

Introduction

In *The Spiritual Imagination of the Beats*, I explore how the “hidden religions” – poet Diane di Prima’s term for heterodoxies that have characterized countercultural minorities from antiquity to the present – have shaped Beat artistic creativity. Each of the world’s major faiths has offshoots that are often rejected or deemed “heretical” by dominant majorities: Islam/Ismailism and Sufism; Judaism/Kabbalah; Christianity/Gnosticism; Buddhism/Vajrayana. Furthermore, disciplines such as magic, alchemy, astrology and Tarot have often been considered as various forms of “superstition” and thus anathema. However, the Beats did not seek to replace one dogmatic system with another. Rather, each author created spiritualities that functioned as individual modes of both personal and political resistance to the American Establishment. What W. B. Yeats memorably said of William Blake – that he was “a man crying out for a mythology, and trying to make one because he could not find one to his liking” – applies to the Beats as well. When asked about his beliefs, William S. Burroughs replied he was “an Ishmalian and Gnostic, or a Manichean.”¹ Gary Snyder evolved his own idiosyncratic synthesis of Native American and Buddhist traditions. In 1971, he built with his friends’ help a dwelling in the Sierra Nevada foothills of Northern California that he named *Kitkitdizze* after the Wintu word for the shrub *Chamaebatia foliolosa*. The architecture was a blend of styles: Mandan earth lodge, Spanish Californian, Japanese farmhouse with a Neolithic fire pit and a smokehouse hole in the roof. I argue in this book that this searching, eclectic experimentation is the defining element of Beat spirituality.²

It was a literary movement whose name bears a religious meaning: for Jack Kerouac, “Beat” signified “beaten down,” music’s rhythmic beat, but also *visio beatifica* – beatific vison, rapturous union with the divine. In chapter 2 of *Satori in Paris*, Kerouac defined literature’s purpose as “the tale that’s told for companionship and to teach something religious, of religious reverence, about real life, in this real world which literature should (and here

does) reflect.” In “The Philosophy of the Beat Generation,” John Clellon Holmes asserted the Beats’ “almost exclusive concern is the discovery of something in which to believe.” Allen Ginsberg’s “Sakyamuni Coming Out from the Mountain” describes Buddha “in ragged soft robes/wearing a fine beard,/unhappy hands/clasped to his naked breasts-/humility is beatness/humility is beatness.” And the Trappist monk Thomas Merton wrote to William Carlos Williams that Ginsberg’s “Kaddish” “is great and living poetry and certainly religious in its concern. In fact, who are more concerned with ultimates than the beats?”³ Yet like the major Romantic poets – Wordsworth, Byron, Blake, Shelley, Keats, Coleridge – the Beats share as many philosophical and stylistic differences as similarities. As with Romanticism, the term “Beat” has been applied retrospectively by literary historians: Burroughs, Snyder, Ferlinghetti, all denied belonging to such a group. Like most names applied to artistic movements, it is a catch-all category. In my usage, the Beats were a subset of a larger *counterculture* – a term that originated in Theodore Roszak’s groundbreaking *The Making of a Counterculture: Reflections on the Technocratic Society* (1969) – an informal description that includes a group of writers who were united in their opposition to the dominant paradigms of US society, bound together by ties of personal friendship as well as professional association. They continued the American visionary tradition from Walt Whitman to Hart Crane, celebrating the quest for the sacred as a principal aim of art: as Allen Ginsberg memorably phrased it in “Howl,” he and his compatriots were “angelheaded hipsters burning for the ancient heavenly connection to the starry/dynamo in the machinery of night.” Indeed, as we shall see, it was precisely their wrestling with the deepest philosophical questions that linked them in a confederation: they engaged in constant dialogue and sometimes sharp disagreement with one another over viable ways to integrate a variety of often ancient beliefs and practices into their contemporary lives.

The variety of Beat approaches to achieving these “heavenly connections” is striking: Theosophy, Gnosticism, Neoplatonism, Hermeticism, Kabbalah, Buddhism, Tantra, Tarot, alchemy, astrology, shamanism, and experimentation with entheogens are among the subjects that fascinated them as well as their predecessors in the San Francisco Renaissance such as Kenneth Rexroth (1905–1982) and Robert Duncan (1919–1988). Allen Ginsberg (1926–1997) encountered William Blake in a mystical vision in 1948, later devoting himself to Tibetan Buddhism, while his friend Jack Kerouac (1922–1969) remained faithful to his Catholic roots, but also created a gigantic manuscript published posthumously as *Some of the Dharma*

Introduction

3

(1997) documenting his discovery of Buddhist history and texts. Gregory Corso (1930–2001) wrote poetry about St. Francis of Assisi and studied Egyptian hieroglyphics. Diane di Prima (1934–) explored Kabbalah as well as the Renaissance magic of Paracelsus (1493–1541), Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa (1468–1535), John Dee (1527–1608/9), and Robert Fludd (1574–1637), while Gary Snyder (1930–) apprenticed himself to Zen Buddhism as well as to Native American culture – both of which he linked to his developing ecological awareness. William Burroughs (1914–1997) was fascinated by Manicheanism, Ismailism, and the occult, as well as Mayan mythology. Philip Lamantia (1927–2005) perused Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite's *Mystical Theology* and ancient Egyptian thought while Bob Kaufman (1925–1986) moved between “Abomunism” – his Dadaist “philosophy of no-philosophy” – and Buddhism. Among the favorite books of Philip Whalen (1923–2002) were Lin Yutang's *The Wisdom of China and India* and the *Upanishads*. While the reading of ancient and modern texts was widespread, several of the Beats also devoted themselves to a variety of spiritual practices: meditation, breathing exercises, zazen, Yoga, Tantra, the chanting of mantras and shamanism.

Entheogens played a significant role in their explorations of consciousness. Albert Hoffmann had synthesized d-lysergic acid diethylamide – d-LSD – in Switzerland in 1938, and Aldous Huxley in *The Doors of Perception* (1954) described looking under its influence at a vase containing three flowers and experiencing “what Adam had seen on the morning of his creation – the miracle, moment by moment, of naked existence” – Meister Eckhart's *Istigkeit*, or the “Is-ness” of reality. British poet and mythographer Robert Graves (1895–1985) – whose treatise on poetic inspiration and the archaic female Muse *The White Goddess* would influence di Prima, Snyder, and Whalen – became friends with ethnomycologist R. Gordon Wasson and sampled psilocybin.⁴ Harvard ethnobotanist Richard Evans Schultes, along with a team of other scholars, invented the term *entheogen* – “inspired by the god” – to describe substances that engendered visionary experiences, while Timothy Leary began the serious investigation of LSD, emerging as the “High Priest” – as his autobiography's punning title has it – of the burgeoning hippie movement. Leary spoke of “the psychedelic religious movement,” indicating that he viewed his research within the context of a wider spiritual revolution.⁵ Michael McClure's “Peyote” – a poem much admired by the co-discoverer of the structure of DNA, Francis Crick – and Ginsberg's “Aether,” as well as Burroughs' *Junkie* and *Naked Lunch* were all devoted to an intense scrutiny of the phenomenology of entheogens.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-41645-0 — The Spiritual Imagination of the Beats

David Stephen Calonne

Excerpt

[More Information](#)

4

The Spiritual Imagination of the Beats

Several disciplines that had great appeal for the Beats, however, have until recently been relegated to the margins of research. For example, Isaac Newton (1642–1727) relentlessly pursued studies in alchemy, a subject often ridiculed by modern scientists, but during the Renaissance it was considered a legitimate inquiry into the physical universe's structure. Newton's translation of the *Tabula Smaragdina*, or *Emerald Tablet* – traditionally attributed to Hermes Trismegistus – has been the subject of serious attention by scholars. Newton believed alchemy's goal was "to glorify God in his wonderful works, & to teach a man how to live well." Newton – as Brian P. Copenhaver has observed – was the inventor of both calculus and a new conception of physics, but during the Enlightenment, Newton's esoteric researches needed to be hushed up. Both alchemy and magic were considered during the Renaissance to be "wondrous" enterprises, but had now become subject to ridicule.⁶ Thus the Beats were actually rediscovering a counter-tradition, as Wouter J. Hanegraaff has described,

that has always been present as the hidden – occult – "shadow" of the mainstream: from Gnosticism and the ancient mystery cults, through alchemy and the other "occult sciences" (natural magic and astrology), to early modern thinkers like Paracelsus and his followers, to Romantic *Naturphilosophie*, mesmerism and finally, modern psychology. In this narrative, the official representatives of the mainstream (Christian theologians, rational philosophers, modern scientists) have always tried to suppress it, but never with any lasting success, because, like the unconscious, it is the hidden secret of their own existence, the vital source without which they could not exist. The positive religions, particularly the monotheistic ones, are "external" products of time and historical circumstance – they have a beginning, and will have an end – but underneath them, there has always been this permanent and universal substratum: a kind of objective paganism expressing itself by symbols and myths, and grounded in the universal human search for self-knowledge, or gnosis.

Max Weber in his essay "Science as a Vocation" (1917) famously diagnosed the gradual *Entzauberung* – "disenchantment" (or more literally, "de-magification") – of modernity by the forces of "rationality," positivism, and bureaucratization: that same magic that had been during the Renaissance a "sublime object of wonder."⁷ In "I Am Waiting" from *A Coney Island of the Mind*, Lawrence Ferlinghetti employed as a refrain: "and I am perpetually awaiting/a rebirth of wonder." The American counterculture – which sought to rediscover this magic – resisted the technological machine's drive to control, dominate, objectify, and instrumentalize human beings.

Introduction

5

The Beats thus may be understood as an alternative, submerged, “underground” community whose members recognize their compatriots through a shared antinomianism as well as a fierce rejection of what has been offered to them as spiritual sustenance.

As the movement gathered momentum, several authors drew up essays or “manifestos,” such as Gregory Corso’s “Poetry and Religion: An Open Letter,” Allen Ginsberg’s “Prefatory Remarks Concerning Leary’s Politics of Ecstasy,” and William Everson’s “Dionysus and the Beat Generation: Four Letters on the Archetype,” which were position statements defining the new sensibility. Gary Snyder’s “Passage to More than India” – echoing Walt Whitman’s magnificent poem “Passage to India” – proclaims the reemergence in America of

a subculture of illuminati … Within Islam the Sufis; in India the various threads converged to produce Tantrism. In the West it has been represented largely by a string of heresies starting with the Gnostics, and on the folk level by “witchcraft.” Buddhist Tantrism, or Vajrayana as it’s also known, is probably the finest and most modern statement of this ancient shamanistic-yogic-gnostic-socioeconomic view: that mankind’s mother is Nature and Nature should be tenderly respected; that man’s life and destiny is growth and enlightenment in self-disciplined freedom; that the divine has been made flesh and that flesh is divine; that we not only should but *do* love one another. This view has been harshly suppressed in the past as threatening to both Church and State. Today, on the contrary, these values seem almost biologically essential to the survival of humanity.⁸

Snyder thus identifies the same sources that di Prima defined as central to Beat spirituality, and it is precisely Gnosticism, Sufism, Vajrayana, shamanism, and “witchcraft” that are among the disciplines Hanegraaff categorized as “the hidden – occult – ‘shadow’ of the mainstream.”

American composer Charles Ives (1874–1954) created a haunting fourteen-minute piece titled *The Unanswered Question* (1908): the strings intone a serene, hymn-like chorale background texture that a trumpet interrupts with an anxious chromatic melody. The silence of the universe is disturbed by humanity’s persistent doubt: what is the purpose of our existence on Earth? So too, young people were now also asking unanswered questions. Following Hiroshima, Nagasaki, the Holocaust and subsequently the Vietnam War, the world had changed into a desolate landscape symbolized unforgettably by Samuel Beckett’s post-atomic masterpiece *Waiting for Godot*. It is likely that the postwar generation had taken note of organized religion’s corruption and hypocrisy during a century of genocide and nuclear proliferation. As George Steiner remarked,

“those who realize that the same church blessed the killer and the victim, that the churches refused to speak out and pursued, under the worst terror ever visited upon civilized man, a policy of unctuous silence, those who know these things are not surprised by the bankruptcy of any theological stands since.” J. Robert Oppenheimer himself – following the nuclear blast at Los Alamos – was moved to quote Krishna’s riveting lines from the *Bhagavad Gita*: “I am become Death, shatterer of worlds.” The threat of imminent Apocalypse – sounded in Barry McGuire’s 1965 song “The Eve of Destruction” – surfaces repeatedly in Beat writings, most memorably in Gregory Corso’s “Bomb.” So-called scientific progress had led humanity, not toward a utopian future, but rather backward into a primal, violent, destructive, chaotic abyss. Thoughtful, sensitive youth began to turn away from conventional American religion toward a more contemplative life, toward inner realms of imagination, to find a refuge from outer madness and to create the nucleus of a better world. The social transformation the Beats set in motion was profound. Indeed, as Hugh McLeod observed in *The Religious Crisis of the 1960s*: “In the religious history of the West these years may come to be seen as marking a rupture as profound as that brought about by the Reformation.”⁹

It may seem difficult to fathom how youth in a country enjoying unprecedented material prosperity would exhibit such restless discontent. Yet in addition to the threat of nuclear annihilation, the nation’s gross injustices – continuing and violent oppression of women, African Americans, homosexuals, and Native Americans – made it impossible for the Beats to avoid rebelling against their society’s hypocritical “values.” As Ferlinghetti declared, they were waiting for the Establishment “to prove/that God is really American,” and for the Beats, God was precisely *not* a White American Male: Gregory Corso titled one of his poems, “God? She’s Black.”¹⁰ They had several reasons to feel alienated from the Anglo-Saxon Protestant majority that dominated their country’s power structure. The Beats’ literary grandfather, William Saroyan – who, as we shall see in Chapter 4, significantly influenced Jack Kerouac – was of Armenian ancestry; Corso, Lamantia and di Prima, Italian; Allen Ginsberg, Jewish: they were themselves “ethnic” outsiders. Homosexuality was a crime, as was drug possession, and open discussion of sexuality was forbidden. The Beats challenged not only American homophobia and militarism, but also racism. During a time of violence and segregation, bridges between the white and black literary communities began to be forged in friendships between Bob Kaufman, Lamantia, and Whalen; Diane di Prima’s friendship with Ted Joans and collaboration with Leroi Jones (Amiri Baraka) in

Introduction

7

editing *The Floating Bear* (1961–1969), a central Beat publication; as well as through Norman Mailer's attempts (although its reductionism is not entirely acceptable today) in his essay “The White Negro” to define the new “hipster,” existential quest for authenticity.¹¹

Stephen Whitfield in *The Culture of the Cold War* documented how radically American life changed during 1946–1962.¹² The United States had just emerged victorious from World War II and was enjoying an unprecedented level of material wealth. Women working in bomber factories making weapons for the war effort returned to domestic life, giving birth to millions of baby boomers, while ex-soldiers now entered universities – both Philip Whalen and Ferlinghetti, for example – on the G.I. Bill. On television, the Mickey Mouse Club entertained a first wave of boomers while the American Military Industrial Complex – as President Dwight D. Eisenhower had named it – grew to mammoth proportions. By 1958, when the Soviet Union launched *Sputnik*, America was committed to a Faustian technological bargain with the entire world – and ultimately outer space as well – as its empire’s goal. A national highway system transformed Route 66 into a transcontinental system of freeways that would allow Kerouac, Neal Cassady, and their friends to head out across the land in order to – in Simon and Garfunkel’s words – “look for America.” By the 1960s, Beat influence on the hippie generation became increasingly evident, and words such as *Satori, Samadhi, Guru, Nirvana, Karma, and Dharma* – began to enter the vocabulary of young Americans. Many began to entertain the concept of reincarnation, while “what’s your (astrological) sign?” became the first inquiry strangers might make upon acquaintance. The new generation’s quest for deeper values as well as its increasing sense of life’s absurdity is documented in the film *The Graduate* (1967). In a famous scene, recent college graduate Benjamin is told by a family friend he should consider exploring *plastics* as a possible career: America had become increasingly unreal as falsity pervaded everything from Disneyland and Hollywood to the artificial and often unhealthy flavors added to food on offer in supermarkets. If plastic and the positivistic tenor of modern life were to be avoided, a novel like Hermann Hesse’s *Siddhartha* – about the life of Buddha – became a bestseller. Young people sought the authentic, to discover their true selves. In addition, some began to retreat from urban centers, returning to rural areas to establish communes, and, in popular music, Joni Mitchell offered her pagan, innocent, idealistic, yearning version of Paradise in “Woodstock,” which became one of the anthems for the flower children: “We are stardust/We are golden/And we’ve got to get ourselves /Back to the garden.”

There are historical precedents for the intellectual revolution that was transforming America and that led to a search for inspiration beyond our shores. Although it is not the case that turning toward alternative beliefs is precipitated solely by social upheaval – indeed, throughout history some individuals have been inclined toward an idiosyncratic spiritual life for reasons that may be entirely related to personal temperament and character – it is nevertheless true that as empires expand and come into contact with previously unknown cultures, the way opens toward exposure to new conceptions. Arnaldo Momigliano in *Alien Wisdom: The Limits of Hellenization* argued that “Hermes Trismegistus emerged from Egypt more or less at the time in which Zoroaster and the Magi became respected figures among the Greeks.... The search for cultural heroes and religious guides was never confined to one country only. It already embraced Brahmins, Magi, Egyptian priests and Druids by the beginning of the second century BCE.”¹³ Peter Green in *From Alexander to Actium: The Historical Evolution of the Hellenistic Age* documented how – as a result of Alexander the Great’s (356–323 BCE) conquests – Greece came into contact with a variety of religious beliefs that ultimately would shape Hellenistic culture (ca. 300 BCE to 300 CE). Connections between Greece, Rome, Egypt, and Persia created a unique religious syncretism: people turned inward, consulting oracles, casting spells, employing charms, erecting apotropaic statues, studying astrology and magic. By the second century, both literary sources and papyri indicate that *theurgy* – a ritual invocation of the gods to achieve unity with divinity – became widespread. Foreign mystery cults were imported: for example, Isis and Serapis arrived from Egypt, as we can observe in Apuleius’ delightful novel *The Golden Ass* in which Lucius is fascinated by magic, joins the cult of Isis in Book XI, and is finally initiated into the service of both Isis and Osiris in Rome. Roman soldiers during their travels became devoted to Mithraism, which involved elaborate rituals depicting the sun god Mithras sacrificing a bull and had roots in Persian Zoroastrianism. The power and influence of Mithraism from 100–400 CE would rival that of Christianity: ruins of the Romans’ centers of worship – the Mithraeums – can be found today in many locations throughout Europe.¹⁴

Like these ancient Greeks and Romans, the Beats would also turn toward other cultures for wisdom. But they were not the first American writers to do so: the Transcendentalists had rebelled against their country’s relentless orientation toward money and business. Ralph Waldo Emerson and Bronson Alcott studied the *Zend Avesta*, *Rig Veda*, *Upanishads*, *Bhagavad Gita*, and the *Corpus Hermeticum*, while Walt Whitman celebrated in

Introduction

9

Leaves of Grass (1855) what Richard M. Bucke named “cosmic consciousness,” a sense of mystical unity with the universe: the renowned scholar of Kabbalah, Gershom Scholem speculated that Whitman’s poetry exhibited profound similarities with kabbalistic doctrines. Both Emerson and Henry David Thoreau read Eugene Burnouf’s *Introduction a l’histoire du Buddhisme indien* (1844) while in *Walden*, Thoreau declared: “In the morning I bathe my intellect in the stupendous and cosmogonal philosophy of the Bhagvat-Geeta, since whose composition years of the gods have elapsed, and in comparison with which our modern world and its literature seem puny and trivial.... The pure Walden water is mingled with the sacred water of the Ganges.” Thoreau refers to Confucius in his great essay *Civil Disobedience*, read the *Vishnu Purana*, *The Institutes of Hindu Law (The Laws of Menu)*, and made translations from the French of both “The Transmigrations of the Seven Brahmans,” *Harivansa* (an appendix to the Hindu epic *The Mahabharata*), and the *Lotus of the True Law*, the *Lotus Sutra*. He also kept a voluminous notebook packed with extracts from his readings in Native American culture – 3,000 manuscript pages in eleven volumes. Hermann Melville was familiar with Gnostic philosophy as demonstrated by his allusion to the Ophites in *Moby Dick* and his brief, trenchant lyric “Fragments of a Lost Gnostic Poem of the Twelfth Century.”¹⁵ And in our own times, two authors who also voiced dissenting viewpoints on American materialism and triumphalism were of particular significance to the Beats: William Saroyan (1908–1980), the great story writer and dramatist whose play *The Time of Your Life* (1939) defined San Francisco as a city of love and kindness and whose style would influence Jack Kerouac; and Henry Miller (1891–1980), whose esoteric studies and struggles against censorship involving his masterworks *Tropic of Cancer* (1934) and *Tropic of Capricorn* (1939) would prefigure the Beats’ own revolutionary trajectory. Miller had once declared: “I cannot accept this world. I know there is another world behind it which is the real world” – sentiments with which the Beats would heartily agree.¹⁶

Furthermore, the spiritual practices of the Native Americans became a major Beat focus. Our literature begins not with Puritans Jonathan Edwards and Cotton Mather, but rather with the continent’s original inhabitants. It has only been recently that anthologies of American literature have commenced with Native American oral myths and tales, thus challenging history’s conventional narrative: superior Europeans arriving on our shores bearing Christianity and salvation.¹⁷ Virtually all the Beats were involved with indigenous cultures and shamanism: Gary Snyder was trained as an undergraduate in Native American mythology; Burroughs traveled to

10

The Spiritual Imagination of the Beats

South America in search of the substance employed by Colombian shamans – *ayahuasca* – and late in life underwent a rite presided over by a Native American holy man to exorcise his “Ugly Spirit”; Gregory Corso composed “Spontaneous Requiem to the American Indian” in 1959, anticipating the Native American political struggle during the following decade; Philip Lamantia shared peyote rituals with the Washo of Nevada and underwent a conversion experience among the Cora of Mexico. Lamantia also refers to Indian lore in *Meadowlark West* (1986) in his poem “Native Medicine” – “the Washo peyotlists” – as well as his allusion in “There” to the Ohlone – the first inhabitants of the San Francisco and Monterey Bay areas.

Three European Beat forebears – Antonin Artaud, W. B. Yeats, and D. H. Lawrence – also explored esoteric philosophy in their confrontation with the crisis of modernity. Artaud delved into Gnosticism, Kabbalah, and Tarot, while W. B. Yeats was acquainted with Madame Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (1831–1891); he joined her Theosophical Society and in 1890 was also admitted to Samuel MacGregor Mathers’ Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, a secret society steeped in ancient Egyptian ritual and symbolism. Yeats would acknowledge that the “mystical life is the centre of all that I do and all that I think and all that I write.”¹⁸ D. H. Lawrence composed a text that includes material uncollected in his *Studies in Classic American Literature* (1923), published posthumously as *The Symbolic Meaning* (1962). Here Lawrence plumbed the allegories of Melville, Hawthorne, and Poe, as well as Walt Whitman’s “Open Road” of the soul. In his essay “The Two Principles,” Lawrence declared: “The religious systems of the pagan world did what Christianity has never tried to do: they gave the true correspondence between the material cosmos and the human soul. The ancient cosmic theories were exact, and apparently perfect. In them science and religion were in accord.”¹⁹ This “correspondence” between the universe and humanity was exemplified by Hermes Trismegistus’ famous apothegm “as above, so below,” and it precisely describes the Beats’ effort to rediscover a direct harmony with cosmic forces. In addition to Lawrence, Yeats, and Artaud, esoteric ideas are also pervasive in such diverse twentieth-century authors as Jorge Luis Borges – who throughout his *oeuvre* demonstrates his fascination with Gnosticism, Buddhism, Kabbalah, Sufism, and the *I Ching* – Franz Kafka, E. M. Cioran, René Daumal, Phillip K. Dick, H.P. Lovecraft, Georges Bataille, and Thomas Pynchon. Norman Mailer would identify himself as a “diabolist and mystic,” and thus closer to the Beats in orientation than his colleague Gore Vidal, whom he classified as “a rationalist and an atheist.” In a letter written in 1984, Mailer also revealed that he