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Breaking Up to Make Up: Gregory Corso's Hidden Poetics

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In "Unreal Cities," the first chapter of her study of twentieth-century poetics, *The Poetics of Indeterminacy: Rimbaud to Cage* (1981), the American literary scholar Marjorie Perloff investigates - among many other things - the development of European and American poetry in general. Before sketching the impact of Rimbaud on a number of recent American poets and writers, from Charles Wright to Jack Spicer and Jack Kerouac, Perloff starts out by distinguishing between a symbolist mode (which according to her is inherited from Eliot, Baudelaire and "beyond them, from the great Romantic poets") and an "'anti-Symbolist' mode of indeterminacy or 'undecidability,' of literalness and free play, whose first real exemplar was the Rimbaud of *Les Illuminations*."¹ Of course one sees what she is getting at: it can hardly be denied that since *Les Illuminations* much poetry, both in Europe and America, has the indeterminate quality which in Perloff's view in the Anglo-American world characterizes at least part of the work of, among others, Ezra Pound, Gertrude Stein, William Carlos Williams, Samuel Beckett and John Cage: "For what happens in Pound's *Cantos*, as in Stein's *Tender Buttons* or Williams' *Spring and All* or Beckett's *How It Is* or John Cage's *Silence*, is that the symbolic evocations generated by words on the page are no longer grounded in a coherent discourse, so that it becomes impossible to decide which of these associations are relevant and which are not."² This leads to the "undecidability" of texts, which continues to play a central role in the work of, for instance, John Ashbery and that of the so-called Language-poets. In order to illustrate her notion of undecidability, Perloff contrast the

“perfectly coherent symbolic structure”³ of Eliot’s *The Waste Land* with the indeterminacy of Ashbery’s poem “These Lacustrine Cities”:

These lacustrine cities grew out of loathing
Into something forgetful, although angry with history.
They are the product of an idea: that man is horrible, for
instance,
Though this is only one example.

They emerged until a tower
Controlled the sky, and with artifice dipped back
Into the past for swans and tapering branches,
Burning, until all that hate was transformed into useless
love.

Then you are left with an idea of yourself
And the feeling of ascending emptiness of the afternoon
Which must be charged to the embarrassment of others
Who fly by you like beacons.
(...)

Apparently to Perloff’s surprise her distinction between a symbolist mode and one of indeterminacy is not one which has been made by many other American critics. The difference between these modes, Perloff claims, “has been minimized in current Anglo-American criticism, which regards as axiomatic the proposition that twentieth-century poetry is a belated version of Romanticism.”⁴ As examples of this minimization, Perloff refers to critical texts by Harold Bloom, Robert Pinsky and Thomas McFarland. In his *A Map of Misreading*, Bloom, Perloff emphasizes, has stressed that “Modernism in literature has not passed. Rather it has been exposed as never having been there.”⁵ Pinsky, for his part, in *The Situation of Poetry*, has argued that “the best poets of our time have learned the lessons laid down by Keats’s ‘Ode to a Nightingale,’”⁶ Perloff points out, and she concludes her criticism of these critics by emphasizing that McFarland “makes no allowance for a poetic that does not ground the ‘transcendent’ in the ‘real’”; consequently he finds “an inherent weakness in all surrealist practice,” in that surrealism “tends to abandon the reality of this world.”⁷ In contrast to these American critics, a number of European scholars are much more in line with Perloff’s way of thinking. Perloff mentions two of these scholars in particular: Roger Cardinal and Tzvetan Todorov. In his essay “Enigma”, Cardinal - as Perloff indicates - has posited that in much recent poetry the concern for

“meanings below the surface” (as in symbolism) has given way to, as Perloff puts it, “increasing interest in the play of the surface itself” and that poems have become “work[s] of enigma...poised between sense and nonsense,”⁸ a description which would clearly apply to much poetry written in the mode of indeterminacy. Todorov, writing on *Les Illuminations*, comes up with a description that, Perloff suggests, is clearly in line with her view that American poetry has become more indeterminate: “The phrases themselves that constitute the text [*Les Illuminations*] are quite comprehensible, but the object that they evoke is never named and one therefore hesitates as to their identification...the interpretative process is radically changed when symbolic evocations, however ingenious, find themselves deprived of a pedestal.”⁹ In the end Perloff can only conclude that “[p]erhaps Todorov and Cardinal read the map of modern poetry differently from Bloom or Pinsky or McFarland because their generalizations are derived from Continental (and especially French) rather than Anglo-American models.”¹⁰

A possible difference between European and Anglo-American poetic models is also suggested by a comparison between Marjorie Perloff’s own approach to Anglo-American modernism and some of the views on the development of poetry expressed by the Dutch scholar A.L. Sötemann. Sötemann (1920-2002) was one of Holland’s most pre-eminent authorities on the ties between poetry and poetics, about which he published numerous articles and reviews. Many of these were collected in a book entitled *Over poëtica en poëzie* [About poetics and poetry], published in 1985.¹¹ This book is largely in Dutch, but it does contain two chapters in English, one of which is called “Poetics and periods in literary history.” In this chapter, and in the book as a whole, Sötemann distinguishes between a pure and an impure tradition in poetry, using the terms employed by Paul Valéry in his preface to a volume of verse by Lucien Fabré. The concept of pure poetry was first put forward by Edgar Allan Poe in his essay “The Poetic Principle” (1850). For Poe, “the essential quality of poetry is a kind of lyricism distinguished by intensity and virtually identical with music in its effects.”¹² He regarded poetry as “entirely an aesthetic phenomenon, differentiated from and independent of the intellect and the moral sense. The products of the latter, ideas and passions, are judged to be within the province of

prose and their presence in a poem to be positively detrimental to the poetic effect."¹³ Following in Poe's footsteps (which had already shown Baudelaire part of his way), Mallarmé's "conception of pure poetry was that of an absolute, a point at which poetry would attain complete linguistic autonomy, the words taking over the initiative and creating the meanings, liberating themselves, so to speak, from the deliberate rhetoric of the poet."¹⁴

Sötemann sees a connection between pure poetry and symbolism, which he contrasts with the impurity of realism and romanticism. While the realist and romantic traditions give rise to the poet as prophet and to a poem which focuses on the personality of the poet, the symbolist tradition produces a poet who is primarily the maker of a piece of artifice, in which the personality of the poet plays a less noticeable role. The obvious contrast between the two traditions could of course be personified, for instance, by the prophet-poet Walt Whitman on the one hand, and the artificer Poe on the other hand.

Strikingly enough, Sötemann's not overly original classification, which comes out of a European context, clashes with Marjorie Perloff's view on Anglo-American modernism. Instead of contrasting (pure) symbolism and (impure) romanticism, Perloff - as we saw - distinguishes between a symbolist mode and an "anti-Symbolist" mode of indeterminacy. Still, if one considers the work of - for instance - John Ashbery and that of the Language-poets, it soon becomes clear that these and other American poets whose work has a strong indeterminate quality in many ways are not unlike the pure poets who are part of the European tradition which contrasts symbolism and romanticism. This seems to suggest that it is not always possible to draw a clear line between a continental and an Anglo-American tradition in poetics.

Moreover, Sötemann also suggests that it is often problematic to distinguish between poets who work in the pure tradition and others who do not. In some cases one particular poet may even seem to belong to both traditions simultaneously. Sötemann comes up with the example of Whitman, who at first sight seems to be part of the impure tradition, determined by romanticism and the view that poetry should be personal and address the world and its problems. He seems to be one of those poets who rely on spontaneity and who do not seem to pay a lot of attention to what

one could call the “mechanics” of their work. However, on the basis of statements made by Whitman, especially in his letters but also elsewhere, Sötemann reaches the tentative conclusion that Whitman was very much aware of his own poetics and that in some respects he could definitely be called a “pure” poet, a maker. The same thing can be said about some of the poets of the so-called Beat Generation, which emerged in the 1950s and which has continued to play an influential role in American literature and society ever since. Allen Ginsberg, throughout his career, knew very well what he was up to as a poet. He started out by modelling his early work on that of Elizabethan and metaphysical poets such as Thomas Wyatt, John Donne, Nicholas Breton and Christopher Smart. As a consequence, the poems that Ginsberg wrote before 1950 have been described as “decorative, overwritten, full of conceits and poetic diction...all in the style of the sixteenth and seventeenth century mystics and sonnetteers.”¹⁵ When a few years later Ginsberg had come into his own as a poet and had written the much freer “Howl,” the ending of the first part of that long poem enumerates some of the poetic techniques employed by the poet and again bears witness to the fact that Ginsberg was a highly conscious craftsman. One hesitates to use the same qualification in the case of Ginsberg’s fellow-Beat Gregory Corso, but whether or not that hesitation is justified remains to be seen.

In what one could call the original nucleus of Beat writers - Jack Kerouac, William Burroughs, Allen Ginsberg and Gregory Corso - it is especially Corso, who died in 2001 at the age of seventy, who for a long time was regarded as a writer who did not take his own occupation, the writing of poetry, quite seriously. He was often seen as the clown among the Beats, a designation Corso himself helped to maintain by claiming that, whenever he and Ginsberg would team up for readings in public, he would serve as the comic foil to the more serious Ginsberg. In fact, it was his friend Ginsberg who helped to create the image of Corso as a poet who most of the time just fooled about. Ironically, Ginsberg did so in a text which was meant to praise Corso, namely in the introduction to Corso’s second volume of poems, *Gasoline*, which came out in 1958. In that introduction, written in Amsterdam, Holland (where Corso spent some time with Ginsberg and Ginsberg’s partner Peter Orlovsky in the

autumn of 1957), Ginsberg begins by advising the reader to open the book “as you would a box of crazy toys.”¹⁶ He stresses the fact that in his view Corso’s word combinations in the book are “imaginary and pure” (I will come back to Ginsberg’s repeated use of the term “pure” in this introduction), but admits that the reader may be puzzled as to the meaning of Corso’s poems. However, as far as Ginsberg is concerned that should not be a problem: “But what is he *saying*? Who cares?! It’s said!”¹⁷ One wonders if this rather lackadaisical reaction to the complexity of Corso’s poetry may not have been detrimental to his being taken serious as a poet.

Actually, Corso’s poetic career as a whole suggests that he did care what he was saying, even though that was not always obvious from a superficial glance at his work, and even though the serious aspects of Corso’s personality, including his poetic activities, were often overshadowed by his outrageous lifestyle. The latter was to a large extent determined by drink and drugs, and anyone who was ever present at a literary occasion which was also attended by Corso will remember the man’s seemingly limitless abilities to make a nuisance of himself. In *Gregory Corso: Doubting Thomist*, Kirby Olson, who studied with Corso at Naropa Institute in Boulder, Colorado in 1977, puts the classier label “iconoclasm”¹⁸ on Corso’s tendencies to create havoc. Still, that fancy term is unable to gloss over the unpleasant aspects of Corso’s behaviour. Olson gives “a partial inventory of [Corso’s] disruptions”¹⁹ during the time he spent with the poet. The list consists of seven items; among the less outrageous are the following three:

1. Corso smashed all of Allen Ginsberg’s vintage jazz records from the 1950s, telling Ginsberg that he was helping him reach enlightenment because he was too attached to those records.
2. Corso fed his three-year-old child, Max Orpheus, from a bottle that he continuously refilled with wine.
3. He gave a series of talks, called “Socratic Raps,” that were always given in an advanced state of inebriation; he changed tracks whenever they seemed to be getting too sensible. All the while he was lecturing, he would sit and obsessively tie and untie knots with a length of string.²⁰

In spite of this kind of behaviour, a number of critics have always been aware of Corso’s commitment to poetry. Apart from the occasional perceptive piece in literary journals, during the last ten years two valuable studies of Corso’s work have

appeared: Michael Skau's *A Clown in a Grave*, published in 1999, and the book referred to above, Kirby Olson's *Gregory Corso: Doubting Thomist*, which came out in 2002. Somewhat earlier, in 1989, Gregory Stephenson published a shorter but equally useful investigation of Corso's literary output, *Exiled Angel: A Study of the Work of Gregory Corso*. All three scholars come up with interesting observations on Corso's work, which does not only consist of poems, but also of a number of plays and a novel, *The American Express* (1961). However, as far as their examination of Corso's poetics is concerned, these scholars were at a disadvantage because they could not refer to the letters which Corso wrote throughout his entire career, but especially between the mid-1950s and the mid-1960s. A substantial collection of these letters was published in 2003, under the title *An Accidental Autobiography: The Selected Letters of Gregory Corso*. It is especially in these letters that Corso has made some very relevant remarks about his own poetics. The latter are of course also implied by some of his own poems, but his correspondence certainly helps to make Corso's poetics less hidden.

Most of the letters in *An Accidental Autobiography* were written in the late 50s and early 60s, when Corso was often in Europe and obviously wanted - or needed - to stay in touch with his friends and publishers in the U.S. What is immediately striking about the letters is that, although their tone is often light and humorous, they contradict the image of Corso as a careless clown. Very conscientiously, for instance, for a number of years he collected material from other poets for an anthology of Beat writing that the German poet and critic Walter Höllerer was preparing for the German publishing house Carl Hanser. After Höllerer had come into touch with Corso, he asked the latter to serve as a kind of go-between between him and the young American poets he wanted to introduce to the German public. The result was an endless stream of letters between Corso and poets in the United States (not all of them Beat and not all of them already familiar to Corso) which only ended when the anthology was finally published in 1961, under the title *Junge Amerikanische Lyrik*.²¹ Not surprisingly, the book contained work by Corso himself and by some of his closest friends - including Ginsberg, Kerouac and Peter Orlovsky - but it also

presented work by New York School poets (for instance John Ashbery, Frank O'Hara and Barbara Guest), Black Mountain poets (including Charles Olson and Robert Creeley), as well as first efforts by poets who at the time were probably completely unknown both in Germany and the U.S., such as Lewis Brown, Stan Persky and a number of others Corso had discovered during the preparation of the anthology. All in all, the book gives an interesting overview what of Beat and Beat-related poets were publishing in America around 1960. The book remains of value, not in the least because of Höllerer's informative afterword and Corso's more personal introduction. That introduction contains striking examples of the fact that, as this essay aims to point out, for Corso the act of creation is closely related to a tendency to destroy. The text, which consists of seven paragraphs written in 1958 and six written in 1960, also reveals Corso's Whitmanic disposition to accept and even thrive on contradiction. Already in 1958, when Corso is heavily involved in finding material for the anthology, he doubts the value of the project and ends up becoming the "rapist" of the project, at least in his imagination:

Do I take this anthology seriously? I don't know. At first, when Poet Walter Höllerer suggested the idea I said Great! I'd like that, yes, why not! - And so I wrote to poets and people all over America and asked for poems and poems came hordes and hordes of them came and soon my closets and cabinets were filled, so filled I got scared! More and more came, they wouldn't stop coming, my room in Paris being a very small attic room was flooded with other peoples songs, I had to begin putting them under the bed and that not only made it scarier but it screwed everything up because all my poems got mixed in with them and I couldn't find my poems - suddenly I became like a monster, I got mad! By becoming a [sic] anthologist I became another kind of being, my whole way of life changed, I'd get letters "Did you accept my poems?" - "When is the anthology coming out?" - "I want to see the translations first!" I became even madder! I became what drove me mad! The raped became the rapist!²²

Two years later Corso is still of two minds about the anthology, as both his letters and the printed introduction to the book illustrate. In the first place he has come to dislike many of the poems in the anthology and once again imagines attacking his own project:

Two years have passed and things have happened - All the poems have been translated and are ready to be published. I haven't seen this collection in two years. How odd looking at it! 60 poets and Two hundred poems. And 170 of them awful! And half the poets are not poets but people! No no no no no! This cannot do! I immediately slashed the collection in half, out! Out! Out with that hideous poem! This one isn't a poet but a salesman who sells himself as a poet to people for 50 dollars an hour! O God, and this female is always trying to tell poets how to write, telling them about discipline! And this one, who is *this* one? Who are these people? Out! And now what is left? I want to take out more! But then I'll have no anthology! I'd better go to sleep and have another look at it tomorrow.²³

This seemingly spontaneous outburst actually and probably quite consciously echoes Kenneth Koch's poem "Fresh Air," in which Koch (who is represented by one long poem in *Junge Amerikanische Lyrik* and with whose work Corso was familiar) attacks the conventional poets who are stifling the younger and more original American poets. "Fresh Air" mocks "the many slimy people connected with poetry," who can only "talk about restraint and mature talent."²⁴ Phrases like these are varied upon by Corso in his introduction, which is not only a good example of his craftsmanship, but also of his tendency to destroy and to contradict. This becomes clear somewhat further on, when Corso - before applauding the completed project after all - stresses the importance of the ability to change. After having gone to sleep and after having taken another look at the anthology the next morning, he is still not happy with the finished product: "I still feel the same! I say all poets today are big unromantic aware creeps!"²⁵ However, he then reaches this conclusion:

But I am constantly changing! Contradiction will rescue me, I am sure, and as I can not dislike anything for long I am sure that I will change my mind about this, but I must change it honorably, nobley - No sleep now but reflection, I must reflect, I will read the anthology again, slowly, carefully, and it might be better now, now that I have slashed out all the horror.²⁶

As Corso's letters strikingly reveal, Germany was more relevant to him as a poet (and as a person) than one would have thought until this correspondence was published. After having spent a short period in Berlin in the summer of 1959, he ends up living in the city between July and October 1960 and really liking it. In a letter to his publisher James Laughlin he writes: "Am in Berlin. Really wonderful here! What with all the professors and students and poets with great talks of Goethe, Fleming,

Schiller, and the man who influenced Kafka, Robert Walser, have you ever read him? He sounds very interesting.”²⁷ As this letter already suggests, in his correspondence Corso singles out quite a number of German, especially romantic, poets as important sources of inspiration. Apart from Goethe and Schiller, Eichendorf, Novalis, Kleist and others are also mentioned, and it is good to keep in mind that elsewhere Corso has apparently mentioned Hölderlin as his single most important influence.²⁸ So one thing which is adequately revealed by Corso’s letters, is that it is definitely not only the English romantics, especially Corso’s adored and often-mentioned Shelley (at whose feet Corso lies buried in Rome), who helped to shape his poetry.

It is true that, apart from mentioning influences, Corso is often rather reluctant to be specific about his ideas about the writing of poetry. When editor Donald Allen asked him for a statement on his poetics for Allen’s important anthology, *The New American Poetry: 1945-1960*, Corso was unwilling or unable to make such a statement. This is what he wrote to Allen: “You asked for a comment on my way with poesy. I know no way. I just write. I love to write.”²⁹ After the anthology had come out, Corso wrote to LeRoi and Hettie Jones about the statements on poetics made by other poets in the book: “All positions must be contradicted. Else it’s bullshit.”³⁰ Shortly afterwards, in a letter to James Laughlin, again commenting on Allen’s anthology, he wrote: “I’m apt to contradict, only make statements that you can contradict.”³¹ This tendency to contradict, to question almost anything, is at the heart of Corso’s poetics. As the title of this essay suggests, one could call Corso a poet who breaks up in order to make up. Kirby Olson has put it somewhat differently, but what he says amounts to the same thing: “Corso’s system is not one of passing on truths but rather of blowing them up and creating something new out of the fragments.”³²

A good example of Corso’s tendency to contradict in order to create is his well-known poem “Marriage,” which can be interpreted as a poem about the writing of poetry. In the poem a young man, in whom one can recognize aspects of Corso himself, considers the question whether or not he should get married. This is how the poem begins: “Should I get married? Should I be good? / Astound the girl next door with my velvet suit and faustus hood?”³³ In the rest of the four-page poem the

speaker withdraws each time the possibility of marriage becomes too real and threatening for him. He does so by behaving in unexpected ways. For instance, instead of taking his girlfriend to the movies, the way any normal American boy would do, the speaker in the poem takes her to the cemetery, where he takes her in his arms to "lean against an old crooked tombstone / and woo her the entire night the constellations in the sky."³⁴ Later, when the speaker has finally consented to marry the girl and has even conformed to such an extent that he has taken her to Niagara Falls, he refuses to do what all other newly wedded couples are probably doing at that particular place and time:

All streaming into cozy hotels
All going to do the same thing tonight
The indifferent clerk he knowing what was going to happen
The lobby zombies they knowing what
The whistling elevator man he knowing
The winking bellboy knowing
Everybody knowing! I'd be almost inclined not to do anything!
Stay up all night! Stare that hotel clerk in the eye!
Screaming: I deny honeymoon! I deny honeymoon!
running rampant into those almost climactic suites
yelling Radio belly! Cat shovel!
O I'd live in Niagara forever! in a dark cave beneath the Falls
I'd sit there the Mad Honeymooner
devising ways to break marriages, a scourge of bigamy
a saint of divorce - ³⁵

Apart from behaving in unusual ways, the speaker in the poem expresses his independence and his sense of liberty by coming up with surprising outbursts of language, word combinations that are abstract and full of juxtapositions. Not long after having stressed his individuality at Niagara Falls by yelling "Radio belly!" and "Cat shovel," the poem's "I"-figure imagines what it would be like if he really got married. As part of the bliss of marriage he pictures a wife who is "so happy about me she burns the roast beef," after which the speaker's wife "comes crying to me" and the speaker, instead of comforting his wife, exclaims "Christmas teeth! Radiant brains! Apple deaf!"³⁶

Obviously, the institution of marriage in the poem not only represents the postwar American middle class, which the Beats were reluctant to join, but also the conventional poetry that was popular in postwar America and which the Beat

writers, including Corso, rejected. The speaker contradicts and undermines, but also creates, by using a playful kind of language that is strikingly different from that of the poets who laid down the academic law in America in the 1950s. At the same time his rebellion consists of an enumeration of elements that were important to Corso as a poet, but which had no relevance for most conventional poets. Flash Gordon, Batman and other elements of American popular culture figure prominently in the poem. These elements would probably have been avoided by Corso's more staid contemporaries, and in all likelihood that would also go for, for instance, Tacitus and Rimbaud, to which Corso also refers.

One thing is clear: "Marriage" contradicts Corso's own statement that he "just writes." It is a carefully crafted piece of work, which clearly echoes T.S. Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock." Whether Corso also mocks and makes fun of Eliot remains to be seen. On the whole the Beats admired Eliot's early, experimental work; both content and structure of "The Waste Land" left their mark on Ginsberg's "Howl" and *Naked Lunch* by William Burroughs, and Kerouac has also expressed his admiration for the early Eliot. However, by the time Corso wrote "Marriage," Eliot had come to represent, both in his life and in his work, the social and artistic conventionality which the Beats were battling against. Still, Corso's obvious references to "The Love Song" may suggest a certain amount of admiration and the similarities between the two poems can hardly be overlooked. Both poems are dramatic monologues of a man who cannot make up his mind. This is illustrated by the questions which the speakers in both poems ask themselves and which sound very much alike. Questions like "Should I tell them? Would they like me then?", asked by Corso's speaker who hesitates to approach his prospective parents-in-law, are reminiscent of Eliot's speaker's questions, "Shall I part my hair behind? Do I dare to eat a peach?" As far as the indecisiveness of Eliot's speaker is concerned, the "rock" in the title of Eliot's poem and in the name of the speaker is sometimes taken to mean "rocking": swinging between two options without being able to make a definite choice, something which obviously is not Corso's speaker's forte either.

As in "Marriage," the "overwhelming question" Eliot's speaker is reluctant to voice, is related to marriage. This is suggested by that other, famous question, "Do I

dare disturb the universe?" which – as has been pointed out by Eliot scholars – is a quote from a letter written by the French poet Jules Laforgue, who wondered whether he should “disturb the universe” by getting married. However, like Corso’s speaker, in the end Prufrock does not ask the question, simply because he cannot act: he is not “like Lazarus, come from the dead.” In fact, he is closer to Hamlet, to whom Eliot also refers and who could not make up his mind either. Because Prufrock is unable to ask the essential question, at the end of the poem he ends up dreaming of mermaids, who do not sing for him and whom he is unable to join in the water. This disappointing conclusion is obviously referred to by Corso in the highly allusive last stanza of “Marriage”. Referring not only to Eliot but also to H. Rider Haggard’s novel *She*, Corso makes it clear that his speaker’s indecisiveness too may lead to missing out on one of life’s essential aspects:

Ah, yet well I know that were a woman possible as I am possible
 then marriage would be possible –
 Like SHE in her lonely gaud waiting her Egyptian lover
 so I wait – bereft of 2,000 years and the bath of life.³⁷

Another example of Corso’s awareness of what he is doing as a poet, is his playful use of a poem by a poet one would not immediately associate with Corso and the other Beats, Wallace Stevens. In his study on Corso’s work Michael Skau has pointed out that the ending of Corso’s poem “Death of the American Indian’s God” contains a cleverly concealed reference to Stevens’ “Bantam in Pine-Woods.” Skau is probably right, because there is – as he points out – a striking similarity as far as “[t]he rhythms, the sound repetition, and even the dramatic positioning of the final word”³⁸ are concerned between Stevens’ “Chieftain Iffucan of Azcan in caftan / Of tan with henna hackles, halt!” and Corso’s “They were the redmen / feathers-in-their-head men / now / down among the dead men / how.”³⁹

Although in his letters Corso sometimes seems reluctant to pin himself down as far as his poetics are concerned, it is clear that on the whole he rejects the spontaneity in writing which was commended – but not always practiced – by someone like Jack Kerouac. In one letter he writes to Allen Ginsberg: “Rewriting, I find, is most [of] the pleasure of writing.”⁴⁰ And elsewhere he claims that “poetry needs time and time

and time." Once again, however, Corso has no trouble contradicting himself, because around the same time he tells Mr. and Mrs. Randall Jarrell, "How I hate to rework!"⁴¹ And in a long and later letter to Ginsberg, he favourably contrasts inspired poetry with perhaps more successful non-inspired poetry:

Anyway, muse, or inspiration, has become a 19th century meaning today; I know most poems I write are definitely written with inspiration, I don't say inspired poems are any better than non-inspired poems, but I do say they are surely dearer to the heart. The only poems I love of mine are the inspired ones; those uninspired, and I'm happy to say I've written very few of them, are, sometimes, much better than my inspired ones, the images are more exact; and clearer; my structure and theme less careless; yet I prefer the ones less [sic?] better.⁴²

The same contradiction is found in an essay entitled "Some of My Beginning - And What I Feel Right Now," which was published in *Magazine 2* in 1965 and reprinted in substantially different form in the anthology *Poets on Poetry* in 1966. In the essay Corso begins by placing himself squarely in the romantic tradition, which in his view entails speaking "from the top of your head, putting all trust in yourself as truthsayer."⁴³ At the same time he calls this romantic tradition "a disturbing handicap,"⁴⁴ and he found that at a certain moment "it became really hard to put down on paper what I wanted to express from the heart." Corso concludes that it is those poems, the ones he had to struggle with and that took "laborious joy to create" are the ones which "remain."⁴⁵ So, to come back to the distinction between pure and impure poetry, between the poet as prophet and the poet as maker, one tends to conclude that Corso - like Whitman before him, the way Sötemann claimed - can be associated with both traditions.

Of course the fact that he is clearly a "maker" of poems does not necessarily make Corso a pure poet, the way Wallace Stevens could be called a pure poet. Unlike Stevens' work, much of Corso's poetry is firmly rooted in reality, with clear connections between signifier and signified, to use the terms employed by Marjorie Perloff to distinguish between the Eliot's symbolism and Ashbery's undecidability. Still, as Ginsberg was the first to notice in the introduction to *Gasoline*, Corso did write a number of texts in which - as Ginsberg puts it - he "gets pure abstract poetry, the inside sound of language alone."⁴⁶ In the same introduction Ginsberg claims that Corso "wants a surface hilarious with ellipses, jumps of the strangest phrasing

picked off the streets of his mind like 'mad children of soda caps'."⁴⁷ Unfortunately many of these more pure and abstract poems, which are hinted at by the strange juxtapositions in "Marriage", have been discarded by most of Corso's critics and by Corso himself. They certainly do not figure prominently in the anthology *Mindfield*, which was put together in 1989. It is especially these poems, which would not be out of place in Perloff's mode of indeterminacy, that show why Corso's work was much-appreciated by the poets of the New York School, especially Frank O'Hara.⁴⁸ A good example of Corso's more abstract poetry is "Heave the Hive with New Bees," from *The Happy Birthday of Death*:

The dead a wildcold body must bear
Follow through with fineries
- an exact mandate
Sick and violent the senses
regain the catch old feelings difficult to rejoy

Sursum corda O dead! With a bragged requiescat
spray blood Deathdrench the dash of life

The dead are born in Cheeryland
Their buttocks neigh⁴⁹

Poems like this one deserve more attention, and that also goes for Corso's tendency to contradict, to break up and to doubt almost everything. It may be possible to link this stance to post-modernism in which which have not been looked into before. As Kirby Olson points out, "Ginsberg and other Beat writers have been extensively cited by postmodern French writers (especially Gilles Deleuze)."⁵⁰ Corso, Olson claims, is "unknown in postmodern circles."⁵¹ Why that is could be the subject of another essay, although the fact that Corso's work was translated into French later and less extensively than that of Kerouac, Ginsberg and Burroughs may be partly responsible for his having been overlooked by, among others, Deleuze.

NOTES

¹ Marjorie Perloff, *The Poetics of Indeterminacy: Rimbaud to Cage* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), p. vii.

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- ² Ibid., p. 18.
- ³ Ibid., p. 13.
- ⁴ Ibid., p. 30.
- ⁵ Ibid., pp. 30-31.
- ⁶ Ibid., p. 31.
- ⁷ Ibid.
- ⁸ Ibid., p. 29.
- ⁹ Ibid., p. 33.
- ¹⁰ Ibid.
- ¹¹ A.L. Sötemann, *Over poëtica en poëzie* (Groningen: Wolters-Noordhoff, 1985).
- ¹² Alex Preminger, ed., *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, Enlarged Edition (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974), p. 682.
- ¹³ Ibid.
- ¹⁴ Ibid.
- ¹⁵ Paul Portugés, *The Visionary Poetics of Allen Ginsberg* (Santa Barbara: Ross-Erikson Publishers, 1978), pp. 26-27.
- ¹⁶ Gregory Corso, *Gasoline* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1958), p. 7.
- ¹⁷ Ibid.
- ¹⁸ Kirby Olson, *Gregory Corso: Doubting Thomist* (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 2002), p. 2.
- ¹⁹ Ibid.
- ²⁰ Ibid., p. 3.
- ²¹ In 1985 the book was reissued under the title *Lyrik der Beat Generation* in the "Heyne Lyrik" paperback series by Wilhelm Heyne Verlag in Munich.
- ²² *Lyrik der Beat Generation* (München: Wilhelm Heyne Verlag, 1985), p. 246, 248.
- ²³ Ibid., p. 248.
- ²⁴ Kenneth Koch, *Thank You and Other Poems* (New York: Grove Press, 1962), p. 54.
- ²⁵ *Lyrik der Beat Generation*, p. 250.
- ²⁶ Ibid.
- ²⁷ Gregory Corso, *An Accidental Autobiography: The Selected Letters of Gregory Corso*, ed. Bill Morgan (New York: New Directions, 2003), p. 250.
- ²⁸ According to Kirby Olson (*Gregory Corso: Doubting Thomist*, p. 66) Corso made this statement about Hölderlin's influence on him in an interview with Gavin Selerie, printed in *The Riverside Interviews 3: Gregory Corso*, ed. Gavin Selerie (London: Binnacle Press, 1982). Actually, Corso does not mention Hölderlin in the interview, but he does refer to him elsewhere, for instance in his poem "Field Report," published in *Mindfield* (1989).
- ²⁹ Ibid., p. 221.
- ³⁰ Ibid., p. 232.
- ³¹ Ibid., p. 245.
- ³² Olson, *Gregory Corso: Doubting Thomist*, p. 106.
- ³³ Gregory Corso, *The Happy Birthday of Death* (New York: New Directions, 1960), p. 29.
- ³⁴ Ibid.
- ³⁵ Ibid., p. 30.
- ³⁶ Ibid.
- ³⁷ Ibid., p. 32.
- ³⁸ Michael Skau, "A Clown in a Grave": *Complexities and Tensions in the Works of Gregory Corso* (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1999), p. 157.
- ³⁹ Gregory Corso, *Long Live Man* (New York: New Directions, 1962), p. 18.
- ⁴⁰ Corso, *An Accidental Autobiography*, p. 25.
- ⁴¹ Ibid., p. 13.
- ⁴² Ibid., p. 150.

⁴³ Gregory Corso, "Some of My Beginning - And What I Feel Right Now," in *Poets on Poetry*, ed. Howard Nemerov (New York: Basic Books, 1966), p. 173.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 174.

⁴⁶ Corso, *Gasoline*, p. 7.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ O'Hara writes about the "extraordinary beauties of Corso's poems" in a short essay entitled "Gregory Corso," in *Standing Still and Walking in New York*, ed. Donald Allen (Bolinas: Grey Fox Press, 1975), pp. 82-85. In the same essay he praises Corso for "having adopted successfully the rhythms and speech of the jazz musician's world without embarrassment and with a light, musical certainty in its employment." The musical and abstract quality of Corso's poetry obviously appealed to O'Hara, who also in the case of Kerouac preferred the "undecidability" of *Doctor Sax* and *Old Angel Midnight* to the realism of, for instance, *On the Road*. Cf. Marjorie Perloff, *Frank O'Hara: Poet Among Painters* (New York: George Braziller, 1977), p. 203.

⁴⁹ Corso, *The Happy Birthday of Death*, p. 71.

⁵⁰ Olson, *Gregory Corso: Doubting Thomist*, p. 27.

⁵¹ Ibid.

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