

Beatitude Golden Anniversary 1959-2009
Edited by Latif Harris and Neeli Cherkovski
\$25.00, paperback

Reviewed by Chad Weidner – Roosevelt Academy (Utrecht University), the Netherlands

Beatitude Golden Anniversary 1959-2009 represents fifty years of alternative publishing. This rough collection of verse attempts to carry on the tradition of producing a literary magazine that is edited lightly, in the spirit of retaining spontaneity and poetic energy. In *Ferlinghetti, the Artist in His Time*, Silesky writes of the Beat attempt to bring “radical openness and free exchange” to art (101). This anthology attempts to carry on that tradition. However, the collection is not without problems, and features of the book left me frustrated. Nevertheless, there is little doubt of the need to commemorate the fifty-year milestone of the colossal publishing venture called *Beatitude*, and this book does just that with remembrance and affection.

The term “beatitude” rings in the collective consciousness of Beat enthusiasts. The expression evokes the search for a place somewhere between beaten down and total blessedness. Bob Kaufman, Allen Ginsberg, John Kelley, and William Margolis founded the magazine in 1959 and had a noble mission: to provide unconventional writers a genuine opportunity to present their writing to a wider audience. *Beatitude* magazine was a vital publishing outlet for the San Francisco Bohemian movement. In *Beat Down to Your Soul*, Ann Charters called Beat writing “some of the only true proletarian literature in recent history” (519). *Beatitude Golden Anniversary 1959-2009* embodies the latest manifestation of the underground tradition of working class poetry.

However, I find the organization of the book problematic. There is no real overall coherence, even within sections. Neeli Cherkovski writes of the earnest attempt to “keep the ragged edges of this enterprise [...] as beatifically ragged as possible” (xvii). Unfortunately, the tattered construction distracts from much of the great poetry contained in the book. Admittedly, the original *Beatitude* magazine lacked what can be considered a thematic layout. However, this collection is far too long to rely on a similar organization. *Beatitude Golden Anniversary* weighs in at a lofty 470 pages (with an additional 111-page insert). Such a large assemblage of nearly 600 pages really demands some sense of order. One of the charms of the original *Beatitude* magazine was its improvised product. However, the sheer quantity of poetry contained in this book makes it difficult to find any author by looking at the table of contents. The volume contains a list of authors “in order of appearance,” although that is of little assistance. If readers want to find poems by Anne Waldman, for example, they have to scour the contents pages. It is understandable that the editors wanted to retain the original feel of *Beatitude*, but the simple addition of an index would have allowed for that—and would have been more practical.

There are other problems with the collection as well. The book contains a number of simple errors that are distracting and disturbing. For example, the font and spacing of different pages varies radically throughout large sections of the book. However, the font and spacing of the 1960 insert of *Beatitude* is consistent. More importantly, spelling and grammatical errors fill the entire volume. Maintaining the spirit of spontaneity is one thing, but such common mistakes are

simply unacceptable in the age of computer spelling programs. In addition, I found the included photos and drawings a bit too random, and wondered if the scope of the entire project was a bit too large. The use of a proper publisher would have improved the layout, organization, and general presentation of the content, which I must add, is good.

Perhaps the most important contribution to the collection is a reprint of a 1960 issue of the original *Beatitude* magazine, but that too is a problem. The editors attempted to link the earlier Beats to their apparent genealogical descendants. I find the marriage of old and new a bit odd in this context. Is it fair to the original Beat poets, who lived in a vacuum tube and Cold War culture, to have their poetry sit alongside the multicultural and postmodern American poets of the twenty-first century? More profoundly, is it fair to the large number of amateur authors included in this collection to have their work overshadowed by the greats of fifty years ago? A better idea might have been to separate the past and present manifestations of *Beatitude* into different collections altogether.

However, I readily admit that the insert of the 1960 issue of *Beatitude* is a real treat. Thumbing through the pages, one gets a real sense of the power and accessibility of the original *Beatitude* publication. Some noteworthy Beat poets are included in the insert. For example, Gregory Corso's "One Day..." offers an image of "light that makes us a fiend of eagles" (31). Richard Brautigan's "The American Submarine" evokes the grace of the nineteenth century pastoral, as in the following passage: "and the buffaloes did not hear a sound, / they continued grazing peacefully / in Nebraska" (34). A. Pankovits' "Progress" is a reflection on living in an industrial culture: "Beer cans / orange peels / waxed paper / soggy lettuce [...] I must go down to the / sea again / Back to nature / Close to God" (85). The inclusion of the 1960 insert more than justifies the cost of the book. However, I would like to know why this particular issue of *Beatitude* was included. A short introduction and proper motivation would prove valuable to readers.

A number of contemporary poets presented in this volume are new for me, and I thoroughly enjoyed reading their work. For example, George Hitchcock's "Siva the Destroyer" is a lovely, tightly crafted poem: "He sits on the throne / of the frozen yellow sun" (113). Thomas Rain Crowe's "Overpopulation" is a splendid tribute to Gregory Corso's "Bomb" and is ripe with apocalyptic visions of ecological ruin in the form of masses of humanity. Crowe writes: "Too many people. Not enough space. Too many / people carrying mace" (197). What a salient synopsis of the modern condition. Other poems by present-day writers are also notable. Patrick Carrington's "Knives" captures the threatened and troubled existence of a solitary young man: "Opening and closing / the blade, testing it on twigs" (206). Much of the more recent poetry in this collection honors the tradition of *Beatitude*.

Despite my concerns about the construction and layout of the book, the poetry here deserves reading, if not by academics, by those who appreciate the role of *Beatitude* in Beat mythology. Latif Harris and Neeli Cherkovski have attempted to keep the Beat practice of spontaneous energy and underground publication alive, and have generally succeeded in my view, even if the edges remain beatifically ragged.