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The Life and Letters of Gregory Corso

Gregory Nunzio Corso—referred to as the “Urban Shelley” of the Beat Generation—lived a life as explosive and controversial as his poetry. It is not surprising that his most iconic poem was titled “Bomb” and met with mixed reviews. Growing up in Greenwich Village, his youth consisted of foster homes, prison, and a brief stay in the Psychiatric Ward at Bellevue Hospital. In his twenties, he moved to Paris, France, and founded the Beat Hotel in 1957. While there, he published poetry through correspondence with City Lights Books in San Francisco via Lawrence Ferlinghetti. Corso was the most Eurocentric of the Beat poets.

Living a waif’s life, he traveled around Europe and the United States, never truly settling into a domestic routine. He was married three times and had five children. In the last thirty years of Corso’s life, he slowly retreated into solitude and drugs. He lived the last months of his life in Robbinsdale, Minnesota, where he passed away of prostate cancer at the age of seventy. Of Corso’s life, critic Ted Morgan states, “he was a misfit, self-invented, rebellious, and blessed by the Muse. If Ginsberg, Kerouac, and Burroughs were the Three Musketeers of the movement, Corso was their D’Artagnan...” (242). In his poetry, Corso is extremely witty, satirical, and politically charged, but his life remains an enigma. It is in his letters that we see the real Corso, a vulnerable man who dealt with mental illness, loneliness, and spiraled into a lifelong drug addiction that caused him to retreat into social isolation.

Corso was born on March 26, 1930, in Greenwich Village. Corso’s mother, Michelina Corso, was sixteen years old and his father, Sam “Fortunato” Corso, was nineteen years old at the time of Corso’s birth. When Corso was a mere eight months old, his parents decided to put him in foster care, a system that he would be in and out of for the rest of his childhood. Unlike the majority of the Beats who practiced Zen Buddhism, Corso was raised Catholic. In a very

moving 1958 letter to Jack Kerouac, also a very devout Catholic, especially towards the end of his life, Corso decided to write about his childhood. He stated, “I don’t regret my Catholic upbringing. There is something in me that is still very Catholic, I think it’s that only-we-see-the-face-of-God conceit” (Corso, *Accidental* 118). Further on in this letter, Corso reveals that he had a problem with bed wetting for most of his childhood, which resulted in a lot of psychological humiliation, and seemed to coincide with his forced relocations. At the age of twelve, Corso was taken out of foster care and sent to live with his biological father and his new stepmother. Both parents proved to be emotionally and physically abusive, leading Corso to run away from home and begin a life of crime.

Corso battled kleptomania for the majority of his life. He had a strange affinity for wristwatches and stole many of them in his youth. He spoke at Allen Ginsberg’s funeral in 1997, and ended up stealing some of Ginsberg’s books during his wake to pawn for drug money. Reflecting on being twelve, Corso stated, “I stole a radio and electric iron from the lady downstairs and took it to a junk shop and sold it for ten dollars. With the money I bought myself a bright wild tie, a sports jacket and went to Times Square and saw *Song of Bernadette*” (*Accidental* 124). This decision would prove to be disastrous, as he was eventually caught and sent to a correctional facility where, in his own words he, “...averaged four beatings and a million humiliations a week” and “learned from that how not to cry” (124). In a biographical sketch for *The New American Poetry*, Corso wrote, “the other prisoners abused me terribly, and I was indeed like an angel then because when they stole my food and beat me up and threw pee in my cell, I...would come out and tell them my beautiful dreams...” (Poetry Foundation). His dreams were of an angel that he claimed inspired him with beautiful words. These dreams

comforted Corso, but he eventually put his hands through a glass window and, as a result, was hospitalized for mental illness.

It was this emotional trauma and violence that landed Corso in Bellevue Psychiatric Ward for four months, a time that he always struggled to write about in his poetry but was able to examine in this same 1958 letter to Jack Kerouac. While lying in his hospital bed, Corso contemplated the screams of a woman in a room next to his, mixing with the sounds of people on the street celebrating the Fourth of July. Corso wrote, “I experienced my first moment of truth, and how amazing it was that I knew, while standing there, that those children playing in the street, and that that sun, and those screams, all contained a whole...it was there I became a poet” (*Accidental* 126). This was not to be the last time Corso was admitted to a mental health institution; he struggled with post-traumatic stress disorder throughout his life. While living in Shaker Heights, Ohio, in 1964, Corso’s wife at the time, Sally Corso, admitted him to the local hospital, stating that he was ““not well physically and mentally”” and would reside there ““for an undecided period of time”” (qtd. in Corso, *Accidental* 363). In true Corso fashion, he wrote many letters about how much he hated being tied down to one location to convalesce.

The origins of Corso’s psychological distress in his childhood experiences are often addressed in his letters to other Beats, but rarely in his poetry. There are only a few Corso poems that even suggest that he struggled in his youth. In a letter to Ginsberg, Corso wrote:

Well anyway, what I felt was what I probably could never do. That is: Write about the thing I really know most and best. My horror, my wracked youth, bred and red on rotted-treated Eastside New York. Why did I ever start poetry but to use it as a means to tell all the world what a strange lugubrious place is Delancey Street.... But I can’t do it, I can’t because somehow I find that I am really a poet and therefore I feel much sweeter less

simpler things. Could you, a college man, claiming himself an anti-academician, see the Chickenplucker? The dead soaked rat in the gutter? The molded bagel up for sale? The dry sad rooftops of Eastside? Yes, you do see dead rats, but do they mean to you what they have meant to me? (*Accidental* 36)

As letters such as this make clear, Corso's painful early life was deeply affected by mental and physical abuse, most particularly the abuse received at the hands of his father and stepmother. He recalls how his father pulled him out of school in the sixth grade to become a factory worker, a job he detested so much that he ran away from home and lived on the streets. It was the accumulation of all these traumatic hardships that Corso was never truly able to write about in poetry, but found he could examine through correspondence with his Beat friends. In poetry, Corso explored "much sweeter less simpler things," while in his letters he exposed the bitter hardships of his youth.

Corso was released from Bellevue Hospital after roughly two months, but at the age of seventeen ended up back in prison for theft. In a letter to his friend Isabella Gardner, Corso wrote, "in prison I got something; there I learned...spiritually, soulfully, beauty and love; I had not learned how to live in the world" (Corso, *Accidental* 130). Prison matrons would bring Corso books to read, which led to his deep love of the written word.

It was in his early adulthood that he immersed himself in the Beat movement, and became a mascot to the other Beats. At the age of twenty-one, Corso met Ginsberg at the Pony Stable Inn, which was Greenwich Village's first lesbian bar. Never homosexual himself, Corso would go to the bar to write his poems or study his books. Corso wanted to see if Ginsberg would buy him a drink, and Ginsberg gladly complied. This led to the two of them talking about poetry for a few hours, launching what would become a life-long friendship. Corso's charisma

made him an unofficial symbol of the Beat poets. In *The Beats: A Very Short Introduction*, David Sterritt states:

Ginsberg dubbed him “Captain Poetry” and described him as a “poetic wordslinger” and a “political philosophe.” And when critics complained about “grave flaws of character” in Corso, [William S.] Burroughs retorted that poetry “is made from flaws” and that a “flawless poet is fit only to be a poet-laureate, officially dead and imperfectly embalmed. The stink of death leaks out.... I think that Gregory would survive even the laurel crown, for the smell of *life* would leak out.” (74)

Despite his hardships, Corso gave new life to the Beat Movement with his enthusiasm and zest for life as a young adult.

Corso’s personality was infectious, especially with the opposite sex. Kerouac wrote about Corso in his book *The Subterraneans*, making Corso’s character into a lowlife who stole the girlfriend of the character Kerouac based on himself. Corso wrote to Kerouac and said, “You see after reading *Subterraneans* again, this time with an awareness, I realized the hurt I caused you...I have cried much over this letter, I hope it lessens the hurt I caused you when you were very much in love” (*Accidental* 126). When Kerouac received this letter he instantly forgave Corso and they remained friends until Kerouac’s death in 1969. Kerouac was one of the first readers of Corso’s first published book, *Gasoline* (1958), and wrote a dedicatory blurb stating, “[Corso is]...a tough young kid from the Lower East Side who rose like an angel over the rooftops and sang Italian songs as sweet a Caruso and Sinatra, but in words...amazing and beautiful Gregory Corso, the one and only Gregory the Herald” (*Gasoline* back cover). These friendships with Corso would eventually lead the Beats to Europe.

Corso lived the vast majority of his life traveling throughout the European continent, exploring all regions from Barcelona to Munich and from Rome to Oslo. He moved to Paris in 1957, where he established the Beat Hotel that he informally managed until its closure in 1963. It was in this Parisian hotel that Corso hosted Kerouac, Ginsberg, and many other notable Beats, and where his poetic career finally started to gain momentum. From this location, Corso would communicate by correspondence with Ferlinghetti, owner of City Lights Books in San Francisco. After Corso's several conflicted revisions, Ferlinghetti wrote him that his poems were good enough to publish, to which Corso responded, "Good God, I hope you are happy with my poems because them poems is me and they are what I believe in, and you must see it that way. Or you mustn't...they are pure and good. They are essentially visionary, and written in much sensible discord" (*Accidental* 46). Corso went on to publish this first book, *Gasoline* (1958), and two years later his second book, *The Happy Birthday of Death* (1960), published by New Directions, which contained his two most famous poems, "Bomb" and "Marriage."

Corso's poem "Bomb" ended up being his most widely known work. Corso worked tirelessly on it for months, suggesting in letters to the other Beats while working on it that he was extremely excited and proud of his poem. What makes "Bomb" unique is that it is shaped as a mushroom cloud while simultaneously functioning as a satirical love poem that, expressing a deep love for the devastation that an atomic bomb causes. Corso wrote, "I finished *Bomb* poem – had much difficulty, pain, thought, for ending. Could have ended it with light or profundity, or humor, or bitterness, I choose the later [sic] because deep in me it's the way I feel – someday perhaps the light but as for now – no" (*Accidental* 112). Ginsberg was visiting Corso in England at the time and both decided that "Bomb" should make its debut at their poetry reading at New College. The poem's startling declaration, "Bomb I love you" (Corso, *Happy* 33), and its

explosive rhetoric provoked an upheaval among the political activists in the audience. Christine Kraemer wrote, “Corso’s presentation of the poem to a poetry group at New College in England was met with frank hostility, ending with Corso and Allen Ginsberg being heckled and bombarded with the shoes of the offended members of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament” (211). Corso’s “Bomb” eventually received better reviews and became one of his most-requested poems at poetry readings. It is this first reading, though, that is the most memorable. As Sterritt notes, “In sum, ‘Bomb’ pleased nobody, and that pleased Corso” (73). Corso was able to record “Bomb” accompanied by a jazz band, which contributed to his fame in the Beat movement.

Ironically, it was the positive critical reception of “Bomb” that contributed to Corso’s estrangement from public life. In a letter written to James Laughlin from Woodstock, New York, in 1968, Corso stated:

Consider *Bomb* [sic]. Critiques on social ills and all such seemed to bring my poetics into some kind of street argument, like the sacredness of language, the magic of the word, was not where I was at, and of course that is exactly where I was at, or wanted to be at, a pox on the rest. Thus I moped about feeling that I lost the word, that my spirit was no longer spirited, that I fouled the tongue that spoke the sacred language, and God knows what else self-recriminations. I found myself traveling the western world now neither revolution’s son nor muse’s standard bearer. I tell you they were heavy awful years...in short, I, not the word, was lost. When I found myself, well I found the word, and my tongue again. (*Accidental* 392)

Corso would continue writing but with less consistency. The books that were officially published roughly averaged one every ten years. The poems Corso would write in-between these decades were often in notebooks that he would sell for drug money.

Despite gaining notoriety and developing an audience base, Corso struggled with the idea of being a famous poet. Where Corso's poetry is political and edgy, his life during these final decades, as seen through his letters, is increasingly reclusive and reflective. Corso often wrote to Ginsberg about how he felt estranged from society, but he was eternally in love with the idea of being a poet. In a letter to Paul Blackburn in 1958, Corso wrote:

I guess I'm bugged by the ambition scene, but why not ambition? Poetry should be given to all, should be sold, be given all all all; but what would Shelley say? I don't believe in the girl diary type who writes and hides it, show no one; but I also don't like the poet ostentatious list-of-all-the-magazines type either. Transitions, the in between, the indifferent one, Burroughs and Whalen are like that, they don't care, they write for themselves. Allen is inspired, I am inspired, we both like to see our poems in print, but the kick lessens all the time; ego be damned, the great poet of the future will cut the throat of the I. (*Accidental* 104)

Corso struggled with critical reviews of his work but loved the thrill of trying to become a great poet. He continually wrote about his "Muse" and what it meant to be a poet like his idol Percy Bysshe Shelley, but in reality it was this "ambition scene" and the drive to keep writing while struggling financially that became too much for him to handle, leading him to drug experimentation.

Corso's drug habit started in 1958, at the height of his poetic career. It was at this time he experimented with many different kinds of drugs, initiating a love/hate relationship with addiction that would plague him for the rest of his life. He wrote, "unlike those who take drugs for kicks, I never enjoyed the blood running down my arms, the holes in them...the poet cried much for that blood" (Corso, *Accidental* 381). During the early 1960s, Corso tried his first dose

of heroin, which ended up being laced with other substances that made him violently ill. As a result of this experience, Corso refused all offerings of heroin until the last fifteen years of his life when he decided to give it another try. He is most upfront about his drug usage in his letters to Ginsberg, often referring to drugs as “Miss Filthy Nurse” (388). While living in Venice, Italy, Corso wrote to Ginsberg and said, “Alas, do miss incentive of undetectable things, is it possible for you to mail me some pot or hash? Do try; squash it in letter, put no forwarding address. Or mail me five joints; my imagination is abundant, but my eyes grow dim. Whatever, no H. [heroin]” (92). It was after publishing *Long Live Man* in 1962 that Corso finally admitted to having a drug problem. In 1967, he wrote:

...drugs did nurse this poet when this poet fell from hell, and in limbs did nod and agony, bleeding arms, filthy as a dull rusty bent needle is filthy...I do not fear death at all, and yet fear O awfully fear the sad stupid death of an O.D. or some junk death...yet I do flirt with it, aye, like a crazy hot rodster kid. (390)

In the last twenty years of his life, Corso’s drug habit became so debilitating that he was spending hundreds of dollars a day to maintain it. In a letter to Ginsberg from Paris, in 1983, Corso wrote:

I asked for money for dope...Thus began my biggest habit, and most hellish nightmare of my life. Remember when you came over and I whispered to you, “Al, I’m in hell.” But I lost you twenty years ago. You couldn’t help me, no one could have. I’d sit on that couch day after day for six months. Every morning copping \$100 worth of dope. (410)

As it turns out, Corso’s big fear of dying because of drug addiction was all for naught, and his final years were far less desolate than he imagined.

During the last ten years of his life he moved into a small apartment on Horatio Street in the West Village, New York. He continued his close friendship with Ginsberg and would only do poetry readings when Ginsberg pushed him to do so. Corso did have some happy moments in the last decade of his life. Hiro Yamagata, “a wealthy Japanese artist who had been deeply influenced by the writings of the Beats” (Corso, *Accidental* 422), became Corso’s patron. While making a video about Corso’s life and the Beats, producers Gus Reininger and Yamagata were able to discover the whereabouts of Corso’s mother. Corso’s father had told him at a very young age that Michelina Corso had moved back to Italy after she abandoned him. Reininger and Yamagata discovered that this was false, and that she had been living in New Jersey for most of her life. Corso and his mother were reunited and were able to spend time together, finally giving Corso an extended family with which to interact.

Despite his increased isolation and his drug dependency, Corso constantly examined the depths of the relationships he had with his most intimate friends and family members. Corso wrote many poems, but “Marriage” became the most requested at readings during the last thirty years of his life because of its humor and upfront honesty. In a last twist of fate for Corso, it became the most prophetic piece he ever wrote. In a stanza near the end of “Marriage,” Corso appears to anticipate his future:

O but what about love? I forget love
not that I am incapable of love
it’s just that I see love as odd as wearing shoes –
I never wanted a girl who was like my mother
And Ingrid Bergman was always impossible
And there’s maybe a girl now but she’s already married

And I don't like men and –

but there's got to be somebody!

Because what if I'm 60 years old and not married,

all alone in a furnished room with pee stains on my underwear

and everybody else is married! All the universe is married but me! (*Happy* 29)

By the end of his life, Corso had been married three times, had one girlfriend he came close to marrying, and had a total of five children. Of his relationships with these women, Corso wrote, “Without the gentle love of the ladies: Hope, Belle, Lisa, Kaye, I'd be the most lonely miserable human spirit in all Galaxies” (*Accidental* 412). Sadly, none of these relationships lasted.

Corso's friendship with Ginsberg, while at times tumultuous, seemed to be the one relationship he was able to maintain. Corso stated that he was a heterosexual, but in one of his final letters to Ginsberg, he wrote, “ You were my great friend in life. I had no body. I was never loved. You loved me. Can't you realize how life suddenly became a pleasure to live?” (*Accidental* 412). After recounting some of their sexual exploits, Corso goes on to say, “Damn it! I imagine if I were your lover, today I'd be rich, all the poetry readings would have been you and I. The farm, mine! Your undying love, mine!” (412). It is clear that Corso maintained his dry wit in his personal and professional writing, all while isolating himself from the relationships he seemed to crave.

Despite his bouts with depression, it is Corso's final letters in the 1990s that really reveal him to be the dreamer poet that he always was. In 1992, Corso wrote, “Can't die a junkie. I've no leisure to be cocooned in drugdom, my work is not yet done.... I so feared reality I refused to enroll in its university; what the surer; the drunk dreamer in life or the sober realist in dream?” (*Accidental* 423). Corso maintained a relationship with his daughter Sheri Langerman and moved

into her home in Robbinsdale, Minnesota, when he was diagnosed with prostate cancer. Corso's dying wish was to have his ashes scattered at the grave of Percy Shelley in the Protestant Cemetery in Rome, Italy. His epitaph was a poem written by himself which reads, "Spirit / is Life / It flows thru / the death of me / endlessly / like a river / unafraid / of becoming / the sea" (Corso, *Herald* 41). Perhaps in the end, Corso the poet and Corso the man were finally able to fuse. What seems undeniable is that at the end of his life Corso was at peace with his "muse." He had indeed become the poet that he always wanted to be, leaving a rich legacy of innovative poems, thus solidifying his place in history as a distinct voice of the Beat Generation. He was a brilliant poet who fought hard to rise above his upbringing, examined and explored the human condition of the 1950s, sought genuine human connection, and eventually faded into a quiet life of poetic isolation.

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