

# Literary Legends: The “Daybreak Boys” of the Beat Generation

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This article focuses on the birth of the Beat Generation in the 1950s as a natural reaction to mainstream culture in postwar America. Even though the Beat Generation’s literary productions were initially perceived as (obscene) provocations by allegedly uneducated writers, Beat literature has survived the test of time and is still influential today. The works of the most famous Beats, such as Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, or William S. Burroughs pushed the limits of what might be labeled “adequate” and eradicated censorship in (American) literature.

Keywords: modern and contemporary American literature, Beat Generation, Kerouac, Ginsberg, Dylan.

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## The Beginnings

The *Daybreak Boys* is the title of a collection of essays on the Beats written by Gregory Stephenson, published first in 1990, and republished in 2009. According to the author, he took the title “with kind permission” from John Clellon Holmes’ original title of the manuscript he published in 1952 as *Go*, the first Beat novel. Beyond any immediate connotations or obvious connections to Blake’s (“Introduction”, *Songs of Experience*) or Yeats’ (“The Wild Old Wicked Man”) poetic imagination, this phrase reveals what seems to resist definition, or, since “rebellious” is another proper adjective for the Beats, what makes them so different from one another, but also so much alike. They are all rebels on the road, they are all *Doppelgänger* of their own characters, crawling from the deepest darkness of the age towards the light of the day (in *Go*, Paul Hobbes is the author, Gene Pasternak is Jack Kerouac, the “coiner and captain of Beat”, David Stofsky is Allen Ginsberg, Hart Kennedy is Neal Cassady, Will Dennison is William S. Burroughs, and Albert Ancke

is, naturally, Herbert Huncke).

*Symbolically*, the first Beat novel “resisted” labeling just as the Beats were going to resist norms: the New York publisher, Charles Scribner’s Sons, rejected the title Holmes had originally chosen because it was too similar to a book published in 1951, i.e. *The Built-Up Boys* by Jeremy Kirk (pen name) (Stephenson 1). *Ironically*, the Beats resisted any artificial parallel with the “built-up boys” of the “Lost generation”. Holmes described the Daybreak Boys as “a river-gang on the New York waterfront of the 1840’s” and added that his book was “about a new underground of young people, pioneering the search for what lay ‘at the end of the night’ (a phrase of Kerouac’s)” (qtd. in Stephenson 1).

The “coiner and captain of the Beat” – the phrase appears in the introduction to Kerouac’s article published in *Playboy*, in 1959 (Kerouac 31) – himself lived the life of a “ghost double,” oscillating between the crazy nights spent with the Columbia group and drugs (alcohol, marijuana, morphine and even Benzedrine, which put him once in hospital) and the “sober” days he spent with his parents at home (Charters xi).



Actually, the “captain” coined the phrase “Beat Generation” during what seemed to have been a night of bacchanalian revelry, perfect for an “unsober”, spirited debate with Holmes, the other leader of the group, in 1948, the year they had first met. The two “brother-souls” had a lot more to share than beer and bebop, which made it a lot easier for them to begin their rebellious journey “on the road” to estrangement from the conventional society of postwar America. They were both aspiring writers in their twenties, supported by the women in their lives, and published their first novels in the early 1950s. They were both from New England and had a difficult relationship with their fathers, which drew them closer to their mothers. As writers truthful to their own life stories, they had to use pseudonyms in their autobiographical novels, apparently for legal reasons, but also to symbolize their brotherhood extended beyond the borders of mundane reality.

### The Legacy...

In the first issue of *Beatdom*, published ten years ago, in the summer of 2007, David S. Wills describes the relation between Allen Ginsberg and Bob Dylan as that between two “brothers,” more appropriate a metaphor than the usual “a Jewish father and son,” adding that they “were only fifteen years apart by birth and five by seminal publication” (88). Even though at some point, Ginsberg criticizes Dylan for one of his lines full of that “dopey sentimentality” “Pound was warning against”, just as Pound had criticized Whitman before offering him “A Pact”, and despite the fundamental differences which set them far apart, this “brotherhood” of verse looks now as one of the most successful projects in the history of American literature: (Poe -) Whitman - Pound - Dylan (“Allen Ginsberg Criticizes Bob Dylan (MMP 22)”).

Allen Ginsberg seems to accept this “brotherhood” and tries to define it by tracing it back to Poe and Whitman. In a conversation with a student at Naropa University, he is very explicit in describing Pound as one of the great masters of American poetry and of language and the one “influence” without there would have been no Bob Dylan as we know him today:

I would venture to say, I guess, my feeling is that there would have been no Bob Dylan without Ezra Pound, and until you understand why, in the development of American poetry, how people’s minds worked and how things changed, without the original research and invention made that Pound made, that Williams used, that turned me on, it would not have been that kind of Dylan, see? That’s why it’s important to understand Pound if you want to understand the bones of the thing, if you really want to understand how everything developed historically, how attitudes

and practices developed from one person to another in a kind of transmitted lineage in a way, personal transmissions, and over the radio, and in *Time* magazine, you’d have to go back to Pound, and then, before Pound, you’d have to go back to Whitman, and then to understand Whitman you’d have to go to crazy (Edgar Allan) Poe. So it’s all one beautiful unfoldment of people developing, one upon another, their ideas. And it’s really beautiful when you understand the development, because otherwise you get to make mistakes between mind-obsessions and gut-feelings (which a lot of Beatnik poets did - *do* - including yourself, sir, looking at your poems!). (“Mind, Mouth and Page - 24 (Contention)”)

Nevertheless, the lineage Ginsberg proposes is only half-finished without the *guru* of the Beat Generation himself, namely the same person who recited Kerouac’s “54th Chorus” (Mexico City Blues) at his grave in Edson Cemetery (Lowell, Massachusetts), in the mid-seventies, in the presence of Bob Dylan. It was thus Kerouac’s poetry, not prose, which “woke Bob Dylan to world minstrelry,” for “He was Poet [whose] ear came from reading and music... a romantic ear. His influence is worldwide, not only in spirit, with beat planetary Youth Culture, but poetic, technical.” This voice produced a verse which spoke to all “San Francisco Renaissance poets” in a true “American Idiom.” Dylan’s words on the occasion are enlightening: “*Someone handed me Mexico City Blues in St. Paul in 1959 and it blew my mind.* He [Dylan] said it was the first poetry that spoke his own language” (Ginsberg i-iv).

It is obvious that Ginsberg minimizes his own influence on Dylan, by overrating the influence of Kerouac’s poetry on the one who was to be awarded a Nobel “for having created new poetic expressions within the great American song tradition” (“Bob Dylan - Facts”). However, irrespective of whom we identify as Dylan’s mentor and major influence, it is a fact that he is part of what we could call “the Beat legacy” (Coupe 80). The binding force that keeps together all members of the Beat Generation is poetry written/read/sung/experienced/embodyed in “the American idiom”, and the “local”, to use William Carlos Williams’s words. It is probably all about an attitude advocated by Ginsberg’s own mentor: “In Williams’s case, this attitude toward history and history making took two directions. The first was in his poetry and experimental prose, through his desire to ‘cleanse the language,’ identify an ‘American idiom,’ and establish ‘contact’ with his local environment” (Bremen 132).

The first “contact” Jack Kerouac was fascinated by was that with the sea, the symbol of freedom, a freedom to travel and to write, which was materialized in his first, but certainly not its best novel, *The Sea Is My Brother*. Nevertheless, his first literary attempt was somehow prophetic in the sense that it opened

the way for a kind of brotherhood which made his (certainly!) best novel and “the Beat Generation” possible. In 1944, he met a group of people (Herbert Huncke, Allen Ginsberg, William S. Burroughs, Lucien Carr) who were to become the “nucleus” of the Beat Generation and whom he used as inspiration for several of his characters in *On the Road*. Suffice it to say, that this group of rebel young men of the mid-forties included Allen Ginsberg, probably the most notable *guru* of the Beat Generation and also its *poet laureate*, and William Burroughs, its “ironic mentor” (Charters x–xi).

This brotherhood of the Beats, as a special relationship between “brother-souls,” was patented by John Clellon Holmes in an interview published in 1985 (qtd. in Charters and Charters 4). Holmes, the “Quiet Beat” (Gair 51) is remembered as the one who published the first “Beat Generation” novel, *Go* (initially titled *The Beat Generation*), in 1952 (about the lives of Kerouac, Cassady and Ginsberg) and *The Horn*, the “jazz novel” of the Beat Generation. They were both born on the same day (March 12) and even though Kerouac was older, Holmes eventually became what would generally be called the “big-brother.” After ...stinging resentments, monumental outbursts and jealousies, they remained friends for the rest of their lives. At the end, it was only Holmes with whom Kerouac still felt close. [...] They had been born on the same day, March 12, four years apart, another “eerie correspondence” in their lives. Kerouac was the older of the two, old enough to be Holmes’ big brother, but after the first few months of their friendship it was accepted that John was the steadier brother whom Jack could always turn to for contact and argument, or for a drink, a party, or a place to sleep for the night. (Charters and Charters 4)

Ironically, the most silent of all the Beats, the “Quiet Beat” Holmes was also the one who authored the first attempt to define the “Beat movement” for the public. Although it was not a *Beat manifesto per se*, it was definitely the first in a long row of similar attempts that had what was sometimes called a “manifesto function.” Somehow neglected over time, productions by Baraka, Joans or Kaufman should also be counted among such “attempts.”

While the Beats never produced a “Beat Manifesto” as such, a whole range of Beat texts contain what we might call a manifesto function, as key figures like Holmes, Kerouac, and Ginsberg, in addition to many “minor” Beats, felt themselves compelled to define and redefine their aesthetic and social practices and to state and restate their opposition to American conservatism after World War II. To reevaluate Beat writing in terms of its engagement with the international avant-garde is to reassess the role played by African American writers in the Beat movement as a whole. (Fazzino 65)

Holmes’s *Times* article brings for the first time to the eyes of the public a whole generation that could have been easily and mistakenly taken for a group of rebellious, debauched, and deviant people. Starting from the face of a (marijuana smoking) 18-year-old Californian girl whose picture was published in a magazine under the heading: ‘Youth. Mother Is Bugged at Me,’ Holmes identifies a set of positive traits, manifest on the faces of all those who were portrayed in the press of the time as young thieves, alcoholics, or addicts, traits which made their faces look “bright, level realistic, challenging” (10). *La génération perdue*, the generation that found its adjective after World War I, was resourceful enough to accept labeling and even take pride in it, but the generation that came out of World War II, to use Holmes’s words the generation that “could get a drink easily once it [World War II] was over,” was in great need of an adjective to represent its “uniform, general quality” (10). According to Holmes, this generation, “moved by a desperate craving for affirmative beliefs”, namely for cataphatic truths in a world full of negative conventions, shares in whatever the term *beat* might refer to.

The origins of the word ‘beat’ are obscure, but the meaning is only too clear to most Americans. More than mere weariness, it implies the feeling of having been used, of being raw. It involves a sort of nakedness of mind, and, ultimately, of soul; a feeling of being reduced to the bedrock of consciousness. In short, it means being undramatically pushed up against the wall of oneself. A man is beat whenever he goes for broke and wagers the sum of his resources on a single number; and the young generation has done that continually from early youth. (Holmes 10)

“Beatness” looks more like the effect than the cause of the “instinctive individualism” of the members of the postwar generation, who had been living in a world dominated by monstrous political projects, war, death, under the emerging light of what was to be referred to as “late capitalism.” Even though they lived against a somewhat similar background, the Beats were not just another “lost generation” reloaded, coming back to life after a second world war, following naturally after a first world war, but they are essentially a step forward, a new generation taking for granted the “shattered ideals” of their predecessors. They ignore the “ruins” and they drink because they are curious, not because they want to make a point or because they are disillusioned. Moreover, “unlike the Lost Generation, which was occupied with the loss of faith, the Beat Generation is becoming more and more occupied with the need for it” (Holmes 19).

It is that faith which is potent enough to survive outside the forms of organized “religion”, that invention of the Roman-Catholic Church (Derrida



71–72), outside the constraints forced upon the soul by religious systems, in search for compassion and a rewarding *katabasis*. This perspective certainly explains some of Kerouac's (in *Visions of Gerard*, *The Dharma Bums* or *Big Sur*) or Ginsberg's ('Howl') experiments with spirituality, as the answer to life's most stimulating questions: "...its ability to keep its eyes open, and yet avoid cynicism; its ever-increasing conviction that the problem of modern life is essentially a spiritual problem; and that capacity for sudden wisdom which people who live hard and go far, possess, are assets and bear watching. And, anyway, the clear, challenging faces are worth it" (Holmes 22). Buddhism provided the Beats with the perfect tools they needed to enhance (subjective) spirituality and to resist the temptations of mainstream concerns of postwar-American society. Nevertheless, at least Kerouac's (shallow) vision of Buddhism is deeply (and paradoxically) indebted to his Roman-Catholic background.

#### Instead of a conclusion

If the novel allegedly gave birth to the Beat Generation and helped the Beats find a way to the literary stage, poetry coagulated the movement and provided the Beats with the energy to resist the decades to come and fulfilled their militant, anti-mainstream, anti-status quo aspirations. Some commentators trace the birth of the San Francisco Renaissance, and thus of Beat poetry, back to 1955, October 13 or October 7, when literature met life at the Six Gallery in San Francisco, in an abandoned auto repair shop, where six young poets each presented by Kenneth Rexroth read to some 150 people. These young poets were Allen Ginsberg, Michael McClure, Gary Snyder, Philip Whalen and Philip Lamantia (see Davidson 3; Cándida Smith 862). Poetry, in fact the criminal case filed against Lawrence Ferlinghetti and his City Lights bookstore sales clerk for selling pornographic material, i.e. Ginsberg's "Howl", encouraged publishers to promote Jack Kerouac's Beat novel *On the Road* (863–64) and people to buy it. Moreover, poetry kept the "Beat" heart beating through time and helped establish a bloodline which became the mechanism behind what could be referred to as an all-American project: Poe, Whitman, and Pound, seconded by Allen Ginsberg and Bob Dylan.

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