Introduction

Stephen Dickey,
Sheila Murnaghan,
And Ralph M. Rosen

This collection of essays explores for the first time a rich, often paradoxical confluence of literary traditions in twentieth-century America: the intersections between Beat writers of the post–World War II decades and the classical tradition. Beat writers—or “the Beats” as they are sometimes loosely called—hardly constitute a group with a monolithic aesthetic or literary agenda, yet all of them were responding to the same nexus of cultural forces. In the wake of World War II, values were being vigorously challenged in every sphere. Throughout the arts, the burdens of older forms and generic constraints gave way, sometimes quite abruptly, to modes that stressed instead the “nowness” of the present moment and a future that didn’t need a past except as something not to repeat. At the same time, the Beats were inescapably formed by their own education and inspired by writers across a long Western, and increasingly Eastern, tradition. What is more, in their continual attempt to transcend what they perceived as the commercialism, superficiality, and overall precariousness of life in the post–World War II era, they were often reaching for exactly the kind of stability and continuity that they thought they were casting off.

In such moments, it was classical authors who provided, on the one hand, a discourse of sublimity to help some Beats articulate their desire for a purity of experience, and, on the other, a venerable literary tradition that attracted them precisely because of its uncanny ability to be as “hip” as it was “square.”

1. Such a paradox, for example, underlies the description of the poet Allen Ginsberg (as the character Alvah Goldbook) as a “hornrimmed intellectual hepcat with wild black hair” in
Cross-country Odyssean journeys, a timeless sublime in the landscape of the American West, hipster lotus-eaters in smoky jazz clubs and bohemian cafés, underworld descents into urban infernos, or exhilarating experiments in Catullan erotics—these are just a few of the classically infused topoi that surfaced in the work of many Beats, shaping a generation of writers who saw themselves as pioneers in a quest for spiritual and aesthetic freedom within a world of conventionality and pragmatism. While the Beats’ debt to romanticism, in both its English and American forms, has been well established by literary scholars, their debts to classicism have not—a striking critical imbalance that this collection seeks to correct.

A few of these authors—notably Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, Gregory Corso, and William S. Burroughs—have by now attained canonical status and are generally taken as defining the Beat movement. But these figures hardly tell the whole story of a “migratory . . . international avant-garde” (Grace and Skerl 2012, 1), “a loosely affiliated arts community . . . encompass[ing] two or three generations of writers, artists, activists, and non-conformists” (Skerl 2004, 2). This collection aims to show the impact of classical literature and myth on a broad range of mid-century experimentalists. The most famous Beats, including Kerouac, Ginsberg, Burroughs, and Philip Whalen, are discussed alongside less well-known but important figures such as Robert Duncan, Ed Sanders, and Kenneth Rexroth. Attention is also paid to writers who did not identify themselves straightforwardly as Beats but were allied through a similar sensibility—such as Charles Bukowski and Robert Creeley—or were themselves influenced by the Beats—such as Charles Olson, a self-described “post-Beat” writer whose compositional theories and practices were, in turn, influential upon the Beats. An essay on Diane di Prima addresses the often-overlooked role of women writers among the Beats.

Our aim is to counter prevailing misconceptions about the Beats through a fuller and more nuanced account of the movement. The literary-historical narrative constructed around the most widely recognized Beats has, until quite recently at least, been misleadingly one-dimensional, and often more concerned with the gloriously self-destructive features of their lives than with analysis of their work. Even as the generation passes, and more and more archival material such as letters, drafts, and unpublished manuscripts

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Jack Kerouac’s *The Dharma Bums* (1958, 11), in a scene that describes the famous reading at the 6 Gallery in San Francisco in 1955 where Ginsberg first publicly presented “Howl.” The narrator of that passage, Ray Smith, also singles out other poets at the reading for their “square” demeanor in a hip setting. See chapter 9 below for more on this event, which was to become a foundational moment in Beat mythology.

2. For more on the problem of defining the Beats, see the afterword to this volume.
becomes accessible, the conceptualization of the Beats in our own era remains coalesced around post-1960s aesthetics and tends to stress the manic, free-wheeling side of their work to the exclusion of their achievements as practitioners of a disciplined craft in dialogue with past traditions.

Ginsberg, in particular, did his part to encourage such an approach, evolving along with the culture of the 1960s from 1940s hipster to psychedelic guru of “peace and love.” The “beat-itude” Kerouac had once craved and romanticized came to seem, by the time of his death in 1969, naïve and adolescent next to Burroughs’s rigorously avant-garde satirical program, Gregory Corso’s intuitively surrealist syncretism, and Ginsberg’s peculiar blend of quasi-mystical “orientalism” with a leftist politics of liberation. Missing from this account, moreover, is an entire array of important figures who never became celebrities, but who fill out the complex picture of this vibrant movement—modernists like Kenneth Rexroth who immediately preceded and overlapped with the Beats, shaping the Beat sensibility with a similar cry to “make it new,” and the generation of writers who came of age after World War II and made their mark in the 1960s as a kind of second wave of Beat—Gary Snyder, Ed Sanders, and Michael McClure, for example. Added to the mix are the academics at Columbia in the 1940s who brought to the restless, impressionable minds of Ginsberg, Kerouac, and the rest of their literary coterie a sense of literary tradition and form, which those writers absorbed even as they bristled against it.

That bristling looms large in any construction of the Beats’ legacy, as when the social activist Abbie Hoffman summed up the appeal of the Beats to younger writers like himself through a sweeping denunciation of canonical figures from the ancient tragedians to Robert Frost: “Who gives a fuck which ancient Greek stabbed which ancient Greek in the back, or how many poems do you want to hear about ‘I’m walking along a country road, staring at a wall?’” But a closer look at the Beats’ own writing reveals that they were just as likely to see the ancient past as offering a telling contrast to the sordid present. In “Call For Aga-Memnon,” a 1948 poem by John Clellon Holmes, author of influential early definitions of the Beat movement, the speaker asks, “Where is the era’s truly tragic man / who understood why he was ground to dust, / and knew the Furies’ ague while he ran?” For Holmes, in post–World War II America, “No man seeks to avoid his curse: / none are compelled except in morbid mental grooves / no Athens ran in” (7–9). Dismissals like Hoffman’s are countered by a readiness to draw upon classical culture, whether simply to take the measure of the modern world or to reinvigorate it,

3. In an interview filmed in 1982 during the ten-day “On the Road” Conference in Boulder, Colorado, which celebrated the first quarter century of Kerouac’s novel.
as examples drawn from two central figures of the Beat generation will illustrate. In the case of Gregory Corso, a career-long fascination with the origins of Western culture shows how fully engaged the Beats could be with the classical past. In the case of Lawrence Ferlinghetti, a single poem demonstrates the allusive complexity that can result from an appropriation of classical material that is inevitably mediated by other literary periods, chiefly romanticism and modernism.

Gregory Corso—honored by Ginsberg as “great Orpheus of these States” (1985, 17)—is probably the most frequent and explicit of all the Beats in his references to classical lore, whether despite or because of the fact that he was the least formally educated. His reading of classical texts began at New York’s Clinton State Prison and continued when he moved to Cambridge, where he illicitly audited courses at Harvard and spent hours in the Widener Reading Room. Much later, as a teacher at the Naropa Institute summer session of 1977, Corso included *Gilgamesh* on his syllabus, explaining: “*Gilgamesh* was the first thing written down. You know why it’s important to me? Because I like to go back to the sources” (quoted in Olson 2002, 75).

Eclectic to the point of surrealism, Corso’s verse has frequent recourse to classical allusion, especially in his earlier volumes (published between 1958 and 1962) and often in the service of establishing a temporal and rhetorical continuum between ancient and modern. In his second collection, *Gasoline* (1958), among references to Neptune, Pan, Penthesilea, and Mimnermus, Corso begins to treat the classical past as something more than a repository of fragmentary allusions, like scattered stones at the site of an ancient temple. “In the Fleeting Hand of Time” presents the poet reflecting upon his birth not as a beginning but as a time of decision:

Born March 26 1930 I am led 100 mph o’er the vast market of choice
what to choose? what to choose?
O — — — and I leave my orange room of myth
no chance to lock away my toys of Zeus
I choose the room of Bleecker Street
A baby mother stuffs my mouth with a pale Milanese breast
I suck I struggle I cry O Olympian mother
unfamiliar this breast to me. . . .
(17–24)

Unlike Wordsworth’s newborn who forgets what he has known, the infant Corso comes into the world trailing clouds of Greek mythology which, inevitably, begin to fade when “Time leads [him] into conditional life” (41) and
thus “profanely I shed my Hermean wings. . . . I discard my lyre of Orphic futility (29, 34).”

In several poems from _The Happy Birthday of Death_ (1960), however, the allusions thicken into a portrait of the artist as a young classicist who studiously recovers that lost birthright. In “Clown,” for example, the poet welcomes a new season:

Spring!
Good to go to the East River
and sit before Brooklyn
with fresh knowledge of Hesiod on farming;
good to be intent on Alcman’s _Maiden Song;_
sit good for hours re-learning
the craft of classical verse —
Welcome Epinikian ode!
(6.21–28)

And in one of Corso’s best-known poems, “Marriage,” the prospective bridegroom imagines future collisions between bourgeois familial expectations and his private, antiquarian, and decidedly idiosyncratic sensibility:

Yet if I should get married and it’s Connecticut and snow
and she gives birth to a child and I am sleepless, worn,
up for nights, head bowed against a quiet window, the past behind me,
finding myself in the most common of situations a trembling man
knowledged with responsibility not twig-smear nor Roman coin soup—
O what would that be like!
Surely I’d give it for a nipple a rubber Tacitus
For a rattle a bag of broken Bach records
Tack Della Francesca all over its crib
Sew the Greek alphabet on its bib
And build for its playpen a roofless Parthenon
(68–78)

The second part of this stanza stands out not just because it emulates traditional “square” poetic typography by capitalizing every line, nor for its pro-

4. The consistency of Corso’s reliance on this vocabulary of ancient myth is apparent when he revisits an image from this poem in “Return,” from his later volume _Herald of the Autochthonic Spirit_ (1981): “The days of my poems/were unlimited joys / of blue Phoenician sails / and Zeusian toys” (1–4).
phantic mockery of future Baby Einstein fads, but because it playfully envisions
the Beat artist—or perhaps any artist—as the inheritor of diverse aesthetic tra-
ditions, traditions he will hand on to his offspring, genetic or artistic. (It may
also record the first pacifier pun in literature: reading Tacitus may not, real-
istically, calm a squalling child, but what better name to encourage silence?)

Questions of modernity’s claim on the classical arise for the artist as well
as the parent. “Is it for me to wipe my dirty pickle hands on the plektron?”
(107) asks Corso in “Greece,” a poem from 1960 responding, in part, to his
recent travels in that country. The question is not merely rhetorical, and the
poem continues to worry the matter of influence and originality, of the urgent
“nowness” of then versus the immediate historical moment of the speaker—

Is this my song? Do I forget my New York City subway
and rooftop sleep
But the sight of ecru-shredded Nike coiled in moonmarbled
snow
her rippling gown her ever-loosened sandal seen
in my 17th year
is more to me than the sight of the subways hurtling
against the rooftops or the sad meaning of Times Square
(Corso 1962, 112–19)

—before concluding with an assertion that the poet’s chief obligation to the
past is to carry it onward. Clearly, though, there is tension as well as contin-
uity between past and present, and Corso’s poems articulate an ambivalence
toward antiquity that declares its obsolescence even as it admits its influence:5

Hear me hear
the once Grecian
Grecian no more
charged with rusty minutest liberty
kingdoms dust at her victory
I’ve new delight—and eternally toward delight
I’ve a possession to assume
to bestow
(223–30)

5. For an obverse instance of Beat ambivalence to the usefulness of classical models, or
more generally of the modern inferiority complex before ancient art, consider Kerouac’s unpub-
lished “Reflections on Ulysses of James Joyce,” which concludes that Joyce’s use of Homer’s
Odyssey shows a kind of authorial weakness. Joyce “is not quite sure of the nobility of his
theme” or, indeed, “of the nobility of Ireland and Irishmen” (quoted in Gewirtz, 2007, 28–29).
Unlike Corso, Kerouac asks, in effect, why Joyce should even want to use a plektron.
But to assume a possession is, in the end, to bestow it again—just as not locking away the toys of Zeus means that others, too, can play with them—and the essays in this volume make clear how thoroughly the Beats absorbed the Classics in ways large and small, respectful of their mutual distance but eager to converse informally, thereby transforming the legacy they claimed.6

“Sailing thru the straits of Demos” are the opening words of the second poem of Lawrence Ferlinghetti’s best-known collection, A Coney Island of the Mind (1958), a volume direct and plentiful in its references to canonical writers and artists. As the poem quickly makes clear, the straits of Demos are not Greek waterways but rather the American people, through whom the poem takes an Odyssean journey while satirically reconfiguring epic motifs into some of the more vulgar and ridiculous features of U.S. political conventions and campaigns. Upon the promise of “Free Elections” (25), however, the last third of the poem acquires a darker, more nuanced tone:

So that
we set up mast and sail
on that swart ship once more
and so set forth once more
forth upon the gobbly sea
loaded with liberated vestal virgins
and discus throwers reading Walden
but
shortly after reaching
the strange suburban shores
of that great American
demi-democracy
looked at each other
with a mild surprise
silent upon a peak
in Darien

(26–41)

This passage begins with the last two words of Ezra Pound’s Canto 1 ([1925] 1973)—“So that”—before returning to its first lines:

6. In a parallel instance, Corso twice mentions having written “a play, my first, about 12 pages, Sarpedon, 1954, in verse” before summing up the complex ratio of debt and innovation that is in a general way the theme of this volume of essays. The play, writes Corso to his publisher James Laughlin, is “an attempt to replicate Euripides, though the whole shot be an original.” See Morgan 2003, 405.
And then went down to the ship,
    Set keel to breakers, forth on the godly sea, and
    We set up mast and sail on that swart ship\textsuperscript{7}

Ferlinghetti’s rearrangement of these phrases advertises rather than conceals the debt to Pound, even as he adds the crucial, and now explicitly self-referential phrase “once more,” and again “once more,” to leave no doubt about the repetition compulsion of his own poem. Yet as Canto 1 will reveal at its conclusion, it too is an act of iteration via Pound’s rendering of Andreas Divus’s 1538 Latin translation of Homer’s Odyssey. Ferlinghetti has repeated the gesture “once more,” while indeed compounding the debt as he steers the poem to its allusive anticlimax where “we” the people

    looked at each other
      with a mild surprise
    silent upon a peak
      in Darien

    silent upon a peak
      in Darien

Just as the absurd “gobbly” jests with Pound’s “godly” sea, so, more subtly, these lines recast the end of a poem by John Keats in which the poet describes a moment of literary epiphany in heroic terms:

    Then felt I like some watcher of the skies
      When a new planet swims into his ken;
    Or like stout Cortez when with eagle eyes
      He star’d at the Pacific—and all his men
    Look’d at each other with a wild surmise—
      Silent, upon a peak in Darien.
(9–14)

This passage, of course, is the sestet concluding Keats’s sonnet, “On First Looking into Chapman’s Homer” (1816), celebrating the sense of discovery granted him by George Chapman’s translations (first published incrementally over the years 1598–1616). The local effects gained by Ferlinghetti’s transformation of “wild surmise” into “mild surprise”—and the implication that “Darien” is no longer Darién, a province in Panama, but an unaccented town in Connecticut (the bland terrain of Corso’s projected marriage)—serve his poem’s wry diminuendo. But the deeper effect occurs within the literary subplot of the

\textsuperscript{7}. “So that” is itself an allusion to Browning’s “Sordello,” a major influence on the following Cantos.
poem, where the complex play of Homeric allusion warps and twists through endless translations and echoes. Ferlinghetti quotes Pound translating Divus translating Homer, then summons Keats to witness Chapman's Englishing of the epic poet.

All roads, all voyages, lead to Homer, evidently. The recursive pattern of epic references in Ferlinghetti's mock-epic poem epitomizes the Beats' appropriation of a usable classical past—one that cannot be, and could never have been, reached directly but only grasped at through a series of precedent acts of allusion and response that chart a course back through other vernacular transformations and new world explorations. Fittingly for this metapoetic theme, the nautical preparations quoted from Homer are those of Odysseus when preparing for his journey to the underworld (Od. 11.1–3). If epic heroes speak with the dead, perhaps it is fair to say that allusions do as well, speaking not just with the dead, but for and as the dead. And although the political satire of “Sailing thru the straits of Demos” is broad and obvious, the Attic made antic, the end of the poem turns to a subtler and sharper purpose, for if we follow the thread of Homeric allusion to its logical end, the satire is indeed deadly: “the strange suburban shores” of America are nothing other than entrances to the Underworld.

As they investigate further encounters between Beat writers and the classics, the essays that follow sketch out a vision of antiquity in which the classical past emerges as an alternative—sometimes inspiring, sometimes dispiriting—to a debased present and as the home of an eclectic array of proto-Beat soul mates. This past is accessed, not only through the canonical authors of the Great Books curriculum, but through assorted intermediaries, including Walt Whitman, James Joyce, and H.D., and Western classical traditions are frequently combined with those of the East—a synthesis that the Beats were instrumental in promoting.

The combined influence of the Great Books tradition and the Beats’ more immediate literary precursors—authors who had integrated aspects of the classical canon into their own modernist projects—left its mark even where overt references to classical sources, such as we have seen in the poems of Corso and Ferlinghetti, are absent. As Christopher Gair observes in his discussion of Kerouac’s debt to Xenophon via Joyce, more mediated references, “filtered through at least one other narrative” are “significant as a kind of classical unconscious that highlights important formal continuities across Western literature” (42). Burroughs, for example, as Reynolds discusses in her chapter on his early novels, shows little interest in directly engaging with Clas-

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8. On the integral role of intermediaries in classical reception, see Martindale 2013, 172.
classical authors, yet his plots follow archetypal quest patterns that have become indelibly associated in Western culture with the Homeric *Odyssey*.

As Nancy Grace and Jennie Skerl point out in their afterword to this volume, a number of Beat writers were drawn to the “mythical method” exemplified by Joyce’s *Ulysses*. Dorothy Van Ghent’s observation in a seminal 1959 article that the Beats could claim a “myth” that followed “authentic archaic lines” gets at this looser, but no less powerful, form of classicism.9 And Richard Fletcher’s account of how Charles Olson identified a significant precursor in Maximus of Tyre, an author whose actual work he found boring and difficult to read, is a reminder that classical influence takes many forms. A modern writer may be responding to ancient figures and cultural practices, or to a broad conception of the classical, rather than to a particular ancient text. In the variety and eclecticism of their dealings with antiquity, as well as in their resistance to the idea of an elite, authoritative cultural standard, the Beats anticipate the critical concerns that have made “The Classical Tradition” an increasingly contested term among classicists—no longer viewed as straightforward and self-evident and now often replaced by “Classical Reception.”10

As we have seen with Ferlinghetti, Homeric epic, and especially the *Odyssey*, was a primary source of inspiration, not only for its mythic motifs of exile, uncharted travel, and descent to the underworld but also as a model for new forms of compositional freedom. The twentieth-century discovery of Homer as an oral poet made him an apt prototype for the modern bard who seeks to speak with spontaneity and performative immediacy. We can perhaps see the unbroken speech of the ancient poet behind the continuous scroll on which Kerouac typed *On the Road*. Ginsberg’s complementary adages—“First thought best thought” (from Kerouac) and “Mind is shapely, Art is shapely” (*Cosmopolitan Greetings*)—together suggest that such spontaneity is both genuine and always conditioned by practice, by the artist’s absorption of past models and forms that have shaped the newly creative mind.11

9. See Dickey’s essay, chapter 1, 15–18, for further discussion of Van Ghent’s essay outlining the Beats’ particular version of the mythical hero—at once idiosyncratic, universal, and firmly embedded in the Western tradition.


11. Burroughs’s Dadaesque experiments with cut-ups and fold-ins could be said to furnish a textual parallel to this creative process, as he recycles and modifies preexisting materials, juxtaposing inherited images, recordings, and words to “make it new,” if only phenomenologically, for the reader, now jarred out of stock responses into a fresh awareness of the textual artifact as something simultaneously derivative and original.
The first three essays in the volume trace the Beats’ redirection of the epic journey across mid-twentieth-century landscapes. Stephen Dickey (“Beats Visiting Hell: *Katabasis* in Beat Literature”) shows how the Beats drew upon the already allusive tradition of epic journeys to and from the dead by such heroes as Odysseus, Aeneas, and Dante the Pilgrim to dramatize their own relationships with their literary predecessors. Examples include Allen Ginsberg’s “Howl,” which maps its tour of postwar America upon a Dantean cosmos, and “A Supermarket in California,” which elegiacally revises the geography of the classical underworld as it depicts Ginsberg’s encounter with the shade of Whitman. Jack Kerouac’s very titles *Orpheus Emerged* and *The Subterraneans* imply katabatic themes, especially as the latter tells its “history of the hip or beat . . . or subterranean generation,” whose members leave their apartments on Heavenly Lane to see films like Kurosawa’s *The Lower Depths* before drinking at Dante’s Bar. Dickey argues that these katabatic motifs were ultimately figured by Beat writers as moments of literary renewal and inspiration.

Christopher Gair (“‘Thalatta, Thalatta!’: Xenophon, Joyce and Kerouac”) pursues a different epic genealogy to a bleaker conclusion. He takes Kerouac’s invocation in *Doctor Sax* of the famous cry “Thalatta, Thalatta!” from Xenophon’s *Anabasis* as a focal point for defining Kerouac’s “Greek Beat aesthetic”—a vision that blends the epic journeying and revolutionary philhellenism associated with both Xenophon and modern Greek history with the modernist outlook of Joyce, whose quotation of the phrase in the opening pages of *Ulysses* was most likely Kerouac’s source. Gair shows how, over the course of Kerouac’s career, the sea itself evolves from the end point of a liberating journey in *On the Road* to the corrupted milieu of a jaded and alienated protagonist in *Big Sur*.

Loni Reynolds (“‘The Final Fix’ and ‘The Transcendent Kingdom Boon’: The Quest in the Early Work of William S. Burroughs”) identifies the epic journey, not as a set of specific allusions, but as a governing paradigm in Burroughs’s early works (*Junky, Queer, The Yage Letters*, and *Naked Lunch*), where archetypes of myth and quest coexist with transgressive, avant-garde themes. Burroughs’s surprising debt to traditional sources—inexplicit or unconscious as it often was—grounds his experimental style in a sturdy framework, even as he deviates from and reshapes this trope to question whether the classical goals of unity and fulfilment can be found within the fragmentation of the modern world.

The next group of essays explores the Beats’ attraction to a very different classical source, the poetry of Catullus, with its transgressive sexual content, satiric bite, and autobiographical stance. As Matthew Pfaff (“The Invention of...
Sincerity: Allen Ginsberg and the Philology of the Margins”) shows, it was by engaging with Catullus's work that Allen Ginsberg was able to counter and critique what he saw as the co-optation of the classics by a cultural mainstream that was essentialist and fundamentally straight, white, and male. Ginsberg's reading of Catullus ultimately allowed him to detach the idea of classicism from the Greek and Latin canon and transpose its authority to alternative social identities and cultural traditions, including those of the East.

Marguerite Johnson (“Radical Brothers-in-arms: Gaius and Hank at the Racetrack”) analyses Charles Bukowski’s close and complicated relationship to Catullus’s poetry through the model of Catullus’s own relationship to his “comites” (companions, tent-mates, brothers-in-arms) Furius and Aurelius, who are at once his companions, his rivals, and the objects of his vengeful mockery. Through allusion, imitation, and parody, Bukowski embraces Catullus as a like-minded precursor in a form of poetic invective that gives voice to feelings of social marginalization and disempowerment and a defensive masculine rage against promiscuous, rejecting women.

For Robert Creeley, as Nick Selby shows (“Riffing on Catullus: Robert Creeley’s Poetics of Adultery”), Catullus was notably a poet who worked in a demanding metrical form and so, in that way, a master of the “beat.” But the formal challenges of recreating Catullus’s poetry in English were echoed in its subject matter, especially given the context in which Creeley’s poem “Stomping with Catullus” was composed (as a bitter and ironic counter to his former friend Paul Carroll’s translations of Catullus; the two had a falling out in 1954 over a domestic squabble). For Creeley, as Selby argues, the issues of domestic breakup, poetic rivalry, restless dissatisfaction, and questionable fidelity all coalesce in his act of translating Catullus.

The next group of papers returns to the Greeks and to the affiliations established by a diverse set of Beat and Beat-related poets with particular lyric and epigrammatic writers. Jennie Skerl (“Sappho Comes to the Lower East Side: Ed Sanders, the Sixties Avant-Garde, and Fictions of Sappho”) considers the appropriation of Sappho by Ed Sanders, one of the major poetic voices of the sixties counterculture and deeply influenced by the Beat aesthetic—we might call him “post-Beat.” Tales of Beatnik Glory is Sanders’s fictionalized memorial to the Lower East Side avant-garde after its demise. The climax of volume two is “Sappho on East Seventh,” in which Sappho appears in a vision to an aspiring bohemian poet, performing the role of poetic mentor, muse, heterosexual partner, teacher, and spirit guide. Sanders foregrounds the countercultural and protofeminist aspects of Sappho’s poetry, Skerl argues, and reimagines her as a critic of patriarchal society—both our own and that of ancient Greece.
Victoria Moul (“Robert Duncan and Pindar’s Dance”) offers a close analysis of Robert Duncan’s “A Poem Beginning with a Line by Pindar,” which reveals the depth, consistency, and structural importance of Pindarism to Duncan’s poetic project. His attraction to, and deployment of, key Pindaric motifs—the dance, the lyre, the bow, the loom—are founded on an appreciation of their productive richness as aesthetic metaphors, as images of a mode of art that is at once something we admire (watch, listen to, read) and something that we (readers or audience as well as writers) create and do.

Kenneth Rexroth’s modernist, proto-Beat poetry was consistently informed by the Greek classics; Gideon Nisbet (“Kenneth Rexroth: Greek Anthologist”) explores the particular influence of the Greek Anthology (a collection of [mostly] ancient epigrams compiled in the tenth century CE). Focusing on Rexroth’s Poems from the Greek Anthology (1962), a collection of his own translations/versions, Nisbet shows how Rexroth transformed these poems in accordance with an aesthetic that could claim ancient poetic continuities but sought at the same time a contemporary voice—free-er, Beat avant la lettre.

A final group of papers presents case studies that bring to light the idiosyncratic combinations of influences—the personal canons—out of which individual poets forged their distinctive Beat practices. Jane Falk’s study of Philip Whalen (“‘A Walking Grove of Trees’: Philip Whalen and the Classics”) highlights the influence of midcentury Great Books curricula on Beat poetic practice; Whalen was exposed to the main texts of the classical tradition in the required Humanities sequence at Reed, and they became foundational for his own writing and continued reading. Equally important was the ongoing interest of the classics to contemporary writers and scholars whom Whalen especially admired, including Jane Ellen Harrison, Denys Page, Robert Duncan, Kenneth Rexroth, and Charles Olson. Out of these diverse influences, Whalen developed his own “New Paideuma,” which was rooted in classical learning even as it incorporated critical views of Western values and sought to break down barriers between Eastern and Western thought.

The fusion of West and East sought by many Beats has been a paramount goal for Diane di Prima, as Nancy Grace and Tony Trigilio show in their analysis of her syncretic, visionary book-length poem Loba (“Troubling Classical and Buddhist Traditions in Diane di Prima’s Loba”). In Loba, di Prima pays homage both to classical epic and to Buddhist practice, and challenges her readers to recognize the twining and twinning of these traditions. Di Prima’s reworkings of classical myth restage female identity as subject rather than object through an emphasis on the female body thriving in its outsider relationship to masculinized religious cultures; the agency of this reborn female
self is, in turn, the essential basis for a truly feminist experience of the Buddhist path to enlightenment.

Finally, Richard Fletcher (“Toward a Post-Beat Poetics: Charles Olson’s Localism and the Second Sophistic”) details Charles Olson’s reliance on Greek writers of the Second Sophistic (the flowering of Greek culture under the Roman empire) to articulate his own wary relationship to the Beats. Olson drew in particular on the travel writers Pausanias and Maximus of Tyre in developing the particularism and localism which underlie his own poems set in Gloucester, Massachusetts, and which he saw as akin to the impulses to travel and see for oneself manifested by such Beat writers as Kerouac and Ginsberg. The cultural belatedness of Second Sophistic writers, and their straddling of local and global identities, made them apt mediators of Olson’s own relationships with the distant past of the earlier archaic and classical Greeks and with the more recent past of the Beats.

Bibliography


