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Dostoevsky and the Beat Generation

American literary history is rich with heroes of counterculture, maverick writers and poets who were rejected by the bulk of their contemporaries but inspired a cult-like following among a few devotees. The phenomenon of Beat Generation writers and poets, however, is unique in twentieth-century American letters precisely because they managed to go from marginal underground classics of the 1950s to the official voice of dissent and cultural opposition of the 1960s, a force to be reckoned with. Their books were adopted by hippies and flower children, their poems chanted at sit-ins, their lives faithfully imitated by a whole generation of young baby boomers. Their antiauthoritarian ethos along with their belief in the brotherhood of mankind were the starting point of a whole movement that gave the United States such social and cultural watersheds as Woodstock and the Summer of Love, the Chicago Riots and the Marches on Washington. The suggestion that Dostoevsky had anything to do with the American Sexual Revolution of the 1960s and street rioting in American urban centres might seem at first to be far-fetched. It is, however, a powerful testimony to Dostoevsky's profound impact on twentieth-century American literature and culture that the first Beats saw themselves as followers of Dostoevsky and established their personal and literary union (and, as it were, the entire Beat movement) on the foundation of their shared belief in the primacy of Dostoevsky and his novels.

Evidence of Dostoevsky's impact on such key writers and poets of the Beat Generation as Allen Ginsberg (1926-1997), Jack Kerouac (1922-1969), and William Burroughs (1914-1997) is found in an almost embarrassing profusion: scattered throughout their essays, related in their correspondence, broadly hinted at and sometimes explicitly indicated in their novels and poems. Many of the Beats testified candidly and enthusiastically to Dostoevsky's influence on their life and work in their many interviews. They reminisced about the way that Dostoevsky and his novels served as a common ground for them in the forties and fifties. They talked of identifying with both Dostoevsky and his characters. They even wrote letters to each other in which they discussed their efforts to incorporate their vision of Dostoevsky's philosophy in their own lives.

Surprisingly, the critics and commentators of the Beats' work have largely ignored their connection with

Dostoevsky, focussing instead on the Beats' admiration for Chinese and Japanese literature and philosophy, their love for Walt Whitman, and their ties to the Dada and Surrealist movements. A scholar interested in Dostoevsky's impact on American literature and culture thus encounters in the Beats' materials a practically unmined lode of provocative data that sheds light on many important issues of Dostoevsky's reception in the United States. The questions underlying the larger issue of Dostoevsky's appropriation by the Beats are three-fold. First of all, why did this group of young iconoclasts who rebelled against the establishment and dedicated themselves to exploring alternative lifestyles choose Dostoevsky as their patron saint? What was their interpretation of Dostoevsky and his works? Finally, what did they take from Dostoevsky for their own writings?

The Beats

The original Beats were a small circle of young and predominantly male writers and poets who met and forged a lasting friendship in New York of the 1940s and early 1950s. A year before his death in 1997 Allen Ginsberg wrote that the "Beat Generation literary movement" began as "a group of friends who had worked together on poetry, prose, and cultural conscience from the mid-forties until the term became popular nationally in the late fifties. The group consisted of Kerouac, Neal Cassady ... William Burroughs, Herbert Huncke, John Clellon Holmes ... and myself. We met Carl Solomon and Philip Lamantia in 1948, encountered Gregory Corso in 1950, and first saw Lawrence Ferlinghetti and Peter Orlovsky in 1954" (1996b:xiv).¹

Literary scholars and cultural historians offer differing perspectives on the identity and the importance of the peripheral members of the group. There is little dispute, however, that the central figures of that first circle were Ginsberg, Kerouac, and Burroughs. Both Burroughs and Kerouac have subsequently tried to dissociate themselves from the Beats. When Burroughs, for instance, was asked about his relation to the Beat movement he insisted that he never had anything in common "with their objectives or their literary style" (1976:43). Kerouac also expressed dismay during interviews given later in life at the way the Beat movement developed and repeatedly said that he had nothing to do with it. Nonetheless, when Gregory Corso — poet and early member of the Beats — reflected in 1997 about the founders of the movement and their respective roles, he singled out each of the three men: "Of the Beat Generation, Burroughs was kind of the captain of the ship. Ginsberg would've been the radio operator; Kerouac, the first mate; and I would have been a passenger" (*The Rolling Stone Book of the Beats* 1999:222).

1 In the case of letters, diary entries, and interviews original dates will be cited when possible.

It was, in retrospect, an unlikely triumvirate: Ginsberg was the offspring of Eastern-European Jewish intellectuals, a gawky bespectacled teenager who mulled about New York reading poetry; Kerouac was the failed athletic hope of Lowell, Massachusetts, a small mill-town to which his working class French-Canadian family immigrated before his birth; Burroughs, older than the other two men and living the classic lifestyle of a social drop-out, was the scion of a privileged Southern family. According to Ginsberg — who became the unofficial chronicler and spokesman of the Beats² — the thing that brought them together in New York was their attraction to Russian literature, more specifically their love for Dostoevsky: “We, meaning Kerouac, myself, and Burroughs, all read a lot of Russian literature, Dostoevsky particularly. The first sort of meeting of minds that Kerouac and I had was over the fact that we both read Dostoevsky’s *Idiot*. And we identified with Alyosha or Myshkin. And Burroughs was very interested in [Dostoevsky’s] nutty-man-confessional”³ (1983:27-28).

Ginsberg’s claims about the Beats’ unity may be taken with a degree of scepticism. As the most active and prominent representative of the Beats in the nineteen-eighties (Kerouac was long dead of alcoholism and Burroughs was leading a largely reclusive life, giving the occasional interview, and publishing the occasional short text), Ginsberg had most at stake in presenting the original Beats as a coherent and legitimate literary movement: a group unified by a shared literary and cultural vision. Burroughs offered a different perspective on literary unity within the group in an interview he gave in the 1970s: “Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg and Gregory Corso are all close personal friends [of mine] of many years standing, but were not doing at all the same thing, either in writing or in outlook. You couldn’t really find four writers more different, more distinctive. It’s simply a matter of juxtaposition rather than any actual association of literary styles or overall objectives” (1976:43).

2 Ginsberg became interested in photography and took many thousands of photographs of all the members of the Beats and their favourite locales. He also promoted the work of the other Beat writers and poets, was instrumental in the publication of Burroughs’s and Kerouac’s work, gave many interviews and wrote many essays throughout his life about the Beats.

3 Most likely *Zapiski iz podpolia* [*Notes from the Underground*], although it might also be Stavrogin’s confessions in *Besy* [*The Possessed*].

Most scholars seem to agree with Burroughs that if the Beats were indeed a literary movement rather than a cultural phenomenon, they were a singularly unstructured literary movement. Gregory Stephenson, for example, writes in *The Daybreak Boys: Essays on the Literature of the Beat Generation* (1990) that “[t]he Beats were never ... a homogenous or a consistent movement. They issued no manifestos, subscribed to no basic tenets, formulated no dogma, embraced no common theory, doctrine, or creed” (Stephenson 8); other scholars assert that the Beats “lacked any shared platform” (Tytell 94). It is obvious, however, that the Beats did have certain fundamental things in common and that the first of these was a shared literary ancestry, in which Dostoevsky occupied a central place.⁴

Practically all the members of the first Beat circle discovered Dostoevsky independently *before* they joined forces in New York. Ginsberg recalled reading Dostoevsky at the age of fourteen, when he “stumbled on ... *The Idiot* and read it through and continued with other Dos. [sic] and other Russians” [1976:208] (in a late poem, “Yiddishe Kopf” [1991] he frames the experience as a Jewish male rite of passage into adulthood and, accordingly, changes the age to thirteen: “reading Dostoevsky at 13 I write poems at restaurant/ tables Lower East Side, perfect delicatessen intellectual” [1996a:378]). Kerouac became fascinated by Dostoevsky’s novels before he embarked on a brief and disastrous stint of service with the Merchant Marines during World War II. Gregory Corso was first handed Dostoevsky’s *Brothers Karamazov* when he was a teenager serving a three-year jail term. He later commented that Dostoevsky’s novels along with those of the great 19th century French writers instructed and liberated him, so that he became “free to think and feel and write” (qtd. by Waldman in *The Beat Book* 1999:1). Neal Cassady, the rebel-hero of the Beats, immortalized in Kerouac’s texts and Ginsberg’s poems, fell in love with Dostoevsky’s novels in a reform school in 1943 (Cassady 1948:39). Dostoevsky was, in this way, one of the few writers that these founder or proto-Beats have all read and were passionate about.

Dostoevsky’s novels both facilitated a meeting of minds for many members of the Beat circle and promoted a closer personal association. When Ginsberg and Kerouac met, they “began to talk about Dostoevsky” (McNally 63), which led to their friendship. Similarly, Lucien Carr, one of the more dramatic personalities associated with the early Beats (he subsequently served time for a supposed “honour killing”), befriended Ginsberg because of “a common interest in the French Symbolist poets and Dostoevsky” (Charters 53). John Clellon Holmes, a compulsive reader of Dostoevsky, commented that his friendship with Kerouac began with and was cemented by Dostoevsky: “Dostoevsky was where we intersected.... I had read Dostoevsky before and was already very influenced by him. Jack had a tremendously free and easy feeling about Dostoevsky. He treated it like reality. So we would talk about

4 The other writers the Beats chose for their joint literary family tree were many and varied. All the founder Beats were widely and eclectically read, with a special interest in Eastern poetry, literature, and philosophy. Burroughs became particularly interested in Arabic legends, while Ginsberg and Kerouac explored Japanese and Chinese poetry and philosophy (they would both subsequently become Buddhists).

characters as if they were real. We'd spent whole nights saying, 'Kirillov wouldn't say that, he'd say *this*,' and we'd invent whole conversations and scenes. Novelistically, I think Dostoevsky was where we really intersected" (Holmes qtd. in *An Oral Biography of Jack Kerouac: Jack's Book* 74).

Suggestively, early Beats frequently employed the names of Dostoevsky's characters as passwords or tokens to recognize other like-minded individuals. Ginsberg's friendship with Carl Solomon (the inspiration for his breakthrough poem *Howl*), for instance, began with their famous meeting at the mental hospital when Ginsberg introduced himself as Prince Myshkin of Dostoevsky's *The Idiot* and Solomon replied that he was Kirillov of *The Possessed*.⁵ This was by no means a unique incident.⁶ John Clellon Holmes recorded that in the 1940s "Carl Solomon [would come up] in the New School lobby, plucking at [his] sleeve, to say: 'Myshkin'; the countersign was 'Rogozhin'" (1962:29). Dostoevsky's characters and the world depicted in his novels were thus re-

5 Solomon later claimed that he was the one to introduce himself as Kirillov first, and that it was Ginsberg who replied that he was Myshkin (in the film *Beat Generation* [1997]). What is relevant, however, is that it was this initial Dostoevskian exchange that led the two men to strike up a friendship.

6 For some interpretations of the significance of this exchange see McNally 119; Charters 146; and Schumacher 114.

inscribed by the Beats into their own contemporary milieu,⁷ while they reinvented themselves as characters out of Dostoevsky's novels.

Choosing Dostoevsky

Although one would hesitate to declare the Beats a representative sample of young Americans in the 1940s and 1950s (the period during which the nucleus of the Beat writers and poets formed), the fact that all of the key Beats became fascinated with Dostoevsky on their own suggests that an interest in Dostoevsky was by no means uncommon among disenfranchised young American intellectuals during that period. There were several factors contributing to a special interest in Dostoevsky's novels by American youth. The first of these were the atrocities perpetrated during World War II. American readership was, historically speaking, particularly attuned to the perception of Dostoevsky as a writer of crisis and the darkness of man's heart, and the events of the war made him seem both a prophet and a model.⁸ John Clellon Holmes takes this perspective when he comments on what he views as the American writers' propensity to imitate Dostoevsky: "it is all very well for the oracles of the literary columns to ask why our age has so many Dostoevskys of the wild side, and so few Tolstoys of 'the normal life.' But doesn't the twentieth century more closely resemble Dostoevsky's nightmares, than it does Tolstoy's realities?" ("The Broken Places: Existential Aspects of the Novel" 1959:167-68).

7 Kerouac compared his circle's constant allusions to Dostoevsky to the way some people identify with the world depicted in Hollywood films: a "huge class of Western mad people ... go to class C Westerns ... [and] continually make allusions to 'Roy [Rogers]' and 'Dale Evans' (his leading lady) and 'Trigger' (his horse) just as we make allusions to Dostoevsky" (1949b:197).

8 The Americans were not alone, of course, in reading Dostoevsky as a writer of gloom and doom. They were particularly disposed to this perspective on Dostoevsky, however, because of the way he was first introduced to them. The translation of Dostoevsky's *Zapiski iz mertvogo doma* (1860-62) was sensationalized in American publication as *Buried Alive or 10 Years of Penal Servitude in Siberia* (1881) and was seen for many years to be the definitive Dostoevsky text. The translation and popularity of Melchior de Vogüé's study *Le roman russe* (1886), with its interpretation of Dostoevsky as a gloomy depressing writer, before most Dostoevsky's novels became available to the American reader also contributed to the enshrinement of Dostoevsky as a writer of darkness. Early American critics of Dostoevsky perpetuated this view.

Secondly, the war gave new currency to the idea that Western Civilization was in a state of crisis. One of the classic treatises which provided the theoretical underpinnings for the belief in the impending doom of the West was Oswald Spengler's *Decline of the West* (1918-1922), which became popular once again. The Beats shared a fascination with Spengler's classic tome⁹ and with the general precept that the Western world was coming to an inglorious demise. Spengler's enthusiasm for Dostoevsky (he considered Dostoevsky to be one of the most portentous authors ever [1918-1922:273]) led many of his readers, including the Beats, back to Dostoevsky's novels. Thus, for instance, one of Kerouac's closest childhood friends wrote him a letter discussing Dostoevsky from a Spenglerian perspective (as he himself admitted), where he commented on Raskolnikov's path away from being an "over-refined, polished, finished product of our Western World" to his native Russian self (Sampas 1943:66).

To their credit, the Beats recognized that many of Spengler's ideas about the waning of the Western model were already found in Dostoevsky's writings. In Kerouac's novel *The Desolation Angels* (1960a), his narrator-autobiographical persona reminisces about his days at Columbia University in 1944, when he and Irwin (a character identifiable with Ginsberg) wrote poems, ate potato soup, and "discussed and dreamed Europe, and of course read everything, even unto the 'weeping over the old stones of Europe' of Dostoevsky" (147). The slightly altered phrase spoken in *Brothers Karamazov* by Ivan Karamazov, who goes on to describe Europe as a cemetery (XIV.210),¹⁰ conveys the sense shared by many of Kerouac's young compatriots that Europe was great as a memorial to the past, but that the future no longer belonged to it, and that it could no longer serve as a guide for anyone looking for a new direction.

The period of economic prosperity in America following the war made Dostoevsky's writings relevant in other ways. If post-war American society promoted materialism and consumerism, then Dostoevsky's novels, where possessions were ultimately shown to be of little worth and where spiritual riches mattered, offered an alternative mode of existence to those not seduced by the latest version of the American dream. Kerouac's autobiographic persona in *Desolation Angels*, for example, calls himself "more fit for Holy Russia of 19th Century than for this modern America of crew cuts and sullen faces in Pontiacs" (1960a:239). If post-war America encouraged conformity (Kerouac's *Dharma Bums* [1958a] includes a snapshot of uniformity in 1950s middle-class America: "inside [every suburban house] the little blue square of the television, each living family rivetting its attention on probably one

9 Burroughs even gave copies of Spengler's book to the other Beats — to Kerouac in 1944, for instance — in order to "edify [sic] [their] mind" (qtd. in Watson 38).

10 Because it is difficult to determine precisely which editions of Dostoevsky's novels were read by the Beats, all citations refer to the Russian Academy's definitive edition of Dostoevsky's collected works: *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii v tridsati tomakh* [Complete Collected Works in Thirty Volumes] (Leningrad: Izdatel'stvo "Nauka," 1972-1990).

show" [83]), then extreme individualism was the norm rather than the exception in Dostoevsky's novels. In 1948, Kerouac wrote to Cassady that "with the advent of Dostoevsky the Russian Christ, we young Americans are turning to a new evaluation of the individual: his '*position*' itself, personal and psychic. Great new age.... The Prophets were right!" (1948b:167). Later in life, Kerouac lamented that the Beat Generation phenomenon has turned from a means to express individuality into another way to become part of the herd, reaffirming that the unique was precious: "Where are them old Dostoevsky characters who, with broken shoes, went to see one guy and spent a week studying him in a loft (INDIVIDUALISM)" (1965:407).

Dostoevsky was important in yet another way for radically minded and disenfranchised American youth. First of all, Dostoevsky's early biography could serve as inspiration for any young revolutionary: he espoused political views that were radical for his times and got into such trouble with the authorities that he ended up being sentenced to forced labour and exile. Secondly, even if one could not ignore Dostoevsky's return to orthodoxy (and the Beats appeared only too ready to do so), the very act of reading Dostoevsky in America of the 1950s was a radical one, imbued with both political and social implications, which opened the reader to attacks from both the political left and the political right. The political left (especially American Communists), following the lead of the Soviet Union, found Dostoevsky's writings to be ideologically unacceptable and even dangerous.¹¹ The political right, inspired by the Red Scare and the hysteria promoted by Senator McCarthy, considered Dostoevsky to be ultimately suspect as well. When Susan Sontag reminisced about that period with Burroughs and others, she said that "the fifties [were] absolutely terrifying" and that Dostoevsky was among the Russian classics people would dispose of "because they were afraid that they would be accused of reading Russian writers" (Bockris 170). The famous "Raskolnikov lives!" graffiti, which began appearing in New York subways, contributed to Dostoevsky's image as a dangerous writer whose novels posed a threat to American social order.

11 See, for instance, Ralph Ellison's account of the difficulties he got into with American left because of reading Dostoevsky (Ralph Ellison, interview, "A Very Stern Discipline: An Interview with Ralph Ellison" [1967]; rpt. in *Conversations with Ralph Ellison*, eds. Maryemma Graham and Amrit Singh [Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1995] 124).

Dostoevsky's reputation as an anti-establishment author was further reinforced for the Beats by the fact that he was Henry Miller's favourite writer. Miller was widely reviled in America of the late 1940s and 1950s as a pornographer (his works were banned in the United States), although some influential critics, like T.S. Eliot and George Orwell, considered him one of the most innovative contemporary American novelists. Kerouac, Burroughs, and Ginsberg also regarded Miller as a great master of prose and an inspiration to writers everywhere; Ginsberg, for instance, called him "life and exuberance ... [and] an impetus to write."¹² The Beats, like most of Miller's diehard fans, knew that he regarded Dostoevsky as a literary guru and personal guide. Miller wrote repeatedly and at length about his debt to Dostoevsky, commenting, for example, "the writer I most admire is the Russian Dostoevsky.... To me without Dostoevsky's work there would be a deep, black hole in world literature. The loss of Shakespeare ... would not be as great as losing Dostoevsky."¹³ The fact that Miller, a banned writer, was so outspoken about his appreciation of and perceived kinship with Dostoevsky added to the aura of subversiveness and antiauthoritarianism around Dostoevsky and his novels.

If the Beats came to Dostoevsky independently in their individual attempts to resist political, social, and cultural conformity, then by choosing him as a mascot for themselves as a group, a contemporary of sorts, they were making a statement about their own radical intentions. In Holmes's programmatic essay "This is the Beat Generation" (1952), he points out in a vaguely threatening manner that

Dostoevsky wrote in the early 1880s that "Young Russia is talking of nothing but the eternal questions now." With appropriate changes, something very like this is beginning to happen in America, in an American way: a re-evaluation of which the exploits and attitudes of this generation are only symptoms ... a lost generation ... is poetically moving, but not very dangerous. But a beat generation ... is quite another matter. Thirty years later, after all, the generation of which Dostoevsky wrote was meeting in cellars and making bombs (64).

The act of aligning oneself with Dostoevsky in post-war America was clearly a suspect gesture and the young Beats readily exploited its subversive potential.

Interpreting Dostoevsky

12 Ginsberg said this in response to my question from the audience on 15 November 1996, when he gave a public reading of his "Ballad of the Skeletons" (1995) in Toronto.

13 Henry Miller, "Mother, China and the World Beyond," in *Sextet* (Santa Barbara: Capra Press, 1977) 187.

While the social and political climate in United States along with Dostoevsky's own youthful flirtation with radicalism made him a convenient mascot for rebellious young Americans, the Beats considered him a literary teacher first and foremost. Their understanding of Dostoevsky's novels, however, was highly idiosyncratic. If the individual Beats had initially read Dostoevsky because of a particular cultural stereotype of what he stood for, they ended up with a vision of the writer that was uniquely theirs. Ginsberg captures this process in his 1949 poem "Fyodor," where he suggests, among other things, that his initially awed vision of "Dostoievski" as the ultimate Other, the "dark/haunted-house man, wild, aged/spectral Russian," gave way to a comfortable familiarity ("I call him/Dusty now") and an assimilation of the Other (by any name) into the core definition of the Self (1996a:11).¹⁴

The Beats' understanding of Dostoevsky and his writings was formulated chiefly through a reading of his texts, rather than through a reading of secondary sources, whether biographic or critical in nature (although Spengler's perspectives may have influenced their early readings in the 1940s). While it is difficult to say with certainty which translations of Dostoevsky's novels the Beats read, it is most likely that their first encounter with Dostoevsky occurred through the medium of the ubiquitous Constance Garnett translations. Garnett's versions were favoured by the Modern Library Editions, which were the least expensive and most readily available versions of Dostoevsky's novels in English translation before the arrival of paperback editions of "classical" literature.

Kerouac's reading of Dostoevsky is in many ways representative of the way the Beats approached Dostoevsky's works and can be reconstructed in some detail based on the accounts and references included in his writings and correspondence. The first Dostoevsky novel that Kerouac read was *Notes from Underground*, which he followed with *Brothers Karamazov*, *Notes from the Dead House*, *The Possessed*, *The Idiot*, and most other important Dostoevsky texts, including his *Diary of a Writer*. Kerouac's actual reading of the texts tended to be thorough and analytical: Barry Miles, the author of the most comprehensive biography on Kerouac to date, *Jack Kerouac, King of the Beats* (1998), writes that *Brothers Karamazov* "took [Kerouac] seven months to read altogether. He ... liked to reread important passages to understand exactly how the author had constructed them" (96). Kerouac was interested in what was happening beneath the surface of the text; he commented in a letter to a friend that when he read Dostoevsky's "Unfortunate Predicament" he "studied it carefully and found that [Dostoevsky] begins with 'ideas' and then demolishes them in the fury of what actually happens in the story" (1949a:189). Moreover, Kerouac tended to periodically revisit Dostoevsky's novels, especially during illness. In 1957, when he had what he considered to be two nervous breakdowns, he wrote to Ginsberg that he was rereading *The Idiot* (ironically enough) to "rest mind"

14 Ginsberg's poem, which Kerouac liked particularly and called "Death's head Dusty" (1952a:2), has been perceptively analysed by Thomas F. Merrill, Ginsberg's biographer and scholar, who sees the poem as a brilliant meditation on phenomenology, arguing that at the heart of the poem lies "its implicit insistence that the 'reality' of Fyodor [Dostoevsky] is not inherent in the Russian novelist himself but lies in the impressions of Dostoevsky that exist in Ginsberg's growing consciousness of him" (36).

(1957b:67). Similarly, he first read *Brothers Karamazov* in 1945, when he was in the hospital with phlebitis, and again in 1951, when he was hospitalized for the same reason (Jones 40). He would later synthesize the two experiences in his poem “55th Chorus” (*Mexico City Blues* 1959:55), where a “big fat ... Holy Nurse” keeps looking over his shoulder and giggling as he reads Dostoevsky’s novel.

In practice, Kerouac’s interpretation of Dostoevsky’s novels was almost always unorthodox. His critique of *Notes from Underground* is a good example of his approach to Dostoevsky’s texts. In Kerouac’s autobiographical novel, *Vanity of Dulouz: An Adventurous Education, 1935-46* (1967), the narrator calls *Notes from Underground* “one of [Dostoevsky’s] gloomiest works” and relates that all he could do after reading it “was gloom over the words and thoughts of Fyodor Dostoevsky” (104). In the comments that Kerouac makes about Dostoevsky’s text, however, he argues that the main thrust of the novel is not its attack on positivism and on the excessive confidence in rationalism. He sees it, rather, as Dostoevsky’s confession of his own love affair gone terribly wrong, told in groundbreaking experimental prose (upon reading Neil Cassady’s celebrated spontaneous-prose letters, Kerouac remarked that they had much in common with “the unbelievably good *Notes from Underground* of Dostoevsky” [1950:242]). Subsequently, Kerouac recast the encounter between the Under-ground Man and Liza as his own disastrous affair with a young African-American woman in his novel, *The Subterraneans* (1958b), which he described as “modelled after [*Notes from Underground*] ... a full confession of one’s most wretched and hidden agonies after an ‘affair’ of any kind.”¹⁵ In a letter to Holmes about *The Subterraneans*, he muses: “in writing it, I felt I was in the tradition of NOTES FROM UNDERGROUND, FULL confession” (1958c:119-20).

15 Kerouac wrote these words in his preface to the Norwegian edition of his novel *The Subterraneans* (cited at length in Kerouac’s *Selected Letters: 1957-1969*, 120, fn.35).

Kerouac's identification with Dostoevsky's characters and his subsequent identification of these characters with Dostoevsky himself is typical of the Beats' reading of Dostoevsky's texts. Ginsberg, for example, enjoyed *Raw Youth* [*Podrostok*] largely because he identified with the narrator, "a kid who had a vision just like me" (qtd. in Portugés 101). (Kerouac, for his part, appeared to have occasionally associated Ginsberg with the cynical devil who appears to Ivan Karamazov; in *Desolation Angels*, the narrator comments that when he "get[s] mad" he thinks that the character identifiable with Ginsberg: "[is] only Dostoevsky's poor devil in poorclothes, giggling in the room" [1960a:147].) The Dostoevsky character who attracted the attention of the Beats most forcefully, however, was Prince Myshkin of *The Idiot* (Ginsberg even made it a point to visit the house in Florence where Dostoevsky wrote the novel¹⁶). While it is clear that practically all the Beats, with the possible exception of Burroughs, identified themselves and each other with Myshkin, the Beats' interpretation of Myshkin's character is more contestable.

It has been argued that the Beats' "own ambivalent erotic feelings" led them to a "simplistic reading of Myshkin" (Bush 135). There might be some basis to the charge, to the extent that the Beats viewed *The Idiot* as a distinctly homoerotic text and employed the characters of the novel to illustrate their own complicated sexual situations. In Kerouac's autobiographic novel *Desolation Angels*, for example, the narrator tries to understand the vicissitudes of the unrequited love of Hubbard (a character identifiable with Burroughs) for Irwin (a character identifiable with Ginsberg) by imagining what would happen "[i]f the Idiot [i.e., Myshkin] had molested Ippolit" (318). Ultimately, however, the Beats' interpretation of Myshkin was much more complex than suggested by their critics.

16 According to his diary it happened sometime in July 1957 (see entry [1995:368]).

According to the Beats' themselves, it would appear that Myshkin attracted their interest because they viewed his character in terms of the paradoxical combinations of innocence and experience, folly and wisdom, disregard for society and acceptance of it. Myshkin, in other words, was understood by the Beats as a kind of a holy fool whose actions might appear to be odd or comic, but only to those who do not perceive his transcendent aspect. Neal Cassady proposes Myshkin as a personal model in a famous letter to Ginsberg, commenting, "I am a blithe idiot ... [and you too should] look at yourself as Prince Myshkin — the idiot — you manifest more of the mystic, the Dostoevskian religious, the loving Christ than does anyone else" (1948:39). It would seem that the other Beats agreed with the idea of casting themselves in Myshkin's guise as the fools of God: Kerouac's autobiographical persona in *Big Sur* (1962) calls himself the "last poor holy fool" (94); in *On the Road*, Dean Moriarty (the character based on Neal Cassady) is called a "HOLY GOOF," the "Idiot, the Imbecile, the Saint of the lot" (160); and in *Vanity of Dulouz*, the narrator calls himself and another character identifiable with Burroughs "funny imbecilic saint[s]" (204). In fact, the Beats later coined the term "Igny" to designate someone who was, like Myshkin, one of them; Steven Watson, author of *The Birth of the Beat Generation: Visionaries, Rebels and Hipsters, 1944-1960* (1995), explains: "Coined in the late 1940s by Allen Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac after Dostoevsky's *The Idiot*, this word meant a holy idiot, an angel in comical form" (36).¹⁷

Interestingly, the Beats not only identified themselves with Myshkin, but ascribed many of his traits to his creator as well, turning Myshkin into Dostoevsky's autobiographical portrait. The confusion of the author with his characters is, of course, a classic mistake in textual reception. It might be argued, however, that the Beats were particularly open to this misinterpretation due to their insistence that Dostoevsky's novels were autobiographical and confessional, just like their own "true-story novels" (Kerouac 1960b:vi). The traits that are ascribed to Dostoevsky in the Beats' novels, poems, and other texts make for a rather idiosyncratic vision of Dostoevsky as a gentle Russian saint ready to embrace all of humanity (this, despite the Beats' knowledge of Dostoevsky's letters and editorials in *The Diary of a Writer*, which tended to be intolerant, xenophobic, and generally vitriolic). The Beats duly noted Dostoevsky's poverty (exaggerated by a character in *On the Road* into an image of Dostoevsky on skid row, picking through the garbage: "put[ting] the newspapers in his shoe and walk[ing] around in a stovepipe hat he found in a garbage pail" [58]), but they focussed most on Dostoevsky's supposed "mellowness" and "humility." Thus, Ginsberg said that Kerouac was like Dostoevsky because he was "mellow in the sense of infinitely tolerant...infinitely understanding" (qtd. in Schumacher 35). Kerouac, for his part, said that a favourite professor of his had a "sufferingly earnest humility" like Dostoevsky in his old age (1948a:2). Curiously, Ginsberg felt that Dostoevsky had "no sense of guilt and a huge brown humour" (qtd. in Schumacher 427). Even Dostoevsky's gambling was not a

17 Ginsberg defines the term as designating a "special honorary type post-hip intellectual" (Ginsberg's letter to Carolyn Cassady — no date given — is reproduced in full on pages 184-85 of her memoir, *Off the Road, My Years with Cassady, Kerouac, and Ginsberg* [1991]).

contradiction of his general saintliness, in fact, in Kerouac's poem "55th Chorus" he describes Dostoevsky as "Gambling Man Fyodor/Dostoevsky/Of Czarist Russia, a Saint" (1959a:55).

The Beats' identification with Myshkin and their paralleling of the latter with Dostoevsky led to the inevitable (and sometimes farcical) identification of themselves with the Russian novelist. In an interview given late in life, Kerouac elaborated on the deep-running correspondence he perceived between Neal Cassady, the muscular blond vagabond hero of the Beats, and Dostoevsky: "Neal is more like Dostoevsky than anybody else I know. He looks like Dostoevsky, he gambles like Dostoevsky, he regards sex like Dostoevsky, he writes like Dostoevsky ... a great Midwest pool-room saint" (1959b:47-48). Whatever exaggerations and embellishments were involved in such a comparison, it is clear that the Beats' version of Dostoevsky became an ideal for them to measure up to; when Ginsberg became upset with Kerouac, he demanded to know what had become of Kerouac's "old Dostoevsky curiosity? You've become so *whiney!*"¹⁸ (qtd. in Charters 276) and in Kerouac's "Old Angel Midnight" (1959), a character (possibly based on Ginsberg) is berated for being a "gossiping non Dostoevskian shit of the ages" (1959c:31).

The Beats related to Dostoevsky not only as Myshkin's model or a *beatific* saint, of course, but also as a fellow writer beset by problems with publishers and censors (they were aware that Dostoevsky had to suppress a chapter of *The Possessed* because of its sexual content, regarded as too shocking for its time). James Campbell observes in *This Is The Beat Generation: New York-San Francisco-Paris* (1999) that the Beats, plagued with constant rejection of their manuscripts, regarded Dostoevsky "as a favourite and consoling point of reference" (211). Ginsberg comforted himself for his own publication fiascos by composing rejection letters that Dostoevsky might have received from publishers about *The Idiot*: "Dear Mr. Dostoevsky, This gloomy novel of yours may be of interest to the psychiatric community, but we do not feel that it would appeal to a general audience" (qtd. in Morgan 205). When Kerouac's *On the Road* was declined by a publisher, Kerouac lamented to Cassady that even though the reader liked the book and thought that it was like Dostoevsky, it would not be published because "they don't even read Dosty [sic] and don't care about all that shit and bums etc.

18 Kerouac included these exact accusations (included in Ginsberg's letter to him) in *Desolation* identifiable with Ginsberg) confronts the narrator and shouts at him.

Angels, where Irwin (a character

... this thing [is] so new and unusual and controversial and censorable (with hipsters, weed, fags, etc.) they won't accept" (Kerouac 1951b:320).¹⁹

Ultimately, then, the Beats reinvented Dostoevsky as a proto-Beat, turning to Dostoevsky's novels as guidebooks for their own lives and literary careers. When Kerouac attempts to explain a complicated love affair to Ginsberg, he finally finds a way to account for it by saying that it was a "situation straight out of Dostoevsky" (1945:2). When Ginsberg tries to understand his attitude toward a woman with whom he has an affair without loving her, he draws upon Zossima's speech in *Brothers Karamazov*, noting in his diary: "I 'don't love her' as 'she loves me' thus starving & killing her heart for my 'casual' pleasure. 'Fathers & teachers,' etc." (1954:61). The Beats also turned to Dostoevsky's novels when they hungered for faith; Kerouac believed that Ginsberg and Peter Orlovsky (Ginsberg's longtime partner) chose as their creed not "the Western church ... but the Orthodox new church of Russia which isn't even born but will be based on Father Zossima" (1957a:1). Even the Beats' Buddhism (Kerouac returned to Christianity toward the end of his life) is obliquely connected to Dostoevsky; the Beats were doubtlessly aware of André Gide's famous claim that "Dostoevsky leads us, we may take it, if not to anarchy, to a sort of Buddhism" (132).²⁰ Finally, and most importantly, the Beats turned to Dostoevsky as a model when they wrote their own works.

Borrowing from Dostoevsky

Kerouac's narrator in *Big Sur* criticizes Herman Hesse for being "an old imitator of Dostoevsky fifty years too late" in *Der Steppenwolf* (1962:24-25). If this is so, then the Beats own texts lay them wide open to the charge of trying to imitate Dostoevsky's novels. The Beats themselves recognized the many connections and parallels between their work and Dostoevsky's writings; they felt, however, that they were not imitating Dostoevsky but reverently following in his footsteps. Dostoevsky's impact is traceable in many aspects of the Beats' writings, including the philosophical premises behind the writings of the Beats, the subject matter of their texts, the characters inhabiting their texts, and the form and style of their writings.

19 This is Kerouac's version of what was said. The reader himself later denied making any comparisons to Dostoevsky.

20 Certainly, the Zen Buddhist stance against the all-encompassing belief in reason has many points of contact with the Underground Man's arguments against 19th century rationalism.

Two key philosophical premises behind the Beats body of work are directly traceable to Dostoevsky; the first of these is the Beats' perception of art as a sacred act and an obligation. Kerouac once said that he began writing with the idea that "art [was] a duty. It's an old theory of mine in teenage notebooks and was culled from Dostoevsky's holy diary. In other words, when I wrote these books, I did it as a 'holy duty'."²¹ Kerouac's acknowledgment that Dostoevsky was the source of this idea for him is particularly significant, because all of the Beats shared this major assumption. In the early years, the Beats could not find publishers for their works, but they continued to write for "the desk drawer," believing that it was their responsibility to find the means to express a new consciousness, a new way that they were seeking of envisioning things and expressing them. Ginsberg later said, "I assumed that it wouldn't be published.... So literally [it was] just for myself or anybody that I knew personally well, writers who would be willing to appreciate it with a breadth of tolerance ... [who would be] looking for evidences of humanity or secret thought or just actual truthfulness" (1965:38).

The other important premise that lies behind the work of Kerouac, Ginsberg, Burroughs and many other Beats and is once again connected to their reading of Dostoevsky is that of writing as a confession. Confessionality is a claim that Kerouac, Ginsberg, and Burroughs (as well as many other early Beats) advance for most of their texts. Burroughs, for instance, commented that he wrote his first book *Junky* "to put down in the most accurate and simple terms [his] experiences as an addict" and that he wrote his novel *Queer* in order to "chronicle ... carefully ... [his] extremely painful and unpleasant and lacerating memories" (1985 "Introduction" xiv). Although the idea of using the text as a confession is at least as old as St. Augustine's treatise, the early Beats traced it directly to Dostoevsky. Accordingly, Kerouac once declared to a friend that he was writing a "FULL confession" and that "for the future" he intended to write a "huge confession about EVERYTHING" in the tradition of Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground* (1958c:119-20). In an interview given in 1968, Kerouac said that when formulating his vision of writing, he remembered Goethe's prediction that future literature would be confessional, adding: "Dostoevsky

21 Kerouac quoted by the journalist and writer Al Aronowitz, in "Part II: The Beat Papers of Al Aronowitz" (1997), which are all posted at URL: <http://www.bigmagic.com/pages/blackj>

prophesied as much and might have started in on that if he'd lived long enough to do his projected masterwork, 'The Life of a Great Sinner'" (1968:101).²²

Many of the big philosophical questions addressed in Dostoevsky's works became crucial issues for Burroughs, Kerouac, and Ginsberg as well. It is more difficult in this case to establish a direct transmission from Dostoevsky to the Beats; nevertheless, several interesting things may be observed. A phrase that frequently recurs in Burroughs's work as an epigraph of sorts is "Nothing Is True — Everything Is Permitted." In Burroughs's *Nova Express* the phrase is ascribed to Hassan i Sabbah, the leader of the legendary sect of the Assassins. In other texts, however, the phrase figures without the attribution. Timothy Murphy, who considers the possible origins of the phrase and the significance that it carried for Burroughs in his study *Wising Up the Marks: The Amodern William Burroughs* (1997), suggests that at least a partial source text for this phrase was *The Brothers Karamazov* (i.e., Ivan Karamazov's assertion that if "God doesn't exist, then everything is permitted") (Murphy 246). This is a likely hypothesis because another image that Ivan employs in his conversation with Alyosha — the ticket which he wishes to return to God — reappears in the title of Burroughs's *The Ticket that Exploded* (a book which includes the epigraph cited above). Whether or not Burroughs intended to suggest by his title that the ticket which Ivan rejects should be spectacularly destroyed rather than placidly given back (the choice of many of Burroughs's characters) is open to debate. It is clear, however, that Burroughs identified one of his most extreme characters, Dr. Benway of *Naked Lunch*, with Ivan's Grand Inquisitor, who also found himself on the other side of good and evil (see Burroughs's letter to Ginsberg 1957:374). Certainly, almost all of Burroughs's major texts deal with the world of the Grand Inquisitor, where both God and truth are entirely absent and everything is permissible. The dark eroticism that forms such a large content of Burroughs's work (which is usually remarked upon first by both readers and critics) would, in this way, appear to be secondary to the existential darkness that envelops his characters.

While Burroughs's drew inspiration from the Grand Inquisitor, Ginsberg and Kerouac concentrated on the vision of brotherhood offered in *Brothers Karamazov*. Kerouac wrote to Peter Orlovsky about Dostoevsky forming the "prime symbol" of Russia: "the *endless plane* or plain dotted with endless brothers.... Ego-less brotherhood in all flat directions" (Kerouac 1957a:1). This, incidentally, was the ideal that the Beats were striving to establish in America. Ginsberg talked of "the sort of warmhearted, open, Dostoevskian Alyosha-Myshkin-Dmitri compassion that Kerouac and I were pursuing" — an "open American scene" (qtd. by Manso 258-60).

22 This does not mean, however, that the Beats felt their confessional texts had to be strictly autobiographical. To the contrary, they were interested in creating texts (both in poetry and prose) that merged personal record-making and soul-searching with rich inventiveness. (When Kerouac described his books for a brief curriculum vita, he called them "true-story novels" ["Author's Introduction" 1960b:vi].) Once again, many of the Beats connected the merging of the two realms directly with their interpretation of Dostoevsky's books. In a letter to Cassidy, Kerouac writes that he decided on a course for the future: his literary plan is to revise his own work extensively "starting with my own life, pure aspects, no fiction, till I can invent like a Dostoevsky and of course I know how and can and will" (1951a:607).

Many of the questions raised in *Brothers Karamazov* and *The Idiot* about the metaphysical benefits of suffering, the importance of mercy, and the spiritual need for beauty, also had a profound impact on Kerouac and Ginsberg and were duly reflected in their texts. Once again, Dostoevsky's novels are obviously not the first time these questions were addressed in Western literature. On the other hand, the Beats often either encountered these ideas first in Dostoevsky's novels or else viewed them as an important source for their own understanding of these ideas. Dennis McNally, for example, suggests in the *Desolate Angel: Jack Kerouac, the Beat Generation, and America* (1979) that Kerouac first confronted the idea that "suffering was the only source of awareness" in Dostoevsky (51).²³ Similarly, while the Beats' focus on the need for mercy is often explained by their involvement with Buddhism,²⁴ they themselves frequently cited Dostoevsky when talking about the idea of mercy in their work. Ginsberg explains that the concept of mercy as it appears in his poem *Howl* consists of "the ability to see and love others in themselves as angels without stupid mental self-deceiving moral categories selecting *who* it is safe to sympathize with and who is not safe," adding "if that is not a value I don't know what is" and referring the reader to Dostoevsky and Whitman for more insights (Ginsberg 1956:152). Dostoevsky was also cited by the Beats when they talked about their belief in the importance of beauty as a spiritual category. In another early essay titled "Beauty as a Lasting Truth" (1940), Kerouac talks about the necessity of a "deeply religious feeling for beauty," mentions that this higher beauty "can only evidence [itself] to men of heroic proportions" and refers the reader to Thoreau, Melville, and Dostoevsky (1940:226).

On another level, as far as the subject matter of the Beats' own texts is concerned, they appeared to be particularly inspired by the notion that Dostoevsky used actual contemporary events as material for his novels (like the trial of Nechaev for *The Possessed*). Kerouac was interested in the idea of "gossip" about contemporaries, as he phrased it, serving as the proper subject of fiction. He felt that his contemporaries — especially his immediate circle of friends — made a perfect (Dostoevskian) literary subject. In the late 1940s, Kerouac advised Holmes to write a novel about their life "the San Remo, the bars, the mad parties, big swirling vortexes like *The Possessed*, not concentrating too much on one individual" (1949b:200). He later promised Holmes that "Someday I'm going to write a huge Dostoevskian novel about all of us" (1952b:610) and wrote another friend that the complicated circumstances of all the people they knew in common were "really like a huge interesting Dostoevsky novel" (1961:287). In the same letter he related that *The Possessed* was "the greatest novel of all time" and that "Gossip is the soul of

23 This concept was undeniably an important one for Kerouac. Even in his early pieces, such as "My Generation, My World" (1943), for instance, Kerouac's protagonist whispers, "My generation...is suffering. Only through suffering does one learn love and fulfilment" (229) — an idea that informs many of Kerouac's texts.

24 There is a basis for this: in Kerouac's *Dharma Bums* (1958a), for example, a character who is departing to a Japanese Zen monastery takes with him a tiny piece of paper with the words, "May you use the diamondcutter of mercy" (169).

Dostoevsky ... Corso almost destroyed me when he accused me of 'gossip not poetry' ... But now I see his motive" (1961:287). In fact, almost all of Kerouac's novels do revolve around his group of friends and their complicated lives, as do the texts of a vast majority of Beat writers and poets.

Dostoevsky's characters have also influenced the depiction and development of characters in the Beats' writings. It was noted earlier that Kerouac tended to envision his friends and himself as Dostoevskian personages, most frequently as variants of Prince Myshkin. Other Dostoevsky characters were also employed by Kerouac as a means of delineating the personalities of his own characters (modelled largely on his friends) in a kind of a Dostoevskian shorthand and of elevating them above the status of the mundane. In *Desolation Angels*, the narrator comments that Simon (a character identifiable with Ginsberg's lover Peter Orlovsky) "wants the whole world to love, a descendant indeed of some of those insane sweet Ippolits and Kirillovs of Dostoevsky's 19th Century Czarist Russia" (1960:161). Interestingly, one of Ginsberg's complaints against Kerouac was that he "never transformed him [i.e., Ginsberg], as he had done Burroughs, Cassady or [Gary] Snyder into 'a major Dostoevsky romantic character'" (qtd. in Charters 359). It appears then that the Beats' convoluted dynamics of character depiction engaged Dostoevsky on several levels, since they involved the portrayal of personages in the Beats' immediate surroundings (including the Beats' themselves) through a Dostoevskian prism, while these personages were already imitating Dostoevsky and his characters in their everyday life.

The Beats also attempted to learn from Dostoevsky's style which they felt was both unique and wholly admirable.²⁵ Kerouac, for instance, wrote that "Dostoevsky you could recognize in a dark alley full of woodfences and Chagall cows" (1964:386)²⁶ and Burroughs considered Dostoevsky, somewhat eccentrically, to be "the greatest Russian poet" (related by Kerouac in Kerouac 1957c:88-89). The Beats' enthusiastic reaction to Dostoevsky's prose style is particularly remarkable considering the widespread opinion prevalent both in European and American literary circles that Dostoevsky was an execrable stylist, if only because he was always rushed to finish his novels.²⁷ The Beats

25 Interestingly, the Beats' views on Dostoevsky's style were shared by the poet and Nobel Prize laureate Joseph Brodsky, who considered Dostoevsky "the very best Russian stylist" (1994:7).

26 This strange image, suggestive of disorientation and confusion, is taken by Kerouac from his own poem "219th Chorus," where Alyosha Karamazov is depicted running home "in the night/Over Charade Chagall fences/snow white/To the pink cow of his father's ear" (1959a:221).

27 The opinion that Dostoevsky's prose style left much to be desired is a common assessment of his work both in the West and in Russia. During his lifetime, Dostoevsky was regarded as an inferior stylist whose works were filled with clumsy constructions and verbiage. Beginning with the foremost Russian literary critic of Dostoevsky's age, Vissarion Belinskii, who called his work "at times insufficiently polished, at others overly decorative" (1847:362), critics were either disparaging his literary style or ignoring it in favour of his "social significance." When Dostoevsky's works became available in the West, the issue of style was complicated further by inaccurate translations and by the negative biases of such influential European critics as Melchior de Vogüé, whose *Le roman russe* (1886) had done

were, in fact, tapping into a narrow but compelling tradition in American letters that was first expressed by Thomas Wolfe and subsequently developed by Henry Miller — two writers also regarded as literary ancestors by the Beats — who felt that Dostoevsky's way of writing, though perhaps chaotic and prolix, was precisely what made him a great novelist.²⁸ According to Miller's interpretation, for instance, Dostoevsky had deliberately relinquished control over his prose in order to write in a free and unconstrained manner, with the end product more accurately reflecting the nature of contemporary life than anything laboured and carefully stylized. The idea of spontaneity and freedom in writing was, of course, especially important to Kerouac and other Beats in the development of their own prose style.

Kerouac himself testified that in his search for a new mode of expression he went beyond the traditional novel to a breakthrough "wild" form: "what I am beginning to discover now is something beyond the novel and beyond the arbitrary confines of the story ... *wild form*. Wild form's the only form holds what I have to say" (1952b:610). Around the same time, Kerouac intimated that Dostoevsky inspired him in this search for a new expression, as "the wildest writer in the world" (1952a:2). In Kerouac's preface to the Norwegian edition of *The Subterraneans*, where he explains that he modelled the book after Dostoevsky's *Notes from the Underground*, he writes that its "prose is what I believe to be the prose of the future, from both the conscious top and the unconscious bottom of the mind, limited only by the limitations of time flying by as your mind flies with it. Not a word of this book was changed after I had finished writing it in three sessions from dusk to dawn at the typewriter like a long letter to a friend" (cited in Kerouac's *Selected Letters: 1957-1969*, 120, fn.35). If Ginsberg's remark that in the Beats' search for the "New Vision" of life they "saw each other as sacred characters or spiritual comrades as in Dostoevsky" (*Allen Ginsberg Photographs* 97) is true, then it would appear no less true that the Beats also used and studied Dostoevsky's texts to arrive to a new mode of literary expression.

Appropriating Dostoevsky

The fact that Dostoevsky was an extremely important figure for all the founding members of the Beat movement appears, on the basis of the evidence amassed, to be largely self-evident. It is clear that the Beats studied Dostoevsky's novels in order to learn the craft of writing (Kerouac perhaps most intently of all) and that their own literary vision

much to perpetuate this stereotype in Europe and America.

28 This is what Thomas Wolfe wrote to Scott Fitzgerald in 1937 (643); this is also what Henry Miller believed and wrote about at length in his own "nonfictional novels." (Miller has the additional distinction of being the first American writer to claim to be influenced by Dostoevsky's style. See Chapter II of my *The Pornographers and the Prophet: Henry Miller, Anaïs Nin, and Lawrence Durrell Reading Dostoevsky* [1998].)

was influenced and to a certain extent shaped by their reading and interpretation of favourite Dostoevsky texts. Further, features of Beats' prose and poetry that are now considered most characteristic of their work, including the practice of spontaneous writing, as well as the autobio-graphical/confessional aspect of their prose and poetry, are again closely connected to their understanding of Dostoevsky's writing process. Moreover, some of the key philosophical premises informing the Beats' body of work, namely, the understanding of writing as a sacred duty and of the writer as a kind of a holy fool, are inextricably linked to their perception of Dostoevsky's life and work.

It is equally obvious, however, to anyone who has any knowledge of Dostoevsky's biography and philosophy that in the Beats' persistent efforts to reinvent each other through their vision of Dostoevskian characters and Dostoevsky's own personality, they managed to "reinterpret" Dostoevsky to the point where it is difficult to recognize their version of the Russian novelist as having any tangible connection to the original. Certainly, the Beats' vision of Dostoevsky as an all-loving embodiment of tolerance (especially indulgent of sexual experimentation) is at odds, at the very least, with the reactionary persona that Dostoevsky presents to the world in his editorials and articles, in which he savages the emerging Russian women's rights movement, to cite just one target of his outrage.

One should not hastily conclude, however, that the Beats were simply ill-informed in their misreadings of Dostoevsky. It is true that they discovered Dostoevsky's novels within a particular social, cultural, and political climate, which may have predisposed them to perceive Dostoevsky in a particular light. It also appears clear that they did not show much interest in most critical or biographical commentaries on Dostoevsky and his work, preferring to depend on their own close readings of Dostoevsky's text. Nonetheless, the Beats had plenty of opportunities to alter or adjust their original impressions of Dostoevsky; they have, after all, read Dostoevsky's *Diary of a Writer* and were surely aware of his scathing treatment of various ethnic, religious, and national groups, as well as of those of his contemporaries who held views which opposed his own perspectives on any number of subjects. Even André Gide, who idolized Dostoevsky (and whom the Beats respected as a writer), had difficulties negotiating the face Dostoevsky presents to the world in the *Diary* and ended by evicting the "profoundly disappointing" *Diary* from the Dostoevsky canon and declaring that the real Dostoevsky is found in his novels (Gide, *Dostoevsky* 91-92). On the other hand, Kerouac refers to the *Diary of a Writer* as "the holy diary" (quoted in Part II: The Beat Papers of Al Aronowitz 1997) and insists on seeing Dostoevsky as the personification of universal love and understanding. Is this merely further evidence of the blind spots in the Beats' reception of Dostoevsky's text or a glaring example of their naivety?

While the tendency of overlooking the features of a given text that do not conform with a reader's expectations of that text may be all too common, the Beats were hardly naive in their persistent misreading of Dostoevsky's personality and writings. Upon closer examination, it becomes clear that their interpretation of Dostoevsky and his texts was tactically advantageous. In the Beats' efforts to become recognized as "serious" writers and poets, they were attempting to travel from the extreme margin of American literary discourse and cultural

narrative to the centre, all the while resisting the dominant social and cultural paradigms. The reinvention and re-vision of Dostoevsky as a proto-Beat became a useful tactic in achieving that difficult goal. If Dostoevsky, whose novels were invariably close to the nexus of cultural and literary debate in the United States but who was still regarded as the ultimate Outsider, could be claimed as a key literary ancestor of the Beats, then the Beats themselves could claim a similar position of importance as the direct inheritors of Dostoevsky's heritage: the Outsiders at the centre, both without and within at the same time. This idea, whether consciously formulated by the Beats or not, adds a more pragmatic dimension to many statements made by them about their kinship with Dostoevsky. Thus Ginsberg's claim that the Beats' emphasis on the oral tradition comes from Russia's classical writers, more specifically, "in Dostoevsky the grief and exaltation of Holy Russia: Holy Russia — Holy America, from Dostoevsky to Kerouac" (1983:27), becomes a declaration of direct transmission from Dostoevsky to the Beats.

If Dostoevsky figured largely in the Beats' project of transforming themselves from marginal dropouts into cultural gurus, he himself was also appropriated, reinvented, and absorbed by the Beats to the point where his presence in their texts, though so prominent upon closer inspection, became invisible to the scholars of Dostoevsky's influence on American literature, who simply did not recognize it, and to the Beats' own readers and critics, who insisted on seeing them either as autochthonic or influenced primarily by the mystical and philosophical traditions of the Far East. Ultimately, the Beats' re-vision of Dostoevsky serves as a warning for scholars of Dostoevsky's influence on American literature. It has long been asserted that Dostoevsky had a profound impact on American literature and culture in the twentieth century. The case of the Beat Generation demonstrates that the impact of Dostoevsky on American literature, culture (including pop-culture), and society was even broader and deeper than originally supposed. On the other hand, it also shows that Dostoevsky's reflection in the various mirrors of American culture often became so distorted as to be recognisable only after its careful de- and re-construction. What is still more significant though, is that the Beats' example demonstrates how Dostoevsky was reinvented by new generations of American readers who created their own version of Dostoevsky and reinscribed him into the cultural narrative, keeping him relevant and current. Unlike other Russian classical writers, like Leo Tolstoy and Ivan Turgenev, whose importance to American culture and literature as a whole decreased over the years, Dostoevsky's significance only grew over the century as competing readings of Dostoevsky by different groups of American writers wrestled for prominence in the social and cultural discourse.²⁹

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29 For a completely different reading of Dostoevsky by another group of important American writers, see my "Rage and Revolt: Dostoevsky and Three African-American Writers."

writers, see my "Rage and

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