



“First thought, best thought”

Psychoanalysis, Existentialism and the Beat Generation

By

Kitti Jakobovits
PhD Candidate, University of Pécs
Hungary

Abstract

The Beat generation was a unique group of artists, especially writers and poets at the '40s, '50s in the USA. Their lifestyle, writing methods, thoughts and feelings greatly impacted literature, the whole culture and society, and it is still perceptible in the contemporary art world. Even though literature studies have spent a lot of time examining them, they have not managed to understand them perfectly. There are a lot of undiscovered aspects, especially about their minds. In my lecture – as an initial step in my PhD research – I try to sketch the possible connections between Beat writers' minds and artistic methods and the psychoanalytic and existential approaches. For example, their motto, “first thought, best thought” is very similar to the psychoanalytic unconscious associations and their spontaneous writing technique is like the phenomenological approach of existential psychology. In my lecture I would like to see behind these observations.

Keywords: Beat generation, existential psychology, psychoanalysis, literature psychology, creativity

To cite as: Jakobovits, K., 2025, “First thought, best thought’ Psychoanalysis, Existentialism and the Beat Generation,” *PsyArt* 29.1, pp. 128-137.

Introduction

My presentation is about the possible psychoanalytic and existential-phenomenological aspects of studying the Beat generation. First, I talk about the Beat generation itself: who they were, what they thought and felt about themselves, the world around them and about their art. In parallel I talk about the historical, social and cultural background to understand them briefly but as fully as possible. After these introductions I outline a few psychoanalytic and existential-phenomenological psychological approaches in what we can and we should study them, their life and their work.

This presentation doesn't attempt to provide answers or solutions. This is more of a first phase in my PhD research. Building on my research, and following my own curiosity, I want to explore promising paths for my ongoing exploration of the work of the Beats.

The Beat generation and their background

The Beat generation is a group of authors whose work spawned a literary subculture in the 1940'-1950' in the United States. The core group includes the most famous Beat authors such as Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg and William S. Burroughs. The main elements of the Beat culture were the rejection of the mainstream American lifestyle; the rejection of economic materialism, conservative standards and consumerism; and the turn towards individual freedom, the sexual revolution, the exploration of different religions, and experimentation with different drugs (Sükösd, 1982, Reynolds, 2016). The Beat generation is "one of the most significant results of the history of literature and literary movements during the post-war era" (Selcik, 2014, p. 27).

One of the most informative sources about the Beat generation is John Clellon Holmes' article entitled *This Is The Beat Generation* (Holmes, 1952). He published his article during the heyday of the Beats. It offers a very intimate and personal insight into the Beats' mindset and their relation to the world around them. According to him this post-war generation instinctively defined itself as opposed to collective

American values, and is preoccupied not with the loss of faith, but with the need for it. His words reflect strong existential thoughts, for example when he says, “At the four trembling corners of the world, or in the hometown invaded by factories or lonely servicemen, they had intimate experience with the nadir and the zenith of human conduct, and little time for much that came between” (Holmes, 1952).

Another valuable work is Norman Mailer’s *White Negro* (1957). This controversial essay is about “the American existentialist,” the *hipster*, who was born in the post-war United States: angry, desperate for meaning in the world. The Beats lived and wrote in a world where – mostly because of the War’s aftermath – basic human values, the meaning of life and death, people’s safety and own control were being questioned. As Mailer says, “the Second World War presented a mirror to the human condition which blinded anyone who looked into it [...] No wonder then that these have been the years of conformity and depression. A stench of fear has come out of every pore of American life, and we suffer from a collective failure of nerve. The only courage, with rare exceptions, that we have been witness to, has been the isolated courage of isolated people” (Mailer, 1957).

It is important to note that Beat authors had very different individual reasons and motivations to write (Sterritt, 2020), thus I am not sure that it is possible to create a universal theory about them. Or maybe it is, precisely because this fact proves that we can only find individual solutions to our existential anxieties and that there are no exact answers to the questions of existence, only our own.

Psychoanalysis and the Beats

I would like to highlight just one connection between psychoanalysis and the Beat writers: the similarity between psychoanalysis’ spontaneous associative method and these writers’ motto, “first thought, best thought.” It wasn’t that they wrote down whatever came to their mind and never edited a single word, but their basic concept is right: the essence of their writing method was to write freely, associatively, from their heart, in order to show through their texts who they really are and what is on their mind.

In his *Essentials of Spontaneous Prose*, Jack Kerouac (1958a) summarised what he believed was the essence of spontaneous prose: “If possible write ‘without

consciousness' in semitrance (as Yeats' later 'trance writing') allowing subconscious to admit in own uninhibited interesting necessary and so 'modern' language what conscious art would censor, and write excitedly, swiftly, with writing-or-typing-cramps, in accordance (as from center to periphery) with laws of orgasm, Reich's 'beclouding of consciousness.' 'Come' from within, out to relaxed and said" (Kerouac, 1958a).

As Tomasz Sawczuk (2019) puts it in a book titled *On the Road to Lost Fathers: Jack Kerouac in a Lacanian Perspective*: "Kerouac's insights into the matter of writing do not diverge much from what constitutes the principles of psychoanalytic free-associating. Uncorrected and written in the spirit of Whitmanesque richness, the writer's chains of free thoughts and reminiscences appear to be similar to the subject's unrestricted production of speech in the course of psychoanalytic treatment" (Sawczuk, 2019, p. 129).

Gloria Murmis (1964) also mentions free association when she talks about the character of the Beat poetry and religion: "[...] allowing for a non-rational expansion of the self. Religion is mystical and expressive, a religion of chaotic inner experience that is not bound to any organizational form [...] This is why everything self-conscious (grammar, for example) is looked upon as artificial, as separating literature from life. Insofar as there is a Beat stand on literature, it is the rejection of coherent, rational discourse. [...] Language as well as literature must be intuitional" (Murmis, 1964, p. 65).

I think the key here is the expansion of self and consciousness, and the independence from organization that the analysts also talk about in their method (Galton, 1883, ctd. Lothane, 2018, p. 417, Freud, 1903, Lothane, 2018). Freud says that the success of therapy depends on the patient's ability to associate freely without constraints and external rules: "He must adopt a completely impartial attitude to what occurs to him, since it is precisely his critical attitude which is responsible for his being unable, in the ordinary course of things, to achieve the desired unravelling of his dream or obsessional idea or whatever it may be" (Freud, 1900, p. 126). Lothane mentions that Freud later specifically renamed the state of free association as "widening of consciousness" (Freud, 1903, p. 249-250, cited Lothane, 2018).

Freud (1900) himself mentions writers and literature when, following Otto Rank and quoting Schiller, he assumes a similar attitude to poetic creation as to

therapeutic work: “It seems a bad thing and detrimental to the creative work of the mind if Reason makes too close an examination of the ideas as they come pouring in—at the very gateway, as it were. [...] On the other hand, where there is a creative mind, Reason—so it seems to me—relaxes its watch upon the gates, and the ideas rush in pell-mell, and only then does it look them through and examine them in a mass” (Schiller, December 1, 1788. cited Freud, 1900, p. 127-128).

Let’s get back to the Beat generation. Why was spontaneous writing so important to them? One response from the literary approach from Kerouac (1958b) is to return to the roots of poetry: “The new American poetry [...] is a kind of new-old Zen Lunacy poetry, writing whatever comes into your head as it comes, poetry returned to its origin, in the bardic child, truly ORAL as Ferling said, instead of gray faced Academic quibbling. Poetry & prose had for long time fallen into the false hands of the false. These new pure poets confess forth for the sheer joy of confession. They are CHILDREN. They are also childlike graybeard Homers singing in the street” (Kerouac, 1958b). One is reminded of Freud's study *Creative Writers and Daydreaming*, in which he draws a parallel between creativity in writing and children's imagination and play (Freud, 1907, 1966).

Another answer is the one we discussed above: they believed that it was through the spontaneous technique of writing that they could come closest to their own unconscious, which was essential to understanding their own existence and thus to creating great works. The phrase "first thought, best thought", also used as the title of the lecture, has often been uttered in various contexts by Beat writers, most notably Allen Ginsberg (McKenzie, 1978). He heard it from his Tibetan Buddhist teacher, Chögyam Trungpa and they used it for describe the spontaneous and free writing, the expression coming from naked and authentic experience. Soon we will see that this runs in parallel not only with free association, but also with the existential-phenomenological concept of creativity.

Existential psychology and the Beats

To illustrate the parallels between the existential-phenomenological landscape and Beat writers' concepts about themselves and their writings, I would start with one of Allen Ginsberg's essays, "*When the Mode of the Music Changes the Walls of the City Shake*" (Ginsberg, 1961). For Ginsberg, "Trouble with conventional form (fixed line count and stanza form) is, it's too symmetrical, geometrical, numbered and pre-fixed—unlike to my own mind which has no beginning and end, nor fixed measure of thought (or speech—or writing) other than its own cornerless mystery—to transcribe the latter in a form most nearly representing its actual 'occurrence' is my 'method'—which requires the skill of freedom of composition—and which will lead poetry to the expression of the highest moments of the mindbody [...] The only pattern of value or interest in poetry is the solitary, individual pattern particular to the poet's moment and the poem discovered in the mind and in the process of writing it out on the page, as notes, transcriptions,—reproduced in the fittest accurate form, at the time of composition. [...] It is this personal discovery which is of value to the poet and to the reader—and it is of course more, not less, communicable of actuality than a pattern chosen in advance, with matter poured into it arbitrarily to fit, which of course distorts and blurs the matter..." (Ginsberg, 1961, p. 148-149).

It is not difficult to see how similar ideas were formulated by the representatives of existential psychology (May, 1961, Kőváry, 2022). According to their conception, the human being is an emerging and becoming being, who cannot be described according to fixed principles and predetermined frameworks, but can only be known by observing him or herself. In psychotherapy they do not (only) look for a pattern, a diagnostic category, or a drive, but the focus of their investigation is on the people existing in the therapist's room's world. Beyond therapeutic considerations this also forms the basis of the psychobiography used to study the creativity of outstanding artists. As Zoltán Kőváry writes about psychobiography, "in such cases, it is not necessary to force the object of our study into the narrow confines of this paradigm, but rather to adopt an approach that is adapted to the ontological specificities of the object. Psychobiography is one such method" (Kőváry, 2017, p. 74).

Murmis (1964) makes an in-depth comparison between existentialist literature (especially Sartre, for example) and the Beat writers. Her points are based on the

dissociation from the conventional, normative functioning of the major society of the moment. Both groups, she argues, emphasise individual responsibility and freedom, and the development of one's own voice and meaning in life (Murmis, 1964).

Funch (2022) refers to William James and his notion of *pure experience* in order to capture the existential-phenomenological essence of creative psychology (Funch, 2022, p. 122). We know from his correspondence that Kerouac also read James and was impressed and inspired by his ideas (Kerouac, October 8, 1941). According to Funch this pure experience is ineffable. It indicates an empty mind, a unity with a life of its own, imbued with variety (Funch, 2022). All these elements can be found in various forms in the *ars poetica* of the Beat writers.

Yalom (1980) thinks of creative work as one possible way to make sense of life. He believes that creative life has meaning in itself, and, mentioning Irving Taylor as well, he says that often artists working with difficult personal problems and severe social constraints develop a sophisticated level of introspection where they recognize their existential situation more acutely (Yalom, 1980, 2017, p. 518-519).

Conclusion

I have presented two starting points from which we can move towards an examination of the creative psychology of Beat writers. First, if their way of writing is like the free association technique of psychoanalysis, then we can come closer to understanding the Beat writers through their writings in a way similar to the tools of psychoanalysis. Vikár (1988) also argues that one of the three sources of Freud's and other psychoanalysts' observations of literary psychology is "from the analysis of the text, which he treats – *mutatis mutandis* – as if as a series of associations in an analysis" (Vikár, 1988, p. 114).

Secondly, if their view of themselves and the world is existentialist, then by studying them we can find the meaning of writing and the purpose of creation. It is already clearly visible that the Beat generation faced a lot of existential questions and crisis and if we go forward, focusing on how these conditions appeared in their lifestyle and writing, we can get closer to answering questions like why or how do writers write when the world around them seems meaningless and chaotic, and how could/can they use writing for themselves, for their own mental state (health?).

Was/is their approach beneficial or is it more accurate to say that maybe those who write are the real mad ones, as it is said sometimes? Such questions may make it possible to (re-)construct psychobiographies of Beat authors as well.

All in all, in my opinion, it's not just about the Beats. The long-term goals of my study include thinking about the psychology of writing in a broader context through the results of studies that focus on them, even incorporating them into therapeutic and counselling work with writers.

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