

Happening in Athens
Sinclair Beiles in Exile

In *Ashes of Experience* Beiles is preoccupied with being not only a traveller but also a stranger, a misfit, an exile. Beiles wrote most of the poems in *Ashes* while travelling in Europe and living for a few years in Greece. His sense of being in exile, however self-imposed, of not fully belonging wherever he is, is evident in the way Beiles writes about himself in these poems, and in how he writes about what he encounters. His entire world view is tinted by the position he both finds himself in and assigns to himself. Beiles seems at times quite aware of the ‘exiled poet’ image he projects onto himself, and of the ironies of writing himself into this role. But in other moments he seems wholly, naively, invested in it, and believes completely in the constructed identity.

Beiles left South Africa in his early twenties, and although he later created many myths about why he did so, there were probably a multitude of factors to his departure and subsequent twenty-or-so year wandering. He allegedly had an illicit affair, or possibly wanted to study in Europe, or both. In essence he saw no feasible lifestyle and no creative outlet in the politically repressive and culturally stultifying South Africa in which he had grown up. His exile was not really political, but cultural and personal.

In ‘Reflections on Exile’ Edward Said draws a distinction between “expatriates” who “voluntarily live in an alien country” and exiles who “have been banished” (Said, 2000: 181) which is certainly politically important, but loses significance when applied to modern literature and the modernist literary experience. From this angle, the most crucial aspect across ‘types’ of exile is that “émigrés enjoy an ambiguous status” (2000: 181). While actual political exiles and refugees probably suffer rather than “enjoy” a similar status, it is the personal and cultural ambiguity which is crucial. Said suggests there is a phenomenon, perhaps a tradition, of writers like Hemingway, Fitzgerald and Joyce (2000, 181; 182), Bowles, Beckett, and others, who sought out, inflicted on themselves, and sustained the ambiguity and other problems of exile as a means of fuelling and

challenging their creativity. The lonely writer, homesick or, more often, sick of home, is a familiar character.

Beiles spent time in London, the Netherlands and Tangier, then stayed in Paris before moving to Greece during the *Ashes* years. Tangier, at that time a multilingual, multi-currency, multi-legal system port city-state or 'international zone' confusingly semi-independent from the rest of Morocco, had an interesting population of expatriate writers, artists, alcoholics and addicts, people who had failed in usual aspirations and/or succeeded in less conventional lifestyles. Burroughs also 'disappeared' into Tangier for a while before moving to Paris and the Beat hotel. In a letter to Kerouac he wrote what was to become a scene in *Naked Lunch*, but was initially intended as "a best-seller Book of the Month Club job on Tangier. So here is what comes out in the first sentence"

(Burroughs in Campbell, 1994: 249):

The only native in Interzone who is neither queer nor available is Andrew Keif's chauffeur, which is not an affectation on Keif's part but a useful pretext to break off relations with anyone he doesn't want to see: 'You made a pass at Aracknid last night. I can't have you in the house again.' (1994: 249)

"Interzone" is Tangier, and, in a post-script, Burroughs adds: "Andrew Keif is Paul Bowles, of course" (Burroughs in Campbell, 1994: 250). Bowles, whose novels are set in more or less fictionalised versions of Tangier and surrounds, was the unofficial head of the literary 'scene' there. Though he did not get along with the Bowles clique, who were a generation older not only in age but more significantly in literature, Tangier itself appealed to Burroughs. Perhaps this was because of the isolation it made possible for him, the anonymity of being a stranger in a strange city, the exotic location and the mix of cultures rich in myth and mystery, and the illicit sex and drugs available for relatively little in dollars. Burroughs met Brion Gysin there, as well as Beiles, who was allegedly working for an expat newspaper, the *Tangier Gazette*, and who was on better terms with Bowles and his assorted hangers-on. Bowles himself had dropped out of university in the US and gone to Paris, "running toward something, although I didn't know what at the time" (Bowles in [unknown author], 1999: 2).

After leaving Tangier Beiles again traveled directionlessly around Europe, and was “occasionally encouraged by the local authorities to travel a little faster when his own sense of reality clashed with the status quo” (Butterworth, 1976: 5). Nevertheless, he found some artistic space and inspiration, as the poems in *Ashes* demonstrate, mostly in the bohemian enclaves left over from earlier times in places like the Left Bank.

The Left Bank of Paris has long been popular amongst the ‘art crowd’ of many generations, and especially favoured by writers in exile of one sort or another, who have left a lasting cultural imprint on the area, allowing it to draw new groups of similarly-minded people. Western Europe has at various times been considered more liberal, with an art-valuing and an artist-tolerant society, than the places it has drawn artists and writers from: postwar baby-booming England, repressive Eastern Europe before that, the American Dream-inundated USA almost always. The bohemian aspect of the French city provided more ‘space’ to various nonconformist writers, for instance, “the figure of poet as delinquent...relatively familiar in France (Jean Genet was the latest incarnation) was all but unknown in America” (Campbell, 1999: 206) and thus could be better explored there. Any such explorations had a much better chance of being published or performed in Europe than elsewhere. Campbell explains the pull of the Left Bank for the postwar writers who lived and worked there:

The people who came to the Left Bank in the years after the Second World War, and stayed, did not see themselves as living in ‘Paris in the Fifties’. The characterization of decades...is a contrivance. But if one were to isolate a single force guiding the actions and inspiring the inventiveness of [these people]...it would be the claim to freedom – from racism, from sexual restraint, the frenzy of anti-communism, the monotony of work, freedom from Calvinist ethics, from conventional dress and conventional opinion and inhibiting families, from artificial rhyme and stiff rhythm, from linear narrative and arrangements of words that repress as wickedly as wicked governments, from the tyranny of the living-room and the totalitarianism of the new thing, television. (Campbell, 1994: 282)

Campbell states with finality that “the Sixties arrived in Paris in 1957” (Campbell, 1994: 240); that is, with the arrival of Ginsberg and Orlovsky at the Beat Hotel. Ginsberg and the other Beats who followed from America came to Paris (or just left their home country, Paris seeming a likely destination) for the same ill-defined but imperative reasons which drove Beiles there:

Like others before him, Ginsberg looked in Paris for a refuge from the puritanical strictures of his home country. But he was not tracking the ghosts of Hemingway and Fitzgerald, already,

to his mind, exemplars of an old way of thinking. Ginsberg wanted the City of Light to be his place of inner illumination. He possessed a headful of visionary enthusiasm. (Campbell, 1994: 240)

Beiles found transient communities in the form of the Beat group in Paris, and a colourful collection of artists and other early hippies in the Greek islands, which were, as Nanos Valaoritis nostalgically puts it, “populated with earnest, excited, or dreamy people drifting from beach to beach, city to city” (Valaoritis, 1991: ix). But these people were escaping from things back home, much like Beiles was escaping South African society, and were in a similar state of flux and exile. They “triggered atmospheres, responses, started things and then vanished into thin air” (Valaoritis, 1991: ix).

In poems like ‘What’s Happening in Athens’ Beiles relates something of the traveller’s experience of the Greek port city. The ironic humour, the fascination with observing private, unaffected moments in public spaces, and the self-consciously world-weary romanticism, the sense of ‘being a poet’ make the poem characteristic of Beiles at the time. He describes some of the local characters, speculating about their lives, for instance “the policeman who lost his job/ sits contentedly/ above the squalid village/ looking towards america” (1-4). He gently mocks the tourists who “meander/ with guidebooks and cameras/ admiring the open drains/ the chickens/ and the frightened cats/ the flapping clothes” (7-12), pointing out that what they are admiring is just poverty and squalor, which their perception renders picturesque. But at the same time he is aware that he is really doing the same thing, making poetry out of the people and places he sees. In writing about her, he is no different from the “college girl” (13) who “swoons on the acropolis” (14). He might well be one of the “beatniks departing for the east” (33). Like the open drains and frightened alley cats, these figures are elements in a panorama, part of the scenery which makes his experience of Athens. Beiles includes himself, or someone like him, in the form of “the poet intent on theft” (22) who “shadows a clam seller/ journeying from bar to bar/ with a basket under his arm” (23-25); it is unclear whether the poet wants to steal the vendor’s clams or his experiences as he walks around selling them.

exiles are planning christmas parties
beatniks departing for the east

abandon their adopted animals
lovers search for furniture
in the flea-market
and lonely tourists lying in cheap hotel rooms
listen to distant music and the flushing of
lavatories (32-39)

This offers a view of the beatnik-exile experience of Athens. What stands out despite the Christmas parties and the lovers are the references to loneliness and constant movement. The “beatniks” are already “departing”, they abandon things with ease, it is a population of “lonely tourists lying in cheap hotel rooms”. There is a sense of wistful sadness to this part of the poem, a sense of impermanence. This is developed in the final stanza, which abandons the descriptiveness of the rest of the poem in order to create a sense of endless movement, a futile stream of actions:

typists arrive in search of cheap abortions
sailors arrive in search of cheap fur coats
architects plan to demolish the picturesque
areas
there are christenings
marriages
funerals
by candlelight
in the dim churches (40-48)

People are constantly arriving, but inevitably they will leave. They are all in search of something, but whether they find it or not seems inconsequential. In the end everything will be demolished. The christenings and marriages all end up in funerals. It is a cycle of repeated actions and movements which, because of their repetitiveness, become insignificant.

Beiles often alternates between the two elements in this poem, that is, a genuine rapture at the things he sees and his ability to write them down, and a pessimistic, perhaps existential weariness of the whole scene and awareness of its ultimate pointlessness. Thus he oscillates between the joy and simple, quaint affection for what he sees in poems like ‘Street Corners’, which Saunders likens to “café sketches” (Saunders, 1969: 20):

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. (8-12)

and the disillusioned cynicism of 'Pissed Off':

the swimming is gorgeous
and leo held in detention for 48 hours
by the coup police
refused to eat

lunchtime at apozos surrounded by mouldy
russian salad and twenties advertisements
pissed off

her back is so greasy
greasy lea looking so self-conscious
in her home-made dresses

i'll sleep with any bugger on the square
who offers me a job as a film extra

ina's dog put his paws on the grocer
and got kicked in the ribs

in the renault in the sunday mountains
rolling joints athens hazy below
i am pissed off

go to tangier
water piped with moroccan amoeba and swiss
drummer summer clap wiped out the entire
female population of the medina (8-28)

The joy and the idealism are gone, and in their stead is an irritated, disillusioned view not so much of Greece, but of the Greece of cheap holiday resorts and young bohemian tourists. What Beiles is 'pissed off' about in the poem are mostly the things these 'exiles' have themselves created – trouble with the police, self-imposed poverty, annoying the locals, communicable diseases – and perhaps worst of all, boredom. "Don't know what to do the days are too long/ sitting in the Byzantium" (33-34). The dream has been lived out, the journey has been made, the goal has been achieved, they have sailed to Byzantium, and it is boring.

Clearly an important aspect of Beiles's exile is the presence of other people in a similar situation. However disillusioned they might be with where they came from, however noble or poetic their reasons for being here, they are, after all tourists, and they easily become bored, petulant, disenchanted. Indeed, much of the humour of the poems lies in

the inevitable inconsistencies in real people taking mythologised journeys. Beiles mocks them, but cannot easily extract himself from this group. His idea of exile is not easily pluralised, and so even as he wants some sort of community, some connection with others, he resents them for sharing, perhaps normalizing, his experience, compromising his lone exiled identity. Like Said's 'authentic' exile, Beiles "jealously insists on his...right to refuse to belong" (Said, 2000: 182). Only in this case, the order of things is reversed. Unlike the exile Said describes, who reacts against his new imposed surroundings by being actively different, Beiles finds himself a lone and transient character in Athens because of his insistence on his "right to refuse to belong" in the first place. And having arrived somewhere on his destinationless journey, Beiles acts out his role. "Willfulness, exaggeration, overstatement: these are characteristic methods for compelling the world to accept your vision – which you make more unacceptable because you are in fact unwilling to have it accepted...Artists in exile are decidedly unpleasant, and their stubbornness insinuates itself into even their exalted works" (2000: 182).

In 'How Long?' Beiles is tired of his bohemian lifestyle, though ultimately his question, wondering "how long/ I can go on living this way" (30-31) is twofold: he is questioning both his satisfaction with this life and how long it can be expected to last. Christo Doherty notes with regard to the selection from *Ashes* in *A South African Abroad* that "this was a moment precariously balanced between destructive forces...the lifestyle [was] under threat from without and within" (1992: 53). From without, for political and economic reasons – both visas and funds eventually expire, as does the patience of countries with their own rebellions to contend with; and from within, in that the attraction and mystique of such a life is its impermanence.

'How Long?' describes the events of Beiles's stay in Greece in a decadently bored tone, as though he would have liked still more experiences, more art, more life:

I have passed my time
In the damp caves of pansy sculptors
Led girls through the ancient ruins
Prattling about art
Stared silently at beakers of yellow wine
Fingered old jewellery in the flea markets of
hell

I have tramped and retramped the streets
Hoping for a change
I have promised to leave for the east
Watched roses wither in bottles
Talked to the old man doing gymnastics
In the courtyard
I have taken ships to the islands
Walked through the pine forests littered
with paper
listened to the clock ticking
Waited for enlightenment (1-18)

He has travelled all this way, done all the right things, been arty and romantic, sat around getting bored, and none of this produced enlightenment. He feels he has done everything there is to do here, and it was a great experience but it did not produce the quite the right results. The only solution he can envisage is to keep going further, seeking more.

The other side of this *wanderlust* and typically Beat drive to keep moving is “the darker sense of exile as homelessness” (Doherty, 1992: 53) which “is a theme frequently hinted at in these poems” (1992: 53). It is one thing to want to keep going, and another to be forced to do so, even if it is just because you feel you don’t belong anywhere. It is not at all easy to separate these factors, to decide when one wants to go and when one simply doesn’t want to stay, and for Beiles these drives are problematically enmeshed. Doherty adds to these social factors or “conflicting tensions” “the dark forces of political authoritarianism in both Eastern Europe and Greece” as well as Beiles’s “psychological illness” (1992: 53). It is this combination of elements which shapes the poet’s prevalent attitude in *Ashes of Experience*, his own sense of himself as being an exile and the ambiguous meanings this has for him.

An exhibition titled ‘Sinclair Beiles and the Beat Hotel’ was held in 1997 in Newtown. It comprised an exhibition of photography by Harold Chapman, an installation reconstructing a room at the Beat Hotel, the screening of Anton Kotze’s film about Beiles, a reading of poetry and a lecture by Donald Moerdijk (de Waal, 1997: 7). The Beat Hotel space looked “probably a bit like it was” (de Villiers in Finlay, 1997: 102), the film “gets lost in its own technical possibilities, like scratched vinyl, and tells us little about Beiles

or the Beats” (Finlay, 1997: 103), the lecture “alternated thinly masked communist idealism with fascinating insights on the period” (Geers, 1997: 3), and all of the reviews seem to be little concerned with the actual exhibition.

Nevertheless, in his article about the event, Kendell Geers refers to Moerdijk’s statement that “the Beats were in exile, pursuing a dream of freedom” (Geers, 1997: 4). Certainly a longing for freedom frequently underlies Beiles’s poems, but like the other Beats, his work is concerned with and sustained by the actual search or struggle for that freedom rather than by the ideal itself. From the outset, Beiles is cynical about the dream, or at least critical of those who follow it, and doubts its achievability and sustainability. The point is not so much the dream of freedom but how that dream interacts with reality.

In ‘This Exile’, Beiles plays with the power dynamics and perceptions of his social status. He turns being an exile – not entirely fugitive but somewhat without a context – into a position of power. Firstly, he is “happy/ this exile” (1-2). Then “in unfamiliar streets/ canaries sing/ and women smile from their doorways/ at the stranger/ who carries his heart/ in his hand” (3-8). Both the unfamiliarity of his surroundings and his being a stranger to them are part of his happiness.

He walks about the marketplace
As if risen from the dead
An ancestor
Come to see his people
Trading old coins
Stamped with his likeness. (10-15)

He imagines himself – Beiles gives his imaginings credibility by writing in the third person of his autobiographical character’s actions and thoughts – as having the secret identity of king whose image appears on the coins people trade with. The distance of a third person speaker creates a false sense of ‘truth’ by writing of things as if they somehow simply ‘are’, as though the voice of the poem were not directly his. He creates an ‘outside’ narrator for his ideas, which allows them to resonate with the sense of timeless history, an unidentifiable past marked by a vague sense of custom.

His anonymity, in a sense his lack of recognizable identity, other than that of a stranger, allow him a sort of freedom – of movement, of being unconstrained by social identity or social ties – and the freedom to imagine himself any way he likes, even to imagine how he might be perceived by others. As “the observer” the poet is “a prince enjoying his incognito wherever he goes” (Baudelaire in Tester, 1994: 4). This curiously powerful freedom of self-construction is not easily achieved in a ‘home’ context, either because people actually know you and have fixed ideas about your identity, or because your social identity is coded in various perceptible ways. Being a foreigner negates these identifications and presumptions in a way which might be unsettling, but also liberating. In this poem the exile figure is likened to “an ancestor” (12), someone unknown, yet belonging.

In an interview with Shaun de Waal, Beiles said of the time these poems were written: “I was coming from absolutely nowhere...I found myself an exile, in Athens. No books, no clothes, no possibility of integrating myself into society. I had a notebook and a pencil, but knew hardly anybody” (Beiles in de Waal, 1997: 7). This sense of “coming from absolutely nowhere” and having no means to be ‘somewhere’, to make a space and a life which is part of something is the downside of rejecting society, of dropping out. ‘The Outcasts’ is a poem of such dislocation, a loneliness which becomes lostness, which becomes loss:

We managed to stagger about
In our old wrappings
Sensuality flickering faintly
When evening came
And our afflictions were only dimly visible.
Sometimes we gathered in the ramshackle bar
And listened to the owner
But said nothing in return
As the sun had erased our memories. (1-10)

He speaks of a ‘we’ in this poem, but it is a collectivity, not a community. They are not together, just in the same place at the same time. The sensuality of other *Ashes* poems, the joy of the island resort life, the beauty of Greece, the novelty of encounters there, is just “flickering faintly”, and the night holds nothing to explore, only hides their “afflictions” a little. They listen to the owner of the bar but say nothing because their

memories are gone. It is not the sun which has erased their memories but the time spent under it, the time spent living this outcast life, in the sunshine but on the peripheries nevertheless. The loss of memories (not of memory) signifies their real dislocation and exile – not geographically but psychologically nowhere, without a way to trace their ways into the past or the future.

A major theme evident in *Ashes of Experience* is that of alienation, both as a result of being in exile and as the major underlying cause of that exile. Holton argues that in the Beat era “alienation came to be viewed as an inevitable consequence of modernity itself” (Holton, 2001: 14). As a result “there arose an apolitical dissent based on alienation as a personal psychological condition rather than as an economic or political category” (2001: 14). Alienation here becomes a condition which has nothing to do with economics or politics, location or dislocation – one does not need to be in exile to be alienated; rather, one goes into exile as Beiles did to ease the tension of the alienation one already feels. Alienation in this sense implies a perpetual state of exile regardless of one’s actual movements in the modern world, which is very much a part of the ‘exile attitude’ which shapes Beiles’s perception of himself and what he encounters while abroad. It is in a sense an exiled viewpoint, a constantly alienated vantage point which allows one to look as though from the margins even when in the social centre. In being an exile one is partly pushed to the boundaries, but partly has to assume the “outsider position” (Holton, 2001: 24) as one’s own, and with it the world-view which inflects one’s perception both inward and outward.

Holton uses Lew Welch’s ‘Chicago Poem’ to pose two very pertinent questions. The poem resignedly states:

You can’t fix it. You can’t make it go away.
I don’t know what you’re going to do about it,
But I know what I’m going to do about it. I’m just
going to walk away from it. Maybe
A small part of it will die if I’m not around. (54-58)

“What exactly is the ‘it’ from which one must walk away? And where can one walk to? What folds of heterogeneity can provide an alternative habitable space for those who feel impelled by a centrifugal force to walk away?” (Holton, 2001: 14)

The ‘it’ from which one must walk away, at least the ‘it’ from which Beiles, Welch, and others who became known as the ‘Beat generation’ walked away, is fairly straightforward, at least in retrospect. At the time it must have seemed huge and boundless to them, an oppressive foggy ‘everything’. ‘It’ is the homogeneity constructed in the 1950s by the end of the Second World War, mass consumerism and the baby boom, by anti-communist paranoia, and the effort by most people to consolidate a strong communal identity and social structure. This need inevitably confronted and sought to overcome an effort in the opposite direction by a minority who wanted individualism and freedom, a desire so at odds with that of the majority that it caused insurmountable tensions and sometimes ruptures within society. ‘It’ was the drive to conform, so powerful that it threatened to obliterate individuality completely. ‘It’ was the threat to the sense of self with which conformist society scared and angered people like the Beats; it was this threatened sense of self which found itself alienated and in exile before it desired to go elsewhere in search of freedom. It was that sense of self which kicked and cried out in Beat writing; it is what “impelled” them like “a centrifugal force” (Holton, 2001: 14) to walk away.

The second question, ‘where to’, also puzzled Beiles, as we have seen in poems like ‘How Long?’. Beiles went to Europe; the comparative freedom afforded him there had partly to do with politics and society (just about anywhere would have seemed more liberal than South Africa was at that time) and partly with the fact that he was a traveller, an exile. His mental illness added to his alienation, both socially and personally, that is, both through people’s perception of him and his of himself. It did little to add to his sense of freedom, but it did contribute to his conceptualization of individual freedom and, more importantly, his understanding of the forces and institutions out to negate or limit it. Beiles sought out other worlds and underworlds – foreign cities and their strange spaces – as places to walk away to.

Beiles's walking away is explicit in poems like 'The Consul', in which the autobiographical protagonist has "washed up on the furthest island" (1). Since there is no indication of what the island is furthest from, it seems that while the island is a real place, being immeasurably 'furthest' makes it a psychological one as well. He is as far away as he can go. Here

He dozes on the tarstained pebbles
Beyond the reach of mental health officers.
Underneath an umbrella made of palm fronds
They – he only knew who they were –
Appointed him honorary consul (3-7)

Through the use of imagination and the tolerance of the local population, he has again transformed himself, this time from a mad washed-up layabout to the honorary consul. In this capacity he does little besides what he had been doing previously. Occasionally he goes to the jetty to meet arriving ships, but the last such event was "years ago" (15).

Apart from that he had no business.
His family paid his bed and board
And he came and went from his pension
On the waterfront
Like a cat.
There was little pocket money
And not much to use it on
On the furthest island. (22-29)

This is an idyllic picture of a very sheltered life, which can be so because it is completely removed from modern reality. The madman is allowed to play the consul because on the furthest island it does not matter. Only on the furthest island can he pretend to be and, from his perspective at least, become something other than a misfit, an outcast, a lunatic.

Beiles's 'exile-attitude' as displayed in these poems has much in common with the *flâneur* of earlier French literature. The classic *flâneur* is something of a dandy, a poet in attitude and self-perception as well as, if not more so, than in practice; he is a city wanderer at once detached and creative, anonymous yet at the centre – much like Beiles styles himself, stating things like "my role is a pure poet. I don't do anything but poeticise" (Beiles in Cummiskey, 2001: 3).

Flânerie, the activity of strolling and looking which is carried out by the *flâneur*, is a recurring motif in the literature, sociology and art of urban, and most especially of the

metropolitan, existence. Originally, the figure of the *flâneur* was tied to a specific time and place: Paris, the capital of the nineteenth century as it was conjured up by Walter Benjamin in his analysis of Charles Baudelaire (Benjamin 1983). But the *flâneur* has been allowed, or made, to take a number of walks away from the streets and arcades of nineteenth-century Paris. (Tester, 1994)

What Beiles engages in, in *Ashes of Experience* might be understood as a form of modern/ postmodern *flânerie*. Although the era and setting are different (though inevitably Paris features strongly) the “strolling and looking” is essentially the same, and is governed by the same attitude towards the city. In “wandering aimlessly around Athens” (Beiles in de Waal, 1997: 7) Beiles encounters scenes which form the subject matter of many poems, but also finds the foundation for the identity – essentially that of the *flâneur* – which he creates for himself in this context. This identity – of an observer and poet, central yet detached, observing himself as a character in every scene, sentimental yet cynical – is the filter through which he comes to see everything, and which even begins to shape what he sees (and fails to see). In his writing, Beiles chooses to describe things which appeal to him, but already before the moment of writing he understands things in a certain way, and includes or excludes them from his view.

Like the *flâneur*, Beiles is a poet in identity before he is a poet in practice. This identity has much to do with being an exile, in attitude as much as in fact. However fascinated the *flâneur* is by the busy city, he is always detached from it. As much as he might watch the people and their interactions, he is constantly alone. From this vantage point he both romanticises and criticises what he describes, wanting it to be charming, rustic, and authentic, and becoming disillusioned when it shows itself to be more complex or real than he anticipated. The most idyllic poems in *Ashes*, like ‘Street Corners’, deal with streetscapes viewed from a distance, almost like tableaux, in which the people, if there are any, are characters who, because they are viewed only for a moment and from afar, seem to support Beiles’s view of them and of his role in relation to them. As they did to the classic Parisian *flâneur*, “those appearing are types. Never does the *flâneur* know them personally. He recreates a picture of the encounter he has had with them...they linger on in his memory while he reconstitutes for us and for himself the story of their life” (Blanchard, 1985: 77).

The most bitter and disillusioned poems like 'Pissed Off' deal with other people whom Beiles encounters closely enough to have to acknowledge their reality, and the fact that they do not fit into his image of Greece. It is in order to preserve this image, even if he does so unwittingly, that Beiles consistently aligns anything which does not appeal to him with the Western travellers. On the other hand, he groups everything he likes, everything pure and simple and beautiful, with his idea of an idyllic and authentic Greek landscape. Yet he knows that even as he does so he is one of the young Western bohemian exiles, and that he is an outsider to what he idealises (that's why he can idealise it). Maintaining this duality, perhaps even duplicity of his perception is the key to utilizing this dynamic and its possibilities in his writing. It requires a constant realigning of himself in relation to what he encounters, while keeping up an identity strong enough to allow him to see everything and everyone in relation to him, not himself in relation to them. It is a sort of shift of power which takes place in the *flâneur*'s mind, in which the world is subject to his 'stylised' perception, a receptacle for his ideas, a field in which only his ideas and emotions figure. In his perception, everything is how he wants to see it, and if it cannot be shaped to his satisfaction it simply vanishes. It is not a very useful sort of power outside the realm of art or literature, which is quite ironic in that it is played out most often in the city streets, where a great deal of the everyday-political takes place and manifests itself. This irony is not entirely lost on Beiles but, in possession of the *flâneur*'s selective and creative lens on the world, he admits or ignores contradictions as he desires. This is "the tense and fluctuating relationship between the poet and his participation in the public life of the city. The poet...is possessed by a special and defining ability" (Tester, 1994: 3). In Baudelaire's terms, it is the ability "to be away from home and yet to feel at home anywhere, to be at the very centre of the world, and yet to be unseen of the world" (Baudelaire in Tester, 1994: 5). It is what makes the "the stranger" (7) in 'This Exile' "happy" (1) when he is alone in the public foreign space, but what makes him view a group of others similar to him as 'The Outcasts' who "managed to stagger about/ in our old wrappings" (1-2). His integration into the scene would ruin its idyllic perfection because he would lose his outsider's perception; to maintain this difficult balance his presence must remain detached – "if the poet could be seen he would be

unable to observe” (Tester, 1994: 4). It is because of what they are that his fellow travellers threaten to compromise his position, and it is what he resents them for in poems like ‘Pissed Off’: “Pissed off/ go 3000 miles to watch liz/ struggling into blue jeans/ got fat on contraceptive pills” (29-32) ... “she couldn’t understand I am pissed off with her” (35). Liz can’t understand that Beiles is angry with her for being real instead of idyllic. Her personal escape from a life of baking cookies and making babies into jeans, Greek islands, and unstable poet lovers interferes with his notion of beauty and freedom.

Despite the moments of anxiety, loneliness, or boredom in Beiles’s exile, he, like the poet Baudelaire fashions, “is a man who is driven out of the private and into the public by his own search for meaning” (Tester, 1994: 2). If we examine the notions of public and private in Beiles’s context, this statement becomes all the more relevant. For Beiles moments in public, ideally on a busy streetcorner where he is present yet invisible, are moments of fulfillment. A poem entitled ‘Love’, for instance, has no interpersonal or intimate interactions in it whatsoever. It states

I have fallen in love with the green beige
On billiard tables
With men carrying placards
With salvation army bands
With cats in lonely sunday streets
With the smell of wet newspaper
With China dogs (1-7)

In contrast to this euphoric affection for the public and ordinary, when by himself Beiles is more often than not anxious or morose:

The canal water
Black.
Black my mood
In this houseboat.
Through the bleary porthole
A cobbled street.
Sodden leaves turning black.
Shut in people with bent heads –
Umbrellas.
A lid rattles on a pot of stew.
Sodden socks hang on a string
Across my brain. (On a Canal, 1-12)

It seems that the public, that is, the anonymity of the city and in Beiles’s case of the foreign allows for more joy, and more freedom, than the private.

Tester's observations about the *flâneur* resonate not only in terms of Beiles's work but in relation to that of other Beat writers as well. For instance, Burroughs as the self-styled figure he was in Paris and Morocco during the 1950s and 1960s has much to do with the gentleman-*flâneur*, the anonymous observer. Beiles's writing of city scenes is closer in tone and sentiment to Kerouac's, and he too finds a feeling of solitary love, freedom and fulfillment not only in what he sees but also in the identity he sees it through. Like the Beats in middle-class Western society, the original *flâneur* "figures as something of a deviant in emerging bourgeois society" (Parkhurst Ferguson, 1994: 25) because he is perceived as "a man of insufferable idleness, who doesn't know where to carry his trouble and his boredom" (1994: 24). The problem of where to "carry his trouble and his boredom" trails Beiles, or is paraded by him, across half the world.

As for Burroughs and Kerouac, for Beiles 'private' also means 'home', the private life of the white middle-class family – closed in, self-conscious, conservative, and unaccepting, even intolerant of the individual. It suggests the "tradition" which "Nietzsche taught us to feel uncomfortable with" and the "domestic intimacy" which in Freud's influential thought is nothing but the "the polite face painted on patricidal and incestuous rage" (Said, 2000: 172). By contrast, 'public' means the city and the opportunity it affords to shape one's identity in the safety of public anonymity, as well as to encounter otherness in a multitude of forms, other people like and unlike oneself. The public includes the foreign – the further away from home, the more public. 'Public' in this sense includes all these elements of different identities and experiences, while, 'private' excludes all but the most proper behavior, the most fixed identity, the least adventurous routes. 'Private', besides being domestic, is also hidden – certainly in the white middle-class 1950s domestic context what was kept private (like Burroughs's homosexuality or Beiles's madness) was most certainly to be kept hidden. 'Public' in this context means crowded, varied, vast, and allows for an assertion of the individual identity, a 'coming out'. The further away from home, the more flamboyant this identity can become.

The anonymity of exile allows freedom of self-definition, and with it a power of self-determination, if one accepts as a basis for further identity-creation the fact of being a stranger. The “princely incognito” (Tester, 1994: 4) of poems like ‘This Exile’ gives the exile-poet the ability to “make for himself the meaning and the significance of the metropolitan spaces and the spectacle of the public” (Tester, 1994: 4). Clearly Beiles makes use of this ability in ‘This Exile’ and ‘The Consul’. Every public interaction, every street scene, whether populated or not, is under the power of his perception and his way of understanding. “The poet is the sovereign in control of a world of his own definition” (1994: 4) and, like Beiles in ‘This Exile’, he is “the self-proclaimed and self-believing monarch of the crowd. And because he can or does look just like anyone else, nowhere is forbidden to him” (1994: 4).

The exile attitude, linked to the notion of *flânerie* which Beiles engages, is either symptomatic of what might be termed an ‘exile world view’ or develops into such an outlook. As Valaoritis notes, the characters in *Ashes* are for the most part “travellers, expatriates, beachcombers; artistic dropouts killing time or trying to catch up with cosmic time” (Valaoritis, 1991: x). This is a somewhat esoteric way of suggesting that Beiles was surrounded by a transient community of misfits, artistic personas and proto-hippies, refugees from the conservative consumerist boredom of the Western world in the 1950s.

This outlook is more inclusive than the *flânerie* Beiles engages on his own. Through it, Beiles is more at ease with the other wanderers he encounters. The difference, or the development, is that he begins to see himself as part of something, however imperfect, however fleeting, and this results in a shift in the *flâneur*-city or misfit-society dynamic. Rather than a stranger enraptured by everything quaint and untainted about the places he visits, he becomes a stranger in the know, seeking out the familiar spaces of foreign cities. He stops being a tourist and becomes discerning, streetwise, hip. He finds the local underground, and this has as much to do with a general awareness as it does with actual encounters. He knows that it is there before he knows exactly where it is, like the “hipster”, “a person who can stand on certain street corners in any foreign big city in the world and connect for pot or junk without knowing the language” (Kerouac, 1960: 255).

At first enchanted with the whole of a foreign city, Beiles now becomes aware and appreciative of the fact that, in all cities, there are cracks to every façade. The nocturnal city, 'streetcorners' as opposed to street corners, the furthest island, are symbolic liminal spaces which scare squares and offer refuge to the outcast, whether they are so by circumstance or by choice.

The notion of the anomic, particularly as Holton reads it in relation to the Beats, can be linked to the exile world view of *Ashes of Experience*. The *flâneur* is not an anomic persona, yet the aspects of the city which attract him might well be, as is the case with the *flâneur*-like Beats. The exile world view as manifested in *Ashes* is essentially a perspective on society, and on the individual in relation to it, from a particular social vantage point, one which is socially disadvantaged but personally advantageous to the individual if he is different, dissatisfied, a poet in Beiles's sense of the word. Beiles as an exile seeks out the anomic as a space of acceptance in a strange land (whether that land is home or abroad) but also of excitement, potential, adventure, a sense of life amidst the ordinary and mundane. Having sought out these anomic 'islands' wherever he goes, he adopts the view of society from those isolated spaces as his own, seeing in from the outside, more often with scorn than with envy. It remains to some extent a collective isolated position rather than a communal one, but it allows Beiles to reconcile the problem of the solitary *flâneur* and the exiled group of which he is inevitably a part.

In 'Ghost Town' this perspective shapes the speaker's view of the entire town, making it seem deserted when in fact it is full of people, much like the junkie's city in 'The Needle Vestal' features only the members of its underground:

The spirit deserts us.
There are people who have never known the
spirit
I feel strange amongst them.
They wait for each other
for the newspapers
For the boat to arrive.
A small boy haunts the house,
Each morning he arrives with a bunch of
flowers
And I let him wander about the rooms.
I lie on the bed watching the flies.

The clock ticks
The village is deserted.
Everyone suddenly left
Only the police remain (1-16)

The village seems deserted, but it is not really so: there are ordinary people who do ordinary things (which mostly involve waiting). “Everyone” has not left, just the ‘everyone’ of the speaker’s perception – everyone he knows, everyone who ‘knows’ the “spirit”, everyone who shares his point of view. Only the ‘normal’ people are left; they are so different from himself that he feels “strange amongst them”, so square that it seems to him that “only the police remain”. Because of how he perceives himself, he feels alone despite the presence of these others; they are not really people to him, but ghosts, like the boy who “haunts the house” – not fully alive, not really there – because they “have never known the/ spirit”.

As in ‘Ghost Town’, this perception filters the reality of the urban space in ‘Exiles’, but in this poem the straight people do not feature even as ghosts. They are no more than a backdrop to the ‘real’ events, the daytime inhabitants of the ‘real’ city which is taken over by the lonesome at night:

in the flower market
at night
beside the church
with its glowing ornaments
beneath the windowsill
on which she leans
staring at the twinkling city
when the dustbins are rattled
by marauding cats
when the shoes of the last lover
beat like drums
and suddenly a chorus of drunken singers
lights up the street
the exiles gather silently
to examine their wounds
and to plan their departure... (1-16)

Once abandoned by the legitimate daytime occupants, those who trade at the flower market and pray at the church, this space becomes the property of alley cats, lovers, drunks, and their sleepless watchers. In this space the exiles emerge from their anonymous stranger identities to “examine their wounds/ and plan their departure” (15-

16). Here they are united, or at least together, and somewhat more sincere, less masked. Here also it is acknowledged that they have to depart, that despite their constant anonymous presence they are individuals who have quests and fears keeping them restlessly on the move. Writing for *Merlin*, one of the English-language Parisian journals in circulation in the 1950s, Austryn Wainhouse observes that “there is nothing else to do but live the important, the essential, part of our lives underground” (Wainhouse in Campbell, 1994: 257). Although some Beat poets, notably Ginsberg, experimented with bringing the ‘important and essential’ above ground, essentially the Beat sense of self, and of literature, is an underground one. Beiles’s recurring themes of the night time city, the strange characters of transit, the harbour, the streetcorners and strange alleyways, have to do with the sort of spaces in which his sense of poetry is grounded, the inbetween spaces, liminal locations and social gaps in which he finds himself. Erving Goffman explains this tendency towards the liminal in terms of social structures and identities:

Without something to belong to, we have no stable self, and yet total commitment and attachment to any social unit implies a kind of selflessness. Our sense of being a person can come from being drawn into a wider social unit; our sense of selfhood can arise through the little ways in which we resist the pull. Our status is backed by the solid buildings of the world, while our sense of personal identity often resides in the cracks. (Goffman, 1961: 280)

The battle for Beiles seems to be to find and demonstrate a “sense of selfhood”; to resist the “selflessness” demanded by a society too concerned with commitment to carefully outlined ‘social units’. Thus he cuts himself adrift from “something to belong to”, rejecting the establishment’s “solid buildings” and opting for an identity and a poetry which “resides” almost completely “in the cracks” of society.