David Stephen Calonne, *The Spiritual Imagination of the Beats* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 244 pp.

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The Spiritual Imagination of the Beats is a far-ranging, meticulous study of 11 Beat writers' investigations of heterodox religious traditions across several cultures. The Beats' fascination with Buddhist and Tantric teachings—as well as with a broad range of occult writings in the Western tradition—is no secret to scholars of US literature. Nevertheless, Calonne's book helps link these investigations to a primary Beat motivation: the spiritual reenchantment of the modern world by poetic means, if sometimes only the private search for visionary states through study, meditation, yoga, or hallucinogens. By linking the Beats' assimilation of esoteric studies to a broader cultural thirst for premodern sources of spiritual engagement in the hope of reconnecting the modern self to the cosmos, Calonne's study transforms a bewildering array of spiritual paths into a syncretistic Beat unity, filtering down to specific works by Kerouac, Ginsberg, Burroughs, and Corso. Others include the critically neglected works of Diane di Prima and Bob Kaufman, the better-known work of Philip Lamantia and Philip Whelan, as well as two great forerunners of Beat hermeticism, Kenneth Rexroth and Robert Duncan, before concluding with a chapter on Gary Snyder, the movement's most ecologically minded voice. In short, the Beats, in the romantic tradition of Blake and Whitman, were breaking down modern boundaries between the inner life and the outer world by reading and deploying mystic theologies passed over by mainstream religion, rational philosophy, and modern science in their combined effort to reorder society on seemingly soulless, mechanistic lines.

The vigor of Calonne's argument lies in its case studies and in the synaptic interweaving of critical motifs among chapters, starting with his discussion of Rexroth and Duncan. Though these older poets of the San Francisco Renaissance were "not Beats themselves" (16), they possessed a formidable knowledge of arcane texts and the scholarship on them—works ranging from Jakob Böhme's *De Signatura Rerum* to the negative theology of Dionysius the Pseudo-Areopagite, collections of Native American myths and songs, the *Corpus Hermeticum*, Gnostic texts, Kabbalist Moses of Leon of Spain's *Zohar,* or *Book of Splendor*, to say nothing of the modern philosophies of William James, Carl Jung, and Alfred North Whitehead. Rexroth's and Duncan's rich intellectual program thus helped generate a new, countercultural *poiesis* intended to revitalize the US, if also to outrage its more orthodox pieties. They also served as mentors and semi-impresarios for the developing Beat scene, organizing and participating in the famous Gallery Six poetry reading where several Beats came to national attention.

Calonne builds on this foundation with a conscientious diversion, devoting two substantial chapters to di Prima and Kaufman, typically neglected by scholars because of their minority status as a woman and an African American, but now assuming pride of place ahead of Kerouac, Ginsberg, and Burroughs. Aside from putting the spotlight on Di Prima's abstruse researches into "the Renaissance magical tradition" (41) and Kaufman's neo-Dadaist exploits as the creator of the farcical "Abomunism" movement, the chapters build on the spiritual themes of the book by using these underrepresented poets to illustrate the consistency of the Beat search for alternative wisdom and a uniquely Beat ethos. Di Prima and Kaufman shared an abiding interest in Buddhist thought, the latter taking a ten-year vow of silence, though Methedrine use, electroshock therapy, multiple arrests, and police beatings contributed to Kaufman's nonspeech act (61), releasing himself upon the US' withdrawal from the war in Vietnam. Di Prima went on to found, with Ginsberg and Anne Waldman, the Jack Kerouac School of Disembodied Poetics at the Naropa Institute in Boulder, Colorado.

Although held in reserve, Calonne's discussion of Kerouac, Ginsberg, and Burroughs doesn't disappoint, even if many of the details of their spiritual endeavors are well established. Especially engrossing is how these divergent efforts sometimes became sources of tension among them. Both Kerouac and Ginsberg, for instance, sought Buddhist Satori—or "awakening"—by tapping the sutras for inspiration, resulting in such poems as Ginsberg's "Sunflower Sutra" or the following lines from Kerouac's *Mexico City Blues*:

> I didn't attain nothing
> When I attained Highest
> Perfect
> Wisdom
> Known in Sanskrit as
> Anuttara Samyak Sambodh
> I attained absolutely nothing,
> Nothing came over me, nothing was realizable—
> In dropping all false conceptions of anything at all
> I even dropped my conception of highest old wisdom
> And turned to the world, a Buddha inside,
> And said nothing. (qtd. in 77)

But Kerouac—never considered as serious a yogi as Ginsberg or Snyder—ultimately succumbed to alcoholism and to "his pious and fervent Catholicism," weeping, as Ginsberg recalls, while "painting pictures of cardinals, popes, Christ on the cross" (84).

Ginsberg would pursue his own studies of the sutras and vedas all the way to India where he lived for two years before returning to the US by way of Japan to Boulder, joining,

under the guidance of Chogyam Trungpa, the new gang of Beat-style Tibetan Buddhist adherents. While Ginsberg's journey was a genuine search for higher consciousness (not discounting his need to assume the public face of that consciousness), Burroughs treated these varieties of religious experience as aesthetic resources to be exploited—not just to achieve his literary aims, but to aid him in a relentless struggle against the demiurgic forces of "control" that possessed him and on which he blamed the shooting of his wife at a drunken party in Mexico City. As he later wrote in the preface to *Queer*, "the death of Joan brought me in contact with the invader, the Ugly Spirit, and maneuvered me into a lifelong struggle, in which I have had no choice except to write my way out" (qtd. in 110). Burroughs's spiritual tools included shamanistic rituals surrounding the hallucinogenic *Ayahuasca* plant, the study of Mayan codices, tarot, and the Egyptian Book of the Dead, sources also plumbed by Gregory Corso in his "Geometric Poem," discussed at length in the book.

While Calonne understandably condenses the enigmatic discourses of these practices, the book sometimes glosses philosophies in ways that reflect the Beats' tendency to treat them as a cosmic smorgasbord of mystic dishes. Despite vexing cultural incompatibilities, they are all one in the spiritual imagination of the Beats, just variants of a universal quest for immanent transcendence. It rarely strikes them that their multicultural interfusions of sacred traditions might be having a desacralizing effect in some quarters. Twice Calonne mentions Beats being criticized for romanticizing certain minorities privy to such codes as enjoying a "cultural authenticity" that the modern Anglo-American lacks. This happens to Kerouac and Ginsberg, but more conspicuously to Snyder for "appropriating" Native American symbols and myths, according to Leslie Marmon Silko (172). Criticisms like these imply that such endangered cultures maintain a sacred aura while other, more accessible ones are fair literary game. Still, it is interesting that Snyder deftly anticipated this critique by deliberately following Zen Buddhism as a more inclusive path than taking the culturally suspect one of becoming an initiate into Native American rites and practices, however much his poetry borrowed from such sources.

Another paradox of the book is how the Beats' researches in obscure fields from Neo-Platonism to the alchemical speculations of Paracelsus and Cornelius Agrippa intertwine not only with hipster lingo and jazz but also with the modernist poetics of Symbolism, Dadaism, and Surrealism. This raises the question of whether the Beats' chief aim was to "change life," as Rimbaud declared, or simply to change poetry by producing more novel manifestations of it. In so doing, were they offering a beneficent alternative to modern culture or simply contributing to the existing one in a cunning shell game of symbolic give and take? The question comes to a head in Calonne's concluding chapters.

In a fascinating discussion of Lamantia and his long, personal association as a young poet with the Surrealist movement on its arrival in New York in the 1940s, Calonne notes how Lamantia ultimately claimed Mallarmé as a literary forebear in inaugurating the dispersal of the self into language (148) in a way that exceeded even Rimbaud's announcement that "je est un autre." Discussing this influence, Calonne invokes Theodor Adorno who complained against occult symbolism's endless, semiotic referentiality, never acceding to an actual truth but facilitating an infinite regress of signification. This rationalist dissatisfaction with the occult parallels a common complaint against modern poetry itself and its claims that "a poem should not mean but be." Archibald MacLeish's pithy apothegm suggests that the "meaning" of poetry is precisely this endless conjuration of signs by which knowledge accrues. Yet one wonders if this shuffling of signs doesn't merely contribute to the distractive efficacy of the arts, sidelining or even short-circuiting the very ideal the Beats seem to espouse in their pursuit of the occult—that of a better, more spiritually engaged world and one in which a modicum of social justice might be attained.

Overall, the book is a fascinating, demanding read that should inspire deeper study, whether in particular realms of theological speculation, the archive of Beat works, or their combination.