

Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism

TCLC

222

TOPICS VOLUME

Volume 222

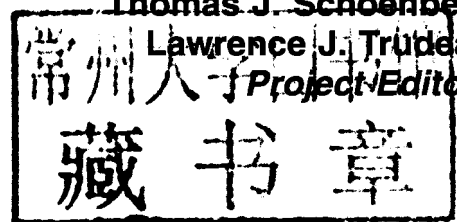
Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism

**Commentary on Various Topics
in Twentieth-Century Literature, including Literary
and Critical Movements, Prominent Themes and
Genres, Anniversary Celebrations, and Surveys
of National Literatures**

Thomas J. Schoenberg

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Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism, Vol. 222

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Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism

Topics Volume

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Preface

Since its inception *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism* (TCLC) has been purchased and used by some 10,000 school, public, and college or university libraries. TCLC has covered more than 1000 authors, representing over 60 nationalities and nearly 50,000 titles. No other reference source has surveyed the critical response to twentieth-century authors and literature as thoroughly as TCLC. In the words of one reviewer, “there is nothing comparable available.” TCLC “is a gold mine of information—dates, pseudonyms, biographical information, and criticism from books and periodicals—which many librarians would have difficulty assembling on their own.”

Scope of the Series

TCLC is designed to serve as an introduction to authors who died between 1900 and 1999 and to the most significant interpretations of these author's works. Volumes published from 1978 through 1999 included authors who died between 1900 and 1960. The great poets, novelists, short story writers, playwrights, and philosophers of the period are frequently studied in high school and college literature courses. In organizing and reprinting the vast amount of critical material written on these authors, TCLC helps students develop valuable insight into literary history, promotes a better understanding of the texts, and sparks ideas for papers and assignments. Each entry in TCLC presents a comprehensive survey on an author's career or an individual work of literature and provides the user with a multiplicity of interpretations and assessments. Such variety allows students to pursue their own interests; furthermore, it fosters an awareness that literature is dynamic and responsive to many different opinions.

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TCLC is designed as a companion series to Gale's *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, (CLC) which reprints commentary on authors who died after 1999. Because of the different time periods under consideration, there is no duplication of material between CLC and TCLC.

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A TCLC entry consists of the following elements:

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- The **Introduction** contains background information that introduces the reader to the author, work, or topic that is the subject of the entry.
- The list of **Principal Works** is ordered chronologically by date of first publication and lists the most important works by the author. The genre and publication date of each work is given. In the case of foreign authors whose

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- A complete **Bibliographical Citation** of the original essay or book precedes each piece of criticism. Source citations in the Literary Criticism Series follow University of Chicago Press style, as outlined in *The Chicago Manual of Style*, 15th ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003).
- Critical essays are prefaced by brief **Annotations** explicating each piece.
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An alphabetical **Title Index** accompanies each volume of *TCLC*. Listings of titles by authors covered in the given volume are followed by the author's name and the corresponding page numbers where the titles are discussed. English translations of foreign titles and variations of titles are cross-referenced to the title under which a work was originally published. Titles of novels, dramas, nonfiction books, and poetry, short story, or essay collections are printed in italics, while individual poems, short stories, and essays are printed in roman type within quotation marks.

In response to numerous suggestions from librarians, Gale also produces a paperbound edition of the *TCLC* cumulative title index. This annual cumulation, which alphabetically lists all titles reviewed in the series, is available to all customers. Additional copies of this index are available upon request. Librarians and patrons will welcome this separate index; it saves shelf space, is easy to use, and is recyclable upon receipt of the next edition.

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Kuester, Martin. "Myth and Postmodernist Turn in Canadian Short Fiction: Sheila Watson, 'Antigone' (1959)." In *The Canadian Short Story: Interpretations*, edited by Reginald M. Nischik, pp. 163-74. Rochester, N.Y.: Camden House, 2007. Reprinted in *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism*. Vol. 206, edited by Thomas J. Schoenberg and Lawrence J. Trudeau, 227-32. Detroit: Gale, 2008.

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The Beat Generation

The following entry presents a critical overview of the Beat Generation, a group of authors and artists from the mid-twentieth century who were known for their rejection of mainstream cultural values. For additional coverage of the Beat Generation, see *TCLC*, Volume 42.

INTRODUCTION

The Beat Generation was a loosely affiliated group of American poets and novelists whose work is characterized by experimental narratives and metrical forms, the use of sexual language and imagery, and an unabashedly honest exploration of their personal experiences. Coming of age in the post-World War II period, these writers rejected the social and literary conventions of the early twentieth century and utilized original forms of personal and literary expression in order to convey their alienation and disaffection with the dominant culture. Inspired by the improvisational style of jazz musicians, the Beats began to experiment with narrative and poetic forms.

One of the best-known representations of Beat literature is Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* (1957), a fictionalized account of his adventurous travels with his friend, Neal Cassady, across the United States. The novel utilizes Kerouac's "spontaneous prose," which was his attempt to record events and thoughts as they came to mind in notebooks without concern for grammar or syntax. Another major Beat Generation writer, William S. Burroughs, experimented with a style that utilized what became known as the "cut-up" and "fold-in" techniques; Burroughs used these methods to randomly place passages of text together in order to form a narrative that would force the reader to approach and comprehend the text in an altered way.

Critical attention of Beat literature has focused heavily on the work of Kerouac and Burroughs, as well as the poets Allen Ginsberg, Gregory Corso, and Lawrence Ferlinghetti. The key themes explored in Beat Generation literature include the oppressive conformity in postwar American society, the looming threat of nuclear annihilation, unconventional sexual and social mores, skepticism toward authority, acceptance of drug use, spiritual awakenings and attraction to Eastern philosophies, and the lure of the open road and abandonment of conventional society.

Kerouac is credited with first using the term "beat" to describe the jaded and disaffected attitude of a growing segment of his generation, which he considered both

"beaten down" by the stifling nature of postwar society and driven by the "beatific" nature of their search to live free of those same oppressive social, sexual, and spiritual conventions. The Beat movement originated when Kerouac, Burroughs, and Ginsberg met each other at Columbia University in New York City in 1944; it gained notoriety, however, with a legendary poetry reading featuring Beat poets in San Francisco in 1955.

The following year Ginsberg's book of poetry, *Howl*, (1956) was published to wide critical acclaim and controversy. While some critics attacked Ginsberg's poetry as obscene, others recognized it as a bold and exciting work that managed to capture the zeitgeist of the era. Unsuccessful attempts to ban both *Howl* and Burroughs's *Naked Lunch* (1959) for obscenity later resulted in important legal precedents for works of literature and freedom of speech. The Beat Generation attracted a great deal of media scrutiny in the late 1950s and 1960s, as journalists were eager to cover Beat communities in New York City and San Francisco, often highlighting the group's liberal drug and alcohol use, sexual exploration, and sense of alienation from mainstream (and thus more conservative) culture.

Over the years the Beat movement attained an iconic status and served to influence many later social and literary movements. Although many early critics deemed Beat Generation literature to be virtually incoherent and pretentious, the appeal of Beat literature has remained strong in subsequent generations. Today it is recognized as a significant and influential period of American literature that has produced a number of noteworthy works of fiction and poetry.

REPRESENTATIVE WORKS

Ray Bremser

Poems of Madness (poetry) 1965

Angel (poetry) 1967

Chandler Brossard

Who Walk in Darkness (novel) 1952

William S. Burroughs

Junkie: Confessions of an Unredeemed Drug Addict [as William Lee] (novel) 1953; also published as *Junky*, 1977

The Naked Lunch (novel) 1959

Neal Cassady

The First Third, and Other Writings (autobiography)
1971; revised and enlarged edition, 1981

As Ever: The Collected Correspondence of Allen Ginsberg and Neal Cassady [with Allen Ginsberg] (letters) 1977

Gregory Corso

In This Hung-Up Age (play) 1955

The Vestal Lady on Brattle, and Other Poems (poetry) 1955

Gasoline (poetry) 1958

The Happy Birthday of Death (poetry) 1960

Diane DiPrima

This Kind of Bird Flies Backward (poetry) 1960

Dinners and Nightmares (prose and poetry) 1961

Memoirs of a Beatnik (autobiography) 1969

Lawrence Ferlinghetti

Pictures of the Gone World (poetry) 1955

A Coney Island of the Mind (poetry) 1958; enlarged editions, 1959, 1968

Allen Ginsberg

Howl, and Other Poems (poetry) 1956

Empty Mirror (poetry) 1961

Kaddish, and Other Poems (poetry) 1961

Reality Sandwiches: 1953-1960 (poetry) 1963

John Clellon Holmes

Go (novel) 1952; also published as *The Beat Boys*, 1959

Nothing More to Declare (essays) 1967

Bob Kaufman

Solitudes Crowded with Loneliness (poetry) 1965

The Golden Sardine (poetry) 1967

Jack Kerouac

On the Road (novel) 1957

The Dharma Bums (novel) 1958

The Subterraneans (novel) 1958

Mexico City Blues (poetry) 1959

Big Sur (novel) 1962

Visions of Gerard (novel) 1963

Desolation Angels (novel) 1965

Vanity of Duluo: An Adventurous Education, 1935-1946 (novel) 1968

Visions of Cody (novel) 1972

Michael McClure

Passage (poetry) 1956

Hymns to St. Geryon, and Other Poems (poetry) 1959

Jack Micheline

River of Red Wine (poetry) 1958

Gary Snyder

Riprap (poetry) 1959

Myths & Texts (poetry) 1960

OVERVIEWS

Fred W. McDarragh (essay date 1960)

SOURCE: McDarragh, Fred W. "Anatomy of a Beatnik." In *Beat Generation: Glory Days in Greenwich Village*, pp. 1-7. New York: Scribner Books, 1996.

[In the following essay, which was originally published in the journal *Saga* in 1960, McDarragh corrects several misconceptions about the Beat writers and elucidates the defining characteristics of the Beat Generation.]

Scratch a beard . . . find a Beatnik. It doesn't even make any difference whether you're actually a rabbi, a university professor, a concert musician, a real, live honest to goodness poet, a grocery clerk, or a bus driver. The beard symbol has become so strong that it doesn't matter what or who you are. If you've got a beard, you're a Beatnik.

This symbol system has become such a "thing" in this country that nobody knows what to believe anymore, perhaps because nobody cares; everybody wants the fake, the phony, the spurious anyway. Here's a classic description of America's Beatnik taken from a major Negro magazine: ". . . Unwashed, bearded, free-loving, pseudo-intellectual, reefer-smoking, nonworking, self-styled artists or writers living in protest of something or other."

Time magazine says Beatniks are "a pack of oddballs who celebrate booze, dope, sex and despair." The same magazine calls Allen Ginsberg "the discount-house Whitman of the Beat Generation." They also call Jack Kerouac the "latrine laureate of Hobohemia."

Time's poison pen sister, another four-letter-word magazine, was perhaps more successful in twisting the pliable minds of Americans. Last fall it published an incendiary piece called "The Only Rebellion Around." It was written by staff writer Paul O'Neil, who is apparently mixed up with fruit flies since he used the expression five times in one paragraph.

Carried away by College Composition I and II, O'Neil opened his remarkably twisted tale by saying: "If the United States today is really the biggest, sweetest end-most succulent casaba eery produced by the melon patch

of civilization, it would seem only reasonable to find its surface profaned—as indeed it is—by a few fruit flies. But reason would also anticipate contented fruit flies, blissful fruit flies, fruit flies raised by happy environment to the highest stages of fruit fly development. Such is not the case. The grandest casaba of all, in disconcerting fact, has incubated some of the hairiest, scrawniest and most discontented specimens of all time: The improbable rebels of the Beat Generation, who not only refuse to sample the seeping juices of American plenty and American social advances but scrape their feelers in discordant scorn of any and all who do.”

The illustration of the “well-equipped pad,” which accompanied the *Life* feature by O’Neil was so funny it was offensive. I happen to know the girl who posed for the photograph. I’m sure she needed the model fee. She is married to a struggling painter. Both are good people who mind their own business. Their two children are just about the most attractive kids anyone could imagine. Nevertheless, in the illustration she is pegged as “the beat chick dressed in black” surrounded by “naked light bulbs, a hot plate for warming espresso coffee pot and bean cans, a coal stove for heating baby’s milk, drying chick’s leotards and displaying crucifix-shaped Mexican cow bells.” The real killer remark was “a beat baby, who has gone to sleep on the floor after playing with beer cans.” You can imagine how that went over in Dubuque.

Gilbert Millstein of the *New York Times* told me, “We’re the innocents.” And I guess he’s right. How incredibly innocent we must be to be not only fooled but also taken. O’Neil’s *Life* article went on and on with cheap drivel, lies, phony stories, misquotes, slander and slaughter of some of my best friends. An apology for a malicious misquote between Allen Ginsberg and Dame Edith Sitwell did not appear in the magazine’s Letters column until seven weeks after the original article was published.

Let me use just one more example of how this erroneous impression of the Beat Generation is perpetuated. Last winter the poetry editor of the *Saturday Review*, John Ciardi, wrote about the Beat Generation as “not only juvenile but certainly related to juvenile delinquency through a common ancestor whose best name is Disgust. The street gang rebellion has gone for blood and violence. The Beats have found their kicks in an intellectual pose, in drugs (primarily marijuana but also Benzedrine, mescaline, peyote, assorted goofballs, and occasionally heroin) and in wine, Zen, jazz, sex, and carefully mannered jargon. . . .

“The Beats wear identical uniforms. They raise nearly identical beards. . . . They practice an identical aversion to soap and water. They live in the same dingy alleys. They sit around in the same drab dives listening to

the same blaring jazz with identical blanked-out expressions on their identical faces. And any one of them would sooner cut his throat than be caught doing anything ‘square . . .’”

It seems clear that the mighty U.S. press has caught on its journalistic meat hook a new scapegoat, a whipping boy, a real live sucker, the so-called Beatnik. It doesn’t matter if the facts are straight, after all, we need a little entertainment anyway. The hell with the Truth and down with the Facts. It’s better to lay it on the Beatniks than to reflect too seriously on the headlines in the morning paper:

Whites Buy Out Gun Shop As Race Rift Widens in Africa . . . City to Intensify Battle on Crime . . . House Expands Inquiry into Federal Power Commission and Gas Industry . . . Child Kidnapped, Abductors Ask \$100,000 . . . Militia Aids Castro in Hunt for Rebels . . . New Haven Asks Another Fare Increase . . . Mistress Stabs Wealthy Sales Executive. . . .

I could go on and on. Allen Ginsberg puts it much better than I can. “Life is a nightmare for most people, who want something else. . . . People want a lesser fake of Beauty. . . . We’ve seen Beauty face to face, one time or another and said, ‘Oh my God, of course, so that’s what it’s all about, no wonder I was born and had all those secret weird feelings!’ Maybe it was a moment of instantaneous perfect stillness in some cow patch in the Catskills when the trees suddenly came alive like a Van Gogh painting or a Wordsworth poem. Or a minute listening to, say, Wagner on the phonograph when the music sounded as if it was getting nightmarishly sexy and alive, awful, like an elephant calling far away in the moonlight.”

What Allen describes here are a few basic necessities of life, the things that make us what we are, Truth, Love and Beauty. As I see it there is very little else in the world that means anything. And this is what the real meaning of the Beat Generation is. This is what the so-called Beatnik wants. The Beat wants his life to mean something to himself. He is looking for an Order. Whether he finds it in poetry, painting, music, plumbing, carpentry, weight-lifting, selling shoes, or no matter what, he must find meaning for his life.

He wants a hero he can genuinely believe in, not like the figure all too frequently presented today, a hero in the form of a professional soldier who won the Bronze Star and half a dozen battle stars, a soldier who carries in his wallet a souvenir photograph of a Red Chinese soldier he bayoneted.

Essentially, it’s a matter of living, of awareness, of sensitivity to nature . . . that single miracle ingredient of life that is present when you stand on top of a hill and face the sunny sky and want to scream at the top of your lungs how wonderful it is to be alive.

The trouble is, most people don't have time for such luxuries of the spirit. They're too mixed up, as Jack Kerouac says, in "hustling forever for a buck among themselves . . . grabbing, taking, giving, sighing, dying, just so they could be buried in those awful cemetery cities beyond Long Island City."

In deciding what he is pursuing, Jack writes, in his fine book, *On the Road*, ". . . they danced down the streets like dingedodies, and I shambled after as I've been doing all my life after people who interest me because 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, the ones who never yawn or say a commonplace thing, but burn, burn, burn like fabulous Roman candles exploding like spiders across the stars. . . ."

I talked to my friend Edwin Fancher about Beatniks and the Beat Generation as we were driving out to Brooklyn to a Methodist church where they were holding a Convocation of Youth. The theme was Man's Strength, Man's Distress. The program consisted of the Beat film *Pull My Daisy*, a lecture on "What Is the Beat Generation?" and a poetry reading by LeRoi Jones, the editor of *Yugen*, which is a pocket-sized literary magazine publishing many Beat writers. The lecture was to be given by Ed.

I first met Ed Fancher at a party nearly a dozen years ago on a snowy New Year's Eve. He was living in the Village and going to the New School for Social Research. He is about 36, a veteran of the war in Europe, has always worn a beard and is a practicing psychologist. Five years ago he started a weekly newspaper in Greenwich Village, *The Village Voice*.

Fancher says that "it is a movement of protest. The Beat looks at the world we live in, everything that is part of our way of life, including finding out what is holy. . . . They live in a world gone mad and no one cares but them. Not only is the Beat Generation interested in intellectual work, they themselves are very social people. It's an attempt to cry out that what we need is a sense of society. If it's necessary to be part of a crazy, offbeat group, all right, that's better than being detached.

"I think the Beats have achieved popularity in America because they correspond to a very deep sense of unrest in America. Americans don't want to think about the real issues of concern; they want to stick their heads in the sand and avoid anything important. They forget that the Beat Generation does feel it's better to have vitality than to be dead at the core like the rest of America. Many Americans are dead at the core and don't know it. The Beats are interested in religion because they live in a society where no one is interested in it. They live in a hostile society and they are struggling to find the meaning of life outside of that dead society."

The religious theme that Ed Fancher talks about was brought up again by Howard Hart. I don't think it makes much difference that he's a Catholic. I've known Howard for about ten years, from the days when the up-and-coming literary set and the *Catholic Worker* crowd used to hang out in the White Horse Tavern and swill down steins of half 'n' half. Howard has been a drummer and has been writing poetry for a great many years. He's the same age as I and is represented in my picture book *The Beat Scene*. Howard says this about the Beat Generation:

"It's an obvious manifestation of the fact that the whole structure of American life is phony. The clothes and the manner immediately call attention to them [the Beats] because they are declaring something which is really a fact and they want to proclaim it. More than protest, there is an affirmative thing there . . . they are really looking for God . . . and after all, God is love. If they didn't have so much of a longing for God in their hearts they wouldn't come on so strong. It's a real search that gives them a kind of right to flaunt themselves even when they haven't got the talent or anything. . . ."

Bernard Scott is another who has some interesting comments to offer. Bud is 31 and is the associate minister of Judson Memorial Church in the heart of Greenwich Village. The church has an adjoining art gallery and sponsors a literary magazine called *Exodus*, which Bud edits. He says, "I always use the term Beatnik to designate a kind of part-time, imitation Bohemianism that was brought up to date with the Beat Generation. The definition of Beatniks rose out of the Beat Generation. It's really nothing more than a couple of dozen writers who helped to define what was happening to people consciously. In fact I remember when I was going to school right after the second war, I was hitchhiking across the country and doing all kinds of weird things. And when the Beat writers came on the scene, I found they were defining me and talking about the things I knew for the first time. They were the articulate spokesmen. I don't associate myself with the Beat Generation in an orthodox, stylistic sense any more, but I welcomed what I saw. They described experiences I knew and they were the first writers to do it.

"When you meet a Beat at a Village party he never asks you what you do because he's not interested in your economic definition. But what you do is one of the first questions you are asked on the outside. Our culture defines people in terms of their utility. The Beat wants to know what you are thinking, what's ticking inside of you, how real you are in your heart, what you've got to say, can you help me see anything, can you turn me on . . . ?"

Somewhat apart from the Beats are the Hipsters, devotees of a philosophy best expressed by Norman Mailer, the author of *The Naked and the Dead*.

I see Norman around the *Village Voice* newspaper office quite a bit since he was one of the paper's founders,

and I frequently run into him at parties. At one party I heard him being interviewed for a Monitor radio broadcast so his comments on Hip were abbreviated:

"I would say that Beat is more idyllic than Hip; it assumes that finally all you have to do is relax and find yourself and you'll find peace and honesty with it. Hip assumes that the danger of the modern world is that whenever anyone relaxes that is precisely the moment when he is ambushed. So, Hip is more than a philosophy of ambition, less destructive of convention than Beat. There is more respect for the accretion of human values. As an example, manners are important in Hip; the Beats say all manners are square. . . . The Beat writers seem to be getting better, more exciting. It may become a very powerful force in our literature. I think the Beat has opened the way to more excitement in our lives. . . ."

Another statement of the Hipster philosophy comes from Ted Joans, the 31-year-old poet and one of the more interesting characters living in Greenwich Village. He says, "I'm a hipster. I'm concerned with the moral revolution in America; revolution through peace and love; we're the richest people in the world and yet we don't have truth and love. It's not what's up front that counts, it's what's in your heart and brain. There is nothing wrong with material possessions. But you should use them and not let them use you. I think everybody wants to conform, but the future of the world lies in the hands of the nonconformists. . . ."

It's difficult for me to remember when I first ran into Mimi Margeaux. Maybe it was at a party, perhaps in a coffee shop. I might have even been formally introduced to her, as unlikely as it sounds. Mimi is 25. She is a beautiful girl, with thousands of friends, has traveled on the road frequently between her home in Chicago and San Francisco, New York, Mexico City, a thousand places. Mimi has been associated with the Beat movement for a long time. She knows all the poets, the painters and all the rest. I was walking down MacDougal Street one day when I met her and asked if she would join me in a beer at the Kettle of Fish, one of the Village's staple Beat haunts. Her conversation was characteristically candid: "There really are two kinds of Beats, people like [Kenneth] Patchen, the jazz musicians, [Norman] Mailer, Jack [Kerouac], Allen [Ginsberg], they're really Hipsters. The Beatniks are younger kids who are taking advantage of the trend. They don't know what they're rebelling against. They just can't get along with their parents so they run away from home.

"I would say I'm a Hipster, but people think I'm a Beatnik.

"The longest I've held a job is about six months. In fact my whole working career is only about a year. Most of the time I've lived from saved money, unemployment, living at home, living with friends, and I was married. . . . I get along."

Then there's John Mitchell, who has a coffee shop called the Gaslight, right next door to the Kettle. For a couple of years the Gaslight has been sponsoring Beat poets reading from their work. Just about every poet in New York has read there at one time or another, and the shop has gained a national reputation. Recently Mitchell published an anthology of poetry called *The Gaslight Review*, which included the work of most of the poets who have read there. John is in his early thirties and is very well informed about the Beat Generation since he has lived in the Village for years and is right in the center of all the activity.

"I've been accused of being a Beatnik," he says. "Maybe it's the way I dress. Maybe I act peculiar and people become hysterical and anything that looks different to them is a Beatnik. Being Beat is really an attitude. I sympathize with these young people. I was raised during the Depression and I can have more fun with five cents than these kids can have with fifty dollars.

"With the Bomb and all, I don't blame these kids for flipping. They're rejecting the incredible mess that the adults have created in the world. Every time you pick up a newspaper you find another corrupt government official exposed. To quote Frank Lloyd Wright, this country went from barbarism to decadence without a period of culture in between. I think the Beat protest is a healthy thing.

"There is a difference between the Bohemians of twelve years ago and the Beats. Five years ago people who came here were rejecting society but they weren't raising hell; they were dejected and defeated. The old-time Bohemians were really beaten down by society. These kids haven't given up. It's a much healthier movement. The Beats aren't a formal movement, but they know what they don't want. They don't want cold wars, hot wars, military service, all the rest. One of the things they reject is a political party in a group. Some good will come from all this. It's a healthy thing and a lot of people are involved. The American people put them down because they're afraid that they don't want change and these [Beats] might change their ways. The last big thing in this country like the Beat Movement was the marches on Washington during the Depression. This movement will be stronger."

I also talked to Jack Micheline, a poet, who is associated with the Beat movement. Jack is in his early thirties and has put in his time on the road, so to speak. I'd call Jack a loner. He has a lot of friends, but he pretty much sticks to himself and his writing, which is a spontaneous, brick-and-mortar, concrete big-city type of writing.

"I want to get away from politics," Jack said. "I might have been politically active but it's all corrupt. I want to see better things happen that would help this country.