

Raluca Rogoveanu

Glancing at Deforming Mirrors : The Mad Artists of the Beat Generation

Abstract: Converting their life experiences into art and drawing artistic energies from mundane activities, the Beat artists imagined a cultural project in which life and art became conjoined aspects, inseparable coordinates of a continuum. This essay analyzes one of the forms of subversion employed by the artists of the Beat Generation in their opposition to the imposed conformity of the 1950: the cultivation of self-assumed madness. The analysis considers both the personal biographies and the artistic productions of three key representatives of the Beat generation: Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac and William Burroughs. Started as a personal performance echoing the sense of loss and general moral dissolution, madness is sometimes simulated, but in most cases lived with a tragic sense of commitment. Apart from loneliness and neurosis, madness also engenders an emancipated behavior, meant to connect the individual to the universal. The violence of madness, though emerging out of crisis and negation, offers alternative solutions and negative challenges to a corrupted self and national ethos.

Key words: *insanity, subversion, Beat Generation artists, carnivalesque identity*

Madness

The tremendous appeal which the artists of the Beat Generation had upon the generation of the 1950s and the ones to follow relied on strong rebellion against dominant American ideological patterns. Their threefold manifestation of subversiveness embraced the social, economic and religious domains of the American civilization. Defying the commonsense and the public decency, the Beats celebrated libertine lifestyles through drug taking or homosexual intercourse. Striking at the American materialism, the Beats took delight in inferior social and economic positions, denying the empowered status of upwardly mobile professionals.

This analysis of the Beat generation ethos will pay attention to a particular element in the inventory of their symbolic capital: (self-assumed) insanity as a cultural site of ideological contestation in the works of Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac and William Burroughs. This essay intends to explore the extent to which the Beat conceptualize madness/ insanity as a

cultural movement creates a web of micro-resistances against commercial and bureaucratic mechanisms, in a formative game of playing with cultural forms which produces, a new type of knowledge/meaning and a new sense of communal identity. Madness as a powerful expression of a subversive life style is engaged in a twofold manifestation: on the one hand, it acts a defensive mechanism against aggressively demanding social institutions, and, on the other hand, it can be considered an offensive formation providing alternative solutions, dealing with existing problematic issues and translating them in symbolic forms.

Postwar thinking enforced the tenet of objectivity and this became a guiding principle for economic sciences and technological discoveries, for the literary paradigm of New Criticism and Freudian psychoanalysis. As the subsequent rejection of subjective perception imposed new standards of conformity, uniformity and order, the Beat artist lamented the pervasiveness of this term, felt it as a crisis of the social and personal realm and deplored the abdication of the soul and the preeminence of the brain from contemporary life experiences. The authors belonging to the Beat Generation consider that this excess in rationality develops at the expense of personal subjectivity and intuition and fear that the cold abstract reason might permanently replace the senses of emotion. Echoing Spengler and Korzybski's *Science and Sanity*, the Beats also consider that mankind is tormented by the spasm of an identification crisis which derives from people's inability to acknowledge the fact that truth is a product of voluntary discovery beyond the surface of language. The westerner no longer functions properly because he is programmed by the social environment which he inhabits rather than by his own will. Consequently, man is determined by language and becomes invariably "infected" with a disease that worsens both human relationship and mind-thought processes. To counteract this science or sanity/the science of sanity, the Beats conceptualize madness as a way of justifying communal and individual identity. Since the main members of the Beat group already had some medical record in psychiatric institutes, the definition of insanity as a cultural site of ideological contestation became a common trope for the Beats.¹

Imagining the period of the 1950s as an open field of contesting and negotiating values, of continual tension between homogenizing impulses and dissonant alternatives, the Beats deploy carnival-like manifestations² in order to identify the competing, mutable, relative and unstable status of the mid 20th century author. Consequently, the Beat productions rely on a type of polyphonic multiplicity and involve subversive methods of an anti-conventional art. The Beats made public their distaste for the social conduct expressed in phrases like "you must adjust", the command "etched above the door of every church, synagogue, cathedral, temple and chapel"(Lindner 51). They also disapproved of William H. White Jr.'s statement that "groupthink is becoming a national philosophy", or David Riesman's theory on the "other-directed behavior". Mikhail Bakhtin's mockery of such serious "theories like group adjustment, rationalized conformity and enlightenment reason" matched perfectly the Beats'

1 In a fit of jealousy, Burroughs had cut off the tip of the little finger on his left hand and had been temporarily committed to Bellevue for four weeks. While in the navy, Kerouac had been diagnosed with a "schizoid personality" and Ginsberg, completely intimated with the horror of madness due to his mother's disease, had spent six months at the Columbia Presbyterian Psychiatric Institute in 1949.

2 see Bakhtin's concepts of dialogism and carnivalism

inclination for eccentric activities and “unorthodox” preferences in life style. Indeed, the forms of subversiveness deployed by Beat artists in general can be meaningfully explained through Bakhtin’s notion of carnivalism , which entails the annihilation of “hierarchical structures” and “a life turned inside out”, fraught with

Carnivalistic blasphemies, a whole system of carnivalistic debasing and bringing down to earth, carnivalistic obscenities linked with the reproductive power of the earth and the body, carnivalistic parodies on sacred texts and sayings. (Bakhtin, *Problems* 125)

The Beats explored the criminal, the sordid, the sinister and the dangerous. At first, their rebellion against the conformist America was not explicit, since it started as a private experience, a personal exploration. “It wasn’t a political or social rebellion. Everybody had some form of break in their consciousness or an experience or a taste of a larger consciousness or satory”. (Ginsberg, *Indian* 77) Allen Ginsberg madness is at times simulated, at times serious, but always lived with a tragic sense of commitment.

I have maneuvered myself to a position I have always fancied the most proper and true for me... I really believe, or want to believe, really I am nuts, otherwise I’ll never be sane. I’ve gotten so hung up on myself now it isn’t funny anymore. I stop in the middle of conversations, laughing shrilly – stare at people with perfect sobriety and remorse, and then go on cackling away. (Ginsberg, *Indian* 67)

In its early stages, madness was perceived in a half-jocular, half-seriously assumed behavior but Ginsberg’s turning 23 showed him painfully aware of his spiritual and physical decay and with contradictory feelings about his mother. The trauma of having seen her marching naked in the house (to his father’s great embarrassment) or of visiting her in the state hospital might have produced permanent emotional scars for the young artist.

[The hospital] stank, sour smell of wards, disinfectant, vomit, piss, people incontinent. And I remember walking down the wards, there were all these old people, and middle-aged people lined up, crooning to themselves, singing, talking to themselves, snapping their fingers, shadow boxing, usually in sloppy ill-fitting clothes. Some of them had been left there for years by their families. (Ginsberg, *Journal* 90)

Convinced that he was mad, he felt a deep sympathy toward her and strong resent against his father’s new family life. However, in a different phase of his life, when encouraged to assume madness in order to reject it, he drew away from Naomi. “I am beginning to hate my mother”.(Ginsberg, *As Ever* 77)

Tonight all is well... what a terrible future. I am 23, the year of the iron birthday, the gate of darkness. I am ill. I have become spiritually or practically impotent in my madness this last month. I suddenly realized that my head is severed from my body, I realized it a few nights ago (Ginsberg, *Allen* 60-1)

The moment of partial cure coincided with the moment of rage against former friends. When William Burroughs accused Ginsberg of permitting his family and friends to manipulate him, Ginsberg deplored his relationship with him and started to question his insights of amateur psychoanalysis with him. "O Bleak Bill, he is afraid that I will find out that he is crazy, that his analysis of me was a tragic farce – not an absurd farce, but a tragic real one that he has led me astray". (Ginsberg, *As Ever* 77)

From a personal matter, the Beats transformed madness into a social strategy meant to question the moral integrity and ethical health of the Faustian civilization. The repressive character of social norms and the type of engagement required by social conventions produced an inhibited, neurotic individual, unable to establish normal human contact or to connect to a universal human essence. Following Spengler's ideas that a unified culture or spiritual community depended on the "communicability of intuitions, sensations and thoughts from one to another", Kerouac, in a 1945 journal entry deplored the inevitable loneliness of individuals sealed in their little melancholic atmospheres, "like planets revolving around the sun, our common but distant desire"(Kerouac, *Selected* 76).The author sees madness as the only authentic American spirit, an emancipated behavior capable to reconnect the individual to the universal. As Kerouac declared in *On the Road* (24), "The only people for me are the mad ones, the ones who are mad to live, mad to talk, mad to be saved, desirous of everything at the same time..."Neal Cassady seems to display the same characteristics simultaneously, and this precise deviation from standards of normality would makes him the uncrowned king of the Beats. This regenerative force of violence gives rise to an exuberant mode of being which interconnects the powers of the individual with those of the macrocosmos. Kerouac describes him admiringly and noted the spontaneous overflow of emotions in Cassady's personality.

He seemed to be doing everything at the same time. It was a shaking of the head, up and down, sideways; jerky, vigorous hands; quick walking, sitting, crossing the legs, uncrossing, getting up, rubbing the hands, rubbing his fly, hitching his pants, looking up saying <Am> and sudden slitting of the eyes to see everywhere; and all the time he was grabbing me by the ribs and talking, talking. (Kerouac, *On the Road* 21)

Unlike Ginsberg and Kerouac who direct their "mad" energy to affirmative purposes through pacifistic means, William Burroughs's insistence on madness springs out of demoniac assumptions and generates solutions of crisis and negative challenge. In Burroughs's work, the schizophrenic man is devoid of emotion, interest aspirations and expectations, becoming an addict, a selfless individual, a mass of uncontrollable impulses, who is permanently terrified at the thought of confronting his other self. It is interesting to note the forms in which the "other" can appear in Burroughs's work. The junk develops inside the body a parasitic entity, simultaneously satisfying and destroying the individual, the hated other, by devouring the self. "A worm gets into your kidneys and grows to an enormous size. Ultimately the kidney is a thin shell around the worm".(Burroughs, *Naked* 87)In his turn, the addict rejects the other and himself and regards "his body impersonally, as an instrument to absorb the medium in which he lives, evaluates his tissue with the cold hands of a horse rider".(Burroughs, *Naked Lunch* 87). Out of the desire to love himself and

supply his body with the wanted element, the individual rejects himself, by making himself dependent on something he is unable to separate from. Lacking volition, the individual becomes an instrument in the hands of the others. He finds satisfaction in being abused, indulges in his own bodily fluids and discharges, and takes pride in his own abjection. The process of intellectual and affective dissipation is paralleled by the process of physical disappearance, a metaphor for the social insignificance and uselessness that the character stands for. Defined by its negation, the individual becomes a dismantled image of man, a sum of internal struggles and personal failures.

The broken image of Man moves in minute by minute and cell by cell. Poverty, hatred, war, police- criminals, bureaucracy, insanity, all symptoms of he human virus. (Burroughs, Naked 59).

To the dutiful and mechanical existence of the official system, with its approved pattern of domestic and public existence, the Beats oppose a contradictory image of the self defined by spontaneous creativity, visionary sensitivity and eschatological aspirations. Burroughs in particular seems to have found clear affinities with Bakhtin's enthusiasm for dialogical formula as well as with his choice of Rabelaisian modes. The parody, grotesquerie and the comedy of excess are poetic strategies developed by the theoretician and the writer alike and both suggest that the boundary-free self and work are the ultimate results of the carnivalesque identity. However, if Bakhtin's theory is basically optimistic in its essence, Burroughs revels in apocalyptic sadism and gleeful violence. Discussing the extreme visions of Burroughs's fantasies, David Sterritt notices:

Burroughs makes this catharsis more harsh and vengeful than purgative and liberating; and his sardonic laughter is designed as much for subjugation as for emancipation. Yet his fantasies have positive value nonetheless, particularly when viewed in the context of his overall challenge to postwar American thinking, which he brazenly parodies and relentlessly contradicts. He is carnivalesque in a deeply dystopian way, but within the homogenized confines of a rational society, his brand of dizzying destabilization is as salutary as it is shocking. (Sterritt 62)

The members of the Beat Generation cultivate a cultural tradition of the grotesque, undermining hierarchies and destroying boundaries and their subversiveness becomes the center of an inverted allegory that presents the American social and cultural realm into a deforming mirror, a way of reflection that inscribes critical comment at its very structure. Beat subculture becomes a disruptive cultural form that postulates deformation, excess, defiance of the essential limit provided by morality and current social principles. It fulfills the function of a "cultural tradition of the grotesque"(Bakhtin, *Rabelais* 84), undermining hierarchies and destroying boundaries.

Ovidius University Constanța, Romania

References

- Bakhtin, Mikhail (1981): *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*. Trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist. Austin: University of Texas Press
- Bakhtin, Mikhail (1984): *Rabelais and His World*. Trans. Hélène Iswolsky. Bloomington: Midland-Indiana University Press
- Burroughs, William (1969): "Atrophied Preface" to *Naked Lunch*. New York: Grove Press
- Burroughs, William (1962): *Naked Lunch*. New York: Grove Press
- Ginsberg, Allen (1974): *Allen Verbatim: Lectures on Poetry, Politics, Consciousness*. New York: McGraw – Hill Ed. Gordon Ball.
- Ginsberg, Allen. (1970): *Indian Journals: March 1962-May 1963: Notebooks, Diary, Blank Pages, Writings*. San Francisco: Dave Haselwood/City Lights
- Ginsberg, Allen (1992): *Journals: Early Fifties, Early Sixties*. New York: Grove Press
- Kerouac, Jack (1991): *On the Road*. Penguin USA