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Raluca Rogoveanu, *The Pillars of the Beat Generation: Ginsberg, Kerouac, Burroughs*

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THE PILLARS OF THE BEAT GENERATION Ginsberg, Kerouac, Burroughs

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practices of the Beat artists and the behavioral preferences of the Beat persona.

The Beat artists debated ontological problems and cultural concerns in their own unique idiom, inflected with religious ideas and Marxist theories and inspired by drug and religious experiences in bebop rhythms. These sections follows the construction of the Beat individual/character/persona and the creation of a distorted style, which draws on a poetics of intimacy expressed in a hip jargon. The chapters also elaborate on the main aspects of the Beat writing strategy and analyze the manner in which the freedom of rhythmic association and improvisation of jazz music molds the Beat discourse.

Drawing on Emerson's ideal of the poet-prophet, on the surrealist strategy of confounding art with life, and on the relativism of postmodernism, the Beats created a new receptacle of American values, a new philosophy of rebellion and acceptance. Key figures of the cultural politics of the mid 20th century, the Beats ensured the transition from the postwar avant-garde to the youth counterculture of the 1960s. Their ideas, which inspired the sixties with ideas about free speech, gay liberation, environmental concerns and heightened consciousness, found them many fervent supporters in the hippie decade and in the generations to follow.

Beat, Beats, Beatness and Beatitude

What was to become one of the most influential literary critique of the cultural entrenchment during the Eisenhower era started against the respectable background of Columbia University, where the undergraduates Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg met in the early 1940s. Lucien Carr, a fellow Columbia student, introduced them to William Burroughs in 1944. Older than the other three, Burroughs had a long-standing influence on these aspiring writers who, disgruntled by the stifling respectability of the "establishment" literature, looked for a "New Vision" in art and a new way of expressing worldly experiences. It is Burroughs who introduced them to the work of Hart Crane, T.S. Eliot, Kafka and other modern writers and it is there, amongst the marijuana smell and the scattered pages of scribbled night writing that the beginnings of the hip culture must be traced. The Beat movement covered a broad geographical space, which spanned the whole United States territory, from New York City to San Francisco and beyond the border, in Latin America, Europe and Africa. Coffeeshouses and jazz bars were seminal places in which the Beats shared ideas about their life experiences which would later be converted into the Beat philosophy.

If the the Beat Generation is described as a social movement rather than a literary trend, then under this conflated label, authors like Gary Snyder, Michael McClure and Philip

Whalen should also be included. Inflating the concept further, one should not overlook the 1960 writers – Diane di Prima, LeRoi Jones, Ed Sanders, Clark Coolidge and Anne Waldman, writers whose literary productions follow closely the thematic and stylistic principles of Ginsberg and Burroughs. Yet, even when referring to the core of the Beat movement, one cannot fail to notice that, despite strikingly similar political sympathies and artistic ideas, despite the strong affective ties that bound them or the common existential experiences which they shared, it is hard to find a common aesthetic fundament and a common interpretative pattern to link Kerouac to Ginsberg and Burroughs.

The effervescent stage of the 1950s inspired and engendered many cultural associations and personal relationships that proved more or less stable throughout the decade. Black Mountain College of North Carolina is generally considered an essential catalyst in the formation and crystallization of the Beat aesthetics. Founding its poetic principles on Charles Olson's essay "Projected Verse", this experimental art school reached its peak of popularity in the mid 1950s. It valued the creative transfer of energy between the artist - as the encoder of the message and the reader -the multiple decoder. The publication of this literary group, *Black Mountain Review*, presented not only the most unusual, but also the most articulate voices of the American cultural scene of the moment – Robert Creeley and Robert Duncan, William Carlos Williams and Denise Levertov, Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac and Gary Snyder. Discussing the legitimacy of a spiritual bridge to link the Beat aesthetics group to the cultural poetics of the Black Mountain School, Thomas Newhouse (45) considers that, despite some passing connections and more or less accidental influences, the Black Mountain mentor Charles Olson, with his

insistence on the value of learning and the cognitive process, could not have much in common with the carefree spontaneity of the Beat artists.

The Beats and San Francisco Renaissance literary movement had a common starting point in the legendary Six Gallery poetry reading in San Francisco, 1955. Emerging out of the avant-garde literature of the previous decades and energized by the censorship of the period, the two literary movements promoted the replacement of the sanitized discourse of the 1950s with a type of literature which professed the transgression of conventional standards. Gary Snyder, Philip Whalen, Michael McClure, William Everson, and Lawrence Ferlinghetti were some of the most prominent representatives of the San Francisco Renaissance. Usually considered a staple in the formation of the Beat spirit, the relationship between the Beats and the San Francisco Renaissance is mostly overestimated. Apart from being contemporary and sharing various degrees of dissatisfaction with the academic mannerism and the cultural-social limitations of the decade, authors like Ginsberg, Kerouac, Whalen, McClure, Snyder, Ferlinghetti have little in common. Sustained through the consistent effort of Allen Ginsberg, the temporary link between the two movements started with the reading of *Howl* at the Six Gallery in 1955. Yet the period of literary "harmony" and creative intimacy between the members of the two groups lasted for a limited period only. William Burroughs, for instance, a preeminent member of the Beat scene never maintained a contact with the San Francisco scene. Jack Kerouac and Gregory Corso openly antagonized the San Francisco Renaissance on many occasions and there were some cases in which leading figures from the San Francisco movement viewed the Beats as cultural upstarts or cheap artists

eager to gain momentum. Though one cannot deny the artistic impact which the Beat movement had on Michael Mc Clure, Lawrence Ferlinghetti and Philip Whalen, one must admit that Beat writers never fully integrated into the West Coast Movement (Newhouse 2).

Initially used by Herbert Huncke (an icon of survival of the Beat generation), the term “Beat“ was used in collocations like “beat it” meaning “mind your own business”, or “get out of here”. As an adjective, it meant “poor, down and out, deadbeat, on the bum, sad, sleeping in subways” (Kerouac, “The Origins” 3). “Passing on subways from Harlem to Broadway Inhalers” (Ginsberg “On Huncke’s Back”, 20-21), Huncke became both the “subterranean” and Kerouac’s “desolation angel”, a symbol of personal awareness and public communion, the authentic philosopher-hipster rising against the excessive artificiality of the Molochian regime. John Clellon Holmes enriched the significance of the term “Beat” with “a sort of nakedness of mind, and ultimately, of soul” (Holmes, “This Is” 69). Borrowing the term “beat” from the Times Square underworld, Kerouac imagined it as the embodiment of Spengler’s notion of mediation between self and world, which meant moving beyond the natural world, unfolding the sacred aspects of nature and feeling the “beatitude” of the world .

In response to a perceived social crisis that affected the individual creative freedom, the Beats put together a collaborative artistic project with political implications which relied on introspection via personal experience as the ultimate source of authority. The personal becomes the political when the individual empowers himself through self-awareness. Before effecting public/political change, the poet needs to become acutely aware of his identity, sexuality and consciousness.

Following Spengler’s idea that politics “is the art of the possible”, the Beat writers assume a radical voice and condemn a rigid and mortifying American ideology and use art as an instrument meant to determine an effective change in the individual.

The first necessity was to get back to Person, from public to person. Before determining a new public, you had to find out who you are, who your person is. This meant finding out different modalities of consciousness, different modalities of sexuality, different approaches to basic identity, examination of the nature of consciousness itself (Ginsberg, “The New Consciousness” 76).

The Beats’ artistic vision and their interpretation of reality draws on a syncretic collage of attitudes and metaphysical idioms promoted by a series of artists, from Rimbaud to Butler Yeats, from Alfred Korzybski to William Carlos Williams, from Blake to Nietzsche. Locating the Beat space on the cultural map, Malcolm Bradbury mentions the other two artistic movements whose presence and development produced deep-seated influences on the emergence of the Beat Spirit. One is jazz, whose improvisational freshness and spontaneity in the tunes of Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespie and Thelonious Monk exerted a powerful fascination on the Beats. The other is abstract expressionism, from which the Beats derived the concepts of art as a continuous event rather than a finite product, an act accompanied by or transmitted through ample, intense gestures and passionate feelings. Indeed, in the 1950s, a decade abundant in forms of art belonging to the “culture of spontaneity” bebop and abstract expressions were particularly influential. Their fluidity and disregard for normative conven-

tions were employed as a strategy to counter hegemonic rebellion, a way of thwarting the mainstream culture of “corporate liberalism” (Belgrad 77-8). Considering that the outward world did not have much to offer, the Beat artists turned inward and started exploring the intimate truth of personal existence. As Freud offered them the technique and strategy and Breton provided them with the mood and general atmosphere, the artists embarked on a new challenge: that of exploring the dark sites of the unconscious and of voicing their worst fears into experimental multimedia discourses which employed music, painting, theater and cinema to form new artistic discourses. In tune with the principles of abstract expressionism, the Beat texts imagine a form of art removed from the page, “off the page” and “into the sheet”, which articulate a dialogue made up of a reverberation of sounds, in which semi-grammatical words are invested with musical qualities. Unusual in its resisting linearity and certitude and compelling in the way in which it professes the sense of anxiety, ambivalence and distrust of language, the Beat discourse represents an assault on traditional literary conventions.

The sound of jazz represents the martyrdom of black America and the indictment of white people. For the black artist, jazz is both an artistic and racial category at the same time. Besides an outlet of artistic emotions, jazz is a symbol of national resistance and a constant reminder of ghetto deprivation, poverty, hunger and death. In jazz, in the freedom of rhythmic association and improvisation, the beginning of a new American cultural style can be found. The Beats praise the virtuosity of Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, Dizzie Gillespie, Miles Davis, Thelonious Monk, John Coltrane, Sonny Rollins, Dexter Gordon and Coleman Hawkins. They exult at

their art and virtuosity which goes beyond the artistic vocation of a horn man, percussionist, piano player or bassist and enters the transcendent spirit of politics. For the Beats, bebop jazz is a “kind of wild Dionysian American music, pure emotion and frenzy” which stands for absolute individual freedom (Kerouac, *The Town* 19). Through jazz, the Beat artists have an unmediated relation with the world, which offers them the unique opportunity to dig situations and people immediately, to become instantly aware of the self and the other. “[...] dig him, dig her, dig this place, dig these cats...” says Cody (Kerouac, *Visions* 33). Jazz becomes an idiosyncratic style of existence and a communal mode of expression. Describing the jazz soloist as the sole possessor of mystical knowledge, Spengler considers that music “can take us right out of this world, break up the steely tyranny of light, and let us fondly imagine that we are on the verge of reaching the soul’s final secret” (Spengler, *Form* 203). Jazz replaces the subjectivity of “I” with its collective counterpart and the appreciation of jazz becomes intertwined with the celebration of sexuality.

In both jazz and abstract painting, as in Beat writing, the fluidity, energy and subjectivity of the creative process become signifying elements of the work itself. This self-consciousness points to the Americanization of modernism in the postwar years.

Challenging the more conservative culture of the fifties, these kinetic arts supplanted traditional forms with a vehement expression of personal energy; they became part of a growing counterculture that appealed strongly to alienated intellectuals and to the rebellions and discontented young (Bradbury 169).