Sounds of Dark Avenues
*Sinclair Beiles and the Beat Generation*

Beat literature and the "avant-garde arts movement and bohemian subculture" (Skerl, 2004: 1) which accompanied it took place in the 1950s and early 1960s, emerging from the particular cultural climate of the postwar period and then merging into the political New Left and hippie counterculture. A rough timeline of the Beat 'movement' would perhaps begin with the meeting of Jack Kerouac, William Burroughs and Allen Ginsberg in New York in the mid 1940s, the inclusion of Neal Cassady, Herbert Huncke and Lucien Carr in their circle of friends shortly afterwards, and Kerouac's writing of *On The Road* in 1951**,** though it was only published in 1957. There was the opening of City Lights in San Francisco in 1953, a bookstore out of which Lawrence Ferlinghetti began publishing Beat poetry. Following the legendary first reading of his poem 'Howl for Carl Solomon' at the Six Gallery in San Francisco, Allen Ginsberg's *Howl* was published by City Lights in 1956. This signaled the coming together of the New York group of writers with the San Francisco Renaissance poets who had been thinking and writing along similar lines since the late 1940s – Philip Whalen, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Gary Snyder and others.

Somewhere around this time the Beats became famous in America, although by that time Ginsberg was already living in Paris, as was Burroughs when *Naked Lunch* was eventually published. From 1958 there was a proliferation of Beat publications – anthologies, collaboratives and journals. The 'peak' of the Beat movement, though culturally explosive, must have seemed quite delayed, perhaps even detached, to its key figures. In many ways the revolution had long since taken place in their personal lives, and their writing, which was only coming to been seen as 'literature' years later. By the late 1950s rock'n'roll music was about to launch a cultural revolution of its own, the civil rights movement was underway, and the Beat 'scene', initially so firmly located on the two opposite coasts of America, had dodged even those geographical boundaries, or found those furthest points still not far enough, its members dispersing in Europe or heading for the east. Burroughs, having spent time in Tangier, moved to Paris, as did

Ginsberg with his partner Peter Orlovsky, where they were soon joined by Gregory Corso. It was at this juncture that the slightly realigned New York group met Beiles.

These dates and localities are best used to provide points of reference rather than confinements, outlining the landmarks of the 'Beat moment' as Joyce Johnson describes it in *Minor Characters*:

> In 1957, Allen Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac seemed to come from nowhere, though they had been writing their poetry and fiction underground since the beginning of the Fifties… powerful desires for a freer life were suddenly set loose by words with compelling, irresistible rhythms. The Beat writers found an audience grown so ripe that the impact was immediate. (Johnson, 1994: xvii)

But while setting out to describe "a movement [which] lasted five years", Johnson writes about a great deal more, reaching into the past and the future in her 'Beat memoir'. Developing a far more 'open' concept of Beat literature, scholars like Ronna Johnson and Nancy Grace, whose work deals mostly with women Beat writers (who, like Johnson, were recognised as legitimate literary voices even later than their male counterparts) understand Beat literature as stretching across two or three generations of writers (Skerl, 2004: 2). Others see the Beat "breakthrough" in the 1950s as fuelled by "poets and artists from several generations of revolt" (Silberman, c.1992**:** 4). Neither view is invalid, and perhaps this is indicative of the difficulties in isolating the Beat writers in any meaningful way.

Studies like *Reconstructing the Beats*, edited by Jennie Skerl, are interesting because they suggest new, more varied approaches, and more inclusive ways of looking at the Beats. *Reconstructing the Beats* explores various ways of 're-historicizing' the Beats, that is, breaking away from the endlessly repeated bits of romanticised Beat 'legend' and looking instead at social and cultural continuities and ideas from which the Beats emerged, and which, in turn, took place within and because of the Beat movement. Skerl's section on 'recovering' the Beats deals with black and female writers marginalised in the American Beat context, but the ideas informing these essays also allow for potential recoveries, or rediscoveries, of other Beat writers left out of previous studies, even previous conceptions of Beat literature. This suggests the possibility of a different, perhaps fuller appreciation and study of the international aspects of the Beat movement. In the section

titled ‘re-visioning’, new ways of reading the Beats are explored, with emphasis on cross-disciplinary readings and explorations of the relationships between the Beats and the art and music of their time. These approaches are useful because they allow for the inclusion of otherwise marginalised Beat writers like Beiles, and also because they broaden the scope of studies on Beat writing which otherwise might exhaust themselves going over the same ground. Such frameworks allow, for instance, for definitions of Beat literature based to a greater degree on the writing itself, and not just its relationship to its socio-historical context. Just as the word ‘Beat’ shifts from describing a state to indicating a way of being, Beat literature attempts to effect this shift in writing itself, so that the writer’s ideas are reflected not just in the choice of content, but in the form as well. For the American Beats, this means an awareness of being American, an awareness of being different, and particularly an awareness of American speech and writing rhythms as different from the British English which was then the only English taught literature could acceptably use. The result is a literature with “nothing English about it – pure American” (Williams in Corso, 2002: 219). An example of this would be Ginsberg’s Whitman-esque metre in poems like *Howl*, although Ginsberg’s use of the reader’s entire breath per image-crammed line results in a faster, more frantic pace than Whitman’s, hence Neeli Cherkovski’s apt term “Whitmanic” (Cherkovski, 1988: 92). Reaching back to Whitman while pointedly bypassing Eliot and his generation has to do with egalitarian ideals as opposed to Eliot’s embodiment of ‘high art’ as well as with a subjective preference for Whitman’s openness as opposed to Eliot’s uptightness.

This rejection of ‘high art’ (through their seeking out of an ‘authentic’ language, a ‘live’ writing, a more direct relationship between experience and poetry and the unprecedented, self-conscious ‘newness’ and innovation of their work) involves the Beats in some of the debates taking place in the arts at around the same time. In particular, the ongoing debate between Harold Rosenberg and Clement Greenberg about abstract expressionism holds some points relevant to Beat writing. Rosenberg’s stance in relation to Greenberg’s echoes Williams’ responses to Eliot’s poetry (“that it would set American poetry back by twenty years” (Holmes, 1981: 5). Rosenberg sees in abstract expressionism an attempt at breaking down the divisions between art and life, which the Beats also attempt to do,

whereas Greenberg argues for a formal understanding of not only the abstract expressionists, but of art in general, and maintains a distinction between what he terms 'avant-garde and kitsch' (Greenberg, 1986). Rejecting middle-class ideas of 'good taste' the Beats embrace urban poor subcultures and rural folk lore and life, in America as well as abroad, not as art or kitsch but as part of life. The attempt to break down this distinction in their own work is not based on any quirk of intellectualism but on a desire for what they considered to be an ideal of open, authentic, essential, 'real' literature.

Beat writing is not 'art for art's sake' as most schools of modernist art are, but it is concerned with the dynamics, methods and aesthetics of writing; that is, in Beat literature the process of writing and the sound and 'feel' of a finished text are sometimes as important as the meaning of the text. The flow of words can be as much part of the meaning and aesthetic of the text as the narrative. Beat ideas like 'first thought best thought' and Kerouac's 'spontaneous prose' are of a similar nature to Rosenberg's concept of 'action painting' whereby the canvas becomes "an arena in which to act", with the result that "what was to go on the canvas was not a picture but an event" (Rosenberg, 1982: 2). The Beats never strive for complete abstraction, and for the most part they maintain a sentimental/romantic attachment to their subjects. But perhaps Burroughs's prose style from *Naked Lunch* onwards and the cut-up method it originates from tend towards the abstract. Burroughs intended the cut-up technique to open up other, or further, or 'underlying' meanings of texts. But formally he creates a new technique, a new way of presenting text and of reading it. The meaning of a novel by Burroughs is most likely to be grasped not from examination of the fragments which constitute it, but by looking at the work as a whole. Burroughs achieves this innovation in meaning-making by abstracting a text in a way – by cutting it up randomly into its elements – words, lines, fragments, sounds, images – and then putting it back together, unconcerned about the meaning originally held by the words, but open to new meaning which might emerge from the new whole. Translated into art, this is a process of taking apart what makes a painting – colour, line, space, texture, and the action of painting – and putting these back together. The individual squiggles of paint in a Pollock mean little, but all together as

painting they manage to convey something of a mood, a moment, an aesthetic, an experience.

The Beats were probably clearer on what they were against than what they were for. The niggling uncertainty about outcomes and alternatives which accompanies the robust fullness of experience in most Beat works has often been read as a fault, as a predictable and therefore flattening aspect of their writing, or an inevitable side-effect of their naïve world view. But Beat writing is not as simple as postwar resentment ridden with traitor's guilt for doubting the American Dream; nor is it just the adolescent phase of 1960s counterculture. In 'This is the Beat Generation' John Clellon Holmes points out that Beat writing comes out of a particular social context, that it is not isolated from the entire generation of people which it writes about, for and to. The writing comes from within this moment in society, from a perspective if not shared, than at least shaped by common experience. For him the 'Beat Generation' is not the handful of writers but the entire generation produced by the same set of social and political circumstances, regardless of what their response to or ultimate stance on those circumstances was. Holmes describes this generation as young people who, growing up with the depression and the war,

> had intimate experience with the nadir and zenith of human conduct, and little time for much that came between. The peace they inherited was only as secure as the next headline. It was a cold peace. Their own lust for freedom, and the ability to live at a pace that kills (to which the war had adjusted them), led to black markets, bebop, narcotics, sexual promiscuity, hucksterism, and Jean-Paul Sartre. The beatness set in later. (Holmes, 1952: 2)

From the start, Beat writing was noticeable against its literary background because of what it was about as well as how it was written. The media and most of American society easily equated Beat writers with the 'beatnik' scene, by which was understood drug abuse, rampant promiscuity, lack of personal hygiene, refusal to hold a steady job, and all manner of other arbitrary threats to "youth, decorum, right-thinking, 'proper' speech" (Lee, 1996: 5), and the American way of life in general. This popular image does have much in common with the subjects and settings of Beat writing, which were a by-product of the American Dream in any case, but it draws just as much from other unrelated sources. The iconic film image of *Rebel Without a Cause* in particular becomes a hold-all image for anything rebellious, though what someone like the earnest, bespectacled

Ginsberg of the 1950s might have to do with the decidedly unliterary hero of that film is anybody's guess.

The title of the film starring James Dean was taken from a 1944 study by psychiatrist Robert M. Lindner in which he discussed and sought to explain male youth rebellion and disruptive social behaviour through a case study of a 'criminal psychopath'. It provided a rather limited explanation of socio- and psychopathology as the etiology of a social phenomenon which continued to disrupt the models western society created for itself beyond the postwar period. Incidentally, Nelson Algren, who is in many ways a direct predecessor of the Beats, provides in his novels a much more insightful depiction of the disaffected, desperate rebel and his origins. What the Beats implicitly argue, and what Lindner dismisses and Algren largely ascribes to socio-economic factors, is that the 'cause' which seems ineffable to the rebel and nonexistent to the rest of society is the fact that power, control and restraint permeate every part of social and even personal life. In that context, the normative and restricting conventions entrenched in society required a gross aberration to be shaken off or at least challenged. For the 'Beat Generation' – the generation out of which the Beat writers emerged – the cause was diffuse, not nonexistent; hence the rebellion against 'everything'.

McCarthyism and other political factors in the USA, like Apartheid in South Africa, served to politicise and pathologise many aspects of social and private life, and Beiles was as keenly aware of and influenced by this in the South African context as the American Beats were by their prohibitively normalised society.

> Apartheid…could not have functioned as effectively as it did, without the utilisation by those who applied it of a politics of normality conducted and perpetuated at the level of identity. A wide variety of different forms of deviance came into prominence under the apartheid regime…apartheid was particularly adept at 'pathologizing' those deviances from the racial, ethnic, gender and sexual-orientation norms it promoted and idealised. (Hook, 2002: 9)

The American Beat writers and Beiles come to Paris and to Beat literature from backgrounds which are not all that disparate despite their geographical distance and outwardly dissimilar political circumstances. Their personal experiences of isolation and differentness within society stem from growing up in the same type of culturally

constrained environment, as does their shared perception that the political permeates every aspect of life, that being so pervasive in daily life makes it easily disguised as or mistaken for something else – something 'natural' or 'right' or 'normal'. What the American Dream and Apartheid have in common, in terms of society and culture, is their ability to make their subjects believe that this enforced way of life is not only the right way, but the only way. Seeing through such an ideological lie brings about the realization of how much of social reality is constructed, how much people's lives are informed by the needs and strategies of the system. Consider, for instance, 'I Have Seen the Light and it is My Mind' by Harold Norse:

> the State has decided: who I am to love, to hate
> what I'm to do in bed, with what and to whom
>
> the State has made a military coup in bed
> stop screaming: the world is a better place
>
> we are now going to sing the virtues of mass murder
> we will follow our religious leaders
>
> our feelings are stamped: State Property
> pornography is practiced by God
> who has raped more souls than you can shake a prick at (1-9)

Norse was one of the American Beat writers who spent much of his life in Europe; he was homosexual, and thus socially marginalised and personally in direct conflict with popularly enforced and legally accepted ideas of being 'normal'. Ostensibly this is the main cause of the poem's challenge, and of his resentment at the state's interference in his personal life. But the poem might very well be about Apartheid South Africa – it is precisely this sort of universality without vagueness which South African writers opposed to the system they lived under struggled to achieve. "The state has decided: who I am to love, to hate" brings to mind Apartheid legislation of sex and marriage officially, and, just as Norse decries from a different perspective, unofficially as well. "What I'm to do in bed, with what and to whom" points out that the attempt at controlling sexuality, even if just through upholding certain norms and ostracizing anyone who doesn't behave in accordance with them, brings about proscriptions and prescriptions about identity and the body which have impact beyond the sexual behaviour of individuals. It is the sort of 'family values' ideology which builds a white picket fence around itself and calls everybody on the outside a freak.

Norse is also concerned with the untruths propagated by the state in order to maintain useful ideologies in different contexts – not necessarily wartime propaganda, but an agenda masked as a concern for welfare nevertheless, and its tendency to dismiss criticism with denial – "stop screaming: the world is a better place" (4). He criticises the way in which people are supposed to (and often do) believe what they are told by those in power without assessing or questioning, even when this leads to obviously 'wrong' situations and horribly ironic discourse around them, as in "we are now going to sing the virtues of mass murder" (5). He also critiques the double standards and hypocrisies of society, and especially of those who have religious or political power, hiding behind accepted absolutes like 'God' or 'Truth' to practice the exploits and exploitations they preach against. The 'God' Norse accuses of 'spiritual rape' and 'practicing pornography' is the God of respectability and 'the American way of life', the God of condoned, ingrained prejudice and discrimination in the name of propriety, the God created by the people who insist on his blessing of their every questionable action.

Norse expresses one of the main concerns of the Beat writers, something that had become so obvious and terrible to them, but which others considered to be their antagonistic causeless rebellion: "our feelings are stamped: State Property" (7). For the Beats freedom from such control is one of the challenges informing their literature, like liberating language from its 'proper' lifelessness, and literature itself from the academies and middle-class front parlour bookshelves. Their emotions, thoughts and actions must, through their writing, be reclaimed from the state with, as Norse implies, its network of church and education, 'culture' and society, norms and values.

A 1958 anthology entitled *Protest: The Beat Generation and the Angry Young Men* carries the following blurb: "rebels without a cause, they are shocked by nothing – defying society, conventions, the world, the 'beatniks' and the 'angries' speak their minds" (Feldman & Gartenberg: 1958). The moral outrage at the first Beat texts gives a good indication of the time they were writing in, the incredibly conformist 'square' era of the 1950s. The horrified and sensationalised reactions to Beat writing add greatly to its

momentum and help create the legendary 'Beat moment', but it is their actual writing which made longer-lasting impact. What is it about Beat writing, besides the unrestrained subject matter and the public menace its authors allegedly personified, that was so different, so innovative, and so important?

Ginsberg's 'America', originally published in *Howl and Other Poems* in 1956, begins:

> America I've given you all and now I'm nothing.
> America two dollars and twentyseven cents January 17, 1956
> I can't stand my own mind. (1-3)

What makes the poem instantly recognizable as Ginsberg's is the immediacy of the address, the sincerity. Already by the third line he states, unashamedly, though troubled, that "I can't stand my own mind" (3). The direct address and the long, solid lines approximate plain speech and not traditional poetic diction. The poem takes the form of an attempted conversation with 'America', the poet getting increasingly annoyed as his questions and provocations receive no response. He states that

> I refuse to give up my obsession.
> America stop pushing I know what I'm doing.
> America the plum blossoms are falling.
> I haven't read the newspapers for months, everyday somebody goes on trial for murder
> America I feel sentimental about the Wobblies.
> America I used to be communist when I was a kid I'm not sorry.
> I smoke marijuana every chance I get.
> I sit in my house for days on end and stare at the roses in the closet.
> When I go to Chinatown I get drunk and never get laid.
> My mind is made up there is going to be trouble.
> You should have seen me reading Marx.
> My psychoanalyst thinks I'm perfectly right.
> I won't say the Lord's Prayer.
> I have mystical visions and cosmic vibrations.
> America I still haven't told you what you did to Uncle Max after he came over from Russia
> (23-37)

Here is the source of the outrage: obsessions, communism, marijuana, no work ethic, refusal to say the Lord's Prayer, visions and vibrations – all manner of un-American beatnik activities, and, implicit in "I still haven't told you" (37), there is more to come. Ginsberg is not scared or embarrassed, he insists that "I know what I'm doing" (25). But despite the aggression of the poem, Ginsberg is not just attacking 'America'. It is not quite a simple us-against-them statement. The fundamental difference between this poem and, for instance, 'next to of course god america i' by e.e.cummings, to which it is readily

comparable, is that despite moments of scathing sarcasm 'America' as a whole is not a parody, as cummings's poem is. Ginsberg has too much of his intimate self invested in it. America is part of his life in the same way that he insists on his right to be part of America, and his accusation is also his confession. Despite all the things he shoves in America's face, all the things he thinks and does and is, despite his anger, Ginsberg refuses to let go, to sever himself from the America he writes to (and from). He knows he is a misfit but he does not slink away; rather his "mind is made up there is going to be trouble" (32). He insists on his right to a disruptive presence, uncowed by all the norms and values he is violating.

Ginsberg has shed all the conventions and trappings which America (or anywhere else for that matter) thought it could use to control or censor people like the Beats. He writes poetry which is unlike poetry considered 'proper' at the time, at least by conventional readers. It doesn't rhyme, there are no similes or metaphors; things either are or they aren't, although there is some allusion; no symbolic imagery, no springtime rapture or lovelorn angst, although "the plum blossoms are falling" (26) and "I sit in my house for days on end and stare at the roses in the closet" (33). The conventional methods of understanding no longer apply, but without subscribing to them Ginsberg still creates an effective – expressive, provocative, meaningful – poem.

Along with the conventions of poetry, Ginsberg flouts every kind of propriety, taboo and social nicety. As much as he yells obscenities at America, he hurls them at himself. He calls himself a "queer" ('America', l88), a "madman" ('Malest Cornifici Tuo Catullo', l1), a 'dopefiend' ("heroin dripping in my veins/ eyes and ears full of marijuana" ('Paterson', l13), a 'commie' ("I used to be a communist when I was a kid I'm not sorry" ('America', l30). In each instance, he uses the term as straight society uses it, but what he means by it is what it means to him, his personal experience.

Ginsberg's characteristic way of mixing public and personal can be understood as a way of merging art and life. His attack from the very bottom of the social ladder, although he does not entirely believe in this designation, his use of the negative labels placed on him

as a weapon against society are effectively an expression of beatness – of rock-bottom outcastness – becoming Beatness in the way he uses them. Ginsberg's relentless outpouring style, his long lines with no pauses, his statement after statement, accusation after confession, with no space for ambiguities, conveys a sense of certainty, a confidence perhaps liberated by desperation. Especially in his first anthology Ginsberg "goes for broke and wagers the sum of his resources on a single number" (Holmes, 1952: 2), creating an all-or-nothing immensity of poetry, a 'first thought best thought' necessity of an aesthetic.

Lawrence Ferlinghetti's 'Meet Miss Subways' from *A Coney Island of the Mind* (1958) is very different from Ginsberg's work, yet it is as definitive an illustration of Beat poetry. The subject of the poem is "Miss Subways/ of 1957" (1-2) who can be seen "riding the Times Square Shuttle/ back and forth/ at four in the morning" (5-7).

Unlike Ginsberg, Ferlinghetti does not accuse or confront, and he makes no sweeping statements. His is a humble poem about an unremarkable city character. Ferlinghetti breaches convention by applying one of the finer literary arts to a Times Square vagrant. He playfully, though sadly, calls her "Miss Subways" (1), an affront to the 'Miss America' icon of youth and femininity. Ferlinghetti's language is straightforward, and his imagery is as city-bound as his subject:

> You can meet Miss Subways
> You can see Miss Subways
> of 1957
> wearing sad slacks
> and matching handbag
> and cruising thru the cars
> and hanging on
> with beat black arms
> a black butt in a black hand
>
> And the iron cars
> shunting on forever
> into death and darkness (19-30)

It is bleak portrait, but Ferlinghetti's final destination of "death and darkness" (30) does not seem hysterical or apocalyptic. Death is the inevitable destination but heading towards it there are these curious 'beat lives', bleak but "hanging on" (25). The poem

eloquently and sympathetically conveys the sense that to the author, people like 'Miss Subways' are real and interesting, and not the ghosts of cities other people would rather forget.

Ferlinghetti allows himself freedom with the language, not only in the use of "thru" (24) instead of 'through', or "fiftycentsise" (10) as a new sort of adjective, but also in the easy use of repetition, the 'spoken' quality of the lines, the repeated 'and's which seem so carelessly uncrafted but actually build up the rhythm of the poem. Ferlinghetti's vision of the city and of this strange woman, a product and, to the writer, integral part of the urban landscape, is Beat – out of the entire city he finds a black woman continually riding the subway to Times Square and back at four in the morning to write about. He does not pity the woman or laugh at her, he does not see her as a casualty of society or a threat to it, he just sees her and writes about her. There is no context provided for her presence in the subway carriage, or in the city, nor is the poet's perception (and presence, in the subway or in the poem) of her framed by any explanation as to his motives or thoughts. Yet the impacting immediacy of the text is gentled by the somehow quiet, early-morning-in-a-supposedly-sleeping-city tone, swayed by the tired almost-regular rhythm of a moving subway carriage. The flow of the poem seems, like Miss Subways's destination-less journey, endless; the encounter between the poet and the woman lingers beyond the text, yet it is almost insignificant. In the anonymous but familiar space of the subway, they seem able to carry on going forever, barely connected but for the stretched moment in time, a random encounter continued as long as she remains on the train and he continues to write of her strange, frank aimlessness.

Beiles's 'Dear Dolly' (*Ashes of Experience*, 1969) contains both the unconventional subject matter and the direct expression which characterise Beat poems. In it he asks Dolly to

> leave your home
> To join me eating salt herring from
> newspapers
> On the banks of industrial rivers
> To walk the streets of great cities
> To pick up businessmen and enough money
> to buy a pair of stockings

And offer poems to the grocer in return for a
packet of olives
Listen to music in record shops
Teach English to lonely men in cafes
Carry a single rose given to you by the
flower seller
Refuse to visit your sick mother
Refuse to pray.
Have my child
A pale starving child
Which has to be sent away.
Dolly I do not know the smell of fragrant
soaps
I do not wear underpants
I am moved by the smell of petrol
Sheltering from the rain in garages
By Hungarian whores who offer me four dollars
By Suzanne who pawned her jewellery to take me
To Greece when I went blind from kif (2-28)

He wants Dolly to leave home, become a prostitute, reject her family, forsake her religion, have an illegitimate child. In addition he neither washes nor wears underpants, and smokes enough kif to make him blind. Dolly must be quite certain by now that he is one of those beatniks her mother warned her about. There is an element of irony in this invitation, in that the speaker must be aware it will not easily be taken up, but beyond that it suggests an unashamed pathos, an unapologetic laying bare of everything he is. There is also an ironic romanticism, characteristic of Beat literature, a world-weary acknowledgement of the silliness of one's romantic notions in a modern setting, but an unwillingness to give them up, as in "the banks of industrial rivers" as the choice of venue for "eating salt herring from /newspapers". Beiles rambles on, becoming increasingly weary of the sort of life he proposes:

I have seen too many olive trees
Too much dust
Too many dawns and sunsets
Too many policemen shifting me shivering
from park benches.
Dolly we won't take to the roads any more.
We'll shelter in libraries
You'll mend my socks in the British Council
Travel about all day in the underground to
keep warm (36-44)

As Beiles becomes more forlorn, the poem's inherent irony topples over into farce – he cannot possibly be serious about this, and yet he is, in a way, perfectly sincere. Writing from the same bohemian deviant social position as Ginsberg does in 'America' (and, incidentally, suggesting the same strategy as Ferlinghetti's Miss Subways of riding the subway to keep warm), Beiles relies on irony and humour to stave off a confrontation with square society which he would inevitably lose. In many of his poems he parodies straight society, but just as often he laughs at himself. It is sometimes difficult to tell whether he means what he says or if he even cares about the things he is momentarily sentimental about. Throughout *Ashes of Experience* his fallback is an 'I don't care anyway' attitude. At times this is poignant, at times infuriatingly juvenile, but for the most part effective in allowing him to exclude himself from worldly or even personal concerns.

'An Invitation', also from *Ashes of Experience*, is similar to 'Dear Dolly' but less playful and with a deeper, darker undertone:

> When your voice
> Sounds of dark avenues
> And parks
> Breathing with mysterious hoodlums
> When the last rattling tram
> Has frozen
> And hangs in icicles from the eaves
> When your heart no longer stands
> On a streetcorner
> With feverish eyes
> Stamping its boots
> When the traffic lights have stopped
> And you are through with calculating
> Forgetting your train journeys
> And timetables
> Come to me
> With your switchblade knife.
> We'll climb the spire of the townhall
> Together
> And carve our names on the moon (1-20)

The ironic humour and overplayed pitifulness of 'Dear Dolly' are gone. In their place is a romanticised but real desperation, a sense of having gone beyond the frantic attempts at living on the fringes of the established world and found a real, livable yet symbolic space

'beyond' the marginal. This poem inhabits a similar space to Ferlinghetti's 'Miss Subways', a nocturnal city space, public in the sense of having nowhere private to go, familiar almost to the point of being home-like to those who frequent it.

The invitation of the poem is extended to someone still struggling to remember train timetables, still standing on streetcorners in search of something, by the speaker who has found a sense of self on the other side of societal margins. The poem seems to be written from the social and psychological space somehow symbolised by the town's night 'space'. The scenes Beiles describes are not like the list of joyfully wayward activities of 'Dear Dolly'. Instead, they are symbolic gestures like "carve our names on the moon" (20) or metaphorical acts like leaving one's heart standing on a street corner "with feverish eyes/ stamping its boots"(10). There is the implication that the addressee is already 'beat' in the colloquial sense, and that what Beiles is proposing is a move beyond this transient outcast life (which he sees as a process of becoming, an acquisition of experience or value, suggested by lines like "when your voice/ sounds of dark avenues" (1-2), to a metaphorical, romantic permanence ("we'll climb the spire of the townhall/ together/ and carve our names on the moon" (20-22) – Beat in the literary sense.

The simple neologism of "streetcorner" (10) from 'street corner' somehow describes this space, and signals the Beat understanding of the outcast populace and of the urban street, the insight turning a liminal space into a venue for interaction. The 'nowhere' streetcorner is transformed into a destination, a designation, and an event all in one in a process begun by the characters on the corner and their activity, but completed through the act of writing which recognises and names it. A street corner is the place formed when two streets intersect; a streetcorner is something entirely different – it is a particular place where "your heart no longer stands" (8) "stamping its boots" (10).

The watcher's perception of the street and its activity, the awareness of private moments in a public space, the fact that "many things happen on streetcorners" (1) is expressed by Beiles in 'Street Corners':

> Lovers part with a kiss
> Salesmen smooth down their hair

And straighten their ties
Cloth manufacturers stare
At the hair on the napes
Of schoolteacher's necks
Blind musicians play accordions
Little boys hand out yellow leaflets
Shop assistants straighten their green skirts
And old dogs on leashes relax and take a piss.
Oh my heart. (2-12)

What Beiles is fascinated by, and what he captures in the poem through a direct, simple style, is the private moments people have in public. The busy street corner is so vast, so full, so public and anonymous that it becomes private to its regular pedestrians who are caught out of role, in between identities. Because everyone is busy performing their little unnoticed, even unconscious, actions, no one will notice if someone adjusts their appearance ("salesmen smooth down their hair/ and straighten their ties") or pays undue, intimate attention to that of others ("cloth manufacturers stare /at the hair on the napes /of schoolteacher's necks"), but for the observant poet who is already in his role when watching the street and writing about it.

The poem is full of motion and colour, and written with a fleeting tenderness for those who briefly walk through it on their way to somewhere else. It is based on the public/private nature of a city space, and the poet's vantage point is crucial to the poem's construction: he is with the people on the street, but separate from them. While they are busy he is idle, but his idleness allows him to observe and produce the poem – to be productive. He sees their every move but is himself unobserved, not because he is hiding but because he is camouflaged, in the crowd but not part of it, present but distanced. Beyond noting his affection for the scene ("oh my heart") he cannot write himself into it – because of his role as observer he is apart, and because he is apart he writes rather than engaging. If he were to join in the bustle, he could no longer see it; the subject matter as well as the vantage point would be lost, and there would be no poem.

In a review of *Ashes of Experience* Gray states that: "one finds in Beiles the literal, lively individuality of one who tries it all and comes back recklessly uncritical and careless. Beiles, to use his own terms, writes poetry by getting burned and reviving" (Gray, 1970:

112). This sums up the tone of *Ashes of Experience*, and suggests an attitude and a writing dynamic which can be traced throughout the course of Beiles's career. What Gray terms Beiles's 'carelessness' is his ability to put down everything as nothing more and nothing less than experience, at best a poem and at worst abandoned notes. It is the sort of carelessness which comes of rejecting the system and everything it tells you to care about, to depend on. It is a Beat carelessness, one which comes of being careworn, not indifferent.

Gray notes the Beat qualities of *Ashes*, but he suggests that they are influences rather than original features of the work. He writes that

> Beiles borrows and converts literary methods from his underground mates of various 'bolgias': Burroughs, Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg are behind the romantic wandering and the absorbing of local-colour quality of his life and output with its pattern of 'stoned' appreciation; Lawrence Ferlinghetti is there in the Prevert-inspired prose poems. (Gray, 1970: 112)

For some reason it does not occur to Gray that Beiles might write like this of his own accord. One would have to do a lot more than just read Kerouac or Ginsberg to write like them, and it is doubtful whether Beat technique can be acquired through osmosis, so it is unlikely that having breathed the same Beat Hotel air as Burroughs explains Beiles's style. Similarly, it is difficult to believe that producing a book by Gray's account "hedonistic, outrageous and joyful all at once" (1970: 113) can be learnt, yet Gray insists on Beiles's debt to other writers while praising the vitality of his work.

In his seminal essay on Beat literature, 'Unscrewing the Locks', Holmes sets out to discuss the following matters regarding the Beat Generation writers: "Who were they? Where did they come from? Were they significant? Did they make any difference? Above all, have they become *safe* enough…for us to confront what they were saying so insistently [?] (Holmes, 1981: 5). It is worthwhile following Holmes's discussion, inconclusive though it is, all the way through, in order to better understand Beat writing from the inside, from its own perspective, and to look at Beiles's poetry in relation to this. Holmes's article does not set out to explain, with proof, what Beat writing is, but rather

he attempts to write, intuitively, what it means, and in this approach there seems to be a great deal of unquantifiable 'authentic' truth.

Holmes states that "I take this movement to embrace all those writers who rejected the formalism, conservatism and 'classicism' that [T.S.] Eliot's influence grafted on American writing; who went back to essential sources…to be renewed" (Holmes, 1981: 6). The important thing here is the rejection of formal and conservative constraints simultaneous with a looking to the past for renewal. This is not just a straightforward rebellion against the old, but an awareness of one's historical and literary past. Like the other Beats, Beiles goes back to his own essential sources. He draws from the Romantic poets, not only in his sensibilities but also in his later use closet drama adapted from Byron and Shelley. His use of verse monologue and merging of dramatic text and poetry in *Sacred Fix*, *Tales* and later works suggest the influences of the Greek tragedies, Shakespeare, Milton and Goethe.

Holmes quotes Charles Olson: "verse now, 1950, if it is to go ahead, if it is to be of *essential* use, must, I take it, catch up and put into itself certain laws and possibilities of the breath, of the breathing of the man who writes as well as of his listenings" (Olson in Holmes, 1981: 7). How is poetry to be of essential use? It must be of importance both on and off the page. It must leave its designated place in culture and become relevant, not to art but to life, not to study but to the moment, not to the poet's books but to the poet himself. To be of essential use poetry must close the gap between art and life; it must make itself inseparable from life and impossible to shut into the world of art. Poetry which is not of essential use is artificial; it is not authentic. Beat poetry, essential poetry, comes from experience, and is real, sincere, though not fixed. It might change sentiments mid-line, it might not care, but it is true to itself. It is not artificial because its meaning dictates its form (because part of its meaning is the poet's response to his subject and his approach to his poem). This is what Olson means by "the breathing of the man who writes as well as of his listenings." One cannot separate the constant sound of one's breathing from everything else one hears. One cannot separate one's perception, or presence, from what one sees to describe, and one certainly cannot separate oneself from

the act of writing. In Beat poetry there is no third-person detachment, no distance. This appears as Ginsberg's preoccupation with his own mind in his poetry; in Beiles's work, it accounts for the lack of 'framing' to many of his poems, the merging of descriptions and dream sequences and many other elements. Of course the context is the poet's mind; of course the point of reference is his writing. In a review of *Ashes of Experience*, Walter Saunders notes that "what characterises these poems is their immediacy and lack of elaboration" (Saunders, 1969: 20). Writing because they found themselves incompatible with society, the Beats must have felt it necessary to make their writing inseparable from their lives, to make it not a pastime or an art but something 'of essential use', to make it inseparable from themselves. Hence an aesthetic of erasing the distinction between art and life – in a society of way too many boundaries, a rebellious poetry has to negate as many partitions as it encounters.

Beiles writes in 'The Poet's Task' that "the poet's task/ is to make/ central heating/ unnecessary" (1-4). What he means by this is the same thing Corso means in his poem 'Discord' by "oh I would like to break my teeth/ by means of expressing a radiator!" (Corso in Holmes, 1981: 1). The idea is of a poetry so real, so part of life that it is tangible, that it starts off as words and becomes a thing, not of fancy but of life. Poetry as real, of as much use, as central heating. Poetry so real it can break your teeth when you speak it. Poetry which is not confined to 'poetry', but which is part of life.

> To go ahead. To be of essential use. The breathing of the man. One perception leading directly to a further perception. Spontaneous prose. First thought best thought. Literature made by the whole man, writing. Rather remain silent than cheat the language. (Holmes, 1981: 7)

Beginning with Olson's statement, Holmes outlines Beat aesthetics, or at least, artistic concerns, here. "Rather remain silent than cheat the language." This maxim accentuates the striving for authenticity in Beat writing, and the rejection of artifice in creativity. In the Beat idiom, authenticity appears as a romanticised ideal, often attributed to various social 'others' who are seen as somehow immune to the loss of identity and individuality of modern western society. For them, someone who is 'authentic' does not play social games, does not subscribe to socially enshrined values, and does not conform to social standards. The label of authenticity and all the meanings and values attached to it are

often projected by the Beats onto those who, for whatever reason, are actively 'different' from the norm, in an enthusiastic but potentially misguided appreciation of everything 'different' which doesn't always take into account the reality of the person they ascribe their ideals to.

The constant search for authenticity, within oneself and one's writing as well as in others, is for the Beats a striving to break through the layers of social learning and conformity which shape modern identity, obliterating or disfiguring the 'authentic' self which is true to its own ideas and ideals; creative, immediate, unmediated by social identity. The Beat concept of authenticity is in a sense a pre-social state, or, alternatively, a drop-out 'postsocial' one when what others think no longer matters. This sort of authenticity allows for, even necessitates, uninhibited self expression and an immediate interaction with the world, a lack of shame or fear and a readiness, if not a compulsion, to immerse oneself in subjective experience. For Kerouac this is 'mad', for Ginsberg it is 'angelic' or 'holy', suggesting a transcendence, a sense of being beyond social mores and able to fully experience and express oneself in a way which is forbidden within the sphere of 'good' social behaviour. The embracing of what is conventionally known as maladjusted or sociopathic behaviour along with the eccentric, the downtrodden, and the marginally deviant in the name of authenticity led the Beats to condone and value the irresponsible and even criminal behaviour of their 'authentic' heroes like Herbert Huncke, a Times Square hustler, addict and thief, and Neal Cassady, the disturbed "secret hero" (*Howl*, 106) of Ginsberg's early poems, "who went out whoring through Colorado in myriad stolen night-cars" (105).

In his "few glancing words about the nature of this writing" (Holmes, 1981: 11) Holmes points out the organic flow of images or perceptions in Beat writing, stating simply "keep the mind and senses connected, and let them *go*. Then the movement will be natural, the way consciousness actually works, with a consequent gain in richness, immediacy, and verisimilitude" (1981:11). This is what happens in Beiles's mind-wandering poems, the simple descriptions leading to the most astute metaphors, as in "whitewashed walls and

speckled/ chickens stalk cautiously/ through rusty structures/ of old relationships" ('The Seasons Meeting', 3-6).

Holmes suggests that it is in part this process which leads to the surreal imagery in some Beat poems. He uses Corso's poetry to illustrate his point, but since Beiles has also been called a surrealist poet, Holmes's observations might be borrowed and applied to Beiles. He notes that incongruent imagery in Beat poetry (he takes "fried shoes" from Corso) "seems meaningless, arbitrary, merely surrealistic, if you hold back and think about it. But if you let it enter your consciousness…further images and associations surface" (1981: 11). Such images are surreal, or can be called surreal, if you try to analyze them, make literal sense of them. But if you let them wash over you (often in quick succession in Beiles's poems) they make a whole, textual sort of sense. They can't necessarily be explained, but they can be interpreted. For instance, in 'Swimming in the Moon', Beiles has the line: "so she went into a Convent/ and turned into a seagull" (34-35) which seems surreal and arbitrary, but works as an image.

For Holmes, Beat aesthetic concerns centre around the crucial point when 'the senses intersect' "with a moment in time, in your world" (Holmes, 1981: 1). Beat poetry is when the poet apprehends the world – when he loves or hates, embraces or rejects it, all the time aware of his perception. What Holmes sees as a moment becomes a dialogue, an interchange, the relationship between self and world which takes on so many guises in Beiles's work.