

on the road:

the beat writers
of new york
and san francisco

October 18, 2004—January 7, 2005

The beat generation began with a group of writers in post–World War II New York. According to Allen Ginsberg, “the phrase ‘beat generation’ arose out of a specific conversation between Jack Kerouac and John Clellon Holmes in 1948. They were discussing the nature of generations, recollecting the glamour of the [post–World War I] Lost Generation, and Kerouac said, ‘Ah, this is nothing but a beat generation.’ ”

To these writers, the term “beat” had different meanings. According to Ginsberg, “The original street usage meant exhausted, at the bottom of the world, looking up or out, sleepless, wide-eyed, perceptive, rejected by society, on your own, streetwise. Or, as it once implied, ‘beat’ meant finished, completed, in the dark night of the soul or in the cloud of unknowing. It could mean open, as in the Whitmanesque sense of ‘openness,’ equivalent to humility. So ‘beat’ was interpreted in various circles to mean emptied out, exhausted, and at the same time wide-open and receptive to vision.”

The beat writers spoke for disaffected youth coming of age in the late 1940s and early 1950s in a time marked by the atomic bomb, mass industrialization, suburban sprawl, decaying spiritual values, and a loss of individual identity. These writers both articulated the problems and suggested a way out through heightened perception and spiritual epiphany.

Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, and William Burroughs are the writers whose works have come to define the beat generation. Kerouac’s *On the Road*, Ginsberg’s *Howl*, and Burroughs’ *Naked Lunch* are seminal works, each developing a style to mirror life and culture in post-war America.

Allen Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac met as students at Columbia University in the early 1940s. Kerouac, several years older, acted as Ginsberg’s literary mentor. Also in New York at that time was Harvard graduate William Burroughs, who, after trying several careers, was

continuing his education by reading modern literature, philosophy, and psychology, and observing his social surroundings. Kerouac, Ginsberg, and Burroughs became part of an ever-changing group that studied and discussed literature while exploring life on the streets of New York. Ginsberg later recalled nights on “Eighth Avenue from Fifty-ninth down to Forty-second and the Times Square area” where they met “an all-night population of hustlers and junkies...intelligent, Mevillean [sic] street wanderers of the night.”

During these years in New York, Kerouac’s writing evolved into the style he called “spontaneous prose.” To him, this style was a way that the inner mind, trapped by social, psychological, and grammatical restrictions, could free itself and take verbal shape.

Searching for a way to free the words, Kerouac often wrote quickly, completing his 175,000-word manuscript of *On the Road* in 20 days. To expedite the flow of words onto paper, he typed the text on a roll of Teletype paper. *On the Road* is based on travels taken by Kerouac (as Sal Paradise) and fellow writer Neil Cassady (as Dean Moriarty), searching for “IT,” the moment of spontaneous ecstasy when all things are known in their greatest purity. Other New York friends appearing in the book are Allen Ginsberg (Carlo Marx), William Burroughs (Bull Lee), and Times Square hustler Herbert Huncke (Elmer Hassel). Though Kerouac finished the first draft quickly in 1951, he had difficulty finding a publisher. It was not until 1957 that Malcolm Cowley at Viking Press would publish *On the Road*.

Spontaneity was key to Kerouac’s poetry as well. In the introduction to his *Scattered Poems*, published posthumously by City Lights Books in 1971, Kerouac noted that “[t]he new American poetry...is a kind of new-old Zen Lunacy poetry, writing whatever comes into your head as it comes, poetry returned to its origin...truly ORAL as Ferling [Lawrence Ferlinghetti] said, instead of gray faced Academic quibbling.”

Burroughs, Kerouac, and Ginsberg developed a symbiotic relationship that deeply affected all their writing soon after they met in the early

1940s. Burroughs introduced Kerouac and Ginsberg to modern literature and contemporary avant-garde thought as well as the underworld drug culture he had chosen as a way of life. Kerouac and Ginsberg drew Burroughs into the intellectual life of the university and encouraged him to begin writing.

In the late 1940s, Burroughs traveled frequently, seeking **new experiences and mind-altering drugs**, finally settling in Tangiers in 1953. For the next six years, until he underwent treatment to break his addiction, Burroughs compiled a mass of fragmentary notes on drugs, travel experiences, and satires attacking social ills. In 1957, he began editing the notes with the help of Ginsberg, Kerouac, and others to create the manuscript of *Naked Lunch*. The book purports to be a record of a man's addiction to opiates, his treatment, and cure. *Naked Lunch* is an experimental form with a montage of routines, called fantasies, consisting of monologues, dialogues, plot episodes, and scene descriptions. **Like jazz**, the organization of the routines is improvisational; they can be read in any order.

Naked Lunch was published in Paris in 1958, but plans for an American edition were held up by the threat of censorship. *The Chicago Review* planned to publish excerpts of the book in its Winter 1959 issue but was prevented from doing so by university officials. The editors resigned and brought out a new journal titled *Big Table* that featured a cover of red, white, and blue with stars and stripes, and they proclaimed it to be "the complete contents of the suppressed Winter 1959 *Chicago Review*." Grove Press published *Naked Lunch* in the United States in 1962, and the publisher successfully defended the novel against censorship in trials in Boston and Los Angeles.

While Kerouac and Burroughs were experimenting with prose, Ginsberg struggled to find his voice in poetry. His earliest poems, written 1948–1952, were not published until they were collected in *Empty Mirror*, brought out by Totem Press in 1961. In a copy of the collection given to Ezra Pound, Ginsberg wrote: "The first scratches at using my own eyes

and mouth to notate particular-local-images.” The book is prefaced by William Carlos Williams, whose imagist form the young Ginsberg emulated.

The watershed moment for Ginsberg and for modern American poetry came in 1955 in San Francisco. A group of poets centered in post-WW II Berkeley migrated to San Francisco at the same time that Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac, and other New York poets, including Gregory Corso, moved west. The event that solidified **this literary ferment into a movement** was a poetry reading in San Francisco billed as “Six Poets at the Six Gallery” on October 7, 1955. It was then that Ginsberg gave the first public reading of *Howl*. Poet Kenneth Rexroth, seen as an elder statesman to the poetry renaissance taking place in San Francisco, moderated the night of readings, calling it a turning point in American poetry. He later stated that on that night poetry underwent a “change of medium—poetry as voice not as printing...The climacteric was not the publication of a book, it was the famous Six Gallery reading, the culmination of twenty years of oral presentation of poetry in San Francisco.”

Publication, however, remained key to disseminating this poetry to those not present at readings. Lawrence Ferlinghetti, poet and publisher, was in the audience at the Six Gallery. His City Lights Bookstore was the gathering place for San Francisco writers, and he had begun publishing poets under the City Lights Books imprint. He met Ginsberg when he first arrived in San Francisco and found the two shared an interest in Whitman. After the reading of *Howl*, Ferlinghetti borrowed Emerson’s message to the young Whitman: “I greet you at the beginning of a great career,” adding: “When do I get the manuscript?” *Howl and Other Poems* (1956) became number 4 in the City Lights Pocket Poets series.

Ferlinghetti’s printing of 1,500 copies of *Howl* quickly sold out. The second printing led to one of the most celebrated censorship trials since the ban of James Joyce’s *Ulysses* in 1933. *Howl and Other*

Poems had been printed in England and **deemed obscene by U. S. Customs officials** when the books arrived in the States. Ferlinghetti's stand was: "It is not the poet but what he observes which is revealed obscene. The obscene wastes of *Howl* are the sad wastes of the mechanized world, lost among atom bombs and insane nationalisms." A lengthy trial followed with many poets and literary critics testifying. The judge ruled *Howl* was not obscene or pornographic, and concluded: *honni soit qui mal y pense* (evil to him who thinks evil).

The trial brought national attention and an increased interest in the new poetry. In the fall of 1956 *The New York Times* asked Richard Eberhart to write a piece on the literary scene in San Francisco. Ginsberg had met Eberhart and "was flattered and egotistically hypnotized by the idea of recognition but really didn't agree with your evaluation of my own poetry. Before you say anything in the *Times* let me have my say." Ginsberg's "say" was a letter, later printed in a fine press edition in 1976. Ginsberg explained in detail his poetics as well as the meaning of his seminal work; not "a howl of protest" but "an act of sympathy, not rejection." Ginsberg also wrote of his pride in being accepted for publication by the *Black Mountain Review*, a journal of avant-garde writers that published established poets such as William Carlos Williams and Louis Zukofsky. The Autumn 1957 issue featured pieces by many of the San Francisco writers including Ginsberg, Kerouac, Burroughs, Gary Snyder, and Philip Whalen.

Publication of their poems brought attention to the beat writers, **but hearing the poetry spoken** remained the preferred medium for transmission. Ginsberg recorded *Howl and Other Poems* in 1959. Lawrence Ferlinghetti and Kenneth Rexroth began experimenting **with a combination of poetry reading and jazz** in an effort to bring their work to a wider audience. "The poets today are talking to themselves, they have no other audience. The competition with the mass media is too much.... We're trying to capture an audience." Rexroth and Ferlinghetti recorded their readings, and Ferlinghetti noted

that these poems, written “specifically for jazz accompaniment...should be considered as spontaneously spoken ‘oral messages’ rather than as poems written for the printed page.”

Ferlinghetti’s City Lights Books became a publishing outlet for many of the San Francisco poets. His Pocket Poets series began with his own *Pictures of the Gone World* (1955) followed by Kenneth Rexroth’s *Thirty Spanish Poems of Love and Exile*, and Kenneth Patchen’s *Poems of Humor & Protest*. The series then began to include younger poets, with Ginsberg’s *Howl and Other Poems* being number four in the series and Gregory Corso’s *Gasoline* number eight. Corso had joined Kerouac, Ginsberg, and their New York circle in 1950. A self-taught poet, Corso appeared to Kerouac as the embodiment of beat: “a tough young kid from the Lower East Side who rose like an angel over the rooftops.” Corso joined his friends in San Francisco where Ferlinghetti published *Gasoline* in 1958 and his poem “Bomb” as a broadside. Confronting the reality of the atomic bomb, the poem is arranged in the shape of a mushroom cloud. Its images of desolation and destruction carry a message of renewal through catastrophe. Other poets published in the Pocket Poets series included Denise Levertov, Philip Lamantia, Bob Kaufman, Diana DiPrima, Robert Duncan, and William Carlos Williams.

The beat writers shared a rebellious questioning of conventional

American values, but there was a great variety in their writing.

Gary Snyder was one of the six poets who read with Ginsberg at the watershed event at the Six Gallery in 1955. While Ginsberg and others detailed destructive responses to the social ills they observed, Snyder offered a constructive alternative to mainstream American culture.

Snyder’s contribution to beat literature was as spokesman for the natural world and the values associated with primitive cultures. During the early 1950s, Snyder lived in San Francisco before moving to Japan to study Zen meditation and write. *Riprap*, his first book, contains the short poems he wrote from 1953 to 1958 while he was also working on his long poem *Myths & Texts*.

The mingling of the New York beat writers with West Coast poets created a vibrant community of experimental literature in San Francisco of the 1950s. As a new generation of youth embraced their message of rebellion and alternative lifestyle, the more **turbulent counterculture movement of the 1960s** overshadowed the beats' message. Their writings, however, have remained vibrant and several of the beat writers, Kerouac, Burroughs, Ginsberg, and Corso, have entered the literary canon, with their experimental literature serving as seminal influences for writers who followed them.

acknowledgments

We wish to thank Richard S. Frary for his generosity in exhibiting selected works from his private collection.

This exhibition would not have been possible without the support of the Friends of the Libraries and the assistance of the following individuals:

curator

Cynthia Requardt, Kurrelmeyer Curator of Special Collections

Special thanks to Robert Wilson (A&S '43) for his assistance with the exhibition.

exhibition program committee

Sonja K. Jordan, Director of Preservation and Chair, Exhibition Program Committee

John A. Buchtel, Curator of Rare Books

Linda Claremon, Associate Director of Development

Madeline Copp, Librarian for English, Film & Media Studies, Writing Seminars and Humanities Center

Pamela Higgins, Director of External Relations

Amy Kimball, Assistant Curator of Rare Books

Sue Vazakas, Science Reference Coordinator

exhibition staff

Martha Edgerton, Conservator Lena Warren, Conservator

Design: Johns Hopkins Design and Publications

The Sheridan Libraries encompass the Milton S. Eisenhower Library and its collections at the Albert D. Hutzler Reading Room, the John Work Garrett Library, and the George Peabody Library.

Other Sheridan Libraries Exhibitions

Collectors' Obsessions: A Treasury of Books

The George Peabody Library, September 17, 2004–January 2, 2005

17 East Mt. Vernon Place, Baltimore, MD 21202, 410.659.8179