

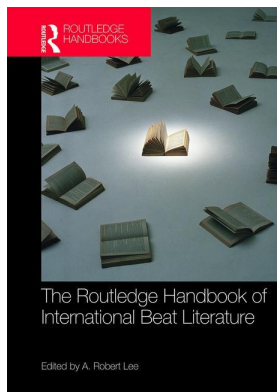
This article was downloaded by: 10.3.98.93

On: 21 Jan 2019

Access details: *subscription number*

Publisher: *Routledge*

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: 5 Howick Place, London SW1P 1WG, UK



## The Routledge Handbook of International Beat Literature

A. Robert Lee

### Beat Britain

Publication details

<https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9781315210278-3>

Luke Walker

**Published online on: 16 May 2018**

**How to cite :-** Luke Walker. 16 May 2018, *Beat Britain from: The Routledge Handbook of International Beat Literature* Routledge

Accessed on: 21 Jan 2019

<https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9781315210278-3>

**PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR DOCUMENT**

Full terms and conditions of use: <https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/legal-notices/terms>

This Document PDF may be used for research, teaching and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproductions, re-distribution, re-selling, loan or sub-licensing, systematic supply or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The publisher shall not be liable for an loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.

# 3

## BEAT BRITAIN

### Poetic Vision and Division in Albion's "Underground"

*Luke Walker*

#### **Introduction: Opening the Beat Floodgates?**

When Allen Ginsberg first visited the UK in 1958, he found that England largely conformed to its stereotypes: fog-bound and emotionally repressed. Audiences at poetry readings were "mild" and "withdrawn," while the English poets he met seemed "afraid to be real & expose themselves" (Ginsberg & Orlovsky 1980: 136–137). However, Ginsberg expressed the hope that his own visit would finally introduce some Beat candor into the British poetry scene. Writing after a BBC broadcast in which he had wept at the realization that he was standing on the "Foggy earth of England's Blake," Ginsberg stated his hopes explicitly: "it will have an effect I'm sure once they broadcast that BBC record, open the floodgates in London maybe, for new feeling in poetry there—it's all so deadened now & insincere" (143).<sup>1</sup>

By the time of Ginsberg's next visit, in 1965, the floodgates seemed to have been well and truly opened. Reading alongside Ginsberg, Corso, and Ferlinghetti at the "International Poetry Incarnation" in London's Royal Albert Hall were Beat-influenced British poets such as Adrian Mitchell (1932–2008), whose poem "To Whom It May Concern" (a.k.a. "Tell Me Lies About Vietnam") received one the evening's most rapturous responses from the audience of seven thousand. In the immediate aftermath of this event, the British poet and artist Jeff Nuttall (1933–2004) felt sure that Ginsberg's prophecy of a Beat-influenced Blakean Albion had finally been manifested: "London is in flames," wrote Nuttall. "The spirit of William Blake walks on the water of the Thames" (Nuttall 1968: 193).<sup>2</sup> Also reading at the Albert Hall event was Michael Horovitz (1935–), who later edited the major Penguin-published anthology *Children of Albion: Poetry of the Underground in Britain* (1969), and whose lifelong mission to nurture a tradition of Beat-affiliated writing and performance in the UK still continues in 2018.

However, beneath the surface of this apparent triumph of Beat transnationalism, multiple tensions can be identified, which make definitions and discussions of British Beat literature more problematic than they at first appear. I am by no means the first to identify these problems. Having questioned "almost forty" British poets who had some connection to the counterculture of the 1960s, R. J. Ellis found that the vast majority declined to accept the label "Beat," a refusal Ellis highlights in his own scholarship by "separating the words *British* and *Beat* with a slash: *British/Beat*" (Ellis 2012: 145). Daniel Kane meanwhile has used *Wholly Communion*, Peter Whitehead's 1965 film of the Albert Hall event, as a lens through which to view the topic, but his downbeat conclusions about Beat transnationalism in general, and British Beat writing in particular, are apparent from the title of his article: "*Wholly Communion*, Literary Nationalism, and the Sorrows of the Counterculture" (Kane 2011).

Finally, in an earlier essay on Ginsberg's own "British" poems, I highlighted the tensions implicit in Ginsberg's appropriation of "England's Blake" as the lodestar of the American Beat movement, and argued that these tensions could be seen as an extension of the ambiguous approach to (inter)nationalism already encoded in Blake's Albion myth (Walker 2013). It will also be apparent in the present essay that the term "Albion," along with references to Blake himself, are important signifiers within British Beat literature.

While I will avoid repeating the scholarship mentioned above, it seems appropriate to begin by looking at various aspects of the 1965 Albert Hall poetry reading, including the issues it highlights surrounding the term "British Beat," before going on to consider how the term might nonetheless be usefully applied to various strands of countercultural writing and performance in the UK.

### Beat Impressions and Transatlantic Tensions

For many of the British poets who participated in the International Poetry Incarnation, the event was a transformative experience, both for them personally and as an indicator that "the Sixties" had arrived in Britain. Spike Hawkins (1943–) remembers his own journey onto the stage as akin to a rebirth:

Pete Brown and Horovitz ... took me down to this tunnel and it was very badly lit, and suddenly this lid went up and I found myself with the light of the world upon me, and thousands of people, just coming out of this little hole in the ground onto the stage. I felt this must be some sort of metaphor. I was totally astounded by it.

Green 1998: 72

Horovitz himself, in the lengthy "Afterwords" essay which concludes the *Children of Albion* anthology, remembers how:

poem after poem resonated mind-expanding ripples of empathy – uncut and precious stones in a translucent pool. The buds of a spreading poetry internationale, the esperanto of the subconscious sown by dada & the surrealists & the beats bore fruit – a renewal of light, of 'the Holy Word / That walk'd among the ancient trees' – made flesh.

Horovitz 1969: 337

While Horovitz here celebrates the influence of the European Surrealists and English Blake alongside the American Beats, he soon makes clear that this "renewal of light" would have been impossible without the shamanic figure of Ginsberg, the "arch-celebrant with flowing beard ... opening our mouths, hearts and minds; navigating our course in the persona of a too-long exiled biblical prophet" (338–339).<sup>3</sup>

As we will see shortly, this trio of Hawkins, Horovitz, and Brown (1940–) were among those British poets who, in the early 1960s, had been keenest to adopt the Beat mantle. Therefore for these poets, and others involved with Horovitz's *New Departures* publications and performances, the International Poetry Incarnation represented the culmination of their efforts to shape the UK poetry scene in the Beat mold, and seemed to confirm that their vision of the rebirth of Albion was attainable.

However, not all the British poets who read at the Albert Hall on June 11, 1965 shared this view. Christopher Logue (1926–2011) was slightly older than many of the other British poets (and therefore closer in age to the Americans), but he seemed to tick all the right boxes for inclusion in a British Beat canon. He had served time in prison for his role in an anti-nuclear protest, released an album of jazz poetry, and would later have his poetry adopted as lyrics by popular musicians including Joan Baez. He had also spent much of the 1950s in Paris, where he worked with his friend Alexander Trocchi (1925–1984) on the literary journal *Merlin* and wrote a pornographic novel for Olympia

Press. Despite these credentials, Logue remained highly skeptical of the significance of the event at which he had performed. According to Logue, the popular claim that it had been a “gathering of the tribes” was simply “rubbish,” and while he found the audience “more interesting than the performers,” he also complained that most of those who attended were insufficiently committed to poetry (Green 1998: 70, 73). Indeed, Logue extended his criticism to cover the whole Beat oeuvre: “I find Ginsberg’s writing sloppy ... it just goes on and on and on” (Green 1999: 34). Michael Horovitz responded by pointing out that “on the one hand [Logue] was mocking us, but on the other he clearly wanted to be on the bill”; he had allegedly threatened to “come and throw bad eggs otherwise” (Green 1998: 70). In fact, Logue was among the better-known poets on a bill that was widely criticized for containing too many unknown British names. Even Alexis Lykiard’s introduction to the *Wholly Communion* companion anthology conceded, “Maybe there should have been fewer poets” (Whitehead 1965: 7).

Most significantly, Ginsberg himself had serious doubts about the quality of work on offer from the British poets whom he had earlier so deliberately set out to inspire. In his wide-ranging *Paris Review* interview—conducted in the UK, several weeks before the Poetry Incarnation—he complained that the desired shift in British attitudes had still not taken place, either amongst the populace or its poets: “The dimness of their speech and the lack of emotional variation is parallel to the kind of dim diction and literary usage in the poetry now” (Ginsberg 2001: 19). In particular, he castigated British poets for not taking advantage of the variety of regional tones and dialects available, which were “not being used like in America—I think it’s just that British poets are more cowardly” (20). Crucially, Ginsberg made it clear that he was not only talking about the dry “Movement” poetry of the period: “even the supposedly avant-garde poets ... write, you know, in a very toned-down manner” (20).

The timing of Ginsberg’s criticism, and the interest he showed in the potential for regional differentiation within British poetry, are both important here. Despite his impatience at the rate of change, the specific mention he makes of the Liverpool and Newcastle accents (Ginsberg 2001: 19–20) suggests that he was already aware of the fledgling alternative poetry scenes in these northern cities. In the weeks between the interview and the Incarnation, Ginsberg visited both cities, staying with poets Tom Pickard (1946–) in Newcastle and Brian Patten (1946–) and Adrian Henri (1932–2000) in Liverpool, and drawing inspiration from these visits as he composed “Who Be Kind To,” which he premiered at the Albert Hall. In Liverpool he interpreted the vibrant music scene as an awakening of Blake’s mythical Albion: “the boom bom that bounces in the joyful bowels as the Liverpool Minstrels of Cavernsink / raise up their joyful voices and guitars in electric Afric hurrah for Jerusalem” (Whitehead 1965: 14). His visit also led him to make the famous pronouncement that Liverpool was “at the present moment the centre of consciousness of the human universe.” It is significant that this quote was first published in Edward Lucie-Smith’s introduction to *The Liverpool Scene* (1967: 15), an anthology which, along with *The Mersey Sound* (also 1967), popularized the work of the “Liverpool Poets,” Henri, Patten and Roger McGough (1937–). Therefore not only did Ginsberg’s Liverpool visit provide inspiration for these poets, but his “centre of consciousness” pronouncement became—whatever Ginsberg’s original intentions—a commercially valuable endorsement of their work.<sup>4</sup>

However, while Ginsberg’s glimpses of an awakened Albion gave rise to the ecstatic and compassionate visions of universal brotherhood expressed in “Who Be Kind To” and the jointly-authored Albert Hall “Invocation” (in Whitehead 1965: 9), he continued to privately cast doubt on the ability of the Beat-influenced British poets who had performed alongside him. There had been, he claimed, “too many superficial bards who read tinkly jazzy beatnick style poems” (Miles 2003: 61).<sup>5</sup> Nor was he the only American participant who felt this way; Corso shared Ginsberg’s “disappointment” with “the poets he met who styled themselves ‘Beats’” (Sinclair 2006: 46), and Ferlinghetti had apparently made similar comments during an earlier visit to England (Ellis 2012: 146).

From the perspective of some of the British poets, it seemed that there was a certain amount of bias involved in this harsh transatlantic judgement of their work. Although Michael Horovitz continues to be one of the most enthusiastic public promoters of Ginsberg’s vision and legacy in the

UK (see e.g. *Great Lives* 2013), his description of Ginsberg's attitude during the organization of the International Poetry Incarnation is less than flattering:

We decided to have a bigger reading, and Ginsberg said, "Yes, let's bring together you English assholes." There was a lot of conflict and Ginsberg somewhat resented the fact that we'd made our own scene and worked differently and he was rather competitive.

Green 1998: 67

There is an obvious discrepancy here between Horowitz's assertion that Ginsberg disapproved of the British Beats because they had their "own scene" and "worked differently," and Ginsberg's own suggestion that the problem was insufficient originality. At its core therefore, this disagreement reveals the fundamental issues at stake in any discussion of "British Beat Literature" (or indeed "International Beat Literature"). How do we identify British Beat writing, and what distinctive elements might characterize this phenomenon, beyond imitation of American models? In what ways does British Beat writing "work differently"?

In answering these questions, we need to be alert to the dynamics of American cultural dominance in the post-war years, and the way in which this cultural presence operated on both mainstream and "underground" British culture. In Daniel Kane's reading of *Wholly Communion*, this becomes the primary message of the film, and perhaps of the Albert Hall event itself; it is "about the difficulty in trying to forge a community-oriented, internationalist, hierarchy-free counterculture" (Kane 2011: 106). Furthermore, while Kane largely agrees with Ginsberg's aesthetic judgement of England's "superficial bards," he also highlights the "highly problematic" way in which the American Beats "saw no contradiction in positioning themselves as antiestablishment figures while maintaining a marked patriotism that distinguished them from their more internationalist peers" (105).

Therefore while it is not my own intention to characterize all British Beat writing as stymied by its relationship with America, it is clear that there was at least a potentially unhealthy dynamic in the transatlantic relationship. In the words of British poet Tom Raworth (1938–2017), simply trying to imitate the American Beats is "like tossing the quarter bottle of whiskey out of the Mini as you drive down the M6—it doesn't work at all" (Sheppard 2005: 42). However, while Raworth claims that this is exactly the trap that some "English sub-beat poets" fell into (42), I want to argue firstly that British Beat writing is capable of a self-conscious (and productive) awareness of the dynamics of the transatlantic Beat relationship, and secondly that this is just one of a number of distinctive themes and modes within British Beat writing, by which it both allies itself with and distinguishes itself from American Beat literature.

### **"The tunnel ... in which all our voices echo"**

To anyone who watches Whitehead's *Wholly Communion*, it is obvious that there was at least one Beat-influenced British performer at the Albert Hall whose poetry was anything but "tinkly jazzy": Harry Fainlight (1935–1982). The viewer must surely also agree with both parts of Jeff Nuttall's succinct comment that "Fainlight was the star by default. He got pilloried" (Green 1998: 69). Nuttall is referring to the absurd and difficult circumstances in which Fainlight attempted to read his long, dark poem "The Spider" (inspired by an LSD trip taken while visiting Ginsberg in New York) and his shorter poem "Larksong." During both poems, Fainlight was interrupted by heckles from the audience, most notably the loud, mescaline-inspired shouts of "love!" and "come man come!" which emanated from Dutch poet Simon Vinkenoog, who was seated directly in front of the stage. The resultant mix of sounds, images and emotions makes for fascinating and painful viewing: Vinkenoog's ecstatic but antisocial interjections, Fainlight's obvious vulnerability and awkwardness as he insists on completing the reading as planned, and the sympathetic voice of Alexander Trocchi attempting to bring order to the proceedings.<sup>6</sup> Another significant aspect of the scene is the drunken, amorous,

controlling presence of Ginsberg himself; as Kane puts it, the “denouement to this thrilling, disastrous reading was Allen Ginsberg pulling poor, wounded Fainlight onto his lap” (Kane 2011: 119).<sup>7</sup>

However, at the center of all this lies Fainlight’s intense and brilliant poem, “The Spider.” The circumstances in which it was most famously read, and the perceived trauma experienced by Fainlight—“it haunted him for the rest of his short life,” says Horovitz (Green 1998: 72)—has meant that the poem itself has rarely been given the attention it deserves. When mentioned at all, it is usually characterized simply as a disturbing vision of the paranoia that accompanies a bad trip, which is set in motion by the speaker noticing a “thread of spider’s web hanging from the ceiling” in the first line. But Fainlight’s poem, largely written in long paragraph-like blocks of prose, is also darkly funny, its black humor deriving in part from the cruel self-awareness of the poet’s acid-infused mind as it performs creative somersaults and ties itself in knots, struggling to discover and communicate meaning:

But, Jesus that was a thought I almost never came back from. That almost left me out on some safari-in-which-so-many-things-have-been-forgotten-that-whatever-I-am-trying-to-remember-is-getting-no-nearer-than-these-lips-breaking-out-on-the-backs-of-my-hands. [...]

OH-THE-NIAGRAS-OF-TURNED-OUT-DRAWERS-I-AM-SEARCHING-THROUGH-FOR-THIS [...]

oh everything impossible now to say – a whole gang of cowardly ironies beating up the few words I might have used, myself just watching idly by.

Whitehead 1965: 45

At the same time as this struggle for meaning, the poem tells the absurd, Burroughsian story of the tripping poet’s metamorphosis into a spider, a process of identity formation which is both intensely sexual and also involves an unexpected fluidity of gender: “The lovely shame of knowing myself deep in my heart an adorable young female spider” (45). Another distinctive feature of the poem is that when the language threatens to become too flowery or obtuse (“mutated by this new hallucogenic [sic] vitamin which I hereby christen SPIRITLECT”), Fainlight (or his tripping consciousness) finds ways to burst this bubble with self-mockery: “A couple of hefty spider sisters brush past lugging in another dead academician” (46). (In the Albert Hall reading, this is the line where Vinkenoog’s interruptions begin, seemingly echoing the tone of mockery which is already present in the poem itself.)

In the final section of “The Spider,” another theme emerges, that of Fainlight’s own relationship (literary and sexual) with Allen Ginsberg, and now this intensely self-aware poem seems to make reference (in paranoid fashion) to the poetic dominance of Ginsberg: “So now we’re all in here at last together [...] going into the tunnel which is your bravery allen and in which all our voices echo, suddenly sinisterly” (47). Thus the poem can be interpreted as dramatizing not only the relationship between Fainlight and Ginsberg, but also between British Beat poets and their American models, a relationship of dominance and submission which seems “suddenly sinister,” and which is only accentuated by the circumstances of the reading at the International Poetry Incarnation. Significantly, this interpretation of the poem—as a comment on the power dynamics between Ginsberg and his protégés—is apparently shared by Michael Horovitz: “Fainlight is going on about ‘My heart is an oven baking spiritual bread / Come and eat of your fellow children,’ rather attacking Ginsberg, as if he were making concentration camps for consciousness” (Green 1998: 71). (Horovitz is quoting lines which follow on from the passage just cited).

Fainlight’s poem therefore seems to fulfil Ginsberg’s request, expressed seven years earlier, that English poets should learn “to be real & expose themselves,” but the Beat characteristics of “The Spider” are derived not only from its extreme emotional and psychological candor, but also from the way in which Fainlight makes his difficult relationship with his Beat models explicit, self-consciously dramatizing the echo of his own voice in “the tunnel which is your bravery allen.” The poem’s strong queer aesthetic (rare within British Beat writing), and its attention to dualities of mind and body, spirituality and sexuality, are also classically Beat. Thus the final part of the poem contains

the following lines, combining thematic and tonal qualities of both Ginsberg and Burroughs: “The lightbulb is staring at me like some Deva’s asshole—its rays just aching to be spread; to be opened out into some huge, gruesome Vision of the Universe which common decency rightly forbids” (Whitehead 1965: 47). As Nuttall argues, “The Spider” has much in common with Ginsberg’s “The Change” (composed in 1963 and also read at the Poetry Incarnation) in its concern with the problematic nature of individual identity and its focus on the embodied mind; as such, the reading of these poems at the Albert Hall “laid the ghost of our previous sickness” as they met “the projected spectres of torment face-to-face” (Nuttall 1968: 192–193).

Another British writer whose poetry and prose gains Beat credibility through its self-aware dramatization of the encounters between writers from the British and American underground is Iain Sinclair (1943–). Slightly younger than Fainlight, Sinclair was neither present at the International Poetry Incarnation nor included within Horovitz’s *Children of Albion*; perhaps for this reason he is not mentioned as one of Ellis’s potential “British/Beats.”<sup>8</sup> Sinclair’s first major poetic publications were *Lud Heat* (1975) and *Suicide Bridge* (1979), works whose Blakean content and Burroughsian interest in esoteric conspiracy clearly signal their Beat affiliations. More recently he has become well known for his novels and works of non-fiction, which have brought the practice of “psychogeography” (first proposed by the Situationists) into broader public awareness. However, like Fainlight, Sinclair also draws on his history of personal contact with American Beats; these encounters are the subject of his 1967 film *Ah! Sunflower*, and the linked 1971 book *The Kodak Mantra Diaries*. While ostensibly a short documentary and diary, the artistic character of both works mean that (like Whitehead’s *Wholly Communion*) they deserve to be treated as British Beat productions in their own right.

A passage in *The Kodak Mantra Diaries*, recording Sinclair’s attempts to film Ginsberg at the 1967 London “Legalise Cannabis” rally, provides a gently satiric insight into the low status of British countercultural poets in relation to their American Beat models, but does so with the self-conscious awareness that Sinclair himself was (at the time of writing and filming) an even more completely unknown figure:

Adrian Mitchell is bawling out a long & inaudible poem. Nobody listens. He screams at the sky. Brian Patten whispers a short poem. Nobody listens to him either. The sound system has failed again. People wander backwards and forwards. Nobody wants to freeze. They all think it must be happening somewhere else.

Ginsberg arrives late [...]. The crowd parts before him. They are ready for a handout of loaves and gefilte fish. [...]

Ginsberg climbs down, to walk among the people. I go after him, waiting my chance.

Sinclair 2006: 13

While the primary targets of Sinclair’s satire at first appear to be Mitchell and Patten, literally unable to make themselves heard or even noticed in front of a crowd which has eyes and ears only for Ginsberg, it soon becomes clear that Ginsberg—the-messiah is also a target, and finally that there is an element of self-mockery here too; Sinclair is no different to the rest of the subservient crowd, waiting for his audience with this Beat prophet who “walk[s] among the people.”

A similar awareness of the complex relationship between the much-mythologized American heroes at the center of the Beat canon and those whom A. Robert Lee has called Beat “outriders” (Lee 2010) is also present within Sinclair’s much later poem “talking with carolyn,” which dramatizes a conversation with Carolyn Cassady in London, some time after the publication of her memoir *Off the Road* (1990). In this short, bitter-sweet poem, Sinclair displays a self-conscious pride at Cassady’s indication that both are “comrades in a revolution / that had been decisively defeated”; in the final lines, Sinclair finds himself “shocked to be lifted / from the safety of myth” (Oliver, Riley, & Sinclair 1996: 99; see also Sinclair 1996 on this meeting).

## The Way-Stations of Beat Britain

Amongst the transatlantic tensions I have just outlined, it is possible to discern a number of reasons why, as R. J. Ellis discovered, the majority of those who might be called British Beats have been reluctant to self-apply this term. Some, like Adrian Mitchell, were especially strident in their denial: “Forget about British ‘beats’ ... none of us were that” (Ellis 2012: 146). However, a small number of British poets have been happy not only to describe themselves as Beats, but also to use the term as a shared identity for all those within the British poetry scene of the early 1960s who felt drawn to American Beat writing and culture. Thus Steve Sneyd (1941–) describes “a kind of family feeling” among groups of poets “who went around together, who thought of each other as fellow Beats ... fellow exiles from America ... who felt they belonged in San Francisco” (*Kaleidoscope* 1991). Although Sneyd had in fact spent part of his childhood in America, there is obviously a certain amount of self-ironizing humor in his description of British poets “who felt they belonged in San Francisco.” However, despite Tom Raworth’s satiric comment about “English sub-beat poets” tossing whisky bottles out of a Mini, it is clear that for a group of British poets centered around Michael Horovitz and Pete Brown, the early 1960s were spent incessantly traveling up and down the UK, “hitch-hiking around the way-stations of the beat existence” as Jonathon Green has described it (Green 1999: 39). The purpose of this circuit was to meet fellow Beat-inspired poets and musicians—in London, Oxford, Bristol, Liverpool, Newcastle, Edinburgh, and elsewhere—and compose, perform, and share poetry, which was then published in small poetry magazines like Horovitz’s own *New Departures*. Spike Hawkins nostalgically recalls “a complete network of people, virtually penniless, traveling to and fro as they spread the word, bringing out new literature, new poems, prose, books” (Green 1998: 21). Whatever the objections to the idea of “British Beat,” it seems churlish not to describe the activities of this group as quint-essentially Beat, or to admire their dedication, both to experimental writing and to the ideal of an inclusive, performance-based poetry scene; crucially, this often also involved jazz music, played by themselves or others.

Although the first issue of *New Departures*, published in 1959, contained short excerpts from Burroughs’s *Naked Lunch* (the first to be published in the UK), Horovitz did not initially align himself with the Beats: “I recognized their involvement with and adaption of jazz and admired that, but I disliked most of the poetry and I rather attacked the beat movement in an editorial in the first *New Departures*” (Green 1998: 8). Horovitz however quickly acknowledged that these early objections mostly stemmed from “the usual late teenage/young man’s competitiveness” (8), and by the time he published the second issue of *New Departures* he had embraced Beat writing with the passion of a convert. It is however significant that his passions for jazz and for William Blake pre-dated this conversion, both influencing his interest in the Beats, rather than vice versa. For Horovitz, jazz was the “sacred river, ... underground movement, living mythology and international language of our upbringing: which addressed its primal messages to the whole world – & through which all could speak” (Horovitz 1969: 328–329).

And while the founding of *New Departures* coincided with Horovitz abandoning a postgraduate thesis on Blake at Oxford, he never abandoned Blake: “I thought that the real work was to make poetry and to realise visions, in the way Blake realised Jerusalem by putting his work together” (Green 1998: 7). The next step, as he explained in “Afterwords,” was his discovery that writing and publishing words on a page were not sufficient to realize this Blakean Jerusalem:

*New Departures* was a preview of life ... only half alive on the pages. Its ‘travelling circus incarnation’ – ‘Live New Departures’ – soon came naturally ... Ideally there would be no admission charge. The work freely given – out of doors whenever possible – a Blakeheaded *commedia del’ arte* – eliminating the fashionably vaunted gap between art and life, revelling in the extra-mural winds of change ... We went on the road in spontaneous accord, to revive the oral traditions by which the world had resounded through the ages – long before the



Gutenberg Galaxy began spinning its webs of obliquity: Beauty's speech was restored to the poet's mouth!"

Horovitz 1969: 321–323

Horovitz dates the beginning of "Live New Departures" to 1961, when "the nucleus of my basic poets' team" was formed by Pete Brown and Adrian Mitchell (Green 1998: 19). For Mitchell, the significance of this "circus for poets" lay not in the disputed term "Beat," but in the democratization of poetry; it would eventually lead to "a huge explosion of poetry readings in this country," finally allowing Mitchell to let go of his oft-repeated dictum that "most people ignore poetry because most poetry ignores most people" (Mitchell n.d.). However, in the same interview, Mitchell also admits that in this early sixties period he was still wedded to rather an "uptight" form of poetry, and credits Allen Ginsberg with advising him in 1964 to "listen to the rhythms in your own voice'... the best advice I had."

If Horovitz's "circus for poets" officially began in 1961, its origins lay a year earlier, when a number of Beat-inspired poets met at the Beaulieu Jazz Festival. This annual festival was held in the genteel setting of Lord Montagu's New Forest estate, but the media frenzy which followed a "riot" by drunken young jazz fans at the 1960 event made it a forerunner of later rock festivals. Jeff Nuttall claims that "the beats ran amok with fire and water" (Green 1999: 130), but it is unclear whether any of the poets were actually involved in the disorder. However, the event demonstrates the centrality of jazz to British Beat and countercultural history, and it was at this tumultuous 1960 festival that Horovitz and Brown first encountered one another, a scene remembered by Liverpool-based Irish poet Johnny Byrne (1935–2008) as "almost like Stanley and Livingstone meeting. We all recognised kindred spirits and had long sort of jazzy, druggy conversations, all-night rapping, just as in the books" (Green 1998: 18). The hint of Beat colonialism in Byrne's reference to "Stanley and Livingstone" is continued in his recollection that after the festival, "[Spike] Hawkins, [Mal] Dean and I, and Horovitz and Brown decided to split the country, rather like the Popes decided to split Europe between Avignon and Rome. Hawkins and Byrne would have everything north of Stafford, and Horovitz and Brown would have everything south" (Green 1999: 131).

Both Byrne and Hawkins remember how this small group of hitch-hiking Beats would leave messages for each other attached to a particular lamp-post near a roundabout on the A5 trunk road, "saying where we had gone to or where we were going":

It went on like that, a bit of an English *On the Road*. There was this circle around which one wandered ... London was no more of the centre than anywhere else. There was constant movement. We were meeting people, communicating, establishing centres. There was a cohesion, as if we had rubber bands stretched all over England and we could just pull one...

Hawkins, in Green 1998: 23

### Performance, Humor, and Gender

Following their "Stanley and Livingstone" encounter at the 1960 Beaulieu festival, Horovitz and Brown hitched north together to the Edinburgh Festival, beginning work en route on their collaborative "Blues for the Hitch-Hiking Dead," "an endless English jazz poem of the road ... never fully published in print but ... performed in many incarnations with many musicians" (Horovitz, in Green 1998: 19). A short excerpt, "Chorus 30," published in *Children of Albion*, begins:

The last of a gaggle of thirty newts  
gigantic fourlegged brontoplanes  
swims through the sky in a mass of bubbles  
& bursts on the sunpyre fire city.

Horovitz 1969: 28

This may be an example of what Ginsberg had in mind when he complained of “tinkly jazzy beatnick style poems,” but the enthusiastic surrealism of the extract (and the fact that the poem is styled as a “Blues”) also provides a link forward to Brown’s subsequent career as lyricist for acid-blues-rock supergroup Cream, where he was responsible for psychedelic blues lyrics such as “Coming to me in the morning, leaving me alone / You’ve got that rainbow feel but the rainbow has a beard” (“SWLABR,” *Disraeli Gears*, 1967).

Poetry and lyrics such as these are clearly suggestive of the influence of drug experiences on British Beat writing. However, I want to suggest that they also indicate the central role played by humor. Ironically, when Ginsberg and Corso had first tried to introduce their own brand of Beat humor to a British poetry audience in 1958, this had fallen completely flat. In a letter written at the time, Ginsberg describes the scene:

we had read at Oxford, Gregory wrote a new fine H bomb poem ... He says I love you H Bomb ... so some young anti-bomb radicals threw a shoe at Gregory and denounced him as a fascist ... and he called them creeps, so I tried to explain the poem to them & they argued politics so I called them a bunch of assholes ... Big funny time & everybody heard about our poetry riot there.

Ginsberg & Orlovsky, 1980: 169–170

It is significant that this failure to understand Corso’s poem “Bomb” came at the height of the British anti-nuclear movement; 1958 was the year of the first Aldermaston march, an event Jeff Nuttall has called “the first shock crowd” of the period, with the 1965 International Poetry Incarnation “the second” (*Kaleidoscope*, 1991). However, as Nuttall explains in *Bomb Culture*, while large-scale anti-nuclear protest “was one thing that passed across the Atlantic the other way, East to West,” and the CND or peace symbol had been invented in the UK, this British movement was, at least initially, more limited in its aims than the American counterculture: “It would be ludicrous to see Ed Sanders’ Gobble Poems printed in [long-running British pacifist newspaper] *Peace News* – ‘and the monster cock / made consuela’s / mouth / taut // & round / as a peace button’” (Nuttall 1968: 63–64). But, as Nuttall convincingly argues (113–133), the collapse in confidence within the British anti-nuclear movement in the early 1960s “left us stranded in the unbearable,” a situation in which the incipient British counterculture finally became receptive not only to the “slaughterhouse carnival” of Burroughs’s *Naked Lunch* (and the dark irony of Corso’s “Bomb”), but also to the native British strand of absurd humor which emerged within British Beat writing of the time, a heritage which Nuttall links back to the post-war comedy of Spike Milligan and *The Goon Show*, and forward to the sixties countercultural/surrealist work of Bruce Lacey, The Alberts, and The Bonzo Dog Doo-Dah Band.

As Pete Brown also suggests, there is a further link to be made here with the distinctive brand of English Surrealism employed by The Beatles and by Pink Floyd’s Syd Barratt. Songs like “Strawberry Fields,” “Penny Lane,” “See Emily Play,” and “Arnold Layne” showed Brown that “you could write rock songs that were English”; he also recognized that both The Beatles and the Liverpool Poets “also derived humour from the traditions of music hall comedy” (Brown, interviewed in Warner 2013: 238).

What Brown calls the “music hall” quality of the Liverpool poets—a term also employed by Nuttall (1968: 132)—aptly describes their use of broad humor and also their involvement with the “popular” music scene. Thus for example the comedy-pop band The Scaffold, formed by Roger McGough and Mike “McGear” McCartney (brother of Paul), had three top-10 hits in the UK. This leads Horowitz to complain that the Liverpool poets had “kissed the leper of Mammon” (though he acknowledges “this may also have been sour grapes”), and to differentiate between “pop” and “bop” poetry: “Our analogy was with bop and to some extent we related to the beat poets, plus American and international protest and jazz poetry” (Green 1998: 21, 49). However, to some critics such differentiation has not seemed so clear. Helen Bailey makes use of John Ashbery’s concept of the “Invisible Avant-garde” to argue that “one problem for poetry in the 1960s and early 1970s was that few

underground poets were, ironically, lucky enough to be neglected,” and cites Penguin Books’ publication of Horovitz’s *Children of Albion* as an example of a “wholly mainstream publishing company” taking the purely commercial decision to buy into “anti-establishment” poetry (Bailey 2013: 136). Similarly, Robert Sheppard ignores any distinction between the “bop” and “pop” versions of British Beat when he argues that “British Beat poetry modulates towards the one-shot (and sexist) joke, possibly as a result of responding too readily to the demands of a live (and ... male) popular audience” (Sheppard 2005: 40–41).

Meanwhile Grevel Lindop, whose 1972 essay “Poetry, Rhetoric and the Mass Audience: The Case of the Liverpool Poets” represents a useful early attempt to consider these issues, shows that what Adrian Henri calls the “revived” or “revitalised” cliché is also a technique used outside of the Liverpool group, giving as an example the punning lines which open Pete Brown’s poem “Slam”: “They slammed the door in my face / I opened the door in my face” (Lindop 1972: 96). While not uncritical of the Liverpool poets’ populism, Lindop pays sympathetic attention to Adrian Henri’s claim that the influence of Surrealism gives such wordplay a political aspect, creating “a little rebellion against the moribund language created by previous generations ... by politicians and parents” (96). I want to further suggest that such childlike delight in language at least potentially demonstrates a Blakean radical innocence; it is therefore significant that both McGough and Patten have also written for children. (Given the omnipresence of Blake within the British Beat scene, “the door in my face” could also contain a trace of Blake’s “doors of perception.”)

Lindop also identifies a form of “primitive magic” within the characteristic Liverpool topos of the “poem of Metamorphosis” (for example Henri’s “Tonight at Noon”), in which, as Henri puts it, “to name something is to evoke its existence” (Lindop 1972: 98). This may well be the case, but the frequently whimsical quality of this “primitive magic” is a long way from the radical form of performative language at work in Ginsberg’s “Wichita Vortex Sutra” (composed around the same time as “Tonight at Noon”), in which Ginsberg uses his mantric power to “declare” the end of the Vietnam War. Perhaps the poem in which Henri comes closest to this kind of imaginative force is “The Entry of Christ into Liverpool” (also the subject of a painting by Henri and a track recorded by his band The Liverpool Scene).

A more problematic aspect of the populist and humorous styles associated with the Liverpool poets is the frequent sexism, as pointed out by Sheppard. A particularly crass example occurs in “Adrian Henri’s Last Will and Testament,” in which (having first instructed William Burroughs “to cut up my collected works”) Henri announces: “Proceeds from the sale of my other effects to be divided equally amongst the 20 most beautiful schoolgirls in England (these to be chosen after due deliberation and exhaustive tests by an informal committee of my friends)” (Henri, McGough, & Patten 1967: 14).

More broadly, the patriarchal structure of British Beat poetry is strongly apparent, just as it is within the American Beat oeuvre; as has often been noted, only five out of the 63 poets in *Children of Albion* are women.<sup>10</sup> Libby Houston (1941–), who is one of those five (and the only woman poet to respond in the affirmative to Ellis’s “Beat” question), has written evocatively of her time as “a Beatnik On the Road” with Brown, Horovitz, and others, and of her position as a woman within this poetry scene: “I thought of myself as a person and a poet; never a woman poet, seldom as a woman,” until the “first nappy lost me the freewheeling road, the company” and she realized “I would have made such a good irresponsible man poet!” (Houston 1983: 43–50).

### Conclusion: Albion and Beyond

Houston, like Horovitz, began her Beat career while studying English at Oxford, and both poets insist that the emphasis on performance which is a central element of much British Beat literature should be understood in the context of a literary history which stretches back to the oral, musical poetry of the Anglo-Saxons (Houston 1983: 45; Horovitz 1969: 331). But Horovitz also acknowledges

in “Afterwords” that the poetic “Underground in Britain” does not consist only of performance poets; the list he gives of “Children of Albion” who “employ cooler aesthetic approaches” includes Andrew Crozier (1943–2008), Roy Fisher (1930–2017), and Chris Torrance (1941–) (Horovitz 1969: 367–368). In common with many other potential candidates, none of these poets has been keen to self-identify as “Beat” (although they might possibly accept membership of another, equally hard-to-define club, the “British Poetry Revival”). This does not necessarily mean that their poetry cannot be defined as such; after all the criteria for inclusion in the American Beat canon is equally contested, and neither Blake, nor Wordsworth, nor Shelley were ever aware that they were writing “Romantic” poetry. Literary canons are mobile and moveable things. In this chapter I have suggested a number of (sometimes contrasting) themes and qualities which might bring various poets, willingly or otherwise, into a British Beat canon. In this conclusion I want to highlight a few aspects in particular. One is the frequency with which many of the poets refer to William Blake. This includes not only Horovitz and Sinclair (though very different writers, they are equally committed, knowledgeable Blakeans), but also Adrian Mitchell, Adrian Henri, and Jeff Nuttall. Several more of Horovitz’s “Children of Albion” whom I have not had a chance to discuss also mention Blake in the anthology, including Lee Harwood, Herbert Lomas, and Neil Oram. Blake, I want to suggest, provides a link to Ginsberg and the other American Beats who took Blake as their “guru,” but he also offers a radical alternative vision of Britain as Albion/Jerusalem.

The poet and critic James Keery has bravely suggested that although Andrew Crozier’s own 1987 anthology *A Various Art* has only four poets in common with Horovitz’s 1969 selection, it might be considered “as *Children of Albion* Vol. II” (Keery 2007: 101). But (as Keery also acknowledges) Crozier’s “austere” foreword mentions the 1960s as a defining, “formative moment” for his poets, only to then explicitly distance his collection from “some speculative counter-culture, alternative or underground, an Albion in place of England perhaps” (Crozier and Longville 1987: 13). However, Crozier instead uses this reference to the sixties “moment” to define his selected poets in opposition to other poets and tastes: they have in common a refusal to “accept the version of English poetry then sanctioned” by Movement poets and arbiters of taste, who promoted “such a depthless version of the past” (12). Therefore despite Crozier’s explicit denial of countercultural Albion, he firstly hints at the importance of earlier, more radical British literature, and secondly suggests to us the method of definition through “contraries,” without which, as Blake himself wrote, “there is no progression.”

In conclusion, I want to offer quotations from two poets, both from the UK, born just a year apart, but seemingly from entirely different generations and traditions. In 1971, Seamus Heaney described his irritation at being forced to spend time with poets whom he characterized as “illiterate, long-haired, hippie, Blake-ridden, Ginsberg-gullible assholes” (quoted in Napier 2002: 182). In 2009, Pete Brown complained that

Mike [Horovitz] and I have never been accepted into any part of the mainstream. We are mavericks, discredited. Andrew Motion and all that shit – nothing to do with us! We have found our own little niche. But a bit of recognition in the UK would be nice.

Warner 2013: 257

Both poets offer definitions of British Beat, by defining themselves against their “contraries.”

## Notes

- 1 As R. J. Ellis notes, this important early visit to the UK by Ginsberg has been “largely overlooked” in Beat scholarship (Ellis 2012: 151). However, an unfortunate typo within Ellis’s otherwise invaluable essay means that he places the visit in 1956 (rather than 1958). In fact Ginsberg crossed the channel from France twice in spring 1958, once alone and once with Gregory Corso; some further analysis of these visits, particularly as they relate to the Blakean content of Ginsberg’s work, is provided in “Allen Ginsberg’s Blakean Albion” (Walker 2013).

- 2 Nuttall, best known for his contemporary study of Sixties Britain, *Bomb Culture* (1968), did not read at the Albert Hall, but his attempt to stage a piece of performance art involving the naked bodies of himself and fellow British conceptual artist John Latham “en-woaded” in blue paint is indicative of the way in which the evening was an early “happening” as much as a poetry reading (see Green 1999: 140–141).
- 3 As Robert Sheppard notes, the “nervous excitement” of Horovitz’s essay may reflect the specific moment in which it was written, in April 1968, as the situation in France escalated towards the near-revolution of May, and between the two major anti-Vietnam War demonstrations in London (Sheppard 2005: 45). From this heightened perspective of 1968, Horovitz seemed justified in believing that the 1965 Albert Hall event had represented the first birth-pangs of the Blakean Jerusalem which now seemed close at hand.
- 4 For an in-depth analysis of Ginsberg’s “centre of consciousness” line, and the significance of his Liverpool visit more generally, see Warner (2013), pp. 175–184.
- 5 Barry Miles, to whom Ginsberg made this remark, goes further, complaining of “poor English poets” ruining the Poetry Incarnation with “their awful bullshit” (Green 1998: 71). While in recent decades he has been the biographer of Ginsberg, Burroughs, and McCartney, Miles himself played a vital organizational role within the British counterculture, which mirrored and extended Ginsberg’s position as “central switchboard” of the American counterculture. Horovitz describes Miles as Ginsberg’s English “St Paul and archivist and secretary ... the little Wizard of Oz of it all, holding that system together” (Green 1998: 44).
- 6 The extent to which people formed vastly divergent views of the Poetry Incarnation is exemplified by the contrasting judgements of Trocchi’s effectiveness as compère. Miles claims Trocchi “didn’t know how to organise the thing or keep control of the mike,” resulting in “one of the worst poetry readings ever” (Green 1998: 71). Alexis Lykiard however notes that a review in the *New Statesman* had praised Trocchi’s “school-masterly firmness,” and himself concludes that Trocchi had “done a difficult job well” (Whitehead 1965: 6). The *Sunday Telegraph* meanwhile described Trocchi as a “model chairman,” and even found in him something of the sacrificial priest: “Like the president of some sacrificial rite, he would unyoke one speaker from the instrument strung around his neck and quickly yoke up the next” (quoted in Scott 1991: 133–134). In common with Fainlight (surely the sacrificial lamb in this reading), Trocchi had spent significant amounts of time in America living and writing alongside the American Beats (see Paton 2012, and also Paton’s chapter on Scottish Beats in the present collection).
- 7 Fainlight is also the subject of Ginsberg’s compassion and sexual desire in “Who Be Kind To,” composed a few days earlier: “a lip to kiss your cheek inside your whiteness thigh / Be kind to yourself Harry.”
- 8 It is not clear whether Sinclair was left off the list of poets who received Ellis’s Beat questionnaire, or whether he did not respond.
- 9 Although he would later print warnings on his books declaring that none of his poems were “to be used in connection with any examination whatsoever,” Mitchell had originally been associated with the more formal, academic poetry of “The Group,” itself a subgroup of the New Criticism-inspired “Movement,” which Horovitz attacked in “Afterwords” (Horovitz 1969: 317). It was presumably this earlier, “uptight” incarnation of Mitchell which Anthony Thwaite had in mind when he concluded that Mitchell and Logue were the only two sixties “underground” poets who were worthy of even faint praise, having “in the past (though not for some years) ... written well” (Thwaite 1978: 124).
- 10 As Horovitz himself notes, his 1992 follow-up anthology *Grandchildren of Albion* much better reflects the multicultural and gender-balanced realities of the British population (Horovitz 1992: 414).

### Works Cited

- Bailey, H. (2013) “Two Poetries?: A Re-examination of the ‘Poetry Divide’ in 1970s Britain,” in P. Robinson (ed.) *The Oxford Handbook of Contemporary British and Irish Poetry*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 130–150.
- Crozier, A., and Longville, T. (eds.) (1987) *A Various Art*, Manchester: Carcanet Press.
- Ellis, R. J. (2012) “‘They ... took their time over the coming’: The Postwar British/Beat, 1957–1965,” in N. M. Grace and J. Skerl (eds) *The Transnational Beat Generation*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 145–163.
- Ginsberg, A. (2001) *Spontaneous Mind: Selected Interviews 1958–1996*, edited by D. Carter, London: Penguin.
- , and Orlovsky, P. (1980) *Straight Hearts’ Delight: Love Poems and Selected Letters 1947–1980*, edited by W. Leyland, San Francisco: Gay Sunshine Press.
- Great Lives: Michael Horovitz on Allen Ginsberg* (2013) BBC Radio 4, broadcast December 17, 16:30. Available at [www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b03lph8m](http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b03lph8m).
- Green, J. (1998) *Days in the Life: Voices from the English Underground, 1961–1971*, London: Pimlico.
- (1999) *All Dressed Up: The Sixties and the Counterculture*, London: Pimlico.
- Henri, A., McGough, R., and Patten, B. (1967) *Penguin Modern Poets 10: The Mersey Sound*, Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Horovitz, M. ed. (1969) *Children of Albion: Poetry of the Underground in Britain*, Harmondsworth: Penguin.

- Horovitz, M. ed (1992) *Grandchildren of Albion: An Illustrated Anthology of Voices and Visions of Younger Poets in Britain*, Stroud: New Departures.
- Houston, L. (1983) "On Being a Woman Poet," in M. Wandor (ed.) *On Gender and Writing*, London: Pandora Press, pp. 42–50.
- Kaleidoscope: And the Beat Goes On* (1991) BBC Radio 4, broadcast October 26, 19:20.
- Kane, D. (2011) "Wholly Communion, Literary Nationalism, and the Sorrows of the Counterculture," *Framework* 52: 104–127.
- Keery, J. (2007) "Children of Albion: Blake and Contemporary British Poetry," in S. Clark and J. Whittaker (eds) *Blake, Modernity and Popular Culture*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 100–112.
- Lee, A. R. (2010) *Modern American Counter Writing: Beats, Outriders, Ethnics*, New York: Routledge.
- Lindop, G. (1972) "Poetry, Rhetoric and the Mass Audience: The Case of the Liverpool Poets," in M. Schmidt and G. Lindop (eds) *British Poetry Since 1960: A Critical Survey*, Oxford: Carcanet Press, pp. 92–106.
- Lucie-Smith, E. (1967) *The Liverpool Scene*, London: Donald Carroll.
- Miles, B. (2003) *In the Sixties*, New York: Random House.
- Mitchell, A. (n.d.) "Adrian Mitchell interview," *The Poetry Archive* website [www.poetryarchive.org/interview/adrian-mitchell-interview](http://www.poetryarchive.org/interview/adrian-mitchell-interview) (accessed March 16, 2017)
- Napier, T. S. (2002) "'Companions of the Cheshire Cheese': epistolary lives of contemporary Irish poets," *Journal of European Studies* 32: 177–192.
- Nuttall, J. (1968) *Bomb Culture*, London: MacGibbon & Kee.
- Oliver, D., Riley, D., and Sinclair, I. (1996) *Penguin Modern Poets: Volume 10*, London: Penguin.
- Paton, F. (2012) "Cain's Book and the Mark of Exile: Alexander Trocchi as Transnational Beat," in N. M. Grace and J. Skerl (eds) *The Transnational Beat Generation*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 201–217.
- Scott, A. M. (1991) *Alexander Trocchi: The Making of the Monster*, Edinburgh: Polygon.
- Sheppard, R. (2005) *The Poetry of Saying: British Poetry and its Discontents 1950–2000*, Liverpool: Liverpool University Press.
- Sinclair, I. (1996) "Customising Biography," *London Review of Books* 18.4 (Feb 22): 16–19.
- (2006 [1971]) *The Kodak Mantra Diaries*, republished as special issue of *Beat Scene* magazine.
- (2012 [1975]) *Lud Heat*, Cheltenham: Skylight Press.
- (2013 [1979]) *Suicide Bridge*, Cheltenham: Skylight Press.
- Thwaite, A. (1978) *Twentieth-Century English Poetry: An Introduction*, London: Heinemann.
- Walker, L. (2013) "Allen Ginsberg's Blakean Albion," *Comparative American Studies* 11: 227–242.
- Warner, S. (2013) *Text and Drugs and Rock 'n' Roll: The Beats and Rock Culture*, London: Bloomsbury.
- Whitehead, P. ed. (1965) *Wholly Communion*, London: Lorrimer Films.