

Beats on the Table: Beat Writing in the Chicago Review and Big Table

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ABSTRACT

Kleine literaire tijdschriften, zogenaamde *little magazines*, hebben een belangrijke rol gespeeld bij de doorbraak, in de loop van de jaren vijftig, van de Amerikaanse Beat Generation. Aangezien grotere uitgeverijen en de gevestigde tijdschriften lange tijd terugschrokken voor de zowel inhoudelijk als formeel van de norm afwijkende uitingen van de Beats, verscheen hun werk aanvankelijk vooral in kleinere tijdschriften als de twee waaraan in dit artikel aandacht wordt besteed: de *Chicago Review* en *Big Table*.

Aan de hand van een beschrijving van de inhoud van deze twee tijdschriften wordt geprobeerd duidelijk te maken hoe het werk van de Beat Generation zich in deze tijdschriften gaandeweg een eigen plaats verwierf. Speciale aandacht wordt besteed aan de rol van de redacteurs Irving Rosenthal en Paul Carroll; door zijn uitgekende strategie om voor het omstreden werk van Beat-auteur William S. Burroughs geleidelijk een steeds grotere plaats in te ruimen, bepaalde vooral Rosenthal het veranderende karakter van de *Chicago Review*. De veranderingen bij dat tijdschrift verliepen niet zonder slag of stoot en waren voor de eigenaar ervan, de University of Chicago, op een gegeven moment aanleiding om de *Chicago Review* aan censuur te onderwerpen. Ook deze censuur en de reactie erop, de oprichting van *Big Table*, worden in het artikel belicht.

KEYWORDS

Little magazines, Beat Generation, editing, censorship, fifties

By the mid-1950s the American writer William Burroughs was hard at work on a novel that would eventually appear under the title *Naked Lunch*.¹ Having accidentally shot his wife in Mexico in 1951, Burroughs had fled to Tangier where, ensconced in a cheap hotel room, he was filling page after page with prose that, according to his friend Allen

¹ The title of the original edition of the book was *The Naked Lunch* (Paris: Olympia Press 1959). The book is now generally known under the title of the first American edition: *Naked Lunch*. New York: Grove Press 1962.

Ginsberg, would ‘drive everybody mad’ – if it ever found a publisher.² In retrospect Ginsberg overstated his case, but it cannot be denied that *Naked Lunch* is one of the most outrageous books ever written. Using his own addiction to drugs as his main source of inspiration, in graphic vignettes he himself referred to as ‘routines’, Burroughs paints a horrifying picture of human life in which everybody is addicted in one way or another – if not to drugs then to control, power or sex. Ginsberg’s expectation that *Naked Lunch* would have trouble finding its way into print was justified when, towards the end of the 1950s, several publishers both in America and Europe refused to publish the book. That it ultimately found its readership is to a large extent due to the efforts of two editors, Irving Rosenthal and Paul Carroll, who introduced the book to the readers of the two magazines they edited between 1957 and 1960: the *Chicago Review* and *Big Table*. Thus paving the way for Burroughs, Rosenthal and Carroll are also largely responsible for *Naked Lunch* finding a publisher; the book was published in Paris in 1959 and in New York in 1962. Moreover, they helped familiarize American readers with the group of writers to which both Burroughs and Ginsberg belonged: the Beat Generation, which in the 1950s rebelled against the conformity of American life and literature. Realizing that many American readers, including those of the *Chicago Review*, might not be ready for the rebellious quality of Burroughs’ writing and that of the Beats in general, they looked for a strategy that would gradually introduce the work of Burroughs and his Beat companions. This essay focuses on that strategy, which was first employed in the *Chicago Review* and to a certain extent continued in *Big Table*, when the publishers of the *Chicago Review* had forced Rosenthal and Carroll to resign.

When Rosenthal and Carroll met at the offices of the *Chicago Review* in 1956, the magazine had been running for ten years, edited by graduate students of the University of Chicago. Having begun as ‘a small, indifferently produced paper, containing student work buttressed by an occasional professional piece by a Chicago writer such as James T. Farrell or by University of Chicago faculty members’, it had gradually developed into ‘a genuine literary and cultural magazine of national scope.’³ Publishing poetry, fiction and book reviews, during the 1950s it also became ‘a forum for cultural criticism, with commentators like Bruno Bettelheim, Hannah Arendt, Kenneth Burke, Erik and Kai Erikson, Leslie Fiedler, Geoffrey Hartmann and Leon Edel filling its pages.’⁴ In spite (or because) of these big names, there was a staid quality to the review, and only occasionally it printed a poem or a piece of prose that really surprised. One text which made readers sit up and pay attention, was a story which Rosenthal contributed to the Spring 1957 issue, ‘An Invitation to Sleep.’ After addressing Hypnos and admitting his recent inability to fall asleep, the narrator begins the story of his life by saying: ‘I’m no ordinary type, you can bet on that.’⁵ The same thing can be said about the story as a whole which,

² Allen Ginsberg, *Howl and Other Poems*. San Francisco: City Lights Books 1956 (3).

³ Elliott Anderson and Mary Kinzie (eds.), *The Little Magazine in America: A Modern Documentary History*. Yonkers: The Pushcart Book Press 1978 (691).

⁴ <http://humanities.uchicago.edu/orgs/review/60th/08carrollindex.shtml>.

⁵ Irving Rosenthal, ‘An Invitation to Sleep.’ *Chicago Review* 11.1, 1957, 75-99 (75).

although stylistically conventional, is full of strange characters and developments. There is, for instance, a ‘huge grandmother cockroach [...] playing the bass fiddle’⁶ who turns into ‘a woman of striking beauty’,⁷ while the narrator himself confesses to his obsession with touch: ‘My love and hate burned whomever I touched, and to touch everybody was my desire.’⁸ Details like these are clearly reminiscent of *Naked Lunch*, which Rosenthal had yet to discover, and almost seem to predict his eventually falling under William Burroughs’ spell.

Partly because of this story, but also because he had already proven to be an excellent copy editor, David Ray – editor-in-chief of the *Chicago Review* in 1956-1957 – pushed Rosenthal forward as his successor when he resigned. Because the rest of the staff stayed on, Rosenthal could now cooperate with the magazine’s poetry editor, Paul Carroll, on a regular basis. As has been pointed out elsewhere too, at first sight no two men were less alike. Carroll was somewhat of a dandy; although his family had seen better days, he had no trouble moving in Chicago’s higher circles. Rosenthal was everything Carroll was not: he was gay, a bohemian and initially rather shy and withdrawn, although that changed surprisingly fast when he became editor.⁹ What brought the two together was their love of literature and their desire to breathe new life into the review. A first sign of that desire is already found in a short essay which Carroll contributed to the Autumn 1957 issue, ‘Notes on Some Young Poets.’ The essay is a lively written expression of Carroll’s feeling that American poetry, including the kind of poetry published by the *Chicago Review*, is in need of rejuvenation. According to Carroll, ‘[s]o much recent American verse [...] seems soporific and enervated.’¹⁰ Proposing a peer to the 1950s conformist ‘man in the gray flannel suit’, Carroll introduces the notion of the ‘young gray-flannel poet’, ‘prematurely corseted with alderman, thinning hair, tenure, and routine no-nonsense sex life.’¹¹ This poet produces ‘[c]ozy middle aged verse’: ‘Absent are most of the expected vices and virtues of the young poet: no technical howlers; no tears for a lost garden of earthly delights; no ranting and raving against the established society; no bumptiously imperative subjective moods.’¹² It is true that Carroll sees some positive development in a poet like John Ashbery, but on the whole he feels that ‘more adventure, guts, even gaudiness’ should ‘accompany our young poets’ commendable respect for technique.’¹³

It is striking how Carroll here expresses the need for a kind of poetry that was already being written – and had been for some time – in various locations elsewhere in the United States: in San Francisco, where the meeting of Beat and San Francisco poets

⁶ *Ibid.* (96).

⁷ *Ibid.* (97).

⁸ *Ibid.* (96).

⁹ Cf. Gerald E. Brennan, ‘[Naked Censorship, Part I: The University Goes Ballistic.](#)’ *Chicago Reader* October 5, 1995.

¹⁰ Paul Carroll, ‘Notes on Some Young Poets.’ *Chicago Review* 11.3, 1957, 76-78 (78).

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.* (78).

had led to the San Francisco Poetry Renaissance; at the alternative arts school Black Mountain College in North Carolina (although that had recently closed down); and in New York not only by John Ashbery, but perhaps even more so by Ashbery's friends Frank O'Hara and Kenneth Koch. In fact, Koch's 1955 poem 'Fresh Air' expresses the same desire for something new which is found in Carroll's essay. However, still in 1957 Rosenthal and Carroll seem blissfully unaware of what writers in some of America's other major cities were up to. In this respect they resembled most other Chicagoans who until recently had been associated with the review. One of those was the essayist and novelist Isaac Rosenfeld (1918-1956), whose talk to the staff of the *Chicago Review*, 'On the Role of the Writer and the Little Magazine', was printed posthumously in the Summer 1957 issue. In the talk he expressed his regret that, under the influence of an increasingly commercial culture and society, both the artistic bohemia and the cultural avant-garde, together with their little magazines, have all but disappeared. He associates the avant-garde and bohemia especially with the Twenties and Thirties, when writers rebelled 'against everything that had been offered to youth as true, standard and good up and to and through the World War - [...] against the old Victorian values, against the accepted morality, against the standards of life of the great vast hinterland of mid-America.'¹⁴ Like Rosenthal and Carroll, Rosenfeld at the time of his death apparently had not yet heard of the Beat rebellion and its social criticism that had emerged from post-World War Two bohemian communities and was fast finding expression in dozens of new little magazines.

Fortunately, Carroll knew of San Francisco poet Robert Duncan, and rumors had reached him of some of the developments that had taken place in San Francisco. While he had not yet read 'Howl', he was aware that the publication of *Howl and Other Poems* in 1956 had led to a ban on the book and to a court trial. He also knew that *Howl* had been published by a man called Lawrence Ferlinghetti, a San Francisco poet and also the owner of a bookstore and a small publishing house, both named after Charles Chaplin's film *City Lights*. When towards the end of 1957 Rosenthal and Carroll had trouble finding material that would meet their demands for something fresh and daring, Carroll ended up writing to Ferlinghetti, suggesting that the *Chicago Review* might be interested in devoting an issue to the poets of San Francisco. Ferlinghetti then provided Carroll with a list of names and addresses, which included that of Ginsberg, who in 1955 had helped to kick off the San Francisco Poetry Renaissance. According to Carroll, Ginsberg responded to Carroll's request for information, 'like a mad bibliographic scholar': 'He sent typewritten letters, single-spaced, six pages, seven pages, or more, full of names, work, criticism, philosophy.'¹⁵

Rosenthal and Carroll were immediately convinced of the richness and the freshness of the kind of writing that was being done in San Francisco, and they quickly decided to open the pages of the *Chicago Review* to the new poets, most of them still unknown. At the

¹⁴ Isaac Rosenfeld, 'On the Role of the Writer and the Little Magazine.' *Chicago Review* 11.2, 1957, 3-16 (6).

¹⁵ Brennan, 'Naked Censorship, Part I.'

same time they realized that the average reader of the review might not be as charmed by the new writing as they themselves were, so they decided to play it safe and to tread carefully. The first poet they published who was both Beat and from San Francisco, was Lawrence Ferlinghetti. The Winter 1958 issue of the review, which was the first issue for which Rosenthal alone was responsible, contained a poem by Ferlinghetti that had already appeared in his first volume of poems, *Pictures of the Gone World*, published by City Lights in 1955. In that book simply numbered '23', here the title has become 'A Picture of the Gone World.' Far less critical of society than some of Ferlinghetti's later work, the poem paints a harmless picture of a day full of 'various very realistic / unrealities'¹⁶ and 'not so accidental / analogies', which 'Dada would have liked.'¹⁷

By printing a fairly innocuous poem that had been published before, Rosenthal and Carroll seem to be testing the waters, trying to find out how readers would respond to a poem like Ferlinghetti's, which admittedly was rather different from the kind of poetry that usually appeared in the *Chicago Review*. In fact, perhaps as a front, this issue of the review also contained some more old-fashioned poems, by the unknown Patric Sweeney and the better-known John Hollander. On the other hand there was a poem with a more modern touch, like Ferlinghetti's poem jumping all over the page, by Paul Blackburn, a New York poet who had been associated with Black Mountain College and who would play a prominent role in the avant-garde of the 50s and 60s. Blackburn also contributed one of his translations of troubadour poetry, for which he would later become famous: a poem by the 12th century poet Marcabru, which seems to suggest that poetry from the past may be more refreshing than what is being written today – a notion which Blackburn probably picked up from Ezra Pound.

Finally, as far as the poetry in this particular issue is concerned, there is the pleasant surprise of the poem which Carroll himself contributed. Most of the poems he published in the *Chicago Review* in the early and mid-1950s, had shown him to be not much better than the 'gray-flannel poet' he disparaged in 'Notes on Some Young Poets.' Now, in 'New Year's Eve with a Dead Surrealist', it seems as if his confrontation with Beat poetry allows him to loosen up as a poet. Like Ferlinghetti and Carroll (and William Carlos Williams before them) dividing his lines in bits and pieces all over the page, in a poem which (thanks to the editor) cleverly echoes Ferlinghetti's poem about Dada, Carroll describes an imaginary meeting with the French surrealist poet Robert Desnos. Although Desnos died in 1945, to Carroll he is not dead at all. On the contrary: as he had already done in 'Notes on Some Young Poets', Carroll holds up Desnos (and the other 'young surrealists') as an example of a poet who is 'embarked on a voyage of the spirit', a voyage which in Carroll's poem takes the French poet and his American admirer on a foggy New Year's Eve through the streets of downtown Chicago.¹⁸

Judging from this description of the poetry in the Winter 1958 issue, it may seem as if the *Chicago Review* had suddenly shed its old skin. That is not quite true. Perhaps as

¹⁶ Lawrence Ferlinghetti, 'A Picture of the Gone World.' *Chicago Review* 11.4, 1958, 43-44 (43).

¹⁷ *Ibid.* (44).

¹⁸ Carroll, 'Notes.' (76).

decoys, but probably also because Rosenthal was stuck with earlier submissions, the issue contained quite a few essays and book reviews that would not have been out of place in earlier issues, edited by more conservative editors. The piece which opened the issue, for instance, 'J.D. Salinger: Seventy-eight Bananas', is a lengthy essay in which William Wiegand links the theme of illness in the work of J.D. Salinger to the work of European authors like Goethe and Thomas Mann. The essay by Martin Green which immediately follows that of Wiegand, also establishes a connection between Salinger and a European writer, and in this case even the title of the essay is reminiscent of the more solemn side of the *Chicago Review*: 'Amis and Salinger: The Latitude of Private Conscience.' It is true that San Francisco scholar (and poet) Lawrence Lipton in his review of a book that discusses the contrast between the oral and the printed traditions is allowed to have his say on jazz and on the role which jazz has played in the San Francisco poetry scene; however, Lipton's contribution, 'Tenth Muse Lately Sprung', has to compete not only against Arthur Schlesinger Jr.'s more seriously titled review of a book on Roosevelt, 'Mask Against Involvement', but also against Ralph Samuelson's twenty-page investigation, 'The Theme of *Mrs. Dalloway*.' The issue ends with a 'Letter to the Poetry Editor', in which Philip Booth, who had had a number of poems published in the *Chicago Review*, voices some doubts about Paul Carroll's 'Notes on Some Young Poets' in the Autumn 1957 issue. Making a case for poets W.S. Merwin and James Wright, both not mentioned by Carroll, Booth criticizes the poetry editor for his 'promiscuous grouping of poets who are so various.'¹⁹ But while Booth claims that he himself is also against the "able, academic, anemic" verse floating its way into publication', reading between the lines one tends to detect Booth's fear that he too may be lumped together with Carroll's 'gray-flannel poets.'²⁰

Philip Booth's letter is one of the few visible signs that not all readers of the *Chicago Review* may have been entirely confident with the way in which Rosenthal and Carroll were taking the magazine. Still, when the introduction of poets like Ferlinghetti and Blackburn (and the 'new' Paul Carroll) did not create a stir, the editors decided to take a large step forward. While most of the Spring 1958 issue was again taken up by essays and book reviews with somewhat musty titles like 'Marcel Proust: Creative Agony', 'Of Truth Instead of Beauty', and 'Texts out of Context', the first thirty pages were reserved for a selection of Beat writing. Beginning with a statement by Kerouac, 'The Origins of Joy in Poetry', and ending with an excerpt from *Naked Lunch*, this part of the magazine presents a striking overview of recent Beat writing. In spite of the subtitle on the cover of the issue, 'Ten San Francisco Poets', not all of the poets in the Beat section actually hailed from San Francisco. Kerouac and Ginsberg are originally from New York, and John Wieners took his first steps as a poet in Boston. Still, apart from Burroughs, all poets in the Beat section were in one way or another involved in the San Francisco Poetry Renaissance, if only because they were present and writing in San Francisco during the mid to late-1950s. Moreover, as Lawrence Ferlinghetti points out in his 'Note on Poetry

¹⁹ Philip Booth, 'Letter to the Poetry Editor.' *Chicago Review* 11.4, 1958, 109-110 (109).

²⁰ *Ibid.*

in San Francisco', which together with Kerouac's statement opens the Beat section, San Francisco poetry is 'not a school nor does it have any definite regional characteristics.'²¹ It is simply a kind of poetry, currently also being written elsewhere in the U.S., which is 'quite different from the "poetry about poetry," the poetry of technique, the poetry for poets and professors which has dominated the quarterlies and anthologies in this country for some time.'²² The modest tone of Ferlinghetti's observation may have made it palatable to a poet like Philip Booth. One can guess, however, how Booth and other more or less academic poets will have reacted to Kerouac's more outspoken view of the 'new American poetry as typified by the SF Renaissance.'²³ In Kerouac's words, that poetry should do away with 'gray faced Academic quibbling' and 'point [...] out things directly, purely, concretely, no abstractions or explanations, wham wham the true blue song of man.'²⁴

While Kerouac's demands seem to be met by his own 'Two Poems' in the Beat section (both from his later volume *Mexico City Blues*) and to a certain extent by the poems by Ferlinghetti, Ginsberg and Michael McClure, they seem less applicable to a poet like Robert Duncan, whose much more indefinite poem 'Upon Taking Hold' was selected. In fact, the inclusion of Duncan, a San Francisco poet but not really 'Beat', suggests that Rosenthal and Carroll may have had a 1957 issue of *Evergreen Review* in mind when they put together their Beat section of the *Chicago Review*. A few months earlier, the recently founded *Evergreen Review*, published by Grove Press in New York, had devoted its entire second issue to the 'San Francisco Scene', as it announced on the cover. Together with *On the Road* (published in October 1957) and Ginsberg's 'Howl', the *Evergreen* issue had helped to put the Beat Generation on the map. Because Rosenthal and Carroll were after the same goal, it is not surprising that there are some striking similarities between the San Francisco issues of the two magazines. Both open with one or more statements in prose; in the *Evergreen* issue that is a 'San Francisco Letter' by Kenneth Rexroth, the 'father' of the San Francisco poetry scene. However, while *Evergreen* pays a lot of attention to Beat and Beat-related prose (including a story by Michael Rumaker and two fragments from longer work by Henry Miller and Kerouac), apart from the fragment from *Naked Lunch*, Rosenthal and Carroll decided to devote themselves only to poetry. As far as that is concerned, there is obviously some overlap between the two issues, but there are also differences. While *Evergreen Review* editor Donald Allen apparently preferred work by some of the older and more established San Francisco poets, like James Broughton and Josephine Miles, Rosenthal and Carroll's choice for younger and still largely unknowns like Kirby Doyle and John Wieners seems more daring. That same sense of independence comes out in their selection of work by Ginsberg, a poet who because of his Beat stature of course had to appear in both issues. While *Evergreen* reprinted 'Howl', deleting some of the possibly offensive words and phrases, Rosenthal and Carroll selected one of

²¹ Lawrence Ferlinghetti, 'Note on Poetry in San Francisco.' *Chicago Review* 12.1, 1958 (4).

²² *Ibid.*

²³ Jack Kerouac, 'The Origins of Joy in Poetry.' *Chicago Review* 12.1, 1958 (3).

²⁴ *Ibid.*

Ginsberg's rare poems in prose, 'The Nap', as well as a subdued early morning scene, 'Dawn.' Both poems lack the social and sexual explicitness Ginsberg would become known for, although the third poem by Ginsberg, 'Malest Cornifi Tuo Catullo' (a description of Ginsberg's first meeting his lover, Peter Orlovsky) may have raised the eyebrows of some of the *Chicago Review's* more conservative readers.²⁵

Although eventually the San Francisco Poets issue and the issue on Zen Buddhism which followed it would become the best selling issues of the *Chicago Review* so far, not everyone on the staff of the magazine agreed with Rosenthal's preference for Beat writing. In order to have his way, Rosenthal even ended up firing two editors 'for speaking their minds too vehemently on the new writing.'²⁶ Another editor, Barbara Graymont, disliked the Beat writing in the San Francisco issue – in particular the fragment from *Naked Lunch* – to such a degree that she requested to have her name removed from the masthead.²⁷ On the other hand there was someone like John Fles, often overlooked when the 'Beat period' of the *Chicago Review*, and of *Big Table*, is chronicled. Although Fles, a poet himself, served the review only briefly – first as book review and essay editor, later as managing editor – he shared Rosenthal and Carroll's enthusiasm for Beat writing, which he ended up publishing himself in a one-shot literary review called *The Trembling Lamb*, as well as in *Kulchur*, of which he was managing and contributing editor in 1960 and 1961. Before resigning from the *Chicago Review*, he helped to put together the Summer 1958 issue, simply titled 'Zen', and featuring work by – among others – D.T. Suzuki, Alan Watts, and Jack Kerouac. At first sight it may seem surprising that Rosenthal interrupted his efforts to increase the amount of Beat writing in the *Chicago Review* by publishing an issue which – although it also contains prose by Samuel Beckett and a number of book reviews – is exclusively concerned with Zen Buddhism. One might even be tempted to suspect Rosenthal of wanting to mislead those readers of the review who did not share his passion for the Beats. However, the emergence of the Beat Generation coincided with a new interest in Zen Buddhism, partly brought about by some of the Beats themselves. Therefore, although the Zen issue contained several contributions by Japanese and American Buddhist scholars and for once no Beat poetry, Rosenthal was able to include a passage from Kerouac's forthcoming novel about his involvement in Zen, *The Dharma Bums*; the issue also contained 'Spring Sesshin at Shokoku-ji', an account of his Zen studies in Japan by Gary Snyder, a prominent Beat poet from San Francisco who had not been represented in the Spring 1958 issue.

Anyone who, after the Zen issue, might have thought that the *Chicago Review* would feature Beat writing less prominently in future, turned out to be wrong when the Autumn 1958 issue appeared. In fact, this issue in particular serves to illustrate the gradual but steadfast way in which Rosenthal had turned the *Chicago Review* into a vehicle

²⁵ It is interesting to note that neither 'The Nap' nor 'Dawn' were included in Allen Ginsberg, *Collected Poems 1947-1980*. New York: Harper & Row 1984.

²⁶ Brennan, 'Naked Censorship: Part I.'

²⁷ *Ibid.*

for Beat writing. As had been the case in the previous issues edited by Rosenthal, the Autumn 1958 issue contained some contributions which would have fitted the older *Chicago Review* to a T; there is for instance an essay on Joyce by Hugh Kenner and an essay by David Riesman, 'The College Student in an Age of Organization.' However, apart from poems by Carroll and two Beat-related poets who had not appeared in the review until now – Brother Antonius, O.P., and Joel Oppenheimer – the two texts which were most prominently featured were a spontaneous and rambling meditation by San Francisco poet Philip Whalen, 'Prose Take 1:VI:57', and the second chapter from *Naked Lunch*, which opened the issue and which continued the first installment from Burroughs' novel which had appeared, less conspicuously, in the San Francisco Poets issue.

Burroughs' novel had been in the possession of Rosenthal and Carroll for some time. When Carroll first approached Ginsberg, asking for information on recent developments in American poetry, Ginsberg had not only provided names and addresses of a number of San Francisco poets, he had also sent a section from *Naked Lunch*, the book Burroughs was working on at the time. According to Gerald E. Brennan, this is what happened:

Irving Rosenthal and Paul Carroll were both in the Review office when the excerpt arrived. Rosenthal recalls seeing a quizzical expression cross Carroll's face before he handed it over. 'I started reading it with difficulty,' Rosenthal recalled in a letter written in 1987, 'due to typing mistakes, misspellings, ellipses (I mean dots though there were plenty of ellipses of thought), and the weirdest, most contracted syntax I had ever seen. But it was funny – really funny. I thought it was the most important bit of writing Allen had so far sent us or that we had so far collected. I wrote both Allen and Bill Burroughs for more.'²⁸

Eventually the entire manuscript ended up at the *Chicago Review* and Rosenthal, who had been captivated by *Naked Lunch* and its author, took it upon himself to find readers for the book, in the first place those of the *Chicago Review*. However, he immediately realized that, much more than the novel's unconventional grammar, its graphic descriptions of homosexual activities and drug use were bound to cause censorship problems. Therefore he decided to introduce the book to readers in the same roundabout way he and Carroll would use to usher in Beat writing in general:

[Rosenthal's] plan was to publish a series of excerpts, each stronger in tone and substance than the one before. If a particular selection didn't evoke protest, and the next was only slightly more offensive, a potential censor was likely to say, 'Well look, why bother raising a stink now? We let the other stuff pass, didn't we?' Before anyone had noticed – so the plan went – *Naked Lunch* would be a fait accompli. Rosenthal believed ardently that once *Naked Lunch* had been published in

²⁸ *Ibid.*

the Review, once it had been read and appreciated by the nation, American publishers would flock to Burroughs and that would be the story's happy ending.²⁹

The story would have a happy ending, but not for some time. Immediately after having brought out the Autumn 1958 issue, which commercially was as successful as the San Francisco Poets and the Zen issues, Rosenthal started preparing the Winter 1959 issue. His intention was to focus on Beat prose in particular and this time to present episodes from *Naked Lunch* that ridiculed American society in a more outspoken manner and therefore might shock readers more than the sections that had been published so far. Apart from Burroughs, the new issue would contain a long example of what Kerouac had called 'spontaneous prose', a text based on sound and association which was first called 'Lucien Midnight' and later 'Old Angel Midnight', as well as two pieces, one in prose and one in poetry, by Edward Dahlberg. In this case the contributions by Dahlberg could be seen as the editor's ploy to detract attention from whatever might be offensive in the texts by Burroughs and Kerouac. Even the text by the rather prudish Kerouac contained lines like this: 'Akron Lehman the Hart Crane Hero of Drunken Records came full in her cunt spoffing & overflowing white enlightened seminal savior juice out of his canal-hole into her hungry river bed [...].' Dahlberg, a 'mysterious, oracular and introverted'³⁰ modernist and much older than the Beats (he was born in 1900), like them may have been an outsider, but his obsession with the classics and prehistory made it difficult 'to imagine a writer with a style and sensibility further removed from Kerouac's 'bop prosody' or Burroughs' hip detachment, or less appealing to their readers.'³¹ But that of course may have been Rosenthal's intention in the first place.

Before the Winter 1959 issue could appear, something happened which for the time being put an end to Rosenthal's plans. On October 25, 1958, columnist Jack Mabley published an article on the front page of the *Chicago Daily News* in which he lashed out at the university for supporting a magazine that in his view published, to quote the title of the article, 'Filthy Writing on the Midway.' Not surprisingly, Mabley did not specifically reveal which words or phrases had rubbed him the wrong way, so his attack is rather general and puts all Beat writers in one box: 'The obscenity is put into their writing to attract attention. It is an assertion of their sense of bravado. "Oh boy, look what I'm doing" just like the little kids chalking a four letter word on the Oak Street underpass.'³² Mabley concludes: 'Let's concede that I'm a bluenose. I don't put the blame on the juveniles who wrote and edited the stuff, because they're immature and irresponsible. But the University of Chicago publishes the magazine. The trustees should take a long hard look at what's being circulated under their sponsorship.'³³

This is exactly what the trustees did. In a number of meetings, members of the faculty board took a close look at Rosenthal's track record as editor and at the direction

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² *Ibid.*

³³ *Ibid.*

in which he was steering the review. Fearing that the increasing clamor about the content of the Autumn issue might endanger the financial support of the university by both individuals and organizations, by mid-November the university decided to discard its own principle of freedom of the press and to censor the review. Rosenthal was told that the upcoming issue had to be ‘completely innocuous and noncontroversial so as not to offend even a 16-year-old girl.’³⁴ If he could not meet this demand, the university would prohibit the publication of the Winter issue. What Rosenthal did not know, was that the administration had already decided that he should be removed from his editorship. Meeting only with various kinds of opposition in his contacts with the university, on November 18 Rosenthal decided to resign, together with five other editors, including Paul Carroll. The seventh editor in Rosenthal’s core team, Hyung Woong Pak, did not leave with the others and became the new editor of the review.

Rosenthal’s clash and ultimate split with the University of Chicago has been described in much greater detail elsewhere. Parts One and Two of Gerald E. Brennan’s ‘Naked Censorship’, for instance, offer an almost hour-by-hour account of Rosenthal’s clash with the university faculty. Brennan’s investigation is in line with Rosenthal’s own, much more concise, account which makes up most of the editorial that opens the first issue of *Big Table*, the magazine which Rosenthal and Carroll founded immediately after having left the *Chicago Review*. In the editorial Rosenthal manages to contain his anger, but he still strongly criticizes the University of Chicago for exerting censorship, pointing out exactly which members of the staff apparently found money more important than freedom of expression. He ends by explaining how the editors who resigned ‘determined first of all to publish what would have been our Winter issue, and secondly to form a literary magazine in Chicago which would not be subject to the review of a Chancellor loyal to the philistines.’³⁵ Thanks to a number of donations and to the help of individuals like former editor John Fles and Allen Ginsberg and Gregory Corso (who refused payment for their reading in Chicago, on January 29, 1959, in support of the new magazine), Rosenthal and Carroll were able to publish *Big Table* Number 1 within months after having resigned from the *Chicago Review*. Strangely enough, in his editorial Rosenthal forgets to thank Jack Kerouac who suggested the title ‘Big Table’ after Rosenthal, unable to come up with an appropriate title, had written a ‘desperate post card’ to Allen Ginsberg: ‘Think up a name for Paul’s mag.’³⁶ As this request suggests, by then Rosenthal, eager to devote more time to his own writing, had decided not to become the editor of *Big Table*. As he himself announced in the editorial: ‘Paul Carroll will be its editor, and I can hardly wait to see its first issue.’³⁷

The first issue of *Big Table* for which Carroll alone was responsible (although he was assisted by three assistant editors, two of whom had been part of the *Chicago Review*

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ Irving Rosenthal, ‘Editorial.’ *Big Table* 1.1, 1959, 3-6 (6).

³⁶ Al Aronowitz, ‘[The Blacklisted Journalist: Section Four](#).’ Column 39, November 1, 1998.

³⁷ Rosenthal, ‘Editorial.’ (6).

team), was the Summer 1959 issue. In all, during 1959 and 1960 *Big Table* published five issues, all edited by Carroll. Not taking into account the first issue, still edited by Rosenthal, it is interesting to see to which extent Carroll continued Rosenthal's policy in introducing Beat writing, that of Burroughs in particular. Looking at the contents of *Big Table 2*, it is immediately clear that Carroll does not carry on the publication of *Naked Lunch* in installments that in the *Chicago Review* had gradually become longer. In fact, no portions from *Naked Lunch* would appear in *Big Table*; when he left Chicago, Rosenthal apparently took the manuscript of *Naked Lunch* with him, hoping that he would be able to find a publisher for the book in New York. This ties in with Burroughs' correspondence from the late 1950s and early 1960s. At the time he exchanged a number of letters with Rosenthal who, by 1960, had 'found an apartment in Allen Ginsberg's building at 170 East Second Street and helped assemble Burroughs' texts for publication, working as his unofficial agent.'³⁸ From that same correspondence it is obvious that Burroughs, who thought highly of Rosenthal, was much less positive about Carroll as an editor. From a letter which Burroughs wrote to Carroll from London, where he was living at the time, it becomes clear that by May 1960 Burroughs was about to stop doing business with Carroll altogether: 'I can only say that my correspondence with you in the past few months has been marked by a lack of candor that gives me little confidence for future dealings.'³⁹

Still, Carroll did publish Burroughs and especially the thirty-three pages devoted to Burroughs in *Big Table 2* deserve a closer look. In his study *William Burroughs and the Secret of Fascination*, Oliver Harris has pointed out that already before he became a writer, Burroughs has often been turned into a legendary figure, especially by Beat friends like Kerouac and Ginsberg. Kerouac's description of Burroughs in *On the Road* and the way Ginsberg writes about him in 'Howl' certainly seem partly meant to arouse the reader's curiosity about this mysterious character. Another prominent Burroughs scholar, Jennie Skerl, has even claimed that Burroughs' 'most important "work" may be his legend, which exists somewhere between the realms of fact and fiction.'⁴⁰ *Big Table 2* undoubtedly contributed to the creation of that legend. The Burroughs section opens with a biographical essay by Burroughs' friend, Alan Ansen, 'Anyone Who Can Pick Up A Frying Pan Owns Death.' Ansen recounts how he 'had the great good luck to meet Burroughs in New York through Allen Ginsberg just before he sailed for Tangier,'⁴¹ and, although he does pay attention to Burroughs' largely unpublished writings, he focuses on the more eccentric aspects of Burroughs' past and personality. Starting out by asking the reader to '[picture] a young man brought up in Saint Louis descended from the founder of one of America's great industrial enterprises,'⁴² Ansen goes on to hint at an 'early

³⁸ Bill Morgan (ed.), *Rub Out the Words: The Letters of William S. Burroughs 1959-1974*. London: Penguin 2012 (18-19).

³⁹ *Ibid.* (30).

⁴⁰ Quoted in Oliver Harris, *William Burroughs and the Secret of Fascination*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press 2003 (5).

⁴¹ Alan Ansen, 'Anyone Who Can Pick Up A Frying Pan Owns Death.' *Big Table* 1.2, 1959, 32-34, 37-41 (34-37).

⁴² *Ibid.* (33).

traumatic experience [that] resulted in a rough love life'⁴³; of course he also refers to Burroughs' addiction to drugs, and he ends by describing Burroughs as follows: 'A tall ectomorph – in Tangier the boys called him El Hombre Invisible – his persona constituted by a magic triad of fedora, glasses and raincoat rather than by a face, his first presence is that of a con man down on his luck.'⁴⁴ A passage like this clearly aims to mythologize, and that also goes for the rest of the biographical information in Ansen's essay, which is in fact so abundant that Ansen himself ends by asking, 'Why so much biography in the discussion of a literary figure?' Ansen's answer is telling: 'What I am writing is not only a paean to a writer: it is also a variant of hagiography.'⁴⁵ Smaller in scope but equally hagiographic, is Paul Bowles' two-page memoir, 'Burroughs in Tangier'. He remembers first seeing 'Bill Burroughs in 1953, passing along a backstreet of Tangier in the rain,'⁴⁶ and gradually turns Burroughs from a shadowy and mysterious figure into a larger than life character, always 'worth watching [...] as [he] stumbled from one side of the room to the other, stirring his drink around and around without stopping, with his index and middle finger, and with two or three kif cigarettes lighted simultaneously but lying in different ashtrays which he visited on his way around the room.'⁴⁷

The Burroughs-section also contains two intriguing photographs of Burroughs. In one of them he is looking at us from a distance, with his face positioned next to a single flower or plant in a pot and above a row of books on what could be a mantelpiece. In the other he is bare-chested and in his underwear, looking down on the viewer and shadowboxing. Both photographs are uncredited, but they have since become quite well-known. They were taken by Allen Ginsberg, who from the very beginning was keen on promoting the Beats, not only by introducing their work to publishers and editors, but also by documenting their activities. When these pictures were taken, in 1953, Ginsberg was collaborating with Burroughs on a manuscript which was the result of Burroughs' extended trip to South America earlier that year. Burroughs had travelled to Ecuador and Peru in search of yage, a hallucinogen indigenous to the Amazon region. From South America Burroughs had reported his findings in letters to Ginsberg, but he had also made copious notes, hoping to turn them into a book like Aldous Huxley's *The Doors of Perception*. When that plan fell through, Burroughs and Ginsberg turned all of the yage-related material into a series of letters, six of which were published in *Big Table 2*.⁴⁸

Because Burroughs' letters were largely put together 'after the fact', it is clear that in this case too a certain amount of mythologizing was employed. The very fact that Paul Carroll played a prominent role in presenting Burroughs to American readers suggests that he was certainly willing to follow in Rosenthal's footsteps. However, although he liked *Naked Lunch* and the texts about Burroughs' search for yage that were later

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ *Ibid.* (37).

⁴⁵ *Ibid.* (38).

⁴⁶ Paul Bowles, 'Burroughs in Tangier.' *Big Table 1.2*, 1959, 42-43 (42).

⁴⁷ *Ibid.* (43).

⁴⁸ For a detailed history of the text of *The Yage Letters*, see Oliver Harris' introduction to William Burroughs and Allen Ginsberg, *The Yage Letters Redux*. San Francisco: City Lights Books 2006, ix-iii.

published as *The Yage Letters*, he was less appreciative of the cut-up experiments in which Burroughs became increasingly involved. By the time Carroll finally decided to publish the short fragment 'But Is All Back Seat of Dreaming' from a novel Burroughs was working on at the time in *Big Table* 4, the two were clearly at cross purposes. While in his rather business-like letters, Burroughs admonishes Carroll to stick to his words, Carroll tends to react with small talk and not always quite convincing excuses that refer to the pressures of his time-consuming job as an editor.⁴⁹

Still, in spite of Carroll's quarrels with Burroughs (they later made up), *Big Table* played a major role in the distribution of Beat literature. One thing which had obviously changed since Rosenthal and Carroll began to feature Beat writing in the *Chicago Review*, was that in two years' time interest in the Beats had grown immensely. Consequently, Carroll could dispose of Rosenthal's original strategy to introduce the Beats gradually and was able to fill the pages of *Big Table* with work by almost all major and minor Beat writers. In issues 2 and 3 he had begun to publish portions from the poem that was Ginsberg's follow-up to 'Howl' in scope and length, 'Kaddish', but it is especially telling to put *Big Table* 4 next to the San Francisco Poets issue of the *Chicago Review*, published only two years earlier. While the introduction of Beat writing in the *Chicago Review* was still slightly circumspect, *Big Table* 4 is almost exclusively a celebration of Beat literature; even the advertisements serve to illustrate the popularity which Beat writing had acquired by the spring of 1960. One of those advertisements is for Donald M. Allen's anthology *The New American Poetry 1945-1960*, which had just come out and which would be the final blow to the hegemony of the academy in American poetry. A long section entitled 'The New American Poets' in *Big Table* 4 reads like a summary of Allen's anthology, although Carroll slipped in some old favorites, like John Logan and James Wright, who in the eyes of Allen would certainly not have been 'new'. On the other hand, for his anthology Allen selected quite a few poems that so far had only been published in the *Chicago Review* or *Big Table*, no mean tribute to Paul Carroll as a poetry editor, and as an editor in general.

Why *Big Table* ceased publication after its fifth issue is not quite clear. Maryrose Carroll, Paul Carroll's widow, in an interview has suggested that when Rosenthal and Carroll founded *Big Table*, the task of finding sponsors was largely left to Carroll, who was 'successful in raising money for five editions of the new magazine.'⁵⁰ On the other hand it is good to keep in mind that the Beat Generation had reached the apex of its popularity in 1960, and that here and there interest in the Beats was already beginning to wane. Moreover, even though he appreciated the Beats and the influence they had on his own work, Carroll was less exclusive in his admiration of Beat writing than Rosenthal. As Paul Hoover put it 'The Poet in His Skin: Remembering Paul Carroll': 'Inclusiveness was natural to Paul, perhaps because of his Chicago perspective, from which bitterly held aesthetic differences on the coasts seemed like so much quibble. Why not the best of all

⁴⁹ Cf. the correspondence between Burroughs and Carroll in the Paul D. Carroll Papers at the University of Chicago, Box 1, Folder 18.

⁵⁰ Tonya Hassell, '[Oral History Interview with Maryrose Carroll.](#)' Summer 2004.

worlds?’⁵¹ In this respect it is telling that *Big Table* 4, apart from all that Beat writing (with Logan and Wright thrown in), also contains a short prose text by Richard G. Stern; much to the dismay of Carroll’s friends, because Stern had been one of the University of Chicago’s faculty board members who had put a stop to the Winter 1959 issue of the *Chicago Review*. Even more striking is an advertisement in *Big Table* 5 which announced the publication, in issue 6, of a symposium on ‘Post-Christian Man’, with contributors like Allen Tate, Russell Kirk, Paul Goodman, and William Phillips. A theme like that, and names like these, seemed to suggest a return to the academic spirit of the pre-Rosenthal and Carroll *Chicago Review*. In the end, the fact that *Big Table* 6 never appeared may have been partly due to a lack of ‘money and energy’⁵² but, as Peter Michelson has suggested, ‘there was also something else, something perhaps unique to little magazines, especially those that burn hard and bright and briefly: a sense of organic completion.’⁵³ This is in line with Paul Carroll’s own view on *Big Table*’s demise: ‘I went on with it until it seemed to reach its termination. And then, when it was time to stop, it was simply time to stop.’⁵⁴

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⁵¹ Paul Hoover, ‘The Poet in His Skin: Remembering Paul Carroll.’ *Chicago Review* 44.1, 1998, 5-12 (8).

⁵² Peter Michelson, ‘On *The Purple Sage*, *Chicago Review*, and *Big Table*.’ In Anderson and Kinzie (eds.), *The Little Magazine in America*, 341-375 (353).

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*