to live. This search and this freedom they embodied in poetry that was vivid, wild and satirical; above all it had to be new and transcendent, it had to match the challenge of the world they faced, and be capable of projecting an alternative vision; it had to be a force which could attack, and a force which could heal and renew. To people who found his work "extreme", McClure could reply that he had lived in World War Two, and "in wars of the ego and in the Cold War, and in the war against the environment, and in the spiritual war, and in the Korean War, and in the Vietnamese War, and now in another massacre in the Middle East. It is a state of crisis, and Mallarmé was right, poetry is the language for it."

It's worth remembering here that nothing comparable took shape in English poetry for a very long time: English poetry was more polite, understated, and quasi-academic, concerned to demonstrate cleverness rather than getting involved in revolutions. When such a movement did develop in the England of the late 1960s, with writers like Michael Horovitz, Heathcote Williams, and Christopher Logue, it came as a response to the American model and it remained on the fringes. It is, by the way, utterly impossible to imagine a book like Foley's being published in England today.

The problem is that such poetry could arise only out of an exceptionally strong sense of selfhood, and the cultivation of selfhood can lead to narcissism, to the apotheosis of the self, and to a vision of life which cannot be sustained in reality. The dangers of this position became clear fairly quickly in the toll of personal breakdown among writers. "Don't hide the madness," said Ginsberg, but others learned that it might be better to live sane and keep the madness for the poetry. So on the one hand I have profound admiration for the sheer verve of this poetry, the fearlessness, the iconoclasm, the fluency - all this is so American, and the sense of freedom that it radiates: this is something I want to share, to learn from and to bring into my own writing. And yet on the other hand I feel a pull back to my centre. A centre? Do we still think there exists a centre in poetry? Don't we now journey through an infinite number of peripheries, accepting that the centre, if it ever existed, has now dissolved?

Well not for me, it hasn't. I still feel in my heart that poetry is that spiritual search to express the mystery of our being, the mystery of the created cosmos, and of our destiny, or insignificance, within that cosmos. This is essentially a vatic role, a seer's role, to explore beyond the trappings of physical, daily existence, recalling mankind to the dimension of strangeness, beauty and mystery in which he truly lives. This role is profoundly serious and it can only be carried out in private, in the naked solitude of the heart, and perhaps only in that ivory tower. Our world today has become corrupted and degraded by man's obsessions with money and power, technology and hedonism, and the poet's role is not primarily to hold a mirror up to that world (although it may be the role of the novelist and the dramatist) but to reach into a language that transcends it, that draws the mind up from darkness into light.

This language forms almost no part of public discourse today, and can easily be dismissed as elitist or esoteric, but I prefer to think of it as religious; perhaps poetry can, in the last resort, function as a substitute religion. Many years ago Rexroth wrote of certain Californian poets: “The thing that distinguishes Robert Duncan, Philip Lamantia, William Everson and their associates is that they are all religious poets. Their subjects are the varied guises of the trials of the soul and the achievement of illumination. Everson’s poems are mystical, records of the struggle towards peace and illumination on the stairs of natural mysticism...How deeply personal these poems are, and how convincingly you touch the living man through them.”

I accept this, and this is why part of me still has to confess to doubts about poetry aligning itself with performance, with public fame, with the modern cult of success, with the desire of a poet to be seen as some kind of star in a performance art. I still believe that writing poetry in the knowledge that it is to be performed before an audience can, and often does, compromise the poetry, out of a desire to play to the gallery, to cause a sensation. I see poetry as something more austere, concentrated, private and silent: the poem as a silent, passive fragment of spiritual truth, waiting patiently to be discovered years or perhaps centuries later, by a solitary unknown reader. I think of a number of great poets of the past (Thomas Traherne, Emily Dickinson, Gerard Manley Hopkins, Edward Thomas, Georg Trakl) who were totally – or almost totally – unknown to fame in their own lifetimes, who had the integrity to continue writing out of their own need to write, to move in and out of that further dimension of strangeness, beauty and mystery. Long after their deaths, their poems still live in the immortality that the printed page has given them. I agree completely with what Andrew Joron said, that of all the arts “poetry has most successfully resisted becoming a commodity.” Great poetry has often been and still can be, amateur, non-commercial, existing in some purer world. In the end, for me poetry is not about virtuosity of language, however powerful, clever or funny it may be; it’s about what the poetry is saying to us, its message and its truth. It’s about shining a quantum of light, however small, onto the mysteries of our existence, and not in a single poem only, but in a body of work which will build into a vision of life.

So while I am full of wonder and admiration for the Californian poets who walk the pages of this precious book, I would emphasise that the model of poetry which it presents is not the only possible one. Poetry can indeed be engaged, passionately concerned with social reality, funny, satirical, shocking, iconoclastic, it can be all these things, but in the end poetry becomes great when it tells us something that can only be called spiritual about our deepest selves. When this happens it takes us into another world, an imaginative world made real through the mysterious power of language. There is no formula for that language, it does not have to be complex and grandiose, clever or learned, in fact it may be a language of the utmost simplicity, which brings us face to face with something that has been long hidden in our own life. Sometimes, when things go well, when the poem takes on life, it seems to the poet that it is not "I" who is speaking at all, but that language is speaking through us, giving us words with which to speak of a different world.

True poetry has something essentially irrational about it, since it expresses man's refusal to accept the world as it is; it is a counterworld, a *heterocosmos* created by the mind. Poetry's sources lie in the twin impulses to resistance and to redemption: resistance to the world of this time, the hostile or senseless outer world into which we are thrown, and redemption into a timeless world of imaginative freedom. This ideal was indeed realised by many of the writers profiled by Foley, but there was also the project of giving poetry an active relationship to contemporary life, and I am not sure that those two motives are in the end compatible. Duncan said that myth and poetry were "the story of what cannot be told", of the thing that cannot be known.

Visions and Affiliations is not so much a book as an epic experience, a journey through the best part of a century when poetry acted as an intellectual and social force in the life of California. Having spent several months with these volumes, I haven't finished with them yet, nor have they finished with me. There are so many people and ideas in it that I would want to discuss, but this essay may already be the longest book review of the year, so I'll let one extract stand for all that missing material. James Broughton, avant-garde filmmaker and poet, is a continuing presence here, and just two years before his death he spoke in characteristic style to Foley about his ideas and guiding principles:

“You must take care of your inner child all your life. That’s the one to raise, never mind your own children. They’ll have to fend for themselves anyway...I think the way to happiness is to go into the darkness of yourself. That’s the place the seed is nourished, takes its roots and grows up, and becomes ultimately the plant and the flower. You can only go upward by first going downward. I’ve never been afraid of losing my beautiful neurosis as a source of my poetry.”

These volumes are filled with the spirit of hundreds of talented, brilliant and outstanding figures like this, some successful, some obscure and defeated, who gave themselves to the search for poetic truth. For me that journey has been an inspiration, and Jack Foley has been the ideal guide: he has been like Virgil guiding Dante into the unknown, but with this crucial difference, that Foley, having led me through a good deal of suffering and heartache in hell and purgatory, doesn’t turn back on the threshold of heaven, as Virgil did. Instead, having opened my eyes to part of the great panorama of American literature, he permits me to see some of the great stars and the lesser who are gathered up there in the celestial court of sweet, wild spirits where the poets reign. It’s a tremendous work of scholarship and love, and I can only say if you care about poetry get it, read it, live with it, but don’t lend it out to your friends, because if you do you’ll probably never see it again.

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