Alexander Trocchi

(1925-84)

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**Introduction**

The problem with much commentary on the 1960s counterculture is that it elevates myth over artistic output. Emerging finally but tentatively from the spell of Beat legend and mass appealing rock and roll, we still tend to think about the literature of the period in terms of which drugs an author took, who they had sex with and how young they were when they died. In this context, the Scottish Beat poet Alexander Trocchi presents the critic with an old and wearying hindrance. Like many of the figures associated with Jack Kerouac, William Burroughs and Allen Ginsberg’s Beat Generation, Trocchi is better remembered for his hedonistic, self-destructive lifestyle than his work. Perhaps the one true British representative of that post-war American movement, he appears in the margins of countercultural folklore as a fleetingly innovative novelist whose talent was first enhanced then wasted by heroin, and detracted from both by callous personal behavior and the willingness to work as a pornographer for hire. Friends with Burroughs, Ginsberg and Leonard Cohen – major pop cultural figures whose comments on Trocchi’s personality are trotted out with each rare re-issue - he has an unfairly superficial position in a period already underestimated in literary history.

Indeed as James Campbell, editor at the Times Literary Supplement, points out, his small fame by association obscures an intellectual seriousness that should in fact distinguish him from the Beats (‘Alexander Trocchi: the Biggest Fiend of All’, p. 458). A student of philosophy, and active participant in Existentialist and Situationist scenes in Paris during the 1950s, his exploration of alienated existence displays a vision that was thought through and intellectually weighty, improvisational like much of the Beats’ work but shaped by firm rather than speculative theory. As we’ll see, two books in Trocchi’s oeuvre prove this – *Young Adam* and *Cain’s Book*, written seven years apart and set respectively in the Glasgow of his youth and the New York underbelly he inhabited in his thirties. Between *Adam* and *Cain* came various pornographic stories, churned out for quick remuneration in Paris, which allude to larger philosophical ideas but – by Trocchi’s own admission – are compromised by their aim to titillate. From the mid 1960s onwards, when his dependence on heroin finally destroyed his will to write, he produced some poetry and informative essays but none of the important fictional prose his early career had seemed to promise.

**A brief biography**

Alexander Trocchi was born in Glasgow in 1925 to a second-generation Italian father and Scottish mother. While both parents came from respectable middle-class stock, his father Alfredo – a pianist and bandleader - was out of work for most of Alex’s childhood and the family struggled to make ends meet. Much has been said, both by the author and his critics, of his relationship with his mother, a loving and well-liked woman who took over sole running of the family when her husband’s work dried up, and who died suddenly when he was just sixteen. ‘Her death’, he later wrote ‘was my direction’, which can be taken cautiously as the experience behind his anaesthetized attitude to love and death in his literature (Andrew Murray Scott, *Andrew Trocchi: The Making of the Monster*, p. 3). Even more cautiously, we might consider it a reason for his unwillingness to settle permanently with any of his four wives or the multitude of lovers he took throughout his life; a basic autobiographical motive that perhaps trumps the more complex philosophical ones he gave.

After a childhood that was modest but not uncomfortable, and a period of active sea service towards the end of the Second World War, Trocchi married young and used a serviceman’s grant to study English and philosophy at Glasgow University. Here he read Plato, Descartes, Locke, Hume, Aristotle and Kant, as well as more contemporary philosophers like F.N. Bradley, and gained the solid grounding for his later forays into Existentialism on the Left Bank. Though he graduated with a second rather than the first class degree he was predicted, the award of a travelling scholarship by a faculty who recognized his potential allowed him to leave Scotland for France, where he eventually set up home and shop. There, in the early 1950s, Trocchi’s literary career began in earnest. With his pregnant wife Betty and their two-year old daughter, he moved first to Gagny, a small Parisian suburb, and supplemented the scholarship fund with a regular column about his experience for the Edinburgh magazine, *The Scotts Review*. When Betty returned to Britain to earn money to support the family, they left their now two children with friends in Paris and Trocchi took a flat alone to concentrate on breaking into an expatriate literary scene populated by old hands like Jean-Paul Sartre and Samuel Beckett and plenty of fellow young hopefuls.

The first of many occasions where he jettisoned family for literary pursuit, it resulted in his co-founding of the magazine *Merlin* and his career-defining association with Maurice Girodias’ publishing company, *Olympia Press*. *Olympia* was a rebranded version of *Obelisk*, the firm run by Girodias’ father Jack Kahane in the 1930s, which had been famous for taking advantage of loose French censorship laws to publish contraband literature. As well as much forgettable pornography, *Obelisk* introduced the now canonical D.H. Lawrence’s *Lady Chaterley’s Lover*, James Joyce’s *Finnegan’s Wake* and Henry Miller’s *Tropic of Cancer* to the world. Following suit*, Olympia* aimed to capitalize on the demand for sexually explicit material but by proxy gave exposure to experimental, otherwise ‘unpublishable’ fiction, from the aggressively criminal and homosexual ‘confessions’ of Jean Genet and William Burroughs to Vladimir Nabokov’s *Lolita*. Alongside his new lover Jane Lougee and the young writers Victor Miller and Alan Riddel, Trocchi founded *Merlin* with purer literary intentions but an equivalent outlaw ethos. The idea, as he put it in his first editorial, dated March 1952, was to publish fiction that would put old categories out of commission. It would, he wrote, ‘hit at all clots of rigid categories in criticism and in life’ (Campbell, *Paris Interzone*, p. 44). Through *Merlin* and his own energetic hustling, he formed personal connections with Sartre, Beckett and Beckett’s colleague in the Theatre of the Absurd, Eugéne Ionescu, publishing Beckett’s novel *Watt* for the first time anywhere and the first ever English translation of *Molloy*. He also associated with Guy Debord, founder of the radical artistic-political movement, Situationist International, and put his name both to that cause and the Lettrist manifesto that preceded it. Through Girodias, who backed Merlin’s small publishing imprint *Merlin Collections*, Trocchi got the chance to see his first novel, *Young Adam* in printin 1954 and was commissioned to write the series of five pornographic stories that made him notorious. Bizarrely, in the same year Girodias also roped him into producing a literary hoax, *My Life and Loves: Fifth Volume*, a fictional work whose pretentions to being the long lost diaries of Irish writer Frank Harris resulted in its inclusion within numerous anthologies of Harris’ work.

Jilted by Jane Lougee – who two years before had become his second wife - and running low on funds, he left Paris for New York in 1956 and entered a new scene in which he was hardly known at all. Jane’s relocation to Greenwich Village a year before may also have motivated the move, although they remained separated after he arrived. By stark contrast to the early years in Paris, Trocchi doubled down on his anonymity in New York, taking a job as a scow captain on the Hudson River and submerging himself deeper into the hard drugs he acquired a taste for in Paris. The purpose, he said, was serious existential and literary exploration, and the result was his second novel. *Cain’s Book*, begun earlier and always intended as an account of life ‘under heroin’, took its proper shape down by the docks and tells the story of a man whose annihilation of consciousness is also his freedom. On its publication in 1961, the book’s illicit subject matter made something like the headlines Henry Miller had in the 1930s. The reviews - appalled and admiring alike – spoke about him as an ally to William Burroughs, who he would later befriend in London and Edinburgh, and to Allen Ginsberg, who he met while part of a nascent Beat community at Venice Beach, California. *Cain* cemented Trocchi’s position in that rarified countercultural world and ensured the title of Scottish Beat that precedes him today. Besides the boost to his international literary reputation, Trocchi’s time in America was characterized by extreme addiction and desperate, cruel measures taken to feed it. Indeed, after years spent dealing drugs, he resorted infamously to pimping out his twenty-one year old third wife Lyn, a woman whose own dependency he was also more or less responsible for. In literary terms, this post-*Cain* descentis represented by his substitution of novel writing for the production of obscure, drug-inspired political manifestos for Sigma, a chaotic revolutionary project he helped set up in 1961, and which sourced Situationism to prophesy ‘the invisible insurrection of a million minds’ (‘Invisible Insurrection of A Million Minds’, p. 34).

Trocchi eventually left America in 1961, when he was arrested on the capital charge of supplying drugs to a minor and chose to skip bail and run rather than face the possibility of the electric chair. He boarded a ship for Aberdeen and ended up settling with Lyn and their two children in London. There he lived out the rest of his life, a low functioning but now registered and protected addict. *Cain*’s notoriety, and the connections to left bank Paris and the American Beat scene led to high profile public appearances – most notably at the Royal Albert Hall in 1965, where he compered Allen Ginsberg’s poetry happening, and at the 1962 Edinburgh Writers’ Conference – but Trocchi was known better as an advocate of heroin than a serious writer for much of the decade. In the 1970s and 80s, his work fell out of print and it wasn’t until the break-out success of Irvine Welsh’s *Trainspotting* in 1993, and the Scottish literary renaissance that followed, that it began to be published and read again. Presented briefly by the media as a Howard Marx-like inspiration to Welsh and his contemporaries – writers like James Kelman and Alan Warner - Trocchi then had another fifteen minutes of fame via a 2003 feature length adaptation of *Young Adam* – a film which starred *Trainspotting*’s lead and burgeoning Hollywood idol Ewan McGregor. The writer returned quickly to obscurity soon after and has remained there ever since.

**The Paris Years: *Merlin*, Existentialism and the Marquis De Sade**

The original thinking and style that justify bringing Trocchi back into the light had their genesis in the Paris years. As Welsh put it in an interview about his importance, there was a catholicity and ‘internationalism’ about Trocchi at that time, far removed from his later self-indulgence (*A Life in Pieces: Reflections on Alexander Trocchi*, p. 18). While most of his British contemporaries were either fawning or suspicious about the avant-gardes emerging on the continent, Trocchi made a rare successful attempt to pitch in. He became, in existentialist parlance, *engage*, seriously conversant with the language novelists and philosophers like Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus were inaugurating and actively involved in a new kind of literature that aimed at social and political impact. This seriousness – in a Parisian scene full of Miller and Hemingway wannabes - explains Sartre and Beckett’s friendliness towards Trocchi and willingness to have their work published in his magazine. In *Merlin*’s ‘mission statement’, Trocchi outlined his view of literature ‘as deriving its main significance from its operation as a practical act within the contemporary cultural totem’[[1]](#footnote-1), words that deliberately echoed Sartre in *Les Temps Modern* and that opposed the consensus among many British poets and novelists at the time that art was better kept separate from the corrupt political sphere (‘Mission statement of Merlin by Alexander Trocchi’, p. 1). He decided to base himself in Paris, he said, rather than London or Edinburgh because this was a city in which writers were finding new ways of engaging in public affairs without fear of being drawn in to contaminative partisan politics. In Paris, Trocchi said, political activity did not mean ‘the old 30s sense of “commitment”’. Rather, ‘you could … be Engage as an outsider’ (*The Making of the Monster,* p. 36).

Trocchi’s *Merlin* editorials and the list of prestigious writers he managed to publish are testament not only to his ambition and networking acumen but a unique contribution to that milieu. Over eleven issues between 1952 and 1956, the concept of engagement from the outside was spelled out eruditely and in a style free from the usual theatrics of avant-garde ‘little magazines’. What Trocchi wanted, he claimed, was to effect social change through the promotion and production of new literary forms. It was the kind of talk that had its roots in the Anglo-American modernism of Ezra Pound – a poet whose presence in Paris in the 1920s Trocchi romanticized and whom he imitated in ascribing a ‘scientific’ role to literature. Where Pound and his ally James Joyce had broken new ground by freeing themselves from poetic and novelistic structures – as well, in Joyce’s case, from the limits of the censor - the task for the present generation was not to imitate their techniques but conceive of fresh ones that would further their mission. ‘Make it New!’ Pound barked in 1928, and Trocchi rallied his fellow writers of 1952 to do the same. If these earlier modernizers had used techniques like ‘stream of consciousness’ and imagism to reflect fragmented modern experience, Trocchi’s own preoccupations were the limits on literature in a post-1945 ‘Atomic Age’. Indeed, as his *Merlin* collaborator Richard Seaver puts it, the magazine’s first issues ‘bore the weight’ both of existentialism and ‘the early Cold War’ (‘Introduction’, *Cain’s Book*, Oneworld edn., xiv). They were full of essays not explicitly about current affairs but questioning the role of literature in a new, scrambled political environment. Specifically, this meant questioning the point of Enlightenment values – of truth, reason, art and the written word – in an age that had just witnessed the barbarities of Auschwitz and Hiroshima. Trocchi’s association with Beckett and Ionesco, who started their ‘Theatre of the Absurd’ in response to exactly such issues, confirms his part in this conversation. In contrast to his contemporaries back home – dissenting ‘angry young men’ who explored issues of post-war alienation within conventional domestic scenarios, or British poets who had, as Trocchi put it, withdrawn from life – he was applying a revolutionary ethos that had energized English language writers before the war to a revolutionary philosophical and political scene active in France after it.

Perhaps the clearest sign of Trocchi’s acceptance within that scene was his relationship with Jean-Paul Sartre. He and Richard Seaver approached Sartre cold in 1952. Impressed by what he had read in *Merlin’s* first two issues, the elder statesman granted them permission to print translated essays, poems and short stories from the pages of his popular journal, *Les Temps Modernes*. Trocchi also later managed to elicit an essay on Jean Genet from Sartre, which was quite a coup. The leading intellectual of his day, along with his protégé Albert Camus Sartre had outlined a vision for the post-1945 ‘Atomic Age’ that captured scholarly and popular imaginations internationally. What he proposed was a post-religious attitude to existence based on the understanding that each individual was entirely responsible for his or her actions. Within this paradigm, morality became not a set of rules imposed by religion, family or society but a personal standard applied by the individual to his or her life. Accused of being nihilistic and ‘anti-humanist’ – opposed to all strategies and values aimed at improving the human lot - Sartre argued that Existentialism was in fact a profoundly moral and humanistic philosophy since it counseled full attention to one’s own behavior – and as an example for all human beings - rather than lazy reliance on other people to police it. For Sartre and Camus, Existentialism meant the only valid chance of freedom in the modern world. This was the inspiration for Trocchi’s desire to engage with society ‘from the outside’ rather than through conventional political ‘commitment’. He was particularly interested in the new opportunities existentialism afforded writers in an age after the destructive partisan politics behind World War Two. Indeed, these were the thinkers who inspired him to question all categories - literary, social but also political, denouncing ‘Capitalism’ and ‘Communism’ as dry abstractions.

The existentialist movement, however, descended into its own partisan conflict when the increasingly political Sartre turned on Camus for refusing to comment on escalating Cold War tensions. In this publically conducted tussle, Trocchi and his Merlin colleagues sided clearly with Sartre. As Richard Seaver puts it, although they refrained from expressing explicit political views within the magazine, they were temperamentally closer to Sartre, the ‘political scrapper’ than Camus, who they characterized rather unfairly as ‘the detached philosopher’ (Seaver, xiv). Writing an editorial in 1952, Trocchi praised Sartre as a ‘man of action’ and condemned Camus for having ‘withdrawn into a largely emotional isolation, into the position of non-participation outlined in his *L’Homme revolte’* (Campbell, *Paris Interzone*,p.58). It is likely that such talk was motivated by personal loyalty rather than genuine philosophical conviction however, since Sartre’s position depended on his support for a Soviet Communist system Trocchi was never fully comfortable with. Trocchi’s politics remained the politics of the individual and the artist throughout his career, even in his 1960s revolutionary period, when the social improvement he envisaged was based on each person liberating him or herself psychically rather than through collective organization.

If there was a genuinely political aspect to Trocchi’s activity in Paris, it had to do with the breaking of social taboos, mainly in relation to sex. Besides his pornographic fiction – which we’ll come to later – he used *Merlin* to disseminate newly translated work by the eighteenth century novelist, philosopher and convicted rapist the Marquis de Sade as well as Jean Genet’s contemporary tales of gangsters, rent boys and the virtue of criminality. Sade and Genet both fascinated Trocchi, and he sought to reproduce something like their subversive power in his own writing, not only through his pornography but the challenges to standard moral ideas that pepper *Young Adam* and *Cain’s Book*. Writing publicity material for Maurice Girodias’ *Olympia Press* in 1953 – a favor done in return for Girodias’ help with Merlin Collections – Trocchi presented himself at the vanguard of an anti-censorship war begun in 1919 with James Joyce’s *Ulysses*. *Ulysses*, which had been banned for obscenity but vindicated on intellectual grounds, was ‘first wrack-breaker’, but the fight needed to be treated as ongoing. Quoting Bertrand Russell – and preempting William Burroughs - he posited censorship as the symptom of a totalitarian mindset and therefore an evil to be fought hard at every turn. ‘The book burners are still with us’, Trocchi wrote, and the answer to their ignorance is to give a readership to ‘men hitherto condemned to silence by ambiguous laws that have caused our heads to be buried like the ostrich’s at the approach of imaginary danger’ (Campbell, *Interzone*, p.145).

At a deeper philosophical level, this interest in obscenity was motivated by a related interest in Sade’s pronouncements on vice. ‘Everything would perish in an instant if there were nothing but virtues on earth’, Sade wrote, claiming that ‘since vice must exist, it is as unjust of you to punish it as it would be to poke fun at a blind man’ (Georges Bataille, *Literature and Evil*,p. 94). Virtue defines itself negatively, in other words, in opposition to vice. Without an example of what it opposes, it ceases to be anything at all. Predicting Nietzsche – who Trocchi read and would take, along with Sade, as a guide in the experiments leading up to *Cain’s Book* - Sade mocked the socially and religiously pious for only being able to affirm themselves by allusion to something exterior, and for not having the humility to appreciate vice and evil’s importance to their scheme. In his attraction to Sade’s attacks on the binary of virtue and vice, good and evil, Trocchi followed the French philosopher Georges Bataille – himself notorious for provocatively obscene fiction in the 1940s and 50s – and also Henry Miller, both of whom read Sade as a perversely, profoundly moral writer. He took it as the basis (or excuse) for an increasingly anarchic approach to sex – from numerous infidelities and experiments in wife swapping to attempts at recreating the sadomasochistic scenes from Sade’s *Justine* and Pauline Reage’s *Story of O*. If his pornographic literature was chiefly a means of bringing in quick cash, it was also motivated by the desire to bring art closer to the anti-bourgeois sexual life he was attempting to lead and of provoking the reader in the tradition of these literary heroes.

***Young Adam***

Proof of Trocchi’s early blend of existentialist and Sadean philosophy can be found in *Young Adam*. Begun while a student in Glasgow, published in Paris but subsequently amended for republication three times in America and England, this was Trocchi’s translation of a French existentialist aesthetic into a Scottish context. It reads in fact, as James Campbell puts it, like a ‘French novel written in English’, the ideas and style reflecting a clarity reminiscent of Camus and preemptive of the Parisian Nouveau Roman movement that would come to prominence in the early 1960s (*Interzone*, p. 57). Taking its premise and basic line of questioning from books like Camus’ *The Outsider*, and much of its form from the solipsistic detective fiction of Georges Simenon, *Young Adam* explored themes of alienated male identity and the inadequacy of public morality within a new bleak setting. Preempting or perhaps divining Trocchi’s later life by the Hudson, the book takes place on the canals between Glasgow and Edinburgh, where his narrator Joe – a young educated drifter - inhabits and works a barge owned by the older man Leslie and his wife Ella. It opens with Joe and Leslie fishing the dead body of a young woman out of the water. Privy to Joe’s thoughts, we hear first of all about his plan and successful bid to seduce Ella then, by and by, come to understand that the woman in the water was his ex-girlfriend, and that he witnessed and had a hand in her death. The rest of the story plays out against the backdrop of the ensuing murder enquiry, which results in an innocent man’s arrest, trial and execution. Like Meursault, Camus’ anti-hero, Joe remains emotionally and morally unmoved for most of the novel, showing few expected signs of grief over his ex-partner’s death and little remorse either about his part in it, the wrongful conviction, or his adultery with Ella.

As with many of the stories surrounding Trocchi’s life, Joe’s insensibility to others’ suffering, his immunity to the kind of instinct most would regard as humane, disorientate the reader, producing a spectacle that appalls and unnerves. Within the safer confines of fiction, however, and in the fictional mind of Joe, the questions Trocchi claimed to be exploring in his own life take on a less decrepit and more instructive philosophical relevance. Trocchi’s main preoccupation, like Camus’, is the subjective truth that people hide in their attempts to appear reasonable, moral and socially cooperative. As Joe puts it midway through *Young Adam*, ‘human beings often compromise with each other … choosing what is apparently, but each knows certainly not to be, a point of contact, simply because to admit openly that no point of context exists is to imply the superfluity of the other’ (pp. 63-64). To confess the truth of what one feels requires a related confession that other peoples’ feelings are beyond full understanding, and that a genuine point of contact between human beings is a delusion imposed by society for dishonestly functional purposes. This is Trocchi’s starting point and raison d’être. Indeed, describing his second wife Jane’s response to an early manuscript of the novel, Trocchi expressed incredulity that she should find his anti-social narrator ‘mad’ (Scott, *Monster*, p. 65) . On the contrary, he said, these were the words of a person who had seen through society’s sham workings.

Trocchi has been lazily differentiated from contemporaries who explored similar themes by his willingness to put his money where his mouth was and live according to the socially rebellious principles in his work. In truth what makes him notable is the combination of philosophical rigour, psychological astuteness and technical subtlety he brought to these ideas. In Joe, he produced a character on a par with Camus’ Meursault – both intellectually perceptive about society and believably damaged, a somnolent experiencer rather than active participant in the world. Despite Trocchi dismissing Betty’s suggestion of psychological abnormality, there are clear signposts throughout the novel of unaddressed trauma behind his detachment from emotion and social mores. Like Meursault, his cerebral alertness is countered by the sense that he is adrift both from his feelings and his actions, forever finding himself in rather than actively arriving at situations, a passive observer of himself as much the people he calculates coldly. While Camus constructs his story around the death of Meursault’s mother – a traumatic episode that muffles all experience – Trocchi fleetingly but clearly inserts his own mother’s passing into proceedings. ‘First my mother, then Cathy, like forked lightning’ Joe states when contemplating his girlfriend’s drowning. As with Trocchi’s larger philosophy, whatever other points are made about freedom of the individual, the hypocrisy of collective moral outrage and the corrupt force of the law, the numbly recovered memory of this loss speaks a more powerful truth. Crucially, that truth serves to enhance rather than diminish the novel’s political purposes, since Trocchi’s nuanced allusions to a muted pain give the rebellion its emotional origin and human context, which means the social message can be appreciated for the kernel of truth it contains but in full awareness of the hurt, flawed human being who pronounces it.

Less obviously, that personal hurt – arising out of a dislocation from the past – is communicated through attempts to make objective comments about the human condition. Trocchi opens *Young Adam* with the line ‘these are times when what is to be said looks out of the past at you’. ‘Past hours, past acts, take on an uncanny isolation’ he continues. ‘Between them and you who look back on them now there is no continuity’ (p. 7). Like his unwitting admission of a connection between the death of Cathy and the memory of his mother, this intellectual statement on the nature of present and past experience points not to the impossibility of ever reconnecting with the past but Joe’s unconscious yearning for it, and to its profound, unacknowledged role in his alienation. Whether intentionally or not, Trocchi explores the contours of psychological damage, damage that has its strongest manifestation in the desire for sexual dominance without regard for human life. Trocchi’s pretext for much of the writing about sex in *Young Adam* is the Sadean attempt to get beyond what Joe calls ‘the odour of righteousness’. Like Sade, he finds that the must of skin and armpits ‘give the lie’ to that odor, serving as a reminder of the truth that exists beyond abstract notions of good and evil, and beyond the tricks human beings play on themselves to ward off their animal natures (p. 146). Sex to Joe is ‘mating’, and the lust he feels is based not on the possibility of transcending but of miring himself in that nature. He desires flesh that is ‘heavy’ and marbled like meat. He copulates outdoors, and expresses a sour admiration for Ella’s sister – seduced late on the novel – because he doubts ‘had ever felt righteous’ (p. 122).

In this respect, Trocchi contributes to an anti-sentimental, anti-humanist line of writing begun with the Marquis de Sade but brought into fashion by confessional authors like Henry Miller and Louis-Ferdinand Céline in the 1930s then Jean Genet after the Second World War. That style undergoes a transformation, however, in *Young Adam* that makes the novel quite a different proposition to Miller’s *Tropic of Cancer* (1934)or Genet’s *The Thief’s Journal* (1949). Where Miller and Genet emphasize sex without romantic pretense triumphantly – pronouncing obscenities with relish and making the reader ‘look down’ at the body’s machinations - Trocchi’s use of his narrator to *epater le bourgeoisie* is shot through with a sense of its own defeat. Each conquest, sought ostensibly for physical rather than emotional purposes, results in greater emptiness. Each Nietzschean attempt to ‘exercise power without exerting it, to be detached and powerful, to be … salient and indestructible as gods’, reminds us just how powerless he is (p. 44). In the last pages, fresh from watching an innocent man sent down for the crime he was, Joe half-enviously eyes a group of laughing students on Glasgow’s college green. Though he finds consolation for the ‘devastating sense of loss for something which I had never had’ by dismissing it as ‘a thing which no one ever possesses for the simple reason that it is something which is created in being seen and which only exists for the spectator', the statement – like so many he makes - is at once philosophically salient and humanly unconvincing (p. 155).

When director David MacKenzie came to make his 2003 film version of *Young Adam*, he conveyed something of Joe’s psychological malfunction through the absence of a narrative voiceover, and by Ewan McGregor’s troubled, faintly autistic interpretation of the character’s taciturnity. Rather than Trocchi’s two fingers to society, the film becomes a pathetic account both of Joe’s trauma and the human cost his rebellious pose carries. It also highlights the arrogant social elitism that surrounded so much dabbling in Nietzschean thinking in the 1960s. As with Walter Salles’s recent adaptation of Jack Kerouac ‘s *On the Road* (2012), the experience of watching voluntarily ‘beat’ young bohemians touring the worlds of the permanently poor is something very different to hearing those bohemians talk you through their existential ideas. In Joe’s case in *Young Adam*, such tourism results not only in Ella and Leslie’s marriage breaking up but the ‘poor bastard’ Daniel Goon, a plumber from a run down part of Glasgow, dying for a crime he didn’t commit. This after the tragic death of Cathy, who is not financially but emotionally destitute and falls into the canal while pleading with Joe to take her back. It all gives sobering perspective to the anarchistic rhetoric Trocchi has Joe deliver. Indeed, the lines are very clearly drawn – as they were in Trocchi’s own life – between the bovine herd in respectable employment and the enlightened few who understand the futility of that path. On discovering that someone has been arrested for Cathy’s murder, Joe expresses a semblance of pity but finds it hard to maintain the position when it turns out to be ‘Goon’, the hard-working tradesman. ‘I dislike people who make a virtue of work’, Joe declares petulantly (p. 96). That Trocchi chose such an obvious cipher for his fall guy is a further clue to his larger political naiveté and a reminder that, despite its mature narrative style, this is a first book written by man in his early to mid twenties and it is rough around the edges.

***Cain’s Book***

Though not much older when he wrote *Cain’s Book*, Trocchi brought to it a stronger sense of artistic, political and philosophical conviction based on the full breadth of his experience in Paris and New York. Published in 1961 by Grove Press – who also published Henry Miller and were now employing Trocchi’s old friend Richard Seaver as an editor - it announced him as both a controversial and serious countercultural writer. While a number of newspapers condemned the book for its candid depiction of sex and drug use, it was deemed an important original work of art where it mattered, garnering praise from Norman Mailer, who called it ‘true’ and ‘brave’ and a book he expected to ‘still [be] talked about in twenty years,” (Richard Seaver, ‘Introduction’, *Cain’s Book*, p. xv). Mailer, incidentally, was one of a group of New York literati who fronted the money for Trocchi’s escape over the Canadian border when he was up on drugs charges, the prelude to his return to the United Kingdom. In England, the small scandal around *Cain* meant it struggled to find a publisher until 1963. Trocchi, who hadn’t kicked the habit but had settled into something approaching a conventional family life, was relieved to be met by near-unanimous approval in the English literary papers. His position as a professional novelist with a steady income seemed almost secure. Soon after publication, however, copies of *Cain* were seized during a raid of newsagents in Sheffield, the book was taken to court and it was banned then burned for obscenity.

*Cain’s* is rightly regarded as Trocchi’s magnum opus. Written from the perspective of another Joe - this time an admitted stand-in named Joe Necchi – it explores the same intellectual themes as *Young Adam* but with greater originality and detailed reference to the philosophers and writers who inform them. Representing himself – or at least a more accurate surrogate – and motivated by a philosophical fervor based on the use of heroin and the life surrounding it, he both consolidated the earlier ideas and developed them through experimentation with new structural forms. In keeping with his move out of Paris and the world of little magazines and into an American scene energized by the improvisational, plotless writings of the Beats, Trocchi built the book not around linear events but the ideas and memories that emerge in the course of his daily quest for and ingestion of dope. The main characters are Moira – an amalgam of Trocchi’s first and second wives, Betty and Jane – his lover Jody and two fellow junkies, Tom Tear and Fay. Preempting so much postmodern fiction, the persona Necchi is also writing his own book called *Cain’s Book,* an ‘almanac’ of the junkie experience that he quotes from throughout. While talking to the other characters and putting pen to paper at his desk on the scow, he uses words, visual images and feelings as jumping off points for memories of New York, Paris and Glasgow, a device that allows him to put his existentialism and phenomenology into action and also to revisit the directives for literature he announced as editor of *Merlin*.

*Cain* is a thorough investigation of the detachment suggested in *Young Adam*, and through a more meaningful attempt to purge the self of comforting delusions. Like the earlier novel, it makes enquiries into mid twentieth century alienation but does so by digging deeper into its narrator’s psyche. From his narrative position of writer – and a writer who has rejected ‘Literature’ for autobiographical prose - Trocchi plays around with what it means to express one’s being through words. In passages that could have come straight out of the pages of *Merlin* he cites Beckett on the redundancy of the word, De Sade on the moral vitality of ‘monstrous works’ and attacks the ‘Aristotelian impulse to classify’, setting out his vision for a new kind of ‘anti-literature’ (*Cain*, pp. 7 & 59). Trocchi/Necchi the author also contemplates the fixedness of his identity, using drugs to heighten the remove he feels from his actions, then circling and re-circling the problem. Moving from heroin to marijuana, he says:

I watched a robot living myself, watching, waiting, gesticulating, for as I prepare this document I watch myself preparing it … To look into oneself endlessly is to be aware of what is discontinuous and null; it is to sever the I who is aware from the I of whom he is aware … and who is he? What is I doing in the third person? (*Cain*, pp. 69-70)

As Tom McCarthy notes in the foreword to the latest edition of *Cain* (London: Oneworld, 2011), the discontinuous and null are Trocchi’s major preoccupations. If *Young Adam* had suggested the emptiness of social gesture and of acceptable social mores – and hinted at a larger emptiness in the individual’s attempt to assert his or her identity - Trocchi ratchets this up in *Cain*, peeling away his many versions of self in violent search of ‘becoming nothing’. ‘His entire sensibility’, McCarthy writes, ‘rests on an intimate relation with a space of annihilation’ (vi-vii). This is Nietzsche’s legacy in Trocchi’s work, expressed elsewhere through his description of his fellow junkies as noble ‘beasts’, freed from the slave morality that weakens their straight counterparts (p. 34). It is also an extension of his interest in the Marquis de Sade, a perversely romantic idea that experience of and dependence on the drug enables transcendence of false, deceptive consciousness. ‘There is no more systematic nihilism,’ he writes grimly but approvingly, ‘than that of the junky in America’ (p. 36).

Though the subject matter and much of the writing in *Cain* bear out John Calder’s description of it as ‘the prime example of British Beat writing’, Trocchi’s concentrated, careful examination of mind and identity separates him from William Burroughs, Jack Kerouac and their contemporaries (Calder, ‘Alex Trocchi’, p. 35). He and Burroughs were both captivated by the life of criminality, destitution and social nonconformity associated with heroin, but they used the drug itself – and all drugs in fact - to very different literary ends. Burroughs’ focus in *Junkie* and *Naked Lunch*, his two novels about life as an addict, is physiological, psychological and social rather than philosophical. He describes the sensations and hallucinations induced by drugs, and figures the control junk exerts over its users as an extended metaphor for larger social systems of control. He makes little sustained attempt, however, to consider the workings of the mind in relation to existence through heroin. Likewise, Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg and Gregory Corso all sourced spiritual and religious visions from their drug-induced reveries but were always poetic rather than empirical. Although he shifts ground constantly, and leaves most of his questions unanswered, Trocchi’s thought process is moored in a logic and determination that give the sense of a genuine philosophical experiment. In this respect, *Cain* is closer to Aldous Huxley’s *The Doors of Perception* (1954) – a William Blake-inspired but unromantic account of the ways that vision and thought change on mescaline – than Burroughs’ *Naked Lunch* (1959), Ginsberg’s *Howl* (1955) or any number of similar works written around that time. If it presents itself as a kind of tell-all story about life on the underside, its major value lies in the author’s ability to detail each shift in consciousness he experiences while opiated, and to explore not just the experience but the existential queries it generates.

If heroin allows Trocchi a glimpse into the ‘nothing’ beyond delusions of identity and social conformity, he also presents it – troublingly - as a litmus test for authenticity. The relationships between truth and thought and truth and utterance both stimulate and plague him throughout *Cain’s Book.* On the drug, he believes it possible to intuit whether what is thought and said is ‘authentic’ or a sham, a genuine signifier of feeling or false concepts and language intended to console or manufacture contact. Scientifically, he watches himself for evidence of one or the other, and stops himself whenever that authenticity seems to be waning. And yet, of course, his ‘scientific’ approach is based on faith, and a faith that excludes others. Like a religious man testing his mind against a larger deific truth, he is forever judging other peoples’ behavior by the same dualistic standard. Authenticity and inauthenticity are Trocchi’s good and evil and he is as zealous in his praise and condemnation as the pious priests and sheriffs he lampoons.

Indeed, coldly reliving a moment back in Glasgow when his disgruntled wife hesitated about whether to leave him, Necchi/Trocchi reprimands her harshly for not being able to make the ‘authentic move’ (p. 51). Not ‘inviolable’, a word that implies a condition unbreakable and absolute and which he uses again and again to venerate the state of mind on heroin, his wife had failed that religious test (p. 51). This is a typically ‘Beat’ attitude, found throughout Jack Kerouac and Burroughs’ work in particular, and spelled out clearly in Norman Mailer’s 1957 essay ‘The White Negro’. According to Mailer’s ‘philosophy of hip’, the post-Second World War West had produced a new kind of spiritual existentialist hero, one able ‘to exist without roots, to set out on that uncharted journey into the rebellious imperatives of the self’, and to remain in touch at all times with ‘what is happening at each instant of the electric present’ (Section II, pp. 3 & 5 [although no page numbers are unlisted]). To be hip means to think fast and instinctively, and to do and say in each moment what your instinct tells you is ‘true’. It also means disdaining the inability of others to ‘make it’, to express themselves in an equivalently ‘honest’ fashion, or a fashion that fits your particular version of the truth.

As the episode with his wife suggests, the most extreme manifestations of these suspect politics involved his treatment of women. Here and elsewhere, he behaves sadistically and with sexual malice towards Moira, deriding her ‘stupidity’, dismissing her as a ‘boring lay’ and observing dispassionately as she squirms under his gaze (pp. 50-51). Like Henry Miller – whose style and attitude he admired and who he met at the Edinburgh Writers’ Conference in 1962 – Trocchi has been absolved of his misogyny by reference to the stand he was taking for freedom in literature. *Cain’s Book*, as he puts it halfway through, is intended as a strike against the idea that book is ‘responsible’ (p. 40). As in the publicity statement he wrote for Girodias’ *Olympia Press,* he argues that the public confession of offensive thought and behavior is essential to the freedom not only of the arts but society since it counters the totalitarian instinct towards moral outrage. By this logic, sexual cruelty becomes just another part of a larger battle against the censor. To object to it means to implicate oneself in a totalitarian mode of thought, and – as a result – commentators on Trocchi tend to downplay his misogyny. It ends up either being overlooked or characterized as a necessary aspect of his experiments with evil. A serious consideration of his writing, however, requires an appreciation of the difference between sexual writing that is explicit for the purpose of breaking taboo, and writing that revels in cruelty towards women. When Trocchi talks about the size and shape of his wife’s ‘cunt’, or describes his shooting partner’s heroin wound as her ‘cunt’, the violence of the obscenity is aimed at the absurdity of moral outrage. When he talks about his wife as ‘a boring lay’, as … and … he directs his violence towards a vulnerable woman who loves him (pp. 50-51). While clearly neither merit prohibition, the one has a valid purpose; the other is gratuitously cruel.

Another related consideration is the psychological purpose behind his sexual obscenity. Henry Miller – who was lauded as a pioneer for sexual freedom in the early sixties but jettisoned with the rise of second wave feminism – made the case that his violence on the page helped him purge the violence of his thought: ‘I was getting the poison out of my system’ he said. ‘Curiously enough it had a tonic effect on others’ (‘My Aims and Intentions’, p. 155). The vocalization of cruelty, in other words, had the therapeutic effect of cleansing writer and reader of those feelings and liberating him or her to feel and behave more humanely. While no excuse for his objectification of women, it does suggest a larger positive agenda. Rooted more firmly in the tradition of the Marquis de Sade, Trocchi’s own arguments for writing graphically about sex do not concede to such humanistic aims. He used literature not to rid himself of ‘the poison’ but to assert its significance in the grander scheme – a fact borne out by the lack of discrepancy between his treatment of women in his life and *Cain’s Book*. In this respect, again, his use of heroin is revealing. Henry Miller – who set a mid-century benchmark to Trocchi’s and William Burroughs’ experiments with obscenity – was dismayed at the next generation’s fixation with drugs. While he had expressed his moral rebellion in writing with the hope of coming out the other side clean, they sought annihilation through heroin not to relinquish the poison but to test its strength and effects. They had no intention, in the act, of coming out the other side at all. Trocchi’s challenge to the censor then was an updated, more shocking version of the challenge Miller had made in the 1930s, and it was at once braver and politically more nihilistic.

**Pornographic Trocchi**

Besides the means for literary experimentation, sex provided Trocchi with his main source of income over the course of his thirty-year career. The five pornographic stories he wrote in Paris, and one in New York, sold widely and have remained in print more consistently than either of his serious novels. Like Henry Miller before him, and like his contemporaries at *Merlin* Terry Southern, Richard Seaver and Chrisopher Logue he fed himself and funded his more respectable endeavors in Paris by the quick turnover of erotic fantasy books. Between 1952 and 1955 Trocchi supplied Maurice Girodias with a range of salacious titles – from *School for Sin* (1955) and *Thongs* (1956)to *White Thighs* (1955)– and he competed with Southern, Seaver and Logueto see how quickly and outrageously they could be written. At the same time – but for intellectual rather than financial reasons - he was translating risqué works by the French playwright Apollinaire and the Marquis De Sade. The New York addition to his pornographic oeuvre was *Sappho of Lesbos* (1960), an exaggeratedly bawdy rewriting of the Ancient Greek poet’s life and times, which he and his publisher passed off as a direct translation. Apart from *Sappho*, all of his erotic fiction and translations appeared originally under pseudonyms, most commonly the female names ‘Frances Lengel’, ‘Carmencita de Las Lunas’ but also ‘Oscar Mole’, ‘James Fidler’.

Significantly, *Young Adam* was also published as work by ‘Frances Lengel’ and sold by *Olympia Press* from the same angle as his erotic works. Accepting Maurice Girodias’ request for ‘one sex scene per chapter’, Trocchi amended it to suit the readership *Olympia* were after, meaning the first edition of *Young Adam* – a book he had been refining since his student days – was sent out into the world with serious flaws. It would take four revisions – in 1960, 1961, 1963 and 1966 - before Trocchi would finally declare himself happy with the finished product (Scott, *Monster*, p. 81). His contemporaries in Paris have pointed out both the damage *Young Adam*’s bastardisationdid to Trocchi’s fledging reputation and a more deeply damaging desire for notoriety his acceptance of Girodias’ demand suggests. By the same token, in *A Life in Pieces*, their 1997 compendium of biographical and critical work on Trocchi, Allan Campbell lists the author’s willingness to sex up ‘his cherished literary debut’ alongside his devotion to heroin as evidence of his underlying ‘spiritual damage’ (p. vi).

If *Young Adam* reached its first readers as a serious book with titillating sections, the reverse is true of Trocchi’s erotic works. All are aesthetically and politically questionable. All contain exaggerated plotlines and abound with misogynistic assumption and imagery. However, the best of them also contain flashes of the philosophical insight that illuminates *Cain* and the later editions of *Young Adam*. *Helen and Desire*, which Trocchi wrote in 1954 and remains his most widely read work, tells the first person tale of a fifteen-year-old Australian girl who escapes her religious upbringing for India, Singapore, India, France and then Algeria, where she ends up sold into sex slavery. Speaking from the girl’s perspective, Trocchi equates her submission to her captors with liberation from the constraints of religious and social dogma, a fairly gross act of gender appropriation that no amount of existentialist theorizing can explain away. Attempts to do so, by critics like Trocchi’s old lecturer at Glasgow Edwin Morgan, serve as unpleasant reminders of a time in which an adult man having sex through the eyes of a fifteen-year old girl could have been deemed ‘proto feminist’ (‘Introduction’, *Helen and Desire*, p. vii). However, amid the deluge of troubling ideas about female sexuality, there are interesting statements about writing, the relationship between memory and experience, and waste and productivity in Western society. Helen, a diarist whose work is presented as having been stumbled upon by a literary Frenchman, gives a hint of the writer Trocchi would become in *Cain*. She is torn, as Trocchi is in *Cain*, between desires to write and live, seduced by the sensation of ‘triumph’ writing offers yet conscious of its inadequacy next to and as a vehicle to express existence (p. 161). At another point, he/she channels both Nietzsche and Georges Bataille to despair at a Western life ‘geared for industry’, a moral system ‘invented to make the hatred of life logical’ (p. 117).

In *Thongs,* also a picaresque from the point of view of an attractive young girl, we see the same combination of crude male fantasy and momentary philosophical wisdom. Inhabiting another sexually insatiable female body – this time belonging to Carmencita de las Lunas, slightly older but as subjugated as Helen – Trocchi describes his heroine’s violent upbringing and resultant proclivity for masochism, charting her career in prostitution from the Glasgow slum of her youth to London then Spain. Like *Young Adam*, *Thongs* was conceived before Trocchi arrived in Paris. It originally dealt with sexuality but in the process of a socially realist account of poverty and violence. On the *Olympia* factory line, however, the book ended up a Sadean romp in which social conditions took a backseat to the fetishes of Carmencita’s customers. Robert Creeley, who wrote an introduction to the American edition of *Thongs*, found it deeply moral in the Sadean sense Trocchi intended. By his narrator’s unconscious demand for pain, Creeley suggested, Trocchi revealed something unspoken about the moral truth denoted by sex. Carmencita’s pleasure in pain, Creeley says, shows the flesh rather than reason or divine commandment as ‘the measure of all possible values’. The reading is borne out by much of Trocchi’s writing in *Thongs*, writing he believed was some of his best. The traces of a valid attempt to subvert the morality tale are, however, offset by an authorial pleasure in the violent use of women that is deeply unsettling. As James Campbell points out in his essay ‘Alexander Trocchi: The Biggest Fiend of All’, referring to the narrator’s father, who brands each girl he sleeps by a slice on inner thighs, ‘sex is hardly visible at all, appearing instead in the guise of power and pain’ (p. 467).

**London, Sigma and the Tragic End**

For most of the 1960s and some of the 70s Trocchi attempted to take his ideas of existential liberation out of literature and into the realm of alternative politics. With a group of like-minded writers, poets, sociologists, psychiatrists and political activists he founded a loose collective called Sigma, which he named after the Greek sign for infinity and which aimed, he wrote in its inaugural essay, for nothing less than the 'invisible insurrection of a million minds' (p. 34). Depending on which angle you took, Sigma was the culmination either of Trocchi's career long effort to escape the limits of writing or his descent into an addiction that rendered him unable to create. His friend William Burroughs, who contributed work to the project, saw it as the latter, claiming that while he knew him Trocchi would find any excuse to stay away from the typewriter and that Sigma was as a good an excuse as any.

Trocchi took the impetus for Sigma from the groups he had been involved with during his later years in Paris. As well as Sartre, Beckett and Ionesco, he forged connections as a young man with The Situationist International, a movement founded by artist/activist Guy Debord, and later made famous during the student uprisings of the 1960s by its radical street stunts. The Situationist International’s main purpose was to oppose capitalism and a corrupt 'bourgeois' work ethic through 'play'. Daubing Paris’ walls and pavements with slogans like ‘Be Realistic. Demand the Impossible!‘, Never Work!’ and ‘Live without Dead Time’, they were to become the real life manifestations of many of the ideas Trocchi had promoted as *Merlin* editor and novelist. All this was after he had left Paris, however. While he was living among them, he put his name to the first Situationist manifesto, but he missed the opportunity to get involved in any of their actual 'insurrections'. Still a member of the group in the 1960s, Trocchi envisioned Sigma as a sort of English chapter. He put out a total of thirty Sigma pamphlets over seven years, in which he included a few of his own essays but mainly work by American friends like Burroughs, poets Robert Crowley and Michael McLure, and Norman Mailer. The project also involved a series of sporadic meetings at which Trocchi set out a vague and constantly mutating utopian plan. According to the playwright Tom McGrath, who was a member and attended these meetings, the group’s aims ranged from the foundation of a ‘spontaneous university’ that would facilitate the expansion of consciousness rather than educate intellectually to the commandeering of a church, or even a Caribbean island where people would have license to live freely, outside the moral constraints of society.

Sigma petered out in the late sixties having failed to secure a regular meeting place, much less a university, church or island headquarters. It took up a great deal of Trocchi's time in that decade and was one reason for his failure to produce a long-promised sequel to *Cain*. The main reason, of course, was heroin. Within Sigma’s reams of publicity material there are some intriguing statements. Returning once again to Ezra Pound, his modernist influence in Paris, Trocchi updates the slogan ‘make it new’ for the sixties: Drugs, he says, allow one ‘to escape out of the prison of [the] mind’s language; to “make it new”’. The very concepts in terms of which men still ordered their lives … these were the root and fabric of our insanity … the dud coinage of our everyday language was the measure of our imbecility’ (Scott, *Monster*, p. 137). For the most part, however, there is little of note by Trocchi in the *Sigma* portfolios that he hadn't already touched on more eruditely at *Merlin* or through his literature.

His greater impact on returning to the UK arose out of engagement with the question of literature and Scottish nationalism. Invited by the publisher John Calder (who later published *Cain*) to speak at the first Edinburgh International Writers’ Conference in 1962, Trocchi made friends and headlines by berating his fellow Scot, the leading nationalist poet Hugh MacDiarmid, for his 'parochialism'. Before many Brits had read *Cain*, his stand for 'internationalism' - bolstered by alliances with fellow attendees Burroughs, Henry Miller and Lawrence Durrell - put Trocchi on the map at home in the 1960s. As well as *Cain*'s UK publication in 1963, it was followed in 1965 by his co-organisation and compering of a now legendary poetry-reading event at the Albert Hall, at which Allen Ginsberg, Gregory Corso and Lawrence Ferlinghetti – who he knew from his time in America - were his invited guests and the main attractions.

As a result of the lack of a follow-up to *Cain*, and of his predictable swindling by the publishers of his erotic stories (Maurice Girodias included), Trocchi was forced to find alternative means of income in the 1970s and early 80s. First he translated a selection of European books of a similar bent to his own; then he sold second-hand books and stamps around London. These last two decades were shrouded in the kind of banal tragedy Trocchi tried his hardest to keep out of his writing. After years of struggle with addiction - and soon after separating from the man who got her hooked - his wife Lyn died of hepatitis in 1972, aged 35. Mark, the eldest of their two teenage sons, contracted leukaemia and passed away just five years later. For the last seven years of his life, Trocchi had a happy relationship with a young woman named Sally Childs, who was initially hired as a nanny for his children, and became a surrogate mother to Mark’s younger brother Nicholas. Alex’s own death of pneumonia in 1984 was followed, horrifically, by Nicholas’ suicide aged just 18.

 **Conclusion**

The critical consensus about Trocchi – or at least the consensus among a small group of interested critics – is about right. He was, as his editors Richard Seaver and John Calder say, a talented stylist and original thinker who frittered it away in search of annihilation. If *Cain’s Book* in particularis testament to the intellectual seriousness with which Trocchi took heroin – and to his importance as a literary pioneer between modernist and postmodernist periods - the basic fact remains that he could have contributed a great deal more had he got clean. The taut, truthful style that undergirds *Young Adam*, and which appears amid original, experimental reveries and rants in *Cain’s Book* promised a great deal but was ultimately left undeveloped due to increasing demands of his addiction. More importantly, the artistically fruitful exploration of ‘inner space’ he set out on ‘under heroin’ in New York itself ended up taking second fiddle to a utopian, hedonistic fantasy of improving human relations through intoxication. The holy reverence of the post-fix scenes in *Cain* are tender, tragic evidence that Trocchi’s motivation lay beyond the desire to reform literature or overturn society’s hypocrisies and in the simple, religious love he felt when opiated. ‘Each of us was conscious of the well-being of the others’ he repeats over and over after the grinding search is done and he and his fellow junkies can finally relax into themselves (p. 25).

According to James Campbell in his book *Paris Interzone*, this represented a side of himself Alex Trocchi felt least comfortable with, and which made him balk when warned – by one friend or other in Paris – to ‘be careful you don’t become notorious instead of famous’ (p. 48). He was, it appears, aware of what Campbell calls ‘an emotional loose wire’ in his system, ‘a likelihood of spiritual damage', and understood too late that heroin had become a drain on rather than wellspring for his creative energies (p. 48). For Irvine Welsh – another Scott who wrote famously about the drug – it rendered Trocchi the ‘George Best of literature’, a man who had and blew it all because he couldn’t 'discipline himself and control his darker side’. That darker side needed further examination through words in writing rather than indulgence to the point of professional incapacitation (*A Life In Pieces*, p. 19). As for politics – and particularly his attitude to women - Trocchi fell into the same traps as many of his contemporaries, a fact that needs more careful attention than it has so far received. Significantly, these issues are tempered by an intellectual sophistication beyond most of the ‘Beat’ writers canonised ahead him. With his training in philosophy and background among the Parisian thinkers Burroughs, Kerouac and Ginsberg understood only in passing, Trocchi should have taken his place as a leading figure of the post-World War Two Renaissance. Sadly, he seems destined to be remembered as a friend to the Beats and bit part guru of a Swinging London less interested in art and literature than the mystique surrounding drugs, free love and bohemian criminality.

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1. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)