Introduction

John Tytell’s foundational study *Naked Angels* analyzes the Beats primarily in terms of the American tradition:

> The Beat movement was a crystallization of a sweeping discontent with American ‘virtues’ of progress and power. What began as an exploration of the bowels and entrails of the city—criminality, drugs, mental hospitals—evolved into an expression of the visionary sensibility. The romantic militancy of the Beats found its root in American transcendentalism. (4)

John Calder, in his introduction to Alexander Trocchi’s 1972 poetry collection *Man at Leisure*, asserted that Trocchi “is the British equivalent of the American beats, but the tradition to which he belongs is really more that of the ‘damned’ French writers, from Baudelaire and Rimbaud to Céline and Genet” (“Preface” v). That the Beat Generation was primarily an American movement is beyond question. However, as the field of Beat studies continues to develop, we are becoming increasingly aware that these two traditions, the European and the American, cannot be separated so decisively. Kerouac may have defined the Beat Generation as “a new group of American men intent on joy” (“Aftermath” 57), but the core of their “New Vision” in the early days drew directly on those “‘damned’ French writers” as much as the American transcendentalists. Indeed, as this volume demonstrates, a transnational
approach to the Beats is highly productive, bringing into focus the heterogeneous mix of cultural traditions that informed their identity and demonstrating the global reach of their influence. A further benefit of this transnational paradigm is the expansion of the Beat line-up to include writers such as Trocchi, whose importance in the postwar literary scene is far greater than the occasional references in Beat biographies would suggest.

Known variously as the “Scottish Beat writer” (Rebel Inc.), “the smack-addled icon of beat literature,” (Cumming, “Mean Streets”), and “the most dissolute of the beats” (Home), Trocchi confirms most of the Beat stereotypes with a vengeance. He experimented freely with drugs, embraced poverty in order to pursue his art, affirmed play over work, circulated within the criminal underworld, explored sexual experience freely, and challenged every middle-class value he could identify. Trocchi was also firmly connected to the Beat milieu: he was close friends with Allen Ginsberg and William S. Burroughs; friendly with Herbert Huncke, Gregory Corso, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, and Robert Creeley; and acquainted with Diane di Prima and Michael McClure, among others. When Trocchi left the United States to avoid drug charges in 1961, he became an important disseminator of the Beat ethos in Britain. Jeff Nuttall, a key figure of the 1960s underground, recalls that “Alex rigged up his study like an office. People passing through London dropped in, Jack Michelin, Gregory Corso, Bob Creeley, Ian Summerville” (“Bomb” 186).

But Trocchi was equally involved with the postwar European avant-garde. He founded the influential, albeit short-lived, literary journal Merlin in Paris in 1952, and in doing so facilitated the flow from Europe to the United States of writers such as Jean Genet and Samuel Beckett. While there, he honed his radical impulses in the company of Guy Debord in Paris, joining Debord’s Lettrist Internationale in 1955 and staying with the group when it evolved into the Situationist International in 1957. His own revolutionary cultural project, sigma, established in London in 1963, would act as a crucial conduit between the Situationists and William Burroughs (T. Murphy, “Exposing” 34). Throughout the 1960s, he remained closely affiliated with Burroughs and Ginsberg, involving them in various counterculture performances and publishing initiatives in Europe, which also included other Beats, such as Corso and Ferlinghetti.

Trocchi resisted the Beat label as he resisted all labels and categories. As he, Richard Seaver, and Christopher Logue wrote in the second edition of Merlin,

Some ways of talking about literature are more useful than other ways of talking about literature. All ways of talking involve the use of distinctions. That is all right so long as those distinctions are not allowed to harden, that is to say, if we abandon them as soon as they cease to be useful. (39)

But even with this caveat, Beat continues to have value as a literary category, for what it primarily denotes is a certain interstitial sensibility that subverts fixed boundaries and borders. Rob Holton has effectively used Frederic Jameson’s analysis of postwar standardization to interpret this Beat interstitiality. According to Jameson, “Historically, the adventures of homogeneous and heterogeneous space have most often been told in terms of the quotient of the sacred and of the folds in which it is