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## **RETURN TO XANADU**

When in Rome, you really should visit the Protestant Cemetery. It would be a bit of a break for the members of this Episcopalian-riddled body, perhaps too high from the surfeit of vestments, incense and statuary they would secretly admire as they visit the Catholic Churches, accouterments and institutions of this Papist-ridden City. Off the beaten path, the Cimitero Acattolico is nestled in the residential Testaccio neighborhood, not too far from the Forum and the other classical tourist attractions, and right next to a pyramid built in the time of Trajan.

On our infrequent visits to Rome, my wife and I make the jaunt to the walled cemetery, patrolled by a battalion of very well-fed cats. Entrance is at the sufferance of a bell man. Beyond these charms, for Susan, it's a chance to see the elaborate gravestones of expatriates from the four corners of the globe. A tidy number of them were erected by refugee Southerners who fled to Italy after the fall of the Confederacy. It is fun as well to see how these former residents of Richmond and other rebel locales were gradually assimilated by the generations into Roman society; at least that is what is hinted in the gradual incursion of Italian names into the family trees as portrayed on the gravestones.

For both of us an even larger attraction are the graves of the great and the famous who rest there among them, the explorer and naturalist, von Humboldt; the son of Wilhelm Goethe; and the jeweler Bulgari, he in a stunning but simple grave with only the word "Bulgari" on a large white horizontal slab of granite marking the site. The main

event is that both Keats and Shelley are buried here, Keats at the far left end of the yard, as you enter, and Shelley at the center back of the site.

Of course, in the best Literary Club tradition, the Protestant Cemetery is not the theme of tonight's paper, but only a starting point. A few years ago, I was stunned to see who had joined the disparate choir of non-Catholics come to their final rest in this quiet spot in the Eternal City since my previous visit there. Last time we visited, I happened upon a surprising addition to the cemetery's literary community. Located precisely at the feet of Shelley's ornate stone is a small, unassuming one inscribed, "Gregory Corso—Poeta". Yes, that is right—the Beat poet, colleague of Ginsberg, Ferlinghetti, Kerouac and the other holy saints running naked through the streets, as Ginsberg might say is buried at the feet of the great romantic poet, Percy Bysshe Shelley.

How Corso got there, why he is there and to what extent he belongs at the feet of Shelley, is a theme of tonight's paper, with similar treatment being given to those other icons of the Beat Generation, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Allen Ginsberg, and Jack Kerouac, with a glance at William Burroughs. As Jerry Garcia said "What a long strange trip it's been."

In the process of ruminating about Corso and the other three, I became aware of some of my own predilections – a tug between conventionality and a desire for the new; reverence for the classics; hunger for my hometown, coupled with the sure knowledge that I could never live there; a need to belong pitted against feeling most comfortable when I can regard myself as an outsider. All of this tintured with revived memories of

my own tumultuous youth, lived in the turbulent 60s, with all they signified for me and, I dare say, for America at large.

By now after my 19 years at this podium, you know this writer well enough not to be surprised that part of tonight's journey involves an examination of how he got here, and what a long strange trip it has been for him.

I only became aware of the Beats gradually, and have had only occasional acquaintance with them since. As you have heard too many times over the years, I grew up in Louisville, and graduated from Bellarmine College in 1966, the first in my family to earn a college degree. Neither Louisville nor Bellarmine in those days were on the cutting edge of either political or literary revolution. I didn't even like the Beats much at that point. Oh, I had a soft spot for Ferlinghetti, as you will see in a minute, but I found Ginsberg, Kerouac and to the extent I knew who he was, Corso, wild and unkempt, not subject to the internal discipline that I thought was necessary to write well or to get ahead in life. Of course, getting ahead was not part of what the Beats were about, even a further reason for my alienation from this seminal group who gave the more restive members of my generation part of their distinctive voice and outlook.

Nevertheless, in one of my literature classes I was turned on (no other verb could ever satisfactorily describe the experience) to Lawrence Ferlinghetti's A Coney Island of the Mind. "Cool Larry" as I always called him to myself lives still, well into his 90s, the author of over a dozen novels and works of poetry. He is also the proprietor of City Lights, a splendid establishment on Columbus Avenue, in the Italian section of downtown San Francisco, both bookstore and publishing house. I have never met or

heard Ferlinghetti in person, but did make the pilgrimage to City Lights in the late 80s with my wife and daughters, as any person of my generation really ought to do.

Returning to my Bellarmine experiences, I found A Coney Island of the Mind a delightful book of poems, and looking at them now see that they have held up well over the years. I lost my original volume years ago; the copy I hold in my hand is a specimen of the 43<sup>rd</sup> printing, and we are told on the back jacket that there are over a million copies in print. Worthily so. A recent re-reading refreshed my recollection and localized for me a number of phrases and images that have floated through my imagination for these last 45 years.

Strung together in generally short lines is a vision of a commercialized, all too conventional America, for which Ferlinghetti has disdain but also hope. Combining flippant wit, a good ear for cliché and common speech, and classical learning, the poems embody a yearning for a more natural, freer life, rid of the absurd excesses of contemporary “culture.” While some references are purely historical, others are timely and timeless.

His “oral message,” “I Am Waiting” is representative of his voice and attitude:

I am waiting for my case to come up  
and I am waiting  
for a rebirth of wonder  
and I am waiting for someone  
to really discover America

\* \* \*

and I am waiting  
for the American Eagle  
to really spread its wings  
and straighten up and fly right

\* \* \*

and at the end:

and I am waiting  
for the last long careless rapture  
and I am perpetually waiting  
for the fleeing lovers on the Grecian Urn  
to catch each other up at last  
and embrace  
and I am waiting  
perpetually and forever  
a renaissance of wonder.

Ferlinghetti's early vision of mixed hope and cynicism delivered in an insouciant, somehow innocent voice was perhaps all I could handle at the early age of 20. I was titillated, idealist though I still was by his declaration in the masterful poem, "Dog," the best description of a dog in motion I have ever read, that:

he's [the dog] not afraid of Congressman Doyle  
although what he hears is very discouraging  
very depressing  
very absurd  
to a sad young dog like himself  
to a serious dog like himself

\* \* \*

He will not be muzzled  
Congressman Doyle is just another  
fire hydrant  
to him

After graduating from Bellarmine in 1966, I immediately enrolled in the graduate English and Comparative Literature program at Columbia, anxious to avoid the draft and keep from getting my ass shot off in Vietnam. Unlike my father, a decorated hero of the Battle of the Bulge, I have never had to serve. I regret this, but that is for another paper. Vietnam was an unjust war and I feel that I would have regretted serving more than I

regret not. Columbia and New York City were rough places in the late 60s. While I enjoyed the 25¢ subway fare to anything I wanted to see or do, the City was a shambles and Columbia was down at heel, not yet fully recovered from the long patriarchal reign of Nicholas Murray Butler and the shorter tenure of Dwight David Eisenhower.

But change was brewing when I arrived on Morningside Heights in September, 1966. During the four years I was there I saw (and sometimes participated on the margins of) riots, fires and building occupations, especially in the seminal year of 1968. Older members may remember the ambivalent memories I have of all that, recounted for me by Tom Blakeley in his masterful Literary Club paper, "Who Owns New York?" In class I also learned who comprised the real core of the Beat movement, already in its early teens. There I first read Allen Ginsberg and William Burroughs and at least learned who Jack Kerouac was.

It is only as I have prepared this paper that I have truly come to like Ginsberg's "Howl." This long barbaric yawp of a poem, written in Whitman-esque style, was a turning point in American letters. The opening lines are as iconic as they are energetic:

"I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by  
madness, starving hysterical naked, dragging themselves  
through the negro sheets at dawn looking for an angry fix ..."

Ginsberg first read the unpublished work at a historic poetry reading in San Francisco, at the Six Gallery on October 7, 1955. Ferlinghetti and Kerouac were in the audience with 150 others. James Franco's performance in the recently released indy film, "Howl" is a sanitized version of what actually occurred. Quite drunk, holding a jug of rot-gut red wine, Ginsberg was initially nervous but gradually grew in confidence declaiming, no

performing the poem “Howl,” according to some gradually stripping himself naked during the reading.

“Howl” is the lament of an outsider laying himself bare in the somnolence and intolerance of the 50s. Its four parts deal with drugs, mental illness, religion, and homosexuality – fears and preoccupations of youth who for many reasons could not, would not fit into the straightjacket of the Eisenhower years.

In “Howl,” we see through the agony of madness, drug addiction, failure to fit in, a yearning for the rebirth of wonder that Ferlinghetti espoused. It is a revolutionary poem, but not an un-American one, as Ginsberg wants Americans to stand for something beyond the rank commercialism and militarism that he felt was asphyxiating him and his generation. As he asked in his shorter poem, “America,” “America, how can I write a holy trinity in your silly mood?” While inveighing against the martyrdom of such as Sacco and Vanzetti and the Scottsboro boys, he hasn’t given up: as the poem ends, homosexual Ginsberg resolutely and famously declares: “America, I’m putting my queer shoulder to the wheel.” Renewal is possible. We all desire it. Perhaps there was a lesson here for those in deadly combat over the silly policy of “Don’t Ask Don’t Tell.”

The day after the Six Gallery reading, Ferlinghetti sent Ginsberg a telegram offering to publish “Howl,” in City Lights’ Pocket Poets Series. The copy here is one of over a million copies in print.

And yet in those days, all this was too rich a brew for this still innocent rube from Kentucky to drink to the lees. I was put off by the work’s raw energy. Indeed, Ferlinghetti was tried for (and acquitted of) obscenity for publishing “Howl.” I saw Ginsberg once, and once only. Attending a “human be-in” on the Sheep Meadow in

Central Park in 1967 (unfenced in those innocent days!), I passed a crowd rushing in the opposite direction. Ginsberg and his long-time lover Peter Orlovsky attired in white robes, chanting and ringing Buddhist ceremonial bells, going one way, cheered by an admiring throng, solitary me heading the other. Our moving in opposite directions was, I regret to say, not only symbolic, but all too starkly true.

Obtaining my Ph.D. in 1971, I was already teaching English at Saratoga Springs' Skidmore College. Climbing the academy's greasy but very slender pole, I lost sight of the Beats for a while, but somewhere along the line, I decided that I had better read On the Road before my taste for the road was totally extinguished. I had led a seminar session at Columbia on William Burroughs's Naked Lunch. I had researched it well, left out little of the squalid detail of that hallucinating, near obscene novel, and earned the grudging praise of my long-dead professor and mentor, John Unterecker: "Tony, your paper almost didn't make me sick." At any rate, in the research process I learned that Kerouac had attended Columbia for a time in the late 40s and even played football for the ever hapless Lions under the legendary Lou Little. The combination of Beat Novelist and football player fascinated me and so I eventually read On the Road preparatory to discussing it with a class of (I am sure) bewildered young ladies from the better suburbs of all the affluent New England cities.

I later taught the novel at Great Meadow Penitentiary, at Comstock, New York, one of New York's four maximum security penitentiaries. There the expansive mood and non-stop action of the narrative were greatly appreciated by a class populated by multiple murderers and others serving long years for atrocious felonies. On the Road follows the adventures of Sal Paradise and Dean Moriarty, that is Kerouac and the

legendary Neal Cassady (the “Adonis of Denver” and secret hero of “Howl” as Ginsberg called him) as they ping pong across America, coast to coast, with stops in Denver and side excursions to Mexico and elsewhere in search of adventure, new sights, jazz, drugs, and “gurls, gurls, gurls.” While the novel even today strikes me as a bit of a mess, it is full of energy. Moreover, it paints a vivid portrait of one part of the underbelly of American life, the American desire to be always on the move, ever to be searching for the new, the vital, the young. Like the work of Ferlinghetti and Ginsberg, it depicts a yearning for a simpler, freer, better America, for a nation free of cant and hypocrisy. It is a good read, an invigorating one in many ways, but only if you have not given up on an appreciation of what it means to be young and alive, whether for good or for ill.

A note on Neal Cassady, “Adonis of Denver” and the Dean Moriarty of the novel. Cassady was a hyperactive, sociopathic catalytic component of the Beat Movement. Called by some a great writer, he published almost nothing. He apparently had little time to write as he seemed to have been irresistibly sexually attractive to a vast array of both men and women. I have seen videos of Cassady and can say as e.e. cummings said of Buffalo Bill “jesus, he was a handsome man.” Where he should be all the time, as Carly Simon sang about James Taylor in “You’re So Vain,” Cassady was on the scene throughout the 50s and even into the 60s, the driver of Ken Kesey’s bus “Furthur” on his memorable excursion across America. Some years later Cassady was found dead well before his time next to a railroad track outside San Miguel de Allende, Mexico.

I fooled around with other semi-Beat texts while teaching at Skidmore. Tom Wolfe’s Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test recounting Kesey’s voyage of discovery, and Kesey’s One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest and Sometimes a Great Notion come to

mind. But after I left academia in 1976, moved to Cincinnati and passed the bar, I lost sight of the Beats entirely, mostly reading foreign literature I never would have been able to shoehorn into Skidmore's English curriculum.

That didn't change for some years. One Sunday afternoon some 20 or 25 years ago, Susan and I found ourselves at the Movies on Race Street, during that brief but wonderful period when downtown had its own art movie house, where the Shakespeare Festival now dwells. The movie was a documentary biography of Jack Kerouac — "Whatever Happened to Jack Kerouac?"-- with a good deal of oral history thrown in. There were comments by Ginsberg and others, but the most charming and insightful of those commenting on Kerouac was Gregory Corso. There must have been eight or nine cuts of Corso talking about his old friend. The session with Corso had to have been filmed in one sitting, and set within the larger film chronologically. I could tell this because Corso was drinking pony bottles of Schoenling's Little Kings Cream Ale as he reminisced, and the pile of dead soldiers grew as the taping went on. By then I had been in Cincinnati long enough and consumed enough Little Kings myself to realize that Corso had to be a man of discernment. This was borne out not only by his choice of beverage, but also by the gentle, somewhat comic but perceptive pronouncements that he made about Kerouac.

Far beyond that, Kerouac came across as a sensitive caring fellow, always devoted to his home town of Lowell, Massachusetts, where he lived not only in his formative years, but also at the end of his life, with his mother.

The tug between the rootlessness of Kerouac's writings and his constant loving ties to Lowell fascinated me. I was also intrigued by the obvious good humor and

insightful intelligence of Corso, whom, I must admit, I had read little of and what little I had read I had found distasteful. And that is where things stood on that day a few years ago, when I discovered Gregory Corso, “Poeta,” lying at the feet of Shelley, unearthing for myself attitudes and memories of mine, long forgotten.

At this point a description of Corso’s laying to rest is an appropriate interlude: months after his death from inoperable prostate cancer in 1991, on a Saturday morning in May, some 200 people gathered in the Cimitero Acattolico to pay their last respects. The cemetery is very full and hard to get into (for the dead). Only tenacious efforts and laborious negotiations by a Roman admirer of Corso’s succeeded in getting the poet his final wish.

While Mozart played through loud speakers, an “independent” clarinet played old Spanish revolutionary songs. Corso’s daughter, a nurse in Minneapolis who had cared for the dying poet in that unlikely venue during the last seven months of his life, brought his urn of ashes and deposited them into the grave. Rose petals were strewn over the urn. After tales, anecdotes, laughter and poetry readings, mementoes followed the rose petals into the open grave: there were written verses, dedications, a sea shell from an Italian beach that had hosted a reading by Ginsberg and Corso, and last but not least a ceremonial joint ritually smoked by some of the attendees.

On the simple gravestone, set humbly at the foot of Shelley’s ornate one, is Corso’s epitaph, which he himself wrote:

Spirit  
is life  
It flows thru  
the death of me

endlessly  
like a river  
unafraid  
of becoming  
the sea.

Quite a finish for a street urchin, born in Greenwich Village in 1930 and effectively orphaned at the age of two. After knocking about in unsatisfactory foster homes, Corso was on his own by his very early teens. He put himself in public school, attending while sleeping in subway tunnels and empty buildings. After a number of run-ins with the law for breaking and very petty thievery, he wound up in the Clinton Correctional Facility at the age of 15, where he was the youngest convict by a margin of several years.

The resident Mafiosi befriended and protected him and he advanced his studies using library equipment procured by the mobster Lucky Luciano during his own residence at Clinton. After graduating from Clinton, before falling in with Ginsberg, Kerouac and the gang, he held a number of jobs, including one with the Los Angeles Examiner, and he audited classes at Harvard. There Harvard and Radcliffe students chipped in the money to help him publish his first book of poetry, The Vestal Lady on Brattle.

Once he had hooked up with the Beats, all some years his senior, he became a full-fledged but very junior member of the group. There is general agreement that his poetry is superior to Ginsberg's. He writes precisely, often in archaic or formal diction, and his poems show classical learning often voiced in the syncopations and rhythms of jazz. An attitude of invincible innocence is coupled with incisive wit and the wise guy attitude of a child of the New York streets. Like the other Beats, he seeks a rebirth of

wonder and spirit, with his chief tools being colorful language and imaginative often surreal collocations of image and situations. Conversely his shortest poems are almost haiku-like in lapidary exposure of the essence of a situation, often treating loss, waste and death, especially of the young. Some examples follow. First, "In the Morgue":

I remember seeing their pictures in the papers;  
Naked, they seemed stronger.  
The bullet in my stomach proved that I was dead.  
I watched the embalmer unscrew the glass top.  
He examined me and smiled at my minute-dead-life  
Then he went back to the two bodies across from me  
And continued to unscrew.

When you're dead you can't talk  
Yet you feel like you could.  
It was funny watching those two gangsters across from me  
trying to talk.  
They widened their thin lips and showed grey-blue teeth;

The embalmer, still smiling, came back to me.  
He picked me up and like a mother would a child,  
Rested me upright in a rocking chair.  
He gave a push and I rocked.  
Being dead didn't mean much.  
I still felt pain where the bullet went through.

God! seeing the two gangsters from this angle was really  
strange!  
They certainly didn't look like they looked in the papers.  
Here they were young and clean shaven and well-shaped.

In contrast, he shows a much different picture and attitude in "Botticelli's 'Spring'":

No sign of Spring!  
Florentine sentinels  
from icy campanili  
watch for a sign —

Lorenzo dreams to awaken bluebirds  
Ariosto sucks his thumb.

Michelangelo sits forward on his bed  
... awakened by no new change.  
Dante pulls back his velvet hood,  
his eyes are deep and sad.  
His great dane weeps.  
No sign of Spring!  
Leonardo paces his unbearable room  
... holds an arrogant eye on die-hard snow.  
Raffaello steps into a warm bath  
... his long silken hair is dry  
because of lack of sun.  
Aretino remembers Spring in Milan; his mother,  
who now, on sweet Milanese hills, sleeps.  
No sign of Spring! No sign!  
Ah, Botticelli opens the door of his studio.

Where did his love of Shelley come from? I am not sure, but it is easy to see why he loved Shelley the other side of idolatry. Let's take a look at Shelley's "Ode to the West Wind:"

O Wild West Wind, thou breath of Autumn's being,  
Thou, from whose unseen presence the leaves dead  
Are driven, like ghosts from an enchanter fleeing,

Yellow, and black, and pale, and hectic red,  
Pestilence-stricken multitudes: O thou,  
Who chariotest to their dark wintry bed

The wingèd seeds, where they lie cold and low,  
Each like a corpse within its grave, until  
Thine azure sister of the spring shall blow

Her clarion o'er the dreaming earth, and fill  
(Driving sweet buds like flocks to feed in air)  
With living hues and odors plain and hill:

Wild Spirit, which art moving everywhere;  
Destroyer and preserver; hear, oh, hear!

\* \* \*

Make me thy lyre, even as the forest is;  
What if my leaves are falling like its own!

The tumult of thy mighty harmonies

Will take from both a deep, autumnal tone,  
Sweet though in sadness. Be thou, Spirit fierce,  
My spirit! Be thou me, impetuous one!

Drive my dead thoughts over the universe  
Like withered leaves to quicken a new birth!  
And, by the incantation of this verse,

Scatter, as from an extinguished hearth  
Ashes and sparks, my words among mankind!  
Be through my lips to unawakened earth

The trumpet of a prophecy! O Wind,  
If Winter comes, can Spring be far behind?

We see the themes of “death,” of “pestilence-stricken multitudes.” And yet the wild west wind breathes life through the being of the seasons. It drives Shelley’s “dead thoughts over the universe” to “quicken a new birth.” Shelley wants the wind to scatter his thoughts like “ashes and sparks” among mankind. Not unlike the title of Corso’s work in Ferlinghetti’s Pocket Poets series, Gasoline. Corso wanted his poems to be incendiary, to ignite the thoughts and spirits of his readers, to quicken the pulse of the living dead slogging their way through contemporary America.

Was Corso successful? Even at this writing, I don’t know. To begin to sum up, I know only this. My encounter with Corso and his older compatriots (how they would probably hate that word!) has renewed my appreciation for the poetry of the 50s and 60s and revived memories of that earlier, tempestuous period of my own life.

It is probably no coincidence that both Kerouac and Corso came from humble circumstances, much as did the writer of this paper. I have always had a love of the underdog, and an instinctive need to side with the poor and the downtrodden. I admire

those who rise above their humble beginnings. Beyond that, it has been work to reconcile myself to the free and untrammelled spirit evidenced in their sometimes hallucinatory poetry and prose. I have never been good at slipping out of the forms and rules of my life, imposed and self-imposed.

At this point you may be asking yourself, how good were these writers? You know there are a goodly number of copies of their works in print, but probably don't know anyone who reads this stuff. It's difficult to understand and sometimes self-indulgent. Maybe, you say, Covatta is getting soft in the head and letting these guys off the hook because of his youthful connections with Columbia.

Well, I must admit my first idea for this paper was to do an extended analysis of Corso, Ginsberg and Kerouac, enlivened by the enthusiasm I picked up in my discovery of Corso's grave in Rome. That didn't work out. While I have new respect for the Beats, all of them, I still find them at times self-indulgent, needlessly obscure and full of the self-referential. I am not sure that the poetry stands up to extended intellectual analysis. It probably was not intended to. I don't know that the work of these writers will last other than On the Road.

I am also personally put off by the fact that both Kerouac and Corso burnt out, probably because of their too easy turning to drugs and alcohol, from which they never escaped. Kerouac spent his final days in Miami, of all places, living with his mother, looking not unlike the bloated, dying king of rock 'n roll, Elvis. Corso wrote little in his last decades, teaching from time to time eccentric courses in which he harangued his probably befuddled students to read Shelley and the other classics if they wanted to become poets.

It is the self indulgence of the Beats and the whole counter-culture of the late 50s and 60s that is most off-putting. A lot of the commotion arose from a very personal desire of many to avoid Vietnam. I don't know that my generation has ever taken full responsibility for what Charles deGaulle called the bedwetting that masqueraded as political activity.

An amusing anecdote involving Corso, Kerouac and Ginsberg illustrates this endemic immaturity. Kerouac, Corso and some other wags were hanging out at Washington Square one evening when Corso saw an abandoned pushcart. He remarked that it would be pleasant to ride in the pushcart and gaze at the stars as they made their way to Ginsberg's apartment in the Village. Kerouac and the others got in and rode and Corso pushed. When they arrived at Ginsberg's place, an argument ensued, for Ginsberg was worried that his landlord would not be pleased to have the stolen pushcart parked on his sidewalk. Reminiscing years later, Corso remembered how pleasant the stargazing had been, and could not yet understand how the argument had developed or why Ginsberg had evinced such a bourgeois response. An adolescent attitude of immediate gratification which the Beats apparently never outgrew. I believe this immature outlook infects our public life even today.

Nevertheless, this endeavor has gotten me back in touch with the youthful spirit with which I descended upon New York in 1966. Full of hope in a world that was turning to destruction and despair, I felt the virtue in a rebirth of wonder and spirit in a world become and becoming all too venal.

And now as I meander to a close, let us turn 90° or so and reflect on the place of this shaggy band within American culture. We could use some of their attitude even

now. Like what Nick Carraway saw at the end of The Great American Novel, F. Scott Fitzgerald's The Great Gatsby, their view was of the fresh green breast of a new world, to them lost in the foul dust of American commercialism, under the eyes of Fitzgerald's symbolic oculist, Dr. T. J. Eckleberg.

Ferlinghetti got it right in the title of his eulogy of the dead Corso: "Untamed Poet Crosses the River." In his quiet and puckish way, Ferlinghetti coupled Corso's rambunctious undead rebelliousness with the classical image of the boatman Charon ferrying the Beat poet across the River Styx into the classical Hades. How fine it would be if we could couple his brash enthusiasm with devotion to the classic principles of American culture that made this country what it has been and what it should be—a welcomer of immigrants, helper of the sick and the dying, reliever of the poor and the unfortunate, and above all a lover of peace. Corso hated war and hated violence. One of his books was sardonically titled The Happy Birthday of Death complete with a poem written in the shape of an atomic mushroom cloud.

For those who think the Beats look monstrous and find the thumbing of their adolescent noses at the Establishment off putting, beyond the pale, continuation of the cynically selfish egotism that permeates our society will prompt an avatar of dissent and rebellion deeper and much more disruptive than the commotion of the 60s ever truly imagined it could be.

To close on a positive note, I am left and leave you with the words of yet another drug-addled poet, this one like Shelley from the Romantic Era, Samuel Taylor Coleridge. His words in Kubla Kahn, whence comes the title of this paper, his great

opium dream of a poem are a call to a rebirth of wonder that I often recall and occasionally try to re-live:

Could I revive within me  
that symphony and song,  
to such a deep delight 'twould win me  
that with music loud and long  
I would build that dome in air  
that sunny dome! those caves of ice!  
and all who heard should see them there,  
And all should cry, Beware! Beware!  
His flashing eyes, his floating hair!  
Weave a circle round him thrice  
And close your eyes with holy dread  
For he on honey-dew hath fed,  
And drunk the milk of Paradise.

I imagine Corso reciting these lines as I do. For that is what Corso and the other Beats were striving for: the ecstasy, the pure delight of achievement, both artistic and otherwise. They may not have fully made their own “pleasure dome,” in Coleridge’s words, or been able to dwell in it for very long, but they made the effort. The realization of that has been a tonic for me, and I hope for some of you as well. I am sure that Corso, at some time during his all too short but much too tough life drank “the milk of Paradise.” For that, let us let him rest at peace next to his hero, his colleague, that other great poet, Percy Bysshe Shelley.

Presented to the Literary Club  
January 10, 2011

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