

Zita, Antonín

The reception in the Czech Republic

In: Zita, Antonín. *How we understand the beats : the reception of the beat generation in the United States and the Czech lands*. First published Brno: Filozofická fakulta, Masarykova univerzita, 2018, pp. 143-162

ISBN 978-80-210-9048-4; ISBN 978-80-210-9049-1 (online : pdf)

Stable URL (handle): <https://hdl.handle.net/11222.digilib/138853>

Access Date: 29. 11. 2024

Version: 20220831

Terms of use: Digital Library of the Faculty of Arts, Masaryk University provides access to digitized documents strictly for personal use, unless otherwise specified.

8 THE RECEPTION IN THE CZECH REPUBLIC

The Velvet Revolution took place in 1989 and what initially seemed to lead to a possible reformation of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia instead caused the Party's downfall and resulted in the first democratic elections in four decades. It might seem logical to think that the Beats would have been forgotten by the time the borders of Czechoslovakia opened to the West. After all, a significant amount of time had passed since the initial outburst of Beat publications in the 1960s and while a few books were published starting in the late 1970s, these were available only sporadically and mostly in small, hard to obtain print runs.

Despite the above, the new democratic Czechoslovakia, which soon split into the Czech Republic and Slovakia, did not forget the Beats. On the contrary, the Beats were treated not as ordinary artists, but rather as important figures that had a significant impact on the people of Czechoslovakia. For instance, Allen Ginsberg traveled to the country in the spring of 1990; that is mere months after the end of the communist regime, and, accompanied by the recently elected President Václav Havel, read his poem titled "The Return of the King of May" in Wenceslas Square. The poem is a sequel to "Kral Majales (King of May)," the poem Ginsberg wrote on his flight to the United Kingdom after being deported from Czechoslovakia. While both poems critiqued Communism, "The Return of the King of May" also warned against the dangers of capitalism and consumerism; the audience's reaction, still affected by the cheerful mood after the fall of the communist regime, was rather lukewarm (Kopecký, "Czeching the Beat" 101). Importantly, Ginsberg reciting his poetry next to the President indicates the way Beats were treated in the days following the fall of Communism: they were celebrated as writers and important social figures by the common readership, and respected by many of the country's government officials.

The meeting of the Beats and high-ranking officials of the country was repeated several years later when in 1998 Lawrence Ferlinghetti arrived in Prague to attend the Prague Writers' Festival. Ferlinghetti's visit was covered extensively by the media and Ferlinghetti himself was overwhelmed by fans at nearly every step. Importantly, an extensive poetry reading session focusing on Ferlinghetti's oeuvre was a crucial part of the event and many leading artists and politicians took part in the reading; among those reciting the Beat's poetry were Václav Klaus and Miloš Zeman – both high-ranking politicians and future Presidents of the Czech Republic – and they not only expressed their enthusiasm to be at the event, but also explained that Ferlinghetti's poetry had had a significant impact on them during the 1960s (Kopecký, "Czeching the Beat" 101). This enthusiasm regarding the Beats was shared by ordinary people as well. For example, when Ginsberg, invited by Professor Josef Jařab to give lectures on poetry at Palacký University, visited Olomouc in 1993, a man in a local bar disclosed to Ginsberg that his poetry had kept him going while he was imprisoned (Rauwolf, "Beat po česku" 23). Simply put, the Beats were an unavoidable presence in the early years of the new country and, as this chapter suggests, still remain popular.

8.1 General Reception of the Beat Generation

Summarizing the initial influence of the Beats on Czechoslovaks, Richard Olehla, a Charles University Professor, explains that Kerouac's *On the Road* has been extremely popular in the Czech lands since its publication (Olehla). Because literature produced in the United States was for a long time considered "the literature of the enemy," it was only rarely translated; however, that all changed with the first translations by Hájek and Zábřana. Eventually, *On the Road* entered the Czechoslovak book market and as a result presented readers with a world starkly different from their own. As Olehla clarifies, the ability of the novel's characters to freely travel from one destination to another symbolized the notion of freedom and personal liberty. The impact of such uninhibited movement on Czechoslovak readers was truly profound. Czechoslovaks were not only barred from traveling to most countries for forty years, but also the Iron Curtain barred them physically from crossing the border to the West. In terms of being able to travel freely – and the liberty this symbolized – the conservative 1950s United States were no match for Communist Czechoslovakia. As such, the Beats were to the Czechoslovaks an even larger symbol of individual freedom than they were to Americans.

The way publishers took to the Beats after the Velvet Revolution acknowledges Olehla's claim. The 1990s saw such a surge in the popularity of the Beat Generation that nearly every publishing house released at least a book or two by the Beats (Dudek 18). As Petr Dudek further points out, some publishers relied on the Beats

to such an extent that they would hardly be able to compile a publishing plan without relying on Beat works. The desire to print the Beat authors in large quantities, however, should not be understood as a simple act of publishers exploring a book market suddenly liberated from the constraints of the communist government. Writing in the introduction to an interview with Ferlinghetti, Ivana Pecháčková argues the work of the Beat Generation and its ideals of individual freedom became “one of the initiatory sources and later even symbols of re-establishing free Czech culture” (12). One of the many examples of such codification of the Beats in the Czech Republic was the aptly titled “Allen Ginsberg Memorial Freedom Festival” held in 2015 by the Department of North American Studies, Charles University. The five-day event not only aimed at commemorating the 50th anniversary of Ginsberg’s visit, but also at celebrating the life and work of Allen Ginsberg, and argued that Ginsberg being elected the King of May was a defining moment in Czechoslovak history (“Allen Ginsberg Memorial”). Corroborating this view, Darrell Jónsson claims that the event was a “key link in the chain of events leading to the Velvet Revolution,” and ranks it as important as the 1968 Soviet invasion or the establishment of Charter 77. While at the beginning Beat poetry was tolerated by the regime because of its anti-American stance, the Beats were hardly the government puppets the Party wished them to be. Instead, Jónsson continues, they had shown that poetry can be an act of resistance, and this is precisely what the crowning of Ginsberg as the King of May symbolized to Czechoslovaks. As a nationality, Czechoslovaks have throughout history experienced short outbursts of freedom at the cost of decades and sometimes even centuries of suppression that usually followed. Ginsberg’s presence at the festival, Jónsson argues, gave the Czechoslovaks a taste of the freedom that they so desired.

In other words, the Beats are considered relevant to the historical experience of the Czech Republic and are treated accordingly. Importantly, this treatment starts at the educational level, as the current “maturita” examination further highlights.⁶⁶ Not only is the Beat Generation one of the twenty-two literary epochs, movements, and groups required for the mandatory Czech language and literature part of the examination, but Jack Kerouac is also included in the short list of important foreign writers of the twentieth century (“Seznam autorů”). The list, which also includes Thomas Mann, Boris Pasternak, and Tennessee Williams, altogether contains nineteen authors whose work the students should be familiar with to successfully pass the exam. For Czech students, the Beat Generation is mandatory knowledge to the same degree as the playwrights from ancient Greece or the French Realists. Simply put, the Beats in the Czech Republic represent the American canon.

66 “Maturita” is a standardized high school exit examination and students can specify most of the subjects they wish to be examined from.

Nevertheless, the Beats are more than just mandatory objects to be studied. After Ginsberg's death, the newspaper *Hospodářské noviny* (Economic Newspaper) published a short obituary, which opened by reminding readers that Ginsberg was elected the King of May during the 1965 Majáles. Noting that Ginsberg "is considered to be one of the last poetic bards in the history of world literature," the paper's recalling of the famous student festival is quite telling ("Král českého majálesu"). Ginsberg is best remembered, the newspaper states, as the American poet who played a vital part in the development of 1960s Czechoslovakia. His implied role is that of a herald of a new age, an age of individual liberty, and thus he had become one of its symbols even after decades have passed since his first arrival in Czechoslovakia. Similarly, Gary Snyder was also recognized for his contribution to promoting the freedom of the individual. When he was one of the guests at the 17th Prague Writers' Festival in 2007, he was hailed for being a member of the Beat Generation, inspiring the hippie movement that followed, and bringing the importance of ecology into the spotlight (Třešňák). In a way, journalist Petr Třešňák continues, Snyder has not only survived his contemporaries, but he has also outgrown them. His message stresses the significance of experiencing nature or the relevance of ancient cultures, and these and other notions present in his work are still crucial even today. The timeless quality of the messages in Snyder's poetry is further underlined by relating a short anecdote regarding Snyder's stay in the Czech Republic. Třešňák writes that Snyder wanted to take a break from the hectic pace of the festival by hiking through the countryside for a day, and the journalist was one of several people invited to accompany Snyder on his outdoor walk; "As if playing tennis with McEnroe," Třešňák thought to himself before setting out. The short hike made Třešňák realize that the ultimate role of the contemporary writer – and therefore Snyder as well – is facilitating interaction with people from different walks of life. Snyder's importance as a writer is then not only achieved through the esthetics of his poetry, but also through the ideas and philosophy he and his poetry represent: Snyder is a facilitator of ideas and viewpoints, and a symbol of spiritual well-being.

Understanding the Beats as representing an ethos had already been quite pronounced a few years earlier at the 13th Prague Writers' Festival. The 2003 festival was dedicated to William S. Burroughs and one of his assumptions – "We don't report the news. We write it." – was the central theme of the festival. One of many writers attending the festival was the Scottish novelists and playwright Irvine Welsh, who said the following about Burroughs and his role in the contemporary world:

These events are fun if taken in the right spirit; you get to meet people from different cultures, experience the cut and thrust of debate, and occasionally indulge in some old-fashioned bad behaviour. As this year's festival is in memory of William Burroughs, this

seemed a fitting approach. Burroughs was a most celebrated writer, especially in the latter part of his long life. Over the past 30 years, every literary young buck or pop star craving some arty credibility just had to get their picture taken alongside old Bill. It's either a tribute to his brilliance or a sad indictment of the conformity of today's writing that, half a decade after his death, he still feels like our most startlingly contemporary novelist.

The above is an apt commentary on Burroughs and his public image, because it embodies the most common approaches to the writer. Due to his long-lasting heroin addiction, open homosexuality, or the accidental shooting of his wife, Burroughs is often perceived as the enfant terrible of the Beats, as Welsh's commentary indirectly explains.

This, however, further complicates the reason behind Burroughs's popularity: while some might be attracted to the ideas frequently appearing in his writing – expansive government control exploiting language as the ultimate control method – others are more interested in Burroughs's persona embodying attitudes and behavior, such as idiosyncrasy and opposition to conventions. The second approach is best seen in a short bio published in the literary magazine *Host* (The Guest). Released to mark the centenary of Burroughs's birth, the text mostly summarizes the author's life; like many such texts, it primarily focuses on the period before Burroughs published *Naked Lunch*. The text opens with a line stating that today Burroughs would have celebrated his centenary; however, the Beat's lifestyle would make such a celebration “practically impossible,” and a similar tone is present throughout the rest of the text (Vykoopil 15). Most of the article is concerned with Burroughs's early life, frequently pointing out various “juicy” bits such as that he chose to live in New York because of the relative ease with which one could have accessed alcohol, drugs, and young male prostitutes. In contrast, Burroughs's literary achievements are summarized in the flat statement, “[H]is work and life has captivated and affected a large number of people” (15). The Burroughs of this short text is not a writer but something of a curiosity – a person who has led a lifestyle of debauchery and whose life choices, the text explicitly states, should not be emulated.

The responses above and others like them – present in study notes for the maturita examination or short magazine articles and disseminated by journalists or social networks – then show the overall simplicity of general reception. While at times this reception can lack nuance to the point of crudeness, at other times its more straightforward nature can help pinpoint the central features of the authors which are most appealing to their audiences. Similarly, these popular interpretations can be accurate, or they can include misconceptions, as when Pavel Turek interviewed Gary Snyder during his 2007 stay. The interview is punctuated by misunderstandings on both sides, which culminates when Turek mistakenly claims that Kerouac's spontaneous writing was a huge influence on Snyder's poetry;

Snyder's refusal of this idea exudes a palpable irritation ("Dopijte tu vody" 46). In general, different interpretations and misinterpretations can indicate the different understandings – and therefore the different discourses – within which the audience operates. Importantly, publisher's peritexts are the types of texts which frequently try to appeal to the general understanding of the reading public.

8.2 Introductions, Afterwords, Book Covers

While not strictly a part of the text, material added by a publisher, such as a preface or introduction, often provides a new insight into the work itself. This insight, however, can be provided indirectly – by analyzing the way the publisher presents the text and its author. Since publishers wish to promote their releases, promotional texts by the publisher and other paratexts included in the release also indicate possible interpretations of the text by trying to evoke certain qualities and thus make the text more appealing to the prospective reader. Naturally, the promotional nature of these texts – their aim is to sell the book, after all – might make them slightly unreliable for analysis. Yet that is precisely the advantage of using publisher's texts for a reception study: they are essentially packaging for the content, therefore often mediating the first contact between the reader and the text itself. As such, texts of publishers help shape and further proliferate the popular image of the author or work in question.

The publisher's peritext for the Gregory Corso anthology *Jak neumírat* (Mindfield) begins by placing Corso firmly within the Beat Generation movement. Corso's early poetry quickly found its rightful place among readers for several reasons, the text claims, because it was humorous, unburdened by complicated wording or puzzling themes, and it was more grounded in reality than the endless "philosophizing" of university professors (Corso, *Jak neumírat*). The reason for his popularity, the text continues, was his ability "to scrutinize an oft-discussed phenomenon through the use of familiar phrases or tiresome clichés, so that the newly formed link reveals the true nature of the phenomenon." The book cover also includes information about Corso's early popularity in Czechoslovakia, noting that the first poetry collection printed in the country was sold out almost immediately. Similarly, the back cover to Kerouac's *Lonesome Traveler* provides a brief yet effective way of characterizing the Beat. The cover starts with a Ginsberg quote calling Kerouac "the new Buddha of American prose," while the publisher's poetic text explains that Kerouac "left the university, because he thought it was too stale, and then he worked on the railroad, at sea, in the forest, he worked everywhere and did everything, and at the same time he wandered and, most importantly, he was writing the whole time." Kerouac's writing then embodies experience uninhibited by the conventions of society.

The book flap of the Ferlinghetti anthology *Ve snu ve snu snil jsem sen* (In a Dream in a Dream I Had a Dream) describes the poet as a “solo tragedian,” street poet, and an activist who prefers to be “a songbird rather than a parrot.” The afterword by I. Bosch begins by pointing out that Ferlinghetti was considered to be slightly more poetic, intellectual and European than his Beat peers (“Historii tvoří lži vítězů” 327). The characteristics of Ferlinghetti’s poetry include describing commonplace events or childhood recollections as seemingly innocuous and ordinary, even though these in fact indicate an important personal or social change. Arguing that Ferlinghetti is not a Beat, Bosch recalls Kenneth Rexroth’s critique of the Beats and his laudatory comments regarding Ferlinghetti in order to draw the dividing line between Ferlinghetti and the others even further. Unlike the Beats, Ferlinghetti does not necessarily try to dismantle all previous traditions, and in fact he even honors them by citing other writers in his poetry (330–31). Ferlinghetti’s playful paraphrasing and modifying of others thus places him in the tradition of artists such as Woody Allen or Quentin Tarantino.

That being said, Bosch also points out that at times it might be difficult for Czech readers to agree with Ferlinghetti. After mentioning the poet’s anti-consumerism and anti-totalitarian stance, Bosch draws attention to the poet’s critique of Ronald Reagan. Ferlinghetti sees Reagan as the President who cut funding to vital social services; in contrast, Bosch claims that Reagan for Czechs will forever be the person who helped topple the Soviet regime through increasing the military budget and therefore causing an arms race that the severely underperforming economy of the Soviet Union simply could not withstand (338). The Czech audience might be able to understand the critique of Reagan, Bosch continues, but they can hardly identify with it. The social and historical context of Czech readers is in this respect different from that of Ferlinghetti’s audience, who have most likely experienced firsthand the events and problems Ferlinghetti critiques. Nevertheless, Bosch assures the reader that Ferlinghetti is still true to the concepts of imagination, freedom, or liberty and that he is a true optimist, even despite the sometimes bleak tone of his poetry (340). As Bosch argues, Ferlinghetti shows that the true artist should have a social conscience and should be politically active, so that ecological disasters and the fall of humanity can be avoided, thus painting Ferlinghetti as a one-of-a-kind poet and a world humanist.

The translator’s note to Ferlinghetti’s *Unfair Arguments with Existence and Routines* describes the poet as an existentialist with a rebellious nature (Pecháčková 173). He was the most engaged “political agitator” of all the Beats and focused on ordinary people, who were often ignored by most poets. Warning against the perils of modern industrial society, Ferlinghetti draws the attention of readers to the importance of freedom, love, spirituality, and living in harmony (173–74). After Ferlinghetti’s writing style is discussed, the translator points out that the poet is still actively engaged in social issues and, unlike many of his Beat peers,

has remained strong both literally and morally. The importance of Ferlinghetti's activism and community involvement is also emphasized in the short biography included as an afterword. While going through Ferlinghetti's prolific career, the text does not fail to mention his anarchist leanings, which led the poet and owner of the City Lights Bookstore and publishing house to eschew the sudden media attention after the *Howl* obscenity trial in favor of a more direct contact with the community and a focus on political activism. The afterword also describes Ferlinghetti's *A Coney Island of the Mind* as portraying the dark side of American society, and touches upon his involvement in the hippie movement or the protests against the Vietnam War (bosch, "Lawrence Ferlinghetti" 177–78).

The social and historical background is also emphasized in the afterword sections to a volume of Ferlinghetti's poetry containing the early poetry collections *Pictures of the Gone World*, *A Coney Island of the Mind*, and *Starting from San Francisco*. The first afterword, a selection of Jan Zábřana's recollections of his first encounter with Ferlinghetti's work, points out that his *A Coney Island* truly encompassed the zeitgeist of the United States of the fifties. The poems contained within were also among the first to illuminate the overbearing power of technological advancement on everyday reality; the poems, Zábřana states, contain real human emotions – humor, anger, protest – and are far from sounding too formal or pathetic ("Ze vzpomínek Jana Zábřany" 213–14). While Ferlinghetti's poetry was certainly new in his home country, its firm roots in Surrealism somewhat resembled the early works of Vítězslav Nezval or Konstantin Biebl and therefore had a tradition to follow for the Czechoslovak readership (214). In Zábřana's account, Ferlinghetti is the kind of poet who despite his foreign nationality can be easily understood by his Czechoslovak readers due to his familiar tone and humane approach. In contrast, Markéta Kaněrová's second afterword is more biographical as it discusses the poet's life, but also describes the early success of the Beats. Kaněrová thus describes Ginsberg as "a bard of the new generation" who in "Howl" protested the suffocating nature of conformism, thus rallying his audience into a revolt against the establishment (223). By abandoning stilted academic poetry, the published works of Kerouac, Ginsberg, Ferlinghetti, and others helped turn American youth away from their careers and directed them toward art instead (225). Kaněrová's reading emphasizes the social aspect of the Beats on a grander scale: the Beats were an important literary phenomenon that had a profound impact across the world; nevertheless, Czechoslovakia and later the Czech Republic was the place where the Beats resonated the most.

Unlike the Beat poets who had a unique position in Czechoslovakia, Burroughs was virtually unknown in the country. He was therefore in a somewhat similar situation in Czechoslovakia as he was in the USA in the 1950s and early 1960s: he had been constantly talked *about* by other Beats despite not publishing anything under his name until 1959. As a result, the only available Burroughs text

in Czech prior to the Velvet Revolution was the short story “The Death of Opium Jones” in the thirteenth issue of *Světová literatura* in 1968, thus the references to Burroughs in various literary journals were rather cryptic. Because Burroughs is the most idiosyncratic of the Beats, the way he was promoted among Czechs in the 1990s varied slightly from the portrayal of other Beats. For instance, the text on the back cover of the Czech edition of *Queer* first starts with an overview of his most important work, then proceeds to establish him as an influential figure by highlighting the impact he had on other Beats, rock musicians, or science fiction writers. The description ends by stating that while the novel was written in 1952, it was published only in 1985, the delay being due to “hypocritical reasons.”⁶⁷ As the back cover says, the novel’s qualities include “a matter-of-fact language, dry style, dark sense of humor and aggressive energy.” These, the text continues, introduce the reader to Burroughs’s visions, which actually have “long become reality.”

The Czech edition of *My Education: A Book of Dreams* took a similar approach toward Burroughs. After a very brief bio, which describes Burroughs as one of the leading Beats and considers him to be one of the most engrossing American novelists of the twentieth century, the blurb tries to present the text – a collection of dream recordings and descriptions – as the ultimate key to explaining Burroughs’s oeuvre. These dreams “question the structure of everyday reality,” therefore not only documenting some of the inner workings of Burroughs’s mind, but also embody “a unique and disturbing journey beyond the limits of human consciousness” (*Škola mého života*). Unlike Corso and his poetry of the mundane or Ferlinghetti’s call for uninhibited freedom and the common good, Burroughs is presented as a tortured figure and a visionary. His sharp mind, the cover argues, enabled Burroughs to address the otherwise ineffable. However, this was at a significant cost; starting from the accidental shooting of his wife and ending with his long heroin addiction, the price for his pointed observation is for most people simply too dear to pay. Reading *My Education*, the cover effectively argues, therefore offers a unique experience to its readers, as the book’s contents refer to an understanding of the real an average person will simply never be able to obtain.

67 It is true that the novel, with its frank depictions of homosexuality, was simply unpublishable in the 1950s. However, claiming that the novel was not published due to the hypocrisy of a person in control of the publishing process seems to be rather dishonest, as Burroughs himself did not consider *Queer* to be a good example of his writing and therefore did not pursue its publication in the first place. This assertion might be a simple mistake of the publisher; nevertheless, it also might be another way of portraying Burroughs as an “outrageous” writer, thus hoping to increase the sales of the novel.

8.3 Ferlinghetti in Prague

While Ginsberg's several stays in the 1990s were certainly well-noted, it was Lawrence Ferlinghetti who has captivated the nation's attention most after the Velvet Revolution. Visiting in 1998, only a year after Ginsberg's death, Ferlinghetti was the host of the 1998 Prague Writers' Festival and the concurrent Beat Generation Fest. Ferlinghetti's arrival was front-page news and the way he was received astonished even Ferlinghetti himself (Snížek 17). For instance, not only did random passers-by constantly stop Ferlinghetti in the streets in order to obtain his autograph, but the improvised book signing taking place during his stay at times resembled a rock concert rather than a book-signing event (Vyternová). As Karel Srp, the founder of Jazzová sekce (Jazz Section) who also organized the Beat Generation Fest, recalls, the podium where Ferlinghetti was signing books was sometimes so overwhelmed by his fans that some of them had to be pushed off the stage (Snížek 18).^{68, 69} Ferlinghetti's current profile at the Prague Writers' Festival webpage gives a hint of the reasons behind the overwhelmingly positive welcome Ferlinghetti received in Prague: "Visibly 'in the American grain,' [Ferlinghetti] remains pre-eminent in American letters as poet, translator, publisher, playwright, and patron saint. His humanistic radical writing is seen as an important predecessor to the Beat Generation" ("Lawrence Ferlinghetti").

Contemporary news articles reporting on Ferlinghetti's visit further reveal the image of the Beat in the Czech Republic. For instance, the Slovak daily *SME* begins by informing its readers about the ongoing reading of Ferlinghetti's poetry titled *Nonstop Ferlinghetti*. The reading, which took place at Saint Salvator's Church in Prague, lasted 72 hours and was conceived as a tribute to an important literary epoch: the literature of the Beat Generation (Petránsky). Noting that the list of readers was extremely diverse, the text describes Ferlinghetti's *A Coney Island of the Mind* as "legendary" and Ferlinghetti himself as still possessing his "phenomenal sense of spontaneity"; similarly, Ginsberg's "Howl" is described as "iconic."⁷⁰ When Ferlinghetti himself was reciting some of his work, the article

68 Jazzová sekce was an import player in promoting alternative culture during the normalization period by publishing novels, bulletins and magazines and organizing various music events. In 1986 several of its board members were imprisoned on trumped-up charges. In addition, a few of its members died while imprisoned or due to the brutal techniques used during interrogation. Importantly, Ferlinghetti was one of the foreigners who petitioned the Czechoslovak government to release those imprisoned.

69 At one point Ferlinghetti looked at Karel Srp and asked about the huge amount of attention and popularity he was receiving: "Did Allen have this as well?" Srp answered in the negative (Snížek 18).

70 Ferlinghetti's poetry was read by a truly diverse crowd: from dignitaries such as the Prime Minister and future President Václav Klaus to random passers-by. In addition, the reading was streamed via the internet to Stockholm, which was at that time the European Capital of Culture, therefore further highlighting the importance of the reading and of Ferlinghetti himself.

adds, the audience was listening as if in a trance and subsequently rewarded the poet with a standing ovation.

Another newspaper article, this time from the Czech *Hospodářské noviny*, begins by describing the eighth Prague Writers' Festival as a large tribute to the Beat Generation and singles out Ferlinghetti as the main feature of the festival. The "famous" and "legendary" Ferlinghetti was an important member of the Beat Generation movement, which the article describes as refusing the traditional values of consumerism and standing against "the society of the majority," promoting "voluntary poverty, a vagabond lifestyle, and erotic licentiousness" ("Americký beatnický básník"). While the article also focuses on the language of Beat literature, it mostly details the event itself and its goals, one of them clearly being the importance of personal freedom. The connection between Ferlinghetti and Czech readers is highlighted by Karel Srp, who notes that Ferlinghetti was one of the foreign writers protesting the imprisonment of Czechoslovak intellectuals by the communist regime ("Americký beatnický básník"). The main point of the festival, which also included a life-sized mock-up of the City Lights Bookstore, and its various events were the ideals and spirit of the Beat Generation, and at that time it was the largest Beat Generation festival to date in terms of the number of various excerpts, archival footage, and newspaper clippings. Commenting on the legacy and importance of the Beats, Karel Srp states the following: "Given our current perspective, at certain times the fifty-year-old history of the Beats might seem childish. At other times, however, their ideas have not been surpassed even today. The general idea of the Beats is still exciting, surprising and shifting constantly" (qtd. in "Americký beatnický básník"). Ferlinghetti himself was certainly overwhelmed by the welcome he received, and stated that he felt more popular in the Czech Republic than he ever did in his home country.

In 1999, a publication was released to further commemorate Ferlinghetti's visit to Prague. Titled *S Ferlinghettim v Praze* (With Ferlinghetti in Prague), it documents all the events, interviews, and encounters that took place during his stay. The book's prologue opens by reminding readers of the allure of the Beats. It was their emphasis on individual freedom and personal choice as well as a critique of consumerism that captivated the minds of Czechoslovaks in the 1960s (Snížek 15). After all, Snížek adds, the Beat Generation and Ginsberg in particular were a large influence on the underground movement of the normalization period. Importantly, their critique of capitalism seemed to be irrelevant in the early years of the new Czechoslovakia following the fall of the communist regime. Nevertheless, as the nineties swept by and the public was faced with yet another political scandal, the dangers of unbridled capitalism became apparent, thus making Ginsberg's warning against the invasion of other ideologies simply replacing the previous ones truly prophetic. As Snížek further states, while the writing of the Beats might have lost the shock value associated with their early texts, their words and

ideas were as relevant in the nineties as they were in the sixties (15). The Beat Generation Fest, Snížek reminds us, was aimed at discovering the impact of the Beats on Czechoslovak culture and its relevance for today's world. Judging by the vast amount of newspaper articles detailing Ferlinghetti's stay, the number of fans and journalist showing up for the various events, and all the dignitaries, including the then-President Václav Havel, who wished to participate in one way or another in the events, the Beats simply cannot be seen as unimportant for the Czech people.

The appeal of the Beat Generation has remained constantly high throughout recent Czech history. As Kateřina Alexandra Vyternová writes in 2013, Ferlinghetti's good standing in terms of his popularity and reputation in the Czech Republic is more than deserved. A similar tone of admiration can be found in an article by Ondřej Bezr when he writes that the "American poet Lawrence Ferlinghetti has always been received here with the utmost respect, despite there not being as many of Ferlinghetti's books translated into Czech as would be desirable." Going into the history of Ferlinghetti publications in Czechoslovakia, Bezr explains that the wish of the communist regime to gain ideological allies from the West made the publication of Ferlinghetti's poetry possible; after all, Ferlinghetti was a vocal critic of imperialism and the United States. Nevertheless, in their haste to obtain another American critical of his home country, Bezr writes, the regime was unable to "look behind the corner" of Ferlinghetti's writing. Had it been able to do so, it would have found ideas and notions extremely dangerous to the Czechoslovakian regime – ideals of freedom and individual self-determination. These ideas, Bezr argues, are still important, which is the reason that, despite the poet's old age and the sixty years that have passed since he started writing and publishing, Ferlinghetti and all the other Beats remain relevant in the Czech Republic even for today's generations. This portrayal of Ferlinghetti and his work thus further emphasizes the historical importance the Beats played in Czechoslovakia.

8.4 The Beats and the Underground

As the example of Ginsberg's and Ferlinghetti's visits show, the Beats are generally viewed as symbols of individual freedom and resistance against government oppression. Importantly, this notion is further echoed in the works of numerous Czech and Czechoslovak artists. For instance, Inka Machulková was influenced by Beat poetry to the point that she is considered one of the few truly Beat poets in Czechoslovakia. She was a part of the Viola circle of artists from the very beginning and the repertoire, Machulková recalls in a 2007 interview, revolved around the Beats and jazz: among the most popular shows was a wildly successful jazz event "Komu patří jazz" ("Whom Does Jazz Belong To") or a reading of Ferlinghetti's poetry in Zábřana's translation (Machulková). Her first experience with Beat po-

etry was Corso's poem "Marriage" published in *Světová literatura*. As she puts it, what struck her about the poem was not only the fact that it voiced her innermost feelings, but also the poetic language used, which was to Machulková entirely new. Overall, while Machulková claims that any effort to explain the allure of the Beat Generation at that time might sound banal, she singles out the notions of inner freedom and personal earnestness as the defining aspects of the Beats she identified with most. However, she claims that the inspiration she found in the Beat Generation was not due to a blind obsession about "the American way of life," but rather to the parallels with her own experience she saw in their works. The work of the Beats, in other words, therefore gained new meaning in the Czech context, which further boosted their popularity in the country. As she further explains, Machulková was easily drawn to Corso's critique of American conformity, because she had lived in a totalitarian country and was able to contextualize the critique of a way of life into a different system of government. In the Beats, Machulková and her peers found kindred souls through their critique of consumerism, pointless materialism, or stifling bureaucracy. This, Machulková notes, was possible since the Beats did not focus on a specific overarching ideology, but rather on social issues which are essential irrespective of the particulars of the given regime.

While Machulková managed to experience the Beats during the relatively liberal 1960s, her poetry was still deemed provocative by the regime; after several interrogations asking about the meaning of specific lines in her poetry, she decided to emigrate from the country following the Warsaw Pact invasion in 1968. However, artists active during the normalization period of the 1970s and 1980s viewed the Beats in a slightly different manner. The Czechoslovak underground movement of the normalization period, loosely organized around the poet Ivan Martin "Magor" Jirous and the avant-garde rock band the Plastic People of the Universe, was fond of the Beats because they viewed them as symbols of American freedom (Olehla). Since their art was not approved by the regime's authorities, the underground movement was forced to work illegally, which eventually led to the Plastic People being sentenced for "organized disturbance of the peace"; similarly, Jirous was imprisoned five times for his political views and opposition to the regime. Importantly it was also Jirous who set out the philosophy of the "second culture" of underground art. As Jirous writes in his seminal essay "Zpráva o třetím českém kulturní obrození" ("The Third Czech Cultural Revival: A Report"):

[T]he first culture does not want us, while we do not want to have anything in common with the first culture... The goal of the underground in our country is to create a second culture; however, this culture, unlike that practiced in the West, does not aim to destroy the establishment, as that would thrust us directly into its throes. Rather than that, the second culture works with those who wish to join by removing their skepticism and showing them that there are many things to be achieved... (19–20)

At first glance, the Beats might seem to be an ideal source of inspiration for the underground artists of the normalization period. After all, Jirous's concept of "second culture" bears similarities to the refusal of the Beat poets to adopt traditional writing methods, instead replacing them with their own programmatic definitions such as Kerouac's spontaneous writing or Ginsberg's experiments with breath and meter. Furthermore, the underground artists were certainly aware of the Beats: for instance, the second issue of the samizdat magazine *Vokno* contains an excerpt from a book called *Satori in Prague*, a clear reference to Kerouac's *Satori in Paris*, while the fourteenth issue includes a translation of an interview with Ginsberg. Nevertheless, an important distinction must be made. The Beats were hardly the most defining in terms of direct influence on underground art. The influence of the Beats on the underground therefore should not be understood in the strict sense of adopting specific literary techniques. Instead, one can see certain analogies between the two in a more general sense, mainly in the shared themes and the refusal to adopt an official style of writing (Pilař 99, 108).⁷¹ In addition, other common features include resistance to mass culture – whether one created by consumerism or controlled by a totalitarian government – and an apparent apolitical stance.

However, even this approach is problematic. Martin Pilař explains that the conscious decision to become an outsider in a society in protest against its values is by no means an isolated phenomenon, but rather a reoccurring phenomenon in history (94). While Czech scholarship frequently compares the underground movement to the work of the Beat Generation in order to discuss their similarities, Pilař clarifies that this results from the false belief which claims that the strongest countercultural movements in the postwar West were the Beats in the United States and the underground movement in Czechoslovakia (97–98). Pilař also points out that even some early proponents of this idea, such as Martin Machovec, later dismissed it as naive. Machovec himself puts it in the following manner: "The oft-repeated conviction regarding the cultural alternative (or the more specific and culturally-oriented 'underground,' which was supposed to exist after WWII only in the United States and Czechoslovakia) is to be considered a myth or a misconception stemming from confusing terminology" ("Avantgarda" 194).

The point of comparing the Beats and the Czechoslovak underground, therefore, should not be to document the exact similarities between the two or to track the influence of the Beats in underground art, but rather to draw attention to the discourse used by artists and historians to address these shared affinities. In other

71 It should be pointed out that here Pilař's text compares the Beats to the writers of Edice Půlnoc (Midnight Edition). These authors, who include Egon Bondy or Ivo Vodsedašek, were mostly active in the fifties and are considered "proto-underground" writers due to their relative obscurity prior to the Prague Spring. Importantly, Pilař's point regarding the Půlnoc writers and the Beats can be extended to the underground artists as well.

words, the objective is to document how the term “Beat” or “beatnik” is used to address a certain “state of mind,” as Machulková would say.⁷²

A prime example of such a use is the comprehensive profile of Vratislav Brabenec in *Respekt* magazine. The text by Pavel Turek already refers to Brabenec, the saxophone player of The Plastic People, as a “beatnik” in the subtitle of the article (56). Stating that despite his old age Brabenec is still wildly active, Turek then recounts Brabenec’s early life leading up to the formation of the Plastic People of the Universe. Painting the musician as rebellious in nature from an early age, Turek in the section of the article titled “An Understanding of Freedom” emphasizes the importance of jazz music and Beat writings to the musician (57). As Turek continues, “[t]he encounter with Kerouac’s prose and Ferlinghetti’s verses in the translations of Jan Zábřana at the beginning of the 1960s was extremely decisive for Brabenec’s sense of poetics and perception of the world.” To fully compliment the musician’s Beat nature, Turek notes that Brabenec “[s]till leads the life of a beat and drunk poet” (57). Recalling Kerouac’s poetic style, Turek closes the text by noting that music is for Brabenec not only a drive, but also “sensuous sex” and “a ritual.” In other words, the language of the text uses analogies and comparisons evoking the work of the Beats to further emphasize the inherent rebelliousness of Brabenec’s oeuvre, and therefore his Beatness.

Commenting on life in the 1960s and the subsequent normalization, the underground writer and performer Milan Kozelka also describes the experience of intentional separation from the government-approved lifestyle as “Beat.” The magazines *Světová literatura* and *Divoké víno* (The Wild Vine) were the few sources of joy in the overall dull period, Kozelka writes, and the work of the Beats was frequently translated by their Czechoslovak fans. The Viola café was the birthplace of the first official Beat culture and long passages by various Beat poets were frequently learned and memorized. However, Kozelka notes that by the beginning of the seventies, it was becoming more and more difficult to pursue a truly Beat lifestyle of hitch-hiking, poetry cafés, and public meeting places. While moving from the capital to smaller towns and the countryside was a partial solution, finding like-minded communities was problematic due to the increasing pressure of the regime on non-conformity. As Kozelka then explains, a choice had to be made: one could either be a free “beatnik” or a trouble-free member of a conformist society.

Yet the important difference between the Beats and the underground movement, Kozelka argues, was the context in which each had to exist. Unlike the Beats, the Czechoslovak underground subculture had nowhere to go and could

⁷² While in English the term “beatnik” is usually used in a disparaging manner, its Czech variant “beatník” is usually used instead of the noun “Beat” in Czech. This naturally makes distinguishing the beatnik stereotype substantially more difficult than in English. It, however, also shows that the beatnik stereotype is virtually absent in the Czech discourse on the Beats.

not simply escape: the excruciatingly dull protective supervision, exclusion from universities and jobs, and intolerance of the regime leading to prison sentences, homelessness, alcoholism, and suicides were daily realities for those who consciously refused the values of the regime. As a result, being “Beat” is a certain state of mind or attitude as much as it means following certain literary techniques. Yet this state of mind simply cannot exist outside the world itself, since it is the context which defines these attitudes and the effect they have. If a Czechoslovak wished to emulate the Beats, for instance through a decision to travel freely or live irrespective of the conventions of society, these acts would have a significantly harsher impact than if one had done so in the United States. This impact, in turn, would redefine the act itself as a different, more radical act than originally conceived.

In other words, if the Beats were “Beat” because of the taboos they unearthed in their writing and lifestyles, the members of the underground movement were even “Beater,” as the repercussions they could potentially face for the same acts were much graver. A general ethos of the Beat Generation is then present in the works and lives of many Czechoslovak underground artists of the normalization period; however, its finer details take a different form, as there is a substantial difference between mild harassment and the actual threat of being imprisoned on trumped-up charges or being forced by government authorities to leave the country.

8.5 Critical Reception

When compared to its American counterpart, Czech academia logically has a substantially smaller interest in the Beats. Most scholarship focuses on the historical impact of the Beats on Czechoslovakia and the Czech Republic, though some, most notably Josef Jařab and Josef Rauwolf, provide additional insights into the Beats. Yet the somewhat limited nature of the scholarship is in many ways illuminating: similarly to the popular reception, the Beats are in the Czech Republic cultural artifacts with substantial social importance. This in turn helps demonstrate not only the stance of the Beats and therefore their reception, but also the overall conception of the Beats in Czech discourse. Unlike in the ever-changing American academia, the notion of the Beats is not being re-defined, challenged, or updated. On the contrary, as in the maturita examination, the Beats are permanent fixtures in Czech discourse. Being canonized, the Beats then help illuminate various aspects of Czech history and culture.

A substantial amount of scholarship analyzes the influence of the Beats on Edice Půlnoc and underground writers. For example, Martin Pilař comments on the problem of studying the influence one literary group had on another. While

there are thematic analogies between the Beats and the Půlnoc writers, Pilař points out the majority of Půlnoc texts had been finished long before the Beats were made available in Czechoslovakia, therefore one can hardly talk about the one being directly influenced by the other (99, 101). Despite developing independently of one another, they do share several typological similarities, for instance in their attitudes to the values of their societies or in their emphasis on building communities (102–103). Similarly, Mirek Vodrážka in his study “Vytvoř si systém, nebo tě zotročí systém jiného” (Create a System or Be Enslaved by Another Man’s) deals with the creation and establishment of the underground movement subculture during the normalization period; the Beats feature in the essay as influential predecessors and inspiration of the Czechoslovak underground. As Vodrážka writes, the underground movement would barely exist without the Beats of the fifties and the hippies of the sixties (15). Whether it was Allen Ginsberg with the band The Fugs or later Ivan Jirous and the Plastic People of the Universe, these writers encapsulated a certain code, a different sensibility, and a total refusal and critique of mainstream culture. In the same vein, Kudrna and Čuñas compare the underground movement with the American counterculture of the sixties and note that both of them were strongly politicized (28). However, they note an important distinction – the alternative subcultures of the West were not the targets of a systematic repression stemming from the government – and use Ginsberg’s following words to highlight it further: “[The Czechoslovaks] were the real underground. We were only toying with it” (qtd. in Kudrna and Čuñas 28). Other examples include Stanislav Dvorský, who analyzes the influence of the Beats on the Czechoslovak underground, noting it was not important thematically, but rather in the way it encouraged spontaneity, inner monologues, improvisation, authenticity, or even interest in controversial subjects (132–33). These studies, in other words, are interested in the Beats as a sociological phenomenon which could help explain the realities of communist Czechoslovakia.

The scope of Beat critiques goes beyond mere comparison with Czechoslovak writers. Petr Kopecký’s “Czeching the Beat, Beating the Czech” discusses the influence of the Beats, namely Ferlinghetti and Ginsberg, in Czechoslovakia and later the Czech Republic. Kopecký points out that after the fall of Communism, it was thought that the Beats might lose their elevated status. The end of the normalization period had led to a surge of books from the West finally being available, which resulted in the texts associated with rebellion or subversion losing their appeal due to the sheer amount of published literature (101). Nevertheless, the Beats have retained their popularity; as Kopecký argues, the reason behind such longevity is “the essential universality of the poets and their trenchant critique of spiritual emptiness, greed and obsession with power” (101). Similarly, Josef Rauwolf’s “Beat po česku” (Beat: the Czech Way) comments on the role of the Beats on Czechoslovak artists and the society as a whole. Most of the points he

makes are essentially the same as those of Kopecký, yet he also identifies a key difference from the reception of the Beats in the United States: while it was Burroughs who seemed to be making the most waves in the United States during the 1990s, he seems to have been virtually ignored in the Czech Republic (24). The “Burroughsian hell” of drug addiction, oppression of homosexuals and control systems, Rauwolf argues, might have been too difficult for the Czechs to easily adapt to; on the other hand, the poetry of Ginsberg and the novels of Kerouac are certainly easier to grasp and therefore easier to identify with. Put simply, the focus of Czech academics is strongly influenced by the publication history of the Beats in Czechoslovakia, which also means Burroughs tends to be omitted from academic discourse.

Ginsberg’s visit in 1965 had far-reaching consequences and as such it is commonly addressed in Czech scholarly publications. Petr Blažek’s “The Deportation of the King of May” begins with Ginsberg’s arrival in Prague from Cuba, and it is a comprehensive study of the poet’s participation in the Majáles festival, his meetings and debates with Czechoslovak artists and students, and the way the secret police monitored Ginsberg’s every step and later deported him from the country. By incorporating numerous files the secret service had on Ginsberg and the operations related to his stay in Prague, Blažek finally illuminates the circumstances surrounding Ginsberg’s deportation. For instance, not only was the secret police bent on obtaining information about all the people Ginsberg met with during his stay, but the file also makes it clear that due to several secret police confidants the government managed to obtain detailed accounts of several gatherings and events originally deemed free of police presence (44). Making previously secret information regarding the government’s involvement in Ginsberg’s deportation available also inspired Andrew Lass to translate the final report documenting Ginsberg’s interrogation and deportation put together by Karel Vodrážka, the Captain of the local secret police section tasked with monitoring Ginsberg.

Professor Josef Jařab was a personal friend of Ginsberg and met him on numerous occasions; what is more, he also invited Ginsberg to lecture at Palacký University on spontaneous poetry.⁷³ As such, he has not only acted as a vocal supporter of Ginsberg and other Beats, but also has a unique insight into their work when compared to other Czech scholars. In the preface to the Ginsberg anthology *Karma červená, bílá a modrá* (Red, White and Blue Karma), he criticizes the historical approach of their critics, because it leads to perceiving them as a social phenomenon rather than artists. This was especially the case with Ginsberg,

73 The notes and recordings of the lectures have been recently transcribed and made available in the form of a Bachelor’s thesis by Jiří Zochr. See Jiří Zochr: *Allen Ginsberg in Olomouc: Allen Ginsberg’s Lecture on Spontaneous Writing with Commentary*. In addition, it should be noted that Jařab played a vital role in negotiating the removal of Soviet troops from the city of Olomouc and was among the first elected university rectors after the Velvet Revolution.

Jařab points out, whose work is often “overshadowed by his political activism” (10). Instead of classifying him as a political activist or a countercultural icon, Jařab writes that one should follow Ginsberg’s example and understand the difficulties of trying to classify phenomena into neat categories, therefore focusing on Ginsberg’s poetic language instead. Furthermore, the revolt of Ginsberg and other Beats was not merely social or political; it was a revolt against a certain kind of thinking, thus promoting spiritual, cultural, and esthetic betterment. Ginsberg, Jařab argues, saw himself as a poet fully embedded in the physical reality of our world and his poetry as an instrument of positive change; after all, these are the reasons why Ginsberg tended to give a large number of interviews and poetry readings (10–11). Ginsberg’s qualities, namely tolerance, spirituality, and open-mindedness, were also embodied in his poetry, which aimed to broaden one’s horizon, challenge various preconceptions and taboos hindering human well-being (12–13). Jařab then concludes that Ginsberg was an “exemplary citizen of the world” and “a good human being” who had positively affected the plurality of the USA (14). Nevertheless, this did not stop the grossly overstated reports of Ginsberg’s debauchery being released by both Czechoslovak and American regimes (Jařab, “Láska”). It was then the image of Ginsberg’s caricature rather than the actual poet which was disseminated in public.

The translator Josef Rauvolf made a vast number of Beat texts available to Czechs, thus significantly contributing to the popularity of the Beats in the years after the communist regime collapsed. What is more, he on numerous times consulted on his translations with both Ginsberg and Burroughs, therefore his position is similar to – and perhaps even more significant than – that of Jařab. Since he is also a leading researcher on the Czechoslovak underground, several of his short studies, for example “Beat po řesku” or “Prague Connection,” focus on the interplay between the Beats and Czechoslovak and Czech society. In a telephone interview conducted by myself, Rauvolf mentions that upon reading Kerouac’s *On the Road* in 1978, readers were struck by the novel’s notions of freedom and the ability to make one’s own decisions. “Looking around, one had to feel as if he were on Mars,” Rauvolf remarked wryly. While *On the Road* was extremely successful, it was not the only Beat text to have an impact on the Czechoslovak readership. As Rauvolf claims, “Howl” was copied among its readers so often that it might have been the most copied literary text in Czechoslovakia.

Continuing the interview, Rauvolf states that Kerouac’s writing is significantly easier to relate to than the bleak visions of Burroughs. Not only is Kerouac as a writer more forthcoming to his readers than Burroughs, but also the overall tone of his novels contains Romantic sensibilities, which make them substantially easier to follow and identify with. Importantly, the concept of relatedness is an overarching theme not only in terms of the Beats’ popular reception, but also when it comes to critical responses. By highlighting the role the Beats had on

Czech society, these studies often indirectly raise the issues of acceptance of and identification with the new ideas and ideals represented by the Beats. As in the popular reception, the emphasis is not only on *reading* the Beats, but also – to a certain extent – on *being* one. By portraying the ideas of the Beats as vital for their writing, these essays not only show the way the interpretive communities of Czechoslovak and later Czech readers accepted the Beats, but also indicate that sharing these ideas is an important part of the reception. In other words, they hint at the fact that a crucial concept is at play when discussing the Beats – that of identity and the subsequent performance of such identity.