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Abstract approved:

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The Beat Generation was an American counter-culture movement in the 1950's. Comprised of nomadic writers, poets, actors, musicians, and artists, the Beat movement represented no systematic philosophy and its most distinguishing characteristic was its apolitical disengagement from society. The Beats offered no substantive alternatives to the existing social order, but they sustained themselves as a collective literary body for nearly fifteen years by a shared opposition to society. Quintessentially an anti-movement, the Beat Generation held a fragile power. By dropping out of society and saying "No" to the social hierarchy, the Beats raised important questions about the relation of the individual to society.

At the leading edge of the Beat Generation were the writers who voiced and penned the movement's refusal to participate in what was perceived as a hypocritical social

façade. Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, and William S. Burroughs formed the nucleus of a "charmed circle" of literary friends who formulated a rhetoric which negated America's preoccupation with materialism, conformity, and security in the "apathetic fifties." The Beat writers attempted to undermine the credibility of the social structure by using America in the fifties as an "anti-model." Without recommending any kind of definitive behavior, they gave a license to virtually any behavior which opposed society.

The movement was an atypical one. From its inception in the early 1940's it never made clear its purpose and the Beats had no self-definition other than what they were not. The Beat credo, reduced to its simplest expression, was "Don't be square" and the Beats depended on the sharp line drawn between themselves and society's "squares" as an implied index to their own values. With the publication of Ginsberg's poem "Howl" (1956) and Kerouac's novel On The Road (1957), the Beats re-entered the society from which they had disengaged themselves and the critical line between the Beats and the squares grew hazy.

As the decade of the fifties drew to a close, the voice of the movement was muted. A counter-rhetoric defending the social structure and striking back at the Beats exposed their lack of any tangible purpose. Moreover, the popularity of the Beat writings took on fad-like dimensions and the potency of the movement's opposition

was diluted. Finally, the times were changing and as the nation inched its way toward a new liberalism in the 1960's, the movement was absorbed by the culture it had opposed. The Beats lost their precarious identity as social "nay-sayers."

The effect of the Beat movement, perhaps incidental rather than consciously planned, has won it an important place in contemporary American history. The Beats took on a dialectical burden by challenging the complacency of America and by inducing the country to re-examine values which the Beats saw as eluding modern society: individualism, integrity, and personal freedom. A chorus of social misfits, the Beats served as an angry voice of the sleeping American conscience.

The Beat Generation: A Rhetoric of Negation

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THE BEAT GENERATION: A RHETORIC OF NEGATION

"America I've given you all and now I'm nothing."
Allen Ginsberg

I. Prologue: The Anti-Movement

The Beat Generation was an American counter-culture movement in the 1950's. It was comprised of nomadic writers, poets, actors, musicians, and artists who had no discernible ideology and were notoriously apolitical. They were not proselytizers trying to convert a larger audience to embrace their viewpoint and, for that matter, their viewpoint itself is exasperatingly elusive. There is no systematic philosophy to be found in the Beat Generation, yet the Beats sustained themselves as a collective literary body for nearly fifteen years. The unifying principles, although obscure, are not entirely inaccessible.

It was quintessentially a "negative" movement which was neither prescriptive nor advocatory but which set itself in opposition to society at large. It most closely approximates the genre of movements that rhetorical critic Leland M. Griffin calls the "anti-movement." (16) The persuasive appeal of the Beats was not for any kind of

definitive behavior but rather against the perceived behavior of society. Offering no positive alternatives to the existing social structure, they attempted to undermine the credibility of the social system and to negate its underlying values. Beat poet Gregory Corso expresses the oppositional stance of the Beat movement:

The Hipster dressed in ermine in the golden halls of the Beat Generation will be the slayer of society, it is told in his enthusiastic eye. He will sack society with his sword of old prunes, climb the fortress with armies of penguins and fly away with the daughter of society. He will wed the daughter of society, and throughout all the nights of their marriage, he will drive her mad with descriptions of her father. (8)

The persuasive possibility of such negation is described in Chaim Perelman and L. Albrechts-Tyteca's theory of "Model and Anti-Model." (31) A model, according to their theory, is a person or group of people who function as a paradigm of desirable behavior. The purpose of the model is to afford an audience a standard to imitate. It instructs through example; it recommends approved behavior.

An anti-model, however, does not encourage a particular kind of behavior but serves as a foil, deterring people from imitating the example. The audience is repelled by the anti-model and turns away from its mode of action. Chevalier de Méré describes the effect of the anti-model:

I notice too that we do not merely avoid people we do not like, but hate everything connected with them and wish to resemble them as little as possible. If they praise peace, they make us wish for war; if they are pious and lead well-ordered lives, we want to be dissolute and disorderly. (31)

To the Beats, society was the anti-model. Everything connected with society became contaminated and the Beats debunked and scorned the values they believed society cherished. Labeling those outside their own ambiguous borders as "squares," the Beats spurned the trappings of respectability in a decade that all but demanded respectable conformity. Few of them held jobs consistently and, gathering no moss, they rolled across the country from New York to San Francisco, dipped down into Mexico and points south, eventually globe-trotted their way to Europe and Africa, and generally drifted from one Beat Mecca to another. Hasty marriages and divorces, interspersed with casual cohabitations, typified their domestic lives. Avid experimenters with sex and drugs, they smashed through the taboos of society and composed their own mores to accommodate their fluid lifestyles. Novelist Jack Kerouac, who coined the term "Beat Generation" in 1948, characterized it as "a revolution in manners in America" (21) but did not hint at what would come in the wake of the social upheaval. The Beats slaughtered

society's sacred cows in their personal search for "authenticity."

The credo of the Beat Generation, reduced to its simplest expression, was "Don't be square." This negative standard linked the movement indissolubly to the culture which the Beats disdained because they depended on it as the implied index to their own value system. Their self-definition was extrapolated from their anti-model, from what they were not; their guiding principles were derived from what they rebuked, not from what they endorsed.

The "square" society depicted by the Beats in their literature was America in the 1950's. It was a prosperous, economically booming society that had emerged victoriously and self-righteously from World War II. But to the Beats, America was a frightened, guilt-ridden nation trembling behind a façade of normalcy and obsessed by what editor I. F. Stone terms a "fetish for security."
(37)

The national character of the United States in the 1950's is generally described in terms of its mediocrity: "the apathetic fifties" is a label that has been indelibly branded on that decade. The name reflects the mood of non-commitment that marked post-World War II American society and a general abdication of personal political responsibility. The Beat writers lunged at the jugular vein of

this society, hoping to draw blood from the pervasive, mid-twentieth century fear they believed to be lurking just beneath the smug façade.

It was, in fact, a country that had been profoundly shaken by a major economic depression and two World Wars. The Depression, with the crashing of the stock market in 1929, exposed Americans to the very raw threat of poverty. Large scale unemployment and bread lines mocked Herbert Hoover's campaign promise of a chicken in every pot and a car in every garage. Slicing through social classes and across geographical boundaries, the Depression took its toll on the confidence of the nation and haunted it even through the prosperous years following the Second World War. Material comfort and security never lost their priority in the national consciousness after the Depression.

World War I stunned the world by its demonstration of destruction and jolted it into a realization of the interrelatedness of all countries. The innocence of isolationism was forever lost to Americans, who could not escape the knowledge that events happening on the other side of the earth could intimately touch their own lives.

World War II was the actualization of the embryonic fears planted by World War I. Cruelly deriding the naive title given to the first War, "the war to end all wars," it married the destructive impulse of man to the

sophistication of technology in a brutal union. The atom bomb exploded the remnants of America's innocence in a mushroom cloud of debris over Hiroshima in August, 1945. Gene Feldman and Max Gartenberg write of the atom bomb:

Man, having found the means to release the natural force imprisoned in matter and thereby to obliterate himself, his heirs and the sum total of his racial inheritance, has created the most pervasive fact in his history: one must learn to breathe, eat, make love in its presence; it is a part of every living consciousness. (10)

The Depression, the World Wars, and the technological revolution in the twentieth century forged a growing incredulity of Americans in any kind of formal ideology. Historian Daniel Bell writes that the doctrines and substratum assertions that once formed the theoretical framework of American government had been rendered a hollow shell by a half-century of rapid and drastic changes. He describes the "end of ideology," saying that its death in the fifties was precipitated by many complex and varied events: the calamities such as the Moscow Trials, the concentration camps, and the suppression of Hungarian workers; the social changes such as the rise of the Welfare State; and the philosophical decline of simplistic, rationalistic beliefs with the emergence of Freud, Tillich, Jaspers, and others. All of these, combined with the advent of modern technology, left ideology exhausted,

passionless, and obsolete. According to Bell, people could no longer believe in the static "truth" of ideology because none could meet the demands of a dynamically fluctuating world. (2)

Material possessions were perhaps the most tangible security available to Americans in the fifties. A job, a suburban home, a car, a television set, and the other accouterments of the middle-class American lifestyle filled the ideological void; they were things that people could hang on to in a whirlwind twentieth century world. In a decade that had survived the catastrophic events and social quakes of the first half of the century, it is not surprising that Americans tended to grasp on to whatever security they could find.

This was not the age of political "causes," but of conservative detachment. Dwight Eisenhower's Republican administration offered the 1951 electorate an unflamboyant leadership that reflected the value placed on security. The catchword of the fifties was "agreement." Commented Yale chaplain William Sloan Coffin, Jr., students in the fifties agreed their way through life, and novelist Philip Roth has observed that his was the most patriotic, most willingly propagandized of American schoolchildren. (42)

The backbone of the security fetish was conformity, the need to identify an "in group" and to define the perim-

eter of that group by sorting out the nonconformists and labeling them. To belong to the "in group" was to find a psychological anchor but to dissent was to jeopardize jobs, friendships, and social status and to risk social ostracization.

The most blatant cases of ostracization were the loyalty-security charges brought against hundreds of American citizens early in the decade by the McCarthy Committee. The paranoiac need to identify the loyal Americans and to weed out the Communist sympathizers and tag them as "Reds" or "Pinkos" illustrates the general paranoia of the times carried to its coercive extreme.

The fifties were comfortable, prosperous years for those who did not fall victim to the preying eye of the House Un-American Activities Committee, who did not challenge the entanglement of the United States in Korea, and who conformed to the social code of the majority. But for those who extricated themselves from the social labyrinth, the fifties were anything but comfortable years.

The Beat Generation, instead of turning to the protective shelter of security and conformity, refused to participate in what they saw as a charade of normalcy. The movement was a social refusal rather than a revolt, for as Beat anthologizer Thomas Parkinson insists, "[the Beats] take no particular pleasure in tearing down a social

fabric that they see as already ruined, and their attitude toward society is suspicious and evasive rather than destructive." (30) With no utopian vision in mind, the Beats simply said "No" to a society which was, in their estimation, fundamentally dishonest, hypocritical, and ultimately deadening in its refusal to confront the major moral questions of the century.

II. Inception: The Social Nay-Sayers

At the leading edge of the Beat movement was a "charmed circle" of literary friends whose names have become its signature. Through their fiction, poetry, letters, and lives, these writers constructed the Beat identity that gave the generation a solidarity which spanned the decade of the fifties. The premier spokesmen for the group, the Beat writers voiced and penned the movement's opposition to mainstream society. They refuted the social norms and argued not for a better order but against the existing one.

The "first conjunction" of the Beat movement, according to author John Tytell, was in 1944 when Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, and William S. Burroughs met in New York. (42) Alone, each was somehow an island, never quite absorbed by the main flow of society. Writer Seymour Krim points out that Kerouac, who was of French Canadian descent, was "a Stranger, a first-generation American who couldn't speak the tongue until he was in knee pants." Krim also says:

As far as WASP America went, Kerouac was almost as much of an outsider as the radical-Jewish-homosexual Allen Ginsberg, the urchin-reform-school-Italian Gregory Corso, and the junkie-homosexual-disgrace-of-a-good-family William Burroughs. (24)

Yet their disaffiliation was, in a sense, chosen; each of the central figures in the early years of the Beat move-

ment had demonstrated an ability to "succeed" by societal standards but each had nonetheless essentially chosen to "drop out" of society.

Jack Kerouac was born in Lowell, Massachusetts in 1922. He was an imaginative child whose fantasies were nurtured by the Saturday movie matinées, radio programs such as "The Shadow," and serial magazines. According to his biographer, Ann Charters, Kerouac was never quite able to reconcile with reality the make-believe world of his own invention. In Doctor Sax (1959), Kerouac reconstructs an elaborate childhood fantasy. The mysterious Dr. Sax, invisible to all but the child protagonist "Jackie," heroically guards the world from the great Snake coiled threateningly in the center of the earth. (19) Many of the books in the "Duluoze Legend," Kerouac's autobiographical works, nostalgically caress his childhood and the magical world he inhabited as a boy but never completely relinquished.

The fantasies took on new forms and textures as Kerouac grew older. In 1941 he won a football scholarship to a prep school and then to Columbia University but his dreams of college life and athletic super-stardom were aborted by the reality of long hours of football practice, an inopportune broken leg, and a general restlessness. He dropped out of Columbia after his freshman year with vague, never actualized plans to join the war effort. A year of aimless wandering, including a half year on board ship as

a seaman, led Kerouac in a sudden burst of patriotism to enlist in the Navy. Shortly thereafter, however, he received a psychiatric discharge for refusing to comply with orders in much the same way that Melville's Bartleby declined orders with an infuriating, "I prefer not to."

Kerouac was dismissed in 1943 for his "indifferent character" and never held a job for longer than a year the rest of his life. Kerouac recounted a dream he had while in the Navy hospital years later in Vanity of Duluo (1967), calling it his "lost dream of being a real American Man."

(23) His haphazard decision to secede from the province of respectability set him adrift in a fantasy world. The points on his internal compass indicated not where he was going but where he had been, and his direction was away from values and institutions—an Ivy League school, the military—rather than toward a specific goal. For years he carried his "lost dream" of American manhood as a reference to his own identity, a tarnished ideal eternally lost to him.

Kerouac was a fertile field, swollen with a rich imagination but with no commitment to the social hierarchy. When he met Ginsberg and Burroughs in 1944, he found a refuge for his fantasy world. They quickly became a supportive audience for his experimental writings and the bond that was formed among the three writers lasted into the early 1960's.

Kerouac's influence on the others is readily evident in their works. Burroughs used Kerouac's suggestion for the title of his best seller, Naked Lunch; Ginsberg adopted from Kerouac the title of the most famous Beat poem, "Howl;"¹ and John Clellon Holmes popularized Kerouac's term "the Beat Generation" in the first Beat novel to be published, Go (1952). Kerouac plugged into a group that reinforced his fantasies and his disengagement from society. Dubbed in later years by journalists "the King of the Beats," Kerouac found not only a harbor in the Beat community but a realm of which he became the leading force.

Poet Allen Ginsberg, born in 1926 in Paterson, New Jersey, has said that he comes from a "Jewish left-wing atheist Russian background." (9) Awarded an academic scholarship to Columbia, Ginsberg accumulated scholastic laurels. He had an A-minus grade average, won the Woodbury Poetry Prize, was president of the Philolexian Society, edited the Jester of Columbia, and belonged to the debating team. Yet he could not acquiesce to the rules of academia. In 1945 he was expelled from Columbia for drawing anti-semitic symbols and obscenities on his dormitory window—Ginsberg claims that he was trying to annoy an obstinate Irish cleaning lady who refused to wash his window—and

¹Ginsberg mailed the then untitled poem to Kerouac who wrote back excitedly, "I read your Howl."

for allowing Kerouac, a non-student, to stay with him in Livingston Hall. He was later readmitted and completed his bachelor's degree in 1948 but his reconciliation with society was not long-lasting. In 1953, after moving to San Francisco as a market research consultant, he began to visit a psychotherapist. He had an epiphany of sorts which he described in an interview with Life:

The doctor kept asking me, "What do you want to do?" Finally one day I told him--quit. Quit the job, my tie and suit, the apartment on Nob Hill. Quit it and go off and do what I wanted, which was to get a room with Peter [Orlovsky] and devote myself to writing and contemplation, to Blake and smoking pot, and doing whatever I wanted. So he said, "Go ahead and do it then." (9)

Ginsberg's statement encapsulates his negation of predominant social values: "Quit the job, my tie and suit, the apartment on Nob Hill." Turning away from material security and social status, he made an implied statement about himself and his own values. His assertion of self, of "doing whatever I wanted," marked an opening chapter in a personal saga which transformed Ginsberg into a living monument to a counter-culture lifestyle in the decades that followed.

Novelist William S. Burroughs also exemplified in his personal life a negation of social values and expectations. The grandson of a St. Louis corporation tycoon, Burroughs was born into the American "aristocracy." He studied literature, linguistics, and anthropology at Harvard and was

graduated during the Depression. After several months of medical school in Europe, he returned to Harvard as a graduate student in anthropology. Burroughs had, in effect, the key to success in the ranks of American society through his wealth, family connections, and education. But like Ginsberg and Kerouac, he said "No" to the niche he could have carved for himself in the world of respectability and adopted a lifestyle that diametrically opposed it.

Neal Cassady once said that Burroughs was "as high horse as a Governor in the Colonies, as nasty as an Old Aunt, and as queer as the day is long." Burroughs graphically described his homosexuality in an unpublished book, Queer, and his painful, 15-year addiction to hard narcotics in his first book, Junkie, and his most famous novel, Naked Lunch. These books mapped the urban underworld, drawing the contours of the casual betrayals, motiveless violence, and the hustling and thievery of the microcosmic drug sub-culture.

Burroughs, more than Kerouac or Ginsberg, was drawn toward the criminal element of Chicago and New York. He said years later that "it seemed a romantic extravagance to jeopardize my freedom by some token act of crime." John Tytell adds:

This inclination was a refutation of his origins, a rejection of the elitist aspects of his upbringing. The attraction to crime was gratuitous—Burroughs was drawn by a buried dark need to escape conventional ambitions, to make himself in-

visible enough so that he could be accepted by his exact opposites in the social spectrum. (42)

Burroughs acted out his need to escape, to become invisible, when he decided to leave the country. Moving to Mexico, South America, Europe, and finally to Tangier, Burroughs became famous initially as an expatriate writer with the 1959 British publication of Naked Lunch, a novel that did not appear in the United States until 1962. His rejection of American society was vehement to the point of self-exile. Ginsberg laments Burrough's voluntary banishment in one line of "America": "Burroughs is in Tangiers I don't think he'll come back it's sinister." (13)

There is little doubt that an esprit de corps, a kind of brotherhood of outsiders, was sensed by the Beat writers. Allen Ginsberg's dedication of Howl and Other Poems to Kerouac, Burroughs, and Neal Cassady before their own books were published is a concerto of fraternal affirmation:

DEDICATION

To—

Jack Kerouac, new Buddha of American prose, who spit forth intelligence into eleven books written in half the number of years (1951-1956) . . . creating a spontaneous bop prosody and original classic literature. Several phrases and the title of Howl are taken from him.

William Seward Burroughs, author of Naked Lunch, an endless novel which will drive everybody mad.

Neal Cassady, author of The First Third, an

autobiography (1949) which enlightened Buddha.

All these books are published in Heaven.

Kerouac, Ginsberg, and Burroughs, the triumvirate of the early Beat leadership, were a fraternity of "isolatos" whose lives were a pronouncement negating society. In their writings they did not use language to negotiate a reconciliation with society but instead formulated a rhetoric that communicated that negation.

The term "the Beat Generation" was a masterpiece of rhetorical ambiguity. Its slippery meaning is as hard to pin down as the movement itself and from the multi-faceted connotations one can only obliquely infer what the movement was about. "Beat" is a Protean word, a shape-shifter. It has an almost inexhaustible repertoire of meanings, any of which may be arbitrarily chosen to describe the movement.

In one sense, "beat" taps the weariness of the social exiles in an arid wasteland and sums up the emotional climate of exhaustion among those who were beaten down, tired, and uncertain of the point in going on. Ginsberg wrote in an early poem later published in a collection called The Empty Mirror (1961):

I feel as if I am at a dead
end and so I am finished.
All spiritual facts I realize
are true but I never escape
the feeling of being closed in
and the sordidness of self,
the futility of all that I
have seen and done and said.

Maybe if I continued things
 would please me more but now
 I have no hope and I am tired. (12)

This poem articulates the Beat sentiment of spiritual impoverishment, a kind of moral skid row which echoes the original meaning of "beat," described by Kerouac as the "poor, down and out, deadbeat, on the bum, sad, sleeping in subways." (21)

But "beat" also captures the rhapsodically sensuous rhythm of the music that was popular in the jazz dens to which the Beats flocked. Kerouac writes that as a novice to the Times Square scene of 1944, he was approached by drug addict Herbert Huncke, who said, "Man, I'm beat." Huncke spoke the words with a "radiant light shining out of his despairing eyes" and Kerouac understood what he meant. It was the jazz beat. Musicians such as saxophonist Charlie (Bird) Parker, pianist Thelonius Monk, trumpet player Dizzy Gillespie, and others sounded the collective heartbeat of the hipsters who were energized by its free, unstructured rhythm. The bop beat, Kerouac explains, enticed them into the crowded coffee houses to exchange in the "be bop" jargon their "long outlines of personal experience and vision, nightlong confessions full of hope that had become illicit and repressed by the War, stirrings, rumblings of a new soul (that same old human soul)." (21)

To Beat poet Bob Kaufman, "beat" refers to the silence in between the drumbeat or heartbeat. The pause is the calm before the storm and its silent beat is "a psychological awareness of something . . . something you feel in your soul." The silent beat, Kaufman says, comes before and after the drumbeat and this absence of sound is the defining edge of the drumbeat. Kaufman, who took a 12-year vow of silence following Kennedy's assassination, insists that the silent beat is the essence of "Soul-Music, Soul-Poetry." (34)

Another slant on "beat" is developed by Norman Mailer in his essay, "The White Negro." (26) "Beat" is the American existentialism which sees values not in rationality but in actions, moods, and feelings. To be Beat is to remain uncommitted to a body of principles and to distrust the systematic reasoning that has cut Americans off from their primordial feelings. The existential forerunner of the Beats, Mailer argues, is the black American who has historically stood outside of mainstream society and is therefore free from the artificial social structures that "squares" hide behind. The existential mood of "beat" takes a chilling turn in Corso's remark to Newsweek:

Everything but the BG [Beat Generation] stands amid the ordeals of lie. The BG is the happy birthday of death Doom was here before we were born, there's no escape. (28)

"Beat" assumed still another meaning when Kerouac, the wizard of slogans, had a mystical revelation that "beat" meant "beatific" or "beatitude." (7) The religious overtone is unmistakable. The Beats, in their self-proclaimed saintliness, saw themselves as holy men.

When Kerouac christened the "Beat Generation" in 1948, all of these meanings were melted into a nebulous phrase that recapitulates the ambiguity of the Beat movement itself. Kerouac describes the baptism in "The Origins of the Beat Generation":

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 it! that's right!" (21)

The phrase was born of a myriad of definitions, none of which reveals completely the character of the mercurial movement. Gregory Corso complained once, "The more you think about the Beat Generation the vaguer your ideas become." (8)

The Beat rhetors may not have been able to articulate a standard of what one should be, but they could easily identify what one should not be: square. Corso, in a series of thirteen fictitious interviews entitled "Variations on a Generation," says:

—Are you beat?—

—Well I'm not a square, you see a square is some guy who forces himself arbitrarily into a square auto-life mold, because squareness is not a shape that any living creature occurs in. There are all varieties of squares in America. (8)

Whereas squares pen themselves in by the artificial constructs called "society," Beats break out of the mass-produced "auto-life mold" of society to be rewarded by a vision of truth. Corso continues:

—Is the Beat Generation a generation of outlaws?

—Was the father of our country an outlaw? Yes. Was Galileo an outlaw for saying the world was round?—I say the world is round! not square! This is a fact.—

In Kerouac's first novel, The Town and the City (1950), he constructs a symbolic vehicle for ridiculing the square society's hypocritical self-righteousness. It is the Times Square "Nickel-0" amusement center. The Nickel-0 is the center of the underworld community in this book as Leon Levinsky, a character patterned after Allen Ginsberg, explains to Times Square newcomer Peter Martin, the loosely fictionalized Kerouac. Levinsky says that the "atomic disease" that is infecting America was first noticed in the old drunks, whores, queers, hoods, junkies, and castoffs of bourgeois society—"all the children of the sad American paradise"—who frequent the Nickel-0 at 4 o'clock in the morning. They look like Zombies, he says, milling around

uncertainly with stares gone blank from seeing too much horror. The bluish neon lights illuminate their grotesquely blemished skin with blistering scars and thick hairs growing out of monstrous moles. Levinsky calls them "geeks" after the macabre carnival performers who bite off the heads of live chickens. He adds with a giggle that the disease is not limited to the confines of the Nickel-0:

"Everybody in the world has come to feel like a geek . . . can't you see it? Can't you sense what's going on around you? All the neurosis and the restrictive morality and the scatological repressions and the suppressed aggressiveness has finally gained the upper hand on humanity—everyone is becoming a geek! Everyone feels like a Zombie, and somewhere at the ends of the night, the great magician, the great Dracula-figure of modern disintegration and madness, the wise genius behind it all, the Devil if you will, is running the whole thing with his string of oaths and his hexes." (22)

Imbedded in Levinsky's description of the modern disintegration is a portrait of the Beat anti-model: neuroses, restrictive morality, scatological repressions, and suppressed aggressiveness are the apocalyptic horsemen of the "atomic disease." The social values of the contaminated culture are an intrinsic part of the anti-model Levinsky proposes and any standard of goodness belonging to the anti-model is, by association, infected and despicable. Levinsky continues:

"Everybody is going to fall apart, disintegrate, all character-structures based on tradition and

uprightness and so-called morality will rot away, people will get the hives on their ears, great crabs will cling to their brains"

Tradition, uprightness, and so-called morality are the values that cement the walls of society and the mortar is beginning to crumble. Levinsky adds that the Nickel-O is a symbol because the disease was first noticed there, the cracks in the social façade were exposed under the garish neon lights. But the disease, he says, is spreading "slowly and insidiously" to all levels of society:

"You'll see great tycoons of industry suddenly falling apart and going mad, you'll see preachers at the pulpit suddenly exploding—there'll be marijuana fumes seeping out of the Stock Exchange. College professors will suddenly go cross-eyed and start showing their behinds to one another."

The imagery is ludicrous. The description ridicules the industrial, religious, financial, and intellectual centers of the country and transforms its leaders into "geeks," burlesque caricatures of sensational morbidity. Peter Martin protests Levinsky's ruthless depiction of society by arguing, "But you know all the things you're talking about, people don't want them! They want peace and quiet . . . even if those things don't exist. Everybody's trying to be decent, that's all." Levinsky snarls maliciously, "Let them try." He is convinced that there is no stopping the virus which is rotting away the framework of society, and he portrays the values of "peace and quiet"

and "decency" as a sham.

In Kerouac's disease metaphor, he does not suggest a cure but merely diagnoses society's values as nefarious. Levinsky, in a rhetorical siege, indicts the culture and points out the irreversibility of the disease. He says that a friend named Mary first named the "atomic disease":

"What she has to say about the world, about everybody falling apart, about everybody clawing aggressively at one another in one grand finale of our glorious culture, about the madness in high places and the insane disorganized stupidity of the people who let themselves be told what to do and what to think by charlatans—all that is true! . . . Don't you see it, man? The world's going mad! Therefore it's quite possible there must be some sort of disease that's started. There's only one real conclusion to be drawn. In Mary's words, everybody's got the atomic disease, everybody's radioactive."

Peter, not quite convinced, mutters, "It's a dumb conclusion."

Kerouac satirizes society but also pokes fun at the wild-eyed, fanatically outspoken Leon Levinsky. His persuasive appeal, however, is not limited to a comical travesty of society and of its Beat infidels. He also slashes lethally into the nightmarish guilt and fear he sees hiding furtively behind society's mask of complacency.

Levinsky prods the "greenhorn" Peter Martin to examine his own fears after Peter weakly protests, "I don't believe I feel like a geek yet. I don't think I buy that."

Levinsky grins slyly:

"Really, now, I know you, I can tell that you have horrible guilt-feelings, it's written all over you, and you're confused by it, you don't know what it is. Admit it at least. As a matter of fact you told me once yourself."

"Admit what?"

"That you feel guilty of something, you feel unclean, almost diseased, you have nightmares, you have occasional visions of horror, feelings of spiritual geekishness—Don't you see, everybody feels like that now."

"I have a feeling like that," stammered Peter, almost blushing, "that is . . . of being guilty, but I don't know, it's the war and everything, I think, the guys I know who get killed, things like that. And well, hell!—things aren't like they used to be before the war." For a moment he was almost afraid that there was some truth in Levinsky's insane idea, certainly he had never felt so useless and foolish and sorrowful before in his life.

Peter, confused by Levinsky's rhetorical barrage, is forced to confront the "truth in Levinsky's insane idea." Peter's concession of guilt feelings is a challenge issued by Kerouac on behalf of the Beat Generation to society, daring the complacent, unquestioning Americans to examine the guilt concealed behind their social masquerade.

World War II never ceased to be a presence in the consciousnesses of the Beat writers and an unspecified guilt carried over from the War is a recurring theme in their literature. Although they were writing from a personal sense of guilt and from their own perceptions of society's culpability for the War, the Beats are not alone in their

suspicion that a ubiquitous guilt crouched in the American unconscious. Norman Mailer, for example, writes that the Second World War presented a mirror to the human condition and anyone who gazed into it was apt to be blinded by a dreadful self-recognition:

. . . one was then obliged also to see that no matter how crippled and perverted an image of man was the society he had created, it was nonetheless his creation, his collective creation . . . and if society was so murderous, then who could ignore the most hideous questions about himself? (26)

Historian Roland N. Stromberg also theorizes that the most significant postwar development in the West was probably its tendency to share with Germany and Italy the blame for the evils of Nazism and Fascism. The initial rush to condemn Germany, to vilify Hitler by attributing to him the destruction and sickness of the War, and to mythologize the Nazis into evil incarnate was diffused in the fifties to a generalized feeling of guilt, Stromberg continues. Inescapable was the realization that the Allies had terror-bombed cities, murdered survivors of torpedoed merchant ships, imprisoned and massacred Poles, and dropped the atom bomb on defenseless Japanese citizens. Stromberg concludes, "One misses much of the authentic postwar mood if one fails to understand how the monstrous guilt of the Nazis was transmuted into a sense of the general guilt of the human race." (38)

This guilt, subliminal or perhaps nonexistent in most of the American population of the 1950's, surfaces repeatedly in the Beat literature. Peter Martin's confusion in The Town and the City communicates Kerouac's internal conflict about the War. Ginsberg, in "America" (1956), is much more antagonistic toward the United States concerning its use of superior technology in warfare:

America when will we end the human war?
Go fuck yourself with your atom bomb.
I don't feel good don't bother me. (13)

This excerpt is a confrontation that announces, in Corso's words, "The Failure of America to generate the energy of Freedom--The Fall of America." (8) In the same vein, Beat poet John Wieners begins "A Poem For Painters" (1958) with a disillusioned, "Our age of bereft nobility" He sketches America's failure in three-dimensional ghastliness:

America, you boil over

The cauldron scalds.
Flesh is scarred.
Eyes shot.

The street aswarm with
vipers and heavy armed bandits.
There are bandages on the wounds
but blood flows unabated.

Oh stop
up the drains.
We are run over. (44)

The Beat writers mourn for America's unfulfilled pro-

phesy of greatness. In The Dharma Bums (1958), Kerouac suggests that Americans have sold their freedom for a prison of "conspicuous consumption." The character of Japhy Ryder, based on San Francisco poet Gary Snyder, describes the "rucksack wanderers" as those who are free from the American malaise of materialism. They are, Japhy says:

"Dharma Bums refusing to subscribe to the general demand that they consume production and therefore have to work for the privilege of consuming, all that crap they didn't really want anyway such as refrigerators, TV sets, cars, at least new fancy cars, certain hair oils and deodorants and general junk you finally always see a week later in the garbage anyway, all of them imprisoned in a system of work, produce, consume, work, produce, consume" (18)

The "work, produce, consume" prison described by Japhy Ryder is a demeaning one and Kerouac argues against it by tainting the consumption/production economic cycle of the United States with excess and waste. His catalog of "things"—refrigerators, TV sets, cars, hair oils, deodorants—is cast in the contaminative shadow of "crap," "junk," and "garbage." By juxtaposing these words against each other, he exposes society's materialistic values and consumptive behavior as a trap that robs people of their dignity.

The trap in Philip Whalen's poem, "A Dim View of Berkeley in the Spring," is extended to the deadening boredom of the fifties:

A graduated row of children, the biggest
 Old enough to feel the boredom
 Leading the rest, tearing up flowers in the driveway

The boredom, the tension

Fraternity men crowded into the wire cage—
 A volley-ball court—jumping, hollering, laughing
 (only one is headed down the hill with his books
 to the campus, smoothing his crewed-down hair)

.....
 What I mean is, nobody
 Can stand it, the tension, the boredom whatever . . .
 Mama and Papa scream at each other about the new deep-
 freeze,

(' . . .and sometimes I just turn the TV off & go
 do something else, I get so tired of it.'
 —that

Was the egg-lady speaking) and
 The children continue destroying the flowers,
 Being too young to go to the show at night alone. (45)

The children are passive lambs, sacrificed to the national
 boredom. Whalen's concern for the generation growing up
 in the listless fifties, lackadaisically destroying flowers,
 informs on the Beat dread of ennui. The imprisonment of
 the caged fraternity men zeroes in on the mindless conform-
 ity of bored college students.

Kerouac, too, chooses conformity as a target in The
 Dharma Bums. He launches an attack on television as the
 great technological leveler, uniformly brainwashing its
 viewers. Contending that Japhy Ryder and his fellow "Zen
 Lunatics" are the last disciples of individualism, the
 only true sages of the time, he writes:

But there was a wisdom in Zen Lunacy, as you'll see if you take a walk some night on a suburban street and pass house after house on both sides of the street with the lamplight of the living room, shining golden, and inside the little blue square of the television, each living family riveting its attention on probably one show; nobody talking, silence in the yards, dogs barking at you because you pass on human feet instead of wheels. You'll see what I mean, when it begins to appear like everybody in the world is soon going to be thinking the same way . . . I see Japhy in future years stalking along with full rucksack, in suburban streets, passing the blue television windows of homes, alone, his thoughts the only thoughts not electrified to the Master Switch. (18)

The scenario is strangely horrifying in its depiction of each living family as a unit of automatons riveted to the television set, with minds plugged into an authorless Master Switch. The comatose robots are pathetically helpless and the defiantly nonconforming "Zen Lunatics" are deified in their resistance to socialization.

Socialization is the seed for spiritual oppression in Ginsberg's poem, "Howl." In the often-quoted opening line he writes, "I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness, / starving hysterical naked." The "best minds" of his generation belong to those who, because of their sensitivity, are driven mad by the existential horror of the modern world. In Part Two of the poem, he fires a searingly bitter round of rhetorical ammunition as he describes that horror:

What sphinx of cement and aluminum bashed open their
 skulls and ate up their brains and imagination?
 Moloch! Solitude! Filth! Uglinesss Ashcans and unob-
 tainable dollars! Children screaming under the
 stairways! Boys sobbing in armies! Old men weeping
 in the parks!

.....
 Moloch the incomprehensible prison! Moloch the cross-
 bone soulless jailhouse and Congress of sorrows!
 Moloch whose buildings are judgement! Moloch the
 vast stone of war! Moloch the stunned governments!

.....
 Moloch whose mind is pure machinery! Moloch whose blood
 is running money! Moloch whose fingers are ten
 armies! Moloch whose breast is a cannibal dynamo!
 Moloch whose ear is a smoking tomb!

.....
 Moloch! Moloch! Robot apartments! invisible suburbs!
 skeleton treasuries! blind capitals! demonic in-
 dustries! spectral nations! invincible madhouses!
 granite cocks! monstrous bombs!

It is a world in which William Butler Yeats' prophecy in
 "The Second Coming" is fully realized: "The blood-dimmed
 tide is loosed, and everywhere/ The ceremony of innocence
 is drowned." The heroes of Ginsberg's poem are those who,
 because they have retained the vestiges of their humanity,
 have refused to participate in the twentieth-century carni-
 val of atrocities:

Real holy laughter in the river! They saw it all!
 the wild eyes! the holy yells! They bade farewell!
 They jumped off the roof! to solitude! waving!
 carrying flowers! Down to the river! into the
 street!

The power of the Beat artillery lies in its assault on the apathetic wasteland of the fifties as it is described in their literature. The Beat writers insist that it is better to scream "No" and go out with a bang than to whimper a passively compliant "Yes." Nowhere in all of the Beat writings is the tortured scream let loose more violently and brutally than in William Burroughs' Naked Lunch (1959). He opens the book by announcing, "I awoke from The Sickness at the age of forty-five" The Sickness is drug addiction and Burroughs explains that he is a survivor of 15 years of addiction to "junk," the generic term given to opium and its derivatives. Most survivors, he continues, do not remember the delirium of addiction in detail but he "awoke" with extensive notes which he has no precise memory of writing.

These notes are compiled in Naked Lunch, offering a guided tour of the physical and psychical descent into Burroughs' personal hell. He does not apologize for the hideousness of his account but explains, "Since Naked Lunch treats this health problem, it is necessarily brutal, obscene and disgusting. Sickness is often repulsive details not for weak stomachs." (4)

In Naked Lunch, Burroughs voices the ultimate Beat negation of America's preoccupation with security. His story is one of unmitigated risk. All the emblems of

security in the fifties are irretrievably lost in the void of the junkie's delirium. Burroughs placed his material security, physical health, sanity, and finally his life on the brink of that void and his greatest trial was perhaps not in facing death but in facing life again after 15 years of precarious balance between the two.

Naked Lunch is a testimony to the fragility of life. Burroughs has said, "No one owns life, but anyone who can pick up a frying pan owns death." (1) He poses a challenge to society to peep through the chinks in the security wall and look at death.

The impromptu social refusal of the Beat Generation represented no systematic, premeditated value system. Yet unquestionably, certain values can be inferred from its negation of society. By rejecting conformity, for example, the Beats implied as a value individualism. Likewise, their disdain for materialism and technological complexity, rationality, and social repression is indicative of the value they invested in simplicity, sensuality, and personal freedom. Kenneth Rexroth, an older poet and critic who was active in Bay Area literary circles long before the Beat migration to California, speaks of these implied values as a viable response to the "Reactionary Generation." He writes as a member of his age group:

For the next ten years or so we are going to have

to cope with the youth we, my generation, put through the atom smasher. Social disengagement, artistic integrity, voluntary poverty—these are powerful virtues and may pull them through, but they are not the virtues we tried to inculcate—rather they are the exact opposite. (33)

These virtues represent ideals that were not translated into active social reform, but were instead woven into a myth that ratified the Beats' rejection of society and metamorphosed the nay-sayers into underground heroes. The substance of the myth, like the movement itself, was drawn from the negation of society's values.

Critic Dorothy Van Ghent suggests that several archetypal patterns of the mythological hero, common to all mythologies, emerge in the Beat lore: anonymous parentage, a mysterious beckoning to the "night" journey through the underworld, a descent into some kind of hell and the subsequent tortuous ordeals, and the differentiation of the hero from the masses of the common folk. (43) The Beat writers cultivated a myth along these prototypic lines.

They denied their parents, Van Ghent observes, in correct mythical fashion. The denial, however, was often more mythical than factual. Burroughs, for example, obscured his prestigious family background and Harvard education, choosing to promote his identity as a drug addict in Naked Lunch and Junkie, and as a homosexual in Queer. In the introduction to Naked Lunch, Burroughs scoffs at the

company founded by his grandfather:

So listen to Old Uncle Bill Burroughs who invented the Burroughs Adding Machine Regulator Gimmick on the Hydraulic Jack Principle no matter how you jerk the handle result is always the same for given coordinates. Got my training early. (4)

Yet Burroughs was using money from a family trust fund to support his morphine habit and to foot the bill for his travels abroad.

The mysterious call to the underworld journey was, in the Beat legend, a call to "the road, the freights, the jazzdens, the 'negro streets.'" (43) Kerouac's title for his novel The Subterraneans is appropriate to the underground nature of the mythical journey. The invitation to the road, best described in On The Road and The Dharma Bums, could not be declined. Impelled to move, to hit the road, the Beats had no greater fear than that of immobility and consequent mental stagnation. As Burroughs once wrote to Ginsberg, "The most dangerous thing to do is to stand still." (42)

The quest of the Beat odyssey, like Jason's search for the golden fleece, took on heroic proportions. The heroism was in the confrontation of the hellish, drug-ridden world to which the road often led. Long treatises on the inferno of degeneracy into which they entered constitute a major portion of the Beat literature. William

Carlos Williams, in his introduction to "Howl," advises, "Hold back the edges of your gowns, Ladies, we're going through hell." Ginsberg's "hell" is the madness of the Beat Generation:

I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness,
starving hysterical naked,
dragging themselves through the negro streets at dawn
looking for an angry fix,
angelheaded hipsters burning for the ancient heavenly
connection to the starry dynamo in the machinery of
the night.

This "madman" rhetoric for which Ginsberg became famous unearths the murkiest, most sardonic aspects of the Beat condition and points like a road sign toward the "journey through hell."

The Beat hero was differentiated from the masses around him by his "angelic awareness." Painfully perceptive and arduously honest, the Beat writer perceived himself as a sensitive instrument moved by the powers of God to record the truth as he saw it. Kerouac's remark that "once God has moved the hand, it's a sin to revise" is not only a justification for his erratic, ungrammatical style of writing, but it is also a proclamation of the divinity behind his inspiration. Inventing a nomenclature by which to raise themselves above their mundane surroundings, these "angelheaded hipsters" and "desolation angels" stoked the myth of spiritual separateness.

Ultimate transcendence to a higher level of wisdom was the visionary goal of the Beat hero's quest. In the Beat legend, the transcendence was sometimes exultingly holy, as in Ginsberg's "Footnote to Howl":

Holy! Holy! Holy! Holy! Holy! Holy! Holy! Holy! Holy!
 Holy! Holy! Holy! Holy! Holy! Holy!

.

Holy the supernatural extra brilliant intelligent
 kindness of the soul!

More often, however, the transcendence was a melancholic recognition that the odyssey which began with promise has, in fact, led nowhere and the promises have evaporated along the way. In the closing passage of On The Road, Kerouac writes:

So in America when the sun goes down and I sit on the old broken-down river pier watching the long, long skies over New Jersey and sense all that raw land that rolls in one unbelievable bulge over to the West coast, and all that road going, all the people dreaming in the immensity of it, and in Iowa I know by now the children must be crying in the land where they still let the children cry, and tonight the stars'll be out, and don't you know that God is Pooh Bear? (20)

Sadder but wiser for having exposed themselves to the raw forces of experience, the Beat writers built into the myth the disillusionment that enshrouded both the beginning and the end of the journey.

The seedling myth of the early 1940's was unexpectedly

thrust into maturity in 1946-7 when Neal Cassady came to New York. When Kerouac, Ginsberg, and Burroughs met Cassady, their myth was actualized. His credentials as an archetypal rebel were impeccable. Raised by an alcoholic father in the shabby hotels and poolhalls of Denver's bowery section, he had served three stretches in reform school and around him hovered a semi-criminal mystique that was perfectly suited to the Beat fantasy. Moreover, Cassady fit into a myth that is peculiar to America. In 1969 Gary Snyder commented to Ann Charters on Cassady's appeal to the Beat writers, saying that "Neal's a beautiful memory because it's so archetypal." (7) Cassady seemed to Snyder a modern day cowboy who, deprived of the high plains and ranges, was "reduced to pool halls and driving back and forth across the country." He adds:

Cassady was like so many Americans who had inherited that taste for the limitless, for no limits, which was a unique American experience. You can get hooked on that if you don't know how to translate it into other regions, since when the sheer physical space disappears you go crazy. Which is like the story of America.

America's frontier has changed since the nineteenth century and instead of roaming across broad stretches of wild, lonely terrain on horse, the modern day cowboy drives back and forth in cars, "like a phonograph record speeded up faster and faster with less and less space to move in . . .

Space becomes translated into speed." Snyder concludes his remarks:

What got Kerouac and Ginsberg about Cassady was the energy of the archetypal west, the energy of the frontier, still coming down. Cassady is the cowboy crashing.

Driven by a maniacal obsession for action and speed, Cassady was quickly transformed into the anarchical hero of the Beat writings. As the character of Dean Moriarty in On The Road, Cassady assimilated the Beat myth by recklessly driving nonstop across America in a futile search for his father, "digging" everything and everyone he saw along the way. He gave the myth the impact and force it needed, pumping life into the legend that had been fabricated but up to then only simulated by the Beat writers. An exuberantly degenerate "orphan of America," Cassady consummated the myth.

The myth was of critical importance to the survival of the Beat Generation. It romanticized the Beat dissension and, without actually recommending socially destructive behavior, it gave license to virtually any behavior that opposed society. The writers created in their works a mythological screen upon which the rest of the Beat Generation could project themselves. For those who stood, in some way, outside of American society in the 1950's, the myth was an invitation to join a group that celebrated

its rejected and rejecting role. "Outsiders" could become "insiders" if they saw themselves in the myth. Merging the fragmented energies of the Beat Generation into a portrait of negation, the myth of the "angelheaded hipsters" gave the Beats a collective passion and voice.

And yet the myth handicapped the movement as well. It did not provide a strong positive model around which the movement could rally its forces and begin to initiate social change. The myth hindered the Beat Generation's evolution from adolescence as a negative movement balking at society, to adulthood as a positive movement with a mature commitment to tangible goals. The Beats luxuriated in their youthfulness and the myth pampered a fantasy of eternal youth and resilience. It cushioned them from the reality of passing time.

From the time of the "first conjunction" of Kerouac, Ginsberg, and Burroughs in 1944 until the publication of Howl and Other Poems in 1956 and On The Road in 1957, the Beat Generation remained primarily an underground phenomenon. Its audience was limited to a relatively small counter-culture group that was already predisposed to the "We're agin it" stance of the writers. The literature functioned to support and reinforce a readership composed of people who had stepped out of society and who stood alone and vulnerable in their nonconformity. Corso, when

asked what the Beat Generation consists of, responded, "Consists of? Oh, beat people with beat hip ideas who have nothing to latch on to but each other." (8) The Beats were their own audience from the movement's inception in the early 1940's until 1957 when the Beat Generation was catapulted into the national consciousness. In March of that year Ginsberg's Howl was dragged into court to face obscenity charges and in September, Kerouac's On The Road became the proverbial "overnight success."

III. Crisis: The Critics Fight Back

Ginsberg's book Howl and Other Poems shoved the Beats into the public arena and for the first time the rhetoric of negation was tested in a public forum. The poem "Howl," laced with scatology and profanity, deals explicitly with homosexuality, drug use, and insanity. It is a "set piece" of the Beat rhetoric.

The reaction against "Howl" was the first inkling of a counter-rhetoric developed by public officials to defend the existing social structure and strike back at the Beats.² Howl, first published by San Francisco poet-publisher Lawrence Ferlinghetti in 1956, was seized by Customs officials under Section 305 of the Tariff Act of 1930 as it was being shipped from a printing company in England. (27) Collector of Customs Chester MacPhee, according to the San Francisco Chronicle, confiscated 520 copies of the paperbound volume and declared, "The words and the sense are obscene. You wouldn't want your children to come across it." (11)

The American Civil Liberties Union backed Ferlinghetti and the case was taken to court on March 24, 1957. The decision of Judge Clayton W. Horn was that the book was not

²Rhetorical critic Robert S. Cathcart contends that it is the emergence of a counter-rhetoric defending the social order that endows a collective body with the status of "movement." (5)

"without the slightest redeeming social importance."

Ferlinghetti said of the decision:

Thus ended one of the most irresponsible and callous police actions to be perpetrated west of the Rockies, not counting the treatment accorded Indians and Japanese. (11)

Ferlinghetti also called the trial "the so-called People's Case (I say so-called, since the People seemed mostly on our side)" and added that Judge Horn's re-election to office after the trial "means that the People agree it was the police who here committed an obscene action."

The sensational press coverage and the legal proceedings brought against Howl made it one of the best-selling volumes of poetry of the twentieth century. (27) Its legitimation in court, foreshadowing the trial of Naked Lunch in 1966, was a coup for the Beats in the first showdown between themselves and the social hierarchy.

Kerouac's On The Road stands beside "Howl" as the other literary pillar of the Beat edifice. It laid bare the Beat myth before the public and in it Kerouac's Dean Moriarty, the James Dean of the printed page, became immortalized. He was another rebel without a cause who captured the restless imaginations of readers across the country and lured them into the Beat myth with vague promises of "IT," the key to making time stand still. The consuming energy that ignited the Beat myth was held up before

a new, broader audience:

. . . the only people for me are the mad ones, the ones who are mad to live, mad to talk, mad to be saved, desirous of everything at the same time, the ones who never yawn or say a commonplace thing, but burn, burn, burn like fabulous yellow roman candles exploding like spiders across the stars and in the middle you see the blue centerlight pop and everybody goes "Awww!" (20)

Kerouac wrote the first version of the Great Beat Novel in 1950 in an astounding three-week Bensedrinic rush of energy. He typed it on a roll of teletype paper in one continuous 120-foot paragraph and when his publisher requested revision, he angrily stalked out of the office. Over the next six years, he did revise the manuscript and on September 5, 1957, On The Road was published by Viking Press. Receiving an enthusiastic response from the public, it went into its second printing by the end of the month, into a third before the end of the year, and for five weeks it was first on the best seller list. Gilbert Millstein, reviewing it for the New York Times, called its publication an "historic occasion . . . an authentic work of art." (7)

Not all the critics were as impressed, however, and a second wave of counter-rhetoric, following the court case against Howl, was now aimed against Kerouac. The gentlest of the unfavorable critics expressed admiration for the book but some reserve about On The Road as a

piece of literature and questioned its limited framework and shallow characters. The harsher critics railed against its hedonism and degeneracy. The Beat Generation was included in the criticism of Kerouac when a Time book review called Kerouac the "Hippie Homer" of a "disjointed segment of society acting out its own neurotic necessity." (7)

The counter-rhetoric grew more venomous as more Beat novels, poems, and essays were published. Outraged critics debunked the Beat myth as ridiculous, dangerous, or both and they attempted to destroy the credibility of the movement. Indignant at the grammatical abyss that Kerouac had created in his novels, the scholars who stooped to dignify his writing with comment saw his "stream-of-consciousness" style as erosive to the language and ultimately to the culture. Norman Podhoretz in "The Know-Nothing Bohemians" taunts:

To be articulate is to admit that you have no feelings (for how can real feelings be expressed in syntactical language?), that you can't respond to anything (Kerouac responds to everything by saying "Wow!") and that you are probably impotent. (32)

The torrent of such criticism was not diverted by Corso's elliptical defense that "the poets of the Beat Generation like Jack Kerouac have entered the leperous kingdom of prose and have kissed the leper." (8)

Podhoretz also singles out Kerouac's lack of literary discrimination and his eagerness to substitute enthusiasm for quality:

The effect of such enthusiasm is actually to wipe out the world altogether, for if a filling station will serve as well as the Rocky Mountains to arouse a sense of awe and wonder, then both the filling station and the mountains are robbed of their reality.

The most vicious of the counter-rhetoric accused the Beats of being against not only society but also against civilization. The counter-rhetors followed suit in using the Beat Generation as an anti-model, sometimes portraying the Beats as werewolves who worshipped primitivism and blood. Kerouac's answer to this kind of criticism is reflective of the group's negative nature. Ann Charters writes:

In interview after interview he insisted that the Beat Generation wasn't "hoodlumism," or "rough-neck," or "violent," or "heedless," or "rootless," yet he never could make very clear what it was. (7)

Corso similarly denied such criticism, saying, "Beats aren't violent. To be violent is not to be beat." (8)

The critics preyed upon the Beats' inability to define the goals of the movement. Herbert Gold in a Nation essay demanded to know "what this clan of superfrantic subhipsters wants." (15) A Time book reviewer observed, "The question ultimately juts up: are these self-appointed

spokesmen for the twentieth century young moving in a quest for meaning, or a flight from it?" (39) Lloyd Zimpel, writing for The New Republic, commented:

The Beat, while keen enough about the obvious absurdity of the square world, still is pretty much aflounder in his hipness; "Beatness" has not yet furnished answers enough of its own. (47)

David Susskind, in a 1959 "Open End" program, asked, "All the alcoholism, dope-addiction, sexual excess, debauchery—what do they mean by it?" Guest panelist Norman Mailer explained on the Beats' behalf that the "debauchery" was a form of protest. (46)

Gary Snyder's defense of the Beats concedes their shortcomings. He admits that most of the Beats have not been able to integrate their spiritual vision with a real commitment to "the stewpot of the world," but at least their lives are devoted to a quest for alternatives, which is "probably better than moping around classrooms or writing books on Buddhism and Happiness for the masses, as the squares (who will shortly have succeeded in putting us all down) do." (36) The defense is lame and doesn't conceal the fact that the Beats had no ideology to substantiate their movement and were left empty-handed and susceptible before the scrutiny of their critics.

The dialectical tension between the Beat writers and society's defenders snapped when the Achilles heel of the

Beat Generation was hit by a poisonous dart. The portmanteau word "beatnik," coined by San Francisco columnist Herb Caen shortly after the Soviet Sputnik was launched, was a catchy nickname used as a diminutive to emasculate the movement. Although Caen claims that he hadn't meant the word in a perjorative sense—he reportedly tried to explain it to Kerouac, without success, in a San Francisco bar one night—the word quickly became popular in the jargon of the counter-rhetoric as a putdown for the Beats. "Beatnik" symbolically reduced the Beats to a hoard of scraggly bohemians, standing on street corners muttering, "Crazy, man." It was a holiday for cartoonists and lampooners. A Time article of 1959 reads, "To be poor, yak the shirtless ones as they sit scratching in store-front espresso halls, is to be holy, man, holy." (40) An article appearing in the following week's issue is typical of the stereotype:

One thing a beatnik cannot abide is a square. The bearded, sandaled beat likes to be with his own kind, to riffle through his quarterlies, write craggy poetry, paint crusty pictures, and pursue his never-ending quest for the ultimate in sex and protest. When deterred from such pleasures by the goggle-eyed from Squaresville, the beatnik packs his pot (marijuana), shorts and bongo drums, grabs his black-hosed, pony-tailed beachick and cuts out. (41)

The Beat Generation, in a counter-rhetoric tour de force, became a joke, an object for ridicule. Kerouac once

protested, "I'm King of the Beats, but I'm not a Beatnik."
(7)

The latticework of the movement, slatted with the Beats' opposition to society, did not prepare them for the counter-attack waged by their critics. But of even greater significance is that it left them unprepared for the acceptance by what Ferlinghetti had called "the People." While the critics were hurtling insults and Kerouac was groping for an explanation of what "the Beat Generation" meant, the Beat books in print were collecting a following of youthful fans. Although the critics' satirization had declawed the movement, its fad-like acceptance was the veritable kiss of death.

As an anti-movement, the Beat Generation lost the defining line of demarcation it had devised to distinguish itself from society when the writers stepped back into the social structure to publish their works. The acceptance of Beat writings by publishers was the first bridge crossing the moat between the Beats and society. It "legitimized" the movement in black and white and lent its rhetors a certain air of credibility as writers. The long years of internalization, of poetry readings in Berkeley coffee houses given by Beats to other Beats, the conversations among the writers stretching into the early hours of the morning about their works, the letters of support when one

mailed a finished manuscript to another, the rejection of the manuscripts by publishers, and the introspective periods of self-doubt were brought to a close. Publication of its literature irrevocably changed the Beat Generation. It was a rite of passage which led the Beats from the inner chambers of their own group to the "very gates of the middle-class." (25) Even the derision by critics, because it was formal recognition, paved the road for the merging of "Howl" and On The Road into the body of anthologized American literature.

The Beat writers, despite the derisive appellation "beatniks," were recognized by sociologists who swarmed into North Beach to study the phenomenon and compile glossaries of hipster jargon, by journalists who demanded interviews and definitions of "the Beat Generation," and by the law which sent policemen storming into the Beat "pads" to clean up the district. Suddenly there was money and a certain social status in being a Beat writer. Seymour Krim writes of the movement's absorption by society:

If you leaf through the men's magazines today you will see that the so-called bohemian values have become a part of American life; the dividing line separating the bearded, horn-rimmed types from our former images of bourgeois respectability seems not so sharp anymore. (25)

Lloyd Zimpel describes the Beat fad, saying that "genuine beatniks" hire out to perform at parties; department stores

sell beatnik kits complete with beard, dark glasses, and beret; and a hand-painted sign reading "Gateway to Beatnikland" was posted on an alley entrance to the North Beach district for the benefit of tourists. To Zimpel, the Beat was exploiting the social phenomenon as "a means of attaining quick status in a world that moves smilingly to absorb him." (47)

The movement was brought above ground. Ginsberg and Kerouac—Burroughs had long since left the country—were no longer subterraneans but popular writers being reviewed nationally. The works of other Beat poets such as Corso, Ferlinghetti, Snyder, and Whalen found their way into print by publishers other than Ferlinghetti's City Light Books. Non-Beat writers who have by accident been linked to the Beat Generation such as William Everson (Brother Antoninus), Robert Creeley, Robert Duncan, Denise Levertov, Charles Olson, Kenneth Rexroth, and Jack Spicer were sought after by the new Beat enthusiasts. Thomas Parkinson of the University of California, Berkeley muses that the term "San Francisco writers" could be "cheerily applied to any writer who knew Allen Ginsberg or was published by Lawrence Ferlinghetti." (30) The "San Francisco Poetry Renaissance" brought throngs of would-be poets from around the country to California.

The incongruity between the disaffiliation of the

Beats and their newly-found popularity was irreconcilable. Eugene Burdick, writing for Reporter, commented insightfully, "Lately the Beat vision has been invaded, mauled, overstudied, imitated." (3) His epitaphic conclusion is that "the ring of bemused spectators has pressed in close with the inevitable result: the vision has suffocated." The Beat Generation was assimilated into the formal culture.

IV. Assimilation: Time Catches Up

Time, the nemesis of all anti-movements, caught up with the Beat Generation. America was not the same country in the late fifties that it had been in 1944 at the time of the "first conjunction." Nor was it the same as it had been in the early part of the decade when the "fetish for security" made America the perfect anti-model for the risk-taking Beats. The country was inching its way toward a new liberalism and tolerance for dissent. By the end of the fifties, the Civil Rights movement was beginning to stir the sleeping political consciousness of the nation. Rock and roll music flooded the AM radio stations and its king, Elvis Presley, brought youthful social rebellion to the television screen. Actors such as Marlon Brando in The Wild One (1953) and James Dean in Rebel Without a Cause (1955) had become matinée idols as cinematic rebels, and Dean's death in 1955 glorified him as the hero of a growing counter-culture legend. The decade ended with John F. Kennedy's defeat of Richard Nixon in the Presidential campaign of 1960 and in January, 1961, when Kennedy was inaugurated, the country laid the fifties to rest.

The Beat movement dissipated as the decade drew to a close. Stunned by the counter-rhetoric from critics,

diluted by its popularity with "the People," and unable to redirect its refusal into a positive statement, it finally dissolved. From their vantage point outside of the social boundaries, the Beats had held a tenuous power to challenge the system and ask important questions about the relation of the individual to society. But once they were assimilated by a changing society, they surrendered that power. The voice of the nay-sayers was muted by time. As a movement, the Beat Generation did not bridge the gap between the fifties and the sixties but as individuals, many made the transition into the social and political activism of the dawning decade.

Allen Ginsberg shed his Beat identity and became a leading social force in the sixties. A poem entitled "The Change," written in 1963, was a pivotal poem for Ginsberg. Describing his spiritual "rebirth," it signalled his personal and literary reorientation from drug-induced consciousness expansion to an intensely physical involvement with reality. Ginsberg commented in an interview with Paris Review, "My energies of the last . . . oh, 1948 to 1963, all completely washed up." (6) Ginsberg took on new causes. No longer the nay-sayer of the fifties, he committed himself to social and political changes.

In the early sixties he received national publicity for his active role in organizing the Gay Liberation Front

in New York. He also testified before a Senate judiciary subcommittee on narcotics and praised LSD as one instrument for bringing about universal love. He told the Senators that LSD had made it possible for him to stop hating President Lyndon Johnson as a war criminal and to pray for him.

Ginsberg visited Cuba in 1965 but was soon expelled from the country by the Castro regime for his public denunciation of the government's persecution of homosexuals at Havana University. He then traveled through Eastern Europe and on May Day, 1965, he was elected by 100,000 students in Prague as "King of the May." The Czech government deported him because, in Ginsberg's explanation, it was embarrassed by the Czech young people's response to "a bearded American fairy dope poet."

Ginsberg invented "flower power" in 1965 as a tactic for antiwar demonstrators in California to resist nonviolently harassment by police and the Hell's Angels motorcycle gang. He organized in January, 1967 the first Gathering of the Tribes for a Human Be-In in San Francisco's Golden Gate Park. Later that year he was arrested in an antiwar demonstration with Dr. Benjamin Spock and others for blocking the steps of the Whitehall Street draft board in New York City. During the 1968 Democratic Convention in Chicago, Ginsberg was tear-gassed while chanting "Om" at

the Lincoln Park Yippie Life Festival.

A well known figure in the seventies as well, Ginsberg still gives poetry readings, sometimes with his father Louis Ginsberg, and was the poet laureate for Bob Dylan's "Rolling Thunder Revue" in 1976.

Other Beat writers made a successful transition from the fifties to the sixties because they branched out from the Beat movement and left it behind. William Burroughs became a widely discussed avant-garde writer and experimented with a "cut-up" method of writing in Minutes To Go (1960) and The Exterminator (1960). In these books he randomly arranged sections to create a collage of experience, unbound by sequential order and the restrictions of chronology. Burroughs' Naked Lunch was cleared of obscenity charges by the Supreme Court of Massachusetts on July 7, 1966 after such witnesses as Ginsberg, Norman Mailer, and John Ciardi testified on its behalf. Today Burroughs gives occasional readings in the United States and was a visiting celebrity, along with Beat poet Bob Kaufman, in Oregon's "First Perennial Intergalactic Poetry Hoo-Ha" organized by novelist Ken Kesey in May, 1976.

Neal Cassady, immortalized by Kerouac as Dean Moriarty in On The Road, became a close friend of Ken Kesey in the sixties and a cult hero of the hippies. As the acid-dropping bus driver for Kesey's "Merry Pranksters," Cassady

rode a second wave of popularity with a new generation of readers in Tom Wolfe's 1968 best seller, The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test. Cassady died in 1968 from an apparent overdose of narcotics and alcohol. His naked body was found to the side of some railroad tracks in Mexico and members of two generations—the Beats and the hippies—mourned his death. Cassady's The First Third, written in 1949 and cited by Ginsberg in his dedication to Howl as "an autobiography which enlightened Buddha," was finally published posthumously by City Lights Books in 1971.

Many of the Beat poets who were instrumental in the "San Francisco Renaissance" such as Gary Snyder, Gregory Corso, Philip Whalen, and Michael McClure developed identities independent of the Beat Generation and are popular today not as Beat writers but as individual poets. Lawrence Ferlinghetti's City Lights Bookstore is still flourishing on Columbus Avenue in San Francisco.

Conspicuously absent from the roll call is Jack Kerouac. It is cruelly appropriate, perhaps, that the man who named the Beat Generation is the one whose life most closely paralleled the decline of the movement. Kerouac is like a lens through which one can see a magnified picture of the movement, from its haphazard inception to its dissipation. He was 38 years old in 1960 and for one whose life had been built on a fantasy of eternal youth,

the stark reality of passing time was devastating. Time caught up with Kerouac and swept by him, leaving him a tragic victim of fantasies ravaged by reality.

Extremely sensitive to criticism and shy before the public spotlight, Kerouac grew increasingly dependent upon alcohol to get him through interviews and public appearances after On The Road made him famous. When he was drunk, Ann Charters says, he was usually a shamble, "out of control, maudlin, sentimental and childish." (7) He panicked before reporters and audiences and turned himself into a clown.

Kerouac's life became more secluded as he avoided the publicity focused on the other Beat writers. While Ginsberg, Snyder, and Philip Whalen were becoming well known as radicals in the sixties and directed their energies toward specific political and social goals, Kerouac retreated to a house he bought in Florida and cut himself off from them. He was disturbed by their ideas on practical anarchism and wanted nothing to do with their politics.

Always apolitical throughout the fifties, Kerouac now leaned toward political conservatism. He defended America's policy in Viet Nam as Ginsberg was being arrested in anti-war demonstrations; and he drunkenly confided in a rare interview that he "was still a Marine"

and would go off to Viet Nam in a moment if he were asked, completely repressing the memory of his 1943 psychiatric discharge from the Navy.

He reacted strongly against the hippie youth movement and it is ironic that later editions of The Dharma Bums advertise on their covers, "By the man who launched the hippie world, the daddy of the swinging psychedelic generation." Kerouac condemned the hippies as "a bunch of slobs" and took LSD only once, in 1961 with Timothy Leary at Harvard. The experience heightened his feelings of failure and afterwards he was convinced that the drug was a Communist plot, introduced into America to weaken the country. Kerouac believed that Ken Kesey and LSD had "ruined" Neal Cassady and after a party in New York with the Merry Pranksters in 1964, Kerouac never saw Cassady again. Raised as a Catholic and always religious, he returned in the sixties to the staunch Catholicism of his youth.

Meanwhile, his drinking problem became more serious and his attempts to "dry out" were short-lived. Alcoholism, Kerouac's "joyous disease," bloated his once athletic, muscular body and left his face swollen and lumpy. Self-conscious about his physical deterioration, he refused to be photographed and guarded his privacy carefully. His decline was brought home to him in a

particularly painful moment. Answering his doorbell in Florida one afternoon, he faced a group of young fans wearing jackets lettered "Dharma Bums." The boys had come to see the famous Jack Kerouac but when he opened the door, as he later told a friend, "the kids' faces dropped a foot and a half." He was so upset that he couldn't talk to them and said afterwards that it was one of the saddest experiences in his life.

Kerouac's final years were not pleasant ones and his later books trace his personal disintegration. The last 30 pages of Big Sur, written in 1961, describe in agonizing detail his delirium tremens upon waking up in Ferlinghetti's cabin after an extended drinking binge. (17) His following books echo with the loneliness and isolation of a man caught in the twilight zone between his fantasies and reality.

By the time he died of massive abdominal hemorrhaging in 1969, the melancholic sense of loss in the conclusion of On The Road had become real in his own life. It could be used as a prophetic obituary for Kerouac and for the Beat Generation:

. . . just before the coming of complete night that blesses the earth, darkens all rivers, cups the peaks and folds the final shore in, and nobody, nobody knows what's going to happen to anybody besides the forlorn rags of growing old, I think of Dean Moriarty. I even think of Old Dean Moriarty the father we never found, I think of Dean Moriarty.

V. Epilogue: A Voice of the American Conscience

The movement that cried "No" crumbled because its purpose was never made clear and nagging questions remain unanswered. Why did the Beats drop out of society and set out on an odyssey with no vision of what lay at the end of the road? And more curiously, why did they conscientiously record a detailed account of that odyssey? One can only speculate as to the raison d'être of the Beat Generation because nowhere in the Beat literature is it spelled out.

In part it was because the Beats were young and dissatisfied with the mausoleum of traditions. Corso writes that "the Beat Generation challenges as any generation must challenge everything that has been done and acted before." (8) And it was partly because, as John Tytell suggests, the Beats were old enough to recall nostalgically the time:

. . . when one could bargain for an article in a general store, when one bought land rather than paper shares in huge corporations, when radio and the airplane represented occasions of tremendous excitement. (42)

Acutely aware of the country's modernization, they registered their resistance by refusing to participate in the social system.

The purpose of the movement is shadowy and just what

it was that the Beats were hoping to find as they embarked on their metaphorical journey is obscured rather than clarified by their enigmatic answer of "authenticity." Endeavors to attribute conscious motives to the movement are conjecture, but the role that it played in American society, whether planned or stumbled into inadvertently, has won it an important place in contemporary American history.

The Beat Generation was a chorus of social misfits who served in the fifties as an angry voice of the American conscience. It took on a dialectical burden in a time when few were willing to jeopardize their security by dissenting. Paul O'Neil, a harsh critic of the movement, admits, "No matter what else it may be, it is not boring and in the U.S. of the 1950s it is the only rebellion in town."

(29) The Beats functioned as a ballast to society in the same way that the chorus in Greek drama did, by posing questions, providing a running commentary, and engaging the protagonist—society—in dialogue.

The power that the Beat Generation wielded as an anti-movement was fragile. The only tool it had was a rhetorical one: the threat it held by asking turbulent, searching questions of a society that had a major investment in preserving harmony. The questions are ones that writers of the subversive tradition, according to John P. Sisk, have been asking for 200 years. Sisk says of the

Beat writers:

They can force us to reexamine some familiar subversive themes at a moment in our history when we most need to. We are at a point when we can least afford to be uncertain about the role of intellect, about the right relation of the individual to society, about the nature of man, about the extent of our involvement with men everywhere. (35)

The Beats underlined the moral values they saw as eluding America and in their social refusal, they called attention to those values. A passage from an article by Allen Ginsberg begins with a description of the anti-model:

. . . an America gone mad with materialism, a police-state America, a sexless and soulless America prepared to battle the world in defense of a false image of its Authority.

It then swings into a tribute to America's grand potential:

Not the wild and beautiful America of the comrades of Whitman, not the historic America of Blake and Thoreau where the spiritual independence of each individual was an America, a universe more huge and awesome than all the abstract bureaucracies and Authoritative Officialdoms of the World combined. (14)

The society he yearns for is not the America of the 1950's or even of the twentieth century, but an idealized America in which the "spiritual independence of each individual" is the fundamental tenet.

All that America could have been but has failed to be is the apparitional vision behind the Beats' rhetoric of

negation. Corso writes of the "Statue of Liberty standing surrounded by the garbage of materialism, a sea of humanity starves in the water outside her." (8) Contrasting the Statue of Liberty as the beacon of American ideals against "the garbage of materialism," he expresses the Beat conviction that the country had short-changed itself by hocking the American Dream for a plastic paradise. Corso's disillusionment is bitter but he offers a remnant of hope in the form of the nay-saying Beats:

The Beat Generation is youth quarrels vexation American disappointment of a cherished hope, an enlightenment, a testimony of honor and distinction. (8)

The Beat writings condemn contemporary society but they are nonetheless intrinsically American in spirit. Dean Moriarty is, as John Sisk suggests, a recognizable caricature of an image in the American heart, an image springing from the dream of utopian freedom and innocence. Kerouac held up that image for society to measure itself against. And so it is with much of the Beat literature which reflects, as in a distorted mirror, ideals that are a part of America's birthright. The spirit of rebellion courses through America's veins, and the unplanned and unorganized rebellion of the Beats in the fifties was a gawky, adolescent offspring of that spirit.

The Beat Generation died as a movement because it did

not translate its elusive ideals into a commitment to tangible goals. It was fixed, like Kerouac, in the twilight zone between fantasy and reality. But the movement lives today in its written documents which are the first-hand record of the Beat odyssey. The writings remain intact as a voice from the outside, an outcast satellite of American society still broadcasting a silent "No."

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