A. Robert Lee

Preface

Beat Goddess.

You might think that would be quite sufficient to win anyone's attention.

But once you get to reading ruth weiss, or listening to her pioneer Jazz & Poetry performances, or watching her film and dance work together with her travel stories and haiku and watercolours, it becomes abundantly clear that so much more is signified in her life and art.

You are dealing with latitudes and longitudes. German birth. Vienna to California. Nazi Europe and the shadow of holocaust to West Coast America and 1950s-and-after bohemian North Beach.

En route a whole treasury of sites and residence. Childhood flight to Vienna and The Netherlands. School-time in New York's Harlem, then Chicago and Switzerland. Travels and adventuring to follow in Greenwich Village, New Orleans, and eventually San Francisco. And all the time the poet. To which her more than twenty published volumes, chapbooks and artwork give every confirmation.

Writings in English and in German translation. Verse, to be sure, but also screen, stage, couture, design.

And always the lower-case signing of her name in protest at Germanic *Ordnung* and capitalization of nouns. Add in her signature blue-green dyed hair as environmental gesture, one wholly in keeping with her demise at 92 years of age at the Mendocino County home she shared with her artist partner Paul Blake and later with Hal Davis in Albion amid California's stately redwoods. Add in her jazz (and non-jazz) readings, be it The Cellar, City Lights, The Co-Existence Bagel Shop, Caffè Trieste or each other venue: riff, phrasings, improvisation, sax, flute, percussion.

A life, a modern European-Jewish and Beat-troubadour American life, managed against initial odds but always with huge creative resilience.

A truly singular life lived inside truly singular history.

A Fool's Journey, which came out in a bilingual edition in 2012, she says is “dedicated to all the fools that paint & write & music make from the outside in.” It is not hard to recognize both her sense of the elusive challenge of art in general and of her own will to literary fashioning. From the outset her eye and ear were nothing if not pitched to capture the world as kinetic, realms of organic growth and nurture as against history's brute fissures, its too frequent human damage.

Take your further pick. In “Dedication” from *Light and Other Poems* (1976) she has her speaker lay down the desideratum “listen poets/dedicate your lines/ to the circle!” In *Single Out* (1978) the poignant autobiographical title-poem (“at the ps some kids called me nazi/the war was on/I spoke German”) and the imagistic “Earth Paintings” speak respectively to her focus in consciousness of history and of the natural world.

These combine in the two volumes and film likely to give her strengths their permanence.

Desert Journal, composed 1966–69 but published a decade later, might almost be a manifesto poem. Its forty-part sequence in its echoes of Moses and the Israelite exodus, Jesus in the desert, and the “Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves” story, offers a reflexive, associational, exploration of the creative mind (“the internal desert”). “The way is always open” gives a Zen-Beat touch, weiss as at once heir to Hebraic and Talmudic tradition and yet a voice committed to her own freely hybrid inflections of vision and image.

Can't Stop the Beat: The Life and Words of a Beat Poet (2011), a quartet of life-diaries in verse and prose with photography, covers wide topographies, among them Vienna, Harlem, South Side Chicago, Africa, the Pacific Ocean, Summer of Love San Francisco, Coit Tower, remembered Mexico with her first husband Mel Weitsman. Here, too, you meet her Beat-Beatnik remembrance, haiku-writing with Jack Kerouac, poetry with Bob Kaufman.

The Brink (1961, video 1986, preservation print by the Pacific Film Archive 2019) remains her film classic, an improvised visual choreography of love and love-pair as free-flow of image. Dance, movement, inscribe a kind of ode to joy against conformity and the rush of conflicting voice. Once known only at Beat margins and underground it has latterly moved more into the light.

Gender of necessity enters the reckoning. If we are getting used to the idea that Beat was not only the Ginsberg, Kerouac and Burroughs trinity, with Corso, Ferlinghetti and Snyder in the frame, then weiss is key among women's Beat authorship. *A Parallel Planet of People and Places: Stories and Poems* (2012) gives generous recognition to her co-makers, forty vignettes no less from Diane di Prima to Jan Kerouac, Joanne Kyger to Janine Pommy Vega. She can even include Billie Holiday and herself in the portraiture ("the beat the beat the beat/the poet to be the instrument").

Some career. Some presence.

To have, then, a first-ever collection of essays given over to her achievement is not only timely but almost spectacularly overdue. Each offers necessary entrance into the cross-lights of weiss's writing and art: Vienna, Desert, Gender, Poetics, Space, Festival, Visuality.

That, too, the collection falls under transnational Spanish-Austrian co-editorship, from a German press, with contributors from the USA, the UK, Austria, Spain, Cyprus, France, Germany, Switzerland, Sweden, Norway and Denmark, and with tributes from Anne Waldman and other countercultural US and European poets, could not be more fitting. weiss was nothing if not transnational in her own terms of place as of imaginative reach.

The documentary made by Melody C. Miller in 2019 as *ruth weiss*, its half-title actually a coining by the legendary San Francisco journalist Herb Caen, attempts one kind of honouring tribute.

Quite another documentary, *ruth weiss: One More Step West Is the Sea*, from the collection's co-editor Thomas Antonic, had its film festival premiere in June 2021.

For their part the essays at hand in *ruth weiss: Beat Poetry, Jazz & Art* give their own timeliest due.