Playing Around at Being a Poet
Sinclair Beiles and the Problem of Context

Shortly after the death of Sinclair Beiles, Alan Finlay writes in his editorial for the online poetry journal *donga*:

> Beiles pissed a lot of people off and lived that archetypal bohemian existence – both tragedy and farce – that would have already made it into American biography. Perhaps his output of quality was limited. Perhaps not. A definitive Beiles biography and review of his work has yet to be written. (Finlay, 2001: 1)

He also notes that "what fascinates me most about Beiles is how – if at all – we are going to contextualise him in the South African poetry landscape(s)" (2001: 1). The problem of context shadows Beiles and his poetry, not only in South Africa but elsewhere as well. One might begin to examine it by attempting to situate his life in relation to a social and historical background.

Beiles grew up in Johannesburg, where his parents moved from Uganda when he was a child. He studied at Wits University, completing a BA with anthropology as his major. Shortly afterwards, he travelled to Europe. Various reasons have been suggested for this, mostly by Beiles himself, including a scandalous affair which embarrassed his family, and trouble caused by something he wrote about the Dutch Reformed Church. Either way, Europe was not an unusual destination for a young man interested in poetry at that time. When Beiles left South Africa in 1953 he was 23 years old; his first anthology, *Ashes of Experience*, was published in 1969. The years in between were formative to Beiles's writing.

There is no clear account of Beiles's travels during those years. He spent time in Holland, where the Amsterdam-based Cold Turkey Press later published some of his writing; Spain, where he met the poet Philip Lamantia, and occasionally Morocco, where the literary scene was dominated by Paul Bowles, and where he became acquainted with William Burroughs. He lived for quite a few years in Paris, either at the Beat Hotel or elsewhere on the Left Bank, where he worked as an editor (various accounts have him as anything between 'the editor' and 'an editor's assistant') for Olympia Press. Olympia was

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a small publishing house concerned mainly with cheaply publishing pornographic novels and selling them to travellers from America and Britain where they were illegal. In *The Beat Hotel*, Beat biographer Barry Miles suggests that it was an interest in moneymaking rather than an interest in literature which led Olympia to first publish Donleavy's *The Ginger Man*, Nabokov's *Lolita* and most of Henry Miller's work (Miles, 2000: 20). Having caused sufficient scandal and sold enough copies, these titles were later sold to 'serious' American publishers. Burroughs's *Naked Lunch*, in which Beiles was involved from putting together a manuscript to the actual publication, followed a similar route.

It was during his stay in Paris in the late 1950s and early 60s that Beiles was in closest contact with the other Beat writers, especially Burroughs, Allen Ginsberg and Gregory Corso. Along with Burroughs, Corso and Brion Gysin he co-authored *Minutes to Go*, a collection of cut-up poetry published by Two Cities Press in 1960. He also lived for a time in Greece, where he wrote many of the poems in *Ashes of Experience*, and in London, where he underwent psychiatric treatment. Some of the poetry Beiles wrote before the publication of *Ashes of Experience* was published in journals, many of which have long since ceased to exist, including *Yugen*, *London Magazine*, *Beatitude*, *Floating Bear* and probably many others.

Ashes of Experience was followed by *Deliria* in 1971 and *Tales* in 1972, neither of which got as much critical attention in South Africa as his first title. This is not surprising because both texts constitute a departure from the norm in every sense – they go beyond the scope of what might usefully be reviewed for the general reading public. *Deliria* is aptly titled, though difficult to classify. It is not exactly poetry but not entirely prose, it takes the form of undated letters, unfinished dialogues, and forgotten instructions. It is 'first thought best thought', it is spontaneous prose in Kerouac's sense of the term, "composing wild, undisciplined, pure, coming in from under, crazier the better" (Kerouac, 1955: 487), it is Beat, aggressive, insistent, with odd preoccupations and disconnected ramblings which make little literal sense. It concerns itself fleetingly with bits of history, drug culture, grandiose ideas, impossible schemes and sordid scenes, but it is essentially about writing itself.

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Tales was the first of Beiles's monographs to be written in rhyme with a precise metre, and what little critical attention it got comes across as puzzled (in *New Nation* Robert Greig made his confusion apparent with "because, like his form, it cannot be adequately schematised, Beiles's poetry is contradictory, like his vision of the subject, life: that is his consistency" (Greig, 1973: 21); a review for *De Arte* opens with "this new publication is being reviewed not for its poetry, but for its illustrations" ('F.H.', 1973: 44) (The book was illustrated with woodcuts by Cecil Skotnes). Later works in this form were mostly ignored.

Having thus estranged himself from most of his audience, Beiles was productive throughout the 1970s, the notable titles of that era being *Sacred Fix* (1975) and *Dowsings* (1978). The pieces in *Sacred Fix* are three plays, partly in verse, as well as a striking collection of prose poems. The play format returns something of a coherent structure to his writing, making the works more accessible. The performance of these pieces in Johannesburg around the time of publication with Beiles often a member of the small cast helped to revive some public interest in his work in South Africa. *Ballets?* (1978) was one of his more obscure works, consisting of poems written about ballet dancers. There was also *The Crucifixion* (1984), which deals with the crucifixion, and *Poems Under Suspicion/Poems on Bits of Paper*, a dual anthology by Beiles and his second wife, Marta Proctor.

Beiles returned permanently to South Africa in the late 1970s, having visited occasionally throughout his travels, and took up residence in Yeoville, which was then a bohemian area of Johannesburg. Aside from *A South African Abroad*, which contained poems from earlier collections but no new work, there is a strange ten-year gap in Beiles's writing from the early 1980s till 1994. *On Stage* marks the beginning of another prolific phase during which he produced a succession of books of verse: *Aardvark City* (c. 1994), *Khakiweeds* (1995), *Yeoville* (c. 1996), *Sugar* (1996), *The Golden Years* (c. 1997), *Nagmaal* (c. 1997), *Springtime at Raubenheimers* (c. 1998), and *Women* (2000). (Beiles had a habit of not dating his publications, hence the approximate dates given). Most of

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these were self-published with help from friends under Limited Editions or Nugget Press, and are generally considered inferior to his earlier work. In addition, he wrote many short plays – over a hundred by his own count, though it is difficult to judge exactly how many there are, since relatively few were published and it seems that not all are archived. Some of these were performed in South Africa and abroad, notably the *Sacred Fix* plays and *My Brother Federico*. It is difficult to ascertain what the public and critical reception of his work was in Europe; the titles published by Cold Turkey Press in the Netherlands and by Lapis Press in the USA were not commercial failures (though, judging by the scarcity of the texts they were small single print runs).

Beiles died in Johannesburg in 2000.

In South Africa the coming to power of the National Party in 1948 was followed by a succession of ever-more draconian laws, the "ruthless enforcement" of which was carried out by an "extended" police force with continually increased power (Christopher, 1994: 3). By the1960s South Africa was effectively a police state in which all aspects of public as well as a great deal of private life was subject to strict control. In addition to separate living areas, unequal access to education, and different political rights, with the passing of the Population Registration Act (1950), the Mixed Marriages Act (1949) and the Immorality Amendment Act (1950) (1994: 104), the state insisted on very invasive control over people's private lives. Sex, marriage, procreation as well as social identity all became a matter of eugenics-informed proscription, and deviation from the norm became a criminal offence as well as a social taboo.

Apartheid was designed to ensure the comfort and privilege of a white minority at the expense of the rest of the country's population. It was intended to oppress black South Africans, not only at a political level but in every sphere of social life. However, to dismiss the white experience of Apartheid as simply unjustly privileged is to overlook an interesting element of cultural and political history. There is no doubt that under the Apartheid regime white South Africans of whatever political persuasion had much easier

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and better lives than others. At the same time, it seems that the NP created and tried to enforce a sheltered world of privilege suited only to the most conservative, conformist members of society, an exclusively "White Christian National State" (Christopher, 1994: 65). Anyone who sought marginally wider horizons than the normative status quo found their civil liberties sharply curtailed. Effectively, anything vaguely liberal was seen as deviant, any questioning amounted to dissent. To eliminate such opposition, the Suppression of Communism Act of 1950 with its "remarkably flexible definition of what constituted the promotion of that ideology" (1994: 161) grouped any ideas other than Nationalist as communist, and thereby illegal.

In 1953 two laws were passed which made any form of protest a crime, and detention without trial was increased to 90 days. In 1960, and again in 1984, a State of Emergency was declared to deal with escalating protests, with a third State of Emergency lasting from 1985 to 1990 (Christopher, 1994: 166) as the Apartheid regime came to an end. While these legislations were aimed primarily at black dissent, they affected all South Africans, including artists and writers who found their work and often their private lives under police scrutiny, with house arrests, "Special Branch (Security Police) raids, the prohibition of writing by 'named' and exiled people, banning and censorship" (Gardiner, 1998: 47) and other forms of intimidation increasingly common. In 1963 over a hundred writers were banned (1998: 46) a figure which escalated into the 1970s. Although Beiles, who "[didn't] think [that] politics belong in literature" (Beiles in Holmes, 1994: 64) was unlikely to have been censored when writing within South Africa or from abroad, the sort of atmosphere created by government control of creativity was uncomfortable enough.

It is this type of social control and authoritarian power, without explicit particularities as to country, regime or institution, which much of Beiles's writing rages against, and which in various ways many of the writers he encountered in Europe, including the Beats, were escaping. In his introduction to *A South African Abroad*, the Greek poet Nanos Valaoritis suggests that "Sinclair takes the South African experience as a springboard to symbolise all oppression, all persecution, all bad taste, all flattening-out uniformity, and all monstrous brainwashing" (Valaoritis, 1991: xi). Although Beiles does not often explicitly

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mention South Africa in his poetry, it does seem likely that his distaste for conformity and his antagonism towards ‘the system’ originates in his South African experience, and that he identifies South Africa as an example, of “what a society can do to the individual” (1991: xi).

Perhaps this difficult time created the enmeshed, even somewhat cliquey, South African literary ‘scene’ which Beiles found it so difficult to fit into upon his visits and subsequent return to the country, although as he often stated “there’s no place for me and anyway, I don’t really want to fit in” (Beiles in Holmes, 1994: 63). By that time he had established himself as a permanent misfit. He would not have fitted in anywhere; his inability to do so was his constant comment on society, and it continued to be his comment on South African society after the end of Apartheid. While there might have been some space for his antagonism during Apartheid, there was little in the ‘New South Africa’, when “the literature of Apartheid” was being described as “a wonderful group effort by South African writers” (Gray, 1991: 30).

South African literature did not really become fully politically engaged until the 1970s, but there had been some voices of dissent – intrinsically anti-establishment, but not explicitly anti-Apartheid – since much earlier on. There was what might be termed a white alternative writing scene, much of which fed into activist and protest poetry later. In *A Century of South African Poetry* Michael Chapman identifies “the distinct emergence in the 1960s of a literature sharply distinguished by a sense of new alternatives” (Chapman, 1981: 23) which he associates with “an altered apprehension of reality during these years, both in Southern Africa and abroad” (1981: 23). In other words, the emergence of a writing (not really established enough to have become a ‘literature’) suddenly aware of new possibilities, in terms of writing itself, with regard to the South African writing tradition, and, as happened just about everywhere in the 1960s, the potential of different outlooks on the world. It was with the writers who ventured into these new alternatives and the publications they maintained that Beiles kept in touch. His work appeared in *The Purple Renoster* edited by Lionel Abrahams, who maintained a strong ‘art for art’s sake’ editorship, indicating that “in setting a level of literary quality

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for the magazine I would not be guided by theories or ideals but be led by the actual writings" (Abrahams in Gardiner, 1998: 43), elaborating elsewhere that "it is disastrous when all art is claimed for politics, because 'everything is political'" (Abrahams, 1991: 4). Beiles also published in many editions of *Coin*, *The Bloody Horse*, as well as in the 1978/ 79 issue of *Quarry*.

The period in South African writing before it became unified, and perhaps uniform, against Apartheid a decade later remains ill-defined even in retrospect. It might tentatively be said that when Apartheid became the focus of creative activity the main debate was whether art should be political or not, and whether political activism could override other paradigms of criticism, values and aesthetics in literature. Prior to this politicised simplification of South African writing, there were ostensibly more debates, a wider variety of writing, and different frameworks for criticism in South African literature. The 1960s in South Africa were not the revolutionary era America and western Europe experienced at the same time. Writing broke away from the conservative, British-influenced tradition of landscape poetry, catching up somewhat with its international contemporaries, but although some individual writers did challenge their boundaries as a whole South African poetry did little spectacular. It was, as Chapman notes, a time of alternatives and possibilities, a pluralistic, individualised period, and perhaps it is only because of the relative openness, the lack of prescribed characteristics of writing during this time that Beiles's work seems least out of place in that context. If one reads *Ashes of Experience* alongside the parts of anthologies devoted to other South African poets of that time, there is none of the disparity that exists between *Dowsings*, for instance, and other South African writing published around 1979 and later. It is difficult to tell whether it is Beiles's fault for being out of touch, or that of other writers for being backward (responding in 1991 to the statement that "if you look at most of our art and literature you would think we were living in the greyest and most sombre of all worlds, completely shut in by apartheid" (Sachs in Brown & van Dyk, 1991: 17), Gareth Cornwell responds that "what is effectively most grey and sombre – and flat and drearily predictable – is the writing itself" (Cornwell, 1991: 17). Perhaps this disparity is not really a fault at all, but Beiles is not so great a writer that he should be singular so easily. His work does not

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stand out as dramatically alongside contemporary poetry published elsewhere. On the other hand if, as in a 1984 review of *Modern South African Poetry*, critics were writing that “if most poetry is bad then South African poetry has a badness of its own” (Watson in Chapman, 1986: 16), perhaps it is not so surprising that a poet with a defined, if chaotic, idea of his writing and experience of international literary scenes was not fitting in at all.

In the 1970s politics raged on the South African writing arena, virtually closing off literary contact with the international scene. In addition to cultural boycotts from without, within South African literature the concerns became increasingly localised and confined to the political present, leaving little space for artistic concerns or experimentation. This is not to say that the body of protest literature from this time is all bad, but rather that it gives the impression that poets were so concerned with the urgency of what they were saying that they barely paused to consider how they were saying it. In a review of Beiles’s *Luna Park* Stephen Gray moralises that “to be playing around at being a poet at a time like this seems indecent” (Gray, 1977:16). But Beiles is not supporting Apartheid by not writing about it; he is excluding it from his writing, giving it no purchase on his poetry or on his identity as a poet, which is in itself a form of protest. It is probably selfish to concern oneself with aesthetics when there is a grossly unjust system to be overthrown, but Beiles is unpretentious about his intention to be a poet, not an activist.

The understanding of what constitutes a sufficiently political (and assumably thereby not ‘indecent’) piece of writing seems to have been quite literal, text-bound and explicit. The ‘engaged’ writing of the time tends to be relatively localised, topical, when in fact a lot of the power of the Apartheid system lay in its manipulation of ideology, knowledge, identity, as well as the more visible things such as social life and interaction (through things like the Separate Amenities Act), education, and economics. A lot of the injustice perpetrated was conducted on these social/ intellectual fronts, and not just through the physical enforcement of laws. Obviously giving people a skewed sense of national identity is not as problematic as something like the Sharpeville massacre, but it does seem awkward that these intangible, complex aspects of Apartheid were so little explored

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by South African writers. Very few ‘apolitical’ and virtually no protest writers examined a possible sense that “white privilege wasn’t worth the psychological distortions that it demanded” (Berold in Metelerkamp, 2001: 163) in their writing, although they were very concerned with trying to write of the black experience of Apartheid, despite the limitations of doing so from a white perspective.

Not only was there a clear division between political and apolitical writing, but literature was under pressure to express its politics in a certain way, perpetuating a somewhat simplified and very literal representation of the South African political situation, with no space for ambiguity. The notion that the nature and form of South African protest writing was so shaped because most writers ‘instinctively’ felt it was the best way to write in response to their context is not without merit, but perhaps a more uncomfortable truth is the extent to which these writers exercised implicit peer and self-censorship. The result is a collective ‘aesthetic’ in which it is very correct and meaningful to publish the blank spaces of censorship on the pages of your newspaper, but it is somehow wrong and ‘selfish’ to blank out the effects of a loathsome imposed ideology from your writing, or to examine the effects it has had on your psyche, rather than on the bodies of others, or to write about the universal politics of power, or the micropolitics of the individual, without invoking a particular socio-historical setting. There are many potentials and possibilities of writing against, away from, around, simply about and in a totalitarian state, which might require a greater measure of the poetic, aesthetic, or formal than most South African writers were willing to allow themselves at the time.

Beiles presents a comment on this type of literal politicisation of literature with the publication of *Aardvark City*, under his own imprint Nugget Press around 1994. The book, a rambling narrative poem, or succession of interconnected poems, consists of bound photocopies of the typewritten manuscript. Any editorial notes or corrections are written in by hand. The text is a parodic criticism of Sun City, an opulent holiday resort created by Sol Kerzner where, for political-logistical reasons (the resort was built in what was then a ‘homeland’), wealthy white South Africans could indulge in ‘immoral’ activities like gambling forbidden in South Africa under Apartheid. In the narrative of

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Aardvark City, a maid is burnt to death in a kitchen oven while patrons watch a beauty contest. In the typed text, the actual names of people and places are used – Sol Kerzner is frequently mentioned, as is Sun City or 'Lost City'. Each instance is then crossed out in pen and 'changed' – 'Kerzner' is amended to 'Caesar', and 'Lost City' to 'Aardvark City'). The original text remains clearly visible.

Beiles presents a poorly-produced text which was evidently only edited at the moment of publication, with pages numbered (not always logically) by hand, and scratched out dedications appearing at random throughout the text; the address of the publisher, 23 Raleigh Street, was in fact Beiles's house in Yeoville. But in doing so he can leave the mechanics of editing, and in this case quite pointedly of (self-) censorship, visible. This serves as a comment not only about the censorship exercised by the state during Apartheid, but also that of the arts exercised upon themselves. The changing of names, from actual to allegorical terms appears very visually, that is, one can see the changes on the face of the published page, literally showing the writer's corrections in his own text. *Aardvark City* is not a polemically political or protest text, but its subject, the exploitative relationship between Apartheid policy and capitalism, and the unofficial but condoned social inequalities and violent abuses perpetrated within its social structure is a criticism not so much of Apartheid as a political and administrative system, but of Apartheid society.

Countering the sentiment of Gray's statement, the first issue of *The Bloody Horse*, which featured two poems by Beiles, also contained a 'Comment' by Patrick Cullinan:

> Necessarily much of this reaction [of writers to their society at the time] will be outright protest and involve an overt political stance. However, writing that is equally cogent need make no ideological commitment or demand contexts of violence. Even in the atmosphere of a squalid, unresolved civil war it is not corrupt to be involved with the structures of words, with art or even artifice…Slogans of rage, the repetitive clichés of fury are self-defeating, confusing and ultimately useless. (Cullinan, 1980: 5)

Cullinan defends the integrity of being "involved with the structures of words" despite political circumstances; he insists on the value of the type of writing, including Beiles's, which Gray denounces as "playing around" (Gray, 1977: 16). Clearly Beiles was not

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alone in his pursuit of art in spite of politics (and perhaps there is an underrated element of spite in writing ‘away from’, not directly against, a repressive government).

Speaking at a conference in 1989, Ingrid de Kok made some useful observations about South African poetry:

> What seems to me to have happened amongst some poets who have been struggling with these questions [of why they write] is that they have defected…to the ranks of political or cultural organizations. Or they have participated in poetry only as a kind of adjunct to their political work. Another option taken by a group of potentially talented English-speaking poets has been to retreat into a transparent cocoon of world-weariness, insisting on their intellectual connections with a profoundly conservative European tradition and decrying what they feel is a drop in standards. Another option is to try to write according to the prescriptions and themes that one perceives to be approved; that is particularly fraught with dangers, because it can produce a set of registers that are just reaction, defiance and assertion. (de Kok, 1989: 56)

It is difficult to ascertain how much Beiles’s absence from South Africa and lack of participation in literary politics might have alienated him, or to what extent his own difficult personality and perceived lack of cooperation with other local authors and publishers played a part in isolating him from the mainstream of South African literary history. Perhaps his desire to escape the politics of South African writing and ability to flourish in the international underground created some resentment. Still, this does not entirely explain why, although “in many circles Beiles is regarded as a demi-god-like sub-cultural hero” (Geers, 1997: 3) his writing is little known, his books are out of print, and remarkably little of his poetry is included in South African retrospectives.

It is not clear how, or where, Beiles fits into South African writing. Perhaps the most obvious is the most true – he does not really fit in at all, except on the periphery to which he was pushed and where he situated himself. Possibly this is why he was so drawn to the other Beat writers, and why he is so easily grouped with the Beat movement, which was defined by its difference from contemporary literature and society rather than any obvious similarities between the writers. Valaoritis proposes that it is primarily because of the uniqueness of Beiles’s style as well as his “special experiences” (Valaoritis, 1991: xiii), by which he ostensibly alludes to Beiles’s mental illness, “that he has always been treated as an alien, a stranger, an intruder, which all important poets have been in their own time” (1991: xiii). Valaoritis is writing the introduction to an anthology of Beiles’s

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work, so is hardly objective. However, it does illuminate the sort of mythology surrounding Beiles, not all of which was manufactured by himself.

The problem of classifying, or contextualizing, Beiles seems to be a South African one, and comes in part from thinking within too many boundaries about him as a poet, about South African writing and about movements and groupings in literature. The debate around Beiles seems more informed by the politics of South African literary identity both now and during his lifetime than by anything Beiles himself said, wrote or did.

While in South Africa there seems to be some disagreement as to whether Beiles was primarily a South African poet, or a Beat one, and whether he might comfortably be both, from the Beat perspective, which was always inclusive and open-ended, there was no trouble with Beiles being Beat, South African, and/or any number of other things. Miles notes that "the international aspect of the Beat Generation has been underappreciated" (Miles, 2000: 6) and recalls Allen Ginsberg's understanding of the term: "Ginsberg felt strongly that the Beat Generation was an international phenomenon, that it embodied an approach to life, a set of beliefs that transcended national barriers" (2000: 6).

The first and most important Beat writers were American, but in essence what they do with writing – using American slang, American rhythms, American scenes – is a matter of freeing their writing from academic and cultural formalities and impositions no longer valid. In this respect they are not unlike their precursors Whitman, Hemingway or Fante. It is a matter of seeing, valuing and exploiting the gap between their language and that of writers before them, between their experience and that of others. Writers like Wopko Jensma do with South African language what Kerouac does with American – "bend the language to suit [their] needs" (Toerien, 1977) with a defiant sense of "no fear or shame in the dignity of your experience, language, and knowledge" (Kerouac, 1955: 487). Beat literature is more about outlook and aesthetic, the sensibility which shapes form, than any localised historical politics.

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Possibly Beat writing begins when usage of the term ‘Beat’ changes from being a colloquial word to describe down-and-outness, weariness, desperation, to describing also a way of being. ‘Beat’ moves from being a state to being a style. Kerouac never coined the term, though it has been attributed to him; he just used it in this slightly different way, and it came to represent this new writing because it encompasses both what the Beat writers wrote about and how they felt about it.

> The word ‘beat’ originally meant poor, down and out, dead-beat, on the bum, sad, sleeping in subways. Now that the word is belonging officially it is being made to stretch to include people who do not sleep in subways but have a new gesture, or attitude, which I can only describe as a new *more*. (Kerouac in Lee, 1996: 1)

The view that Beiles’s interaction with Beat writers in Paris was too brief and coincidental, that he was more of a fan than an equal at the Beat hotel, besides being untrue, does not discredit his Beat identity. Being a Beat poet is not reliant on how intimately one knew ‘The Beat Poets’. It is simultaneously a way of being and a way of writing, and in these respects Beiles and the writing he produced is decidedly Beat. Speculation as to how well acquainted Beiles really was with his more famous counterparts in Paris (people seem overly concerned with the Beat Hotel moment, when in fact he had moved in Beat /bohemian /literary /alternative circles beyond what has been converted to popular legend) is more successful at toppling Beiles’s reputation in South Africa as ‘one of the Beats’, which is a slightly different matter.

Beiles self-consciously styled himself as ‘a Beat’ in the way that term had come to be understood by the small Beat-reading South African public. When the first Beat texts were finally published and the ‘movement’ made headlines in the U.S.A., most of the Beats developed public personas, in a sense exaggerations of themselves and their lives. So Burroughs was *el hombre invisible*, Ginsberg took his clothes off at poetry readings, and Kerouac played his *On The Road* part so well that he became a Gap advertisement long after he was a depressed drunk and not Sal Paradise at all. And Beiles continued to be his Beat ‘lonesome traveler’ self after he returned to South Africa, which his fans (or the fans of the Beat writers in general) liked and his critics found quite annoying. He was aided in this by the South African media, who would often interview him just for anecdotes about the Beat Hotel years. One article begins with “heard about Beatniks?

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Sinclair Beiles is an authentic survivor of that era…" (Holmes, 1994: 60). So to point out that by the 1990s Beiles was not the hip young poet he had been, but an aging name-dropper hanging around Yeoville, makes some sense. But to say that Beiles was not really a Beat because the Beats were American, and anyway he only met them once, is to completely miss the point.

The questioning of whether Beiles can really be called a Beat writer, the showing up of his "unsustainable myths about his life in Paris" including "his so-called friendship with Burroughs" (Geers, 1997: 3) seems not unlike jealousy. The Beat writers made a big impact on literature, and were part of a turbulent and exciting time in cultural history. They possessed a social 'hipness', a youthful, romantic, rebellious 'coolness' which appeared almost as a natural, intrinsic defiance of the stuffy academic 'high art' literature they had, seemingly without effort, rejected. 'Beat' was one of the first moves towards counterculture, the first plunge into a new sense of art and literature, the first determined pursuit of a new set of values, ideals, possibilities. No longer 'beat' as the Beats themselves used it, to mean a world-weariness and a *Desolation Angels*-type sorrow translated into perception translated into a new way of writing, but 'Beat' as their readers came to use it: an *On The Road* kind of Beat, a joyous exuberant "yea-saying" (13) Beat, a banned Beat, not in the predictable way that political writers were banned in South Africa for being political, but as *Howl* was, for obscenity, winning a case to prove not its innocence but its worth. This requires a certain kind of commitment, to art, not to a political cause. Beiles found himself in the right place at the right time, and was able to make the most of it. He was prepared to be a poet, unconditionally and without petty concerns, to, as Gray puts it, "be playing around at being a poet" (Gray, 1977: 16) all the time, even when it "seems indecent" (1977: 16). Perhaps there is bit of resentment at the fact that when just about every other writer was doing 'the right thing' by politicising their poetry in South Africa, Beiles was travelling the centres of literary activity and writing as he pleased. So there is debate about whether he was really Beat, and not just a South African poet like everyone else, but at the same time he is excluded from anthologies and his work is rarely mentioned.

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From a different perspective, there is a tendency towards emphasizing Beiles as a Beat writer. Some of the South African readership want him to have been 'the South African Beat poet' and maintain a sense of awe at his proximity to the Beat movement, perhaps more so than they appreciate his actual work. It might be that the metamorphosis of 'Beat' into 'beatnik' in Holmes's article has a peculiar South African twist of its own: what people saw in Beiles upon his return to Yeoville was a little Beat, authentic but tame – a beatnik – all of their own. Once the emphatic protest moment of South African literature was over and Apartheid was coming to an end, the arts in South Africa found themselves in a difficult place. Artists and writers were suddenly made aware that they had allowed themselves to be "completely shut in by apartheid" (Sachs in Brown & van Dyk, 1991: 17) and that whatever purely artistic endeavors had taken place under Apartheid had been largely ignored, if not frowned upon. The presence of writers like Beiles provided a rejoinder of sorts, a way of saying 'we were not so isolated, we even had a Beat poet'.

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But most likely what creates the greatest tension around Beiles's 'South African Beat poet' identity is Beiles himself. There seems to be a public view of 'the Beat Generation' which differs somewhat from the Beats' experience of their own writing and identity. This view tends to confine 'Beat' to the big names of Beat writing – Kerouac, Ginsberg, Burroughs, Corso, Snyder, Ferlinghetti – and to a particular time and place, i.e., New York, San Francisco, Paris (Mexico, Morocco) from about 1956 to around 1969. This is a rather narrow view of Beat writing, one which ascribes to them a "datedness, a historic pastness" (Lee, 1996: 2) but it is the one perpetuated by various biographies, introductions to republished Beat writings, and many other texts which surround Beat literature. It is not necessarily inaccurate or invalid, because those years were the most eventful in Beat history, but it reads the Beats historically rather than conceptually, which might impoverish appreciation of their work. It is a romanticised view which neatly encapsulates everything it requires to make sense of the Beats in a necessarily bygone era. But it does so without taking into account that a lot of Beat writing was done before any of the Beats were famous, and that some significant Beat texts were written after the 1960s (notably the poetry of Ginsberg and Ferlinghetti, which continued to develop along

Beat lines, and seminal texts like Holmes's 'Unscrewing the Locks', which was only written in 1980). It does not take into account what Holmes terms the "continuities" of Beat writing (Holmes, 1981: 9) – linear links in literary history but also 'lateral' ones leaking across literatures and ideas.

It does not detract from the immediacy and historical importance of Beat writing to view it with acknowledgement of such continuities, but that is not the popular view, and it is the popular view which Beiles disrupts. The idea of the Beats as belonging to a mythical America and/or Paris in a romanticised past is even easier to maintain from somewhere like South Africa, where one would be unlikely to run into an aging Beat and have one's ideas about 'the Beats' shattered by his reality, were it not for Beiles.

In her biography of Kerouac, Ann Charters relates how, towards the end of his life, the writer was often visited by fans who expected him to be exactly like the autobiographical characters in his novels, and were openly disappointed at the decrepit alcoholic he had become. Possibly a similar dynamic is at work with Beiles in South Africa. Beiles came back and continued living and writing in South Africa until the end of his life. He was not always what people imagined a Beat writer to be like, and his writing changed (and possibly digressed) over time. Very simply, the fact that Beiles was still living after the Beat Generation was supposed to be over disrupted the Beat legend. The questioning of his simultaneous Beatness and South Africanness is an expression of the seeming incompatibility of the two concepts. We want Beiles to have been one of the Beats, but struggle with his authenticity, the reality of his life. It does not fit our image of the Beat Generation that Beiles chose to fade into obscurity here, not die or disappear elsewhere, as most writers seem to do from a South African vantage point. By being what we desire him to be – a real Beat writer, a real person, he challenges our perception of what a 'real' Beat writer is. In acknowledging Beiles's Beatness we impose the limits of the Beat Generation on him, expecting him to 'end' where and when Beat literature ends for us. In his study of the role of Beat culture in sub- and counterculture, Clinton R. Starr points out that the "Beats did not necessarily conform to media stereotypes of the Beat Generation.

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Indeed, in their daily lives many Beats challenged such stereotypes. The time has come for scholars, especially historians, to do the same" (Starr, 2004: 53).

The company of Burroughs, Ginsberg, and others tends to overshadow Beiles's presence during the Beat Hotel period, not least because most of what has been written about it has come from an American perspective. Miles notes that "for a brief period, from 1958-63, the Beat Hotel in Paris was the site of the largest concentration of Beat Generation activity" (Miles, 2000: 4). It was during this time that Beiles lived at the hotel and was engaged in the creative activity which centered around it, writing poems which later appeared in *Ashes of Experience* while also working for Olympia Press. The Beat Hotel was pivotal in Beat history, partly because of the freedom and hedonism it allowed its foreign tenants, and also because they all happened to be in important early phases of their careers. "At the Beat Hotel, Allen, Gregory, and the other residents lived in a micro-climate of their own creation, self-referential and hermetic. It was an ecosystem that fell within the emerging drug culture, with its background in jazz and the avant-garde, its roots firmly planted in the bohemian tradition" (2000: 65). Artist Kendell Geers gives the Beat Hotel even more significance, writing that "the history of creativity has been built upon aesthetic and conceptual convergence and divergence such as happened at the Beat Hotel in 1960" (Geers, 1997: 6).

In his powerful article/eulogy titled 'The Trouble with Sinclair Beiles' Dawie Malan, who was a friend of Beiles's, suggests that "the lasting influence was his encounter in Paris with Burroughs, Gysin and Corso – the cut-up exercise which manifested in the foursome's *Minutes to Go*, and, as editor of Maurice Girodias's Olympia Press, the publication of *Naked Lunch*" (Malan, 2001: 3). Malan sees the Beat hotel years as formative of Beiles's career as a writer, elaborating that by the influence of the cut-up poetry "I mean the lasting influence of the practice of cutting up, and out, of the formal linear conventional links" (2001: 4). A statement about Beiles's texts, it applies to his writing in broader terms as well. 'Cutting out of conventional links' is what the Beats did best, and what all the writers involved took away from the Beat Hotel. The cut-ups also allowed Beiles to ascertain his views about poetry, in that, after the initial excitement of

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experimenting with the new technique, Beiles felt that it was not really a mode of writing which he could maintain. There was a split between the four authors of *Minutes to* Go: while “Brion and Bill held out for [the] randomness and chance” (Miles, 2000: 201) of the cut-up technique, “Gregory and also Sinclair Beiles…felt that imagination and poetic inspiration were of the greatest importance” (2000: 201). Many people see this split, over cut-ups but also over the nature of poetry, as fundamentally important. On the basis of this legendary argument, Geers calls Beiles “a great romantic poet” who “in 1960…had the courage to stand up to one of the greatest thinkers of the twentieth century and pursue a path that was noble as much as it was inspired” (Geers, 1997: 4).

In contrast to the South Africa he wrote back to, parts of Europe in the 1950s offered a bohemian paradise to Beiles, and an entire generation of people like him. Miles paints the following portrait of the Parisian Left Bank during the time:

> In the 1950’s the Left Bank, or Latin Quarter, was to Paris what Soho was to London, Greenwich Village was to New York, and North Beach was to San Francisco: an inexpensive central neighborhood where artists and writers could meet and spend their nights talking or drinking, where basic accommodation was cheap and the local people were tolerant of the antics of youth. (Miles, 2000: 8)

Beiles found a great deal which appealed to him in Europe, but it is important to keep this in perspective – he felt comfortable there as an outsider. It was an environment in which he could develop and live his romantic vagabond poet persona to the full, but he no more fitted in there than in South Africa. It’s just that there it was easier to be a misfit. He found people with whom he identified, with whom he shared ideas, but they were transient communities, not homes in any real sense.

Beiles did not necessarily get along any better with society at large in Paris or Athens, although certainly there was much more space for waywardness there than Apartheid South Africa. Rather, he was exposed to a larger group of individuals who belonged just as little and felt just as defiantly unconcerned about it. The European bohemia of the 1950s was perhaps less about solidarity than about numbers, and what later became seen as a rebellious unity originated as the scruffy loyalty of strays, people so out of context and isolated that they stuck together.

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In his poetry Beiles often satirises the bohemian life he encounters, clearly aware of both the “tragedy” and the “farce” (Finlay, 2001:1) inherent in its romance. In ‘Pissed Off’ he offers this decidedly un-idyllic view of Greek island hippie life:

> the swimming is gorgeous
> and leo held in detention for 48 hours
> by the coup police
> refused to eat
>
> lunchtime at apozos surrounded by mouldy
> russian salad and twenties advertisements
> pissed off
>
> her back is so greasy
> greasy lea looking so self-conscious
> in her home-made dresses
>
> i’ll sleep with any bugger on the square
> who offers me a job as a film extra
>
> ina’s dog put his paws on the grocer
> and got kicked in the ribs
>
> in the renault in the sunday mountains
> rolling joints athens hazy below
> i am pissed off
>
> go to tangier
> water piped with moroccan amoeba and swiss
> drummer summer clap wiped out the entire
> female population of the medina (8-28)

The swimming might well be “gorgeous”, the food cheap, the drugs readily available and the women willing, but the politics are inescapable, the aspirations hopeless, the locals have their limits and the free love has its consequences. In ‘The Scene’ Beiles sadly realises that “like brilliant fireflies/ none of us/ will live/ very long” (14-17). Part of the attraction of this lifestyle is its unsustainability; the hedonistic sense of freedom is enhanced by the knowledge that it cannot realistically be expected to last.

From his early twenties Beiles suffered from bi-polar disorder, then known as manic depression. A significant proportion of his poetry deals with his ‘madness’. Beiles often uses stereotypes of madness, particularly in relation to poetry, in his writing. In these poems subjective experience breaks from public performance, because while in his upbeat, creative, manic moments Beiles could indeed write prolifically and entertain his

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audience with his antics, in his painful depressions the whole thing fell apart, and he could only write out some of his angst pressured by fear of losing his ability to write – for him, dangerously close to his ability to exist altogether. His mental illness could still be used as publicity or inspiration when he chose to undergo treatment with in vogue therapists, like Joseph Berke in London in the 1960s, but could not be held together when he was involuntarily hospitalised after crossing too many boundaries and causing too many scenes.

Beiles came to see his madness as very closely linked to his writing. In a 1971 interview he stated that "I suffer from depressions which I try to combat with an escape into poetry" (Beiles in Badenhorst, 1971: 16). Perhaps a simplified version of the facts, this statement nevertheless indicates how important writing was to him in attempting to maintain an equilibrium, and suggests that these "depressions" might have inspired him to write. In a poem from *Ashes of Experience* called 'Terrible Dreams' the attempt at combating depression through poetry becomes a terrifying struggle:

> My condition is lamentable – to me anyway
> I keep a kind of old flying machine stability
> On a cupboard full of drugs
> And as I fly through the day
> I can hear my nerves creaking.
> I look over the side of the cockpit
> And below I see the horrors of enemy territory
> - The mental hospitals.
> All I can think of is writing as much as I can
> While a semblance of sanity and strength
> remains for me (1-11)

But there is more to Beiles's madness in relation to his writing than a stylised poetic identity and angst-filled poems. Beiles's madness, enmeshed with his writing, is his creativity, his constant alienation, his experience of the world. When writing about it, he often starts from the vantage point of someone labelled as 'mad' who, even while challenging the system which forces this identity on him, feels that his own experience of insanity is crucially linked to his mode of expression, and allows it to inform all aspects of his writing.

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Perhaps it was due to the instability of his life and his mental illness that Beiles came to cling so fiercely to his identity as a poet, though always with a sense of irony. He came to see himself as primarily a writer, and everything else after. Perhaps self-indulgent, perhaps a bit of an excuse to avoid the real world, but perhaps also a way of keeping hold of his identity throughout his turbulent life.

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