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14

The Beats

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The Beats: A Problematic Canon

Writers commonly dislike group labels, feeling that their works are being cruelly amputated – an arm off here, a leg there ('the work bleeds', D. H. Lawrence protested) – to fit a communal box. Yet, as David Lodge has pointed out, no text can generate meaning in a vacuum. The meaning of a book is in large part a product of its differences from and similarities to other books. If, say, a novel did not bear some resemblance to other novels, we should not know how to read it, and if it was not different from all other novels we should not want to read it. Any adequate reading of a text, therefore, involves identifying and classifying it in relation to other texts, according to content, genre, mode, period, language, nationality, and so on. Granted the comparative imprecision of literary categories, there is a special onus upon any critic using a group designation to limit the capacity for slither by lending that term a utile definition (through one that must always be held under potential cancellation). And, certainly, of all such terms bandied about in recent decades, the Beat label is one of the oftenest used but least defined.

The source of most of the confusion bedevilling discussion of the Beats is a critical obsession with their lifestyle rather than their literary aesthetic. Emerging in the culturally repressive America of the Cold War era, the Beats sought to counteract a philistine and inhibitive society by exploring the most extreme, potentially ecstatic areas of the self. Characteristic preoccupations of those engaged in this quest were art (Abstract Expressionist painting was especially admired); jazz in its 'Bebop' and 'Cool' phases; drugs (from alcohol to heroin); sex (in Ginsberg's words, with 'whomever come who may'); communal living; frenetic travel; anarchistic drop-out politics; religious experimentation (with various forms of Buddhism, for example); the espousal of an anti-materialist ascetic lifestyle; an infatuation, sometimes consummated, with criminality (archetypal Beat heroes include the murderer Lucien Carr, William Burroughs who 'accidentally' killed his wife, the thief and heroin addict Herbert Huncke, and

the car thief and sometime homosexual prostitute Neal Cassady); and, when on the offensive against society, a policy of bugging the squares – or, as it would become known in the 1960s, 'freaking the straights' (a revival of the time-honoured avant-garde tactic of *épater les bourgeois*).

That many Beat authors not only adopted this lifestyle, but also used it as the subject matter of their art is indisputable. Kerouac's novels are heavily fictionalized chronicles of the antics of him and his pals, Allen Ginsberg becoming the Alvah Goldbook of *The Dharma Bums*, Lawrence Ferlinghetti becoming the Lorenzo Monsanto of *Big Sur*, William Burroughs being pseudonymized as Old Bull Lee in *On the Road*, Gregory Corso appearing as Raphael Urso in *Desolation Angels*, and so on, thereby creating the misleading impression that the reader might pierce the text in order to grasp an originatory autobiographical 'truth'. Another problem is that many non-writers adopted the lifestyle, with the result that even the more useful studies of the Beats are apt to be gossipy, sociological tours of one or another of their bohemian haunts with no attempt being made to discriminate the literary praxis from the general behavioural code. Lawrence Lipton's *The Holy Barbarians* (concentrating on Venice West, Los Angeles), *The Real Bohemia* by Francis J. Rigney and L. Douglas Smith (San Francisco), Ned Polsky's *Hustlers, Beats and Others* (Greenwich Village, New York) and Iain Finlayson's *Tangier: City of the Dream*, are examples of this mode. Elsewhere, Jane Kramer's *Paterfamilias*, an account of Allen Ginsberg in the 1960s, sycophantically forebore to comment that his poetic talent was depreciating in inverse ratio to his accession to 'guru' status; Ann Charters and Dennis McNally have written biographies of Kerouac that preposterously assume his novels to be an unmediated transcription of actual events; while major Beat writers have themselves sought to include amongst their number certain friends whose lifestyles they admired, but whose literary talents are irredeemably minor (Herbert Huncke, Carl Solomon, Peter Orlovsky and Neal Cassady are but the most conspicuous instances).

Fifty years after the events, the time has come to set a new agenda for the Beats, and one not based on any of these irresponsible meldings of the biography and the art, the lifestyle and the literature. Alas, this process can hardly be said to be underway, the best recent books in the field still being biographies; especially, perhaps, Gerald Nicosia's *Memory Babe: A Critical Biography of Jack Kerouac* (1983), Barry Miles's *Ginsberg: A Biography* (1989) and Ted Morgan's *Literary Outlaw: The Life and Times of William S. Burroughs* (1991). The most widely available anthology, *The Penguin Book of the Beats* (1992) edited by Ann Charters, is organized on a New York–San Francisco axis based on the personal friendships of Kerouac and Ginsberg. The most recent critical symposium, *The Beat Generation Writers* (1996) edited by A. Robert Lee, contradicts its own title by devoting its longest essay to Huncke and Cassady. And even James Campbell's splendidly ascerbic and undeluded monograph, *This Is The Beat Generation* (1999), crosses the threshold between biography and literary criticism so freely as to blur the distinction between the two. Whatever their virtues, and there are plenty of them, these are not the revisionist studies we so badly need.

Beat Aesthetics

One place where a closer examination of Beat texts might begin is with the Romantic ideology on which their aesthetic is predicated. Quintessential features of this ideology include the attributing of superior value to the individual rather than the collective; the subjective rather than the objective; the irrational rather than the rational; innocence rather than experience, with children, blacks, bums and drug addicts being especially deferred to; nature rather than the city, though with a degree of idealization that is the mark of the urbanite rather than the hardened country dweller (see Ginsberg's 'Sunflower Sutra'); an expressivist poetics in which it is proposed that art should aim for the heart rather than the head, the best way of affecting the reader's emotions being to speak directly from one's own ('I am the substance of my poetry', Corso claims); and, with regard to the act of composition, a privileging of the spontaneous, the epiphanous, the inspirational, over the considered and premeditated (see Kerouac's essay 'Essentials of Spontaneous Prose' and Ginsberg's poem 'On Improvised Poetics' whose axiom 'First thought best thought' might be translated to mean 'First draft, best draft'). With regard to this last point, it is worth remarking the pride with which Kerouac claimed to have written *The Subterraneans* in three nights, Burroughs to have compiled *Naked Lunch* in a few weeks from a vast array of disparate manuscripts, and Ginsberg to have composed 'A Cottage in Berkeley' and 'A Supermarket in California' on the same day, the long first section of 'Howl' in an afternoon, and 'Sunflower Sutra' in twenty minutes.

Granted the insistence with which Ginsberg has acknowledged his debt to Blake and Whitman, Kerouac his admiration for Melville, or Corso his debt to Shelley, it is alarming the unanimity with which champions and detractors of the Beats have alike sought to suppress this pervasive Romanticism, the former in the interests of enhancing the movement's claims to originality, the latter in a desire to dismiss it as an unparalleled plunge into barbarism. However, nothing could be further from the truth than to present the Beats as a naive revival of an indigenous Transcendentalism, unmediated by post-Romantic developments in art and thought. It is hardly possible to read a classic Beat text without being aware of the way in which its Romanticism is contained, qualified and interrogated by the modernism of Stein, Pound, Eliot, Williams, Faulkner, Hart Crane, Thomas Wolfe and Henry Miller; the surrealism of Apollinaire, Prévert, Eluard, Reverdy and Lorca; and the Existentialism of Hemingway, Céline, Artaud, Sartre and Camus. It is precisely the tensions, the dialectics, the electrically precarious negotiations, set up between Romanticism on the one hand and these later developments on the other, that give the best Beat literature its remarkable energy and authority. When their Romanticism is unqualified, the Beats collapse into sentimentality of content and flaccidity of style. It is when Ginsberg places the Romantic poet Whitman in a supermarket in California, or when Kerouac views nature through the plate glass window of a car racing towards the urban delights of Denver, or when Burroughs presents drug states as at once a revelatory expansion

of consciousness and the most sickening form of capitalist dependency, that the authentic note is struck. And in this context the polysemic, contradictory term 'Beat' is not as inexact as has sometimes been thought.

Jack Kerouac coined the expression at the close of the 1940s, a fact documented by John Clellon Holmes in his essay 'This is the Beat Generation' in *The New York Times Magazine*, 16 November 1952. The Beats, then, were a phenomenon of the 1940s and the first half of the 1950s. The original nucleus was drawn primarily from the states of Massachusetts (Kerouac, Holmes) and New York (Ginsberg, Corso, Ferlinghetti), attended such East Coast universities as Harvard (Burroughs) and Columbia (Ginsberg, Kerouac, Ferlinghetti), and had its headquarters in New York City. Theirs was the America of Truman, Eisenhower and McCarthy; of the Korean war, the Cold War and the communist witch-hunts; of middle-class values, the work ethic and the sublimated eroticism of Doris Day; of a stultified cultural climate that found its noblest expression in the decent, anguished Liberalism of a Lionel Trilling or Arthur Miller; and of a literary-critical establishment whose house journals (*Hudson Review*, *Sewanee Review*, *Partisan Review*) could neither countenance nor accommodate their writings. It is worth reminding ourselves of these matters, for it helps account for that note of psychological extremity, of existential alienation, that is a hallmark of Beat literature.

Kerouac himself insisted that 'the word "beat" originally meant poor, down and out, deadbeat, on the bum, sad, sleeping in subways', and that only secondarily did he have a 'vision of the word Beat as being to mean beatific'. Holmes made the same point when he said that

Beat means not so much weariness, as rawness of the nerves; not so much 'filled up to here', as being emptied out. It describes a state of mind from which all unessentials have been stripped, leaving it receptive to everything around it, but impatient with trivial obstructions. To be beat is to be at the bottom of your personality, looking up; to be existential in the Kierkegaard, rather than the Jean-Paul Sartre sense.

Kerouac's coinage, then, encompasses several levels of meaning: to be Beat is to be defeated, beaten, dead beat, exhausted by the demands of straight society; it is to be hepped up, to have a quickened heart beat, in a high-risk, go for broke, shoot the works, all-or-nothing attitude, such as the writers associated with the best jazz music of the day; and it is to be hungry for beatitude, that epiphanous breakthrough from quotidian norms to an area of ecstatic consciousness in which the self feels itself to have been momentarily eternalized.

Once this complex of ideas has been unravelled, even in some such hasty and reductionist manner as the above, certain correctives to a lax critical orthodoxy immediately present themselves. First, many of the writers included in Beat anthologies (from Denise Levertov to Kenneth Koch) have nothing whatsoever to do with the movement. Second, the fact that this East Coast phenomenon first found a receptive audience when Ginsberg read the unpublished 'Howl' at the Six Gallery, San

Francisco, on 7 October 1955, should not blind us to the fact that the poets of the 'San Francisco Renaissance' differ from the original Beats, lacking their urban angst, their feverishness. To put it another way, the San Franciscans tend towards the beatitude end of the Beat spectrum at the expense of the bottom-dog, deadbeat, existential end which Kerouac said was primary. Third, certain figures who were neither part of the New York-San Francisco axis nor of Ginsberg's and Kerouac's circle of acquaintance partake of the Beat aesthetic much more fully than those who were: one thinks of Charles Bukowski living in Los Angeles (it would do no harm to the Beat canon for the profile of Los Angeles to be promoted at some expense to that of San Francisco); of Harold Norse, whose European and North African patrol resembles that of Burroughs; and of William Wantling, whose Midwestern background and long years in prison kept him out of the fashionable coterie.

Finally, the Romantic ideology of Beat literature, when released from the ball and chain of contemporary urban anxiety, has a tendency to recycle classic American myths, often of a quasi-frontier kind, in a way that is politically reactionary. The frantic desire to drop out, hit the road, head for the hills, and share a car with a trusted buddy (like the Lone Ranger and Tonto riding out into the unknown), is fundamentally a need to escape domesticity, parenthood, heterosexual commitment – in short, woman. From the Beat perspective, nothing locks one more ruinously into a restrictive society than a wedding ring, a mortgage and a pile of unwashed nappies (see Corso's poem 'Marriage'). Hence, the prevailing atmosphere of misogyny (often accompanied by mother love); and the lack of any significant women Beat practitioners, with the possible exception of Diane Di Prima – though such disenchanted but forgiving memoirs as Carolyn Cassady's *Off the Road*, Joyce Johnson's *Minor Characters* and Bonnie Bremser's *Troia: Mexican Memoirs* have their own importance. Similarly, one might note that the Romantic privileging of the primitive, uncultured and innocent has sometimes tempted the Beats into racial stereotypes that are unconsciously patronizing and demeaning. Kerouac's talk of the 'happy, true-hearted, ecstatic Negroes' is symptomatic. As Ned Polsky has tellingly remarked, to see the Negro as more elemental than the white man is 'an inverted form of keeping the nigger in his place'.

The point at issue is not just that the canon of Beat literature has been falsely founded on biographical rather than literary criteria; but that as a result we are for the immediate future obliged to adopt adversarial reading strategies if we are to avoid entrenching an already stale orthodoxy. The remainder of this essay will endeavour to complicate and enrich usage of the term by focusing on four aspects of Beat mythology that are particularly in need of redefinition.

A Practised Spontaneity

The Beat writers repeatedly urged spontaneity and anathematized redrafting, as though the latter were the enemy of the former. Hence, in the mini-essay 'The Origins

of Joy in Poetry', Kerouac promotes the virtues of 'writing whatever comes into your head as it comes'. In practice, however, the major works in the Beat canon are almost invariably those which benefited from arduous crafting; conversely, the genuinely impromptu pieces are usually the most disposable. This is not to say that the masterpieces exude laboriousness; but that their air of spontaneity has been hard won. Indeed, one of the reasons that academic critics were slow to applaud Beat artistry is that they did not appreciate just how hard it was to make it look that easy.

Ginsberg's 'Howl' is the poem that is usually thought to epitomize Beat aesthetics. When a facsimile edition was published in 1986 it reprinted five drafts of Part I; eighteen of Part II; five of Part III; and seven of Part IV. Other versions, some now lost, are alluded to in the commentary. The variants that are included chronicle the dramatic revisions the poem underwent before assuming its final form. In Part I, for instance, what is now the seventh strophe was the fiftieth in the first version; similarly, the present twenty-second, twenty-third, twenty-seventh and thirtieth strophes all moved fifty or more places in the sequence, often undergoing extensive rewording in the process. Moreover, the facsimile edition concentrates on the period 1955-6, whereas Ginsberg actually met the poem's dedicatee Carl Solomon in 1949, jotting down at the time many of the latter's anecdotes and aphorisms which subsequently found their way into the poem. In other words, 'Howl' was composed over a seven-year period, some parts of it undergoing at least twenty rehearsals before arrival at a persuasively 'improvised' discourse.

Much the same holds true for *On the Road*, usually regarded as the definitive Beat novel. The events it fictionalizes took place in 1947. A year later Kerouac had the title and the basic conception of the narrative. By early 1951 he had completed a 125,000-word version of the novel. By May, 1952, he had entirely rewritten it – though at 530 pages it still needed major surgery. By the mid-1950s he was not only compressing the plot, suppressing libellous passages and excising homosexual episodes at the behest of the novel's eventual publisher, Viking Press, he was also allowing his editor Malcolm Cowley to make his own changes without consultation. 'No emendations in time's reconsidering backstep', Kerouac proclaimed; but when *On the Road* finally appeared in 1957 it was the mature product of ten years' graft by several pairs of hands. The instant celebrity of the novel ensured that Kerouac would never again be under such editorial pressure to revise his work, with the unfortunate consequence that apart from *Visions of Cody* he never again attained such coherence and authority.

Of all the writers who might be considered Beat, it is arguable that only Charles Bukowski extemporized his best work, pressed up against the instantaneity of his inspiration and without the safety net of extensive revision. Two factors made this possible: first, Bukowski perfected his technique, not by redrafting the same text over a ten-year period like Ginsberg and Kerouac, but by drafting different poems and stories for approximately a quarter of a century before arriving at a style a reputable publisher thought worth preserving; and, second, he gave John Martin of the Black Sparrow Press *carte blanche* to select what he wanted from the vast, uneven eruption of material that continued right up until Bukowski's death. Martin rejected half the

material that his author sent him, finding much of it close to gibberish: Bukowski, for his part, knowing that he only became blocked if he strove too consciously for perfection, was happy to delegate all editorial functions in this way. Although it does not follow the usual pattern, then, Bukowski's career is further testimony to the virtues of tenacity, dedication and ruthless editing, rather than the expected ones of an anything-goes writing style followed by quick success.

An Educated Barbarism

On the first page of his most famous novel, William Burroughs explains: 'the title means exactly what the words say: NAKED Lunch – a *frozen* moment when everyone sees what is on the end of every fork'. The notion that the writer's duty is to convey experience raw, unmediated by literary convention or good taste, is repeated many times, Burroughs purporting to reject any attempt at novelization and presenting himself as the scientific documentor of his own (and, by extension, the larger culture's) morbid symptoms:

There is only one thing a writer can write about: *what is in front of his senses at the moment of writing*. . . . I am a recording instrument. . . . I do not presume to impose 'story' 'plot' 'continuity'. . . . Insofar as I succeed in *Direct* recording of certain areas of psychic process I may have limited function. . . . I am not an entertainer.

Paradoxically, in rejecting literature Burroughs simultaneously calls upon it, the title *Naked Lunch* deriving from Kerouac and the clause 'I am a recording instrument' invoking the Berlin stories of Christopher Isherwood together with their theatrical adaptation by John Van Druten, *I Am A Camera* (itself subsequently the inspiration for the stage and screen musical, *Cabaret*). As for the text itself, this scabrous phantasmagoria is densely interwoven with allusions, some admiring, some satirical, to the Bible, Confucius, Lao-Tse, Shakespeare, Webster, Swift, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Keats, Dickens, Rimbaud, Housman, Conrad, Stein, Joyce, Eliot, Kafka and Ginsberg, together with a plethora of popular songs – including, rather incongruously granted the surrounding squalor and mayhem, 'Believe me if all these endearing young charms . . .'!

The truth is that far from stepping outside the mediating frames of culture to get at experience direct, the Beat conceptions of unmediated reality were themselves culturally produced. How typical that when Burroughs murdered his wife it was not in some ghastly explosion of domestic rage and passion, but drunkenly acting out the fictitious William Tell story made famous by Schiller's play and by Rossini's opera *Guillaume Tell* (1829). Similarly, when Ginsberg voluntarily entered Columbia Presbyterian Psychiatric Institute in order to escape imprisonment for possession of stolen goods, he was met by a bespectacled overweight Jewish boy with a towel wrapped around his head. 'Who are you?' the stranger asked. 'I'm Myshkin', Ginsberg said.

'I'm Kirilov', Carl Solomon rejoined. Not even the extreme experience of psychiatric detention was drastic or terrifying enough to be apprehended raw and inchoate, but presented itself pre-processed by the novels of Dostoevsky. (Myshkin is the saintly hero of *The Idiot*, Kirilov the demonic nihilist in *The Possessed*.)

Of course, there is nothing wrong with artists being steeped in their cultural inheritance; nor with the literary stratagem of using intertextual references as a way of foregrounding the fact that all our perceptions of reality are culturally mediated. The trouble is that the Beats themselves keep wobbling between shame and pride in their own scholarliness, lurching from the crudest anti-intellectualism to dandified flauntings of artistic knowingness. In the sixth of the 'Pictures of the Gone World' section of *A Coney Island of the Mind* (1958), Lawrence Ferlinghetti opts for the anti-high art posture:

walking around in museums always makes me
want to
 'sit down'
I always feel so
 constipated
in those
 high altitudes

Yet poem after poem of this same volume (whose very title is an allusion to Henry Miller) begins with some such line as 'In Goya's greatest scenes we seem to see . . .', or 'Kafka's Castle stands above the world . . .', or 'Sarolla's women in their picture hats . . .'. There is no passion so animal, and no animal so bestial, as to elude this web of citations, as when an apparently feral dog waits

with his head cocked sideways
 at street corners
as if he is just about to have
 his picture taken
 for Victor Records
listening for
 His Master's Voice

Despite Ferlinghetti's penchant for lumberjack shirts and mountain boots, his poetry has more in common with Oscar Wilde ('What has nature ever done except copy art?') than *The Call of the Wild* (nature red in tooth and claw, etc).

The same holds true for the other Beats. James Campbell has remarked the extraordinary literary pedigree of Kerouac's title *On the Road*, citing as evidence works of the same name by Douglas Goldring (1910), Gwen John (1920), Langston Hughes (1935) and Cyril Campion (1954). As for Ginsberg, many of his best poems are written over the top of previous works by earlier authors: 'Malest Cornifici Tuo Catullo' translates and adapts a poem by Catullus; 'A Supermarket in California' reworks Lorca's 'Ode to Walt Whitman'; 'Sunflower Sutra' is clearly modelled on Blake's 'Ah, Sun-

flower!'; 'Kaddish' leans heavily on Edward Marshall's 'Leave the Word Alone'; while in 'Howl' the echoes multiply, many of them carrying the marks of more than one prior usage (for instance, Ginsberg took Christ's agonized cry 'eli eli lamma sabachthani' – 'My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?' – not from its New Testament source in Matthew 27.46, but via Tristan Corbière's 'Cris d'Aveugle', so that both anterior texts are in play in the pertinent passage towards the end of Part I).

There has always been a criticism hostile to the Beats, usually entailing a last-man-on-the-ramparts, end-of-civilization-as-we-know-it tone of hysterical oppositionalism. Thus the poet John Ciardi wrote contemptuously of their 'unwashed eccentricity', while Norman Podhoretz, in 'The Know-Nothing Bohemians', claimed that they stood in opposition to 'intelligence itself'. Yet the Beats are characteristically erudite, bookish, sedentary. As the jam-jar bottom lenses of Ginsberg and Burroughs's spectacles attest, these were men more at home in a library than roughing it 'on the road'.

The Biographical Fallacy

In a 1956 letter to his old college tutor, Lionel Trilling, Allen Ginsberg opined: 'I think what is coming is a romantic period. . . . Eliot & Pound are like Dryden & Pope. What gives now is much more personal.' This speculative neo-Romanticism has latterly been rigidified by sympathetic critics like Ann Charters into something altogether more reductive. In the *Penguin Book of the Beats* she repeatedly asserts that 'Beat literature is predominantly autobiographical' and that 'the Beats insisted on writing directly about events in their own lives'.

Two exhibits will demonstrate the violence done to these texts when they are approached as versified autobiography. The first, 'Pusan Liberty', by the neglected Beat writer William Wantling, is one of the finest English-language poems to come out of the Korean conflict, comparable to the best First World War poetry in its perception of contending soldiers as alike victims of their respective political and military masters. The poem offers a clear example of the way in which Beat literature's defining note of alienated authenticity is artistically constructed rather than being the result of the author vomiting personal experience direct upon the page.

The poem opens with a scene that brilliantly encapsulates the devastation and corruption modern war visits upon its host society:

the 6 × 6 bounces me down the
washboard roads, I see the

sun-eaten walls of Korea, my
girl-wife & child in a mud &

straw hut back in Taegu & here
I am meeting the SEAL as he

sits on his roller-skate cart
minus arms & legs but beneath

his ass a million \$'s worth
of heroin

What initially convinces us of the poem's veracity is not just the precise detailing but also the psychological extremity of the situation, the Wantling protagonist buying and shooting up heroin before selling some on to the enemy:

2 Chinese agents come around

to make their buy, 2 young
boys, they're hooked bad & I

charge them too much – we sit
there & fix, I fix again, the

so called Enemy & I, but just
3 angry boys lost in the immense

absurdity of War & State sudden
friends who have decided that

our hatred of Government exceeds
the furthest imaginable limits

of human calculation

We know Wantling was the youngest Marine Sergeant in combat during the winter 1952–3 campaign of the Korean War. We also know that his adult life was in part shaped by his addictions (many of his individual poems and pamphlets have such titles as 'Heroin', *Heroin Haiku*, 'Once You've Been a Dopefiend' and 'For the Peyote Goddess'). Again, the poem's acknowledgement, even as it establishes the momentary camaraderie of '3 angry boys lost in the immense / absurdity of War & State', of the narrator's little betrayal of his 'sudden / friends' by overcharging them for their fix seems like an earnest of psychological candour. As Camus put it in *The Fall*, 'we cannot assert the innocence of anyone, whereas we can state with certainty the guilt of all'.

Yet that use of the word 'absurdity' when describing the situation the three 'boys' find themselves in, invoking as it does Camus' 1942 essay *The Myth of Sisyphus*, in which the existentialist view of the absurdity of the human condition was given definitive formulation, might be interpreted as a sign, not of the poem's veracity, but of its literarity – or, if you prefer, its fictiveness. It is noticeable, for instance, that the protagonist of the poem is given no name: this not only rolls a boulder in the way of our desire to conflate the narrator of this first-person monologue with its author; it may also suggest that, to the contrary, the authorial intention was to present the protagonist as a sort of everyman, his anonymity implying a degree of universality.

(A comparison might be made with Stephen Crane's classic war novel *The Red Badge of Courage*, whose central character, Henry Fleming, remains nameless for most of the story's duration, being referred to simply as 'the youth'.) This is not just a matter of Wantling presenting his experiences as representative so that the subjective or autobiographical has objective or universal value, for thus far no evidence has come to light confirming that he, like his narrator, had a 'girl-wife & child' in Korea. Most tellingly of all, in a frank letter recounting his life of crime and drug use to Edward Lucie-Smith, Wantling admitted that he actually took up heroin in the United States not Korea, in 1955 not 1952–3, in peace time not in war. However much autobiography infiltrates 'Pusan Liberty', its narrator's experience is not the author's, and the poem's air of extreme authenticity is a fictional construct. In short, the emotional force of the piece is not the result of Wantling baring his soul but of Wantling baring his technique.

Our second exhibit demonstrates by the opposite means the same point – namely, the fictiveness of the Beat text and the absurdity of trying to take its measure in biographical terms. As already noted, Allen Ginsberg met Carl Solomon in the Psychiatric Institute of New York in 1949. Ginsberg dubbed Solomon 'an intuitive Bronx Dadaist and prose-poet', noted down his more memorable anecdotes and turns of phrase, picked up from him Artaud's concept of the artist as a man mad (i.e. sane) in a sane (i.e. mad) society, and six years later brought all these elements together in a poem whose full title is 'Howl for Carl Solomon'. The piece famously begins

I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness, starving
hysterical naked,
dragging themselves through the negro streets at dawn looking for an angry fix

and Solomon is presented as a prime example, a lunatic–saint cruelly incarcerated in a mental asylum by an uncomprehending society. The pivotal moment of the long first section of the poem begins with a passage particularly reliant on Solomon's stories:

who threw potato salad at CCNY lecturers on Dadaism and subsequently
presented themselves on the granite steps of the madhouse with
shaven heads and harlequin speech of suicide, demanding instantaneous lobotomy,
and who were given instead the concrete void of insulin Metrazol electricity
hydrotherapy psychotherapy occupational therapy pingpong & amnesia

and culminates in the direct address: 'ah, Carl, while you are not safe I am not safe'. The third part of 'Howl' opens with a variant of this address – 'Carl Solomon I'm with you in Rockland' – the last five words of this line thereafter being repeated eighteen times as a refrain. (Rockland was one of the mental hospitals in which Solomon was held.) In short, Solomon is the poem's dedicatee, addressee, inspiration and hero–victim. He is to 'Howl' as Neal Cassady is to *On the Road*, the real person whose life the work celebrates.

sits on his roller-skate cart
minus arms & legs but beneath

his ass a million \$'s worth
of heroin

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We know Wantling was the youngest Marine Sergeant in combat during the winter 1952–3 campaign of the Korean War. We also know that his adult life was in part shaped by his addictions (many of his individual poems and pamphlets have such titles as 'Heroin', *Heroin Haiku*, 'Once You've Been a Dopefiend' and 'For the Peyote Goddess'). Again, the poem's acknowledgement, even as it establishes the momentary camaraderie of '3 angry boys lost in the immense / absurdity of War & State', of the narrator's little betrayal of his 'sudden / friends' by overcharging them for their fix seems like an earnest of psychological candour. As Camus put it in *The Fall*, 'we cannot assert the innocence of anyone, whereas we can state with certainty the guilt of all'.

Yet that use of the word 'absurdity' when describing the situation the three 'boys' find themselves in, invoking as it does Camus' 1942 essay *The Myth of Sisyphus*, in which the existentialist view of the absurdity of the human condition was given definitive formulation, might be interpreted as a sign, not of the poem's veracity, but of its literarity – or, if you prefer, its fictiveness. It is noticeable, for instance, that the protagonist of the poem is given no name: this not only rolls a boulder in the way of our desire to conflate the narrator of this first-person monologue with its author; it may also suggest that, to the contrary, the authorial intention was to present the protagonist as a sort of everyman, his anonymity implying a degree of universality.

(A comparison might be made with Stephen Crane's classic war novel *The Red Badge of Courage*, whose central character, Henry Fleming, remains nameless for most of the story's duration, being referred to simply as 'the youth'.) This is not just a matter of Wantling presenting his experiences as representative so that the subjective or autobiographical has objective or universal value, for thus far no evidence has come to light confirming that he, like his narrator, had a 'girl-wife & child' in Korea. Most tellingly of all, in a frank letter recounting his life of crime and drug use to Edward Lucie-Smith, Wantling admitted that he actually took up heroin in the United States not Korea, in 1955 not 1952–3, in peace time not in war. However much autobiography infiltrates 'Pusan Liberty', its narrator's experience is not the author's, and the poem's air of extreme authenticity is a fictional construct. In short, the emotional force of the piece is not the result of Wantling baring his soul but of Wantling baring his technique.

Our second exhibit demonstrates by the opposite means the same point – namely, the fictiveness of the Beat text and the absurdity of trying to take its measure in biographical terms. As already noted, Allen Ginsberg met Carl Solomon in the Psychiatric Institute of New York in 1949. Ginsberg dubbed Solomon 'an intuitive Bronx Dadaist and prose-poet', noted down his more memorable anecdotes and turns of phrase, picked up from him Artaud's concept of the artist as a man mad (i.e. sane) in a sane (i.e. mad) society, and six years later brought all these elements together in a poem whose full title is 'Howl for Carl Solomon'. The piece famously begins

I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness, starving
hysterical naked,
dragging themselves through the negro streets at dawn looking for an angry fix

and Solomon is presented as a prime example, a lunatic–saint cruelly incarcerated in a mental asylum by an uncomprehending society. The pivotal moment of the long first section of the poem begins with a passage particularly reliant on Solomon's stories:

who threw potato salad at CCNY lecturers on Dadaism and subsequently
presented themselves on the granite steps of the madhouse with
shaven heads and harlequin speech of suicide, demanding instantaneous lobotomy,
and who were given instead the concrete void of insulin Metrazol electricity
hydrotherapy psychotherapy occupational therapy pingpong & amnesia

and culminates in the direct address: 'ah, Carl, while you are not safe I am not safe'. The third part of 'Howl' opens with a variant of this address – 'Carl Solomon I'm with you in Rockland' – the last five words of this line thereafter being repeated eighteen times as a refrain. (Rockland was one of the mental hospitals in which Solomon was held.) In short, Solomon is the poem's dedicatee, addressee, inspiration and hero–victim. He is to 'Howl' as Neal Cassady is to *On the Road*, the real person whose life the work celebrates.

Once again, however, the case is not what it seems. Solomon left hospital years before the completion of 'Howl' and went to work for Ace books where he accepted Burroughs's *Junky* but rejected the 1951 version of *On the Road* because Kerouac was still refusing to revise. Not only was Ginsberg's plangent identification with his captive buddy ('I'm with you in Rockland') out of date, Solomon being free, but as the latter admitted the wild adventures he had earlier recounted to the poet, and which provide 'Howl' with so much of its vivacity, were largely bogus:

I gave Allen an apocryphal history of my adventures and pseudo-intellectual deeds of daring. He meticulously took note of everything I said. . . . [H]e published all of the data, compounded partly of truth, but for the most [part] raving self-justification, crypto-bohemian boasting à la Rimbaud, effeminate prancing, and esoteric aphorisms plagiarized from Kierkegaard and others – in the form of *Howl*. Thus he enshrined falsehood as truth and raving as common sense for future generations to ponder over and be misled.

In making this disclosure, Solomon gleefully supposes that he has exposed the poem as worthless. However, just as we found with the Beats' use of improvisation that a spontaneity that has been premeditated, rehearsed and artfully constructed – if you will, a simulated spontaneity – feels more real than genuine extemporization; so the autobiographical 'truth' of Beat literature is most plausible when the product of fictive means. The poet probably thought he was 'telling it like it is'; but by persuading Ginsberg of the truth of his fabulated life, Solomon released him from the treadmill of the biographical into a larger realm of linguistic play. And this, in turn, made the fiction real in the only place that matters, not at the level of the life lived but at the level of the words on the page. To put it another way, the success of Beat literature stems from the fact that even when the authors were trying to be autobiographical they signally failed in the endeavour.

Queering the Canon

In 1996 A. Robert Lee edited a collection of ten essays by British and American scholars under the title *The Beat Generation Writers*. The essays are interesting and provocative, yet all shirk the fundamental task of identifying a Beat aesthetic, preferring, in the usual way, to define the group as a circle of acquaintance on a New York–San Francisco axis. Granted this regrettable dependence upon the biographical, it is paradoxical – though, again, typical – that not one of the essays squarely tackles a subject such an author-centred methodology would seem to make unavoidable: homosexuality. Most of the Beats were either gay (Ginsberg, Burroughs, Norse, Huncke, Wieners) or bisexual (Kerouac, Cassady, Orlovsky); and even those who act macho, like Bukowski, are usually so strident about it that their writings seem rather a theatri-

cal performing of masculinity than a simple affirmation of male power. My own view is that the rise of the feminist movement following the publication of Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) swiftly rendered the sexual politics of the Beats suspect, if not mastodontic, and that the only context in which they can still be read as liberational is that of gay rights.

One of the advantages of such an approach is that it can help explain the unusual but shared career trajectory of Beats like Burroughs, Ginsberg and Kerouac. For all began with a decade of false starts and periodic writer's block (roughly 1945–55); then experienced an astonishing uprush of creativity usually entailed to an uninhibited exploration of the homoerotic (1955–60); and thereafter, although prolific, went into a steady qualitative decline with the occasional brief recovery on a generally falling graph. This pattern, I am suggesting, is a product of the mid-century patriarchal order, 'Howl', *On the Road* and *Naked Lunch* all being 'coming out' texts whose liberational intensity is directly proportional to the epistemological constraints of the 1950s' closet. The problem for the authors, of course, is not only that they cannot keep voluntarily returning to the closet so as to reachieve the explosive release of their masterpieces; but that their major works have anyway so transformed the ideological climate that the closet no longer exists in the same way. Their very success, though a long time coming, was decisive enough to swiftly make them obsolete.

Edmund White wrote in his 1997 AIDS novel, *The Farewell Symphony*, 'Never had a group been placed on such a rapid cycle – oppressed in the 1950s, freed in the 1960s, exulted in the 1970s and wiped out in the 1980s'. The Beats are indispensable guides to the first two decades in this abbreviated gay history. Kerouac's *On the Road* and *Visions of Cody* may well be the definitive accounts of what it is like for one man to love another and still be in denial that the romance is erotic as well as companionate. Burroughs is much more outspokenly homosexual, but his Swiftian excrementalism may be read as a sign of self-disgust and his *oeuvre* regarded as transitional. By contrast, Ginsberg's garrulous strophes choreograph most of the vital stages in the progress towards self-acceptance: the stultification of the poems up to 1954 honestly unveils the futility of homosexuals trying to conform to heterosexual norms; by invoking Lorca and Whitman, 'A Supermarket in California' takes crucial, tentative steps towards gay canon-building; 'America' is mock confessional ('America I'm putting my queer shoulder to the wheel'); 'Howl' opts for a 'better blatant than latent' explicitness ('who let themselves be fucked in the ass by saintly motorcyclists, and screamed with joy'); while 'Kaddish', a funeral lament for his mad mother, directly confronts the source of his oedipally driven flight from womankind:

One time I thought she was trying to make me come lay her – flirting to herself at sink – lay back on huge bed that filled most of the room, dress up around her hips, big slash of hair, scars of operations, pancreas, belly wounds, abortions, appendix, stitching of incisions pulling down in the fat like hideous thick zippers – ragged long lips between her legs – What, even smell of asshole?

Thereafter Ginsberg's erotic poems get steadily duller and even more lurid, as though driven by an obsessional need to answer the question said to vex the straights – what do gay men do in bed?: see, for instance, the 1968 'PLEASE MASTER' ('& please master make me wiggle my rear to eat up the prick trunk / till my ass halves cuddle your thighs') or the 1986 'Sphincter' ('active, eager, receptive to phallus / coke bottle, candle, carrot / banana & fingers').

If the Beats are united by a subject as well as an aesthetic, then this surely is it: the mid-century crisis in masculinity; the attempt to establish a male camaraderie that is resolutely anti-patriarchy; the refusal to become a father as a challenge to the Law of the Father. In the process of opening up this new terrain, Beat writings subvert or profane the sacred social discourses of nation (they are particularly good at excavating the latent militarism that undergirds patriotic feeling), family (their work presents the family not as our refuge from the ills of the world but as the place where we are first exposed to them), gender (no contemporaries did as much to unmoor society's sexual certitudes) and normalcy (for the Beats normality is not an edenic given but an ideological aspiration that visibly warps its adherents). If their writings are uneven, and no comparable literary movement has as high a drivel percentage, their achievements are still prodigious and in ways the critical debate has hardly begun to calibrate. Perhaps the recent deaths of Bukowski, Ginsberg and Burroughs will elicit the reappraisal that is so long overdue.

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15

Confessionalism

Lucy Collins

The considerable difficulty inherent in categorizing literary movements is distinctly evident in the problems surrounding the term 'confessionalism'. Applied retrospectively to the work of a number of mid-century American poets, it was a term which these poets rarely used to describe themselves. Confessionalism has no leader, no manifesto, and in spite of representing an extreme development in modern poetry, it is often difficult to pin-point exactly. It is detected with most accuracy only in a stage of a poet's career, perhaps even in an individual poem or sequence, and because of this its role in the transition of creativity from one stage to another may be a key one. The critic M. L. Rosenthal was the first to explore at length the implications and achievements of the confessional poets and the scope of this essay is somewhat determined by the limits of that study. The poets providing the focus here are those which Rosenthal places centrally, but there are other figures, among them Randall Jarrell and Delmore Schwartz, whose work at times exhibits key characteristics of confessionalism and whose connection to its major figures makes them especially significant. I will concern myself primarily with work written in the 1950s and consider both its collective impact on the progress of modern poetry and its significance in the development of individual poets.

Steven Gould Axelrod cites three essential elements of confessional poetry: 'an undisguised exposure of painful personal event . . . a dialectic of private matter with public matter . . . and an intimate, unornamented style' (Axelrod, 1979, p. 98). In a critical climate which often appears to privilege the first of these definitions at the expense of the others, it is important to consider the relationship between personal and cultural upheaval as well as the formal implications of such poetic change. The expression of personal pain has been regarded as a hallmark of confessional poetry. All its chief proponents suffered from severe personal difficulties: destructive family relationships; traumatic childhoods; broken marriages; recurring mental breakdowns; alcoholism or drug abuse. This was the first generation of poets to be widely affected by the development of psychoanalysis and many dealt with the recesses of the psy-