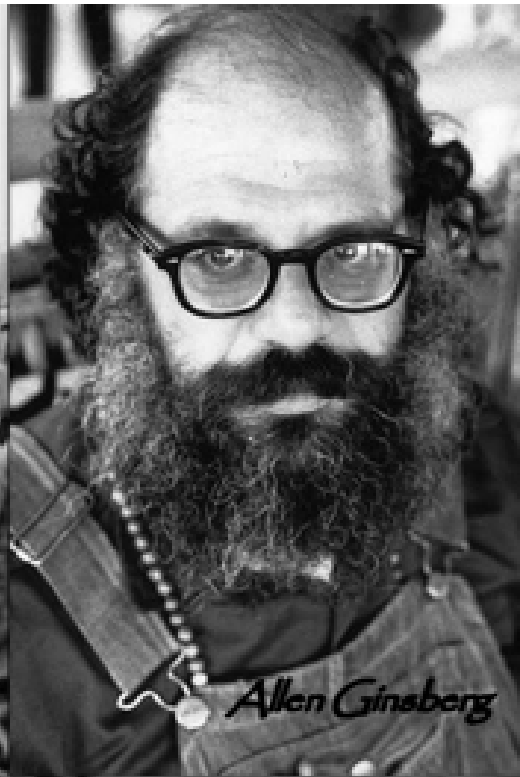


# DISDAINING THE TRIBE: ANTI-HUMANISM IN THE COUNTERCULTURE



Dr. Guy Stevenson



A revolutionary backlash against the 'technocracy ... a society in which those who govern justify themselves by appeal to technical experts who, in turn, justify themselves by appeal to scientific forms of knowledge'

Theodore Roszak, *The Making of a Counterculture: Reflections on the Technocratic Society and its Youthful Opposition* (New York: Anchor Books, 1969), pp. 7-8.

- Remembered **NOSTALGICALLY** as a 20<sup>th</sup> century revival of of the 1<sup>st</sup> American Renaissance in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century (Walt Whitman and Ralph Waldo Emerson) and as crusaders for freedom of expression and a culture of youth protest, + permissiveness.
- **DISMISSED** as a superficial & teenage fad; a self-indulgent hedonistic pop scene.

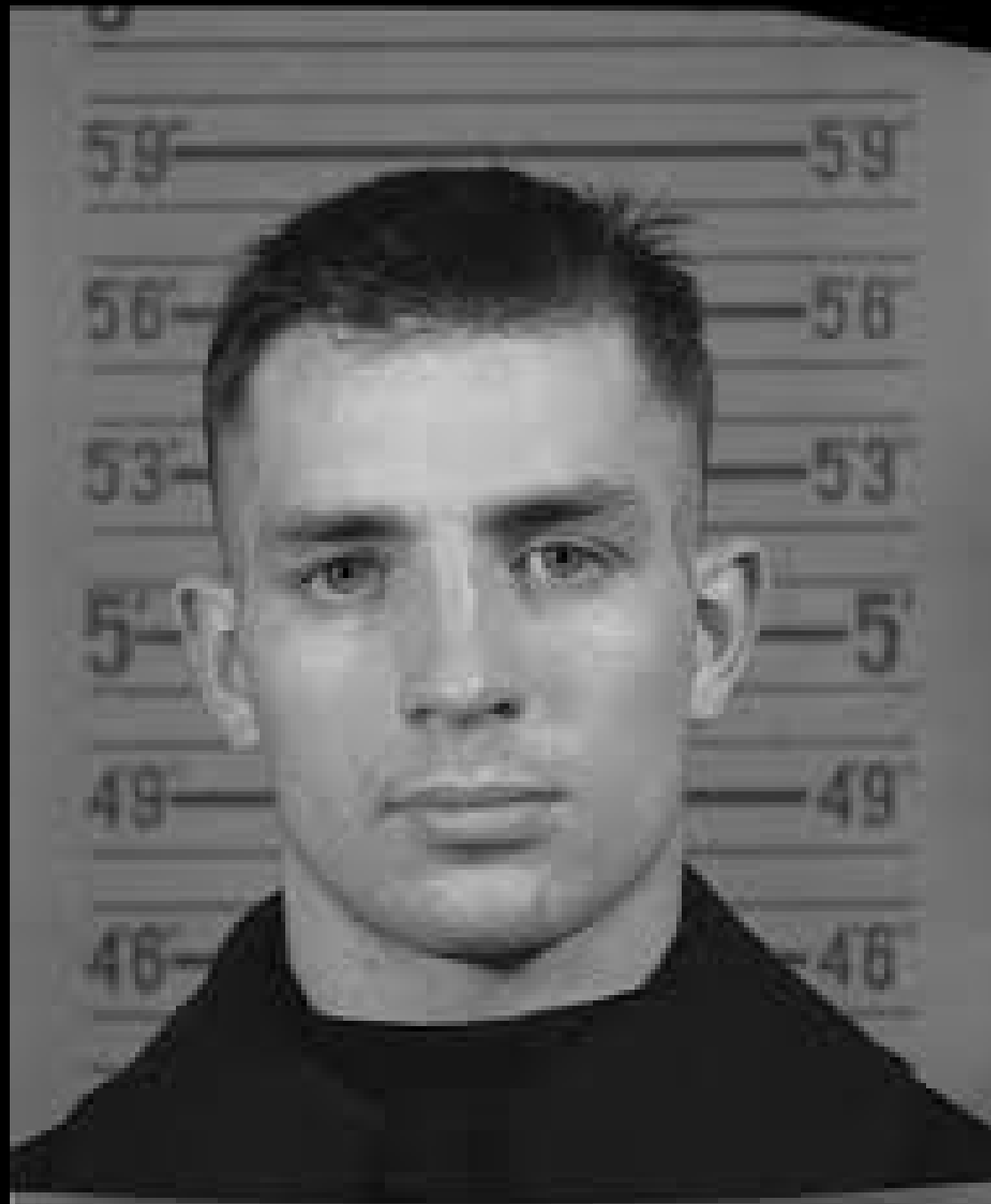
# **ANTI-HUMANISM**

- REJECTION OF HUMAN PERFECTIBILITY
- REJECTION OF THE ENLIGHTENMENT FAITH IN REASON
- REJECTION OF HUMANITY AS EXCEPTIONAL
- REJECTION OF REASON AS THE DRIVING FORCE BEHIND COLLECTIVE HUMAN PROGRESS

# OUTLINE

1. WHO WERE THEY?
2. WHAT DID THEY STAND FOR?
3. WHAT CULTURAL INFLUENCE DID THEY HAVE?
4. ANTI-HUMANIST  
PHILOSOPHY/REACTIONARY POLITICS
5. WHAT MIGHT THIS TEACH US TODAY?

# 1. WHO WERE THEY?





a novel  
by Jack Kerouac

a novel  
by Jack  
Kerouac



ON  
THE  
ROAD

Viking

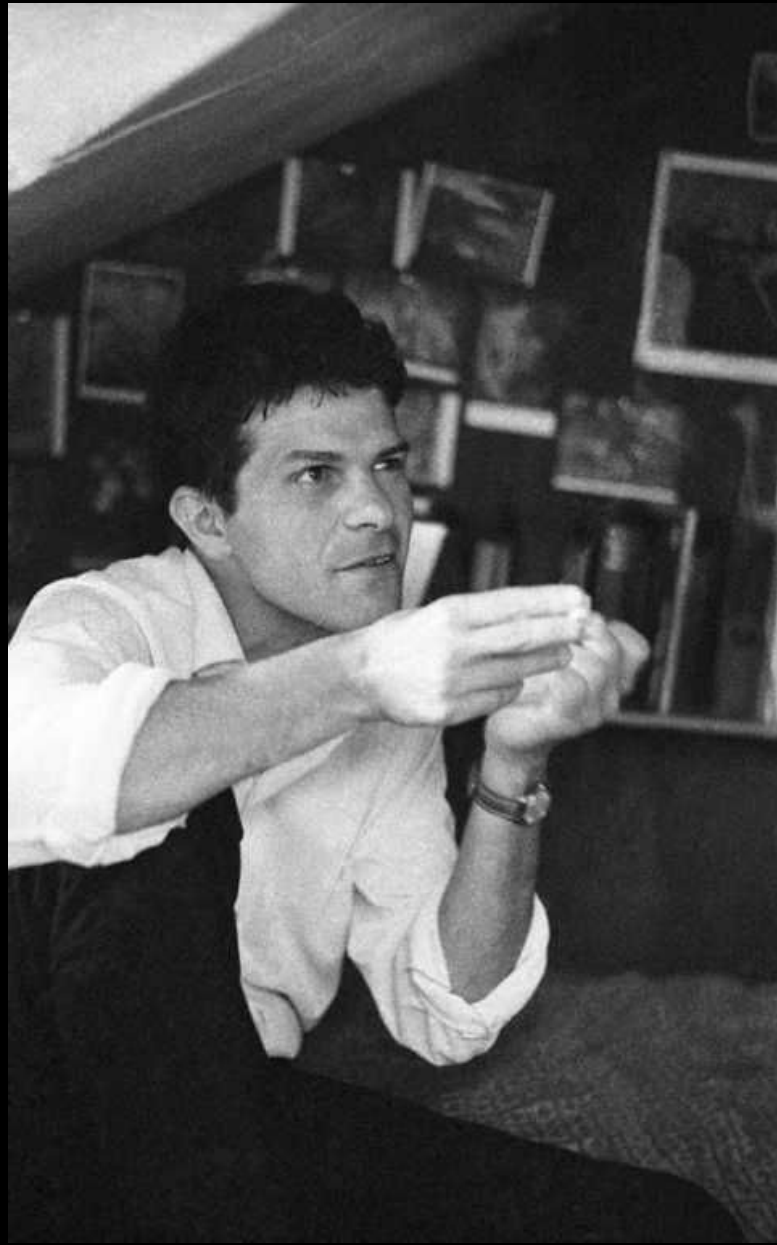


ON THE ROAD

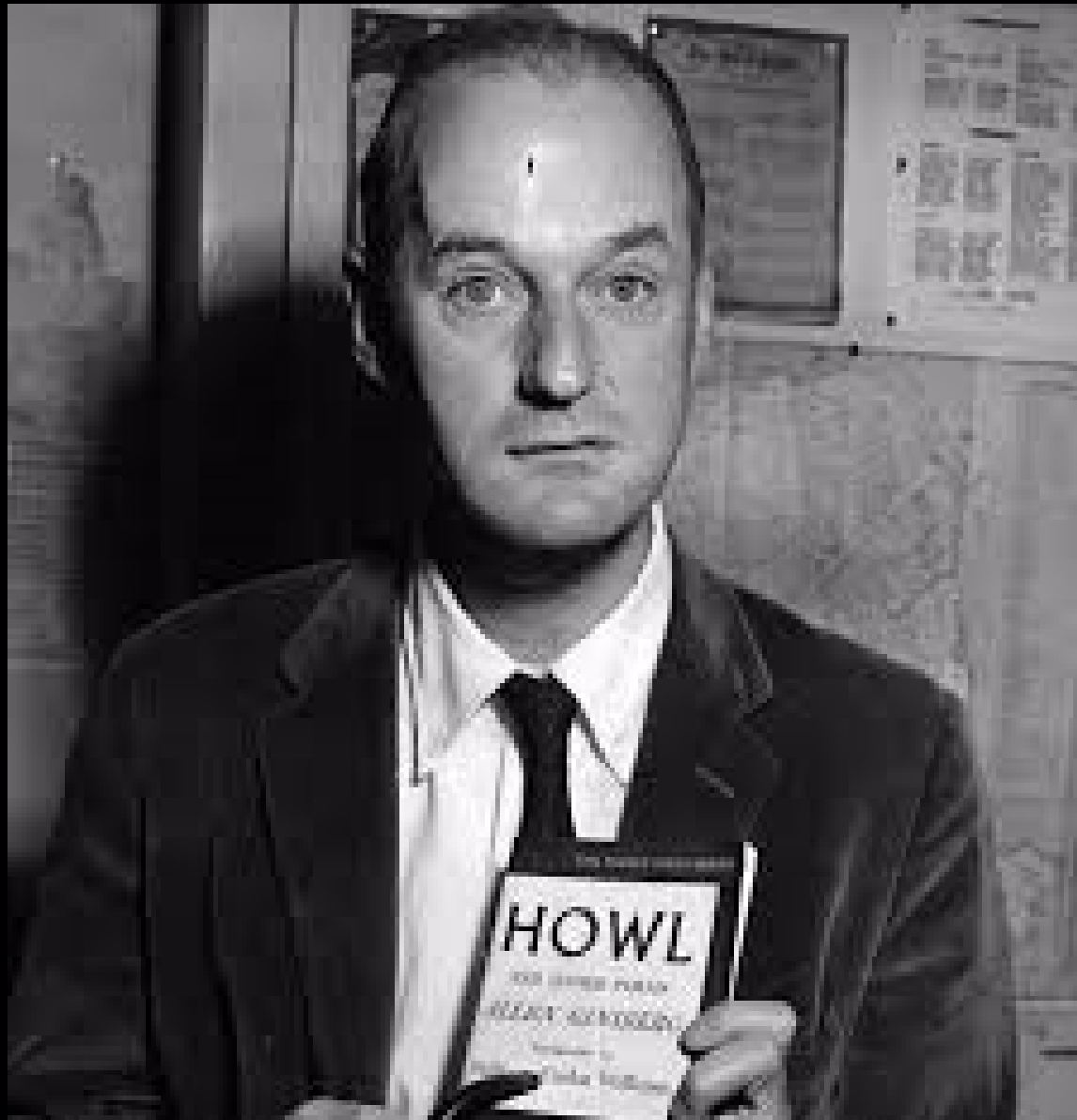


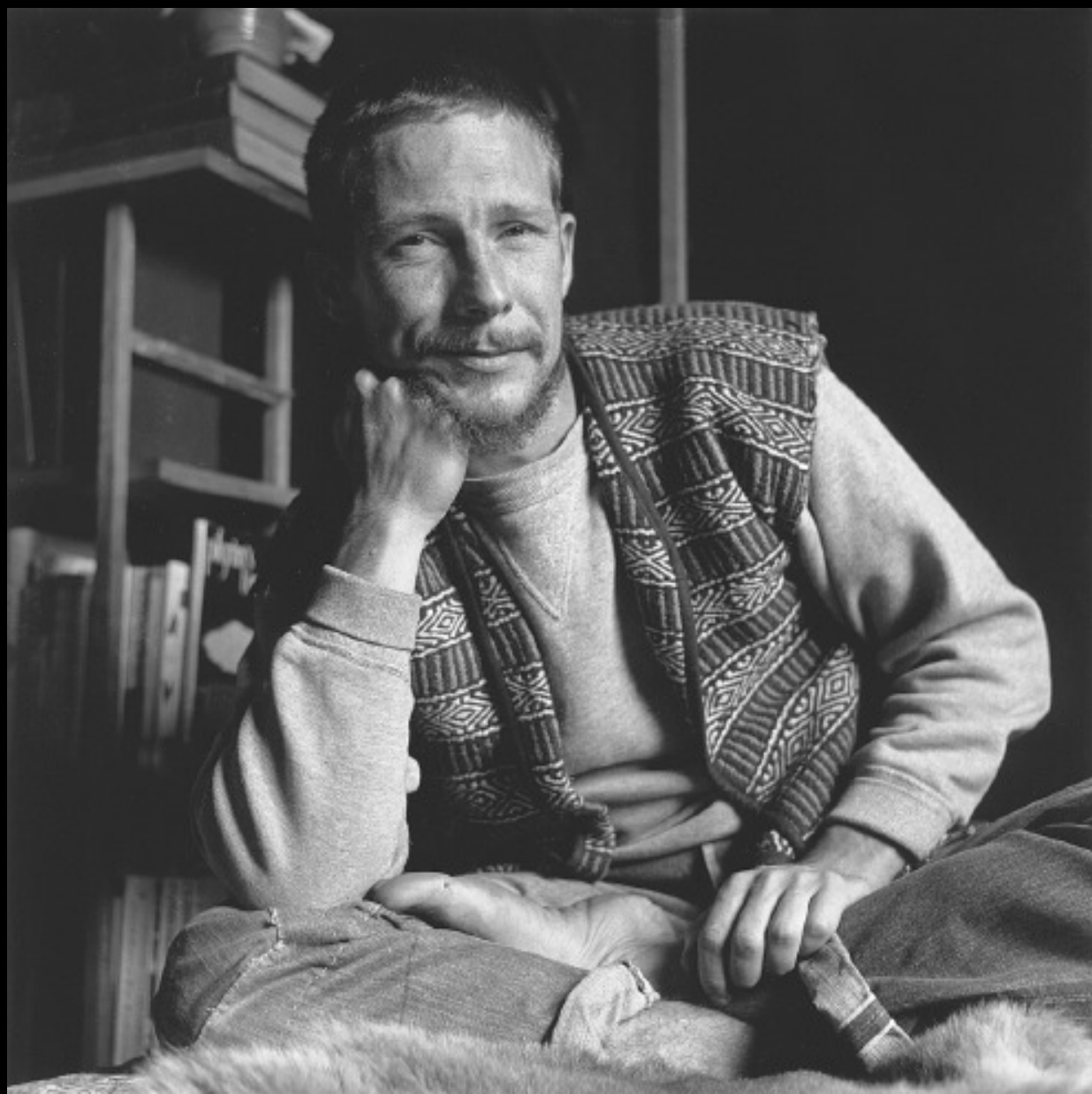
















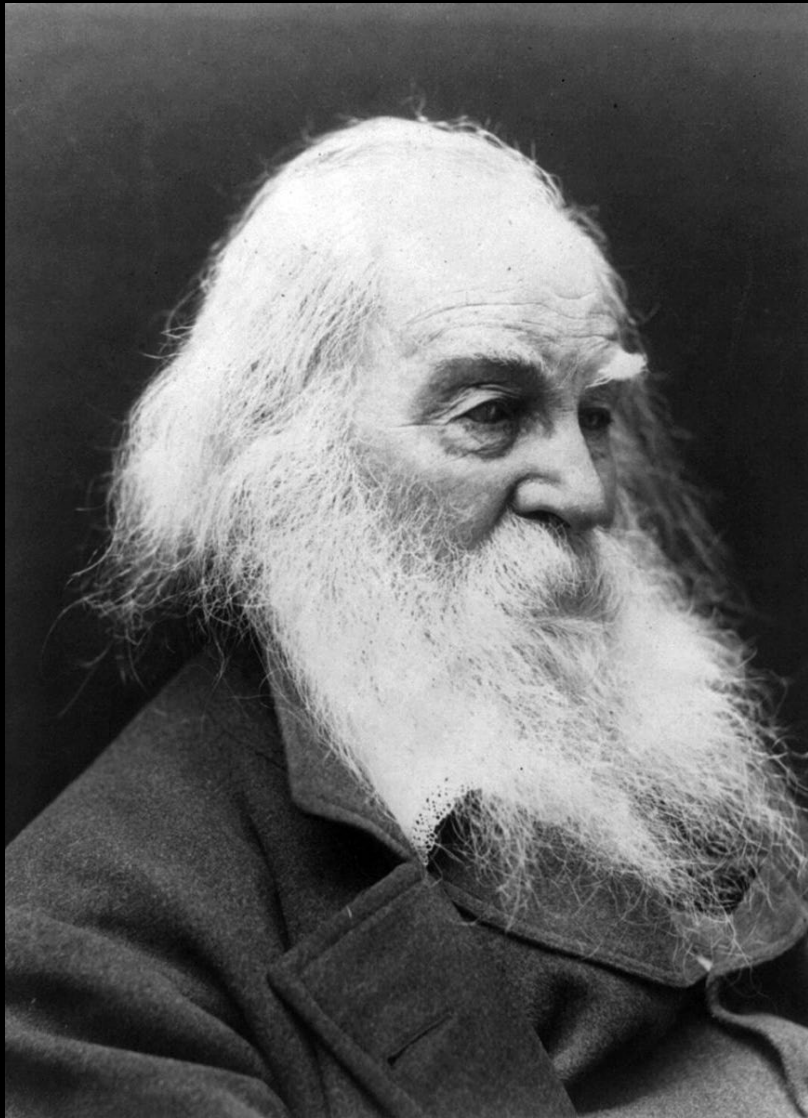


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‘THE LONG,  
PRODIGIOUS,  
AND RATIONAL  
DISORDERING  
(DERANGEMENT)  
OF ALL THE  
SENSES’

ARTHUR RIMBAUD



Walt Whitman



Ralph Waldo Emerson

'The youthful thirst, the restless exuberance, the quality of search, that pulsed in them ... bottled eagerness for talk, for joy, for excitement, for sensation, for new truths. Whatever the reason, everyone my age had a look of impatience and expectations in his eyes that bespoke ungiven love, unreleased ecstasy and the presence of buried worlds within.'

John Clellon Holmes, 'This is the Beat Generation' in *The New York Times Magazine*, Nov 16<sup>th</sup> 1954

## 2. WHAT DID THEY STAND FOR?

‘my own complete life, an endless contemplation, is so interesting,  
I love it so, it is vast, goes everywhere’

Jack Kerouac, *Visions of Cody* (New York: Penguin, 1972), p. 173.

‘I celebrate everything I see or am/ And sing or laugh and deny  
nothing’

Walt Whitman, ‘All is Truth’, in *Leaves of Grass* (Nashville: American Renaissance, 2009 [orig. ed.: 1855]), p. 307.

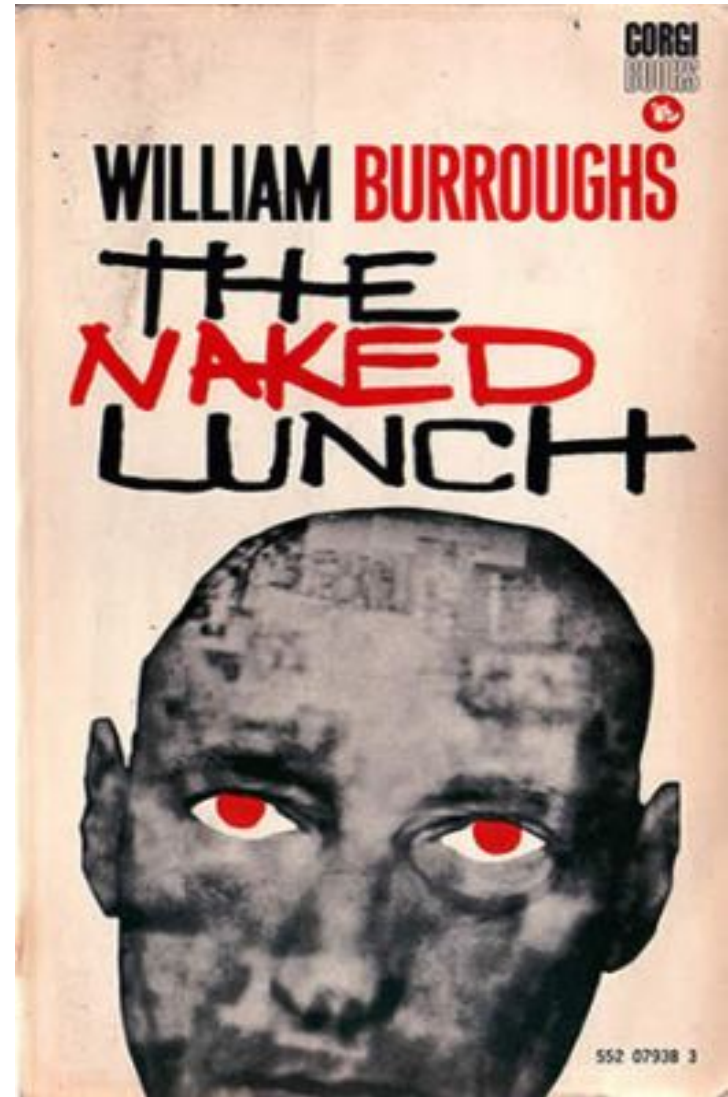
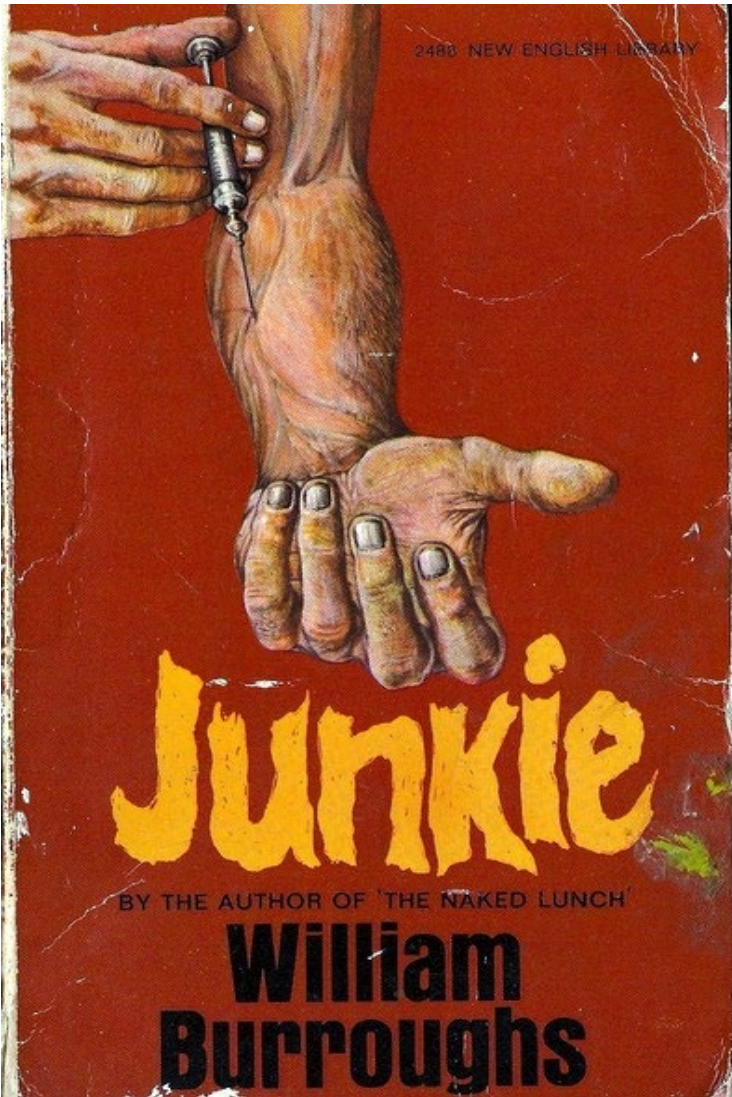
# **REBELLING AGAINST:**

- AMERICAN CONSUMERISM
- CULTURAL UNIFORMITY
- BOURGEOIS SUPPRESSION OF THE INDIVIDUAL'S RIGHT TO THINK, FEEL AND BEHAVE FREELY



‘The control machine. Simply the machinery – police, education, etc. - used by a group in power to keep itself in power and extend its power’

Jack Kerouac, *Visions of Cody* (New York: Penguin, 1972), p. 124.



# **FORMS OF REBELLION:**

- ITINERANT LIFESTYLE
- RADICALLY FORMLESS AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL LITERATURE
- SEXUAL PERMISSIVENESS IN LIFE AND OBSCENITY IN LITERATURE
- OPENING 'THE DOORS OF PERCEPTION' THROUGH DRUGS, EASTERN RELIGION AND PHILOSOPHY (ZEN BUDDHISM, HARE KRISHNA)



## 3. INFLUENCE

# Blame these 4 men for the Beatnik horror

THE outbreak of beatnik violence that wrecked Lord Montagu's jazz festival at Beaulieu last week must be blamed on the cult of despair preached by four strange men.

The four beatnik "prophets" do not themselves preach violence. But they do infect their followers with indifference or outright hostility to established codes of conduct.

Nothing matters to the beatnik save the "kicks" or thrills to be enjoyed by throwing off inhibitions. If you feel any urge, no matter how outrageous, indulge in it. If the beat of jazz whips up violent emotions, why not give way to them?

● Britain has been shocked by Peter Forbes's report on the great unwashed army of beatniks.

● Today he names the men whose rantings have mesmerised a large and impressionable section of young people throughout the world... men who have nothing to offer but despair.

That is how the teenage "disciples" of the four men who inspired the cult interpret their masters' teachings.

I know this to be so not only from what happened at Beaulieu. My investigations into the beatnik horror both here and in America lead me to the conclusion that violence and viciousness are the inevitable result of the beatnik "philosophy."

Let me introduce you to its four prophets so that you can see how their teachings, in one or another form, though they may appear, nevertheless become the source of evil.

First, there is Jack Kerouac, the former American merchant seaman who



KEROUAC the

An ex-seaman who became a talented writer, he prefers to devote his talents

CORSO the crank poet



● The only way to enter a modern city, he wrote, is "very tentatively with two suitcases filled with despair."

became a talented writer. Unfortunately, he has devoted his great gifts to exalting the bums and jazz-maniacs of the New York jive cellars.

## 'Corrupt'

Kerouac evolved a theory of a post-war generation "beat" by society, but becoming "beatnik" by turning their backs on a "corrupt civilisation."

Some of the younger, callow generation of Americans took that to mean that they could forget civilised morality, too.

They became rebels against society. They took to jazz or drugs as a means of escape from the ordinary world. They despised work. They didn't wash.

All this because everything in the "corrupt" 20th century world evokes disgust. The disgust is certainly fed by the other American beatnik prophets.

William S. Burroughs, for example. He is in his middle forties, freely admits to have been a drug addict for 15 years. He is now cured, but

This is how he wrote recently of his drug taking:—"I lived in one room in the native quarter of Tangier. I had not taken a bath in a year nor changed my clothes or removed them except to stick a needle every hour in the fibrous grey wooden flesh..."

Allen Ginsberg is the third of the American beatnik prophets, whose despair has infected some teenagers. He is 34 years old and—in his own way—a gifted poet.

One of his poems begins: "I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness. Starving hysterical naked, dragging themselves through the Negro streets at dawn looking

For an angry fix..." Like Burroughs and Kerouac he, too, in his writings, seems obsessed by drugs and drug addicts.

The fourth of the beatnik prophets from America, Gregory Corso, wrote that the only sensible way to enter a modern city is "very tentatively, two suitcases filled with despair."



BURROUGHS the ex-drug addict

are concerned, disgust and revolt against ordinary values is confined to words. But their followers and disciples act....

The break-up of Lord Montagu's jazz festival is a warning of how beatniks over here can take to violence.

Fortunately there is no encouragement of beatnik behaviour by ordinary people in Britain.

That is why so many young British beatniks are going abroad, to France in particular. There, where the atmosphere is somewhat more lax, they can let themselves go.

They can and they do—as my next report will show.

NEXT WEEK: The British beatniks in Paris. The dentist's son who became a tramp. A London girl who repented.

THEIR CULT OF DESPAIR IS DRIVING THE TEENAGERS TO VIOLENCE

He lived for a year in a room in Tangier without taking a bath or removing his clothes.

GINSBERG the hate merchant

At 34 this gifted poet's hate of society and modern life led him to write: "I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness." Now the beatniks worship his philosophy.



How one section of the media saw the Beatniks... an extract from an article

D1718  
SIGNET  
BOOKS

THE NEW NOVEL BY

**JACK  
KEROUAC**

AUTHOR OF

**ON THE ROAD**

**THE  
DHARMA  
BUMS**

The sensational bestseller  
about two reckless wanderers  
out to scale the heights  
of life...and love

A SIGNET BOOK COMPLETE AND UNABRIDGED

'A great rucksack revolution, thousands or even millions of young Americans wandering around with their rucksacks, going up mountains to pray, making children laugh ... wild gangs of holy men getting together to drink and talk and pray ... to meditate and ignore society'





## 4. ANTI-HUMANIST PHILOSOPHY/ REACTIONARY POLITICS

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‘When one analyses the language of man, one doesn’t discover the nature, essence or freedom of man. In their stead, one discovers unconscious structures which govern us without our noticing or willing it’

Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archeology of the Human Sciences* (London: Routledge, 2002 [orig. ed.: 1966]), p. 357.

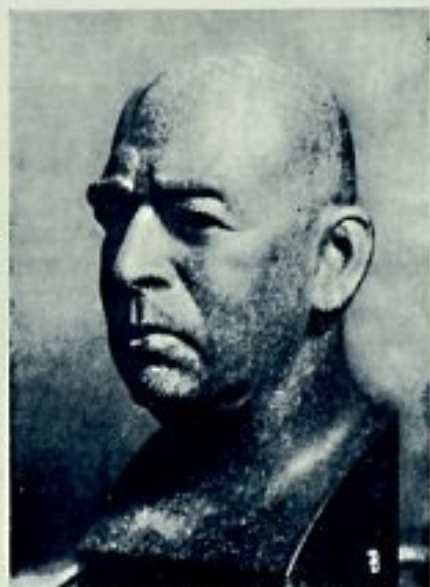


William Roberts, *The Vorticists at the Restaurant de la Tour Eiffel*.  
Courtesy of the Estate of William Roberts

‘When a sense of the reality of ... absolute values is lacking, you get a refusal to believe any longer in the radical imperfection of either Man or Nature. This develops logically into the belief that life is the source and measure of all values, and that man is fundamentally good. Instead, then, of/ Man (radically imperfect) ... apprehending ... Perfection, -/ you get the second term (now entirely misunderstood) illegitimately introduced inside the first [elipses and brackets Hulme’s own]. This leads to a complete change in all values. The problem of evil disappears, the conception of sin loses all meaning.’

T.E. Hulme, ‘A Notebook’, in *Collected Writings*, pp. 419-56, p. 444. Originally published in *The New Age* in seven installments (December 1915 – February 1916).

OSWALD SPENGLER



THE DECLINE  
OF THE  
WEST

Volume II. Perspectives of World History

ALFRED · A · KNOFF



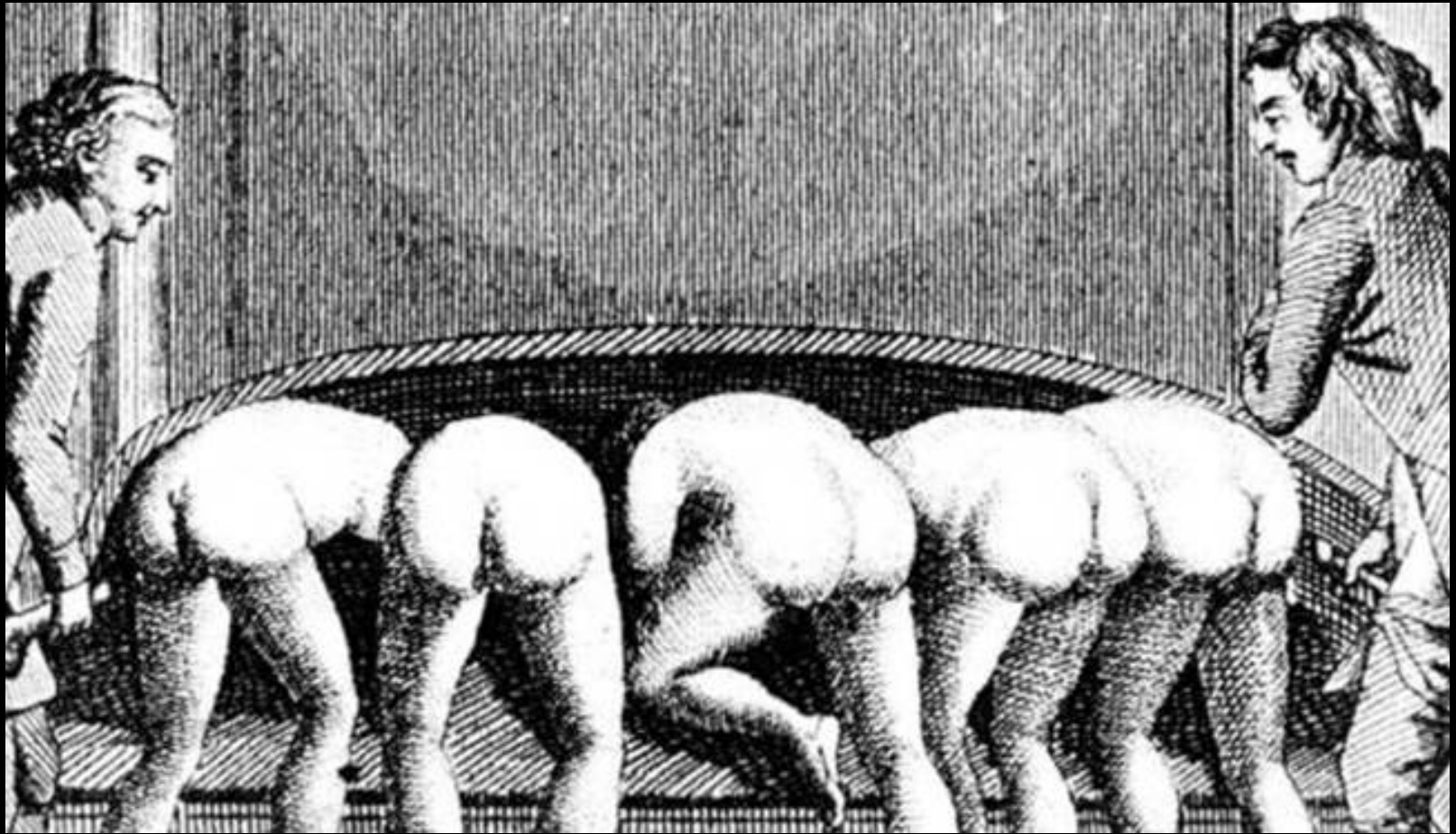
PUBLISHER · N · Y ·



'The Beats' faith in self – even societal – liberation through art was tempered by a Spenglerian expectation of the total breakdown of Western culture.'

John Tytell, *Naked Angels: The Lives and Literature of the Beat Generation* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1976), p. 9





‘The Victorian age produced a morass of sugary comfort and amiableness, indulged men so much that they became guys of sentiment – or sentimental guys. Against this “sentimentality” people of course reacted. So the brutal tap was turned on.’

Wyndham Lewis, ‘The Caliph’s Design’, in *The Egoist*, 1919

# PRETTY LITTLE FASCISTS?

- The Beat bid for progress through mystical experience rather than rational, scientific advancement has been called into question.
- What to make of their 'defection from the long-standing tradition of skeptical, secular intellectuality which has served as the prime vehicle for three hundred years of scientific and technical work in the West' (Theodore Roszak)?





‘The burden of my generation was the knowledge that something rational had caused all this ... and that nothing rational could end it.’

John Clellon Holmes, *Nothing More to Declare* (Boston: E.P. Dutton & Co., 1967), p. 215.

## TENTATIVE CONCLUSIONS

- At a cultural level, anti-humanism in the Beat Generation hints at equivalent paradoxes in the 60s counterculture they inspired:
  1. Belief in human potential along with fatalism about the many who cannot get on board with the new way of thinking/living/
  2. A binary of authenticity/inauthenticity that contradicts the message of peace and love on which the counterculture was sold
- It also hints at an irresponsibility towards the tribe the Beats were nurturing – an awareness of complicated imperfections in the human condition but a dangerous willingness to ignore them in the pursuit of a romantic story.
- Finally, reading the Beats for their unexpected anti-humanism may allow for a better appreciation of countercultural thought today.
- The currency of authenticity and inauthenticity in the counterculture, of hip versus square, remains with us – in public discourse around social justice, of 'woke' and 'non-woke'.
- The idea that certain people get it and others don't, and the willingness to discard those who don't.
- A legacy of the 1960s, it's an attitude shared by the right and the left today and can be better understood through attention to the decade that produced it.