

# **Wholly Communion, Literary Nationalism, and the Sorrows of the Counterculture**

**Daniel Kane**

all those americans here writing about america it's time to give something  
back, after all  
our heroes were always the gangster the outlaw why  
surprised you act like it  
now, a place  
the simplest man was always the most complex you gave me  
the usual things, comics,  
music, royal blue drape suits &  
what they ever give me but unreadable books?

Tom Raworth, "I Mean"

These opening lines from "I Mean" by British poet Tom Raworth, published in 1967 in Raworth's first full-length collection, *The Relation Ship* (Goliard Press),<sup>1</sup> stand as a kind of metaphor for a larger problem facing British avant-garde poetry in the 1960s. Put simply, "I Mean" addresses an "American" influence on British letters that was to weigh heavily on poets challenging the restrained formalism and hostility to the modernist project characteristic of the British "Movement" poets.<sup>2</sup> How were the many Beat and Black Mountain–enamored versifiers of Albion to be innovative on their own terms?

The avant-garde, as Raworth seems to have it, is predicated on the aura of the "outlaw," the "gangster." Such figures are suggestively American, particularly when read within the context of the poem's opening lines. American signs pointing the way forward for a developing British poetics include an idealized simplicity, comics, and music.<sup>3</sup> Raworth's poem works in part to ask whether the English will be able to "give something back." What would that "something" sound like? What would it look like? Would it be somehow

distinctly English? Would it be as good as the Americans? Is Raworth ventriloquizing and mocking the anxiety felt by British fellow poets enamored of experimental American verse, or is he being sincere?

If Raworth is ventriloquizing, why might that be the case? To write “all those americans here writing about america” is to address the highly problematic way American avant-garde poetry and poetics were unselfconsciously nationalized in the 1950s and 1960s through a variety of strategies. Many British poets, for example, got their first taste of American alternative poetry from Donald Allen’s popular 1960 anthology *The New American Poetry*. Allen Ginsberg, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Gregory Corso, Jack Kerouac, and related figures were all ensconced in a book whose title gladly relied on identification with the United States as an attractive selling point, and whose cover featured red and white stripes allusive of the American flag.

The Beat poets in particular saw no contradiction in positioning themselves as antiestablishment figures while maintaining a marked patriotism that distinguished them from their more internationalist peers. Ginsberg, for example, appeared any number of times throughout the 1960s in an Uncle Sam hat. This challenged mainstream American values by virtue of the hat’s placement on the head of a polysexual bearded Jewish poet, as it simultaneously marked a sincere love of country that Ginsberg, following Whitman, expressed throughout his work. We can refer to his 1956 poem “A Supermarket in California,” which invoked and implicitly called for a recuperation of an idealized “lost America,”<sup>4</sup> and move right through his poetry of the 1980s and 1990s to get a sense of the poet’s lifelong commitment to the United States as a promised land that had to be redeemed.

Kerouac certainly never shied away from expressing his loyalty to the States even as he, like Ginsberg, railed against the limitations it placed on his desires. His *On the Road* refers repeatedly to an America that symbolized—like no other place—the freedom he so craved. Despite all its problems, America was “the mighty land.”<sup>5</sup> As Manuel Louis Martinez suggests,

it may be that [Kerouac] is neither the voice of dissension as his most ardent readers claim, nor the violently reactionary racist he came to resemble in his final years. It may turn out that what the Beats most clearly signified was the tendency of American dissent to subvert its own countercultural instinct for the middle road, for stability, for the comfort of the status quo that promises a protective space for the individual. Even as Kerouac attempted to criticize political extremism in any guise, his most fervent and bitter criticism was saved for the “Flower Power Generation” and their protest against the “national right . . . of the United States to defend itself against its own perimeter of enemies.”<sup>6</sup>

This is all by way of saying that acknowledging the influence of Beat-affiliated writers specifically and postwar American avant-garde poetry more generally is to unavoidably take on that work as it is defined by a complicated nationalist discourse. Thus, I want these references to Ginsberg’s and Kerouac’s

work, as well as Raworth's poem and the questions that *it* raises, to hang uncomfortably if productively over this essay.

Ultimately, I believe they will help us read all the more closely the significance of Peter Whitehead's *Wholly Communion*. The Albert Hall reading was promoted at the time as the "International Poetry Incarnation" and featured poets from the United Kingdom, the United States, New Zealand, and Western Europe. *Wholly Communion* limited itself to presenting three American poets (Ferlinghetti, Corso, and Ginsberg); four British poets (Michael Horovitz, Harry Fainlight, Christopher Logue, and Adrian Mitchell); a Scotsman (Alexander Trocchi); and an Austrian (Ernst Jandl). Not featured in the film—or in the accompanying book, *Wholly Communion*, which came out in two editions around the same time the film was being distributed—were John Esam and Daniel Richter (a New Zealander and an American, respectively, who helped coordinate the reading); English-born poets Pete Brown<sup>7</sup> and Spike Hawkins; Anselm Hollo (a Finnish poet who emigrated to the United States in 1967); George MacBeth and Tom McGrath (from Scotland); the Dutch poet and marijuana activist Simon Vinkenoog; and Paolo Lionni, an Italian poet who later moved to Oregon and became headmaster of a boarding school. No women poets participated in the event. While Whitehead might have had the opportunity to film an international (or at least Anglo-European) version of a poetic avant-garde in both film and book form, what we have as a record of the time is a predominantly Anglo-American affair in which the Americans clearly ruled the day.

As I show in succeeding pages, *Wholly Communion* is a film that is both deeply moving and markedly melancholic. It reveals the belated status of British poetry and poetics as it is manifested through its relationship to the American avant-garde. It shows not merely that American writers were "ahead" of their British counterparts, but, I would propose, makes larger (if perhaps unintended) claims about the difficulty in trying to forge a community-oriented, internationalist, hierarchy-free counterculture.

### ***"Why Is British Poetry So Nicely, Charmingly, Diffidently Dull?" The British Poetry Scene in the 1960s***

The Albert Hall reading was linked to the small press publishing and bookstore scenes in London, Liverpool, and related poetic hot spots in the United Kingdom that looked consistently to small press literary cultures in the United States for inspiration. The "mimeo revolution" coming out of New York and San Francisco in particular influenced small press magazine production on the other side of the pond. By the late 1950s,

anyone who felt they had something to say in print could launch a magazine, and many people did. In 1959 Michael Horovitz launched *New Departures* from Oxford, Gael Turnbull and Michael Shayer launched *Migrant* from Worcester; and Barry Miles, a future editor of *IT* published his first magazine,

*Tree*, while an art student in Cheltenham. These, and magazines like *Poetmeat* (Blackburn), *Underdog* (Liverpool), *Outburst* (London), *Sidewalk* (Edinburgh) catered to the coffee-bar bohemia such as nurtured the Liverpool poets and pop groups. . . . The new magazines looked not to London, but to San Francisco, where Lawrence Ferlinghetti's City Lights Press (1956) formed a focus for the American Beat movement. . . . Jazz stimulated a new lyricism, open forms, a poetry of chant and breath, and the young British poets who were rediscovering the modernism of Ezra Pound and Bunting after the conservatism of the Movement, followed their American models by writing specifically for performance. As Michael Horovitz put it, "Jazz: sacred river, deeply embedded in the American idiom, was a seminal influence for many of us: underground movement, living mythology and international language of our upbringing: which addressed its primal message to the whole world—and through which all could speak."<sup>8</sup>

The British small press community took its cue from its American counterpart. Horovitz's *New Departures* winked at James Laughlin's *New Directions* press,<sup>9</sup> as Horovitz himself fell back on Jack Kerouac's theory that jazz could serve as a model for poetics. *Poetmeat* alluded perhaps to the first line of Kerouac's 211th Chorus, included in his *Mexico City Blues* ("the wheel of the quivering meat conception").<sup>10</sup> *Poetmeat*, based in Blackburn, Lancashire, positioned itself as a transatlantic journal with a special affection for the New York Beat scene, and published poets throughout the mid-1960s including Carol Bergé, John Giorno, Diane di Prima, and Jack Micheline. *Migrant* introduced American poets like Ed Dorn and Robert Creeley to English readers. *Migrant's* co-editor Gael Turnbull, who was based for a time on the West Coast and hung out with poets and artists including Robert Duncan and Wallace Berman, served as a kind of UK-U.S. literary ambassador.

Other journals and presses not mentioned above took the promotion of American writing very seriously indeed. Ian Hamilton Finlay's Wild Hawthorn Press, for example, published Lorine Niedecker and Louis Zukofsky, among others; Alexander Trocchi's Sigma Portfolio published William Burroughs and Michael McClure; Fulcrum Press published books by Ginsberg, Ed Dorn, Larry Eigner, and Gary Snyder; and Bronx-born, London-based publisher Asa Benveniste published a range of American poets like Jack Hirschman, David Meltzer, and Louis Zukofsky alongside nascent British avant-gardists J. H. Prynne and Tom Raworth through his Trigram Press imprint.<sup>11</sup>

The traffic in Anglo-American avant-garde poetry was mostly one-way.<sup>12</sup> The dozens (if not hundreds) of American small press journals and presses—from Ferlinghetti's City Lights press in the late 1950s, through Ed Sanders's magazine *Fuck You/a magazine of the arts* in the 1960s, to *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* magazine in the late 1970s—were not particularly committed to representing their Anglo peers, even as American contributors were happily getting their poems published in small press magazines throughout the United Kingdom. The British couldn't get enough of them.

This uneven relationship may have been due in part to the fact that many UK poets themselves believed British writing had lost its way. “In the *London Magazine* in 1962 Julian Mitchell asked ‘Why is British poetry so nicely, charmingly, diffidently dull?’”<sup>13</sup> Alexis Lykiard (who wrote the introduction to the book *Wholly Communion*) remembers, “I was inclined to be receptive to certain poets who seemed to me genuine, fresh transatlantic voices—the big Beat sound beginning to surge irresistibly against Little England’s cautious, ever conservative shores.”<sup>14</sup> Whitehead recalls his undergraduate days at Cambridge University in the first half of the 1960s:

I had a first edition LP of Allen Ginsberg reading “Howl” and “Kaddish” . . . so even though I wasn’t into “Beat poetry” in that true sense . . . I was much more familiar with Yeats and the Lake poets . . . I was absolutely aware that what was really happening at the time in America was much more significant than what was happening in England, because ours was a mere reflection of what the Beats and the Left and the counterculture were doing in America.<sup>15</sup>

Bookstores in the United Kingdom devoted to innovative poetry also tended to highlight their American holdings. Barry Miles, former manager of the now legendary London-based store Better Books and, soon after, co-owner of the equally legendary Indica Gallery (which showed artists including Yoko Ono and Liliane Lijn and sold books by Burroughs, Ginsberg, and Corso et al.) admits to being charged “of only ever promoting American poetry, Beat poetry in particular.”<sup>16</sup> Although Miles rejected the accusation, he explained:

The literature department [at Better Books] imported American paperbacks, in particular those published by Grove Press, New Directions and Alan Swallow, and Tony had an arrangement with Lawrence Ferlinghetti’s City Lights Bookstore in San Francisco, so that a complete line of City Lights publications was available in return for regular consignments of used Penguin paperbacks. [Also on sale at Better Books were] the difficult-to-sell American small-press books from Diane di Prima’s Poets Press, the Auerhahn Press, Oyez, LeRoi Jones’ Totem Press, White Rabbit, “C” Press and the publications of Ed Sanders’ notorious Fuck You Press, “published at a secret location in the Lower East Side” . . . Americans planning to visit London . . . were often surprised to find a better selection of underground literary magazines such as *C*, *Lines*, *Mother*, and *Kulchur* than was available in most big American cities.<sup>17</sup>

In May 1965, just after his triumphant coronation in Prague as the “King of May” and subsequent deportation from Czechoslovakia by paranoid Communist authorities, Allen Ginsberg arrived in London and was promptly ensconced at Better Books as resident Beat. A reading was scheduled at the store, and everyone was there. Ginsberg’s appearance would be “the first healing wind on a very parched collective mind. The reading was a triumph, packing out the basement not only with London’s poetry lovers but with a passing caravan of New Yorkers, among them Gerard Malanga, Andy

Warhol . . . , Edie Sedgwick, Baby Jane Holzer, the creators of *Fuck You* magazine, and Kate Heliczer.”<sup>18</sup>

Many individuals hanging out at Better Books were sympathetic both ideologically and socially to the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND).<sup>19</sup> This organization, which called on the United Kingdom to commit to unilateral nuclear disarmament and organized a series of highly publicized marches to the nuclear weapons manufacturing center at Aldermaston, attracted figures like poet Jeff Nuttall, who were very much on the scene in an increasingly Swinging London. As the CND fell apart due to a combustible mixture of internal divisions and the refusal of the Labour Party to commit to the CND’s platform, the anti-ideological if simultaneously wildly dissident aura characterizing the American avant-garde poetry scene began to look increasingly attractive to the disaffected antinuclear brigade. Ginsberg himself was a perfect model for the New Left. Refusing to commit himself to the ideological binaries of either free market, consumer-oriented American capitalism or Soviet communism, Ginsberg argued for a more nuanced understanding of revolution as one predicated in large part on radical interrogations of normative cultural and personal practices. That is why, coming so quickly after the disintegration of the CND, Ginsberg’s reading at Better Books was an auspicious moment in the history of London’s counterculture. For Whitehead, Ginsberg’s appearance was especially transformative:

I came down to Better Books shop to buy some books and noticed something saying that Allen Ginsberg had just arrived from Czechoslovakia, he’d been elected King of May, and that he was going to be here with a bunch of English poets—none of which I’d ever heard of or ever read—in Better Books, next Thursday. So I thought, bloody hell, Allen Ginsberg! So I arrived with my little stills camera, sat in the back and listened to the whole thing. I can’t really remember much of anyone else except Allen Ginsberg, which was a bit mean of me I suppose, so, anyway, at the end of the event I overheard the poets chatting about renting the Royal Albert Hall! And I thought there’s thirty odd people here, you know, how are we going to swing this? And I got to talking because by that point most of the people had left, and I stayed on as if I was one of them. I was at the time a newsreel camera man, so I told them I was a filmmaker, you know. I knew enough about the scene and their language to make them feel comfortable. . . . I started talking to John Esam, who was a bit of an operator and had a lot to do with putting together the Albert Hall event, and I said “Look, I’m a cameraman, I’ve made films before (which was true, I had made *Perception of Life* by that time), and if you’re really going to do this I’ll come along and film it.” . . . Two days before the event, I get a call from John Esam, and he’s asking me “Did you see the newspaper this morning?” I said “no,” then he said, “Well, we’ve booked the Albert Hall! It’s happening, it’s happening on the 5th of whatever, the 11th of June, and I’ve talked to everybody and they’d be very happy if you came and filmed it. Barbara Rubin will be filming it as well, but you said you’d be filming it a little bit more straight.” And I said, “well . . . fine, OK, good.”<sup>20</sup>

The right people at the right place at the right time led directly not only to the Incarnation but also to the beautiful if (as I now argue) presciently elegiac filming of the event that was Whitehead's *Wholly Communion*. Before I start insisting somewhat melancholically that the film now seems more about the human failure to connect with the Other than a decisively celebratory foundational moment for the UK counterculture, I should point out that many people who were actually there insist on the event's positivity. Whitehead, for example, concluded an interview by insisting the Incarnation was a "seminal event, the first great happening of the counterculture, an expression of some kind of communication going on between American Beat poets and the English bunch of guys who saw themselves as that."<sup>21</sup> Jeff Nuttall described the reading retrospectively in a way that suggests a rebirth of a community-oriented avant-garde and its efflorescence in the public eye: "[All] our separate audiences had come to one place at the same time, to witness an atmosphere of pot, impromptu solo acid dances, of incredible barbaric colour, of face and body painting, of flowers and flowers and flowers, of a common dreaminess in which all was permissive and benign. There was a frisson for us all to savour as there had been at the first Aldermaston, and the Underground was suddenly there on the surface, in open ground with a following of thousands."<sup>22</sup>

And yet, I have seen this film countless times and come away from it each time all the more touched by the sensitivity of Whitehead's eye and all the more dismayed at the tensions and self-absorption evident on the faces of those who were caught on film, particularly as these tensions are underscored by the clearly subservient relationship the British poetry performances had to their American counterparts. I recognize, of course, that the film is in no way a direct, objective record of the reading. (I don't mean to imply that *any* film could ever capture the "truth" of an event. I just want to emphasize here that Whitehead's version of the event was precisely that—a version, one among many possible versions.) As he only had forty-four minutes of film available to shoot, Whitehead did not capture many of the poets reading that night. He also acknowledges only being familiar with the work of the American performers, which explains in part why most of what little film stock he had was spent on figures like Ginsberg. All that said, I think there's enough information in the film to illustrate the problematic relationship British poetry had in the sixties to its American counterpart and, subsequently, to read *Wholly Communion* as a swan song—however inadvertent—for a counterculture that was as yet barely aware of its own existence.

### ***Wholly Communion***

The first establishing shot in *Wholly Communion* is of Adrian Jones's monumental sculpture "Peace in Her Quadriga," which sits atop the 1828 Wellington Arch on Hyde Park Corner. The sculpture (depicting the angel of peace descending on the four-horse chariot of war) is filmed in such a way as to

allow the sun to shine blindingly and beautifully through the very center of the frame. “There’s this amazing image just going past into Hyde Park of the sun coming through that huge chariot, which is Helios, you see, and I thought right! right! I’ve got the beginning!”<sup>23</sup> Against this background, we hear nondiegetic lines from two poems by, respectively, Lawrence Ferlinghetti (“To Fuck Is to Love Again”) and Allen Ginsberg (“The Change”). The excerpts from the poems resonate with the image on the screen. First, we hear Ferlinghetti’s “The sun the sun behold the sun / Great God Sun still riseth / in our rubaiyat / and strikes the towers with a shaft of light / The sun the sun still rules everything / even the sky as we know it / even love as we know it.”<sup>24</sup> We then hear Ginsberg shouting “the Sun the Sun the Sun my visible father / making my body visible / thru my own eyes!”<sup>25</sup>

So, from the first moments of the film we find an image iconic to British visual culture defined verbally through the sound of two Beat-affiliated American poets voicing their lines. The focus on the Beats continues in subsequent scenes. After some additional establishing shots run their course (the exterior and interior of the Royal Albert Hall with some freeze-frames of the audience), we hear Ginsberg chanting a Maitreya mantra, accompanying himself with finger cymbals. As Ginsberg chants offscreen, we witness a series of shots of, respectively, Vinkenoog, Corso, Horovitz, Mitchell, Jandl, Logue, Ferlinghetti, Trocchi, Fainlight, and Brown. After this collage, we are back in real time and space as the camera focuses on Ginsberg doing his chanting routine. Occasional shots of the audience lend a wonderful ambience to the proceedings, particularly those of a beautiful, clearly stoned woman in a polka-dot blouse and matching cap and her neighbor, a young male wearing an open-necked white shirt.

So far so good; however, almost immediately after Ginsberg’s completion of the mantra, as we hear appreciative applause and are treated to close-ups of audience members smiling charmingly, the tenor of the film shifts away from the celebratory mode. This is due to a trenchant shot of Ginsberg sitting cross-legged and combing back what little hair he has left on the top of his head. Ginsberg’s countenance is disaffected, almost aggressively blasé. The disjunction between Ginsberg’s comb-over and the purportedly selfless, community-oriented act of chanting a Hindu mantra is funny, if bathetically so. Ginsberg is shown as disengaged, far from enraptured. Whether Whitehead intended to or not, the ways these opening scenes are edited suggest that the camera is being used as a critical eye revealing ruptures in the utopic ethos of the Incarnation.

### *Lawrence Ferlinghetti*

The first poet to appear in the film after Ginsberg’s mantra was Lawrence Ferlinghetti, who was recorded reading versions of his poems “I Am Waiting” and “To Fuck Is to Love Again.” I say “versions” because Ferlinghetti was literally improvising or riffing off of the published forms of these poems,

using the lines as occasions to address the circumstances of the Albert Hall. "I am waiting for Voznesensky to turn on with us and speak love tonight!" Ferlinghetti proclaimed, turning back from the podium to perhaps look at the Russian bard himself, who was in attendance but, according to various histories of the event, either didn't read because he didn't want to or because he was forbidden to by the Soviet authorities. Later on in the performance, Ferlinghetti added, "I am waiting for Voznesensky to answer / and I am waiting for Neruda to answer," again pointing to the fact that Voznesensky would not perform and that Pablo Neruda, scheduled to read, did not show up at all. Perhaps addressing those in the audience who were refugees from the CND, Ferlinghetti also let the assembled masses know that he was waiting "for Aphrodite / to grow live arms / at a final disarmament conference." Fully aware that most in the audience knew Ginsberg had recently been kicked out of Prague, Ferlinghetti intoned, "Why are you so puritanical comrade, kicking Allen Ginsberg out of Czechoslovakia?" In part by looking away from the book he was reading in favor of uttering seemingly spontaneous lyrical comments inspired by the immediate community around him, Ferlinghetti adhered to the ideals behind the Incarnation by conflating "art" with "life." Artistic expression was, in Ferlinghetti's case, a public and wholly contingent utterance predicated on sociability.

At least, that's what it looked like until Whitehead contaminated this positivity by interrupting the recording of Ferlinghetti for one penetrating moment in order to edit in a freeze-frame of tortured-looking British poet Harry Fainlight. Seated, his rake-thin body folded slightly as he rested his head on one hand, his other hand clenched in a fist on his lap, Fainlight was a hieroglyph of anguish. Why would Whitehead choose to isolate this moment, particularly given the effort to build community through poetry evident in Ferlinghetti's performance? If for nothing else, through this freeze-frame, the viewer is reminded of individual human suffering and alienation in contrast to the high hopes around the Incarnation. I return to this theme in more detail when I consider Fainlight's own reading below. Suffice it to say for now that this particular freeze-frame felt like a warning to the viewer that perhaps not everything about the Incarnation was going to be groovy.

### ***Michael Horovitz***

The melancholy strain that seemed increasingly to determine the tone of the film took on an absurdist cast when Michael Horovitz hit the stage. Unfortunately, the British Beat poet was a poor follow-up to Ginsberg and Ferlinghetti. Horovitz's stylized hipster clichés, in full effect in the poems he performed at the Incarnation, tended to highlight the role he played in *Wholly Communion* as a borrowed one. As the first British poet to perform in the film, Horovitz proved a poor representative for the country's poetry and poetics.

Horovitz read his poem “For Modern Man” that evening. We should pause for a moment on the following selection, which the audience at the Albert Hall was privy to, even if these particular lines were not included in the film:

Shrieking Capital! Commune! Let OUR name reign  
Gandhi die in vain—Russell! explain  
to Socrates, Pope John  
to God—  
“Then kill, kill, kill, kill, kill!”  
“Howl, howl, howl, howl!”<sup>26</sup>

In some ways, these lines are a far too easy target for any critic looking to lampoon the British effort to mimic American Beat heroes. Making clear his antipathy toward ideology, Horovitz tars both capitalism and communism with the same broad brush. An idealized community is exaggerated with the all-cap “OUR,” only to then move rather awkwardly into the elegiac mode with an offhand reference to Gandhi and, for good measure, Bertrand Russell, former head of the CND. The poem lumbers on, quoting “kill kill kill” rather inscrutably. Then, in case anyone was missing the point, Horovitz goes on to show his readers he is hep to Allen Ginsberg—thus the word “howl” repeated four times, with an exclamation mark at the end of it for good measure.

It seems Horovitz was aiming to be Britain’s poetic voice of conscience, as he was eager to position himself as the United Kingdom’s Allen Ginsberg. Is this one of the men Ginsberg was complaining about in a letter condemning the Incarnation when he referred to “too many superficial bards who read tinkly jazzy beatnick style poems”?<sup>27</sup> After all, Horovitz, unlike the suit-wearing Ginsberg, looked like a character straight out of beatnik central casting, complete with a Beat black-and-white striped shirt and goofy spectacles. Taking on the role of counterculture spokesman, and affecting a kind of fey outrage, his poem served mostly to ensure that everyone understood Horovitz was on the right side. “Why fight!—If fight, fight for that—for you / and you and her and he / fight for all humanity,” he insisted, looking directly at the audience so they could understand that *he* was speaking about *them* and that *we* were all in this *together*. This awkwardness was extended in the next line—“Not in fascinated fear—as moths fight the light”—as Horovitz thrust his right hand forward, palm open, and then hovered it suggestively above his head in an effort to embody moths fighting the light. Similar beatnik kitsch characterized the poem’s concluding lines:

Not in fascinated fear—as moths fight the light  
as though the atom were the monster  
when it’s we who have the power  
to see—or cloud  
the universe  
a new flower

If we keep it on a human scale  
–combat the darkness loud–  
drown the doomboom flight of bombers' night  
Unmourned mortality of a mushroom shroud–

At “when it’s we who have the power,” Horovitz made sure to increase the volume on the “we” and raise both hands up to form halfhearted fists. During “to see—or cloud / the universe,” Horovitz slowed down his delivery, looked beseechingly at some invisible point above him, and then looked mournfully down at his book during the line “a new flower.” The final lines found Horovitz becoming practically stentorian. “If we keep it on a human scale” he said, looking directly at the audience, as if posing a rhetorical challenge. Horovitz concluded by alluding tamely to Gregory Corso’s poem “Bomb.” Where Corso wrote a poem shaped as a mushroom cloud that was fairly bristling with outrageous humor and hypnotic onomatopoeic effects (“O resound thy tanky knees / BOOM BOOM BOOM BOOM BOOM / BOOM ye skies and BOOM ye suns / BOOM BOOM ye moons ye stars BOOM / nights ye BOOM ye days ye BOOM / BOOM BOOM ye winds ye clouds ye rains / go BANG ye lakes ye oceans BING / Barracuda BOOM and cougar BOOM / Ubangi BOOM orangutang / BING BANG BONG BOOM bee bear baboon”),<sup>28</sup> Horovitz tamely threw out a “drown the doomboom,” ended the poem awkwardly on the final line, “Unmourned mortality of a mushroom cloud,” waited for a couple of seconds to give the audience a chance to realize he’d finished the poem, and walked off the stage as Trocchi arrived to introduce the next speaker.

Isn’t Horovitz’s performance, as Whitehead shot it, in a sense “about” the tensions between an English poetic tradition positioning itself as irrelevant in the face of the growing hegemony of American literary culture—a culture that was in large part predicated on celebrating a revised though still inherently patriotic vision of “America”? Horovitz, who attended Oxford University, did after all have the patrician accent one arrives with or cultivates in such an institution, yet his public persona agitated against association with such a privileged sphere. The old rules that granted authority to the moneyed, Oxbridge-educated classes were being challenged to some extent within the context of an avant-garde poetry happening. Given Horovitz’s attempts to wear his American Beat uniform and express, if superficially, the beatific subjects of spirit, love, community, and flowers, he appeared to be aware of the need to break with the stern, formal social text that characterized the British poetry scene after the Second World War. Horovitz’s allusion to Corso’s “Bomb” shows that he was trying to link up to and internationalize the new American poetry. However, coming after Ginsberg and Ferlinghetti, Horovitz is shown up as a diluted version of his heroes, someone who wears the uniform but will never be picked for the team.

In *Tonite Let’s All Make Love in London*, Whitehead’s retrospective, semi-fictional account of Swinging London that includes a long section on the

Incarnation, Whitehead makes the case for a reading of the American Beat poet Gregory Corso as a truly authentic writer and, correspondingly, of the Incarnation as a place fairly humming with its own contradictions. Here we have two of the main characters responding to Corso, just after he read the line “‘Last night a white apple fell from the loneliest tree in the world’”:

Marvin was fed up. “Come on let’s get outta here, we’re wasting valuable time!”  
She felt like spitting in his face. But she knew her time would come. Later.  
“I’m not wasting my time, darling, I’m listening to poetry! American poetry!”<sup>29</sup>

If it’s *American* poetry, then, the message seems to go, it should be prima facie evident that no one should leave. The real stuff, the exciting stuff, is from the United States, and shouldn’t be missed. By juxtaposing American Beat poets alongside a Beat imitation like Horovitz, the opening readings in *Wholly Communion* serve to develop a narrative around the idea of authenticity that increasingly comes to define the film. As Whitehead comments, “Well Horovitz I just shot a bit of. I didn’t think it was very good. [He was] an English parody of the Beats! I had never heard of Horovitz, I didn’t know who he was . . . I probably started thinking when Horovitz came on ‘Well, here’s the first English guy, OK, better film him.’”<sup>30</sup> Again, Englishness—specifically the white, upper-class, Oxbridge version of Englishness that cannot be disguised even with a beatnik costume—is a problem, not a virtue.

### *Gregory Corso*

Uncharacteristically subdued and dressed soberly in a professorial blazer, Corso appeared as a real counter to Horovitz’s beatnik affectation. First, the poet read from a seated position. While this may not seem so remarkable, we should consider that Corso was surely aware of the style in which the Incarnation was being publicized. The poets did after all write a collaborative poem/press release containing lines that included “World declaration hot peace shower! Earth’s grass is / free! Cosmic poetry Visitation accidentally happening / carnally! Spontaneous planet-chant Carnival!”<sup>31</sup> As such rhetoric practically demanded a lively performance style, Corso’s taking the seat can be read as threatening the predominant feeling in the air, one that fed off of easily replicated antiestablishment postures (the swear word, the beatnik striped shirt, the facile political slogan).

That Corso then went on to read “Mutation of the Spirit”—a difficult, syntactically knotty, and ruminative poem—only added to the sense of the “original” Beats as, intentionally or not, setting up a counternarrative to the celebratory ethos being staged that day inside the Albert Hall. Corso’s delivery was (if inadvertently) the polar opposite of Horovitz, given Corso’s thick working-class New York accent contrasted to Horovitz’s perfectly English enunciation. Lines from the poem including “The field is green The sun is bright / Old men with wide pants hold twisted belts / and children attend

their spirits / the vision was peace O how silly I was in that scene”<sup>32</sup> are, in the context of the Incarnation, suggestively critical of the peace-and-love vibe that was otherwise in full swing that evening. Corso’s refusal to look up from the book he was reading (apart from a couple of nervous glances at the audience) further emphasized his move from exteriority and communal celebration to interiority and subjectivity. As Whitehead has it, Corso certainly “wasn’t Horovitz, you know, it wasn’t even Ferlinghetti. It was this introverted junkie in a sense, with all the pain. And he started reading ‘Mutation of the Spirit.’ And I responded *immediately* to that poem. I think it was by far the best poem of the evening.”<sup>33</sup>

Whitehead filmed this section in a manner that contrasted radically with the straightforward recording of Horovitz’s performance. This was not by design, but by circumstance. Early into Corso’s reading, Pete Brown and John Esam sat directly in front of Whitehead, blocking Whitehead’s view of Corso. Whitehead—using his wits and making the best of a bad situation—incorporated the unanticipated two-shot into a lyric study of Corso’s poem:

Then of course as you see in the film the other two poets sat in front of my camera during Corso’s reading and blocked him out. Now, you see, the ITV or BBC camera would have immediately said “Get these people out of here!” I just thought, well, this is funny. They were actually *whispering* to each other, and then they separated again, and there Corso was again in the frame. I would have liked to have done his whole poem, though I did quite a lot of him. I thought he was a very moving image, a wonderful face, and such pain and expression as he was getting into the poetry, his appearance was onomatopoeic with the poetry, and these funny people *editing* it, the audience editing the image between me and Corso, so that was my response to Corso.<sup>34</sup>

Whitehead improvised brilliantly by composing a kind of *pas de deux*: as the men variously leaned their heads toward and parted away from each other, the camera responded to the opening and closing of the visual field by zooming gently toward and away from Corso. It is a manifestly rhythmical use of the zoom mechanism and works as an analogue to the lyric nature of Corso’s poem.

The final moment of Corso’s reading is particularly moving in terms of how *Wholly Communion* highlights the always-contingent nature of seeing. At the moment Corso read the final syllable of his final line (“Who wrings this piteous surrender of the spirit like a wet towel Don’t say”), the camera’s access to him was once and for all entirely blocked by the two men leaning in toward each other. Corso, now invisible to our eyes, could be overheard stating in an exasperated, tired voice, “That’s it.” “That’s it” indeed—we can’t see Corso, as the two men who were not really listening to him in the first place had in effect erased him from view.

It wasn’t Whitehead’s intention to allow Esam and Brown to determine our reception of Corso’s image. Accidents happen. “No, none of that was intentional, it was an instinctive thing. The guys came over, and started to

talk like that, and then separate.”<sup>35</sup> And yet, as the final cut indicates, the interruption worked as a metaphor for Corso’s performance. “The fact was that this interruption, this fact of people not even listening, people may be listening and not understanding a word, was the very predicament and pain that Corso is dealing with in his poetry. The introversion and the pain.”<sup>36</sup> Corso’s reading style—his nonperformance performance—is the closest we come in *Wholly Communion* to hearing a poem sound like something designed to be read in the privacy of one’s room. That fact alone—that “introversion”—transgressed the law privileging orality and collectivity that was at the heart of the Incarnation.

### *Harry Fainlight*

Harry Fainlight did not look comfortable as he stood in front of the seven thousand-strong crowd delivering “The Spider,” his long poem about an LSD trip gone horribly wrong. The tension showed on Fainlight’s painfully wiry body and face. At one point, he looked up at the ceiling and closed his eyes. His mouth was probably unbearably dry as he recited the following dark, funny lines:

So is my spiderhood a whole new mythology—a cavern full of wicked sisters, a whole new breed of them mutated by this new hallucinogenic vitamin which I hereby christen SPIRITLECT—The vitamin which has made the intellect get up and walk. (A couple of hefty spider sisters brush past lugging in another dead academician.)<sup>37</sup>

At the word “academician,” Whitehead edited Fainlight out of the picture temporarily, filling the screen with a still of the interior of the Royal Albert Hall, shot from the top near the roof balcony. Offscreen, the sound of someone shouting could be heard. It was the sound of a man shouting out a single word over and over again. That word was “love.”

“LOVE! LOVE! LOVE! LOVE! LOVE!” in quick succession, then, trailing off in volume and speed, “love, love.” Then, again, starting off quietly and building to a crescendo before slowing down again: “Love love LOVE LOVE! LOVE! Love. Love.” At the ninth cry of “love,” the still was replaced by scenes of the audience arranged around the central podium. The camera darted around trying to find the source of the cries. (We know what that camera feels like. We feel its lens as intimately as we remember feeling our own eyes flitting around in their sockets whenever we tried to locate a singular voice in a crowd.) After some seconds, the camera found its man. Sitting right by the stage was Simon Vinkenoog, utterly enchanted by a quantity of mescaline he had taken earlier. He drew out three more repetitions of “love” slowly, beatifically—“Love . . . love,” and then, with a final, relieved exhalation of air, “luuhhhvv.” It was not over yet, though. “COME MAN COME!” Vinkenoog yelled, and then, quickly, a final “COME!” Vinkenoog’s arms fell to his sides, his head lolled onto his chest, and the crowd went wild.

What follows is how Whitehead remembered the incident about thirty-five years later in his book *Tonite Let's All Make Love in London*. It is worth quoting extensively, particularly as Whitehead was faithful to the real-life conversations that occurred between Fainlight, Vinkenoog, Ginsberg, Trocchi, and the increasingly contemptuous audience:

Harry Fainlight, broken off in mid hexameter, was not amused. The mood he felt he was carefully orchestrating had been cruelly broken. He'd been back there in his room next to the radiator in the midst of his orgiastic confrontation with the spider (Allen?), trapped by the LSD in its excruciatingly lucid, harsh inevitability and weird holographic logic. Now he was back with a sudden jolt, face to face with 7,000 people who he felt were hostile. A huge network of faceless beings caught in a web of unseen grey corridors. Seven thousand spider faces leering in the hideous darkness. One had been bad enough. It was just like that film *Alphaville* he'd seen in Paris, visiting his poet friends in the Hotel Git le Coeur. Pity Burroughs hadn't come, after promising he would.

"Listen! LISTEN!" he shouted . . . but to no avail. The crowd were [*sic*] laughing and clapping and having a jolly good time. Vinkenoog, smashed out on mes-caline, apparently, had sunk back into the translucent emerald green grass of the Elysian field.

"Listen—you're a lovable idiot you know!" Harry cried at him, trying to be mocking, even forgiving, but mostly angry.

Trocchi stood up and waved to the audience to be quiet. Eventually there was a reluctant, ruffled silence.

"Okay Harry. You can continue. Okay? Sorry about that."

"Listen Alex, for Christ's sake—this poem has already been *FUCKED* up—what's the point?"

"Go on! Take no notice. Just continue. It didn't happen. Just read on. Read the poem. The POEM!"

"Yeah man . . . but . . . yeah. Yup! Where was I? Yup . . . yeah. Listen. This poem . . . this . . . er . . . poem is a very important poem . . . and . . . er." But he'd been thrown. Allen Ginsberg was trying to drag him one way and Alex the other.

"Harry! Read the poem! The POEM!" Allen was shouting.

But Harry *knew*. The mood had gone. Cut off in full thrust. Denied the orgasm. He was crying now with abject misery, frustration and rage. He'd lost his erection. (144–145)

Perhaps no other sequence in the film illustrates the paradox at the core of the psychedelic underground—the very drugs and communal events that were designed to bring people together were equally likely to coax out basic narcissism and self-centeredness. Vinkenoog was alone in his "Elysian field." Fainlight was alone, enraged, and embarrassed in response to what he believed was an unbearably public humiliation.

Fainlight did end up finishing the poem with a surprising degree of confidence considering what he had just gone through. In the film, his reading of the final stanza was heard offscreen: "Oh happy lightbulb, / Still so patiently

preaching your doctrines, / Indoctrinating your systems; / Lightbulbania, Lightbulbania, / Why couldn't I realise / This is where I always really lived."<sup>38</sup> Onscreen, Fainlight was replaced by some more audience shots of various figures that included a priest in clerical collar lighting up a cigarette and Trocchi smoking his pipe.

When Fainlight finally managed to finish "The Spider," Trocchi got up to the podium and tried to introduce the next speaker. Fainlight, however, insisted on reading another poem. "You're not reading any more," insisted Trocchi. "I'm reading a last poem," countered Fainlight; then, as Trocchi continued to argue, Fainlight said, "I don't care. I've got one short poem." Trocchi, ever the gentleman, announced to the assembled masses, "Ladies and gentlemen, hold on hold on hold on . . . this evening is an experiment and we're finding out just what happens when we put 5,000 people in a hole with a few poets trying to be natural. Now, hold on . . . Harry Fainlight wants to read one more poem, one very short one, and I think that he should be allowed to do so." At this point, Fainlight was pursing his lips anxiously and having an argument with Ginsberg, who was simultaneously yelling at Fainlight while pulling on Trocchi's trouser cuffs. The decision was made—Fainlight would read one more poem. Fainlight then began with "This poem is just essential to this reading, it's called 'Lark's Song,' it's about the lark." There were more shouts of "READ POEM! READ POEM!" and heckling, which Fainlight acknowledged by saying "right" self-effacingly. He then read his relatively short poem "Larksong," though he insisted on his right to say more things about it when he was done. Christopher Logue ended up onstage, saying, "You've done a great thing here, a great thing!" while bodily moving Fainlight off the stage. Even Vinkenoog appeared by Fainlight's side as if to help Logue push Fainlight off the stage. Finally, Fainlight walked off. The dénouement to this thrilling, disastrous reading was Allen Ginsberg pulling poor, wounded Fainlight onto his lap.

### ***"I've Lost My Poetry Book!"***

What followed in the film after Fainlight's reading served to highlight even further the vast chasm that separated not just the British from the American and the belated hipster affect from the real McCoy but also the contradictions that in part defined the counterculture of the 1960s.

Adrian Mitchell, following Fainlight, was perhaps the greatest hit of the evening. Mitchell read his career-making poem "To Whom It May Concern." The poem follows a distinct pattern of Mitchell's own making. The first stanza is a quatrain that starts off with a rhyming couplet ("I was run over by the truth one day / Ever since the accident I've walked this way") and ends with what we soon recognize as a refrain ("So stick my legs in plaster / Tell me lies about Vietnam"). The second stanza is a quintain featuring a new opening rhyming couplet and a new line placed above the original refrain. The third stanza is a sestet featuring a new opening rhyming couplet and a

new line placed above what is now a three-line refrain. Thus, the sixth and final stanza is composed of the following nine lines:

You put your bombers in, you put your conscience out,  
You take the human being and you twist it all about  
So scrub my skin with women  
Chain my tongue with whisky  
Stuff my nose with garlic  
Coat my eyes with butter  
Fill my ears with silver  
Stick my legs in plaster  
Tell me lies about Vietnam.<sup>39</sup>

Adrian Mitchell's studiously restrained rage, directed as it was to projecting agitprop, was effective even if the ironic contrast between the form the poem took and its gruesome content was clumsy and obvious.

Mitchell received thunderous applause from the audience, and this did not sit well with Ginsberg. Just after the rapturous response to Mitchell, Whitehead included a shot of Ginsberg and filmmaker Barbara Rubin (at the time, Ginsberg's girlfriend) looking singularly unimpressed. They refused to get up, even as all the people around them were delivering a standing ovation. When Mitchell ended his reading with a throwaway poem called "Stunted Sonnet" ("Love is like a cigarette / the bigger the drag, the more you get"),<sup>40</sup> Whitehead featured a shot of a disgusted-looking Ginsberg lying down with his head on Rubin's lap. In his diary at the time, Alexis Lykiard wrote bitterly, "Typical of this dismal country that cheap propaganda poems on Vietnam got biggest applause while Ginsberg, a true visionary, got howled at." The English just didn't get it.<sup>41</sup>

Following Mitchell was Christopher Logue, who provided a similar if less rousing performance. His poem "Chorus (after Sophocles)" was dedicated to making a series of trite points about how "man," despite being capable of doing good, instead does lots of bad things like building walls between people, trapping animals, polluting the land, and so forth. In the final stanza, for example, we are taught that "man,"

even as he makes, whatever he makes,  
And no matter how much he makes,  
Man longs to destroy the thing he has made.  
Finding no enemy, he becomes his own enemy;  
As he traps the horse, so he traps other men;  
And the others strike back, trap closing on trap.<sup>42</sup>

Following on Logue's heels was an all-too-brief scene featuring Alexander Trocchi reading a very short excerpt from his novel *Cain's Book*. The hilarious Austrian sound poet Ernst Jandl came after Trocchi, and provided one of the most interesting performances featured in the film, particularly in terms

of the crowd's reaction and Whitehead's madly swinging camera work and judicious use of freeze-frame. *Wholly Communion* included Jandl's performance of his "Ode auf N" ("Ode to N") and "Shützengraben" ("The Trenches") and a collaborative performance (with Michael Horovitz and Pete Brown) of Kurt Schwitter's "Fury of Sneezing." Jandl's solo pieces delighted the audience. It is not hard to see why, as Jandl was clearly having a ball and his utterances, divorced as they were from standard reference, apparently needed no translation. Below is a transcript of a section of "Ode auf N," though text alone cannot do justice to Jandl's brilliant performance:

nonoo	
nononoo	
nonononooo	pooleon
paa	pooleon
pl	poleeeon
paa	pooleon
pl	poleeeon
pl pl	naaaaaaaaaaaa
ononn	pooleon <sup>43</sup>

What many in the audience did not necessarily "get," however, was that this poem was based around the letters and improvisations off of letters mined from the name "Napoleon." Similarly, "Shützengraben," which in the film built into a crescendo impelled in part by the increasingly rhapsodic audience's rhythmic clapping, was composed using explosive and militaristic sounds Jandl pulled from the word *shützengraben*. Strange, isn't it, that Jandl would choose to read poems inspired by despots and trench warfare at the International Poetry Incarnation? Lykiard invoked the bitter irony of the occasion succinctly:

As his sound-poems rose to a crescendo, a rhythmic furore aided and abetted by the claps and cries of the crowd, so, suddenly, the destruction of words and their conversion to a shouted, half-hysterical series of sounds, seemed sinister—took on a Hitlerian aspect: the Hall became almost a Babel. It was perhaps the most extraordinary event of the evening: parody and warning, cacophony with its own logic, rational collapse of reason, and despair of communication communicating itself.<sup>44</sup>

Following Jandl, and concluding the film as a whole, was the purported star of the evening, Allen Ginsberg, who went on to read Andrei Voznesensky's "The Three Cornered Pear / America" and his own long poem "The Change." However, things got off to a shaky start and stayed there. Whitehead explains, "Well, Ginsberg was bored! He hated the whole thing! He got so drunk . . . he said he drank and drank and drank because of all that awful poetry! Well, I quote him . . . 'I've got to circumnavigate all that awful poetry!'"<sup>45</sup> Ginsberg's reading did not fail to impress, despite his inebriated condition. Fortuitously, radical psychiatrist R. D. Laing had brought several of his

patients with him to the event, and one of them—a particularly attractive, long-limbed young woman in a flower-print dress—began dancing to the rhythms of Ginsberg’s incantations. What resulted was some truly astonishing footage of the dancing woman (her style anticipating the sinuous, twirling, serpentine dances that would soon come to characterize audience members’ moves at a Grateful Dead concert):

I see this girl, I turn around and I see her and . . . she’s starting to move. And I went quietly around and I managed just to get into the right position, and then of course we had . . . music. What successful poetry is there that doesn’t have music? It is about music . . . She revealed the music of Ginsberg’s poetry. She revealed that his poetry and the way that he delivered it, his love of his own voice, of performing, of having an audience, she, suddenly, bored to tears down here, suddenly hears a sound, a voice, the archangel Gabriel, so she comes over and looks and *sees* it, starts to move her body, dance, oblivious to the 7,000 people, and there’s that extraordinary bit where suddenly she goes like that [Whitehead thrusts his hands up in the air] and *he* goes like that, in exactly the same way! I knew then that I had a film. It revealed the sensuality, the *eroticism* of the camera. Its penetration. [The camera is] caressing her.<sup>46</sup>

As the dance continued, Ginsberg seemed to settle down a bit to deliver a fairly effective performance. At this stage, Whitehead appeared to make a couple of editing decisions that were in direct response to the content of the poem. The first was the one and only instance in *Wholly Communion* when Whitehead cut to negative, which occurred when Ginsberg enunciated sweetly, “Kabir says this,” just as the dancing woman swooped up from her seated position and blocked the camera’s view of Ginsberg. This moment can be read as a practically symbolic attempt to visually enact the synthesis of opposites—male and female, positive and negative—that was the thematic core of Ginsberg’s poem and which, more broadly, spoke to the efforts of the Incarnation organizers to point to a state of transcendent bliss impelled in part by pot, poetry, and communion.

Indeed, the cut to negative as it worked in tandem with Ginsberg’s recitation of “The Change” can be discussed in relation to Ginsberg’s Blakean mysticism<sup>47</sup> and his recent experiences in India. As Ginsberg recalled regarding the events that fed into his composition of “The Change”: “The greatness of India I saw was the absorption into Hinduism of all the gods—the Western ones and the Buddhist ones—and the open space, the accommodation to all varieties of human nature.”<sup>48</sup> All is ideally equal here on Ginsberg’s playing field, a point that Whitehead highlighted by effectively allowing the dancing woman to visually absorb Ginsberg. Albeit temporarily, the masculine was integrated with the feminine, the “star” with the audience, as the effect of a “real time” event was shown to be an illusion, a film. The documentary moment here became a dream moment.

Similarly, and perhaps even more touchingly, soon after the negative cut—at the point when Ginsberg intoned the lines “Come, sweet lonely Spirit,

back/ to your bodies, come great God/ back to your only image”—Whitehead faded entirely to black. While one might think that coming back to one’s body is to be rematerialized, Whitehead here interrogated such a reading by insisting that the *void* is, ultimately, our “only image.” The great celebration of life anticipated by the organizers of the Incarnation, where attendees were promised a “Cosmic poetry Visitation accidentally happening / carnally!” is quietly if dramatically refuted via Ginsberg’s lines and Whitehead’s fade. No matter how cosmic or carnal we might feel, the poet and filmmaker remind us, what awaits us all is the blackness of no being.

Following these dramatic edits, Whitehead returned the viewer to Ginsberg’s reading and filmed as much as he could of what was left of the performance. But then there wasn’t enough film to get it all. Beginning as it did with images of the sun, *Wholly Communion* ended by fading to black for the second and final time. Whitehead explains:

You notice I start with the light and end with the darkness? It starts with the sun—and the sun and the sun and the sun . . . the sun . . . the sun . . . and we end in darkness BUT with Ginsberg’s lines over it: “Where is my poetry book? I’ve lost my poetry book.” That’s the ultimate melancholic, despairing . . . he’s given himself, he’s lost himself, the words have gone out, into space, forever, they’re on their way to Sirius, and suddenly he’s scared, he’s lonely, he’s afraid somebody’s stolen his book, what he wants most of all is to get a hold of his poetry book . . . it was his totem. It was his magic staff. He was the shaman, and he had lost his magic.

As the credits rolled, Ginsberg’s voice offscreen was heard sounding plaintive, almost pathetic: “Alex, Alex gave me a limit . . . Alex? Trocchi? Anybody have the time? It’s a quarter past eleven?” Someone shouted “a quarter to!” and then Ginsberg, taking the opportunity to read some more despite being the last reader standing at the end of a poetry marathon, insisted, “Oh, oh, then I’ll read one poem. If I can find my book, I have a big long . . . may I have my book? I’ve lost my poetry book!” At this point, the credits ran their course and *Wholly Communion* came to a close.

### ***Postscript***

The *English Intelligencer*, a small-circulation mimeographed magazine edited by Peter Riley and Andrew Crozier from 1966 to 1968, was one of the more unique UK-based poetry journals of the later 1960s. The editors published poetry as well as correspondence between writers—Prynne, Raworth, Crozier, Turnbull, Elaine Feinstein, John James, and others—that focused mainly on criticism and articulating a developing avant-garde poetics. Prynne, despite having introduced work by a number of writers like Charles Olson and Ed Dorn to his fellow Englishmen in the early to mid-1960s, got to the point where he decided such influences were potentially detrimental. In a letter from Prynne to Riley, for example, Prynne complained, “I’ve just seen some

new poems by Tom Raworth, including one called 'History.' I liked this & I suggest you write to him asking for it. Much of the rest is a completely wilful assemblage of nervous 'images,' surreal/mechanic often enough in the worst NY manner."<sup>49</sup> Poetry knows borders, Prynne implies, and for British poets to display the American influence unduly was an affront—not just of taste, but of identity.

Indeed, the *Intelligencer* ceased publication in large part because some of its regular participants felt that the American style had soiled the English project. Peter Riley, for one, resisted this tendency toward nationalizing aesthetics and complained to Crozier that, although the magazine continued to be published, Prynne's shift against the American influence was beginning to annoy him: "Meanwhile it *does* continue: Jeremy has done a review of Dowden for me (which wasn't so much keeping up w/ the scene as that the terms of that particular book seemed to demand some kind of note: Albion arise and all that shit)."<sup>50</sup> Prynne, however, had company—in the third issue, Gael Turnbull critiqued the prevalence of an American style in the poetry published in the *Intelligencer*. Complaining about a poem by John Temple published in the first issue, Turnbull declared:

I just don't see the point in such near parody's [*sic*] of Olson as, for example, that first poem—I mean, I'm interested to see what Temple can do with his "roots" etc.—but must he swipe the means *so* obviously from Olson? . . . I know, it's easy to carp, and easy to be negative etc., but the whole thing seems to me to be an easy transcript into what is the currently fashionable American poetic idiom . . . at least it should be possible to avoid the more obvious sort of "I, minimus, of West Hartlepool etc."—or the nervous jerks of Creeleyesque.<sup>51</sup>

By the time the *Intelligencer* ground to a halt, Peter Riley lamented in another letter to Crozier, "There hardly seems to be much force holding people together any more. Jeremy wrote (weeks ago) that he's *completely* disillusioned & lost interest in the whole American Olson/Ginsberg/Creeley thing."<sup>52</sup>

The new American poetry of the late 1950s and 1960s was both a blessing and a curse for writers in the United Kingdom. A study of *Wholly Communion* and related poetry scenes in the United Kingdom reveals that British poetry in the 1960s was understood to be overly dependent on social and literary models developed in (and, through implication, organically connected to) America. We can return, then, to Raworth's question posed at the beginning of this essay: What have the British ever given back to their American cousins? Well, "not much," at least when that question is posed strictly in the context of British influence on American poetry during the period around the Incarnation. And it was not just a hierarchy-free, internationalist poetry scene that failed to materialize out of this hopeful era. There was to be no lasting demotic, poetry-propelled international counterculture, despite the poets' dream of "Global synthesis habitual for this / Eternity!"<sup>53</sup>

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## Notes

- My thanks to Thomas Evans and Keston Sutherland, whose conversations with me about English poetry of the 1960s helped me see *Wholly Communion* in a whole new light.
1. Tom Raworth, “I Mean,” in *Collected Poems* (Manchester: Carcanet, 2003), 14.
  2. The “Movement” poets were anthologized in the relatively popular 1955 anthology *New Lines*. Work by writers including Philip Larkin, Elizabeth Jennings, Kingsley Amis, and Donald Davie was, at the time, characterized by straightforward, vernacular speech and themes incorporated into otherwise formalist verse.
  3. Even the English drape suit might be read as American, given that it was adapted and retailored in the late 1930s and 1940s into the American zoot suit and reclaimed in the 1950s in England by the American pop culture-obsessed Teddy boys.
  4. Allen Ginsberg, “A Supermarket in California,” in *Howl and Other Poems* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1956), 29.
  5. Jack Kerouac, *On the Road* (New York: Penguin Classics, 2002), 55.
  6. Manuel Louis Martinez, *Countering the Counterculture: Rereading American Dis-sent from Jack Kerouac to Tomás Rivera* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2003), 117.
  7. Brown did make an appearance in the film reading alongside Ernst Jandl and Michael Horovitz, but was not featured as a reader in his own right.
  8. Robert Hewison, *Too Much: Art and Society in the Sixties, 1960–1975* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 95–96.
  9. New Directions Press introduced the American avant-garde—from Sherwood Anderson to Gregory Corso to Ezra Pound to William Carlos Williams—to a wide reading public beyond the small magazines in which most of these authors were first published.
  10. Jack Kerouac, “211th Chorus,” in *Mexico City Blues* (New York: Grove Press, 1959), 211.
  11. For an excellent history of Trigram, see Kyle Schlesinger, “No One ‘Understands’ Language: Asa Benveniste and Trigram Press,” in *Hidden Agendas: Unreported Poetics*, ed. Louis Armand (Prague: Litteraria Pragensia Books, 2010), 6–28.
  12. Raworth was published in a number of U.S.-based small magazines, as were some other British poets. For example, Lewis Warsh and Anne Waldman, based in New York City, published British poet Lee Harwood’s debut book, *The Man with the Blue Eyes*, through their Angel Hair Press, and Ed Sanders published British poet and Ginsberg love interest Harry Fainlight in his mimeographed

magazine *Fuck You/a magazine of the arts*. That said, instances like these were relatively rare in comparison to the preponderance of American poets showing up in British publications.

13. Hewison, *Too Much*, 98.
14. Alexis Lykiard, "Catching the Spirit: Low Angles and High Seriousness," [www.alexislykiard.com/Poetry/wholly.htm](http://www.alexislykiard.com/Poetry/wholly.htm) (accessed September 20, 2010).
15. Interview with Peter Whitehead, June 29, 2010.
16. Barry Miles, *In the Sixties* (New York: Random House, 2003), 52.
17. *Ibid.*, 51.
18. Jonathan Green, *All Dressed Up: The Sixties and the Counterculture* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1998), 137.
19. For extended analyses of how the CND was tied to the nascent British counterculture, see Mark Donnelly, *Sixties Britain: Culture, Society and Politics* (Harlow, UK: Pearson Education, 2005); Green, *All Dressed Up*; Miles, *In the Sixties*; Jeff Nuttall, *Bomb Culture* (New York: Delacorte Press, 1969); and Andrew Wilson, "Spontaneous Underground: An Introduction to London Psychedelic Scenes, 1965–1968," in *Summer of Love: Psychedelic Art, Social Crisis and Counterculture in the 1960s*, ed. C. Grunenberg and J. Harris (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2005), 63–98.
20. Whitehead interview, June 29, 2010.
21. All that said, I want to add that Whitehead finished this particular sentence in reference to the "English bunch of guys" with the phrase, "none of whom gained the stature of the Americans" (Whitehead interview, June 29, 2010).
22. Quoted in Green, *All Dressed Up*, 143.
23. Whitehead interview, June 29, 2010.
24. Lawrence Ferlinghetti, "To Fuck Is to Love Again," in *Wholly Communion*, ed. Peter Whitehead (New York: Grove Press, 1965), 28.
25. Allen Ginsberg, "The Change," in *Wholly Communion*, 23.
26. Michael Horovitz, "For Modern Man," in *Wholly Communion*, 58.
27. Quoted in Miles, *In the Sixties*, 61.
28. Gregory Corso, "Bomb," in *Happy Birthday of Death* (New York: New Directions, 1960), 32.
29. Peter Whitehead, *Tonite Let's All Make Love in London* (Northants, UK: Hather, 1999), 124.
30. Whitehead interview, June 29, 2010.
31. "International Poetry Incarnation," in *Wholly Communion*, n.p.
32. Gregory Corso, "Mutation of the Spirit," in *Wholly Communion*, 32.
33. Whitehead interview, June 29, 2010.
34. *Ibid.*
35. *Ibid.*
36. *Ibid.*
37. Harry Fainlight, "The Spider," in *Wholly Communion*, 49.
38. *Ibid.*, 50.
39. Adrian Mitchell, "To Whom It May Concern," in *Wholly Communion*, 54–55.
40. Mitchell, "Stunted Sonnet," in *Wholly Communion*, 55.
41. Lykiard, "Catching the Spirit."
42. Christopher Logue, "Chorus (after Sophocles)," in *Wholly Communion*, 44.
43. Ernst Jandl, "Ode auf N," in *Wholly Communion*, 63.
44. Alexis Lykiard, "Introduction," in *Wholly Communion*, n.p.
45. Whitehead interview, June 29, 2010.

46. Ibid.
47. Describing the aftereffects of his famous “Blake vision” to the poet and editor Thomas Clark, Ginsberg detailed his experience in a bookstore in which he realized the customers “all had the consciousness, it was like a great unconscious that was running between all of us that everybody was completely conscious, but that the fixed expressions that people have, the habitual expressions, the manners, the mode of talk, are all masks hiding this consciousness.” “The Art of Poetry: Allen Ginsberg,” in Thomas Clark, *Paris Review* 8 (1966), [www.theparisreview.org/interviews/4389/the-art-of-poetry-no-8-allen-ginsberg](http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/4389/the-art-of-poetry-no-8-allen-ginsberg) (accessed October 29, 2010).
48. Suranjan Ganguly, “Allen Ginsberg in India: An Interview,” in *ARIEL: A Review of International English Literature* 24, no. 4 (1993), 31–32.
49. J. H. Prynne to Peter Riley, April 8, 1967. Series A, *English Intelligencer* Archive, Fales Library and Special Collections, New York University.
50. Peter Riley to Andrew Crozier, December 3, 1967. Series A, *English Intelligencer* Archive.
51. Gael Turnbull Letter, *English Intelligencer* 3, October 1967. Series A, *English Intelligencer* Archive.
52. Peter Riley to Andrew Crozier, n.d. Series A, *English Intelligencer* Archive.
53. “International Poetry Incarnation.”