

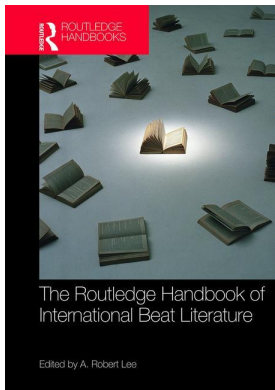
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### Beat Turkey

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## 20

# BEAT TURKEY

## A Belated Influence

*Erik Mortenson*

The Beat relationship to Turkey is a strange one. References to Turkey appear in numerous Beat writings, but Istanbul never hosted a Beat enclave like the ones that formed in Paris or Tangiers. In fact, only two Beat writers ever traveled to Turkey. Peter Orlovsky visited the country in the early 1960s, before reuniting with Allen Ginsberg in India. Ginsberg often talked about visiting Turkey, but only arrived for a much-overdue trip in 1990. Neither of these Beats, however, wrote extensively of their Turkish experiences. While Beat writers were, for the most part, widely-traveled and widely-read, their limited contact with Turkey meant that a chance for a fruitful dialogue and cross fertilization, on both sides, was initially missed. In the early 1960s, many European writers became friends and even collaborators with the Beats as their fame spread throughout Europe, but the absence of visits by Beat authors and a paucity of translations meant that few Turkish writers were aware of the movement when it emerged. Isolated translations of Beat works appeared in the 1960s and 1970s, but it would not be until the 1990s that the Beats and their texts became widely known to a new generation of “underground” writers like Hakan Günday and küçük iskender.

Today, Turkish writing has welcomed the Beats, and while they are certainly not household names, writers like Burroughs, Ginsberg, and Kerouac have begun to have an influence in Turkey. Despite this renewed interest in the Beats and their writing, the temporal and cultural gaps between the post-war USA and contemporary Turkey have helped shape the ways in which the Beats and their texts function. Turkish writers have gotten the Beats as part of a larger reservoir of countercultural writing that has come to be labeled “underground literature.” Turkish writers have picked up on the Beats’ anti-establishment message, but cultural differences have meant that, with the notable exception of the Beat-inspired poet küçük iskender, Turkish underground writing is far more pessimistic than its Beat forebear. And while many involved in the underground have borrowed the conventions of the Beat and countercultural publishing scene of the 1950s and 1960s, here again contemporary needs in Turkey have demanded an updating of the genre. Underground Turkish writing contains a Beat politics and, to a lesser degree, a Beat poetics. But Beat influence in Turkey is a circuitous one, ending in literary work that, while sharing a desire to challenge social expectations, is not always immediately recognizable as Beat.

### **The Underground Re-Emerges**

The reason for this “delayed” reception in Turkey can only be understood in the context of a shift in Turkish culture that occurred after the 1980 coup. Headed by the General Kenan Evren, the coup was designed to curb the unprecedented political violence that Turkey had witnessed throughout

the 1970s. Before this watershed moment in Turkish history dissent was political, with a Marxist left vying with a nationalist right in often violent clashes. Following the military intervention in 1980 that established order and stability, dissent started to appear in the cultural realm for two key reasons. First, government crackdowns made direct political action far more difficult. As Turkish literary and cultural critic Nurdan Gürbilek notes, “Over five hundred people were sentenced to death, fifty of them executed; over a hundred died under torture; thousands lost their citizenship” (2011: 4). Yet at the same time the Turkish government became more repressive, it also jettisoned its state-centered economy and entered the global marketplace. Although Turkey and the Ottoman Empire had previously enjoyed cultural exchange with the West, there was a government push to open Turkey to foreign markets. Along with greater economic exchange came an increased cultural exchange, and a new generation was able to connect with the world, allowing for the importation of Western products and ideas both. With direct political action suppressed, attention gradually moved toward the cultural as the realm for challenging the establishment. The Beats were ideally positioned to contribute to this change, and they emerged as perfect models for this “new” type of dissent.

Yet it is important to note that the Beats were not imported wholesale, but rather were filtered through a novel set of cultural assumptions. In order to understand the influence the Beats have on Turkish writing, it is crucial to trace their initial reception through the concept of the “underground” (*yeraltı*). While isolated Beat poems appeared as early as the 1960s in Turkish literary journals, the Beats’ increased visibility in the culture really began much later, in the early 1990s. Following the easing of restrictions and access to foreign materials in the wake of the 1980 coup, rock ‘n’ roll fanzines began to appear that provided access to information about the Beats and translations of their works. Anti-authoritarian and, in Turkey, usually illegal, these fanzines were the mouthpieces for subcultural youth groups focused around music and poetry that challenged the Turkish status quo, and were in many ways the breeding grounds for the underground Turkish authors and writing that followed in their wake.

The Beats did not arrive alone. Because they were interspersed among other countercultural texts, editors needed a catch-all term to describe this new form of cultural import, and settled on the “underground.” The term, borrowed directly from a Western countercultural tradition, describes a range of countercultural products, from bands like Led Zeppelin and Nirvana, to critical theorists such as Guy Debord, to film mavericks like David Lynch, as well as to other post-war US countercultural writers and figures. In addition, while earlier underground products were exclusively Western imports, over time a home-grown Turkish variant has flourished, drawing on Western models while amending and updating them for a contemporary Turkish audience. While most coverage in the Turkish media dealt with reviews of new Beat translations, two prominent literary journals, *Varlık* (2005) and *Notos* (2011), ran a series of articles by publishers, editors, critics, and underground writers attempting to define “underground” and establish its importance. Two critical tendencies emerged from these dossiers (*dosyalar*): The underground was seen either as a group of texts with “dark” themes, characters, and storylines that transgress established norms, or, as in the Soviet *samizdat* tradition, as illegally distributed clandestine material. Even as underground literature moves ever-more firmly into the mainstream with each passing year, both of these interpretative strategies continue to provide lenses for understanding both the Beats and the underground writing that emerged after their arrival.

### A Shared Challenge to the Mainstream

What draws readers to Turkish-produced underground literature is its description of lifestyles that lie far beyond the norms of society. Turkish underground works are, for the most part, either autobiographical or thinly veiled fictional accounts of their authors’ struggles to live their lives in an underground world of sex, drugs, and other illegal and immoral activities. They are stories of truly marginalized people and more than a celebration of deviant behavior. Though they encounter

numerous problems in the attempt, most Turkish underground narratives embrace the decision to live outside society's strictures. There is, however, ambivalence about the choice—although characters celebrate the freedom to live life as they please, many remain unhappy with this marginal existence but do not know how to integrate themselves back into mainstream society. Thus, Turkish underground literature is in a sense Beat as in “beaten down,” but without the “beatific” sense of garnering a purer knowledge or understanding because of it. Unlike Beat texts that portray such marginalized suffering as ultimately redemptive, the majority of Turkish underground texts present lives that are characterized by struggle. Their power typically lies in the social critique such depictions provide, and not in turning this suffering into mystical understanding or through the hope for a countercultural revolution.

The list of Turkish writers working in the Beat vein is extensive, and a full coverage is beyond the scope of this chapter. But it is helpful to flesh out some of the major players in order to understand how they compare to their Beat forebears. The work of novelist Hakan Günday, for instance, helps to clarify the understanding of underground texts in Turkey. Much like writers such as Kerouac, who chafed at the term “Beat generation,” Günday dismisses the underground label. Yet his works are marketed as such by his publisher Doğan Kitap Press, are sold in the underground section of bookstores, and are almost obligatory in discussions of underground literature in Turkey.

Günday presents deviant characters that go beyond the sort of outsiders normally encountered in the Beat genre. In fact, they are best characterized as sociopaths—they lack pity and remorse, and engage in violence indiscriminately. Evren Karataş, discussing the novels *Kınyas ve Kayra* (2000), *Piç* (2003), and *Zargana* (2002) in his article “Underground Literature in Turkey and the Traces of Underground Literature in Hakan Günday's Novels,” provides a list of characteristics of Günday's characters that read as an apt description of Turkish underground literature as a whole: discord with life, idealizing death, preferring loneliness, not being able to become socialized, protesting against institutions and moral principles, addicted, violent, and against civilization (Karataş 2010). In *Zargana* (literally “garfish” or “sea needle”), the story of a young runaway who is raped by four Algerians in Berlin, the titular character searches for an identity outside even his allotted species: “Zargana, who believed he was not human, was depositing tens of thousands of Deutsche Marks to various bank accounts every week so that he could touch and hear the lifestyle he dreamed of, in other words to reunite with his own species, whose name he did not know but whose existence he was certain” (Karataş 2010: 104). Ultimately, he is able to come to terms with his identity and reintegrate back into society. The novel ends with Zargana leaving Berlin with his girlfriend, the implication being that he will now embark upon a more “normal” life.

Günday's work is interesting because despite this obvious appeal to underground themes such as social deviancy, many critics exclude his work from the underground canon. Given the extensive marketing of his work and its high sales volume, for those who believe the underground should be well hidden and hard to find, Günday is clearly above ground. The highly fictionalized nature of his work also draws attention, demonstrating that underground in Turkey remains closely associated with personal documentary and confession rather than literary imagination. Finally, the fact that Günday's characters typically re-integrate themselves back into Turkish society is a sign that they are not really offering a social critique. They are instead indulging in underground themes but not in order to call attention to the plight of those trapped by social expectations. Rather, they offer readers a chance to enjoy an exhilarating ride into a subterranean world but with the ultimate assurance that stability and sanity will return at the novel's close. Turkish underground writing typically requires a more pessimistic view.

This is certainly the case with another key underground writer in Turkey, Metin Kaçan. His celebrated novel *Ağır Roman* (translated as *Cholera Street* and made into a film of the same name; 1995) chronicles the back streets of Istanbul's Beyoğlu district where poverty, filth, crime, violence, and drugs are a way of life. Providing realistic accounts of the lives of those forced to live outside the mainstream, Kaçan forces readers to confront Turkey's social ills. In the language of the streets, *Ağır*

*Roman* explores the lives of those stuck between the temptations of the big city and the fading morals of the Anatolian village:

The age of electronics exploded in Cholera in all its fury. As the television was considered “the tool of the devil,” peasant women and the wives of religious zealots watched it with fear after they had covered their heads and wiped their houses clean. While they watched the TV calmly with a sigh of relief when there was a female reporter on the screen, they ran away to the kitchen or the room next door when they saw men on it. When their husbands were not home, they secretly watched male reporters through the half-open door and rubbed themselves against the edges of the sofa.

Kaçan 1995: 58

The women of “Cholera Street” are attracted by the new possibilities offered by the city, but cannot break free from social expectations in order to fully enjoy themselves. The young narrator struggles to survive in this world, but ultimately dies by suicide (as did the author himself). *Ağır Roman* provides readers with an insider’s knowledge that characterizes works like Ginsberg’s “Howl” or Burroughs’s *Naked Lunch*. For many in Turkey, this gritty portrayal of lives normally left unseen is the real payoff of underground literature, in both its Turkish and Beat varieties. By providing characters outside the mainstream, issues that are normally muted in the culture can finally be brought to light.

The importance of raising taboo social questions in the Turkish underground is also clearly seen in texts written by the genre’s women authors. The works of Turkish women writers Sibel Torunoğlu, Kanat Güner, and Ayça Seren Ural share with their Beat counterparts a desire to present new possibilities for women by offering works that challenge both gender expectations and the status quo that supports them. These authors have earned the countercultural title of “underground” in Turkey by presenting protagonists that break free from social expectations. However, given gender issues inherent in Turkey, these texts also reveal the difficulties women face when challenging masculine-dominated societies. Turkish underground women writers demonstrate a freedom from social constraint, but their work also reveals the tenacious gender expectations operating in Turkish society. Despite historical and cultural differences, both Turkish underground and Beat women writers share a similar critique of social norms, as well as similar aesthetic strategies in their attempt to portray strong female characters living their lives on their own terms.

A comparison between Beat women writers and Turkish women underground writers is compelling because both groups respond in similar ways to similar social conditions. The work of Nancy M. Grace and Ronna C. Johnson has been particularly useful in understanding the sort of rebellion formulated by Beat women writers. These critics view Beat women writers as representing an intermediary stage between the silent acquiescence of the 1950s and the more radical feminism of the 1960s and 1970s. In their introduction to *Girls Who Wore Black*, these authors explain that

Although it is formally diverse, most writing by women Beats is what second-wave feminists termed woman centered: it takes (mostly white, mostly middle class) women as its point of departure. It focuses on women’s lives and existential concerns in post-war bohemia; on challenging stereotypes of white women’s passivity and sexual frigidity in the fifties; on the liberation of women’s sexuality and self-expression.

Johnson and Grace 2002: 22–23

Beat women’s writing focuses on the difficulties of being a woman in a male-dominated society. But it does so through a portrayal of personal issues and their expression, rather than through appeals to a large-scale social activism. As Johnson will go on to discuss in relation to Joyce Johnson’s *Come and Join the Dance*, such texts make “no claim to address directly the emancipation of women; its corrective discourses are written in a Beat key rather than with the rhetoric that would be familiar from later women’s movements” (Johnson 2002: 70). Though they are distanced in both time and space,

Turkish women underground writers are not offering a re-theorization of women's role in society either. Although they raise a voice of protest as women, like their Beat predecessors they do so individually, and not as part of a larger feminist movement.

Just as the works of Beat women were meant to offer a counter-narrative to post-war gender expectations, these Turkish women writers likewise challenge social constraint in their work. The marginalized, "underground" lifestyle portrayed in these works presents an escape from Turkish social norms prevalent in society that the characters feel are constraining their freedom, mobility, and exploration of self. All three of these writers thus offer a counterpoint in individual expression, with characters choosing to live life on their own terms. Sibel Torunoğlu's *Travesti Pinokyo* (*Transvestite Pinocchio*; 2002), for instance, presents the lives of transvestite sex workers in Istanbul's rugged Dolapdere neighborhood. In her book she discusses the very real physical and psychological problems such residents face, like violence, rape, and abuse, in an unconventional style. Kanat Güner's *Eroin Günceci* (*Heroin Diary*; 1997), as its title implies, describes the narrator's struggle with her addiction. While it provides a sympathetic treatment of the addict, it also involves the narrator's attempts to free herself from the social norms of the culture in order to discover her own sense of self. Ayça Seren Ural's *Pogo* (the title refers to the "pogo" style of dancing associated with punk rock; 2003) is perhaps the more upbeat of this genre. Like Diane Di Prima's *Memoirs of a Beatnik*, Ural expands on her real-life adventures to produce a text that exceeds strict autobiography. The novel presents a world where two females fend for themselves, often resorting to theft and robbery to pursue their desires. Like Beat women writers who felt constricted by a society that expected them to perform the duties of wife and mother, these writers likewise rebel against social obligations.

Despite clear thematic overlaps in their work, establishing the exact nature of the relationship between Beat and Turkish underground texts is extremely difficult. While few Turkish underground writers make direct reference to the Beats, both groups share a desire to explore themes of deviation and social transgression. But ultimately, Turkish underground writers on the whole are even farther removed from society than their Beat counterparts. As Halime Öcal Çoğulu concludes in her study of the genre: "In short, in America, Underground Literature is a literature that is outside the system, but inside life. However, in Turkish literature, it is clear that [underground literature's] social mission is not that well defined and that it remains a much more individual struggle and effort in the society" (Çoğulu 2010: 75). Because the US has more of a history of individual rebellion, deviation from the norm forces one to become an outcast, but that decision still leaves the individual with a position in society and often a rather large network of likeminded "misfits" with whom to associate. Thus, the Beats, although undeniably alienated from society, "beaten" down by it, were nevertheless tapping into a larger post-war current of dissent that would eventually manifest in the 1960s countercultural movement. Turkish underground writing is far more isolated.

The Beats are also not as pessimistic as Turkish examples of the underground. Writing in *Varlık*, editor, writer, and academic Feridun Andaç highlights this distinction between underground as "evil" and as a portrayal of another lifestyle that might hold the possibility for hope:

When I discovered Jack Kerouac, I also got curious about his life too. I found the book *An Illustrated Biography / Jack Kerouac* by David Sandison in between heavy metal CDs in an unusual bookstore in Vancouver ... [In it] you felt that the concept of "Underground" was not decay, that it was the reflection of an outlook that expressed the malaise a human being felt ... in an environment of societal cracking.

Andaç 2005: 14

The assumption in Turkey is that underground literature must be depressing and despairing since it chronicles life on the margins of society. Yet when Andaç encounters Kerouac's life and work, he realizes that it is more of a social critique than a record of despondency. This is not to claim that Turkish underground writers are somehow more authentic or rebellious than their Beat predecessors.

Beat texts, especially in the early post-war, were a direct challenge to authority in much the same way that Turkish writing poses a threat to commonly-held Turkish norms. But the sort of cultural revolution the Beats helped to inaugurate has proven adept at transforming those very texts from oppositional to classic. In a country like America, where teenagers are expected to rebel and undergraduates to discover themselves, Beat texts become a legitimized zone of experimentation. Only time will tell if such a change will occur in Turkey, but at least for now, underground literature does offer characters who directly confront the mainstream and, given the country's current cultural climate, will likely remain controversial for the foreseeable future.

Comparing Beat writers with their Turkish counterparts demonstrates the ability of the spirit of Beat critique to transcend both temporal moment and cultural distance. Turkish underground authors likewise explore a marginalized space that shares many similarities with their American counterparts. By "dropping out" of mainstream society to embrace alternative lifestyles, both groups re-negotiated the roles allotted them, even if that attempt was sometimes fraught with difficulty. The result is a body of writing that chronicles a very similar feeling of oppression and offers a comparable message of determination in the face of social constraint. This shared attempt demonstrates the universality of the countercultural struggle. The desire to explore new modes of living and writing in order to discover a more authentic version of the self clearly knows no boundaries, even if cultural difference ensures that writing which challenges society will never be exactly alike.

### A Turkish Beat—küçük iskender

Despite the increased visibility of the Beats in Turkey and the establishment of a Turkish underground literature "scene," it is surprising how few of these Turkish works actually directly address Beat texts. References to the Beats appear in the work of Turkey's most famous underground writer, Hakan Günday. In his *Kınyas and Kayra*, for example, one character describes himself in a shared diary by comparing himself to Dean Moriarty in Kerouac's *On the Road*. Ayça Seren Ural's novel *Pogo* mentions Kerouac as well, and her two protagonists who travel on the road clearly invoke Kerouac's novel. One Turkish underground writer, however, is self-consciously working in the Beat mode: küçük iskender. This provocative poet is openly gay, flouts his use of alcohol and drugs, is proud of his use of profanity and slang, and is also outspoken about the influence of Ginsberg and other Beat writers on his work. Küçük iskender demonstrates the fascination Ginsberg continues to hold for younger poets looking for a model of freedom in their lives and in their writing.

Küçük iskender has always been something of a rebel. Born Devran İskender Över in 1964, he left Istanbul University's Cerrahpaşa Medical School in his senior year in order to study sociology, only to quit the university for good in his third year. Both times he explained his actions with the statement, "I've learned what I needed for my poems" ("Şiirlerim için gerekli olanı öğrendim"; Doğa 2009). Över published his first article in 1985 in *Adam Dergisi* under the pen name küçük iskender, and since then has gone on to become Turkey's best known, and most controversial, underground poet (Avcı). This rebellious streak is present even in his name. As the poet himself has explained, "küçük iskender" has three meanings. The first references the son of Alexander the Great, or "little Alexander," and demonstrates the scope of the poet's aspirations. "küçük," as little, was also used to designate the pupils in traditional Turkish art, and thus shows küçük iskender's willingness to learn from his elders. The final meaning is Turkish slang referring to the penis, the "little Alexander" or little conqueror (Çobanoğlu 2010: 14). It is this last reference that is particularly shocking in Turkish society, and given the poet's willingness to write in the confessional mode about his homosexuality, makes küçük iskender a highly controversial figure in Turkey.

Unsurprisingly, the Turkish media has taken sides in the debate over küçük iskender's work and his appropriateness for Turkey. The controversy surrounding his reading at the 2008 Frankfurt Book Fair provides an example of the sort of response his actions and his work generate. Hüseyin Kulaoğlu,

writing in the right-wing newspaper *Vakit*, expresses outrage that someone like küçük iskender would be invited by the Ministry of Culture to read at “Turkish Poetry Night.” His article, “This is küçük iskender!” (“İşte Küçük iskender bu!”) seeks to expose the poet for the socially unacceptable nature of his work:

We have found the books of gay-Kemalist Küçük İskender who had been prominent during that meeting. In poetry circles, he is known as “the master of suicides that do not result in death” [...] It has been established that in his books, he makes statements that encourage obscenity, homosexuality, and drug use; that his books titled *Flu'es* and *Methods for Going to Hell* (*Cehenneme gitme yöntemleri*) are full of obscenity and curses with “sinkaf.” The book titled *Methods for Going to Hell* is notable in that it encourages drug use and contains pornographic elements.

Kulaoğlu 2012

Kulaoğlu is voicing a common condemnation of küçük iskender’s work. The poet is attacked for both his life and his art, for being a homosexual drug user who then writes about his personal experience. Kulaoğlu is unwilling to even mention the sort of words iskender employs, instead using the two Arabic letters “sin” and “kaf” to designate “sexual intercourse,” an abbreviation used in official documents and court proceedings to emphasize that a curse includes sexual content. Although the titles mentioned in the article are indicative of the type of provocative language küçük iskender uses, they are chosen for their transgressive nature—“Master of Suicides” and “Methods for Going to Hell” are certainly not going to play well with those on the religious right. Nor is küçük iskender’s secularist Kemalism, which is equated with his homosexuality (“gay-Kemalist”) in order to doubly discredit the poet in the eyes of *Vakit*’s readership. Kulaoğlu’s critique reveals a litany of complaints that are generally heard when the poet’s works are attacked.

Küçük iskender, however, is not a universally maligned poet. He also has a large fan base and a myriad of supporters who view his work as a necessary intervention into the social anxieties that plague Turkey. The left-wing *Radikal*, for instance, came to küçük iskender’s defense. In the anonymous book review of *Sex Party in the House of the Dead* (*Ölü Evinde Seks Partisi*), the author responds,

İskender is the first poet who takes the humiliated and marginalized underground culture of the city and the emotional conflicts experienced in that cultural milieu and makes them essential for his poetry. The various aspects of his homosexual lifestyle are featured in his work. For the first time, an urban discourse that included jargon and obscenity became part of poetry.

“Çoğalmayıp Yetkinleşen Şiir” 2008

*Radikal* defends küçük iskender on two grounds. Against the charge of obscenity, the author argues that iskender’s work (much like that of his Beat mentors) is actually reflecting underground life in the cities, and thus should be celebrated for its willingness to engage the issues and problems of a social sphere excluded from public discourse. Perhaps more tentatively, *Radikal* insinuates that as part of his life and personal choice, the issue of homosexuality is necessary to iskender’s work. Given the Turkish anxiety with overt displays of homosexuality, the author appears reticent about celebrating this aspect of iskender’s work. Nevertheless, küçük iskender and his poetry are seen as raising important literary and social issues in Turkish society, and are thus championed as a breath of fresh air in an otherwise stultifying climate of repression.

Given the issues that küçük iskender raises, Ginsberg is an obvious choice as a mentor figure for the poet. While Ginsberg and the Beats are certainly not the only influence on küçük iskender, they are certainly the most prominent, as the poet himself willingly announces. In a *Lacivert* interview in 2010, küçük iskender responds to the question of Tümay Çobanoğlu, “Which writer from the Beat Generation did you first read and were impressed by?” with the response



Allen Ginsberg. He is an incredible poet ... I had a little New York trip. During that trip I had a chance to see both Allen's and Kerouac's houses, hanging around the same streets that they walked on ... Beat might be the only movement from abroad I envy. Not that I wanted to be part of it, because I belong to this land. But I'd like to have a movement here in Turkey too which is similar to the Beat Generation.

Çobanoğlu 2010: 14

In another article, by the poet himself, entitled "The Strained Comraderie of the Bad with the Good" ("Güzel ile Kötü'nün gergin birlikteliği") in the journal *Sabitfikir*, küçük iskender goes on to explain the reasons for his fascination with Ginsberg. According to the poet, Ginsberg "did not neglect to become one of the most aggressive speakers of Beat generation inside the Buddhism / Communism / Jewish triangle. By adding the strata of sexual freedom, freedom of identity, and the freedom of drugs, he created the most radical language of the independence of the individual" (iskender 2013). Küçük iskender's love of Ginsberg stems from his openness towards homosexuality and his willingness to explore and announce in his poetry all facets of his life, including his use of drugs. The poet is also impressed by Ginsberg's creation of an "independent language" to convey his experience. Küçük iskender is still very much a Turkish poet, but his debt to Ginsberg and the Beats is openly acknowledged.

Ginsberg's influence is undeniably present in küçük iskenders' poetry. For Turkish underground writing, the Beats' social transgressions are usually more important than their stylistic contributions. But küçük iskender is an exception. The clearest example of this occurs in his 1994 poem "Turkey" ("Türkiye"). The poem references Ginsberg's "America" (1956) in both line and theme. İskender begins the poem, "When I have time from boys and alcohol, I think about you, Turkey" (iskender 1994: 189). Like Ginsberg, iskender personifies his native land in order to critique it. "Türkiye" goes on to admonish the country, calling it to task for its various problems in a sarcastic and ironic manner. Ginsberg does the very same in "America," asking his homeland "America when will you be angelic? / When will you take off your clothes? / When will you look at yourself through the grave?" (Ginsberg 1985: 146). İskender translates this into the Turkish context with the query "Turkey, I'm sorry to ask but when will we snap out of it; when will we let go of Cyprus, Turkey and when will we be worthy of the thousands of our revolutionary martyrs" (iskender 1994: 192). The Cypress question mirrors America's imperial designs, and like Ginsberg, küçük iskender calls attention to the "revolutionary" martyrs that typically go unrecorded in a nation's celebration of accepted heroes. "America" works so well because it uses humor to avoid becoming a simple didactic complaint. Instead, the poem forces its readers to see the ridiculousness of the "official" version of America. By drawing on a similar style, iskender's "Türkiye" updates that critique for a Turkish society.

Küçük iskender not only draws on Ginsberg's unique style in "Türkiye," but on his content as well, updating typical Ginsbergian concerns like homophobia and the use of drugs for his contemporary Turkish audience. These issues, along with iskender's use of profanity and slang, are a leitmotif in his work, and they come together in one of the longer lines of his poem that outlines his vision of a new Turkey:

I want sex-shops, a communist party, a Muslim democrat party, a rock party, all sorts of gay bars to be opened; the abolishing of the mandatory military service Turkey, I wanna see Nobels, Oscars, LSD, freedom and cock monuments in this land, I'm returning my share from per capita income so that you can spend it on the changes that I want; evacuate jails, zoos, camps, asylums immediately; I wanna be a traveler who travels around your cities with peace, grace, human rights and great joy.

iskender 1994: 194

It is important to realize the force that these lines have in Turkey. While planning a questionnaire for a study on underground literature in Turkey, my co-authors and I had originally hoped to show this quotation to respondents (Mortenson 2015: 94). When we presented it to those responsible for

hiring the interviewers, they immediately refused to include it. When asked why, they explained that there was real concern for the safety of the staff that would be conducting the interviews. We redacted the extract by cutting references to drugs and “cock monuments” (*sik amıtan*), and withdrew other passages that touched on the sensitive concerns of homosexuality, nationalist issues such as military service, and quotes such as İskender’s that employed profanity. This quotation is indeed highly inflammatory. İskender’s reference to “gay bars” (*gay barlar*) and “cock monuments” are perhaps the most eye-catching (İskender 1994: 194). Homosexuality in Turkey is tolerated if it remains hidden, but İskender’s strategy in the poem (and in his other works as well) is to call attention to and even celebrate a gay subculture that is just now finding its voice in Turkey. The poet hopes to travel the country in “peace, grace, human rights, and great joy,” but that would require Turkey to openly acknowledge and accept the sort of lifestyle that İskender is promulgating.

Küçük İskender is also asking Turkey for the freedom of its citizens to explore the use of drugs like LSD. While drug policy in America has been liberalizing, in Turkey the situation is quite the opposite. Despite the fact that hashish and opium were sold legally in Ottoman Turkey, films like *Midnight Express* (1978) that paint the country as awash in controlled substances, and references by Burroughs to widespread heroin use in Istanbul, the fact is that even alcohol is coming under stricter bans from Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s AK Party. İskender openly admits to the use of alcohol and drugs, and even advocates their consumption. Though he is quick to claim that he is not an addict, it is clear he believes in the benefit of such substances, telling Özcan Erdoğan in a 2008 interview in the journal *Bireylikler*, “For the academic research of poetry, drugs should be in every poet’s laboratory” (Erdoğan [2008]). This aligns İskender with Ginsberg, who advocated the use of drugs for consciousness expansion, and even took to the streets with a sandwich board to question the US government’s criminalization of marijuana. Drug legalization was a cornerstone of Ginsberg’s anti-establishment message, and even into later years the poet remained concerned with drug policy and wrote several prose pieces discussing his personal use of drugs as well as US drug policy and its international effects. With the legalization of marijuana in many states it appears as though Ginsberg’s fight has finally paid off, but küçük İskender is facing the sort of virulent anti-drug and even anti-alcohol rhetoric in Turkey today that characterized early post-war America.

İskender also champions a permissiveness of language that runs counter to the sort of “polite” discourse expected in Turkish poetry. This desire to infuse his work with language culled from the margins places his work squarely in the Beat mode. The poet explains, “Though I used dead words, I also included the words of this century into the literature. I added the experiences of vernacular, pornography, metropolitanism, technology, jargon, subjacent, medicine, contemporary folk who are at the Tigris and Euphrates, different sexual identities . . . I am the first user of many of these words in Turkish poetry” (Erdoğan [2008]). İskender clearly sees himself as a maverick, saying the unsayable things in Turkish culture. Ginsberg, too, faced the same sort of challenges when discussing taboo subjects in a language drawn from the various subcultures chronicled in a poem like “Howl”. Both poets feel that to truly record their experiences in the underground culture, they need to employ the language spoken there. While this strategy brings küçük İskender closer to the sort of poetry Ginsberg and the Beats espoused, it also distances him from many Turkish readers who feel such topics and language have no place in poetry, or even in public discussion.

### Continuing the Countercultural Struggle

In addition to expanding the range of literary themes and offering models for poetic inspiration, the Beats have also influenced the mode in which underground literature circulates in Turkey. One Beat-focused publication continues the tradition of countercultural struggle that the Beats helped inaugurate—*Underground Poetix* (2008–present). Issued by the publishers 6:45, who have published a series of Beat translations including *The Beat Generation Anthology* (*Beat Kuşağı Antolojisi*, 2011), *Underground Poetix* draws on earlier countercultural publications in terms of themes, style, and layout,

but updates the Western alternative press for their contemporary Turkish audience. In order to do so, the editors rely on a punk-inspired, anything goes, do-it-yourself fanzine style. The result is a publication that offers an eclectic stance against the mainstream. The Beats figure prominently, but are also placed alongside other countercultural figures from a variety of temporal periods and geographical locations. Readers can go from Ralph Waldo Emerson to punk rock to Turkish pornography to the Beats in the span of several pages. This “cocktail” of rebellion is meant to both educate those unfamiliar with the countercultural tradition while simultaneously inculcating a shared sense of transgression against cultural, artistic, social, and in some cases, legal norms. *Underground Poetix* places the Beats at the center of a desire to form a community of like-minded individuals who feel that their thoughts, opinions, and beliefs cannot be adequately expressed in existing Turkish forums.

6:45 is also self-consciously promoting the Beats. As the editor Şenol Erdoğan explained in our interview, “Turkey, in every context, politically, literally, and morally, is at the point of explosion, and that creates an interest in the Beat Generation” (Ş. Erdoğan 2010). The Beats function as a potential catalyst that could help crystallize a general feeling of discontent into a serious challenge to restrictive norms. For Erdoğan, the Beats are important not only because they offer a means of thinking revolution, but also because the sort of problems they struggled against are eerily reminiscent of the current situation in Turkey. As Erdoğan himself declares, “America’s 1950s period and Turkey’s situation right now have terrifying similarities” (Ş. Erdoğan 2010). Given Erdoğan’s belief that Turkey is just as conformist today as the US was during the post-war period, the Beat social critique has become as timely as ever.

In order to facilitate the challenge that the Beats pose, each issue of *Underground Poetix* consists of various types of pieces that attempt to provide readers with information and original texts from countercultures both past and present. Although Turkish writers do sometimes make an appearance, the bulk of the material deals with Western sources. By far the majority of each issue is devoted to author profiles, interviews, and informative pieces. The Beats figure prominently in each. Kerouac, Ginsberg, and Burroughs are continually profiled, and their interviews and transcripts translated in almost every issue of the journal. Other Beat writers such as Gregory Corso, Gary Snyder, and Lawrence Ferlinghetti also make appearances, and much attention is paid to 60s countercultural writers such as Richard Brautigan and Tuli Kupferberg. In addition to informative content, *Underground Poetix* provides its readers with access to a variety of original poetry and prose that would be difficult and costly to acquire in the original and nearly impossible to find elsewhere in Turkish translation. But *Underground Poetix* is nothing if not eclectic. The journal presents an array of rebellious and innovate figures, from filmmakers Stan Brakhage and Jonas Mekas, to the sexually provocative photographer Richard Kern, to early forebears like Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau. While this broad range ensures that all readers will find something to enjoy, it also serves to mobilize a disparate constellation of figures into a united front of rebellion.

The editors also promote work from 6:45’s own list of writers, such as Mehmet A. Öztekin’s *Veronica Wants the Pump: A Kadıköy Western* (*Veronica Pompa İstiyor: Bir Kadıköy Western’i*; 2011). This last title, and the litany of male authors covered in the journal, are telling. *Underground Poetix* is mainly addressed to a young, male audience who wants to be titillated as well as informed. Öztekin’s work, with its sexually suggestive title, chronicles the exploits of a vigilante as he attempts to track down the Madam of a gang of prostitutes. Along the way, the unnamed protagonist attempts to save these women by beating them, while reserving his sexual desire for the elusive Veronica. The illustrations are provocative, and the back cover salaciously declares “I got really hard” (*iyice sertleşmişim*). The journal is also fond of including naked women in suggestive poses in almost every issue. This has led to a backlash—Turkish women’s rights groups complained that the first four issues were sexist (Ş. Erdoğan 2010). In response to these complaints, Erdoğan began to incorporate more feminist and LGBT pieces, such as the Riot Grrrl manifesto and space devoted to Kathy Acker, Camille Paglia, Lydia Lunch, and Lady Gaga. Still, this misogynistic tendency is disturbing, and reinforces the often-problematic nature of Beat gender politics (and recalls

the sometimes misogynistic tendencies inherent in the 1960s counterculture itself). Increased attention has been paid in the West to those women and minority Beat writers marginalized from the Beat canon. Although *Underground Poetix* does include some work and portraits of African American Beats like Bob Kaufman and Ted Joans, with the exception of a translated interview with Carolyn Cassady, no Beat women have found their way into the journal's pages. Such treatment reinforces the idea of the Beats as a "boy's club" with women nothing more than the object of sexual attention.

Such gender questions are important, since *Underground Poetix* sees itself as a promoter of the Beats. Erdoğan's championing of the Beats is not just about posing a challenge to a Turkey that he believes needs immediate changes. Erdoğan is also on a crusade to educate his audience about what "Beat" means. In our interview, Erdoğan laments "William, Jack, Allen ... In Turkey, people idiotically put them all on a par. More than anything, we want to break that myth. In Turkey, readers are not able to consider [these writers] as individuals, writers" (§ Erdoğan 2010). *Underground Poetix* sees its role as not only the disseminator of Beat texts that could impact the future state of Turkey. They also believe that they are doing the Beats' literary legacy a valuable service by clearing up myths about the Beats and providing their readers with more detailed, accurate information that will help put Burroughs, Kerouac, and Ginsberg's contributions into the appropriate contexts. In his introduction to 6:45's *Beat Generation Anthology*, Erdoğan lambasts those who lump the Beats in with an array of other American countercultural figures: "half-witted anthology editors become merchants by inserting even hippie generation gurus into Beat literature and publishers encourage them" (§ Erdoğan 2011). The *Anthology*, along with *Underground Poetix*, seeks to set the record straight by providing Turkish readers access to primary texts by these different Beat authors as well as other pieces that seek to explain and elucidate who each Beat was and the sort of role they played in the movement. The press sees itself as both educational and revolutionary.

A comparison between *Underground Poetix* and current Western publications reveals the difference in focus. In the West, journals devoted to the Beats appear more celebratory, or seek to uncover texts and information about Beat writing and lives. "RealityStudio: A William S. Burroughs Community," one of the premier online sites for the discussion of Burroughs's work, is almost academic in its posting of links to archives and difficult-to-find material. Discussions on its site are very learned, often encompassing publication histories, contextual concepts, and biographical data on Burroughs. *Beatdom*, an online journal with its own publishing arm, likewise focuses a more scholarly eye on the Beats. *Underground Poetix*, by contrast, still operates very much in the provocative spirit of the 1950s and 1960s, building solidarity around issues that help to define their alternative, subcultural communities. While issues of social and governmental oppression, alternative lifestyle choices, and the desire for personal expression are consistent with Beat and countercultural themes, the ways in which these topics are discussed become refracted through specifically Turkish situations. The Beats inspire, provide themes, and exhort, but ultimately Turkish writers are more interested in exploring their own issues and concerns, in their own way.

## Conclusion

In a globalized world where many of the problems and difficulties humans face are beginning to look a lot alike, it seems intuitive that forms of resistance will appear to be similar as well. Given that the Beats have proven useful in the past, it makes a great deal of sense that their countercultural message of dissent would be redeployed, especially when cultural conditions seem similar. But writers and their texts are the products of their time. While conditions must be right for a strategy of importing rebellious themes, styles, and authors from another culture to be viable, those works will always bear the imprint of a host culture that will choose and amend them. The lasting power of the Beat critique resides in its malleability. Despite carrying the outward marks of the post-war era, deep down

Beat works are able to strike universal chords perfectly adaptable to diverse needs, ensuring that the Beats, their texts, and their message will continue to circulate as long as there are people dissatisfied with the prevailing state of affairs. This is certainly the case in Turkey, where the Beats and their texts have re-emerged as an important countercultural legacy offering models for writing and resistance adaptable to the needs of the present.

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