

They saw him writing the offensive word
Sacred Fix and nonconformity

Nonconformity might be understood as the enduring fringe around societies, the decrepit part of every functioning city (city as space and city as metaphor). It could be understood as the fact that as soon as a system is established someone will elude it, as soon as there is a standard someone will challenge it, as soon as there is a norm someone will deviate from it. But eluding the system is not necessarily breaking a law, and countering the norm does not immediately make one abnormal. Nonconformity might have links to the concepts of deviance or abnormality, but it is not interchangeable with them. Furthermore, nonconformity is largely dependent for its definition on context. As sociologists David Downes and Paul Rock point out, “ambiguity does seem to be a crucial facet of rule-breaking. People are frequently undecided whether a particular episode *is* truly deviant or what true deviance is: their judgement depends on context, biography, and purpose” (Downes & Rock, 1998: 4).

Perhaps this ambiguity, the gap between conformity and actual deviance, the overlaps with criminology, psychopathology, politics, and many other social phenomena, is precisely where nonconformity resides – rule breaking which is not necessarily law breaking, anomaly which is not necessarily pathology, difference which is not necessarily abnormality. Erving Goffman explains nonconformity as a particular sort of deviance. His criteria are dated, showing how contextually bound such definitions and deviations are. But while unintentionally indicating the social context of the late 1950s, when *Stigma* was written, Goffman creates the basis of a structure, in terms of identity and ideology, for the understanding of nonconformity – social deviance which can be disruptive, though is not always confrontational, which is not direct protest against a particular thing, which is not easily explained by socio-economic, psychological or political circumstances. He isolates from various forms of deviance “individuals who are seen as declining voluntarily and openly to accept the social place accorded to them, and who act irregularly and somewhat rebelliously in connexion with our basic institutions...These are the ‘disaffiliates’” (Goffman, 1963: 170). He lists a wide,

incongruent variety of people in this group: “prostitutes, drug addicts, delinquents, criminals, jazz musicians, bohemians, gypsies, carnival workers, hobos, winos, show people, full-time gamblers, beach dwellers, homosexuals, and the urban unrepentant poor” (1963: 170). Arguably it is their public rejection – not violent, but steadfast – of society with its proscriptions and prescriptions, on individual, personal grounds, which allows such people to be grouped together for any purpose. The only thing that gypsies and homosexuals might have in common in this context is an awareness that society has specifically constructed itself with no space for them, and a resentment of this fact; what draws Goffman’s parade of misfits together is a shared dislike of the conventional lifestyle, and a desire to circumvent it.

We might tentatively say that nonconformity is a reaction. It is the answer to the feeling of not fitting in, or of rejection. In breaking an expected social silence, it is perhaps a means of self-assertion. In contrast to the view that “deviants rarely engage in collective efforts to interpret their own behaviour” (Downes & Rock, 1998: 28), nonconformity is quite-self aware. For instance: someone like Ginsberg discovers himself to be homosexual, which, according to the social codes prevalent at the time, is considered deviant. His nonconformity lies in his being public and outspoken about his homosexuality, a behaviour which did not conform to social norms of secrecy and shame about homosexuality. Similarly, Beiles’s madness is not a matter of choice, but his use of it in his writing and in his public life does not conform to social codes enforcing ‘discretion’ and silence about mental illness.

The symbolic interactionist school of sociology, and labelling theory, place emphasis on “the *effects* of labelling” (Shoemaker, 1990: 210) on the individual. Even without ‘official’ – legal, medical – labelling, the processes identified by labelling theory can take place – “one does not have to be officially labelled criminal or delinquent in order to label himself as such” (1990: 210). Thus a perception of the individual, or a label, becomes an identity, with what Lemert identifies as primary and secondary ‘adjustments’. “Primary deviance” is defined as “original acts of nonconformity that may be caused by any number of factors...primary deviants have not adjusted their behaviour to

accommodate societal reactions to their deviance” (1990: 210). In other words, whatever happens that results in someone being termed deviant, or whatever action or incident or realization leads one to think of oneself as not necessarily *deviant*, for that is the word of the authorities, but as irreconcilably different from others and their values. “Secondary deviance” is then “deviance that is committed *as the result* of the problems of self-identity and social interaction” (1990: 211). In other words, the self-conscious nonconformist behaviour which takes place as a result of feeling and being perceived as different, and possibly as a reaction to the values which have created that sense of differentness – the label. Nonconformism in this sense is one of the “significant gestures” (Downes & Rock, 1998: 195) – actions constructed “around the probable reaction that they will elicit” (1998: 195) available to someone who either by a process of social labelling or self-labelling or a combination of both sees themselves as nonconformist. To write something which questions or rejects the values which resulted in one’s being labelled, or led one to perceive of oneself as labellable, is such a gesture. It is a refusal not of the label but of its power.

Because “social deviants also provide models of being for restless normals, obtaining not only sympathy but also recruits” (Goffman, 1963: 172) middle-class youth rebellion such as happened in the 1960s borrows from perceptions of the working class and attempts to forge links to the civil rights movement, as well as quoting, literally and ideologically, earlier social and/or political radicals, bohemians or revolutionaries. As often as allegiances are forged, misunderstandings and further divisions can occur, keeping nonconformity constant but preventing serious social change. Emmet Grogan’s explanation of youth rebellion and its relationship to its models is bound to a particular context, but it highlights the incongruencies emerging from this type of dynamic:

These parents never figured their children would attempt suicide by scaling the fortress walls of suburbia and running to the ghettos which had become part of their generation’s fantasies – fantasy ghettos like the Haight-Ashbury and the Lower East Side where sidewalks were more real than the lawns of Westchester and where people were red-blooded human beings, instead of blanched, bloodless, cardboard automatons. The poor have no sympathy for these young whites who’re searching out what was kept hidden from them. They have none at all because of the hippies’ arrogance, an arrogance they wear on their sleeves, an arrogance which mocks the poor for wanting what they’ve rejected, and insolently pities them for not comprehending or understanding the reasons why they left the ‘American Dream’ behind. (Grogan, 1972: 405)

While the generation Grogan describes took inspiration for their rejection of convention from the Beats, the Beats borrow primarily from jazz and the black hipster scene, but also from other manifestations from the pool of interrelated deviances and nonconformities available to them. For the Beats, homosexuality is one such manifestation, or technique of nonconformity, and madness is another. Madness becomes a symbol of otherness, difference, not fitting in. Downes and Rock note that in certain situations “crime becomes politics” (Downes & Rock, 1998: 9). Arguably in other situations madness becomes politics, as in others politics becomes crime.

The Beats wrote out of and against a particularly conformist time in social history beginning in the postwar era and peaking in the 1950s. The conformity of the 1950s is associated with America, or rather, our understanding of it is filled with American images. This is possibly because we associate the 1950s with the militant conformity of McCarthyism, and partly because America, due to its postwar economic boom, was really at the head of the rampant consumerism which typifies the ideals of that time. But it was more or less like that all over the western world. It was not very different in South Africa at the time Beiles left for Europe.

If, at the beginning of 1950, some clairvoyantly gifted editorialist had wanted to pin a label on the decade just beginning, he or she might have tagged it ‘subversive’. During the 1940s, we were liberated from the threat of tyrannical domination; during the 1950s, the fight will continue, but it will be liberation from convention, from the tyranny of form, in society and in art. (Campbell, 1994: 44)

The American history of subculture and nonconformity, of which Beat is a part, and to which Beiles subscribes, begins in the Depression with a greatly increased population of disenfranchised, disaffiliated migrants and vagrants in part forced economically into, and in part choosing to pursue, a lifestyle at odds with, and perceived as a threat to, the community-based upstanding-citizen version of American life which grew in strength as a result of the war and its impact on socio-political life. This pre-Beat ‘other America’ with its literary expression in Algren and Steinbeck attracted the Beats, but by the time they encountered it on literary terms it had already changed. It had become a by-product of the consumerist 1950s, not a result of the Depression; it developed a Cold War rather than World War fear. It was urban rather than rural, riding the subway or the El rather

than hopping freights, and stealing more than it panhandled. The shift is evident in Kerouac's *On The Road*, which describes a search for old American independence, but finds only reason to assert its own brand of difference.

From wartime 'beat', as in messed around, tired of it, and willing to take desperate chances because of it as used by Algren's early nonconformist characters, comes 'Beat' in which form follows content, and the author follows his writing. From 'hip' in black jazz-speak comes 'hipster' who chooses his outsidership rather than having to deal with it, and just as the first impact of 'Beat' writing starts to fade and starts to gather followers in the domesticated form of 'beatniks', 'hipster' improbably morphs into 'hippie', unleashing a pent-up attack on 'four-square' American life.

The Beats developed their own type of nonconformism as a direct reaction to the particular sort of society they were faced with. "The Beat Generation raises its head as the suppressed demon in ordinary American life, as the urge for total anarchical freedom, without respect for laws or civilizing norms" (Campbell, 1994: 246). The Beat movement shows an inversion of social values through its idealization of figures like Herbert Huncke, Neal Cassady and Carl Solomon. Huncke was a Times Square hustler, a drug addict and a thief. Cassady was a juvenile delinquent from a practically vagrant midwestern family. Solomon was mentally ill and spent much of his life in psychiatric hospitals. They were not the sort of people American society would hold up as heroes. They were the sort of individuals likely to be shunted outside the parameters of 'normal society' early on their lives, forgotten if silent or controlled as well as possible by various authorities when they drew attention to themselves. To the early Beat group, they became icons, and the key feature of their celebrity was their conflict with the system in various ways, and the fact that on closer inspection they were neither evil or pathetic, as society would have you believe, but people capable of survival, of creativity, of an entirely different way of being.

While people like Huncke were on the streets as a matter of some choice, Cassady had less say in his position in society, and Solomon virtually no say in his. Yet this fact does

not detract from the political power of the nonconformity of these individuals had for the Beats – rather, it comes to be seen as an inherent nonconformity, an intrinsic rebellion ingrained in one's way of being. This is a romanticised view, and a problematic one. It involves misunderstanding and misrepresentation, but it is not the malicious lack of empathy and negative labelling the system imposes on such individuals.

Another sociological concept relevant to Beat writing is that of anomie. The original term 'anomie' is defined as "inconsistencies between societal conditions and individual opportunities for growth, fulfillment, and productivity within a society. The term *anomia* has been used to refer to those who experience personal frustration and alienation as a result of anomie within society" (Shoemaker, 1990: 99). From Durkheim's anomie David Riesman, author of *The Lonely Crowd* derives 'anomic': "the diversity of maladjusted individuals existing beyond – or perhaps beneath – the reach of conformity" (Holton, 1998: 23). Beat scholar Robert Holton's understanding of the anomic suggests a particular social 'space', an anomic space inhabited by "a variety of eccentrics: drug addicts and transient carnies, homosexuals and fringe artists, criminals and visionaries, misfits of all kinds" (1998: 23), his list closely resembling Goffman's earlier one. Holton argues that this sort of space attracted and inspired the Beat writers because of the difference, the heterogeneity and potential variety of strategies of nonconformity it offered.

Interestingly, at its origin in Durkheim's work anomie is viewed as a serious social problem; he develops it in his work on suicide. By the time Riesman reworks the term, it is an interesting social condition, though not really a tragedy. By the time Holton uses it to look at Beat writing, it is viewed as a commonplace aspect of society, and rather than being a problem space it is a sphere alive with possibilities of heterogeneity and alternatives to everyday life and everyday thinking. It is this latter view that Beiles, like the other Beats who, as Holton suggests, embraced the anomic, subscribes to. In this context, maladjustment to society is a given, and anomie becomes an exploration of ways of experiencing and expressing that maladjustment.

Campbell notes that “[Ginsberg] had always linked the personal and the political. For Burroughs and Kerouac, ‘beat’ was body politics: freedom from police interference, from moral interference (whose morals anyway?), freedom to move to different latitudes and freedom to mutilate oneself, or mutilate one’s text” (Campbell, 1999: 251). This is a useful comment on Beat nonconformity; however, Campbell’s equation of Beat “body politics” and “freedom” is a bit simplistic.

The Beat preoccupation with micropolitics – that is, the politics of the system in relation to the individual, the power of authority over the actual self and ways of eluding and countering that power are often linked to the physical person. For instance, drug use and sexual activity, both prominent themes in Beat writing and later writing about the Beats, are very much things of societal stricture and personal freedom played out on the body. The bodies of those designated mentally ill, like Solomon, Ginsberg and Beiles, become the means by which control of the mind is negotiated (Solomon writes very lucidly of his experiences of insulin shock, Beiles of his reliance on therapeutic drugs). There are numerous other examples. Kerouac and Cassady’s restless mobility suggests a resistance to the pressure to ‘settle down’, to surrender to values of consumerism and stability. Johnson writes in her memoirs what a big statement, a move beyond the point of no return to ‘respectability’ it was for a young unmarried woman to move out of home in the 1950s, regardless of what she did or didn’t do in her independent dwelling. In Beiles’s work too the body becomes a site of rebellion, often through self-destruction. In Diane di Prima’s words, “this flesh all I have to offer, to make the play with/ this immediate head, what it comes up with” (‘Revolutionary Letter #1’, 9-10).

The freedom of which Campbell writes is in many ways central to Beat writing, but it is the struggle for that freedom rather than its benefits that they are most concerned with. “Mutilating” (Campbell, 1999: 251) oneself, or one’s text, is not an expression of freedom but a comment on the controls of that freedom. Nonconformity in any manifestation is not an expression of the freedom to not conform but a challenge to the conformist. “Freedom from moral interference” (1999: 251) as a concept present in any literature, or any subculture, inherently asks the question “whose morals anyway?” (1999:

251). All these questions, rebellions, rejections and reconsiderations come out as a bit of a jumble in Beat writing. There is no clear-cut line of criticism, and no definite plan for change. Nevertheless Beat strategies of nonconformity were not just the simple reject-everything 'rebel without a cause' attitudes which are often attributed to them. Rather, they sense that "the only life-giving answer is to accept the terms of death...to divorce oneself from society, to exist without roots, to set out on that uncharted journey into the rebellious imperatives of the self" (Mailer, 1959: 283).

The Beats were not alone in perceiving the political in everyday life. In his study of American poetry in the 1950s Paul Breslin notes that "social criticism of this era shifted its attention from politics as traditionally conceived and tried to describe the social psychology of contemporary life" (Breslin, 1987: 4). The extent to which conformist values infiltrated every aspect of life during the 1950s to some degree prompts the ways in which the Beats refused to conform. Holton writes of "the attempt by the Beats to explore, adapt, and establish collective heterogeneous spaces based on the examples of marginalised groups whose exclusion seemed to guarantee their immunity from the privileges and perils of mainstream modernity" (Holton, 2004: 11). The Beat interest in social deviance, and their interaction with and writing about people considered deviant, which to some extent rendered them nonconformist by some sort of social osmosis, stemmed from the same drive which caused them to be intrigued by, and imitative of, black hipster culture. Leroi Jones/ Amiri Baraka explains that "the...whites who associated themselves with this Negro music [bebop] identified the Negro with this separation, this nonconformity, though, of course, the Negro himself had no choice. [M]erely by being a Negro in America, one *was* a nonconformist" (Baraka in Holton, 2004: 22). In other words, "the hipster refused to accept conventional society; the Negro was refused by it" (Campbell, 1994: 258). The same process of identification is at work when the Beats identify the mad, or any other outcast group, with nonconformity, and themselves identify with that image of that group. Baraka points out that, without it being a matter of choice, as it was for the white Beats, being Negro meant "one *was* nonconformist". It is precisely this matter of choicelessness, this nonconformity as a part of one's social identity, which so attracted the Beats. It is also what much of the criticism

of the Beats is based on – their inability to see this as an unshakable label which is not necessarily desired, and their reinforcement of stereotypes. They tended to see the nonconformism of which Baraka speaks as intrinsic to the people thus labelled, rather than an artificial, and often damaging, socially enforced identity. But at the same time, the value the Beats place in the differentness of marginalised groups in defiance of conventional social values is a positive aspect of their rather naïve attitude towards the outcast. It is their search for what Holton terms “the folds of heterogeneity” (Holton, 2004: 11) which remains relevant, not the assumptions they made and reinforced in the course of this search – assumptions prevalent at the time, and not peculiar to the Beat group.

Criticism of the Beats is also aimed at their perpetual rebellion against everything vaguely suggesting ‘the establishment’. Peter Michelson aptly describes this attitude: “if you walk safely with the light across an intersection it’s a sign of moral obtuseness, whereas if you walk against the light and get flattened by the bourgeois steamroller it’s a revelation of your exquisite moral sensibility...and your medal of honour is insanity” (Michelson in Breslin, 1987: 27). Like Ginsberg, whose work Michelson refers to, Beiles is often guilty of throwing himself under the “bourgeois steamroller”, but he often has humorous insight into the gratuitous futility of doing so.

In *Sacred Fix* Beiles explores all these concerns in various ways. The book is a collection of four texts written between 1972 and 1975. The works included vary in form, each pushing the boundaries in terms of its genre. All were allegedly written “while in psychiatric care” (Cumiskey, 2001: 5). While this was used as a sort of marketing tool for the book when it first appeared, it might also be relevant in terms of understanding the text itself. In *Sacred Fix* Beiles explores the position and of the individual within the system and possibilities of countering it, a concern which he often links to his illness and treatment elsewhere.

The first text in the collection, ‘Lear in Los Angeles’, is a theatrical piece featuring the voices of a narrator, a script writer, a film producer, and an audience, as well as numerous

actors and characters. Beiles himself appears in the text in different ways – it is often suggested that he is the scriptwriter, he is discussed as an actor in the pieces of film, and he is the Lear of the title. The sense of shifting identities and entangled voices is accentuated by the fact that Beiles provides no indication of who is speaking, the lines follow on like a monologue until it becomes apparent that an interaction of some sort is taking place. The reader's initial confusion is made complete by the fact that 'Lear in Los Angeles' features a play-within-a-play structure, with various bits of unseen 'film' being described or actually played out, with no indication as to when they stop and start within the play. Pieces of film or theatre are interspersed with, or interrupted by, commentary on what is being 'seen' by the audience. This gives Beiles ample opportunity to suggest his presence in the play; one gets the sense that Beiles is playing a weird sort of peek-a-boo with his reader, appearing briefly through a character, casting himself in a film sequence, using the narrator's voice to make a comment, then disappearing again without having taken on an actual definable role.

The opening monologue begins with no introduction, but it seems to be part of a play or a piece of film (within 'Lear in Los Angeles'). It is written in blank verse, but the language tends towards the archaic, and the content is theatrical, as though it were alluding to an older, established form of theatre:

rage! plunge brawn arm into the night
and pinch out stars and drape the moon
with velvet cape
o spite it all to pitch!
no one will float nor rise
call up a witch [sic] from other universe
boom out a curse
cast off all mannerly disguise
and play the beast
see how choirs flee
chorused with woe!
all queens of other pantheons
all angels low
curse you! (14-27)

Beiles is not writing to fit any particular metre, yet he employs the technique of omitting unnecessary words to shorten lines. Without the constant slowing down of pronouns and prepositions, the poetry is pared down expression, just image and action. This lends the

words a forcefulness, a condensed energy. But Beiles is just playing with form. The technique might work very well in this particular sequence, but the piece means little in the context of the play. It is just one in a sequences of dramatic fragments to each of which Beiles matches his writing style, a collage of pieces which are never concluded, and most of which are explicitly critiqued and 'rejected' by the Hollywood Producer voice.

At this point the narrator-character sheds some light on the structure of the play:

enough! let us retire to the projection room
and see the latest sperimental film by sinclair.
it's silent... I'll rea[d] the commentary.
he played in it too. afterwards all the cast had nervous breakdowns
grip your arm rests!
now one, two three" (37-42)

What follows reads not so much like commentary as a very particular accompaniment to the unseen film. Beiles has devised a functional context in which the otherwise incongruent pieces are held together, and in which the detail of description and stage direction are made unnecessary by the film story, yet, because the films are silent, all meaning is conveyed through the text. The reader is supposed to believe that there is an entire visual aspect to the play which they are denied, but in fact they miss nothing because all of the films exist only in the text. In some of these film commentary sequences, 'Sinclair', elsewhere the writer and/or director, appears as an actor as well: "is that Sinclair?/ he smears himself with ochreous paint/ o how his love does faint/ to see his livid lips outstood/ this monster she thought kind and good" (54-58) whereafter Sinclair's character exits by donning a pair of wings and flying into outer space.

It is significant that Beiles casts his Sinclair character in this scene. Sinclair is not intended to be Beiles, his appearance is not just the intrusion of the author into the text. But Sinclair is a Beiles-like character, and he is intended as a figure signifying some aspect of Beiles, some projection of himself into his play. Or, despite the mixed-up and layered identities of the play, although Sinclair is acting, he does in a way signify Beiles, and in scenes such as this he is recognised. Sinclair the character shares his name with Sinclair the author, and the voice saying "is that Sinclair?" recognises and identifies them

both. As such, his first acting assignment as a “monster” (58) might hold more than just the fun of dressing ‘himself’ (Sinclair) up as improbable characters, though certainly there is an element of that in the various roles Sinclair plays. It is noteworthy that although the heroine considered “this monster” “kind and good” (58), she never doubted he was a monster. It is also interesting that after this brief encounter Sinclair’s character literally flies away, an image of escape and freedom.

Interjections by the audience appear throughout the text, discussing Sinclair in his role as an actor or, as in this instance, director: “hush it’s another by sinclair/ that trash filled savage in our home/ he’ll only roam/ to death us drive” (163-166). The speaker is very depreciating of Sinclair, yet his comment is initially about the need to pay attention to the film. Beiles places Sinclair in an odd relationship with the audience – they hate him, say he’ll drive them to death, yet want to see the film he has created. They want his art but not him.

The veteran’s hospital sequence portrays a squalid scene, with the hospital resembling an asylum filled with drug addicts. Beiles’s anti-war sentiment is clear in lines like “LONG LIVE AMERICA IN THE VETERANS HOSPITAL” (118), the results of the war on the soldiers is apparent in “NO! LONG LIVE *COCAINE*” (123). These slogan-like proclamations by the inmates of the hospital are tempered by what is really the core of Beiles’s anti-war stance: “all in hell rejoice to see/ the downfall of the young and free” (139-140). War for Beiles is a way in which governments sabotage the lives of the young. When the audience request “another war movie” (193) Beiles, or Sinclair, returns to the implications of war for the individual, but unlike the veteran’s hospital scene this takes the perspective of the army as a way out of a difficult life:

a wife, two kids living on the dole
how this ravages the soul
the irk
through lack of work
no thing to turn one’s hand
no thing inside to ride the boring days
perhaps a silly puzzle
anguish anger languor
better war and early death
the corner prophet saith

something to do
to 'scape this homebound murky brew
it's an olden story
that wartime days bring glory (196-209)

Here unemployment, poverty and boredom serve to coerce men into going to war. As in the veteran's hospital sequence, the idea is control of the individual. Whereas in the first scene the sentiment is that the authorities condemn young people to death, or an invalid existence like that of the veteran's hospital inmates, by sending them to war, in the second 'war movie', things are made a bit more complex: the system places people in such a position that they themselves choose to go to war, seeing it as a way out of their poverty ("a wife, two kids living on the dole") or just a socially accepted form of suicide – "better war and early death".

It does not end there, though, because, as the next sequence shows, a generation later having taken this way out means that "*Yoore a killa!*" (216):

that was too long ago. what about them crazy thins
those hippies get up to smokin weed, ritchals an
murders an soosides. weeze sellrespectin
people an ma kid she kums home frum skool y'know
an she sez y'know *Yoore a killa!* grandad wuz a
killa! greatgranpaw wuz a killa./ dunno where she
gits it frum. we respetible peeple in oil (212-218)

Beiles parodies the older generation's perception of the counterculture, emphasizing the moral outrage at "them crazy thins them hippies get up to". There is irony in the speaker's conviction that the hippies are prone to "murders and soosides" when his daughter accuses him and his father and grandfather of murder, challenging their claim to being "respetible peeple".

The image of death is also present in the next 'film', in which two young lovers form a suicide pact but are unable to go through with it, deciding at the last moment that they want to live. It is a melodramatic scene, but the idea of almost dying yet ultimately choosing life is revisited repeatedly. It resurfaces in a strange scene featuring Leonard (Cohen, assumably), and two women named Suzanne and Ann. What happens is unclear, but the conclusion is "i'd planned to stab you in the heart/ then stab myself/ i know not why/ four youngsters in their prime/ why die?" (300-304). Beiles was friends with Cohen

(whose appraisal of Beiles's poetry features at the end of *Sacred Fix*), and they both lived on the Greek island of Lorca around this time, as did the Suzanne of Cohen's famous song, but the scene might be anything from reminiscence to dream narrative to pure fantasy.

Another almost-suicide scene is more aware of its sentimentality and to some extent parodies itself through the use of quaint archetypes, stock characters of the Hollywood vocabulary. But strangely despite this 'shorthand' it achieves a 'fuller' story and goes further towards exploring the concerns outlined in the first instance. It begins:

in heat of sun
he took a gun
and put the muzzle 'gainst her heart
pimp and tart
they'd planned a double end
thinking that on earth they couldn't blend
or for themselves well fend.
she'd grown old and out of trade
he was deserted by the other maid
for turk who gave her better grade (326-335)

The two characters are essentially correct in their perception of themselves, "thinking that on earth they couldn't blend" (331), that they won't be accepted, and aware that they have no legitimate means of income – "or for themselves well fend". They cannot survive in straight society, and, having grown "old and out of trade" are struggling to make it in the underworld as well. But as in the other suicide scenes, "moment before trigger squeeze" (357) "SUDDENLY THEY CARE" (363). Despite their hopelessness, they want to live. The producer cuts through the sentimental ending with: "NAH GOOD THEM ART FILMS/ WHAT THEY WUNT IZ STUFF ABAHT SHOWBIZ" (374-375).

The parody steps up a level – not only is Beiles parodying popular films, he also laughs at the film world, or what the producer calls 'showbiz'. Primarily through the notation of his speech, the producer is presented as a stereotype and mocked as such. The sort of things requested of Sinclair and what he presents in response to these requests starts to become a parody of the writer, who creates ever more ridiculous scripts while attempting to please his audience. At an increasingly frantic pace Sinclair changes the form and style of his work, doing everything he can think of to get a positive response from the cynical,

shallow producer. When a trite scene set in “PARIS, 1939” (607) is rejected: “NAH
WAT ABAHT SUM LOKIL KULLA/ YOOSE ARRL AIRIE FAIRIE/ REEL
BOHEEMIAN WAKIN IN THA STREET STUFF!” (628-630), Sinclair counters it with
some *real* ‘bohemian walking in the street stuff’:

curved, sabled, coiled.
garnet eyes whippet
blue apron galoshes
splashed pavement
red rubber hose gushing
fish ice nuggets
shivers on a leash
alcoholic corner
shopping bag hiss
spuds plunged in oil
old coat weak sun
soupkitchen fumbles
for a match
muttering grime
the tailor’s dummy is immobile
demands a commission
hammering outside
a leaking faucet
no anguish in the metro
blotched girl selling street candy
smiled eyes switched on
tunnels and its warm
air coming up through
the grating above the station
handbag a mess of letters
change seats to feel right
in the clatter... (631-658)

As with the opening monologue, Beiles has pared his words down to the essentials, a succession of images written as they assail the city pedestrian. You cannot map his path to the subway – there are no directions, no sense of distance, no points of reference. But you can understand his passage, not by identifying the things he sees but by interpreting his impressions of them. There is hardly a needless word, no unnecessary detail. It is impressionistic, imagist. This conveys much of the poet’s experience of the street, and creates images such as “soupkitchen fumbles/ for a match/ muttering grime” which conveys in very few words more of the fumbling of a hobo for a precious match about his grimy person than any detailed description could. Similarly, the two dogs in this piece are described as “garnet eyes whippet” and “shivers on a leash” which are not descriptions of dogs at all, but descriptions of a passing perception of them. The immediacy of the

writing, the lack of hesitation in juxtaposing unrelated words, as in “blue apron galoshes” (633), makes images not only of things but of the movement around them. The fact of the writer’s perception, (the breathing of the man in Holmes’s terms) is taken as a crucial part of what is described. Predictably, the producer calls it “REEAL BULLSHIT!” (659).

The more the sequences parody film conventions, the more they bear a semblance of possible reality. The more implausible Sinclair’s part, the more it might have to do with revealing something of his actual self. Thus the last scene, titled “SINCLAIR DISGUISED AS THE LATEST THING RETURNS TO THE ENGLISH STAGE” (908) features Sinclair playing “a girl with an itch/ for diamonds and furs” (910). It is through this character, through the incongruence and overt staging of identity that the play ends with the words “i’m me! dahling!/ i’m me!” (944-945). At the end of a chaotic turmoil of voices and identities, this is significant, not less so because Sinclair says it in disguise and in character. Again, there is a sense of simultaneous sincerity and parody. The only time Sinclair, or through him Beiles, actually addresses the reader or speaks of himself, he does it in disguise, playing the part of a particularly superficial, shallow character. The moment at the end of the play which might be called ‘real’ in some way - an assertion of being and identity at the end of a confusing collage of identities and voices in which the real and the staged are constantly overlapped and merged – is constructed as ‘overly’ staged. Sinclair plays an actress who appears onstage and then tries to convince someone, perhaps herself, that “I’m me!”

‘The Hardwoods’ takes the more straightforward form of a closet drama in which two characters with help from a narrator discuss their wayward son, John, described as “puny and nervous/ and heir to the knighthood” (19-20). John is never present in the text – he is talked about, but never speaks. John’s father states that “alas our john is sore disgrace/ of acumen has little trace” (24-25), concluding that “better he die young” (32). Yet when his mother joins in this tirade against John she mentions “last term/ saw him/ mooning at the lake/ with talk of suicide” (37-43). They want him to die, yet his suicidal ruminations are added to the list of things that apparently make him so disgraceful. The other things they mention are his dislike of hunting and a fear of dead mice; what they mean is a lack of

conventional masculinity. The parents see him as a major calamity which has befallen them:

we've been a careful family
ne'er mating for advantage
save of breed
we never joined to crock
no herder was more careful
with his stock
and yet the puny will rise
pity they can't be culled (50-57)

The parents' fascist attitude towards John as an inferior specimen of their family extends to "we are stopped/ from gelding him/ despite the need" (167-169), yet they fail to see the incongruity between wanting to have John 'gelded' and complaining about his lack of interest in conventional 'masculine' behaviour.

Despite all this John showed "signs of commerce/ and of thrift" (93-94), "opened up a bank account/ bought shares" (104-105) and became successful on his own, "but not a jot was glad/ they'd spawned a wizard of finance" (108-109). It seems that having John different and disgraceful was bad enough, but having him different and independent is intolerable, so "family physician diagnosed/ what all supposed/ the boy was mad" (110-112). Clearly the physician's role, indicated by "what all supposed", is to prove the family right, and to disempower John and bring him back under their control. The diagnosis also provides them with an explanation for John's 'different' behaviour without calling their own assumptions and beliefs of what is 'normal' into question, though in theory someone who wishes to have their child castrated and 'culled' might be in need of psychiatric intervention.

Not surprisingly, "whate'er his treatments/ he remained the same" (113-114), and John is sent "to a boarding house in Nice/ where people of his nature/ were dispatched" (120-122). John has been labelled incurably mad, and accordingly confined and then sent away, removed from his family's and society's sight. But John does not surrender easily, and "after one summer alone/ by selling the lowly icecream cone/ john himself did own" (126-128). "Himself did own" is interesting, in that for Beiles the fundamental point of John's success is his independence, his "owning himself" and not being under the control,

financially or otherwise, of others. John regains his earlier success, “and now he owned a house/ and a limousine” (131-132) and is “accompanied by beauty queen” (133). But then “they had an accident/ in car/ and both were instant killed” (136-138).

It seems that throughout the text John’s parents speak of him in terms of categories – not who he is but what he is and, more importantly, what he is not. He is not a person but “is sore disgrace” (24). Beiles allows the things said about John to influence what happens to him. The parents say it would be better if he died, so he dies. They see John as a disgrace, so to them he *is* a disgrace – it is as much their own doing through their articulated perception of him as any action on his part. Sociologist Howard Becker points out that “treating a person as though he were generally rather than specifically deviant produces a self-fulfilling prophecy” (Becker in Frazier, 1976: 33). John might be different but he doesn’t do anything particularly disgraceful. It is their labelling of him which propels him to outcast status, not his small actions which are in effect harmless. They make him shameful because they are ashamed of him. Because all these decisions and interactions take place in dialogue, the importance of language in this process, the naming or labelling is brought to the fore.

The same process takes place when John is incarcerated. It is said that John is mad, so everything he does is interpreted as madness. He does not respond to treatment because he wasn’t ill to start with, but more importantly because once labelled mad he can’t really be treated – he can’t be made un-mad. Madness is used against John as an enforced identity, not a condition, which gives others power over him and which he cannot change. Nothing makes him ‘better’ because they don’t want him to get better – the madness is their own construct and they cannot and will not remove it from him. As Beiles clearly and simply shows, once they call you mad you are always a madman, and any attempt to argue will be seen as proof of your madness. Goffman explains this “vicious-circle process” (Goffman, 1961: 269) in *Asylums*:

Stigmatization as mentally ill and involuntary hospitalization are the means by which we answer these offences against propriety. The individual’s persistence in manifesting symptoms after entering the hospital, and his tendency to develop additional symptoms during his initial response to the hospital, can now no longer serve him well as expressions of disaffection. From the patient’s point of view, to decline to exchange a word with the staff or

his fellow patients may be ample evidence of rejecting the institution's view of what and who he is; yet higher management may construe this alienative expression as just the sort of symptomatology the institution was established to deal with and as the best kind of evidence that the patient properly belongs where he now finds himself. (Goffman, 1961: 268-269)

Goffman's observation of the workings of a mental hospital shed light on John's fate in 'The Hardwoods'. John is a victim of the stigmatization and hospitalization which Goffman describes; the ideology informing the treatment of John in Beiles's text is precisely what Goffman describes as the assumptions made and acted upon by hospital management concerning the patient.

In 'The Needle Vestal' the heroine, Phillipa, has a prolonged argument with her husband concerning her addiction to heroin. Beiles uses this dialogue to convey her perception of herself and her drug use.

Phillipa, in a drugged state, sings the praises of heroin and denounces all the 'squares', who might contradict her, including her husband whom she is addressing. She explains that "i was born for venture and for other use/ than mere reality provides/ everything has been explored/ with all sensations i am bored/ yet 'fraid to die" (5-8). Phillipa is bored of the world, tired of "mere reality". But she is still scared of death, and therefore unwilling to end her bored life. She sees heroin as a sort of in-between existence, away from tedious reality but still in the living world. For her it constitutes a reason to live – "so why decry this need i've made/ to keep alive" (10-11). She also notes that "somehow with it i still thrive/ away from the madding crowd" (12-13). Heroin, and being an addict, create for her a motivation to keep going though she has rejected, or lost interest in, the conventional means of motivation. They also provide her with a space "away from the madding crowd", a space simultaneously within, but outside of, society. This space from which Phillipa speaks might be termed an anomic space, in Holton's sense of the word.

Phillipa does not experience anomia for socio-economic reasons, which were seen by Durkheim as the main causes of anomie. But she does experience frustration and alienation, and it is mainly for reasons of perceived 'inconsistencies' within society that she does so. Such inconsistencies were perhaps viewed differently in the 1970s, when

‘The Needle Vestal’ was written, and in the 1930s, when Durkheim developed anomie theory. Possibly, for the counterculture who were rebelling against the conformity of a 1950s upbringing, things less obvious than money constituted enough societal inconsistencies to warrant a reaction not unlike anomie. Phillipa does not feel alienated and frustrated because she is in a social position from which she cannot attain the goals suggested to her by society, but nevertheless somehow, like the traditional anomic, she cannot match socially accepted aspirations, motivations and roles to herself, and thus opts for an alternative.

‘The Needle Vestal’ with its principal players of Phillipa, her husband, and her tenants is set in an anomic space as defined by Holton as a source of inspiration for the Beats. Phillipa places herself in this space, partly through the fact of her being a heroin addict, and partly through her perception of herself as such. What happens in ‘The Needle Vestal’ is not unlike what Burroughs does in *Junkie*, in that both texts suggest that the anomic space is one out of which anomic individuals develop, and which at the same time attracts others like them, or who see themselves as like them (or at least as more like them than their original social milieu). Not without exception, this tendency of downward social drift, or dropping out, applies to middle-class youth who view the poorer ‘original’ or ‘authentic’ anomic as a better option than their own middle-class designation, described by Grogan as a ‘suicidal’ attempt at escape incomprehensible to both the middle-class parents and the lower strata of society where these young people locate liberation.

From a somewhat different perspective Becker, in identifying ways in which deviant behaviour emerges in society, identifies a social space which, although he does not refer to anomie theory, is similar in character and function to the anomic space identified here. He describes a group of people, a sub-strata of society “free to follow [their] impulses. The person who does not have a reputation to maintain or a conventional job he must keep may follow his impulses. He has nothing staked on continuing to appear conventional” (Becker in Frazier, 1976: 32). Naturally enough, as we see with the Beat movement, and as Beiles illustrates in ‘The Needle Vestal’, such people and the social-

geographical city space which belongs to them attract others from a different background who want to follow their impulses, who do not want to preserve their reputations or their jobs, who no longer want to appear conventional. Thus only for this second group is going into the anomic space and becoming nonconformist (from not wanting to conform to becoming nonconformist might be seen to follow the same sort of 'moral career', in Goffman's terms, as becoming a criminal or drug user or mental patient) a willful act of nonconformism, of protest or of 'voicing' one's difference from society. For the original anomic or 'deviant' group, no such choice is made – no such choice is available.

From this position Phillipa questions her husband's conformism:

tell me from what goodness i have turned
are all the matters that you've earned
by work and schemes...
do they gratify as much as dreams?
the parties and the holidays
the racecourse and the social ways
of your blessed set? (15-21)

and argues for the validity of her own stance: "i'm no cog/ within your stupid roundabout" (31-32) although she is aware of her closed-in world: "what do i care! /i have my animals/ my world/ my cat/ my dog" (26-30). Even to Phillipa, a world consisting of a cat, a dog, and a big habit seems impoverished, and she becomes increasingly defensive. She elevates her addiction to the status of "a holy cult./ a needle vestal, if you wish,/ diner from the lotus dish..." (38-40). Similar religious imagery appears elsewhere in drug literature, creating a sort of cultish aesthetic, as in Lenore Kandel's 'Blues for Sister Sally': "against the bathroom grimy sink/ pumping her arms full of life/ (holy holy)/ she bears the stigma (holy holy) of the raving christ/ (holy holy)/ holy needle/ holy powder/ holy vein" (9-16). Kandel's Sister Sally shares with Phillipa a detached, falsely self-sufficient outlook in which all the questions are neatly answered by heroin: "our stash is in our elbows/ our fix is in our heads/ god is a junkie and he has sold salvation/ for a week's supply" (Blues for Sister Sally, 40-43).

Phillipa says that "there is no home except within my skin/ and mercy be my veins are never thin" (46-47). This is an interesting assertion, in that despite her very real

dependence and diminished functioning in the real world Phillipa is claiming autonomy, a self-sufficiency and lack of need for everything associated with 'home'. Her needs have decreased to simply requiring a fix at regular intervals, and because of this she has become isolated. She desires nothing that the straight world can provide her with, and through this she is independent of it, in what Alexander Trocchi describes in *Cain's Book* as the "experience...of an alien in a society of conformers, a personal cosmology of inner space" (Trocchi in Campbell, 1994: 263). From the viewpoint of straight society, represented by her husband, she is a barely functioning wreck in need of very much help. From Phillipa's perspective, she is completely free of their concerns, insulated from their interventions, and able to gratify her needs very simply. She is subject only to her addiction.

Phillipa's statements suggest the responses identified as possible reactions to anomie. These are innovation, ritualism, retreatism and rebellion. Innovation in this sense is defined as "an acceptance of cultural goals but a rejection of legitimate means" (Shoemaker, 1990: 102). Strictly speaking, this refers to different types of deviance than Phillipa's – for instance, theft as a means of attaining the goal of having money without the legitimate means of working. However, Phillipa's substitution of heroin for 'legitimate' reasons "to keep alive" (11) arguably functions in the same way – she has created another means of attaining the goal of maintaining interest in life. Ritualism, in which "the goals are sometimes rejected while the means are rigidly obeyed" (1990: 102) describes addiction rather well – sometimes Phillipa takes heroin because she believes herself to be part of "a holy cult" (38) or "a goddess who has other needs" (59), and sometimes because "nothing can compare/ with my despair/ when i've run dry of it" (55-57), but she always takes it. Retreatism is defined as a rejection of both "goals and means" (1990: 102), a rejection of society altogether, as suggested by Phillipa's complete retreat into herself – "there is no home except within my skin" (46). Rebellion entails not only a rejection of society's norms and values, but also "a desire to substitute new goals and means" (1990: 102). This is Phillipa's unconvincing attempt to persuade her audience that her addiction *is* an act of rebellion and even a religious commitment. Phillipa repeatedly asserts her difference, her nonconformity, which results from her

addiction and, as she claims, drove her to it. She sees the fact that only heroin can give her “a sense of life” (68) as proof that she has seen through the illusions which constitute a sense of life for other people – what her husband describes as “wondrous life/ i’m free of chore and strife” (77-78). Paradoxically, she is reluctant to see through the illusions she has created for herself.

Beiles underplays the husband’s emotional reaction to Phillipa’s addiction. Phillipa tells him that “nothing but this holy liquid can imbue/ me with a sense of life!” (67-68), which is really a rejection of him along with her withdrawal into her addiction. The husband’s response is rather emotionless and more concerned with norms and roles than interpersonal relations. His concern for her is tainted by a sense of transgressed propriety and the fact that she does not fit the role of “a noble wife” (73). He feels that she should appreciate his money (“my income’s set you free/ to find pursuit/ in all the wholesome pleasures” (70-72) and high social status, and not spend the former on discrediting the latter.

Their marriage serves as a microcosm of society, with marriage as an institution, and the home as an establishment, and the rift between the couple as an individual’s rebellion against conformity. Phillipa rejects her husband’s outlook, his conformism, and replaces their relationship with her solitary preoccupation with heroin. As such she rejects the conventions of marriage, at least of the ideal her husband seems to believe in. The husband pleads, then rages, and eventually leaves, abandoning Phillipa to degenerate in her anomic atmosphere. This is in a way what society does with deviants and misfits, intervening and punishing, then ultimately rejecting them as a lost cause. The incongruent perspectives of Phillipa and her husband are apparent when he tells her that “you are not simply all alone/ and even then you’d have no right/ to make your skin and bone/ just something to be tossed/ into a nursing home, all lost” (85-89). But all his reasoning is met with a “derisive laugh” (84). She fails to see his point, he fails to see that she does value herself very highly, believing herself to be a “goddess” (58). As Phillipa, “backed by a chorus of addicts” (stage direction) states, she is insulated from everything, including her husband:

this complex age
has fevered all our brain
and we can hardly bear the strain
of facts and maginings.
no bird sings a simple song
the time is wrong
and so we take immunity in heroin. (93-99)

The world is too complicated, “the time is wrong”, and both reality and imagination are too much to bear. Heroin provides them with “immunity” to all this, a simple solution of shutting themselves off from the world, a withdrawal from daily concerns.

The husband’s leaving allows for the entrance of two new characters, because Phillipa has to take on lodgers to sustain her habit. They are a gay couple described briefly in the stage direction as “a pair of aging theatricals”, and referred to only as “A” and “B”. Phillipa uses the dissatisfaction of both with their careers and relationship to persuade them to start using heroin as well, either out of her belief that she is part of a “needle vestal” (39) or her isolated loneliness, telling them: “come now take your shot/ and forget your gloomy lot” (187-188).

The perspective of the play then ‘zooms out’ a little, and we are presented with a city in which all the addicts are in a state of crisis:

the town is dry
the cops have swooped
the chain of dealers
are now cooped
in jails
cars cruise like snails
about the streets
in search of pusher’s stuff
cons enthuse
about home brews
and addicts in a crave
shoot up
near anything at hand
dissolved pain killer
cough mixture for a thriller (189-204)

From the narrator’s perspective, which is constructed to be, to the reader, the only perspective, it is largely a city of junkies and police – no mention is made of other parts of society, because from this point of view they are quite irrelevant. The scene presented

is that of a liminal space enlarged by the speaker's perception to be the whole world. It is a dismal, desperate world:

some raving for a needle
besiege the hospitals and wheedle
out a shot
some feel cold and then feel hot,
the signs when drugs are drawn away
some give say
to visions! (219-225)

It becomes more so as the 'drought' continues, and the addicts become increasingly desperate and ill. They become less human, revealing themselves to be strange sick creatures in a macabre descriptive narrative which becomes surreal as its subjects become more otherworldly:

their clothes are torn
and from all sense their tongues are shorn
and they are filled with senseless babble
a mighty crowd of crippled rabble
stretched upon the sand
glittering green
strange creatures hitherto unseen
kinds of mollusc in between
the sky a molten yellow sheen. (229-237)

The town's population is likened to washed up molluscs withering in the sun, a surreal image but an apt one. The play ends with a "heroin harvest festival" (stage direction) to mark the end of the drought, which results in Phillipa's death by overdose.

The last section of *Sacred Fix*, entitled 'Selected Catastrophes (in the Cavern of the Damned)' is a series of blank verse and short prose poems, all set in the same nightmarish city-state, 'the cavern of the damned' of the subtitle, although it is not a cavern but a whole urban community. Beiles rather deprecatingly referred to 'Selected Catastrophes' as "the poems that appear at the back [of *Sacred Fix*]" (Beiles in Butterworth, 1976: 7), which is strange because they are very strong works, with a consumingly haunted, tragic mood, and a depth which isn't always achieved in the plays. In the same interview he noted that "they were written in a state of great depression...I felt that if I could not move from one poem to another my literary death would take place" (1976: 7).

The 'Selected Catastrophes' all share the same context, an eerie town or city space in which various strange events take place either by ordination of the 'government' (an unnamed Orwellian leadership) or as a reaction against this authoritarian ruling power. There is a strong sense of alienation in both the bizarre behaviours of the people and the space they inhabit. Context and detail are built up and established across the poems, so that each provides some idea of this society, which informs the reading of the next. (All the pieces are untitled, so they will be referred to numerically.)

Selected Catastrophe I begins abruptly with "they saw him writing the offensive word/ late at night on the wall of a warehouse/ at the dock" (1-3). The reader is thrown into the action of a chase by a sinister undefined "they" after this unnamed offender. It is never established what the offensive word is, or why it is so offensive. In this context the meaning of the word is irrelevant, certainly to the authorities and possibly to the offending writer as well. Because of the word's taboo status, whatever its original meaning was has been eclipsed by its forbiddenness. To write the word means deviance, rebellion or vandalism, regardless of what the word is. Yet "as they chased him along a wharf, he kept on/ repeating the word and scrawling its initial/ on the walls he passed by" (9-11). He is running towards a "the dead end of a tunnel where he had/ written the terrible word many times over" (12-13) where he is caught and, by implication, killed. It is as if he is leaving his mark, the last trace of himself, but instead of his name he writes the word or its initial instead of his own. In a way the word has become his identity. Because he has written the offensive word he is deviant, is offensive to those who maintain the system. The offensiveness becomes his identity, so the word becomes his name, his sign for himself.

The fact that a word is forbidden (it "had been expunged from the/ dictionary many years ago, after the revolution" (7-8), that he has to find a secret place to write it, and that this writing is seen as a great crime indicates the extent of social control and totalitarian power in this society. The writing is literally underground, and the actions it engenders – the crime, the pursuit, the capture, the struggle, perhaps finally the death of its author – indicate its power and its disruptive potential both publicly, and as the graffiti-covered

dead-end tunnel suggests, privately as well. The same thing is implicit in the moment when he is “caught in the glare/ of an electric torch, he had the/ effrontery when turning round, to actually/ pronounce in a loud voice this detestable of/ all words” (3-7).

III critiques a mechanised society of “packaged people” (2) who live “this expressionless life of action” (5). In modern society there is no more space for expression, only for action. Society is a “machine without passion” (6), but one which is “seething with discontent” (7). Even without outlet for individual expression, as a whole this machine society is not satisfied. But it “is kept in order by the mechanical/ prescriptions of morality” (11-12), maintaining its unhappiness through its own moral strictures and conformism. “The heart” (13) – something human, something of emotion or passion, a force against the artificial and mechanical – “still beats underneath” (13) but it does so “in a body so refashioned/ that it will never again find its real way/ and it expresses itself in murders, revolutions,/ wars of crusade – the angry heart” (14-17). Beiles identifies an illness in this society, a pathology which results only in negative, destructive self-expression. Because there is no outlet for emotion through the individual or creative, the only possible reaction is destructive. Revolution is a symptom of this mechanised society, but not a solution to it. The view expressed is that the damage done to individuality by this society is irreversible. People have been so maimed by the machine that they might rebel, revolt, reject, behave “in an incomprehensible fashion” (22) but they can’t return to, can’t locate, their real selves, “they will never regain their ancient humanity” (23).

IV holds a similar sentiment, but is angrier, a Ginsberg-esque rant beginning with “society! /I will not support you” (1-2). The speaker feels betrayed by society and its “promises of paradise” (7). Having seen the lies of society, perpetuated in order to make people conform to its needs, he ‘kept to himself’, rejected society and tried to isolate himself from it. But “now the whole world has found you out/ and is banging at your deserted edifices/ demanding new lives” (9-11). This is the counterculture, no longer a few isolated outcasts but “the whole world” (9) demanding change. It seems that they have still got it somewhat wrong, for they are looking for answers from “deserted edifices” (10) and “searching for themselves/ in the rubbish dumps” (15-16). As in the

previous poem, revolution is not an answer to a problem society but a symptom of “society/ which destroyed souls” (17-18).

Now it seems that this society, personified, has “lost all its energy/ and fled” (21-22). Beiles sees ‘society’ as not necessarily the same thing as the people which make it up. While ‘society’ has fled, there are still crowds of angry people demanding answers from it. Possibly ‘society’ here is ‘the system’, whatever it is that keeps most people going in a certain direction, conforming to certain spoken and unspoken rules, until often a few and occasionally many of them realise that they are doing this against their will. The speaker mocks this fleeing society, telling it that “i will not support you/ when you shed your hideous electronic disguises/ and stagger through the alleyways of oblivion/ looking for shelter” (2-5). He is vengeful, even spiteful: “society, if you stagger by me/ carrying your disguises under your arm/ i will trip you up and laugh.” (22-24).

VI has a sinister tone in “and when they get old/ and are filled with the voices of the spirits/ they are taken away” (1-3) – by implication, they never come back. ‘They’ seem to be the old, perhaps demented, perhaps mad (they “are filled with the voices of the spirits”). They are removed and “those whose lives haven’t broken out of the prisons of physics/ are left unperplexed and unembarrassed” (4-6). Those who do not think beyond the strictly real and everyday, who have no metaphysical or emotional or spiritual lives are not disturbed by this. They do not think beyond themselves, nor beyond their immediate reality. It does not occur to them to think about where these people are taken and why.

VII addresses the ways in which people mimic each other and try to make themselves resemble the stereotypical facades of what they aspire to. Beiles notes that “very few people are satisfied/ with their identities” (1-2). Only “detectives, policemen, statesmen/ and people in love in the style/ presented on television are known/ for what they are in the way they like” (3-6). Such identities are in a way socially coded through dress and manner, and thus easily identifiable. Such people are “known/ for what they are” (3-4) because they are easily identifiable – when on duty, at least, there can be little doubt as to

a policeman's role and identity. As a result, "the whole population tries to ape them" (7), that is, not necessarily be like them but appear to be like them, to be as they seem to be. This allows people to "for moments lose their uneasiness" (9) with their own complicated, less easily readable identities.

If this is the sort of society in which the 'Selected Catastrophes' take place, then the macabre story told in IX is almost plausible. In this poem, "the state mating computer" (1)

went out of order
and experts said that it would take years
to mend. during those years, said the
leader, those people that reached the
age of mating should show patience.
unorthodox attempts at mating would not
be tolerated. (1-7)

This is a mechanised world in which humanness does not matter. But the breakdown of the system is not the end of the tyranny, it simply makes matters worse. "Those whose time came for mating still/ stayed on in the separate male and/ female camps" (8-10), in which every aspect of their lives is controllable.

finally the day dawned
when the mating centres guided by the
giant computer were opened but very few
of the people who had been deprived of
the company of the opposite sex showed
up. retraining or reawakening techniques
in this area were beyond the means of
science, so a political solution was
found. the recalcitrants were put into
camps and labelled anarchists. (12-21)

As in the previous poems, society creates its own problems; the actions of individuals are reactions to what has been done to them. In response, a political solution is found to a social problem. To remove the problem those who do not conform and do what is expected of them "were put into/ camps and labelled anarchists" (20-21). A political label serves to control and sanction action against the wayward, even though their waywardness is caused by the same social control which then seeks to contain and remove them. Beiles's choice of words accentuates the simple functionality of the label and the action it allows, the arbitrariness of recalcitrance 'becoming' anarchy indicating how artificial the label is, how little it needs to be based on facts in order to function.

X is a comment on entertainment and the media and people's blind consumption thereof. "Nobody listened/ or looked anymore/ so the radio and television people got uneasy" (1-3). People no longer react to what they are shown or told, so the government takes over media programmes – "some were prescribed as medicaments/ others as punishment for criminals/ and yet others for the compulsory education system" (5-7). What was supposed to be entertainment becomes medication or punishment. In this use it becomes unclear whether treatment, correction or this type of education serves to improve, repair, reintegrate or resocialise people, or to make them more isolated and apathetic. If radio and television, sources of information or communication, are put to this sort of use because people are not interested in them, would they serve to educate and re-establish an interest in culture and society, or would they be a more sinister *A Clockwork Orange* type of re-conditioning? The implication seems to be that the dumbest and most ordinary things can be used by the system against people, who are too apathetic to resist.

In XII Beiles attacks people's isolation and lack of contact with each other. He sees a modern society in which despite their proximity to one another people barely communicate, and live isolated lives. This society is portrayed as a train "on civilization's very last trip" (2). The train is filled with commuters. A surreal intervention removes "all the newspapers" (6) they were reading (or hiding behind). With their diversions and screens taken away, the commuters have to face each other, and "before long they were unable to contain their secrets/ and they began to play out the wretched lives/ they had been reading about" (7-9). Without the props of their polite, detached commuter selves, "the walls which effectively insulate them" (Goffman, 1959: 224) they encounter one another in new, more real way, which quickly results in chaos. "The murderers prevailed on this last trip" (10) and, it being not only the last trip of the literal train, but also of the metaphorical one carrying civilization and society, the outcome is terminal. The train stops after the driver is killed, "and as the days passed/ all that was heard were screams/ and various national anthems sung weakly" (14-16). The people remain in the stationary train, going nowhere but with no initiative to get out and do something else. The screams suggest misery and violence, the national anthems a vague attempt at holding onto

‘civilization’. The narrator, who seemed to have been omnipresent at the beginning of the poem, has left the train in the end, telling only what can be observed from the outside – “all that was heard” (15).

In XIII a town is devastated as though by a plague, but death is spread by rumour instead of illness. “A rumour went abroad that all the milk bottles/ were contaminated and that whoever touched them/ would soon succumb to melancholia – a disease which was spreading through the city” (1-4). The rumour is that milk bottles spread melancholia – depression. The fear of contamination, however impossible, results in a strange scene: “soon long lines of milk/ bottles were formed on the pavements outside/ each door and people began to walk in the/ streets. cars came to halt and the city/ was paralysed” (7-11). The city is incapacitated by fear and sorrow, not by anything physical. In the end it is neither the milk bottles nor the melancholia which kill people, but “many died of /starvation” (22-23) because they “shut themselves in” (22) to avoid the increasing amounts of untouched milk. The end result is a ghost town of melancholic dying people and sour milk, with only the milk delivery service still functioning, because “noone could be found to remove the milk/ bottles and noone could dissuade the milkmen/ from continuing their deliveries” (16-18).

XIV is a study of gullibility. “It was said that something extraordinary/ would be taking place at the city centre” (2) so everyone flocks there to see what this event will be. The irony is that “nothing at all happened” (8). “A lot of people, however, were crushed to /death by the crowd” (9-10). It is not the event but the idea of one which draws the people, and it is nothing but their conformism, the need to be where everyone else is going, to see what everyone is talking about, which causes the catastrophe. They kill each other with their own stupidity.

In XVIII “despair with the state food /reached such a pitch /that people took to swallowing earth” (4-6). Like many of the actions in ‘Selected Catastrophes’ this is a desperate reaction to an oppressive situation, and serves to make matters worse. “As a preventative measure /gardens were covered over with concrete slabs /and citizens were

not allowed to travel into the country” (8-10). This is a reactionary counter-response, a bizarre attempt at controlling – not resolving – the problem. But the authorities prevail, because “nobody dared to complain about the state-food openly – that would result in immediate incarceration” (12). Any criticism is treated as a punishable offence, but not complaining has a similar result – people’s freedom of movement is controlled, and gardens are covered with concrete, removing their access to earth which was both a (poor) alternative to the state food and a means of protesting against it. Without putting people into prison, the world around them is turned into a prison anyway. Unlike the people, the state also has at its disposal the power of knowledge: “scientists dutifully explained that the unusual behaviour/ was due to a sunspot which had a deleterious effect/ on most of the population” (14-16). However implausible this explanation might be, it serves to support the stance of the authorities and discredit that of the people, making their desperate protest into involuntary behaviour which they themselves don’t understand.

XX is a sort of counterculture parable, and while the author is certainly not on the side of authority in the constant ‘us’ and ‘them’ struggle he perceives everywhere, he is at least ambivalent about the success or usefulness of revolt. He sees it primarily as a result, a symptom of oppressive society (oppressive not necessarily politically but socially and culturally as well), as a reaction, not a pro-active course. He is not idealistic about revolution, although his perception of rebellion as tragic – as a passionate but doomed response to a sick and mechanised society – is somewhat romantic. He is aware that the individual and rebellious will never win the war with society which they nevertheless must start, but he is not entirely cynical about the fact that they will die trying. In this piece the angry youth, “the children who had suffered so much /from the revenge of their parents” (2-3), “in their extreme despair” (4) become “fire-worshippers” (5), perhaps choosing a deity which is bound to be destructive. “Everywhere in the city they threw off their clothes /and made fires of them /and chanted strange words /hitherto unuttered” (6-9). The children say something new, something “hitherto unuttered” but already these are just “strange words”, already they are “chanterd” – not expressed ideas but repeated slogans. The result is tragic if predictable: “most of the buildings were gutted/ and with them many of the children” (11-12).

XXII, the last of the catastrophes, plunges the world into darkness: “suddenly the sky went black. /the sun stopped shining /and the stars went out” (1-3). People attempt different ways of dealing with the darkness. Scientists try to find explanations for the disappearance of the sun, while others “were seen on hilltops chanting and performing rituals” (10). The “governments of the world” (7) state that people “would just have to get used to living in the dark” (8). The governments are right, because that is what people do, almost involuntarily. After their initial reaction, “some people said that things had come to such a pass/ that it didn’t really matter” (14-15) while others “said that it was a good thing because we saw so much/ that our other senses suffered” (16-17). Either the disappearance of the sun becomes just another in a series of misfortunes, or it offers a new way of experiencing the world. Whatever their outlook, the people accept the darkness and find ways to deal with it. The real catastrophe here is not the darkness but the fact that, as the governments know, people can get used to it, as they can accept and get used to anything else no matter how strange or inexplicable or wrong. Scripting a catastrophe of darkness to befall society, Beiles seems to mock its accepting, unquestioning reaction to it. The ability to survive or endure is to him not a strength but a sign of obtuseness, and refusal to question or object to anything that happens.

Sacred Fix portrays and explores various strategies of nonconformity. The first of these is the anomic and with it the particular anomic space which features in many Beat texts. Holton identifies the anomic as one of the “folds of heterogeneity [that] can provide an alternative habitable space” (Holton, 2004: 14) for those no longer willing to participate wholeheartedly in conformist society. He seems to suggest Beat culture itself as the creation of such a space, Beat writing as the forcing of a new way out of what seemed to be a cultural dead end. “The Beat sensibility...seemed to offer the means to break out of the cultural enclosure” (2004: 17). However, in order to create that alternative way of life and literature the Beat writers had to seek in unusual places, unconventional social spaces and off-limits cultural gaps, unhomogenised enclaves which Holton terms “the various wrinkles and folds of the postwar cultural fabric not yet smoothed out by the homogenizing power of modernity” (2004: 17). Going into the 1970s, these social spaces

are perhaps not so much ‘not yet’ modernised, although the era was marked by a nostalgic interest in the ‘natural’ and pre-modern, as ‘post modern’ in a way, having seen modernity and found ways to escape or resist its “homogenizing power”.

Holton’s ideas about the quest for heterogeneity in a conformist society are pertinent to this text, especially to ‘The Needle Vestal’ and to some extent ‘Lear in Los Angeles’. He identifies the anomic space in society as one in which the Beats located a potential heterogeneity, a space of individuality and difference which they could access.

‘Lear in Los Angeles’ features a variety of misfit characters: pimps and prostitutes, addicts and soldiers after the war, troubadours and show people. In various scenes Beiles reconstructs the worlds associated with these characters, and in doing so shows what these worlds are made of. He self-consciously uses a filmscript ‘shorthand’, a collection of recognizable props and stereotypes to convey what sort of person a character is playing without stopping for descriptions or explanations. For instance, he uses ‘phonetic’ notation of particular types of American speech to convey the social identity of the speaker. In using social and dramatic ‘codes’ he draws attention to them, and to how we read them. This in turn leads to a consideration of why we do so, and points out how quickly we take a few symbols to create an image of a person.

Beiles’s use of scruffy, outcast characters in much of the play is almost celebratory.

While it holds many ironies pertaining to identity in the outcast or anomic context, the text also shows a sense of appreciation and enjoyment of the misfit milieu.

“Embodiments of Riesman’s worst nightmare of anomia, inhabitants of subcultural folds already structured with the crucial elements of language and social conventions, these ambassadors from the marginal spaces...presented the possibility of clear exit” (Holton, 2004: 23). In ‘Lear in Los Angeles’ Beiles not only enjoys writing these characters, knowing the response they traditionally elicit, but also uses them as Holton suggests the Beats used the anomic.

One of the key concerns of the play, which remains unresolved, is that of identity. We do not know if Lear is Beiles, if Sinclair is Beiles, if any of the other voices in the text are Sinclair, or Sinclair in the role of someone else. We don't know whether even the constant characters like the producer are whole characters or just voices, or Sinclair acting yet another role, or Beiles contradicting himself. What we do know is that the play takes us through a whirlwind of speakers, actors, roles and identities, sometimes revealing the Sinclair character, who, right at the end, makes a claim to identity and selfhood through multiple layers of staging. Perhaps it is through this multitude of roles, snippets of melodramas and war movies, actors out of work and out of character, that Sinclair manages to first elude and then find himself. It is also through them that the misfit Lear survives in Los Angeles. Whatever the combination of Beiles/ Sinclair/ Lear the final "me" of the play is, it survives till the end by hopping from one unassimilated character to another, using the freedom afforded by lack of conventional identity markers. The key strategy of the text is elusiveness, which it achieves by toying with and obfuscating the concept of identity. It creates instability about the identities present in the text, and uses this uncertainty to both hide the protagonist and allow him to assert an identity – still not fixed, but present – at the end. As Goffman notes in *Stigma*, uncertainty about social identity poses a problem for most people, "a sense of not knowing what the others present are 'really' thinking about him" (Goffman, 1963: 25). In this context neither the author nor any of the characters are concerned about what the reader is thinking, and the uncertainty creates a space of freedom to put together an identity less socially coded and more personally authentic.

In 'The Needle Vestal' the anomic space is more fully explored. For Phillipa it is both heroin and her identity as an addict which she uses to assert her otherness and reject her husband and the straight world he represents. Phillipa might not win the argument with her husband, but she succeeds in making him leave her alone, in separating herself from him and his world view. What Phillipa has found is a strategy of "unusability" (Holton, 2004: 23). She has made herself useless to the system, uncontrollable and unproductive. This gives her access to "a Utopia of misfits and oddballs, in which the constraints for uniformization and conformity have been removed" (Jameson in Holton, 2004: 23).

The town in the time of 'drought' is a junkie's town, in which all the rest of society barely features, except perhaps for the hospital from which a fix might be begged. Beiles allows this perspective to prevail throughout the play. What this, as well as Phillipa's mythologizing of her addiction suggests is the "structured space, anomic and alienated, but internally coherent and habitable" offered by "the demimonde of drug addiction" (Holton, 2004: 24). What is most significant about 'The Needle Vestal' is its total immersion in the usually hidden world of the addict, and its expression from that perspective, not that of the straight world which inevitably looks down on any underworld. The exploration of vice as a means of protesting against and removing oneself from society is also interesting. It is treated as a possible strategy; not a very good one, as the portrayal of the suffering addicts in the dry town indicates, but a plausible one nevertheless. The proposition put forward is that vice can actually constitute a critique of society, which lends it the political legitimacy normally denied by society and its specialists on such matters. The idea that addiction does not only mean falling through the gaps of straight society, but also drifting into a subculture and identity which functions in opposition to the society left behind is an interesting one.

While 'Lear in Los Angeles' and 'The Needle Vestal' explore social spaces and subcultural identities 'The Hardwoods' and some of the 'Selected Catastrophes' are concerned with outcastness and identity on a more intimate level. They explore the options of nonconformity available to the individual, and the means of authority to control these rebellions and irregularities. 'The Hardwoods', through the story of the unconventional son John, looks at how society, first through his family and then through institutions, attempts to control individuality, be it positive or pathological, real or imagined.

All of *Sacred Fix* is essentially concerned with freedom and control, conformity and individuality. The Catastrophes dwell on these considerations the most, and offer the bleakest outlook. In these poems individuals are faced with the machine-like conformism of a totalitarian state, and their attempts at finding or creating an alternative, if they are

even capable of such attempts, are futile. A key element in these sequences is the role ordinary people play in the oppression of the individual, including themselves. The Catastrophes repeatedly illustrate how much the power of authority is enforced by society. Their conformism, their blind acceptance, and their fear serve to keep people under control on behalf of the state.

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