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## RAYMOND FOYE AND LEGACY

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### 'A Lifelong Involvement'

*Raymond Foye has spent most of his professional life working on behalf of his Beat heroes. Here, the writer, editor, and literary executor for Gregory Corso, John Wieners, Rene Ricard, and James Schuyler reflects on what it takes to keep literary legacies like theirs alive.*

By Brett Sigurdson

Raymond Foye first met Gregory Corso in 1973 when his English Honors class at Lowell (Massachusetts) High School attended the Jack Kerouac Symposium at nearby Salem State College. There, Corso presided in one of his not infrequent sour moods (he “seemed very nearly the devil in the flesh,” Foye once wrote). During the evening’s poetry reading, Corso left the crowd spellbound with his poem in tribute to Kerouac, “Elegiac Feelings American (for the Dear Memory of John L. Kerouac).” Foye recalled that the experience awakened him to the “cult of Orpheus.”

In the years since, Foye has become a multi-hyphenate whose hip bonafides are without equal: he’s a writer, curator, editor, and publisher whose wide-ranging career has intersected with Allen Ginsberg, William S. Burroughs, Gregory Corso, Robert Frank, David Crosby, Ed Sanders, Stan Brakhage, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Patti Smith, Bob Dylan, Harry Smith, Jasper Johns, Graham Nash, Herbert Huncke, Francesco Clemente, and so many others. He’s worked for City Lights Books, New Directions, Petersburg Press, and Hanuman Books (he’s currently a consulting editor at the *Brooklyn Rail*.)

Foye has also edited collections of work by and about Edgar Allan Poe (*The Unknown Poe*), John Wieners, and Bob Kaufman (he received the American Book Award for his work editing Kaufman’s *Collected Poems* with Tate Swindell and Neeli Cherkovski).



His journeys have taken him from Lowell—he was born in Kerouac’s hometown the year *On the Road* was published—to San Francisco for art school to India to the Chelsea Hotel, where he has lived since the 1980s.

Foye is the literary executor for the estates of John Wieners, James Schuyler, Rene Ricard, and Corso. It’s the nature of his responsibilities overseeing the legacies of Beat and post-Beats that interested me. We corresponded over email recently about how he came to represent the interests of his Beat heroes, what scholars should know about working with literary estates, and the role executors like him play—or should play—in cultivating an author’s legacy. This interview has been lightly edited for clarity.

**Your biography describes you as a writer, curator, editor, and publisher. How does “literary executor” overlap with these identities? In the Venn diagram of your professional life, how do you describe the point of intersection between these roles?**

Being a literary executor, I partake in all the activities you mention. Hopefully, being a writer gives one insight into the working methods of other writers, while being an editor is useful for all the general reasons associated with that job, from spelling and grammar to larger critical considerations that go into making a book. Because of the considerable amount of unpublished material that remains after an author dies, editorial decisions play a big role in executorship. Therefore, a prior working editorial relationship with the author during their lifetime is helpful because then the executor is already informed about their quirks and preferences. This can come into play on a line-to-line basis—for instance, when confronted with a critical decision about whether one should correct spelling or not.

The same familiarity with the author may be invaluable in making larger decisions about what to publish or what not to publish. When George Scrivani and I were editing *The Golden Dot: Last Poems 1997–2000* by Gregory Corso, we constantly asked what Gregory would do in this instance. Ninety percent of the time, we felt reasonably secure with our decisions because we both had such a close working relationship with him for decades.

In terms of unpublished materials, it's important to determine the author's intentions: does the material merit being published, or should it remain unpublished and preserved in the archives for scholarly purposes? I believe an author's intentions should be respected most of the time, but an author may have been prejudiced against a piece of writing for reasons that, in the end, have nothing to do with the merits of the work. Or they might have changed their mind if they had lived.

I believe strongly in seeking out the opinion of others who knew the writer well (or sometimes just the writer's work). For example, when Simon Petit edited a collection of uncollected poems by James Schuyler called *Other Flowers* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011), I think initially I allowed my familiarity with Schuyler's published poems to negatively influence my judgment toward these unpublished poems. I considered them

slight and tended to see them as rejects. So, I consulted John Ashbery. He read the manuscript carefully and said, “Oh no, you're wrong. Look at it again. These are remarkable poems. They just don't fit into what we think a James Schuyler poem should be.” And he was absolutely right.

The matter of an author's later revision of earlier work is always fraught. Often, those revisions are *not* an improvement (as in the case of Walt Whitman or W. H. Auden, in my opinion). In that case, the executor is stuck between respecting the author's intention and one's own opinion about the relative merits of those revisions. Ideally, in this case, having multiple editions is the ideal—but extravagant—solution.

As a publisher, I would like to think I have a more realistic view of the book business than most—namely, how little money there is to be made. Hence, I am grateful to those who still publish, as it is mostly a labor of love, especially with regard to poetry.

My curatorial experience in the art world has made me appreciate writers' visual creations, such as John Wieners' collages or Gregory Corso's paintings and drawings. I have curated gallery exhibitions of William Burroughs's paintings and Allen Ginsberg's photographs, and my curatorial experience and art world connections certainly came in handy in those instances.

As I've described above, the point of intersection of all these roles actually comes in the job of literary executor.

**You have contributed to the Gagosian's “Building a Legacy” series, which features in-depth interviews with experts in artists' estates. What role does—and should—literary executors play in fostering the legacies of the writers they represent? How do you define the line between exploiting and preserving a writer's legacy?**

The most important qualities for a literary executor would be responsiveness, answering emails, educating people about the author's work, and communicating one's enthusiasm for it. Encouraging young scholars in their research is very important. It comes down to maintaining communication, and good relations, with people. Some executors have been famously

difficult and contentious—Stephen Joyce or Paul Zukofsky would be good examples. The wrong type of personality can have a very negative effect on an author's legacy. As for exploitation, I think that only comes into play when an author is *extremely* famous. Then advertising or merchandising might come into play—not something I need to worry about.

**You've said that pacing is a key concern when considering releasing new material. You said of Belson, "Every new show should be some kind of new revelation. So you have to think about the estate in terms of material, eras, concerns—breaking it up and then revealing it bit by bit." How does this play out practically? As the estate executor, are you actively cultivating projects on, say, Gregory Corso that fit a release plan?**

Pacing is important—spacing apart new releases, trying to ensure that each new release has something unexpected or novel about it. There is a natural ebb and flow to the public's interest in an author's work. There are periods of interest, followed by fallow periods. The fallow period when there is little interest is normal, and even useful, because every generation should experience the excitement that they are discovering an author for themselves.

I don't have a formal release plan for any author, but I do keep in my head projects yet to be realized. In the case of Gregory Corso, there are several books I would like to see realized in the next few years: a book of uncollected poems (of which there are many), and a book of his prose writings. A lot of people are not aware that Gregory regularly wrote for magazines in the late 1950s and early 1960s. I'd like to see these articles collected and published. There are also many fine notebooks in various research institutions which deserve to be published in a facsimile or critical edition. For Corso, the notebook was a medium unto itself because his work was so process-oriented, the way it unfolded both in his mind and in his life and on the page.

**Are you waiting for project pitches that meet your sense of a legacy's narrative arc?**

'Project pitches' mostly come from scholars wishing to pursue a project, such as a biography, or a volume of correspondence.

Recently, Peter Valente came to me with the idea of a "Collected Prose of John Wieners." At first, I thought, "That's a stretch." But as I read his manuscript, I realized it was a brilliant idea. John's prose style was very different from his poetry. His critical thinking is everywhere evident. There are book reviews, movie reviews, prefaces, and introductions, all kinds of things that never had a place anywhere else. And then, at the last minute, we decided to include all his interviews—it just seemed right. Otherwise, those would have been orphaned, and these show another marvelous side of his intellect.

Letters are an extremely important part of a writer's legacy, and I think one of the main undertakings for an executor should be trying to publish the correspondence. In this regard, M. Seth Stewart's editing of *Yours Presently: The Selected Letters of John Wieners* added a tremendous amount to our knowledge and appreciation of that writer. And Robert Dewhurst's comprehensive biography of Wieners is nearing completion. It will be an important addition to our understanding of this great poet.

It's very interesting to see how reputations change over the years. John Wieners was a very neglected and obscure poet when I first sought him out in the early 1980s, and now his reputation is considerable and world-wide. I think he's one of the most read, studied, and appreciated American poets of the 20th century. I am not taking credit for that; his work accomplished that. I've also seen other figures like filmmaker Harry Smith or poet Bob Kaufman go from the fringes to something like the mainstream.

**As you think of pacing and positioning new projects, do you find the Beat connection a help or hindrance in this contemporary moment?**

I find the Beat connection to be a help, actually—just as the "New York School" label is a help with James Schuyler's legacy. Whenever writers or artists organize themselves into a group—or just fall into a historical group by generational circumstance—it somehow amplifies the notoriety of the individual author. A group almost always gets more attention than a lone figure. Maybe it's because they have the power of the zeitgeist behind them. The "Beat Generation" label is only as limiting as you

allow it to be. The range and scope of writers who fall under that designation are amazing, yet they all partake of a similar spirit. And they are all outside the academy—that's very important to remember.

**I'm a young scholar with some experience working with literary estates. I've found the prospect generally daunting—they can feel opaque and forbidding. In fact, the executor of one Beat estate, whom I've never met, called me "an idiot" when I asked him about contributing to this publication. How should scholars approach working with literary estates? Conversely, how should literary estates think about working with scholars?** Being a literary executor puts one in a position of control, and that often brings out the worst in people. Some executors have an official narrative they are trying to promote or protect. Some are trying to settle old scores. Some even harbor resentment against the very author they are representing. When literary executors are family members, then all those neurotic familial relations can come into play. Sometimes, there are secrets that people are trying to hide. I've seen it all.

The most important thing a literary executor can and should do is say 'Yes.' Of course, not in every instance, but in most instances, I would say it is best to err on the side of openness and let the general critical exchange of ideas work things out. No self-respecting scholar is going to allow anyone to tell them what they should think, and if that happens—and it does—they will simply shift their attention to another subject. It is very important to encourage young scholars in their work while understanding the skills of scholarship and writing take a very long time to master. Encouragement and stewardship are what's needed most from an executor. I don't know if there's any right way to approach a literary executor. Straightforward would be my approach. I do understand the problem and have encountered it myself.

**You're also a writer and an artist. Considering your role as an executor, how does this inform your thoughts about the way your work is preserved and passed down to the next generation?**

I'm a writer. I wouldn't say I'm an artist. I've always seen myself as a student of the Beats. They were my university, a university of the streets. My legacy, to the extent that I think about it (which isn't much), is as someone who appreciated artists and poets and tried to help whenever I could. Some of the most extraordinary poets I've known, such as John Wieners and Bob Kaufman and Rene Ricard, really needed help in their life, both personally and with the preservation of their work. I recognized this, and I tried to give assistance. It's been a lifelong involvement. I was so young when I met many of these great figures that it's only now I'm beginning to understand the implications of what they were about. In my publications, I'm trying to contextualize, explicate, and promote their works and gifts. These were extraordinary people. I owe it to them.



Raymond Foye (at left) with Bill Morgan (seated, slightly obscured) Jean-Jacques Lebel, Peter Orlovsky, Allen Ginsberg, and Felix Guattari in January 1982.  
Photo: Jean-Jacques Lebel

**What projects do you have in store for 2024—personally and from the estates you represent?**

As for my projects in 2024, as usual, I have far too many. I have too much on my plate, and it's quite a problem most of the time. I understand that, and there's not much I can do except not get uptight about it.

Anyway, some of my projects for 2024 are a new edition of John Wieners's 1975 masterpiece *Behind the State Capitol*, with some supplementary critical texts and a little bit of history about the publication. I have a 550-page *Collected Poems* by Peter Lamborn Wilson/Hakim Bey that is pretty much ready to go to press. He's one of my favorite poets and very much underrated in that field. He was also very unfairly maligned by certain aspects of cancel culture in his lifetime. To some extent, I am trying to address that wrong. I have five other books by Peter Lamborn Wilson in various stages of completion: a memoir of India in the 1960s called *Monsoon Raga*, a memoir of Iran in the 1970s, and a book of essays on occult topics called *Mercurious*.

I'm also working on a *Collected Poems* of Rene Ricard, which I would like to think is nearly finished, but I keep discovering important new poems in private collections and research libraries, so I'm not sure if that book will be ready in 2024. I have five or six short stories Rene wrote, some important writings on Jean-Michel Basquiat, and a very exciting text about the Warhol Factory called "Memoir of an Underground Movie Star" that was discovered by William Rand. All of these are unpublished. So maybe the book will be a collected writings or a "Rene Ricard Reader." As an editor, you are always asking yourself, "What is the right form?" Rene's manuscripts are scattered far and wide because of his chaotic lifestyle, which is a challenge for anyone interested in his work.

I would like to see an edition of the letters of John Ashbery and James Schuyler. They were best friends, yet John lived in Paris for almost ten years, so they kept in touch through correspondence. I will not do that book myself, so if any scholars out there are looking for a good project, consider this.

I'm also organizing another art exhibition of the work of Jordan Belson for Matthew Marks Gallery in New York in 2024.

I'm part of a team of people who are preserving the films of Belson and putting them in circulation once again. Belson made approximately 36 highly personal abstract films between 1948 and 2006, and they've been out of circulation for far too long. Recently, I read the Jack Kerouac/Allen Ginsberg letters, edited by David Stanford and Bill Morgan, and Belson appears throughout those letters. He's one of the "heads" of the scene, like Philip Lamantia: a guide, someone they truly admire. So here's an example of how Beat studies are not just literary.

**As you look further into the future, what thoughts do you have about your role as an executor specifically and about literary executorships generally?**

One thing many executors have not understood or provided for is the need to name a successor. I think a lot of estates will end up in limbo in the next generation. The only option then is to petition the courts in the state where the writer died, and asked to be appointed the executor. This is time-consuming and expensive. I did this with the John Wieners estate because he left no Will. The reason I did it was because John was being left out of important poetry anthologies. There was no one in a position to grant rights. A publication like the *Norton Anthology of American Poetry* will only reprint a poet if they have a clear title to the work. That's what actually got me into this whole literary executorship business in the first place.

A part of me thinks the best thing an executor can do is just put the work into the public domain. I'm considering that with some estates I control. However, an executor doesn't always own the copyrights. The beneficiary does, and those are often not the same person. Sometimes, there are pre-existing contracts that have been signed with publishers, which would make such a move impossible.

Anyway, my position is this: if there isn't an immediate surviving heir who needs and deserves the royalties to live on, then the copyrights should be dissolved because that will do society the greatest good.