



The San Francisco Renaissance

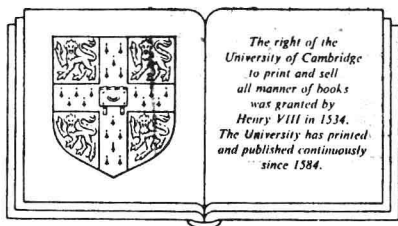
Poetics and Community
at Mid-century

MICHAEL DAVIDSON

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CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge

New York Port Chester Melbourne Sydney

Published by the Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge CB2 1RP
40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011, USA
10 Stamford Road, Oakleigh, Melbourne 3166, Australia

© Cambridge University Press 1989

First published 1989

First paperback edition 1991

Printed in the United States of America

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Davidson, Michael, 1944–

The San Francisco Renaissance : poetics and community at mid-century /
Michael Davidson

p. cm. – (Cambridge studies in American literature and culture)

ISBN 0-521-25880-4 hardback

1. American literature – California – San Francisco – History and criticism. 2.
American literature – 20th century – History and criticism. 3. San Francisco
(Calif.) – Intellectual life – 20th century. I. Title. II. Series.

PS285.S3D38 1989

811'.5409'97461 – dc20

89-1025

CIP

British Library Cataloging in Publication Data

Davidson, Michael

The San Francisco Renaissance : poetics and community at mid-century. –
(Cambridge studies in American literature and culture)

1. Poetry in English. California writers, 1945–.

Critical studies

I. Title

811'.54'09979461

ISBN 0-521-25880-4 hardback

ISBN 0-521-42304-X paperback

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"Hypocrite Women" from *O Taste and See* by

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**Printed in the
United States of America**

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The San Francisco Renaissance

Cambridge Studies in American Literature and Culture

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For Roy Harvey Pearce

Preface

This book owes a great deal to all of those well-intentioned English teachers who never said a word about the literary movement going on in San Francisco during the late 1950s and early 1960s. Their silence meant that as a student, growing up across the bay in Oakland, I had to learn about these events on my own through a kind of “vernacular pedagogy.” Such an education is created piecemeal out of popular mythology and hearsay and gains much of its impetus by the suppression of its subject matter. The vernacular pedagogy that led to the writing of this book began on a schoolbus sometime in 1959 when an older “bohemian” student loaned me a copy of Lawrence Ferlinghetti’s translations of the French surrealist poet Jacques Prévert. It was a book in Ferlinghetti’s Pocket Poet series published by City Lights Books. Not only had I never read poems like that (we were still trying to figure out why the horse *did* stop in the woods on a snowy evening), I had never seen books made like that. Its small format and stapled binding bespoke a portability intended for immediate access, a book one was meant to read while on the bus or standing in line. And there was something about the clandestine way that my friend handed the book to me that signaled secrecy and solidarity at the same time.

Like many other teenagers of my generation, I followed the book to its lair, taking the yellow Key Line train across the Bay Bridge to the First Street Station and then walking through the Financial District to Chinatown and then to North Beach, where “it” was happening. I’m not sure I knew then what “it” was, but one thing was certain: It wasn’t what was happening in my middle-class neighborhood in Oakland. North Beach was a perpetual theater where all sorts of unpredictable things were going on. People dressed “differently” and spoke the exotic argot of the hipster. In those days, underaged youths could get into clubs

(at least those that served food) and hear jazz at The Cellar or The Place, folk music at the Coffee Gallery, or chamber music at the Opus One or the Old Spaghetti Factory, not to mention poetry readings at a number of galleries and bars. My friends and I could sit around Beat shrines like Cafe Trieste or City Lights Books or Dante's (Mike's) Billiard Parlor and forget the fact that we were kids with crewcuts from the suburbs. We may have been living out a fantasy of liberated adulthood, but nobody bothered to tell us so.

I mention these nonliterary contexts because they played an especially important role in what has come to be called the San Francisco Renaissance, a movement in which lifestyle was as important to its dissemination as any specifically literary values. Although in the pages that follow I qualify certain myths of the movement, it is important to stress the value of these stories in creating a sense of community during a period of consensus and conformism. Reception theory and reader response analysis have introduced concepts like a "community of readers," but such critical methods say little about actual historical readers who not only read literature but are made by it. For my generation, exposure to the literary renaissance of the late 1950s and early 1960s involved an awareness of new social forms and practices for which our formal education had little prepared us.

These nonliterary factors in the San Francisco Renaissance worried early critics, who saw in Beat bohemia the destruction of an important barrier between mass culture and high art. Poetry could be heard on street corners and in jazz clubs, and read in the pages of quickly printed, mimeographed magazines. Figures like Kerouac, Ginsberg, and Corso appeared on television talk shows, and their remarks on the state of culture could be read in *Esquire* and *Playboy*. The Beat movement in particular identified with alienated heroes of Hollywood film like Marlon Brando and James Dean, and much of its antiestablishment humor derived from the Marx Brothers and standup comedians like Mort Sahl. Such unashamed assimilation of mass culture brought new audiences to poetry that were not necessarily part of the academic establishment. The movement also reintroduced a new coefficient of contemporaneity (or its more debased version, "relevance") into a literary hermeneutics that had become increasingly technical and formal.

This shift in reception turned the definition of culture away from its Enlightenment associations with "civilizing" and rationalizing activity to an earlier, anthropological meaning that stressed processes of enrichment within the entire community. Raymond Williams reminds us that the term "culture" originally referred to the raising of crops and animals, the cultivation of land. The modern use of the term, beginning in the seventeenth century, applied the idea of cultivation to products of the

mind – the cultivation of “Spirit” – and by the mid-nineteenth century the term referred to the process of becoming civilized.¹ We could see the San Francisco Renaissance as reinforcing the earlier, agrarian definition by the ways that it foregrounded primitivist notions of community (the oral tradition, the role of the tribe, the divinity of nature) through which collective activity takes precedence over individual volition. For the writers with whom we shall be concerned, a new poetics implied not only formal innovation but also discovery of alternative social forms. As Robert Duncan asserts, “Surely, everywhere, from whatever poem, choreographies extend into actual space.”²

Despite the rhetoric of tribalism or mutual aid adopted by many of the writers during this period, the actual development of community was not always so egalitarian. Poets often had recourse to rather exclusive and exclusionist rituals that belied their democratic social ideals. The bohemian bar life of the 1950s was a competitive arena in which many of the power struggles of the dominant culture were acted out in microcosm. Poetry became not only a vehicle of personal expression but a complicated intertextual and dialogical field in which rivalries and sexual preferences could be encoded and defended. The work of this period reveals a tension between certain extravagant claims of transcendence and lived reality, but that tension was also a measure of postwar America’s inability to provide a social validation equal to its extraordinary economic success. World War II had catapulted the country into a new stage of capitalist development that moved away from single markets and industries toward global ventures and multinational corporations. If the country was at least economically prosperous, its social dialectic was far less stable, manifesting itself in the “joiner” mentality of middle America as well as in the red-baiting rhetoric of the McCarthy committee. Popular sociological accounts of the period, like those of David Riesman and Daniel Bell, attempted to describe some of the anxieties of the burgeoning middle class – tensions brought on by bureaucratization, mobility, decentralization – but one can see the same sense of disaffiliation within literary bohemia.

In defining the tensions between claim and reality, I have occasionally relied on anecdotal and apocryphal histories of the period, not simply to trade in gossip but to show how a certain literary subject was inventing itself through representations of freedom, emancipation, and participation. A good example is the series of alter egos Jack Kerouac created in his novels to embody the independence and involvement he could never obtain for himself. The same could be said of Kenneth Rexroth’s vision of the engaged proletarian artist, Robert Duncan’s projection of a heavenly city of art, or Jack Spicer’s idealized bar world. Within the “enabling fictions” of community surrounding the San Francisco Renaissance

can be glimpsed the utopian hopes for some kind of *Gemeinschaft* that was rapidly being replaced by suburban anonymity and the new corporate state. Such fictions do not diminish the integrity of the movement but suggest the difficulties that postwar writers had in separating themselves from the society they criticized.

The existence of such enabling fictions of community has not been much discussed in recent criticism of American poetry, which, in one version, has attempted to define the canon by reference to the oedipal struggle of “strong” poets with equally strong precursors. The desire there is to identify transcultural principles that embody a distinctly cultural (American) identity, thus leaving aside issues of gender, race, sexual preference, and class in the bargain. Even when issues of culture and history *do* enter the debate, the primary goal is to identify consensus rather than creative dissent. Robert von Hallberg, for example, has argued that the best recent poetry is accommodationist rather than oppositional, that it is concerned with the center, not the margins, of American life. Poets as diverse as John Ashbery, Ed Dorn, Mona Van Duyn, and James Merrill write an Arnoldian “culture poetry” that takes as its primary focus “the feelings, experiences, and difficulties that are considered the irreducible center of public life.”³ Though I respect von Hallberg’s desire to study a diversified group of poets “not all read by the same audience, and not all of whom care deeply about each other’s work,”⁴ I also feel that the mainstream culture that these poets address is an enabling fiction in itself, one created by the critic to explain ideological chasms glimpsed by the poet.

The motivating feature of much recent criticism is a desire to subsume difference and conflict within the great paradox of American literature itself, one announced by Emerson and adumbrated by Whitman: that of a democratic ensemble that empowers the idiosyncratic individual. Within that capacious idea, however, are tensions that even Whitman could not solve, tensions that can be felt in the middle portions of “Song of Myself” and later in *Drum Taps*. What a literary democracy does not tolerate is sectarianism and insularity – poetic movements fighting over turf or poetry wars conducted in little magazines. I will make the unfashionable case that such insularity is often necessary for the creation and survival of culture poetry. A poet like Ezra Pound was able to concern himself with what he took to be the central issues of his day only by constantly revising history in his own terms. Through poems, correspondence, essays, and broadsides Pound battled perceived “central” authority (Roosevelt, Jewish bankers, British jurisprudence), and the center he most desired – a fascist millennium – seems to us now the most hideous parody of all such unifying structures. The point is that Pound – like many of the poets I discuss in this book – gained much of his

impetus to write by regarding himself as embattled, a “lone ant” on the anthill of decaying European culture. He relied on a complex network of magazine editors, politicians, and other poets as sounding boards for ideas that he regarded as salvational but that his recipients (including Mussolini) regarded as errant nonsense. To neutralize the element of sectarianism and cultural myopia in Pound’s work would be to de-historicize radically this most historical of poets.

It may be objected that because of my focus on a regional literary movement I am unable to speak about larger developments in American poetry during the same period. Although I occasionally refer to writers outside San Francisco, my attention remains on figures who lived and participated in the “excitements” (as Robert Duncan called them) of the period from 1955 to 1965. Obviously my remarks about the revival of romanticism could as easily be said about John Ashbery or A. R. Ammons or Elizabeth Bishop as they could be about Robert Duncan or Allen Ginsberg. There are probably more significant aesthetic parallels between Robert Duncan and Charles Olson than there are between the former and, say, Jack Kerouac or Lew Welch. The fact is that such larger continuities *do* exist, and they have been the subject of several important recent books. But in deterritorializing writers for the sake of shared aesthetic continuities, one loses some of the vitality produced by region and community.

It may also be objected that because I am limiting myself to a relatively small area, I must deal with “minor” poets whose impact on the national scene has been minimal or whose work seems less rigorous, complicated, or intellectual than that of others working in the same idiom. In order to answer this objection, it is necessary to examine the means by which a writer attains “major” status – those seemingly universal standards by which one author is anthologized and another ignored. One could usefully employ the example of recent feminist scholarship, which has emphasized the degree to which evaluative terms for literature are determined by gender. These terms marginalize literary works by women, either because the genres in which they write are considered minor (sentimental romance, diary, epistle) or because the idiom is personal, expressive, or confessional. In analogous ways, certain writers of the San Francisco Renaissance have not achieved recognition, either because they have refused forms of literary self-promotion (Jack Spicer, Philip Whalen, Joanne Kyger) or because the interpretive standards of the day will not admit their openly romantic idiom.

Exclusion from the major literary venues not only is a matter of literary taste but includes those questions of lifestyle mentioned earlier. John Crowe Ransom’s reasons for rejecting poems by Robert Duncan that he had initially accepted for the *Kenyon Review* were based on his having

read the poet's "Homosexual in Society" essay and deciding that the poems were tainted by Duncan's sexual "advertisement." No doubt Ransom felt that he was exercising disinterested critical judgment when he first accepted Duncan's poems as much as disinterested social judgment in subsequently refusing them. Canon formation occurs in the imperceptible fissure between these two forms of disinterest.⁵

A word on the term "Renaissance": The term implies renewal as well as return, and both senses apply to the San Francisco poetry movement. The return was not to an indigenous literary flowering of an earlier era but to the romantic movement itself, which had been thwarted, so the poets felt, by the sedimentation of its ideals during the period of late modernism. Robert Duncan was the most vocal proponent of this view, but it can be felt in Kenneth Rexroth's hope for a literary revival on the order of the one that occurred in Paris in the 1920s and William Everson's celebration of the bardic tradition. At the same time, many who referred to the period as the San Francisco Renaissance recognized the absurdity of an event based on something that had already happened. For the American western poet, deprived of any culture at all, the use of a highfalutin' term like "Renaissance" for a scruffy, proletarian movement had just the right kind of humor attached to it. Hence the "San Francisco Renaissance" refers to a self-conscious attempt to have an inaugural literary movement at the same time as it signals the impossibility of having first things first.

Acknowledgments

The cover photograph for this book shows the Golden Gate Bridge under construction in the late 1930s. Although this moment precedes the San Francisco Renaissance by some years, it nevertheless embodies the spirit of western growth and change that this book chronicles. More important, the incomplete nature of this great western icon provides an image of a literary community already in formation by the time of the bridge's completion. The writing of literary history is also a communal project – an “increment of association” as Pound called it – that re-creates the past as a living presence. I therefore want to acknowledge the community of friends and scholars who have made my task easier.

The inspiration to consider the San Francisco Renaissance as a gathering of literary sects and circles came from Robert Duncan. In many conversations, he and Jess described the psychic geography of San Francisco not only as a historical literary movement but as a visionary topos in the romantic imagination. Their anecdotes and reminiscences (some of them unprintable) provided a vivid sense of a period in which they were central actors. I have been similarly assisted by discussions with Ron Loewinsohn, Paul Dresman, Tom Parkinson, Judy Grahm, Lyn Hejinian, David Bromige, David Meltzer, Robert Creeley, Michael McClure, Susan Griffin, Jerry Rothenberg, Ron Silliman, Bruce Boone, Robert Gluck, Donald Allen, Philip Whalen, and Robin Blaser. Lew Ellingham graciously made available his amazing (and as yet unpublished) manuscript on the Spicer circle, *Poet, Be Like God*. Michael Palmer provided a consistent (if heretical) commentary on all matters poetic and otherwise. His correspondence and conversation are so implicated in my writing that I am not quite sure where “I” begins.

The major impetus to write a book on the San Francisco Renaissance was provided by Marjorie Perloff, who has extended support and con-

structive comments during the past five years. Special thanks go as well to Jim Breslin and Bob Bertholf for their sensitive readings of the manuscript. The editorial staff at Cambridge University Press (particularly Andrew Brown, Mary Nevader, and Robert Racine) has been responsive and efficient at every stage of production. Albert Gelpi has been a perfect editor, reading the manuscript carefully and thoughtfully and providing much-needed encouragement along the way. His sympathy for the project and his own important work on contemporary poetry have been a great help.

I received incredible scholarly assistance from Lynda Claassen and her excellent staff at the Mandeville Department of Special Collections at the University of California, San Diego. I also received help from the directors and curatorial staffs of several manuscript depositories: the Butler Library, Columbia University; the Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley; and the Poetry/Rare Books Collection, State University of New York at Buffalo. I am particularly grateful to the late George Butterick of the University of Connecticut, Storrs, who answered many of my questions about individual authors and whose example as a textual scholar has always been an inspiration. His loss is felt by all of us working in the field he helped to create.

The wonderful cover photograph was made available by Bob David of the Golden Gate Bridge, Highway and Transportation District. I want to express my gratitude to copyright holders for letting me quote from published materials and to poets and estate executors for permitting me to quote from unpublished manuscript and audiotape materials.

Parts of chapters have appeared in journals and magazines, among them *Acts*, *Ironwood*, and *boundary 2*, for which thanks to editors David Levi Strauss, Michael Cuddihy, and William Spanos. Thanks also to Dawn Kolokithas, who organized the Jack Spicer/White Rabbit Conference, and Michael Lynch, who chaired a special MLA panel on Robert Duncan where sections of the book were presented.

Lori Chamberlain has read more of this manuscript than she wants and has given me more help than she can possibly know. Her presence, patience, and affection are the empowering conditions beyond the text.

Finally, I want to extend my gratitude to Roy Harvey Pearce, to whom this book is dedicated. His pioneering work on American poetry and his willingness to include the "New American Poetry" in a continuity extending back to Edward Taylor and Anne Bradstreet gave permission for many of us to follow his lead. His sensitivity to poetry as a cultural and historical document, "Part of the res itself and not about it," has been central to my thought in writing this book. His personal support as a mentor and colleague is immeasurable.

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Introduction

Enabling Fictions

INAUGURAL MOMENTS

The limitless and stretching mountains of the damned
Surround Arcadia; they are the hells that rise above the ground
Of this poetic paradise;

(Jack Spicer)

The writing of literary history invariably takes mythic forms. A new school, movement, or aesthetic credo often emerges from a series of enabling fictions that structure the reading of a given text. Inaugural moments like the premiere of Stravinsky's *Sacre du Printemps*, the Armory Show, the arrival of Tristan Tzara in Zurich, and the meeting of Picasso and Braque have become, for better or worse, the luminous centers around which modernism has been formulated. Such moments galvanize public attention and give to the desultory evolution of literary history the illusion of purpose and direction. But these enabling fictions of origin often obscure creative dissension and opposition that are a part of any literary movement.

The history of what has come to be called the San Francisco Renaissance is no exception. What began as a series of loosely organized readings, publications, and meetings has been read as a unified narrative of the literary and artistic life of the San Francisco Bay Area during the late 1950s and early 1960s. This book is a history of that narrative rather than a narrative of that history, the latter having been written already, often through the filter of those myths of origin just mentioned.¹ My interest is not to debunk that history but to see in the disparity between what has been claimed and what has been produced some of the tensions in contemporary poetry in general.

In this, I am adapting an idea of Jerome McGann, who has discussed

the tendency of critics to write the history of nineteenth-century poetry out of a particular "ideology of Romanticism," one produced "by an uncritical absorption in Romanticism's own self-representations."² These representations include an emphasis on the creative imagination, enthusiasm, and transcendence to the exclusion of more problematic areas of skepticism, irony, and existential despair. The romantic ideology, as promulgated by Rene Wellek, M. H. Abrams, and others, valorizes aesthetic and psychological issues without considering the political and historical backdrop against which these theories were formulated. What McGann says of romanticism is also true of the way that contemporary poetry, itself an outgrowth of romanticism, has created its own reading based on certain myths of participation, immediacy, and spontaneity. These myths, like those projected by the first-generation romantics, lead the poet to conceive of life in allegorical terms, each moment intersecting with the divine, so that the creation of poetry is directly linked to the creative powers of nature itself. Such an attitude was particularly pervasive during the San Francisco Renaissance, when matters of aesthetics were inextricably confused, in the public perception as well as in the minds of its participants, with matters of lifestyle. The history of the period, then, far from being an objective report, often seems like another chapter from one of Jack Kerouac's novels. And since Kerouac was often the source of this history, any claims to authenticity have to take into account his own complicity in the events.

If one were to write a comprehensive history of the San Francisco Renaissance, it would have to include the myth of the place itself: its colorful bohemian past, its political and social iconoclasm, its impressive physical setting. It would have to make some reference to earlier artistic movements like those in Big Sur during the 1930s and in Berkeley during the late 1940s. It would have to include the opening of Lawrence Ferlinghetti's City Lights Bookstore in 1953 and the subsequent publication of City Lights Books. It would have to make reference to the 1957 issue of the *Evergreen Review*, the "San Francisco issue," which featured many writers of the period along with Harry Redl's stark, somber photographs. It would have to include the publication of Allen Ginsberg's *Howl*, its seizure on the New York docks, and its obscenity trial. It would have to mention the publication of Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* by Viking Press and the various journalistic accounts of the movement spawned by that book. It would have to include accounts of the North Beach scene, its bars and coffeehouses, its poetry and jazz sessions at The Cellar, its occasional conflicts with the local police. Obligatory reference to drugs, sex, and wild parties would probably enter into certain parts of the narrative.

Of all such events, one in particular has come to epitomize the spirit of