

Ruling a nation of shadows
The Life and Literature of Sinclair Beiles

For various reasons, Beiles found himself to be an ill-fitting member of conventional society. Ideological differences, mental illness, unusual motivations and interests, a strong tendency towards the romantic, the desire to be a writer, all contributed to his sense of not belonging, a perception he outwardly styled and inwardly based much of his life on.

The society Beiles was at odds with was as problematic as the writer himself, as easy to reject as it was controlling, as demanding as it was alienating, as full of ironic, difficult, 'heterogeneous' holes in its fabric as it tried to be clear on the constricted boundaries it drew around itself to demarcate its others. The South Africa Beiles left behind for over twenty years, trying to escape it, although he was less of a fugitive than he perceived himself to be, was at times a hate-fuelled police state, ridiculous in the church-and-state-defended lies it managed to convince itself of. Under the surface of a brutally ordered, oppressively controlled society was a troubled confusion of unsettling, unsettled ideas which could not easily be explored, or even discussed in some contexts. Europe during that time seemed a liberal, tolerant paradise by comparison, cheap and easy to travel, already attracting a population of proto-hippie artists and their hangers-on, with some locations like the Left Bank of Paris, the Greek islands, and the southernmost tip of Spain supporting a culture and history of underground and wayward art and literature. But even the traditionally bohemian enclaves of Europe were ill suited to provide a lasting home to Beiles and his transient community of self-styled exiles. Though much more inviting than South Africa or the USA, much of Europe was in some sort of political jumble, as Beiles's run-in with the Greek military coup indicates. The effects of the Second World War could still be seen and felt in some places; alliances, political and ideological, were already being formed towards the Cold War, and socially, the forces which were soon to propel the hippie counterculture that swept the west were uneasy, restive ones, far more troubled than the stylised Haight-Ashbury scene entrenched in collective memory.

Beiles's European era, though it was a time of happy-go-lucky travelling and prolific writing, was also when his poetry developed, when he actually started being a writer instead of just thinking of himself as one, when he was forced by circumstance and enticed by what he encountered to form an identity, an ideology, to shape his life away from his family and the rather optionless society he came from. It was also when his mental illness developed/ manifested itself, throwing his emotions, expectations, and sense of self off-kilter in a way no romanticised poetic melancholy, no real or imagined talent, no amount youthful energy and anger, could have done.

It seems fated rather than fortuitous that Beiles encountered Burroughs, Ginsberg, Corso and others, on their way to becoming 'the Beat Generation Writers' during this time, in Paris. The Beat movement had already been set in motion, and some of the writers had already reached acclaim and notoriety – by the time of the Beat Hotel Burroughs had published *Junkie* under the pseudonym William Lee, Kerouac's *On The Road* had finally found a publisher and an avid following, and Ginsberg's *Howl* was up on trial in the American courts on charges of obscenity.

Nevertheless what drew this new ex-patriate/ traveler/ exile Beat group together in Paris was more or less what had formed the friendships and sustained the writings of the earlier ones in New York and San Francisco: a sense of unbelonging, a dread of taking on modern western life as prescribed by society, mingled with a romantic longing to experience life as they thought it might be in some other way, on some other level. An outcast's mistrust of society and the curious, vague conviction that there might be unspoken alternatives. An affinity for the larger, deeper, darker, necessarily more free social others living out an otherness they perceived within themselves. And growing out of this an aesthetic, a desire to write in ways which captured all these things and did not pander to the regulations of 'art' and 'literature' which they felt had little to do with the real life they adamantly tried to create for themselves. A sense of the potentials and possibilities of literature as complex, vivid, hushed up and real as the characters of a Times Square midnight, of a Paris steeped in generations of the sordid and poetic, of a bustling Greek harbour behind the scenes. The idea that the blatant self-expression of

those unspoken of in polite homes might be closer to what they believed than anything they had been taught, that the ramblings of misfits and madmen held more truth than anything discussed at the universities they had been sent to, and that in order to be of use, to be part of life, to be worth pursuing, literature would have to change fundamentally to grasp this reality. In this sense it is both the substance of his life and the qualities of his work which make Beiles a Beat writer.

It follows, then, that what made Beiles Beat – alienation, difference, loneliness – is also what made him write. His poetry is tied directly to his life, to his sense of self – a difficult self, an alienated self, a wandering self, and a mad one. Defining Beiles by anything other than his writing remains difficult, returning, perhaps ultimately, to Dawie Malan's curiously fitting, anti-accurate eulogy:

the trouble with sinclair beiles

was that he wouldn't wear a hat, that none of the hundred we had ready would fit. first, he wasn't south african. he wasn't jewish. he wasn't a poet, actor, playwright, director, painter. he wasn't off the wall, a nut, he wasn't crazy. he wasn't a beat, and he didn't do drugs. he wasn't avant-garde. he wasn't an anarchist, a traditionalist, modernist, post-anything. he didn't win the nobel prize. he wasn't a lover, he was no regular husband. he didn't have friends, walk the streets, sit in cafes, libraries, have a house. he didn't have money. he wasn't mugged, wasn't a victim, never got sick. he was never a patient. and last year, in johannesburg general, he didn't die. (Malan, 2001: 1)

Beiles made a life out of being unconventional, a status he wore with jaunty pride despite the deeper problems underlying it. As Malan suggests he was and wasn't many things; his writing indicates he was also against many things, and for others, mostly to do with freedom, which he did not seem to see as an absolute or an ideal, but a series of fights and negotiations. In this personal politic of living and writing, the major themes of loud nonconformity, being unwilling and unable to fit in, a sense of exile, both at home and abroad, mental illness, as an experience and as an identity, are the weapons drawn as well as the injuries sustained. In his work these are deeply personal and universally political issues, sustaining the harlequin-like combination of sincerity and parody in his work, and his ability to draw anything he encountered into his own subjective cosmology.