Hip Sublime

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Published by The Ohio State University Press

Murnaghan, Sheila.  
Hip Sublime: Beat Writers and the Classical Tradition.  
The Ohio State University Press, 2017.  
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The essays in *Hip Sublime: Beat Writers and the Classical Tradition* introduce a critical perspective overlooked by decades of Beat scholarship. While the Beats’ debt to romantic, modernist, and American literary traditions, and their exploration of non-Western literatures and cultures, especially Buddhism, have been acknowledged and variously explored by critics, the engagement of Beat writers with the Western classical tradition has been neglected, no doubt because of the dominance of Beat authors’ persistent criticism of post–World War II mainstream culture in tandem with their equally persistent rhetoric of eschewing a hegemonic past. This volume seeks to address this rich and sometimes fraught topic, attempting for the first time a sustained, focused exploration of the ways in which Beat writers appropriated, imitated, revised, and recreated Greco-Roman texts and authors as part of their postwar avant-garde project. In essence, *Hip Sublime* exemplifies what the poet Diane di Prima identifies as the ability of Western poets to recognize “a precision of lineage,” as they sought to address this lineage in their art and lives. In effect, as di Prima explains in her book on the influence of H.D. (Hilda Doolittle) on Robert Duncan’s poetry, the poem “stands at a juncture of planes—of whatever lineages have become manifest at a given point” (2011, 3).

*Hip Sublime* raises several issues pertinent to Beat Studies as a disciplinary subfield. The most obvious question arising from the particular authors represented in the collection is “who is Beat?” The answer is vexed (it has certainly been repeatedly contested), but suffice it to say that Beats were a
loosely affiliated arts community which interacted with the other avant-garde poetry movements after World War II, such as Black Mountain, San Francisco Renaissance, and the New York School. The writers discussed in this volume include those who identified as Beat (Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac, William S. Burroughs, Gregory Corso, Diane di Prima, Philip Whalen, Ed Sanders), those who were associated with Black Mountain College and who interacted with the Beats (Robert Duncan, Robert Creeley, Charles Olson), mentors and supporters from an older generation (Kenneth Rexroth, Olson, Lawrence Ferlinghetti), and one who rejected the label but is seen as allied with the Beats through his public readings and publication history (Charles Bukowski).

The question of who is a Beat is intricately bound to a general aesthetic philosophy associated with the “New American Poetry,” a rubric identified by Donald Allen in his groundbreaking 1960 anthology by that name and in the updated and expanded 1982 volume, *The Postmoderns*. All of the authors discussed in this volume, except Bukowski, are included in Allen’s two anthologies. Allen and George Butterick’s preface to *The Postmoderns* sums up an aesthetic defined as the postwar avant-garde in a poetic line traceable to Pound, Williams, and Olson. Olson’s “Projective Verse,” published in the 1960 volume, functioned as a manifesto for open, spontaneous form, “composition by field,” with immediate perception, breath, and the syllable replacing traditional figures, meter, and verse forms. Allen and Butterick also note that the new American poets, who questioned received literary, political, and sexual values—and sometimes the premises of Western civilization itself—shared an oppositional stance. These writers conceived of themselves, or were perceived by others, as outsiders, including academic outsiders.

While oppositional in many respects, Beat writers were not uniformly anti-intellectual or anti-academic in their craft and their stance. In fact, as *Hip Sublime* subtly suggests, the oppositional aesthetics pursued and propagated by Beat writers was at its most radical, that is, at its root, a modern iteration of a dialectical stance that has for millennia propelled new literary forms and theories, especially through an almost *de rigueur* obligation of younger artists to repudiate their mentors even as they internalized and renovated their works. Many Beat writers, as this volume shows, carefully studied literary history—both through formal education and as autodidacts. One might even say that those who were formally educated (and some at elite institutions—Burroughs at Harvard, Kerouac and Ginsberg at Columbia, Ferlinghetti at the Sorbonne, Snyder and Whalen at Reed College) were also lifelong learners as they pursued their own reading and research, including the classics, to develop their poetic and social resources and their own versions of the classics. In effect, many Beat writers created an alternative academy and therefore
a foundation for alternative authority. Philip Whalen’s comment on the academy characterizes many of the Beats: “[I] have assumed its function in my own person, and in the strictest sense of the word—academy: a walking grove of trees” (Whalen 2007, 153).

All of these writers were individualistic in their response to the classics, which was very much an idiosyncratic process in each case. What they had in common was a post–World War II poetics, not an intellectual approach to the classics. For instance, the most important precursors or models for Beat writers were not the ancient writers but rather modernists who demonstrated how a “modern” could employ the classics as a tool of the avant-garde project. Modernists—especially Joyce, Pound, H.D., and Williams—followed by older contemporaries including Rexroth and Olson, served as important textual mentors for many Beat writers. Joyce’s *Ulysses* was an influential model for “the mythical method,” and thus the narrative works discussed in this collection—both prose and poetry—use the structure of journey, quest, *katabasis*, and *anabasis* drawn at least in part from classical epics and myths. This strategy characterizes not only the work of Ginsberg, Kerouac, and Burroughs, where this structure is the focus of several essays in the volume, but also Sanders and di Prima. For the poets, Pound and H.D.’s imagism remained powerful, and the *Cantos* were a model for the modern long (or epic) poem. The long poems of midcentury free verse continued to employ a modernist collage of fragments that combined epic and lyric. Thus, the classical genres of epic, lyric, and epigram persisted in avant-garde configurations.

However, for many Beat writers (and other post–World War II writers, as well), T. S. Eliot’s “The Waste Land” signaled through its heavy reliance on dozens of cultural and linguistic traditions—including classics such as Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*—the return of poetics to the academics, to those, as Terrence Diggory contends, with “the knowledge to translate Eliot’s many foreign phrases and explicate his mythical allusions” (Diggory 2014, 60). Eliot, for better or worse, became the scapegoat for Beat rhetoric and practices that sought to approach the classics apart from midcentury “classicism,” which promoted a “great books” curriculum as the foundation of mainstream postwar values.

On a broader level, the anti-Eliot trend coincided with the diminution of the Greco-Roman classical curriculum as the foundation of Anglo-American education, a reality that classicists addressed. Recognizing this slippage, for example, the editors of *Arion*, a long-standing classical studies journal published by Boston University, distributed a classics questionnaire to major literary figures in the early 1960s, including luminaries such as Allen Ginsberg, Robert Graves, Marianne Moore, Robert Fitzgerald, Kenneth Burke, Iris Murdoch, John Updike, and René Wellek. The questions posed repeatedly rein-
forced a need to assess and affirm the role of classical studies post–World War II, as the following three illustrate: “Claims are still made for a living continuity between Graeco-Roman civilization and our own. If these claims are anything more than familiar cultural gestures, at what levels, and in which contexts, can they still valuably be made?”; “How far can the classics live meaningfully within our culture, and our literature, when so few people have a real command of Greek and Latin?”; and “What has been the effect of the Musée Imaginaire metaphor by which Greece and Roman are no longer two uniquely privileged, paradigmatic father cultures, but simply two cultures among many? Liberating, or destructive?” (Anon. 1964, unnumbered foldout sheet attached to back cover). In such a context, Beat writers confronted and were confronted with the paradoxical power of the classicism of the era: a former formidable giant to be both respected and depreciated—a tradition that they, to varying degrees, opposed and yet drew upon as an impetus for their individual attempts to reclaim, rediscover, rewrite, or reject. Michael Pfaff’s discussion of Ginsberg and Catullus in this volume provides a trenchant example.

As the Arion questionnaire indicates, Beats’ classical materials were also mediated by a historical series of translations, allusions, and precedents in English literary traditions, and they themselves are “translators” in their turning to the Greeks and Romans to support an avant-garde aesthetic and a countercultural ethical stance. As this volume demonstrates, to these ends certain Beat authors attempted a careful translation of sense and sometimes meter, while others concentrated on creating free or loose translations. Others engaged in imitations and/or adapted subject matter, paradigms, and attitudes from classical traditions not only to reinterpret the classics but also to support their own postwar values through critique and/or appropriation of the Greco-Roman heritage. One striking and revealing pattern that we see across the essays here is the choice of a classical writer as a precursor, model, guide, and companion: Sappho, Catullus, Pindar, Maximus of Tyre, and Pausanias emerge as especially significant. In each case, the classical author is embedded in the contemporary poet’s vision and craft, and refigured as part of the author’s countercultural critique. The volume also reveals the persistent relevance of the Greco-Roman legacies, even among those who have not pursued formal academic study of the field. Allusions to gods and goddesses, authors such as Sappho and Homer, along with many others, appear like cultural touchstones used almost instinctually as a lingua franca and are interpreted with equal facility. These essays, then, reveal that Beat engagement with the classics was complex and far from superficial. They grappled with these precursors and how they have been traditionally received. If they didn’t reject, they sought to fuse with their outsider perspective.
Not all writers associated with the Beat generation aligned themselves with Greco-Roman traditions, whether implicitly or explicitly: among those who did not were Joyce Johnson, Bonnie Bremer Frazer, LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka), and Hettie Jones. We would also be remiss if we did not point out that some of the authors addressed in this volume were not as enamored with that particular lineage as were others. Although Kerouac’s early creative efforts, such as *Orpheus Emerged*, rely thematically on the classical figures of Orpheus and Prometheus as models of artistic identity, his Dulouz Legend does little with explicit classical history and myth except through his Joycean language-based experiments and more general quest narratives. In the case of Burroughs, although the quest is present in his early work, he undercuts its authority by avoiding narrative closure, and, in his later experimental fiction, he disrupts all narrative to deconstruct the Western humanist subject. It is worth speculating that certain Beat writers—and here we refer to Ginsberg as a prime example—may have initially turned to classical models as a way to legitimize themselves as literary talents recognizable to those with already established literary credibility, a move that should not be surprising considering the power of mainstream academic curricula, even among members of a counterculture. With respect to Ginsberg, Diana Trilling, in her insightful close reading of his complex personality, suggested that the young poet “wish[ed] to meet the teacher on equal ground,” that is, “to propose an alliance between the views of the academic and poet-rebel, the unity of a deep discriminating commitment to literature which must certainly one day wipe out the fortuitous distance between . . . pupil and teacher” (2003, 92). Later in his career, Ginsberg decentered classical allusions in a broader field of cultural traditions drawn from Eastern and other ancient cultures. A similar decentering takes place in the later poetry of Whalen and di Prima, who were drawn to non-Western thought as a corrective to the dominance of the Greco-Roman legacy.

Finally, an intriguing issue raised by this anthology relates to the nature of Beat production as multivalent, logically leading to the question of how to approach the study of Beat texts from a similar perspective. *Hip Sublime* illustrates the way scholars from different fields approach this issue. In this collection, we see in operation translation work, interestingly from two perspectives, that of the Beat artist (e.g., Kenneth Rexroth and Robert Creeley) and that of the literary critic (Gideon Nisbet and Nick Selby, respectively). Close readings focused on textual forms dominate, exemplified by Loni Reynolds’s quasi-Proppian structuralist interpretation of William S. Burroughs’s narratives. We also see the standard cross-disciplinary practice of literary critics, which is to integrate close readings with attention to composition and cultural histories.
along with the application of theoretical tools from other disciplines—in this case not only various features of the histories and mythologies of the Greco-Roman periods but also crosscultural religious practices and beliefs, along with feminist philosophies, linguistic methods, and musical corollaries.

Most significantly, however, the collection combines various historical, linguistic, and literary approaches to further our understanding of the intersections between Western avant-garde practice and the cultural legacies of ancient Greece and Rome. It is a challenging process for scholars of both classics and Beat studies, to say the least, but *Hip Sublime* presents a balanced critical approach well suited to illuminating the complexities of Beat generation writing. In total, *Hip Sublime* has taken a crucial first step toward situating Beat artists and aesthetics within a rich literary tradition that, in the end, the writers themselves could never fully escape, even if this was, at times, exactly what they professed to do.

**Bibliography**


