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The early Beats: humanity and machinery

James A. Winders

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THE EARLY BEATS: Humanity and Machinery

by

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History 392
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INTRODUCTION

The beatnik has been a favorite character in American films and television in recent years. Somewhere in the lost shuffle of Jerry Lewis movies is found a scene containing typical Hollywood treatment of the bohemian of the 1950's. A "square," i.e., a "normal" person, finds himself in a smoky tomb-like cafe featuring the props necessary to represent a "beatnik scene:" expresso coffee, unwashed, bearded men wearing sweatshirts, dungarees, and sneakers accompanied by classic beatnik "chicks" (female bohemians) with long, straight hair, an abundance of dark eye shadow, perhaps sunglasses, and, of course, they are clad entirely in black. Without fail, the center of activity would be a tousled-haired young man wearing sunglasses, goatee, beret, or some other suitable badge of eccentricity. This bard would be shouting unintelligible poetry against the equally unintelligible rhythms of a beatnik combo. All about him, the sunken cheeks, sad eyes, and mouths sucking cigarettes attest to the sheer profundity of his verse. All this provides the comic setting for the square hero's antics; a superficial technique for lampooning a superficial bohemia.

For many, such a scene, together with the strange but lovable Maynard G. Krebs, who entered millions of American homes weekly via the television series "Dobie Gillis," and
feature articles in *Life* and *Time*, provided orientation to the phenomenon of "the Beats."\(^1\) Was this treatment of a significant sector of American bohemianism grossly unjust, or did the Beats create their own superficiality? Was the revolt of men such as Ginsberg and Kerouac merely another attempt by *avant-garde* artists to gain recognition, or did it have real significance for the generation immediately following the Second World War? If the revolt was serious, what did these writers resent in post-war America?

Most importantly, this paper will focus upon the men with whom most Beat writers acknowledge "it all began:" Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, and their fellow artists and compatriots who sought to channel their frustration and bitterness over what America had become into the creation of a new literature. Particular attention must be paid to the vision of what might have been; a vision shared by those early Beats, many of whom became bitterly disillusioned over what the Beat "movement" became. The origins of the Beat phenomenon, in the late 1940's and early 1950's, are at once very close to us and very far away. World War II is a major *Wendepunkt* in American history, and history after World War II is usually bracketed into a "Since 1945" or "Post-War" or "Cold War Years" category. To try to gain the perspective of the artist at the beginning of this period, one must imagine an America which did not yet know of "beatniks" or of an officially recognized literature of revolt; a new leader of the major world powers, a technological
giant which dwarfed the artist and filled him with both awe and remorse.
THE "FOUNDING FATHERS"

Much of the early history of the Beats is locked within personal, literary friendships; in conversations that lasted entire nights in the post-war New York of Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, John Clellon Holmes, and their small but eccentric circle of artistic friends who helped to feed their vision of a "new prosody" that would embody all the sensuous energy needed to combat the new, terribly efficient, computerized, sexless America.

Memories of such conversations are now incomplete, for there was no Boswell to diligently record the pronouncements of these young writers. Both Jack Kerouac and John Clellon Holmes (one of the modern-day "New England Holmeses") claim to have coined the phrase "Beat Generation." Still, Holmes' book *Nothing More to Declare*, published in 1967, is probably the most thorough record of those obscure early days of inspiration and anticipation.

Columbia College, on the eve of World War II, provided a meeting place for three students who were destined for Beat notoriety: Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, and William S. Burroughs. Kerouac, both precocious and athletic, had quit the football team after he earned an "A" in the
Shakespeare course taught by Mark Van Doren. Ginsberg was a high-strung Jewish homosexual genius, the product of a high school English teacher who was also struggling for recognition as a poet, and an insane, politically radical, paranoid mother who was convinced that Hitler was lurking about her Paterson, New Jersey home. Burroughs, also a homosexual, was the product of the wealthy St. Louis family behind the Burroughs business machine fortune. Burroughs would later serve a prison sentence for possession of narcotics, and was to write his horrifying tale of drug addiction, *Naked Lunch*, noted for its fantastic imagery.

In a sense, each of the three were outsiders to begin with. Although born in Lowell, Massachusetts, Kerouac was a "Canuke"—a French Canadian. This background was always a strong influence in his work. Seymour Krim, one of the first writers to praise Kerouac and to claim a literary kinship with the Beats, writes

As far as WASP America went, Kerouac was almost as much of an outsider as the radical-Jewish-homosexual Allen Ginsberg... and the junkie-homosexual disgrace-of-good-family William Burroughs that he was later to team up with.

The war interrupted studies at Columbia, and although both Kerouac and Ginsberg served in the Merchant Marines, war experiences themselves seem to have almost no influence in their works. What occupied the minds of the literary bohemians of post-war New York was the place of the artist, and of man in general, in the highly technological, thoroughly organized society which seemed to recognize no need for a poetic spirit.
This sense of alienation was hardly a new theme in American literature. Many critics have pointed out that the writer is, by nature, a critic of society. John P. Sisk notes a "subversive tradition" in the leading American Twentieth Century authors.

Theodore Dreiser exploded the daydream of an "acquisitive paradise," H. L. Mencken's irreverence derisively mocked the pursuit of false ideals, Thomas Wolfe's restless, romantic spirit ran counter to the stabilization of American manners and morals, as did Ernest Hemingway's adventurous spirit. Against callous "respectability," writers such as J. D. Salinger and Truman Capote rally behind the misfit. In opposition to the poverty of imagination in the pulp press we have the brilliant anarchy of E. E. Cummings.

Closer to the Beats both chronologically and in influence are William Carlos Williams, Henry Miller, and Kenneth Rexroth. The themes of irrationalism and vigorous sexuality found in their works were echoed again and again in the novels of Kerouac and in the poems of Ginsberg.

Williams is important in Ginsberg's development. Williams watched Ginsberg grow up in his hometown of Paterson, New Jersey, and he looked benevolutely upon Ginsberg's poetic efforts.

More important for the Beats at large was Henry Miller. In the tradition of D. H. Lawrence and Lawrence Durrell, Miller attacked prudishness and the denial of sexual impulses. Another common concern of Miller and the Beats
is that of the artist as outcast. Miller was a member of the "Lost Generation" that found freedom to create in Paris of the 1930's. Bitterly opposed to materialism, the "psychology of success," and the poverty of feeling and imagination in American culture, Miller could only survive as an expatriate. When he returned in the early years of World War II, he expected to "rediscover" America, and to find his bitterness gone. Instead, he found what he called an "Air-Conditioned Nightmare," and his bitterness reached new heights, sending him in retreat to his cabin at Big Sur, California.

Kenneth Rexroth was a key figure for the Beats, for he is something of a transitional writer—a bridge between two literary generations. He took up the Beat "cause," while maintaining his former contacts, and his stature as a writer and translator was a boon to the Beats. Rexroth, a radical "from the old days," had remained in the United States, but his dissatisfaction was much akin to Miller's. He has been called "the Beat impresario," for the help he has given Beat writers in publishing their works, and by defending their writing against the criticism of his own contemporaries. Rexroth also stresses an irrational theme—and he is a very learned man, particularly in languages—and he states that "what holds society together is our all-prevading Eros."

Although to an extent the early Beats inherited their sense of alienation and "subversiveness," they added dimensions of their own. Many now scoff at the idea of fear
of "the Bomb," but such a fear of universal annihilation was very real to many artists in the days after Hiroshima. As after the First World War, writers had a profound sense of being "survivors" who, having escaped the Holocaust, must create a new life-style to prevent another such threat. But, after the development of nuclear weapons became a reality, any satisfaction a writer might have over having survived the war was lost. Paul Goodman warns that we should not underestimate the importance of the threat of "the Bomb" for the world-view of these young men. 10 It seemed increasingly clear to the early Beats that the only possible life-style was one of escape, in which one lived furiously, ignoring the future; living "for kicks," with no "kick" forbidden.

It is difficult to be certain about the meaning of "Beat," or of the exact origin of the phrase "Beat Generation." Kerouac tells of an incident in 1944, when Herbert Huncke, a poet of sorts, as well as a junkie and a thief, came up to him in Times Square and moaned, "Man, I'm beat."11 Kerouac does not say whether he received the inspiration for "Beat Generation" at this time. On the other hand, although Seymour Krim emphatically credits Kerouac with the creation of the Beat Generation, 12 John Clellon Holmes claims to have originated the label. This is not to imply that this contradiction became a polemical struggle, but the following quote from Kerouac should illustrate how Holmes may have confused the authorship of the phrase:
John Clellon Holmes and I were sitting around trying to think up the meaning of the Lost Generation and the subsequent Existentialism and I said, "You know, this is really a beat generation," and he leapt up and said, "That's right!"\(^13\)

There is another interesting, and highly doubtful, legend that when Jack Kerouac met Gertrude Stein (Beat Generation face-to-face with Lost Generation\(^13\)), she said, "You are all a beat generation."\(^14\)

Many think that "Beat" refers to the attempt to adapt poetry to jazz rhythms. Another interpretation is that "Beat" expresses the pulsating energy of spontaneous writing at its best.\(^15\) Another possibility is that "Beat" is an abbreviated form of "Beatitude," the title of at least one of the "little magazines" which published Beat writing. This would be an expression of the Beat "religiosity\(^\text{16}\) the search for vision and something in which to believe.

Whatever the meaning, or its origin, the "Beat Generation" is at least a convenient label for writers who identified with spontaneous writing—true to the pulse of life—and who sought to live the lives about which they wrote.

If John Clellon Holmes is to be believed,\(^17\) Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, Jay Landesman, Gershon Legman, and himself to a lesser extent, created the Beat Generation in New York in 1948.

Neither Kerouac nor Ginsberg ever completed their studies at Columbia. Both became restless and bored with academia. Actually, Ginsberg's departure was met with relief by the
Columbia administration, with which he had been involved in a few disputes over his "conduct," a subject which would take much more discussion than it can be given here. Bear in mind, however, that at this time Ginsberg was experiencing great anguish over his mother's mental illness, his father's abandonment of her, and his father's subsequent remarriage. His homosexual relations with fellow poet Peter Orlovsky (still his room-mate) also served to create strife between Allen Ginsberg and Louis Ginsberg, his father. The culmination of this personal torment was a stay for Ginsberg in a mental institution for the greater part of 1949, where he met a poet named Carl Solomon, to whom his famous poem "Howl" is addressed.

In 1948 Kerouac completed an enormously long novel, *Town and the City*, which was being passed around the bohemian set of New York. When John Clellon Holmes first met Allen Ginsberg—the same week that he met Jack Kerouac and Gershon Legman—Ginsberg informed him that he "must read" this "masterpiece." This novel, which, for Kerouac, is written in a fairly traditional style, was published, after it was shortened considerably, by Harcourt, Brace, and Company in 1950. The relative ease with which Kerouac was able to get his first novel published stands in marked contrast to the six-year struggle he undertook to have his second—and first "Beat" novel published (*On the Road*).

*Town and the City* was well received, and Kerouac became lionized nearly overnight as a result. Despite the novel's
tameness, compared to his later novels, Kerouac's initial success helped him become something of a "leader" to his fellow artists. They greatly admired his talent, and his first novel probably did more to place him in the vanguard of the new writers than any personal desire for leadership.

It is fitting to begin with Kerouac and Ginsberg in discussing the New York literary "underground" of 1948-1950, and the early Beats, for both men remained in the public eye more than any other Beat writers, and impressions that they left with people tended to be applied to all Beat writers. However, there were other very important figures in the circle of writers around Ginsberg and Kerouac.

The characters in John Clellon Holmes' book: Jay Landesman, Gershon Legman, Allen Ginsberg, and Jack Kerouac all offer revealing portraits of men engaged in shaping a literature of alienation. Holmes is what a Marxist might call a "fellow traveler;" one who sympathizes with the movement without officially joining its ranks. Holmes felt a strong kinship with the Beats, especially with Kerouac, but he chose to maintain a separate station as a writer, borrowing concepts and taking inspiration from the Beats, but maintaining his contacts with other schools of writing. Still, his involvement in this first circle left a profound impression upon him. He has remained a personal friend of Ginsberg and Kerouac, until the latter's death in 1967, and yet has maintained a distance from the Beat phenomenon which enables him to treat it fairly, to the satisfaction of a wide
spectrum of opinion on the merits of Beat literature.

It was through Jay Landesman that Holmes was introduced to the Beats. Landesman, a man of both literary and journalistic inclinations with a flair for showmanship, published a lively little magazine, the first important "little magazine" for the Beats, called *Neurotica*. It survived through nine numbers and contained several of Ginsberg's early efforts, as well as pieces by Holmes, Legman, and works by non-Beats, most notably Lawrence Durrell.

Landesman was an ebullient, energetic, witty man who delighted in shocking others into awareness of new ideas and artistic concepts. Holmes describes the atmosphere of a Landesman conversation as that of laughter accompanied by the sound of hot air escaping from reality's punctured balloons.¹⁸

Landesman possessed an insatiable curiosity, and, in indulging his curiosity, he preferred things that were unusual and eccentric.

In that Stone Age (ten or fifteen years back), when enlightened people sat in their Eames chairs, under their Calders, talking about T. S. Eliot, Landesman was already living in a thicket of Victorian bric-a-brac, and publishing Allen Ginsberg.¹⁹

His imagination probably surpassed his productivity. He wanted to be "the social Diaghilev," to bring the public to an appreciation of cultural trends such as avant-garde drama; to bring about a revival of popular interest in literature similar to the boost that Diaghilev's Ballets Russes had given to the dance.²⁰
Significantly enough, Landesman eventually married and moved into almost complete obscurity in St. Louis, where he attempted to precipitate his cultural revolution on a local scale. There is no record of his success or failure as a "social Diaghilev" in St. Louis, but Holmes comments that the theatre-goers of St. Louis were more than a little surprised to find their usual fare of "last season's Broadway hit" replaced by such plays as Samuel Beckett's _Krapp's Last Tape_. It is significant that Holmes chose for the title of his chapter on Landesman "The Pop Imagination." Had Landesman remained in New York, he may have taken his place alongside, and hopefully above, such underground gods as Andy Warhol.

Through Landesman, Holmes met Gershon Legman, whom he calls "the first revolutionary." Legman was a little man who, according to Holmes, resembled Balzac, with his walrus-mustache and his stocky frame. Legman was a scholar of an unusual sort; he was, and is, a collector and student of erotica: great erotic literature, such as the works of the Marquis de Sade, cheap pornographic novels, magazines, and comic books. He often acted as a go-between for "respectable people" who wished to purchase sex paraphernalia. Many young writers eager to win the favors of a certain female companion would bring her along to Legman's apartment, for his lively conversation, says Holmes, had a "liberating" influence upon normally inhibited people.
Legman pursued his interests with scholarly diligence. He became interested in the etymology of four-letter and other slang words, and he eventually compiled a Dictionary of Slang. In addition to erotic literature, he was a passionate collector of comic books. Moreover, his basic library was quite large and nearly filled his apartment.

Legman only worked when he was in desperate need of money, and even then only grudgingly. He and his wife lived in their small apartment full of books, papers, cats, and the pungent smell from the kitchen of the less-than-choice cuts of meat which Mrs. Legman was forced to buy on their limited budget. Legman would take a job long enough to "liberate" the books he desired from the bookstore, and, having accomplished that, he would return to full-time scholarship.

At this time Legman had just completed his study on censorship, Love and Death, and Landesman was interested in publishing it. This work is a polemic against censorship, with extensive references, and the question it asks is an uncomfortable one. Legman wants to know why sex is considered unfit for the reader's consumption, while bloody, descriptive passages of human violence escape the censor's scissors? Legman answers his own question by showing that in order to erase sex from the minds of children, and from the public at large, they must be fed a heavy dose of violence: murder mysteries, "Wild-West" stories, and war movies, all featuring "real he-men" and "bitch-heroines."
He scoffs at the idea that "we must protect our children:"

Editors, publishers, policemen, lawyers, judges, and jailers—even a few writers—have become accustomed to the legal absurdity that, in writing of sex, the theoretical incitement to commit a misdemeanor—masturbation or coitus—is punished as a felony.\(^22\) for murder and violence are more damaging than sexual expression (aren't they?). At the end of his polemic he says:

Murder is a crime. Describing murder is not. Sex is not a crime. Describing sex is. Why? The penalty for murder is death, or lifelong imprisonment—the penalty for writing about it: fortune and lifelong fame. The penalty for fornication is . . . there is no actual penalty—the penalty for describing it in print: jail and lifelong disgrace. Why this absurd contradiction? Is the creation of life really more reprehensible than its destruction?\(^23\)

Legman's work was rejected by all major publishers. It had tremendous appeal to the New York literary underground. Finally, in 1952, Legman left for France, despairing of ever "getting through" to his country.\(^24\) Holmes was taken with Legman's "Cromwellian Zeal," but much as Holmes admired Legman for his bold challenge to the publishing industry, he had some reservations:

A man imprisoned by an idea is a potentially dangerous man, whether that idea is true or not, and many people who ardently agreed with Legman in those days would probably have left the country had he been elected President—as he, himself, did when his opposite number ran for the office in 1952.\(^25\)

Holmes nevertheless admired this "penniless David challenging the Goliaths of publishing." In Legman, Holmes, Kerouac,
Landesman, and Ginsberg saw many of the qualities they were to seek to emulate:

Here was a man who spoke up for cats, and who was appalled for children, who made delicate things with awkward and loving fingers. And here was a mustached "eccentric" who insisted that a writer's sole responsibility was to indict his time if he found it wanting, never to collaborate with the Enemies of Life (even when they become internalized) and to do all this alone, unaided, and despised by everyone, if need be.26

Although Holmes was probably closer to Kerouac than he was to any other Beat writer, he has remarkable insight into Ginsberg. He refers to Ginsberg as "The Consciousness Widener." Although at this time Ginsberg had not begun his extensive experimentation with vision-inducing drugs, he had begun to write poems that were faithful to the way in which the mind actually works. Thus, his experimentation with consciousness-expanding drugs such as LSD came from a desire to "expand" his art. Ginsberg should be flattered that Holmes saw this at such an early stage.

What Holmes most respected, as did other writers who frequented Ginsberg's company, was his amazing energy. Ginsberg's exuberance has been compared to the lusty spirit of Walt Whitman, just as Ginsberg's poetry is very much akin to Whitman's. Ever since he began to write, Ginsberg has kept extensive notebooks and journals. The shopping bag that he always carries is bulging with "School Time" notebooks, which he fills with ideas and poems, or fragments of poems, during his many travels. Just as he seeks to increase his vision with hallucinogens, Ginsberg travels tirelessly to broaden
his outlook and to provide a rich foundation of experiences from which to write. Holmes sensed this "gnaw that has always kept him on his extraordinary adventure." Imagination is not enough for Ginsberg, he must also experience, if possible or advisable, the situations about which he writes:

travelling on pennies more widely than anyone else I know with dollars, so that whenever I see him he has always just arrived back, or is just departing; that adventure that always makes me place him in my mind's eye in Kenya, Tibet, Peru, or Thule; illuminated under the bridges of Paris, pelted with shoes in Oxford, naked in Hollywood, bearded in Saigon, walking the savage roads of the Peloponnesus, masturbating in a hammock in Yucatan, selflessly sampling all narcotiques du pays, his own body the tabula rasa on which his mind writes.

This is not to say that only adventure and unusual, fantastic experiences stimulate Ginsberg to write. What many consider his greatest poem, "Kaddish," is a hymn to his dead mother; a painful dissection of his childhood experiences with his mother—the original wound beneath the scar tissue of his homosexuality and his own mental anguish. Like Blake whom he so much admires, Ginsberg stresses the irrational, romantic, mysterious nature of man. Like Whitman, he is in love with man, and perhaps the most painful experience to him is the denial of love that might have been, such as the love between mother and son that was strained by mental illness. The anguish that Naomi Ginsberg's insanity brought to the family, and particularly to Allen, is brought out by Louis Ginsberg's poem, "To a Mother Buried:"
Naomi, when the world swam away
And the windows grew blind,
Were you thinking about who searched endless corridors
Of sanitariums, hoping to find
His old lost love?
Now, with earth above
Do you know that your lawyer son, Eugena,
Often will start
At the grief shaking
The dungeons of his heart?
If you only know
How your poet son, Allen
Raves over the world,
Crazed for the love of you! 29

The most enigmatic character in Holmes’ impressions of the early Beats is Jack Kerouac, the writer most people think of first in relation to Beat writing. Holmes says that he has always been "awed" by the talents of this "great rememberer," and "enraged" by his stubbornness;30 his nonchalant "so what?" posture (or mask) that so many were to interpret as lack of intelligence and ability.

Kerouac was burly and athletic, and he drank too much; so much that, at his death, he had actually burned a hole in his stomach. There was also another Kerouac, naive, shy, introspective, a lover of animals and old people and old houses. In yet another way, Kerouac was a mystery. He was a passionate student of language, and he had access to the best authors and the greatest literary traditions. Yet his art was thoroughly undisciplined, and his novels are very physical and very masculine, with an emphasis upon frenzied, furious living for now—for there may be no tomorrow. In a statement typical of Kerouac, he said

This is Beat. Live your lives out?
Naw, love your lives out.31
His novels are essentially picaresque, and in that respect he is in the tradition of Fielding, and more closely Mark Twain, especially *Huckleberry Finn.* Frederick Field makes a good case for placing Kerouac in the tradition of the "hobo novels" of Jack London and John Dos Passos. Field sees in Kerouac's novels the heroic portrait of the dropout from society wandering aimlessly about, but free. Although a Beat hobo is vastly different in background from a hobo who is a victim of the Depression, for example, there remains that "call of the road," which is such an important ingredient in American fiction. In *The Dharma Bums,* the hero, Japhy Ryder, offers the following solution for the ills of American society:

A great rucksack revolution—thousands or even millions of young Americans wandering around with rucksacks, going up to the mountains to pray, making children laugh and old men glad, making young girls happy and old girls happier, all of 'em zen lunatics who go about writing poems that happen to appear in their heads for no reason and also by being kind and also by strange unexpected acts keep giving visions of eternal freedom to everybody and to all living creatures.

Also, in Kerouac one detects the same restlessness of spirit that pervades the novels of Thomas Wolfe:

Yet for all these traditional influences, Kerouac's style is almost totally new. He would sit at a typewriter until all of his ideas tumbled out of his head onto the paper, and when he ran out of ideas, he had a novel. He liked to think of himself as a jazz artist "blowing a long, slow
blues," with more emphasis upon improvisation than upon a basic framework. The result was what Ginsberg called "spontaneous bop prosody." Like Ginsberg in his early poems, Kerouac felt very strongly that he should never change one word of his manuscript; that the writing would lose its spontaneity if he did, and that spontaneity was the key to great writing. Critics of "the Beat Mind" seize upon this aspect of writing more than any other to emphasize what they see as the Beats' anti-intellectualism. Kerouac and Ginsberg scoffed at the idea of disciplined, sublimated writing, and they have continually had to answer for this with almost universal rejection by academic critics.

The first novel in which Kerouac practiced this unbridled style was On the Road, completed in 1951 and unpublished until 1957. In the interim Kerouac worked at all sorts of odd jobs, and continued to write without publishing, except for a few pieces in "little magazines." His spontaneous prose was regarded as decadent by most publishers. In 1957, after the storm over "Howl," in which Ginsberg and the Beats were catapulted into national recognition thanks to the foolish attempts of the world-be censors, it became profitable to publish Beat writing, and Viking Press released On the Road, complete with fanfare and come-on phrases like "bible of the beat generation," "wild drives across America," "frenetic search for experience and sensation."

Stressing Kerouac's ties with such distinguished literary ancestors as Mark Twain, John P. Sisk compares the initial
reaction of most publishers, and later much of the public, to *On the Road* to the initial reaction to *Huckleberry Finn*. When Twain's masterpiece was first released, this quote appeared in the *Boston Transcript*:

> The Public Library committee decided to exclude the book because it was "rough, coarse and inelegant, dealing with a series of experiences not elevating . . . being more suited to the slums than to intelligent, respectable people." 36

*On the Road* is a record of the adventures of Kerouac and his friend Neal Cassidy, also a writer, on their rambles across America. Neal Cassidy was known affectionately to the Beats as "the Johnny Appleseed of the Marijuana Racket," a distinction which was to earn him five years in prison. 37

The novel's panorama of an uninhibited, "dropout" existence was to serve as both an indictment and a glorification of the Beats, depending on your point of view.

Many of Kerouac's later novels continued a similar theme, but the tone became increasingly desperate and fatalistic. John Clellon Holmes calls this paragraph "the key to Kerouac:"

> I'm writing this book because we're all going to die—In the loneliness of my life, my father dead, my brother dead, my mother far away, my sister and my wife far away, nothing here but my own tragic hands that were once guarded by a world, a sweet attention, that now are left to guide and disappear their own way into the common dark of all our death, sleeping in my raw bed, alone and stupid: with just this one pride and consolation: my heart broke in the general despair, and opened up inwards to the Lord, I made a supplication in this dream. 39

The New York literary underground of 1948 was short-lived, with most of the writers travelling from one place to another.
The next significant "outbreak" of Beat culture was in San Francisco in 1956-57. It was during this gathering that the Beats were brought to the public's attention, for it was here that Lawrence Ferlinghetti, poet and owner of the City Lights Bookshop, was arrested for publishing Allen Ginsberg's *Howl and Other Poems* in his own "City Lights Books." Despite the notoriety of the Beats in the San Francisco days, New York of 1948 remains the starting point for Beat writing. San Francisco's North Beach had long been a community where bohemians could gather without harassment by the local citizenry, and to Kerouac, Ginsberg, and others originally located in New York, it served as a haven where they could find peace and stimulating companions.
THE BEAT STYLE OF LIFE AND ART

There were several positions contra society and contra established literature which the early Beats shared, and which were to be echoed by many other writers who identified themselves with Kerouac and Ginsberg. They wanted no part of American society. Technology had, they felt, destroyed all that was good and vibrant and life-giving, and there was no hope for change. The only method of survival, however temporary, for the artist was escape from the vast conspiring to impose one level of consciousness on mankind and exterminate all manifestations of that unique part of human sentience, identical in all men, which the individual shares with his Creator.

... the words of Ginsberg, who also proclaimed

sudden emergence of insight into a vast national sub-conscious nether world filled with nerve gases, universal death-bombs, malevolent bureaucracies, secret police systems, drugs that open the door to God, ships reaving Earth, unknown chemical terrors, evil dreams at hand.

Since man is without a soul in such a society, the only way he can "reclaim" his soul is by disengaging from society. 41

Man's only goal, that is, the "goal" of the Beats, in relation to society is to have no part of it. 42

Could the members of New York's literary underground in
the post-war years truly escape society? Without the society itself, their writings would have little meaning. Sisk argues that

No matter how completely they [the Beats] try to cut themselves off, they remain a critically engaged part of society, through the directness and value of their subversive predecessors. One cannot read Holmes, Kerouac, [Gregory] Corso, Ferlinghetti, or Ginsberg without realizing that their interest, even to themselves, is always in relation to the society that contains them. They depend upon the city, the physical symbol of society, to exacerbate in them the pearl of beatness.

The beats were unavoidably a component of technological society. "Everywhere else they would not be noticed," writes Malcolm Bradbury. While they are critics of society, they are also products of it.

Nevertheless, the rage which Beat writers express over the materialism and technology of their world is very great. Allen Ginsberg, in "Howl," mourns for his generation, for spirits crushed by acquisitive madness:

What sphinx of cement and aluminum bashed open their skulls and ate up their brains and imagination? Mohloch; Solitude; Filth; Ugliness; Asheous and unobtainable dollars; Children screaming under the stairways; Boys sobbing in armies; Old men weeping in the parks.

To reverse the phrase of Leibniz, the Beats felt they had inherited the "worst of all possible worlds;" peacetime military training, genocide, nuclear weapons, all the products of "Mohloch." If this is the essence of modern man, then the Beats would prefer to become "barbarians;" enemies of society. Their barbaros consists of the rejection of any type of conformity with a spiritually bankrupt society.
Along with the "escape syndrome" and the revulsion with technology, there is a great deal of fatalism. Since the advent of nuclear weapons, death now has a finality which it did not have before: the destruction of all life. "The Bomb" plays a great role in the "live-for-now--love-your-lives-out" philosophy of the Beats. With the bomb as a prospect, there is wisdom in escape. Can the beats be called irresponsible for living without a thought to the future? With the advent of nuclear weapons, "future" had become a tentative concept:

It is not a question of whether the future will be good or bad, but whether there will be any future.

There were many routes of escape. The most obvious route was that of travel. Many Beats went to Paris, like their literary ancestors of the 1920's and 1930's, but just as many went to the Orient, to South America, and across America. They covered the globe in an effort to escape from civilization, not in order to sample Europe or any other civilization. Unlike the numbers of the Lost Generation, the Beats did not yearn for the superior culture of Europe, for Europe had contributed just as surely as the United States to the destruction of life. True, an artist might, like Legman, find greater freedom to create in Europe, but Europe has always been more tolerant of its artists than has the United States.

More challenging than emigration was the idea of remaining in the United States, but "dropping out" and pursuing a life
style counter to the majority culture, with utter disregard for its social standards. If there was wisdom in escape, the more varied the avenues of escape, the greater the wisdom.

One characteristic of bohemian culture, though not true of all Beats, is voluntary poverty, a trend that Michael Harrington noted in his study of American poverty. Unlike other poor people, the Beats were impoverished by choice. They renounced possessions and property as limitations to their freedom. Most poor people live with a desire for the houses, cars, and appliances that the Beats renounced. The voluntary poverty was not absolute; these poor artists might be called "the discerning poor." They managed to come up with enough money to buy the books, records, cheap art prints, and drugs or alcohol that they desired. Aside from these luxuries, they professed "an unwillingness to mortgage their lives to material possessions."\(^{51}\)

Most of the Beats were educated and could probably have found decent jobs, but they religiously avoided work.

Sensible of America's inequitable distribution of income and its increasing depersonalization of work and leisure\(^{52}\) and its racial injustices and its Permanent War Economy, the beats have responded with the Permanent Strike.\(^{53}\)

They were not merely attacking capitalism, for they possessed no unifying doctrine or program for social change. Beats rejected "both armed camps:" capitalism and communism.\(^{54}\)
Another outlet for escape was that of drugs. Beats did not renounce alcohol, and Kerouac's drinking exploits are now legendary, but drugs were educational. It is important to remember that, in the 1950's, hallucinogens such as mescaline, the derivative of the Peyote cactus, and lysergic acid (LSD) were not widespread enough to cause alarm in the medical profession, and were, in fact, legal. The absurd fact is that marijuana was considered extremely dangerous, and was close to heroin and other hard narcotics in degree of penalty attached to conviction of possession.

Not only was there no great stigma attached to the possession of hallucinogens, but the use of consciousness-expanding drugs was a topic of interest to intellectuals, and to psychologists in particular. Aldous Huxley had brought intellectual "respectability" to the use of mescaline and LSD with his book, The Doors of Perception. The positive aspects of hallucinogens, i.e., the exploring of the "frontiers" of the mind in order to learn more about ourselves, was emphasized. Non-Beat writers such as Robert Lowell tried LSD. Allen Ginsberg spoke before a group of psychiatrists of his LSD experiences, and he was enthusiastically received.

For the most part, drug use did not become adominant force with the Beats, although a few unfortunates turned to heroin. The use of drugs was, again, a way to satisfy curiosity, to find a greater vision in a world which seemed
to place a premium upon production while despising vision and imagination. William Burroughs even moved for a time to Peru, in order to sample a drug known as "yage," found only in South America. He and Ginsberg, who had used yage, exchanged a series of letters during Burroughs stay in Peru, which were later published as The Yage Letters. Beat writers wanted to increase creativity, and thus they favored experimentation with drugs. However, use of heroin or cocaine would stunt creativity, and were therefore to be shunned. Gary Snyder, a poet known for his deep interest in Zen Buddhism and meditation, wrote:

Although a good deal of personal insight can be gained by the intelligent use of drugs, being high all the time leads nowhere because it lacks intellect, will, and compassion, and a personal drug kick is of no use to anyone in the world.

Some of the best poetry of the Beat poets was composed under the influence of peyote or some other hallucinogen. Several of the poems in Ginsberg's Kaddish and Other Poems and Michael McClure's "Peyote Poem" are good examples.

Predictably, sexual permissiveness was a characteristic of Beat Life, but only as an indication of their contempt for social moves. With the exception of Legman, there were no great sex scientists; but there was a spirit of tolerance of all forms of sexual expression. For the Beats, sexual expression was important, since one's humanity needed to be expressed in every possible way. Several psychologists argue that Beats were failures in establishing meaningful relationships, because of their furious desire for "kicks." Paul Goodman calls the sex behavior of the Beat a futile
search for "bigger and better orgasms." The Beats continued to carry on Lopman's struggle against censorship and prudishness. When Ginsberg's "Howl" faced charges of obscenity, and Lawrence Ferlinghetti faced a possible prison sentence for publishing it (1956), Beat writers and college professors flooded the literary reviews with attacks on the censor, San Francisco's Collector of Customs Chester MacPhee. After he had been acquitted in a trial which featured testimony by many writers, Ferlinghetti collected his thoughts on the incident. In an article published in Evergreen Review, Ferlinghetti quoted the San Francisco Chronicle: Collector of Customs Chester MacPhee continued his campaign yesterday to keep what he considers obscene literature away from the children of the Bay Area. He confiscated 250 copies of a paper-bound volume of poetry entitled Howl and Other Poems. "The words and the sense of the writing is obscene," MacPhee declared. "You wouldn't want your children to come across it." to which Ferlinghetti responded: It is not the poet but what he observes which is revealed as obscene. The great obscene wastes of Howl are the sad wastes of the mechanized world, lost among atom bombs and insane nationalism... a world, in short, you wouldn't want your children to come across... Thus was Goya obscene in depicting the Disasters of War, thus Whitman an exhibitionist, exhibiting man in his own strange skin.

In the storm over "Howl," Kenneth Rexroth, the standard-bearer of the Beats, found that he was as dissatisfied with the "favorable" reviews of "Howl" which misinterpreted (as he saw it) the poem and the poet and the poet as he had
been with the attacks on the poem. He answers those favorable reviewers who had used phrases such as "sustained shrieks of fanatic defiance," "single-minded frenzy of a raving madman," "paranoid memories," "childish obscenity:"

It ["Howl"] isn't at all violent. It is your violence it is talking about. It is Hollywood and the censors who are obscene. It is Dulles and Khrushchev who are childishly defiant. It is the "media" that talk with the single-minded frenzy of a raving madman. Once Allen is through telling you what you have done to him and his friends, he concerns himself with the unfulfilled promises of Song of Myself and Huckleberry Finn, and writes a Sutra about the sunflower that rises from the junk heap of civilization . . . your civilization. Negative? "We must love one another or die." 60

"Beatness" contains an essential religious quality. Several of the Bay Area poets were devout Roman Catholics, some belonged to monasteries. At times Kerouac seems to be a modern day St. Francis of Assisi. Kerouac and Ginsberg have experimented extensively with Eastern religion, and there is evidence that, Life magazine notwithstanding, Zen Buddhism was more than just a fad for them. John Clellon Holmes says of the Beats:

This is a generation whose almost exclusive concern is the discovery of something in which to believe.

Religion was a matter of personal experience, rather than of theory, and is experienced in several ways: by "vision and illumination-seeking" (which can overlap with drugs, Yoga, and jazz), by practicing a pacifistic lifestyle with love and respect for all forms of life, and by
studying various religion traditions and collecting the
best elements of each; fusing them into a personal creed.

Such religions "practices" were criticized as superf-
ficial, and were often interpreted as identical with
experimentation with drugs and sex. Admittedly, by striking
out in all directions at once, the Beats were left without
any one area of influence or identity, and failed to fully
explore any one avenue of escape . At least one critic
has decided that the religious vision of the Beat was a
direct result of the artificial vision induced by drugs:

The communicants line up to receive God, but
the wafer has lost its transubstantiating
power, and the host is impotent to bring the
holy vision of God without the intercession
of drugs.62

The life-style of the Beats was not strictly eccentric
behavior for its own sake. There were definite goals in
regard to art. Jazz was essential to the Beats. Charlie
Parker, the great jazz saxophone man, was something of a
cult hero, especially to Kerouac. Kerouac's "spontaneous
bop prosody" is the most conscious attempt to achieve a "holy
marriage of jazz and poetry." Lawrence Lipton, however,
hints that the mixing of jazz and poetry was really a "shot-
gun wedding."63 A poetry reading backed by jazz music re-
quired that both the poet and the musician adjust their
performance to each other, consequently, the amount of
improvisation open to each participant was limited.

If the attempts of Rexroth and Kerouac to return poetry
to its traditional musical setting failed, they did serve
to make poets more aware of the importance of reading
poems aloud, and of the added dimension a poet could
give to his art by developing an effective oral delivery.

Allen Ginsberg has mastered the art of reading poems
aloud. Recently, he has supplemented his readings by per-
forming Hindu chants, accompanying himself on an harmoni-
He has been able to fully explore the qualities and re-
sources of his voice, mastering it much as a musician
masters his instrument.

Ginsberg is the lion of the poetry-reading
circuit. He declares his own startling verse
with wild fervor, and heckless attack him at
their peril. At a recitation in Los Angeles last year a man stood up and demanded to know
what Ginsberg was "trying to prove." "Nakedness,"
said Ginsberg. "What d'ya mean, nakedness?"
bawled the unwary customer. Ginsberg gracefully
took off all his clothes.

Convinced of the purity of their jazz-like spontaneous
writing, the Beats are universal in their denunciation of
academic writers, critics, and professors of literature. It
is commonplace to find derogatory references to "Ransom,
Tate, and Company," or the "Eliot-Trilling-older genera-
tion." It was a major victory for the Beats when Karl
Shapiro dared to attack Marianne Moore, the "grand old
lady" of academic verse, in the October 24, 1959 New
York Times Book Review.

Beats such as Ginsberg and Kerouac were extremely well-
read, Ginsberg had been a student in Lionel Trilling's
classes at Columbia. The bitterness which the Beats felt
toward academia was not an anti-learning stand. The bitterness resulted from the rejection, by critics such as Trilling, of the works of the Beats. If disrespect for academia is strong among the Beats, denunciation of the Beats by the professors and scholars is at times almost violent. Most such critics now dismiss the thought of a lasting importance for the Beats. If the Beats were unimportant, why was such a vigorous campaign waged against them?

The Beats were right in making a plea for flexibility in literature, even if they carried it to extremes; just as the critics were correct in admonishing the Beats for refusing to revise their works and to use economy of style. Even so, the bitter exchanges in the journals and reviews now seem ludicrous, even embarrassing, to the student of literature.

The most violent attack came from Norman Podhoretz, in "The Know-Nothing Bohemians." Podhoretz, comparing the radical bohemian of the 1950's to his counterpart of the 1920's and 1930's, seriously criticizes the Beats for their total withdrawal from the political sphere of activity. To Podhoretz, the Beats are irresponsible, anti-intellectual, and even "primitive."

Spontaneity, he argues, is a cover-up for lack on intelligence, and a "pathetic poverty of feeling." Their revolt is meaningless to him, since it is not directed against any social ills; not carried out along political lines:

This is the revolt of the spiritually underprivileged and the crippled of soul—young men who can't think straight and so hate anyone who can; young men who can't get outside the
morass of self . . . who dream of the unobtainable perfect orgasm which excuses all sexual failings in the real world.  

Such obvious contempt may say more about the critic than about the object of his criticism. Podhoretz does bring up a point which concerned many of his generation who saw something more disturbing in the Beats than undisciplined writing. This concern is the decision of the Beats to drop out of society. Reform-oriented people such as Podhoretz could not comprehend such an utter retreat from social problems. Very few of the "older radicals" could appreciate this stance, although Rexroth, one of the 1930's "pinkos," was able to understand.

In an era of McCarthyism, when many would-be critics of society were bullied into silence, many dissident members of society saw no hope of being heard, or of even accomplishing any progressive goals. Therefore "dropping out" had less stigma among the disaffected artists than it might in a totally different time, such as in the early months of the Kennedy administration.

In this vein, it must be added that the Beats really did not see themselves, except perhaps vaguely, as members of any "movement" at all. Many Beats—and the term is one of convenience, referring to writers such as Kerouac and Ginsberg—would have denied the existence of a Beat "movement," with leaders and followers and a platform.
Of course the beat is pleased to see beat attitudes spread, but he isn't interested in joining any organized social movement toward that end. Each of the three words "organized social movement," sounds obscene to the beat's ears. And though naturally amused to see some of his fellows such as Allen Ginsberg achieve notoriety and shake up the squares, he doesn't regard Ginsberg or anyone else as his spokesman (much less "leader") in the sense that squares conceive of spokesmanship. The beat's only spokesman is himself. 73

This insistence upon the fact that there was no Beat "movement," coupled with rejection of any unified program of social or artistic concern is one reason why the Beats faded so quickly from the literary scene.

To read through the work of the "beat generation" writers means to encounter a variety of experimental styles ranging from Shakespearean paraphrase to Whitmanesque enumerative style, from prose reminiscent of Dos Passos to delicate Dadaist tidbits. There is no unified "beat" style; the group, moreover, has no manifesto or statement of common critical purpose, which would lend it a central unity. 74

Because of its lack of a premise; religious, philosophical, or political, the Beat Generation may not be remembered, and may cease to have importance for contemporary literature. With the bold vision of the New York writers of 1946 in mind, this is indeed tragic.

With few exceptions, most notably the work of John Clellon Holmes, the real story of the Beat Generation has not yet been told. Jane Kramer's Allen Ginsberg in America is readable and interesting but superficial. A biography of Kerouac is sorely needed. Unfortunately,
writers often have to die before they are given thoughtful consideration. As a result of their massive effort to permanently discredit the Beats, scholars have greatly reduced the possibilities for a clearer view of the Beat literary phenomenon, both by other scholars and by non-scholars. Also, the Hollywood—Life—Time—Newsweek treatment of "beatniks" has obscured much of the seriousness of the Beat writers. The popular media is always eager to make pronouncements (as soon as possible;) on the "latest trends," and the Beats were pigeonholed and stereotyped like any other "curiosity." Features were run on "authentic" beatnik coffee houses, which were, in reality, tourist centers which the Beat artists avoided like the plague. Life magazine, with its customary good taste, ran a feature on the clothing one must have in order to be an "authentic" Beat. Jack Kerouac, particularly, felt great remorse over such shallowness and misunderstanding. By 1960, he was settled quietly again in Lowell, Massachusetts, away from the public eye, and from many of his former associates. He wrote, and spent the next seven years quietly destroying himself.

However, the Beats themselves must share the blame for the misunderstanding. Many other writers agreed that technology, production, and arms stockpiles were unsatisfactory determining factors for the lives of men, but they found the alternatives offered by the Beats to be weak and incoherent. The Beats failed to fully explain what they were about, though perhaps it would have been impossible
to do so. The poet John Ciardi articulates this very well when he writes

Were it a simple choice between going Madison Avenue and going Beat, I should certainly insist that the Beat has all the merit on his side. 76

The closer the Beats get to the present day, the more their meaning and significance become blurred. For all their rejection of academic literature, the few Beats who were still producing at the end of the 1950's were finding an increasingly receptive public on university campuses. After all the bitter polemics, Ginsberg began to see his poems in college anthologies, and to receive awards and invitations to read at leading universities. One cannot help but wonder if this is because of the high esteem in which his work is held, or because of his continuing presence as a leading counter-culture figure.

Ginsberg has been at home in both Beat and hippie circles. While the emphasis upon dropping out of society and the use of drugs and the cultivation of an opposite lifestyle is common ground to both Beats and hippies, the hippies have yet to match the Beats in the literary area. Perhaps out of the "hippie movement" will come significant works of art. More distance from the present headlines might bring some startling discoveries, but it is still too early. As has been shown, even 1950 is in many ways close to us. The "history of the present" is a field which needs much more development.
While the New York literary underground of 1948 was quite different from the counter-culture of the 1970’s, the message of the early Beats is still a contemporary one: The most sophisticated technological society in the world is hardly worth the price if it drives away its creative persons. Man needs more than maximum material comfort to justify his existence in the modern age.

As to what future critics will think of the value of Beat writing, it may take years before the Beats can be fairly judged, before the cries of "beatnik" and "weirdo" have subsided. Eccentricity and irrational behavior have often gone hand-in-hand with creative ability:

It is easy to forget that Poe was a drunk, Coleridge an opium eater, and Vincent Van Gogh a madman, and that a great deal of the world's art has a disconcerting way of getting produced by very odd types. A few Beat writers demonstrate that gift of phrase and those flashes of insight which bespeak genuine talent. [11]

The Beats gave us more than a stereotype, they spoke up for the necessity of human feeling against "the blind machine." They produced very readable works, and cooperated in some lively reviews, known to us now as the "little magazines," such as Yugen, Big Table, Exodus, Brith; little only in size. If they carried their convictions to extremes that does not erase the urgency with which they felt them, the desperate need they felt to uphold spontaneous human feeling in a mechanical age. Their task was too ambitious, and their targets too large, but if they failed to live up
to the task of establishing a "new literature" and a
rebirth of cultural activity in the United States, that
does not mean that their hopes are to be ignored.

One does not have to claim positions of greatness for
the Beat writers, or reject the academic literature, to
appreciate the urgency of what Aldo Leopold called "the
final revolution," in an address delivered in 1959 at the
University of California School of Medicine:

The application to human affairs, both on the
social level and on the individual level, of
technology . . . to reconcile the spontaneity
of human liberty to applied technology.78
FOOTNOTES

1. Hereafter, I shall use this term for the sake of convenience, without awkward italics or quotation marks. Let me hasten to add that the reader must realize that this "catch-all" phrase is far from adequate.


4. Seymour Krim, "Introduction," Jack Kerouac, Desolation Angels (New York, 1960), xii and xiii. Kerouac did not speak English until he was five or six years old. With this in mind, his command of English in his novels is all the more remarkable.


6. Ibid., p. 196.


14. Enshrined upon the inside cover of the Beatitude Anthology (San Francisco, 1960).


17. Allen Ginsberg, when I met him in Williamsburg, assured me that Holmes has accurately revealed the beginnings of the Beat phenomenon in *Nothing More to Declare*.


19. Ibid., p. 35.

20. Ibid., p. 42.

21. In the chapter called "Avatars of the Bitch," Legman discusses the importance of the "spirited" heroine, such as Annie Oakley or even Scarlet O'Hara, who, devoid of normal sexual impulses or gratification (due to the "built-in" censorship of the public taste), must assert herself by acts of violence against males. To Legman, this appears to be a corruption of the sex-drive resulting in masochism.


23. Ibid., p. 94.

24. He has only recently returned. Apparently he senses a "Thaw".


26. Ibid., 33.

27. Ibid., 53.

28. Ibid., 54.


30. Holmes, 68.


34. See Kerouac's only volume of poetry - Mexico City Blues ("Two hundred forty-two Jazz Choruses").


38. Kerouac's novel, Visions of Gerard, is based on his brother, who died as a child. See A Bibliography of Works by Jack Kerouac, compiled by Ann Charters.

39. Holmes, Nothing More to Declare, 68.


45. Allen Ginsberg, Howl and Other Poems (San Francisco: 1956), 1957.


49. Paul Goodman, Like a Conquered Promise 6.


51. Feied, No Pie in the Sky, 76.

52. Some have expressed the belief that the Beat way of life was the first "pilot study" on the use of leisure.
59. Ferlinghetti, "Horn on Howl," 147.
63. Lipton, *The Holy Barbarians*, 216.
65. Other sources give Hollywood as the location for this famous incident.
69. "Academic verse" refers to disciplined, carefully constructed poetry, as opposed to the spontaneous, unrestrained work of the Beats.
71. Ibid., 211.
72. Ibid., 211.
73. Polsky, *Hustlers, Beats, and Others*, 157-158.
75. Herbert Gold ("How to Tell the Beatniks From the Hipsters," *The Noble Savage* (I: 1960, 132-139) insists that beatniks did not really exist, but were the Beats "parodied and packaged as a commercial product."


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———. Howl and Other Poems. San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1956. Also introduced by Williams. Ginsberg's most famous and most controversial volume.


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Yugen, New York, I-VIII (1958-1962) passim. Little magazines, edited by the gifted black poet Le Roi Jones and Hettie Cohen. First published by Trebadour Press, beginning with Third Number by Jones' Totem Press. Yugen proclaimed "new consciousness in arts and letters," and the first number announced that "Yugen means elegance, beauty, grace, transcendence of these things, and also nothing at all."