

(14) The Beat Generation

Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, Gregory Corso, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Charles Reznikoff, Ted Berrigan, Timothy Leary, Charles Bukowski, Gary Snyder, Kenneth Rexroth

The San Francisco Renaissance

- Beatnik
Predecessors
- in the late 1940s and **1950s** the San Francisco Bay Area became the seat of avant-garde arts, especially poetry
 - the former culture centres in New England were abandoned by writers who sought a more liberal climate
 - the migration from the East to the West was complemented by a wave of immigrants from Asian countries
 - the San Francisco poets emerged as a **counter-culture** against the formalist and confessional establishments
 - their poetry emphasized drama and performance, language and line were shaped by the voice in conversation
 - represented by **Kenneth Rexroth** (1905–1982), **Robert Duncan** (1919–1988), **Gary Snyder** (b. 1930) etc.

The Beat Generation

- Meanings
of 'Beat'
- the term 'beat generation' seems to have been coined by Jack Kerouac and has several relevant connotations
 - in a musical sense 'beat' suggests keeping the beat in harmony with others, specifically implies the **jazz beat**
 - beat poetry was called 'typewriter-jazz', catching the abrupt syncopated rhythms of jazz, bebop and swing
 - in a social, psychological and vaguely political sense 'beat' suggests the **'beaten' condition** of the outsider
 - beat poetry cherishes the stance of the alienated, the dispossessed and even the nominally insane individual
 - in a spiritual sense 'beat' is related to **'beatitude'**, the innocence, blessedness and raptness of the generation
 - beat poetry seeks to pursue 'visionary consciousness' through music or meditation, drugs, mantras or poems
- Origins
& Views
- initially associated with New York, in the mid-1950s Kerouac, Ginsberg and Corso shifted to San Francisco
 - national prominence and notoriety was guaranteed by the confiscation of Ginsberg's *Howl* by police (1956)
 - harboured anti-establishment sentiments, rebelled against the bourgeois consumer society, sought liberalism
 - typically divided by a thin line between their own lives and the lives of their protagonist in social margins
 - formally not related to programmatic leftism, preferred **'metapolitics'**, psychological and spiritual freedom
 - influenced by Eastern philosophies and religions, drew heavily on the rhythms and improvisations of jazz
 - attracted to **visionary** poetry, influenced by William Blake, American Transcendentalists and Walt Whitman

Jack Kerouac (1922–1969)

- Writing
Mode
- his semi-autobiographical writings document the beat consciousness and his search for truth in **Zen Buddhism**
 - his writings share an urgent repetitive rhythmic style, an excited evocative tone and spontaneity and intimacy
 - his prose is inspired by the sheer vastness of the American continent, through which he travelled extensively
 - his poetry is influenced by the Japanese haiku¹, produces poetic miniatures describing the beauty of the nature
- Novel
Masterpiece
- On the Road*** (1957)
- the novel brings together the American self and American space in a celebration of the vast potential of both
 - the narrator and protagonist, Sal Paradise, the author's self-portrait, is a struggling writer in his mid-twenties
 - shows his encounters with the teenager Dean Moriarty, modelled on the Beat poet Neal Cassady (1926–1968)
 - includes also fictionalized figures of Allen Ginsberg and of the Beat novelist William Burroughs (1914–1997)
 - follows Sal and Dean travelling with or to each other, undertaking five trips from coast to coast in five years
- Travels &
Experience
- in the course of the novel Dean meets and deserts different wives and lovers, Sal has a brief affair with one of Dean's partners and manages to sell his novel to a publisher, but nothing substantial happens in terms of plot
 - the events that occur and are described possess the fluidity of a stream rather than the fixity of narrative form
 - the narrative is focused on **experience** rather than evaluation, the characters keep on moving to new events
 - the experience is the love, loneliness and longing felt when they contemplate the boundless areas they move in
- Novels
- The Subterraneans*** (1958), ***The Dharma Bums*** (1958), ***Visions of Cody*** (1972)
- the novels recollect the author's life and friends, the last mentioned his travelling companion Neal Cassady
- Poetry
- Mexico City Blues*** (1959)
- a poetic sequence consisting of 242 stanzas dealing with various personal themes in a spontaneous language
 - inspired by the blues poetics and the jazz improvisations, the title refers originally to a musical composition

Allen Ginsberg (1926–1997)

- Background
& Influences
- born in a Jewish family, influenced by the conservativeness of his father and the mental disease of his mother
 - rebelled against the conservative values, harshly criticised the pretentious society and the tricky governments

¹ The Japanese haiku comprises three lines of five, seven and five syllables respectively. It expresses a single idea, image or feeling.

- influenced by the example of Walt Whitman (1819–1892) and advice of William Carlos Williams (1883–1963)
- followed William Blake's (1757–1827) mysticism and Henry David Thoreau's (1817–1862) civil disobedience
- drew on folk songs, jazz and blues, even recited his poems to rock music accompaniment, as by Bob Dylan
- made his **breath the measure**, 'one physical-mental inspiration of thought contained in the elastic of breath'
- recorded some of his 'mind-flow' poems directly on a tape-recorder rather than composing them on the page
- perceived poetry as 'a catalyst to visionary states of mind', sought to insert his **prophetic vision** in his poetry
- mixes the intimate and prophetic, comic and serious, seeks to celebrate and sing himself as representative man
- focuses on his own genuine feelings and emotions, opens taboo topics, including his homosexual inclination
- deals with people, places, politics, psychedelics, ecology, love, nature and war in an oracular, prophetic tone

Form & Content

Master-piece

Howl and Other Poems (1956)

Themes & Mood

- the title poem is a litany, not an individual's cry but a lament over a whole generation destroyed by conformity
- the poem offers grimly serious, yet comically **surreal** improvisations on the theme of betrayal of a generation
- follows the Romantic tradition which sought to glorify the figures of outcasts, rebels, in this case drug addicts
- mixes religious intensity and wry realism, weaves modernist disjunctures with an ancient sense of **apocalypse**
- balances between acknowledgement of the grubby everyday life and proclamations of the presence of the ideal

Form & Message

- the poet seeks to 'discover' the poem in his mind, copies the discontinuities and revelations of consciousness
- the opening lines establish the basic beat of the poem, and the anaphoric 'who' then helps to keep the measure
- the first part explores the denial of the visionary impulse by forces as 'the narcotic tobacco haze of Capitalism' and celebrates its continuance in such subversive elements as 'angel-headed hipsters' and 'the madman bum'
- the second part denounces in a prophetic tone 'Moloch the loveless', the god of power and 'pure machinery'
- the third part focuses on his friend Carl Solomon², whom the poet identifies with as an archetype of suffering, and projects their imaginary liberation when they wake up to their 'own souls' airplanes roaring over the roof'

Elegy on Mother

Kaddish and Other Poems (1961)

- the title poem takes the traditional Hebrew form of an elegiac lament, gives a powerful account of personal grief over the death of his mother and includes an extremely frank portrayal of his mother's mental affliction

Vietnam Protest

'Wichita Vortex Sutra'³ (1966)

- the poem denounces the Vietnam War, declares that 'the war is language' and that the Vietnam conflict is a product of the 'Black magic language' or 'formulas for reality' with which the corporate America blinds itself
- undertakes to construct a model of 'language known in the back of the mind', a true vocabulary for true vision
- presents the poem as 'the right magic', a new language of recovery to promote a new vision and a new society

Buddhist Calmness

Death and Fame: Poems 1993–1997 (1998)

- the collection shows his gravitation to Buddhism, surveys his earlier nightmares with a sense of acceptance

Gregory Corso (1930–2001)

Poetry Features

- his poetic persona stands apart from the game of life and refuses to commit himself to a fixed definite status
- refuses to be tied down by any institutions or poetic forms, whether it is metre, stability of mood or marriage
- characteristic for his subversive **humour**, unpredictable changes of pace and tone, fluid voice and rapid line
- resembles Allen Ginsberg's poetry with long forms and long lines, but unlike him uses playfulness and irony

Juvenilia Collection

The Vestal Lady of Brattle (1955)

- his first poetry collection, published due to funds from his fellow students at Harvard where he spent one year
- early pieces, but already show innovative use of jazz rhythms, cadences of spoken English and hipster jargon

Ginsberg Influence

Gasoline (1958)

- his second collection, published by Ferlinghetti's City Lights, with a foreword by his mentor Allen **Ginsberg**
- influenced by Ginsberg, but prefers his own swift and witty voice rather than a prophetically incantatory one

Masterpiece Collection

Happy Birthday of Death (1960)**'Marriage'** (1959)

- a witty meditation on whether to submit to convention and marry, suggesting rebellion rather than compliance
- the poem presents the speaker trying out possible marriages, inventing potential selves and discarding them all
- attacks traditional values but accepts the fact of their existence, unlike Ginsberg, who praised homoeroticism

Later Poetry

Elegiac Feelings American (1970)

- continues in his bitter-sweet tone of boyish rebellion, but since the 1970s becomes tainted by disillusionment

² Carl Solomon (1928–1993), a minor American poet; Ginsberg befriended him during a brief stay at a mental institute in New York.

³ Wichita is a city in Kansas, which the author visited during his Mid-West travels. Sutra refers to canonical scriptures of Buddhism.

Lawrence Ferlinghetti (b. 1919)

- Views & Influences
- a native of New York, in the early 1950s settled in San Francisco where he founded the **City Lights**⁴ Bookshop (1953) and Press (1955), publishing avant-garde poetry in the Pocket Poets Series and in the *Beatitude* magazine
 - a representative of the San Francisco Renaissance and the Beat Generation, a poet, painter and liberal activist
 - argued for a populist **street poetry**, sought to get poetry out of the classroom and even **off the printed page**
 - concentrated on the voice, conceived many of his poems as oral messages performed to a jazz accompaniment
 - influenced by jazz improvisations and by French Surrealism, which he combined with a search for his identity
 - developed a cascade-like structure of the poem, similar to Charles Olson's (1910–1970) views of Projectivism
- Forms & Subjects
- uses a variable foot, long and flowing line, strongly idiomatic language and colourful, even theatrical images
 - prefers roaming verse forms, declamatory style and devices as incremental repetition and paratactic syntax
 - indulges in **slapstick** and corny jokes but all the same insists on engagement with the serious **issues of the day**
 - speaks in the energetic voice of an anarchic individualist about the absurd institutional lives and nation-states
 - makes his poetry both public, in performance and subjects, and personal, in his private vision and experience
 - insists on the need for direct statement and clear responsibility in poetry, dismissed the nihilism of other beats
 - the poet is a performer, 'a charleychaplin man', and a pedagogue, a 'super realist', entertaining and instructing
- Poetry Collections
- Pictures of the Gone World* (1955), *A Coney Island of the Mind* (1958), *Starting from San Francisco* (1961), *Where is Vietnam?* (1965), *The Secret Meaning of Things* (1969)

Charles Reznikoff (1894–1976)

- Background & Relations
- born to Russian immigrant parents in a Jewish ghetto in Brooklyn, resided in New York almost uninterruptedly
 - started writing poetry remarkable for its Imagist intensity of vision, influenced by Ezra Pound (1885–1972)
 - produced 'urban imagism', pointing out the loneliness, ironies and numbness of an urban tenement immigrant
 - became the poet for whom the term '**Objectivism**' was first coined, the poet Louis Zukofsky (1904–1978) referred to Reznikoff's work in what became known as the Objectivist issue of Harriet's Munroe's *Poetry* (1931)
 - co-founded with Louis Zukofsky and George Oppen (1908–1984) the Objectivist Press to publish their work
- Imagist & Objectivist
- By the Waters of Manhattan: Selected Verse* (1962)
- the best of his earlier poems refuse to moralize, the social comment is all the more powerful for being implicit
- Master-pieces
- Testimony: The United States, 1885–1890* (1965), *Testimony: The United States, 1891–1900* (1968)
- began as prose retellings of court records that the author was hired to summarize for a legal publishing house
 - eventually elaborated into an extended free-verse poem that runs to some five hundred pages in two volumes
 - presented as a **found poem**, using the words of the participants, avoiding metaphor and authorial personality
 - believed that the chosen period was a time when a social and psychic crisis occurred in the American nation
 - suggested that every life was worth remembering, that the testimony of every person was worth attending to
 - omitted the judgements, focused rather on the stories and included all the raw detail he considered relevant
- Found Poems
- Holocaust* (1975)
- based on the courtroom accounts of Nazi concentration camps, further developed his **prose-poem** technique

Ted Berrigan (1934–1983)

- Imitations & Parodies
- the central figure of the second generation of New York School of Poets, founder and editor of the *C Magazine*
 - author of nearly two dozens volumes of experimental poetry, highly diverse in style but very often **parodic**
 - wrote often in collaboration, among his collaborators was the fellow New York poet Ron Padgett (b. 1942)
 - considered himself a 'late Beat', drew on the Expressionist tradition which grounds literary authority in the personality of the writer rather than traditional aesthetics and which was practised by the Transcendentalists
 - influenced especially by Frank O'Hara (1926–1966) whose '**I-do-this-I-do-that**' style he imitated or parodied
- Poetry of Self
- presents the world in his poetry as an extended projection of his self, seeks to make his poems be like his life
 - focuses on effects drawn from the influences of surrealism, abstract **expressionist** painting and serial music
 - imitates the forms and practices of earlier poets and re-creates them to express his own personal experience
 - borrows procedures and even lines from other poets but always seeks to absorb them and make them his own
 - projects a sensibility that is confiding, sad, graceful and affectionate, closely resembling his own personality
- Master-piece
- The Sonnets* (1964)
- weaves together traditional elements of the Shakespearean sonnet⁵ with the disjunctive structure and cadences

⁴ Called so for a Charlie Chaplin film of the name (1931). The books were published in paper-bound editions for anyone to afford.

⁵ The Shakespearean sonnet is written in iambic pentameter and comprises three quatrains and a couplet rhyming abab cdcd efef gg.

of T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922) and with the author's own literary innovations and personal experiences

- replaces Eliot's characteristically wearied tone and sensibility with his own peculiar mix of humour and grace
- substitutes Eliot's quotations of canonical works of high culture by references to **popular culture** of the time

Drug
Life

Tambourine Life (1967)

- an extended poetic sequence in the Whitmanesque style, unified by a common theme and a consistent tone
- 'tambourine life' is 'drug life', the poem was composed by 'mushrooming technique', under drug intoxication
- opens with a centred line reading 'Fuck Communism', combines otherworldly surliness and baiting obscenity
- includes references to popular culture, like John Cage or the Marx Brothers, and **anti-establishment** slogans

Collaboration

Bean Spasms (1967)

- a medley of poems and prose pieces written with Ron Padgett, avoids specifying who contributed which pieces

Late
Poetry

In the Early Morning Rain (1970)

- marks a shift in his style towards a minimalist mode, tries to strip his poems of all but the most essential words

A Certain Slant of Sunlight (1988)

- poems written towards the end of his life, notable for their strong emotions and intricate, subtle modulations

Timothy Leary (1920–1996)

Career &
Activities

- psychologist, futurist, author of professional writing, advocate for the use of **LSD** and other psychedelic drugs
- raised in a Catholic household, attended the Military Academy at West Point and the University of Alabama
- received a doctorate in **psychology** from the University of California, Berkeley, where he became an assistant professor (1950–1955) and developed an egalitarian model for interaction between psychotherapist and patient
- appointed a lecturer in psychology at Harvard University (1959–1963), founded the Harvard Psychedelic Drug Research Programme and began controversial **experiments**, including administering drugs to graduate students

Research &
Conclusions

- experimented with psilocybin, a synthesized form of the hallucinogenic agent present in certain mushrooms
- his Concord Prison Experiment (1961–1963) suggested that psychedelic drugs could help reform criminals
- concluded that psychedelic drugs could be effective in transforming personality and **expanding consciousness**
- dismissed from Harvard, moved to New York where he became the centre of a small hedonistic community
- produced his book ***The Psychedelic Experience: A Manual Based on The Tibetan Book of the Dead*** (1964)
- began experiments with LSD, initially with control over the 'set and setting', then increasingly undisciplined
- embarked on a chain of public lectures, his 'turn on, tune in, drop out' became a popular counter-culture slogan
- considered a corrosive influence on society, arrested for possession of marijuana resulting in a long legal battle
- in the 1990s became an early advocate of the potential of new technologies like virtual reality and the Internet

Charles Bukowski (1920–1994)

Position &
Influences

- the author served as a link between the San Francisco poets and Los Angeles, California, where he resided
- refused to be associated with the San Francisco or with the Beat Poets, stood outside as an **isolated individual**
- influenced by Henry Miller's (1891–1980) iconoclasm and Robinson Jeffers's (1887–1962) individualism
- began writing short stories that introduced a hard-boiled **rough loser** as the characteristic persona of his work
- started writing poetry only at thirty after having experienced the life of an outsider, alcoholic and drug addict

Subjects &
Approaches

- rebelled against the established traditional literature, mocked self-serious young poets and **wrote to amuse**
- produced raw autobiographical poetry poking fun at and criticizing the myth of success gained by hard work
- sang and celebrated himself in the whitmanesque manner, praised both beauty and ugliness without distinction
- intermixed **crude realism** with outrages of **surrealism**, concentrated on the content rather than on the form
- appreciated traditionally more in Europe rather than in America where his work is regarded as non-literature

Poetry

It Catches My Heart in Its Hands: New and Selected Poems 1955–1963 (1963); ***Mockingbird Wish Me Luck*** (1972); ***Horses Don't Bet on People and Neither Do I*** (1984) • poetry collections

Stories

All the Assholes in the World and Mine (1966); ***Notes of a Dirty Old Man*** (1969); ***Erections, Ejaculations, Exhibitions and General Tales of Ordinary Madness*** (1972) • short story volumes

Novels

Post Office (1971), ***Women*** (1978), ***Ham on Rye*** (1982) • novels

Gary Snyder (b. 1930)

Influences

- born in San Francisco, lived in different places at the Western Coast, including California, Washington, Oregon
- spent his youth in the mountains and forests of the Northwest, worked as a logger, forest ranger and seaman
- studied anthropology, later Japanese and Chinese, lived several years in Zen **Buddhist** monasteries in Japan

Ecology & Philosophy

- influenced by Ezra Pound, Charles Olson and Kenneth Rexroth, but soon formed his own vision and technique
- preoccupied with **ecological** and environmental themes, produces predominantly poetry of natural observation
- resembles Robinson Jeffers with his inhuman poetry and Henry David Thoreau (1817–1862) with philosophy
- differs from Jeffers in not taking a misanthropic view of men and from Thoreau in his calm and restrained tone
- shows a **humanistic** attitude and an interest in Eastern philosophies and ancient cultures, as American Indians
- accepts the fact of American cultural plurality and explores its history as far as to Native American mythology
- praises the essential in human existence, writes what is perhaps the finest ‘poetry of and for the common man’

Poetry Volume

Riprap (1959)

- his first poetry collection, the title refers to stones laid on steep rocks to make a trail for horses in mountains
- the title poem suggests a link between poetry and artificial paths, both are based on nature but must be adapted

Pulitzer Winner

Turtle Island (1974)

- this Pulitzer-Prize winning volume is called for the name of the American continent in Indian creation myths

Kenneth Rexroth (1905–1982)

Position & Activities

- considered the **father figure** of the San Francisco Renaissance, acted as mentor and promoter of younger poets
- laid the groundwork for the San Francisco Renaissance by holding a weekly salon for philosophy and poetry
- organized and emceed the legendary **Six Gallery** reading (1955) at which Allen Ginsberg introduced his *Howl*
- held anti-establishment and anti-government views, associated himself with left-wing artists and intellectuals

Views & Works

- criticised the east-coast literary establishment and the then fashionable academic formalist impersonal poetry
- worked hard on self-education but deliberately chose to write as differently as possible from traditional poetry
- developed his own poetics making use of colloquial language, spontaneous expression and narrative impulses
- produced a large body of literary and cultural criticism testifying his familiarity with the world and extensive self-education, besides original poetry produced many volumes of translations of **Chinese and Japanese** poetry

Poetry Volumes

In What Hour (1940)

- his first poetry collection articulated the author’s ecological sensitivities along with his political convictions

Nature & Love

The Phoenix and the Tortoise (1944)

- his second collection continued his exploration of the natural and the erotic, presented his pacifist stance on the Second World War and expanded his range with poems concerning world religions and the history of philosophy
- incorporates numerous references to the work of **classical poets** and philosophers from the East and the West
- develops his view of love for another person as a sacramental act that could connect one with a transcendent universal awareness, perceived love as a key to truly realizing his existence, as shown in his erotic love poems

Californians v. Greeks

‘Vitamins and Roughage’

- the poem shows California beech sports while interspersing the lines with allusions to ancient Greek thinkers
- the Greeks met both intellectual and physical education, the Californians meet but one of these requirements