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# On Elise Cowen (1933-1962): Poetry on the Margins

"In the 1950's if you were male you could be a rebel, but if you were female your family had you locked-up. There were women, I knew them, their families put them in institutions, they were given electric shocks treatments".

- Scobie (1994).

During the 1950's in America a literary bohemianism developed which was similar to the decadence of late 19th century Paris, indeed the poetry of Charles Baudelaire and his essays on hashish helped form the psyche of the sub-culture which became known as 'Beat'.

'Hashish, like all other solitary delights, makes the individual useless to society, and also makes society unnecessary to the individual.'

- Baudelaire (1966) p39.

These writers and dreamers, rejected the mass consumerism of post war American society which was itself fuelled by arms spending (see Kidron (1968) for a Marxist analysis of how capitalism is temporarily stabilized, economically, by arms spending) and embraced the 'new' in both art and life-style. They separated themselves from mainstream or "straight" culture which they saw as bourgeois and corrupt with its "nice" families and "nice" people who were simply ideological replicas of the ruling class and its shallow culture. Indeed these "nice" people had brought the world to the brink of nuclear annihilation with a combination of U.S. imperialism and the consequences of the "degeneration" of the revolution in the Soviet Union.

The 'Beats' also rebelled against the stagnant literary forms and themes which had ossified western culture in the post-war period. William Burroughs used "cut-up technique" to create a surreal world in his novels e.g. 'Naked Lunch' and Allen Ginsberg transformed the world of poetry with his poem 'Howl' in 1956. They wrote about people who live on the existential edge, those who Jean-Paul Sartre said lived "authentically". Indeed Ginsberg's 'Howl' was inspired by Carl Solomon whom he had met in Bellevue mental hospital.

In the spring of 1953 Ginsberg and a young woman named Elise Cowen went out together on a "date". Elise had been born into a wealthy but unstable family:

'Mr Cowen was given to threats and rages;

Mrs Cowen to recriminations and tears'.

-- Johnson (1993) p (?).

As Elise had grown up she'd developed an aversion to "straight" society, locking herself in her room and reading Ezra Pound and Dylan Thomas. She began to neglect her appearance, but still went to university. Elise didn't succeed academically at college; but this was because she had an independent mind and spirit which wasn't subordinated to the dictates of her professors. Her state of mind began to deteriorate further at this time as she began to regularly use mind altering drugs, her poetry brilliantly sketches the demise into depression and later into psychosis:

## **Death ...**

'Death I'm coming

Wait for me

I know you're be

at the subway station'

Here it is possible to be aware of Elise's knowledge of one of her favourite poets, Ezra Pound:

## **In a station at the Metro**

'The apparition of these faces in a crowd;

Petals on a wet, black bough'.

- Pound (1975 p53).

Here both Pound and Cowen convey a sense of isolation and alienation from mass society.

...

Next Elise makes an (at the time) revolutionary comment on marriage:

Or wait till rot down

with the

majestic orange

she stuck on

her finger

- Cowen (1996) p162.

Elise has expressed the absurdity of the 1950's American culture with a beautiful eloquence which is gained from having experienced the depths of depression and the 'highs' of amphetamine abuse. Her poetic technique breaks down the traditional form of earlier writers and the fragmentation of lines is suggestive of both a literary experimentation and a dislocated awareness, but most importantly it is an authentic consciousness in the face of death, which with the possibility of a nuclear war, the shadow which hung over the 'Beat' writers. Elise fell in love with Allen Ginsberg and thought they were "twin souls". In the same way as many people with mental illness do she perceived connections and associations which most people would not. Elise believed that because she and Ginsberg had both been patients, at different times, in Bellevue psychiatric hospital this was a 'sign' they should become lovers.



Allen Ginsberg and Elise Cowen.

They and their friends were mostly poets centred round Columbia University, but they overlapped with some older writers, such as William Burroughs, with whom they would form the core of the Beat movement. They had a relationship, but Allen Ginsberg "came out" as being gay and moved in with Peter Orlovsky. He would always refer to Elise as "the intellectual madwoman". Her friend commented:

'Elise was a moment in Allen's life. In

Elise's life Allen was an eternity'.

- Joyce Johnson (1983) p (?).

She began a love affair with a woman called Shelia, but this was a failure and other attempts to find the love she hadn't found in her family also proved to be fruitless. Elise was sometimes hospitalized, but she would seem more dispirited as a result. Her drug use increased at this time with the stimulants being used in conjunction with hallucinogenic drugs. The, almost, obsession of the 'Beat' poets with drugs and death can also be located in other revolutionary literary movements. An example of this is Romanticism [see Hayter (1968)]. Samuel Taylor Coleridge was a leading member of this movement, who wrote one of his most significant poems, 'Kubla Khan', under the influence of opium:

'In Xanadu did Kubla Khan'

A stately pleasure dome decree:

Where Alpha, the sacred river, ran

Through caverns measureless to man

Down to a sunless sea'.

- Coleridge (1996) p 229.

Coleridge's companion Thomas De Quincey claimed opium allowed him to:

'By signs in heaven-by changes on earth-by

pulses in secret rivers...and hieroglyphs

written on the tablet of the brain...to gain

the words'.

- De Quincey (1999) p 17.

This next poem gives us insight in Elise's state of mind as she declined into psychosis:

Did I go mad...

'Did I go mad in my mother's womb

Waiting

to get out

...

On my brain are welts from

the moving that never moves

On my brain are the welts

from the endless stillness'

Here Elise describes the sometimes almost physical experience of mental illness, but also a sense of the descant into eternal void. Some within the 'Beat' movement were interested in a form of 'hip' Buddhism with the mystical states of nothingness being augmented by peyote.

'I don't want to intone

"See how she suffers"

"See how she suffers"

(The sting of eyes reminds)

That not really, or only what

Elise is questioning the conventional domestic roles of women:

I mean-among other things I am not

permitted to feel that much

tick tock'

'But that the truth I guess of

(Even were I to KNOW it)

Is EVERYONE'S

And what is not this, is a

rag flapping

sometimes on the window in the wall

across the shaft

Just more waiting, with bells on,

And the Truth, is it only the FACT

of WAITING, the flash at the end

of cosmic striptease?

I wants a little something for itself

Unique, a single word

treasure

act

perfection

If only to give away

Only to "He scatters

his blood on the street."

Cowen now questions the purpose for her continuing existence:

'Love? Is this where, what, why

Love, loving-all this time?'

- Cowen (1996) p 163.

By 1962 Elise had become very ill with hepatitis and psychosis and was admitted into Bellevue Hospital, she was discharged against doctor's advice into a private hospital. Whilst a patient there Elise's friend Leo Skir visited and later published parts of the conversation:

'She looked fine, better than I'd ever seen her, neat, clean.

But she was mad, quite mad. She felt the City (New York City)

had machines trained on all her thoughts and also that she could

here them, the New York City workers, foolish, bored, boring,

mean-souled people. She described to me in detail

the four people, two men, two women assigned to her.

'Elise, I said, 'you're paranoid.'

'No,' she said, 'I'm not'.

- Skir (1970).

She was discharged into the 'care' of her parents, they confined her and Elise jumped through a closed window to her death. Cruelly her parents destroyed Elise's poetry after her death; but

fortunately her friends had kept some copies. In the study 'Minor Characters' Joyce Johnston makes an incisive comment on Elise's life:

'She (Elise) could never put on a mask.'

- Johnson (1983) p (?).

Elise was never published in her life-time, but is now regarded as an important Beat poet. Perhaps William Burroughs encapsulates well the essence of the 'Beat' writer:

'I'm a martyr to this fucking  
typewriter...but before I'll ask  
help from the Commander I'll  
write with blood and a hypodermic  
needle.'

- Burroughs (1999).p 153.

Like Icarus Elise and many others who have tried to solve their inner riddles flew close to the sun, the Truth, but it consumed them.

By N.S.Pearce.

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