

## BOOK REVIEW

*Hip Sublime: Beat Writers and the Classical Tradition*. Edited by SHEILA MURNA-GHAN AND RALPH M. ROSEN. Classical Memories/Modern Identities series. Columbus, OH: The Ohio State University Press, 2018. Pp. x + 292. Hardback \$79.95. ISBN: 978-0-8142-1355-1.

This superb collection of essays offers the first full-scale exploration of “the intersections between Beat writers of the post-World War II decades and the classical tradition” (vii). Beat literature, here, defines an American literary movement that continued in various genre forms into the 1970s. Twelve essays, plus an Introduction and Afterward, cover a long waterfront of literary and cultural history. More details on how the project took shape, along with further theoretical discussion about its “cross-disciplinary discussion and collaboration” (vii), would have been welcomed as a guide for further such studies. The project knots receptionist and tradition threads, with the title siding with *Tradition*, but much of the discussion, outside the softer traces of the epic impulse, is receptionist. The authors gather from classics, English and American literature, and comparative literature. Beat writers—some of whom were exposed to classical texts in Great Books curricula of post-WWII, and some of whom were autodidacts—established the terms of their avant-garde movement by rebelling against the hegemonies of 1950s American culture. However, these stances of potent cultural criticism “appropriated, imitated, revised, and recreated Greco-Roman texts and authors” (271).

The book is grouped into four overarching topics, each in three essays. The first, on epic themes, begins with a perceptive study by Stephen Dickey. “Beats Visiting Hell: *Katabasis* in Beat Literature” takes up journeying archetypes of the epic tradition as found, for example, in Allen Ginsberg’s “A Supermarket in California” and Jack Kerouac’s *Big Sur*. Christopher Gair, in “*Thalatta! Thalatta! Xenophon, Joyce, and Kerouac*,” expands the epic traces to include the *Anabasis* and *Ulysses*; Gair contrasts how “the promises of freedom and enlightenment offered by the Pacific in [Kerouac’s] *On the Road*” (52) are darkened in its nightmarish counterpart, *Big Sur*. Loni Reynolds, in the insightful essay, “‘The Final Fix’ and

"The Transcendental Kingdom," offers a detailed tracing of the "quest" theme in four works of William S. Burroughs. The "power" of this motif provides "a recurrent mechanism for organizing even that chaotic and aberrant experience that Burroughs sought to recount" (57). Through the prism of these essays, the legacy of ancient epic surely now includes the highlighted Beat works, albeit unconventionally instantiated as such.

In section two, Matthew Pfaff, Marguerite Johnson and Nick Selby leave Greece to explore how, respectively, Allen Ginsberg, Charles Bukowski and Robert Creeley appropriate the poetry of Catullus to give form to their revisional lyricisms. Though Pfaff's essay, "The Invention of Sincerity: Allen Ginsberg and the Philosophy of the Margins," becomes overwrought by comparison to the crispness of the companion essays, it interrogates Ginsberg's reworking of Catullus 38 in "Malest." In "Radical Brothers-in-Arms: Gaius and Hank at the Racetrack," Johnson's more class-focused reading explores Bukowski's shared "machismo" with Catullus; at end, this voice of "protest masculinity" suggests ironically a "voice of disempowerment" (111) and the expressionism of the "beaten down" Beat, a contrast to Kerouac's own Eastern mystical ideal of the "beatific." Nick Selby's "Riffing on Catullus: Robert Creeley's Poetics of Adultery" adroitly investigates the poems "Stomping with Catullus" and "The Whip." While Selby's metaphor of the "poetics of adultery" never attains, for this reader, the categorizing power that he invests into it, the multifaceted approach to Creeley's "adulterous" attraction to *and* distancing from the Beat pretenses of authorial "spontaneity" brings to surface a contrarian meta-awareness. In sum, the three essays both tease out the Beat reception of this Roman poet and freshen Catullan studies.

Section three returns to Greece. Jennie Skerl's "Sappho comes to the Lower East Side: Ed Sanders; the Sixties Avant-Garde, and Fictions of Sappho" reviews the legacy of the reception of Sappho that Sanders further reworks in his narrative poem, "Sappho on East Seventh." Sappho, a "poet who disrupts patriarchal structures and hierarchies" (147), visits a graduate student of classics (Sanders himself studied Greek at NYU) and becomes his guide for alternative aesthetics, oral sex and the social value of ethical compassion. Victoria Moul's "Robert Duncan and Pindar's Dance" identifies a host of Pindaric themes in Duncan, whose expressionism in turn speaks to Beat formalism: "long poems of ambitious range and scope, a blend of political and mythological material, a strong authorial voice and [importantly] a remarkable imagistic [poetry school] style" (180). Gordon Nisbet, an expert of *The Greek Anthology*, the 10th-century Byzantine compilation of epigrams, eruditely explores the phenomenon of Kenneth Rexroth's

“translation” of this text. Here, an amateur philologist trusts his own sense of the epigrams’ inner truths free of the trappings of too much dictionary work; the embellished project stages “happenings” in which “a literary classic” eschews the vanilla pedantry of literalism so as to fete readers at a banquet of universal truths. Each essay here succeeds in developing a clear picture of a Beat poet and situating his neoclassical expressionism.

In section four, under the catchall heading of “idiosyncratic combinations of influences,” Jane Falk’s “Philip Whalen and the Classics: ‘A Walking Grove of Trees’” discusses “Whalen’s numerous allusions to classical literature and myth” in his project of integrating the salutary ideas of Eastern Buddhism with Western antiquity in service of a “New Paideuma.” In a helpfully schematizing study, Nance M. Grace and Tony Trigilio take up a neo-Beat epic, namely “the syncretic visionary” *Loba*. Its author, Diane di Prima, is “the most prominent female writer associated with the Beat literary movement” (226) but is linked too to the feminist-revisionist mythmaking pioneered by Alicia Ostriker. The authors trace the strands of Greco-Roman imagery within *Loba*’s much broader palate of worldwide mythology. Richard Fletcher, in “Towards a Poet-Beat Poetics: Charles Olson’s Localism and the Second Sophistic,” discusses the poet and cultural observer Charles Olson. Olson finds the Beat movement’s parallel era in the Greek writers of the Second Sophistic. The shared aesthetic of belatedness marking Beat sensibilities and Plutarch and Pausanias’ nostalgia and “localism” defines a “project of cultural recovery and maintenance,” epitomized in the respective travels of Pausanias’ tour of Greek sites and Kerouac’s trek to the Pacific. The “vital” imperative of such journeying is “seeing things oneself” and using “the road” as a means “to understand layers of history and culture while not getting stuck or hung up on either” (259).

*Hip Sublime* is a fitting title for the project itself, one that effectively clears ground for its project of exploring Beat uses of antiquity. In a format largely free of typographical errors, this study is highly recommended for all Beatnik-at-heart scholars of classical reception, and its individual essays are fitting assignments for many undergraduate courses.

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