Outsiders Atomised: Beat, the Subversion from Within

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The popular conception of the Beats has more to do with the myth that surrounds them than with their actual literary production; and this, in turn, has had a strong impact on how they have been received. Not because the public has misread their works, but rather because Beat artists and writers are rarely approached holistically, in a way which would allow us to comprehend the greater significance of their output; taking into account both the content *and* the form of their works; the context in which they were made, the themes that they explored and the aesthetic strategies that they used, as a whole. Frequently this is what has been problematic with the coverage of the Beats: either glorified or vilified, they remain notorious, often, for the wrong reasons – more for their provocations and *coups d'éclat* than for their stylistic bravado. This patchy appreciation has generated a long series of misconceptions widely conveyed by the mainstream media, which can be traced from the very first publication of Kerouac's *On the Road* to the present day. The books by the writers and poets of the Beat generation, as John Clellon Holmes points out, were used 'as bibles for hipness by the Beatniks, derided as incoherent mouthings by the critics, and treated as some kind of literary equivalent of rock'n'roll by the mass media'.[1] In the first place, is there such a

[1] John Clellon Holmes, 'The Great Rememberer', in *Selected Essays*, vol. 2: *Representative Men: The Biographical Essays*, ed. by J. C. Holmes (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1987), pp. 113-35 (p. 132).

thing as a 'Beat generation'? And if so, what holds the group together, what do its members have in common?

The phrase 'Beat generation' is a media construct from the 1950s, and it attains relevance when approached from a historical and cultural perspective. Many critics, such as James Campbell and Steven Watson, have demonstrated that the phenomenon of the 'Beat generation' came into existence as a reaction against the civilisational model of post-war America, a model that relied on three main pillars: a prosperous economy, cultural conformity and social control.[2] For Beat artists and writers, the contemporaneous conditions of reality – the Cold War and the restrictive policies that stemmed from it – but also heteronormativity, domestic comfort and social as well as artistic and literary conventions, were envisaged as a menace for the creative self. Hence, it may be argued that what the Beats shared on a basic level was a fundamental *disagreement* with the post-war status quo; a disagreement of a creative type that sought to resist, and contest, the various atomising forces at work in post-war America, in order to reclaim an existential sense of selfhood – a re-appropriation of one's own existence in the anaesthetising reality of the 1950s. Such a reading of the Beat generation emphasises the will to escape social conditioning and reclaim one's own authority over that of society and even that of history, a theme largely explored in Beat writings.

It appears, therefore, that the search for individual freedom constitutes one of the foundational values of the Beat ethos. This freedom would be achieved through direct,

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[2] See James Campbell, *This is the Beat Generation: New York – San Francisco – Paris* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1999), and Steven Watson, *The Birth of the Beat Generation: Visionaries, Rebels, and Hipsters, 1944-1960*, Circles of the Twentieth Century (New York: Pantheon Books, 1998).

unmediated experience; viewed as an ontological duty with significant repercussions for the Beat aesthetics. As John Tytell highlights:

> The Beats [...] had to find new ways to remind their culture of the dignity of self-reliance and to provide an Emersonian awareness of the tyranny of institutions. Execrating the worldly, dreading the implications of control, they chose to consecrate the whims of the individual.[3]

Crucially, this freedom would be achieved through an inextinguishable quest for experience, a central trope in Beat writing. The value of individual experience brought the key notions of vitality and spontaneity to the fore – the illusion of liveliness – but also that of danger. Indeed, the vast majority of Beat writings articulate the paradox of a desire that seeks extinction as its finality – an obsession with the potentiality of death that functions as the main narrative and aesthetic force; catalysing a subtle interplay between strategies of destruction and forms of creation at various levels both in, and through, the texts.

Nevertheless, the 'Beat' designation necessitates a series of reductions that tend to homogenise the movement to which it refers; disregarding the essential plurality of the group and thus overlooking significant divergences between individual members.

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[3] John Tytell, *Naked Angels: The Lives and Literature of the Beat Generation* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1976), p. 259.

We will now take a brief look at some of the most famous figures of the movement, starting with the poet Allen Ginsberg. Ginsberg – spokesman for the movement if there ever were one – conceived of poetry as a medium between the community of men, represented by the readers, and the transcendent; a medium through which he could formulate visions of a transcendental nature and reveal the divine essence of existence. This positions Ginsberg as a conveyor of the visionary: his duty is to receive the vision and pass it on to the audience or the reader, actualising the Prophetic tradition in the here-and-now – in the context of modern America. Ginsberg achieves this effect through a poetical strategy of embodiment that relies on breathing patterns: a strategy of transcendental performativity that is Emersonian in inspiration, but also deeply influenced by William Blake and the Romantics. At the same time, Ginsberg's poetry is largely informed by his participation in the countercultural politics of the 50s, 60s and 70s; elaborating a poetry in which the socio-political is tightly interwoven with the mythical.

For Beat poet and artist Gary Snyder, Buddhism shaped much of his poetry, from the poetical form of the haiku he frequently used, to his recourse to a minimalist and naturalist poetics. Snyder's poetical strategy is dictated by the flow of nature: it constitutes the origin and endpoint of the vast majority of his poems, but also their main inspiration. This mise-en-abime of natural phenomena, partly influenced by the transcendentalism of Thoreau, seeks to retrieve the ecological and mystical consciousness of an America that has long forgotten its primeval essence, real or supposed. Peppered with contradictions and paradoxes, Snyder's poetry is intrinsically political and yet, in the tradition of anarchism, it eludes dialectical systems; it displays a

relentless desire to apprehend the depth and intricacies of individual existence without removing any of its mystery.

Beat novelist William Burroughs could not be more different: discarding nature in his writing and despising the spiritual realm – which had no reality for him – most of his novels are fiercely sadistic and often display a tendency to annihilate, or debase, the human. Burroughs favoured the realm of the artificial. Against the real, the *surreal*: in *The Naked Lunch*, there are episodes of aerial orgies organised by a deviant scientist which involve captive humans – and aliens taking advantage (the 'mugwumps'). Against the modern, the *postmodern*: devising an aesthetic strategy of collage with friend and artist Brion Gysin – the 'cut-up' technique – that demolished the sense-making process and fractured both self and text.

With Burroughs, we stand far from the effusive circumvolutions of the prose of Jack Kerouac. Through a late modernist version of the stream of consciousness, Kerouac's writing affords a more stable and traditional perspective on the self. Most of Kerouac's works articulate a quest for transcendence that will be denied as long as suffering has not been acknowledged, experienced in the flesh, and processed in spiritual terms. The spiritual syncretism of Kerouac's writing may seem vertiginous; intermingling the pantheistic frame of romanticism and transcendentalism with the codes of Catholicism and of Buddhism. The consequence of this syncretism is that the base and the common are sacralised: in the right conditions, experiences turn into *visions* – genuine gateways to the transcendent, right here and right now. Kerouac's technique of the 'spontaneous prose' is instrumental in this regard. As Benedict Giamo analyses:

> [Kerouac's spontaneous prose is] best characterized by its stream of consciousness that joins with the torrential flow of experience, [and by] its sheer energy and rushing enthusiasm, natural rhythm, musical phrasing (when spoken), richly detailed imagery, and sonic jazz improvisation.[4]

It typifies an endless flow of experiences, perceptions and emotions that rushes at the reader, demanding a compassionate response which, in turn, binds the reader affectively with the writer.

To consider Ginsberg, Snyder, Burroughs, Kerouac, but also Diane DiPrima, Philip Lamantia, Michael McClure, Lenore Candel, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Gregory Corso, Amiri Baraka, Philip Whalen to quote but a few – all of them labelled as 'Beat', as a group is arguably coherent in a historical and cultural context; yet they are discordant at the level of their writing projects and polyphonic in terms of artistic motives and aesthetic strategies. As a result, their subversive potential – genuine in most cases – cannot be but strictly individual and considered on a case by case basis, as I will now do for Kerouac.

Kerouac's early novels depict a plethora of situations where the narrator interacts with nature. As Kerouac writes in *On the Road*:

> We had reached the approaches of the last plateau. Now the sun was golden, the air keen blue, and the desert with its occasional rivers a riot of sandy, hot space

[4] Benedict Giamo, *Kerouac, the Word and the Way: Prose Artist as Spiritual Quester* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2000), p. XIV.

> and sudden Biblical tree shade. […] 'Man, man,' I yelled to Dean, '[…] wake up and see the golden world that Jesus came from, with your own eyes you can tell!' […] he looked to heaven with red eyes, he almost wept. […] Great fields stretched on both sides of us; a noble wind blew across the occasional immense tree groves and over old missions turning salmon pink in the late sun. The clouds were close and huge and rose.[5]

This passage refers to what Kerouac himself termed *visions*. Typically, visions materialise a continuum between the individual, the natural environment and the divine; a continuum that manifests a homogeneity between self and transcendent. Such a conception of visions tallies, largely, with the Emersonian ethos, which promotes an 'organic relationship between the self and the cosmos' through nature.[6] For Erik Mortenson:

> The visionary state reveals the truth of the world – it is a peak behind the curtain of reality that provides an authentic glimpse of the universe. By eradicating mental structures and preconceptions, the vision provides an opportunity to see the past in a new light, thus creating potential for change.[7]

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[5] Jack Kerouac, *On the Road* [1957], Penguin Modern Classics (London: Penguin Books, 2000), p. 273.
[6] David Bowers, 'Democratic Vistas', in *American Transcendentalism: An Anthology of Criticism*, ed. by Brian M. Barbour (London: University of Notre Dame Press, 1973), pp. 9-21 (p. 19).
[7] Erik Mortenson, *Capturing the Beat Moment: Cultural Politics and the Poetics of Presence* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2011), p. 71.

Visions participate in a form of transcendental euphoria that emerges in a mystical brand of pastoral. In romantic fashion, they articulate a process by which the external becomes a conduit for the internal. Through the visionary state, the individual may comprehend, and eventually *embody*, the spiritual essence of the world. This fundamental relation of man to the cosmos, of outer to inner nature, constitutes a moral code that is paramount in Kerouac's writing throughout his career. The search for this type of transcendence acts as one of the main narrative thrusts of Kerouac's road novels. This quest for transcendence in *On the Road*, this quest for *visions*, transmutes into a genuine obsession that gradually becomes deleterious in his later work. The novel *Big Sur* for example, published in 1962, brings the search for transcendence to a tragic culmination.

In *Big Sur*, Kerouac charts his narrator's retreat from the world. His intention is to 'be alone and undisturbed for six weeks just chopping wood, drawing water, writing, sleeping, hiking, etc., etc.'.[8] Within the context of Kerouac's work and with regards to the literary and cultural traditions that inform his writing (American romanticism, Transcendentalism), the goal is to dwell as close as possible to nature in order to retrieve the capacity to experience visions and access states of transcendence. Crucially, this commitment to nature is the corollary of a *disengagement* from the rationale of the 1950s; a specific socio-historical moment conceived as materialistic and objectifying, conformist and inhibiting, and creating therefore a largely toxic environment for the free expression of the self. This dialectical articulation, between a demobilising environment and the fulfilment of the deeper self, is highly romantic and also implicitly political: it epitomises a form of engagement towards nature envisioned as a gateway to

[8] Jack Kerouac, *Big Sur* [1962] (London: Flamingo, 2001), p. 1.

transcendence, and it also exemplifies an insurrection against the cultural predicament of post-war America, envisaged as fundamentally alienating; it restores the promise of the transcendental, but also conveys a radical repudiation of historical reality.

It is this deliberate estrangement for the sake of a *private* sense of transcendence that creates the conditions for an extreme form of alienation; a self-alienation that not only nullifies the possibility for social change, but also jeopardises the potentiality for self-fulfilment because it is so intent on reaching transcendence for itself and *through* the self, that it obliterates external reality. This approach engenders an ontological experience that responds only to its own laws and desires, an experience purely autonomous but also largely fantasised and radically disconnected from the real. And this is what Kerouac's later novels achieve: in these works, the narrator's search for transcendence slips towards a solipsistic quest for transcendence that is delirious, paranoid and utterly self-destructive in the long run. This lapse into solipsism was anticipated by Kenneth Rexroth:

> The disengagement of the creator, who, as a creator, is necessarily judge, is one thing; but the utter nihilism of the emptied-out hipster is another. […] Between such persons no true enduring interpersonal relationships can be built, and of course, nothing resembling a true 'culture' – an at-homeness of men with each other, their work, their loves, their environment. The end result must be the desperation of shipwreck – the despair, the orgies, ultimately the cannibalism of

> a lost lifeboat. I believe that most of an entire generation will go to ruin – […] even enthusiastically.[9]

In *Big Sur*, the narrator's cultivation of the highest form of transcendence is also profoundly nihilistic: not only does it dismiss the world as a whole, it also denies reality by subverting, and subsuming, its empirical status. This flight from socio-historical reality epitomises a private retreat into the self; an inwardness that breeds a solipsistic agony, which will become the major narrative motif of Kerouac's later texts.

This withdrawal from the social environment, from the historical moment, and from the physicality of the world, is also a flight from the bodily; a repudiation for the world incarnate. It echoes the Catholic trope of liberation through the revocation of the body, which largely undermines the Beat notion of experience and engagement *with* the world, of creativity, of performativity, of vitality. Thus motivated by a vision of ultimate transcendence, radical and pure but also resolutely solipsistic and mortiferous – which in fact is the vision of death itself – Kerouac's strategy of *dis*-engagement positions him outside the Beat ethos. Conversely, his is a stance outside the canon, enabling him to explore the space within, subverting and reinventing the well-worn definition of 'beat' in post-war America through the liminality of his Catholic vision. As Kerouac himself confessed: '[I'm] actually not "beat" but strange solitary crazy Catholic mystic'.[10]

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[9] Kenneth Rexroth, 'Disengagement: the Art of the Beat Generation' [1957], in *The Penguin Book of the Beats*, ed. by Ann Charters (London: Penguin Books, 1993), pp. 323-38 (pp. 337-38).

[10] Jack Kerouac, *Lonesome Traveller* [1958] (London: André Deutsch, 1962), p. vi.

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