

COUNTERCULTURE INCLUDES TRADITION

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“When I read it, I don't wince, which is all I ever ask for a book I write.” - Norman Mailer

Abstract: *By stating that counterculture includes tradition we understand that the beat generation is not so disconnected from the message exposed by the American transcendentalist writers of the 19th century. So tradition is present in a subtle form even in the movements that challenge the literary and artistic establishment. Counterculture is different from subculture – thus it is normal that it includes a tradition that was thwarted by the cultural mainstream.*

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Isn't it clear that the golden days of counterculture have been swallowed by the conformist and dry mainstream? The scourging days of 1964, when Timothy Leary urged: “you have to Go out of Your Mind to Use Your Head”¹. Those years when the experiments with psychedelic drugs took place at Harvard and on writers! The counterculture took on to aesthetic experiments together with a sharp social involvement. The same Leary professing open hate to the establishment: “To shoot a genocidal robot policeman in the defense of life is a sacred act”². And keep in mind – this was the second stage of counterculture, after its pinnacle!

The authenticity of counterculture is indisputable as writers' biographies extensively rivalled their fiction. In 1960 Norman Mailer stabbed his wife. Okay then, he was mentally disturbed. If it had been only for that! But his private life got redeemed by overflowing into the public realm. In 1969 he ran for mayor of New York. The writer's status was so important that he could charge 50 bucks admission to his 50th birthday party. What if he had covered Adam's lifespan?

Dolly culture, crazy counterculture

Within the same interval, Hunter S. Thompson was going for “big bang psychotherapy”³ firing rifles out of his window. No wonder he was described as “a literary

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¹ Whitmer, O. Peter and Bruce VanWyngarden, *Aquarius revisited: Seven Who Created the Sixties Counterculture that Changed America: William Burroughs, Allen Ginsberg, Ken Kesey, Timothy Leary, Norman Mailer*, MacMillan, New York, 1987, p. 15.

² Whitmer, O. Peter and Bruce VanWyngarden, *Aquarius revisited: Seven Who Created the Sixties Counterculture that Changed America: William Burroughs, Allen Ginsberg, Ken Kesey, Timothy Leary, Norman Mailer*, MacMillan, New York, 1987, p. 42.

³ Whitmer, O. Peter and Bruce VanWyngarden, *Aquarius revisited: Seven Who Created the Sixties Counterculture that Changed America: William Burroughs, Allen Ginsberg, Ken Kesey, Timothy Leary, Norman Mailer*, MacMillan, New York, 1987, p. 87.

bull in the china shop of western civilization”⁴. Now we can clearly hear the “hum of the block machinery”⁵, that is the Combine repressing everything that wanted to be different. What if culture, especially the academic one, has become a Procrustean device supporting a hypocrite and dull political correctness? What if this new type of culture, cemented with piles of red tape – rules, regulations, diplomas and certificates – has got the appearance of Miss Ratched in **One Flew over the Cuckoo’s Nest**? “Her face is smooth, calculated, and precision-made, like an expensive baby doll, blend of white and cream and baby-blue eyes, small nose, pink little nostrils”⁶. A dolly culture imbued with cute and cosy considerations, the function of which is more and more didactic, but less and less challenging and critical.

Now, what is the good of a civilized culture, wherein one writes keeping the score: number of articles, scholarships, memberships, committees and so forth? If McMurphy popped in one day and asked us: “Who’s the bull goose loony here”⁷, how many of us would have the guts to face him? He was battling hammer and tongs against that Big Nurse who wanted everybody and everything “adjusted”. One way or another, even we, the intelligentsia, have become the employees of a cultural factory. But this giving in isn’t sufficient. We have to let ourselves be reformed into “a bunch of chickens at a peckin’ party”⁸, telling on those still resisting, those who don’t want to surrender to the snugly rhinoceros condition.

Try and not be polite, try and not be ecumenical and the globalists will ridicule you as a *retrograde* factor. Again, we are living in an Age of Enlightenment relying not that much on Reason, but on conformity to corporate thinking. As Harding, the philosopher of the loonies put it allegorically: “All of us in here are rabbits of varying ages and degrees, hippity-hopping through our Walt Disney world”⁹.

A tumultuous ivory tower

The paradox of this Newer World Order is that all the previously banished abnormalities and perversities are now accepted as long as they back up the conjugated efforts of diminishing liberties. You can be whatever you like if only in small quantities and slumbering intensity. Like in John Fowles’s **The Collector**, the thinkers are a Miranda imprisoned by a Caliban incapable of understanding her larger-than-world aspirations. I think Orwell overestimated the fears of the dominant class. Why would it be necessary to make people blindly believe the official lie and fanatically die for it? Religion, not to say philosophy and art, is a strong enemy of manipulation. Better and easier is to replace these abstract attractions with superstitions and consumerism.

As for the creators and thinkers, they can brood over whatever they want as long as they draw the conclusions only in their minds. The mind stays free, but the expression of it no. Disentangling from all sorts of manipulations becomes harder and harder. In order to

⁴ Whitmer, O. Peter and Bruce VanWyngarden. *Aquarius revisited: Seven Who Created the Sixties Counterculture that Changed America: William Burroughs, Allen Ginsberg, Ken Kesey, Timothy Leary, Norman Mailer*, MacMillan, New York, 1987, p. 88.

⁵ Kesey, Ken. *One Flew over the Cuckoo’s Nest*. Clays Ltd, London. 2002. p. 7.

⁶ Kesey, Ken. *One Flew over the Cuckoo’s Nest*. Clays Ltd, London. 2002. p. 10.

⁷ Kesey, Ken. *One Flew over the Cuckoo’s Nest*. Clays Ltd, London. 2002. p. 25.

⁸ Kesey, Ken. *One Flew over the Cuckoo’s Nest*. Clays Ltd, London. 2002. p. 72.

⁹ Kesey, Ken. *One Flew over the Cuckoo’s Nest*. Clays Ltd, London. 2002. p. 81.

attain this capability, one needs (counter)culture, not official and tamed education. But (counter)culture doesn't pay anymore. The contemporary free-thinker has become a famished figure.

What we shouldn't forget is that the Beats didn't molly-coddle in literature. Their movement was a reaction against "the stifling conformity of the Eisenhower presidency of the 1950's"¹⁰. This political involvement highlights the seriousness underlying all their revelries and escapades. Then, it was the position taken against the Korean War, immediately after which many representatives of the (quasi)generation abruptly ended their public life.

The Beats - hardly a generation

Although the Beat writers dwelled mainly upon their personal experiences, heavily relying on the first person narrative, they never enjoyed escapism. In their case, the ivory tower was a travelling device, either spatially or in the guise of a drug trip. If their ideals converged to a certain degree, this aspect doesn't entitle us to crowd them under the flag of a generation. Already in the 60's the genuine spirit of the group had made room for the "media-hyped 'beatnik' industry"¹¹, an appalling conclusion for the real Beats. We mustn't forget that the term "beatnik" was an ironic coinage. In criticizing the dullness of the new post-war material comfort, the Beats turned to patriarchal values. They are the true heirs of those Transcendentalists who had withdrawn to hamlets and cultivated their own back-garden food. Ralph Waldo Emerson warned about the dangers of the economic spirit swallowing the spiritual values. If we gather together the critiques brought to the American Dream, we shall notice the common key struck in turns by the Transcendentalists, the Beats and the more comprehensive Flower-Power movement. On the one hand, we have the primitive and Zen attitude, on the other hand the Fordist enthusiasm for technological progress and social welfare. Ginsberg's *mantra* "first thought, best thought" isn't that far away from Henry David Thoreau's Walden preaching spontaneity, simplicity, and pure-heartedness. Now the culture should imply individualism and, at least, cleavage from, if not protest against, the utilitarian-gregarious vision of the world. And here lies the main difference from subsequent literary currents inferring themselves from the Beat "canon". The Beats didn't pay homage to literature as to a fetish - as it will be the case with their pretended successors. Writing was mainly a lifestyle, the capture of psychedelic and social experiments. This fact is reflected in the Beat counterculture's protagonists becoming in time (well-sold) idols of the popular culture.

Again, the Beat attitude wasn't strictly a scriptural one. All the arts shook hands over sabotaging the ponderous mainstream. There came the Bebop, Marlon Brandon's *Method Acting* and Jackson Pollock's Abstract Expressionism. Their involvement was so fierce that many exponents of this reshaping of artistic condition destroyed their lives or others. Lucien Carr killed David Kammerer, Jackson Pollock suffered a fatal car accident as a result of his chronic alcoholism, Jack Kerouac had a vicious and premature death, not to say about William Burroughs who shot Joan Vollmer and shockingly admitted afterwards:

¹⁰ Gair, Christopher. *The Beat Generation: a Beginner's Guide*. 2008, Oneworld Publications. London, p. 25.

¹¹ Gair, Christopher. *The Beat Generation: a Beginner's Guide*. 2008, Oneworld Publications. London, p. 5.

“I am forced to the appalling conclusion that I would not have become a writer but for Joan’s death. The death of Joan brought me into contact with the invader, the Ugly Spirit, and manoeuvred me into a lifelong struggle in which I had no choice except to write my way out”¹². “Writing their way out” meant writing on the brink of craziness; which is somehow paradoxical if we keep in mind the structural conservatism of the Beats. Their writing techniques may be avanguardist (see Burroughs’s cut-up method), but their message and their cultural background stay conservative and romantic.

So, Bebop relaxes the geometry of Swing in jazz, Marlon Brandon’s impersonating Stanley Kowalski in Tennessee William’s **A Street Car Named Desire** epitomized the importance of gesture and of overwhelming, animal passion, disregarding the clear and self-contained diction, while Abstract Expressionism reacted against the figurative social realism prevalent in the painting around 1930. Beat culture meant especially context. Context is always a kind of shelter, too. One feels protected, one could slip into improvising. As the new musicians did, Kerouac used to practise his pen in sketching whatsoever passed by his window. The fragment became momentous. Of course, the power of fragment lies in its expressivity, not in the complex structure or in imposing ideational concatenations. Original techniques emerged in every art, all of them desirous to disrupt continuity, logics, figurativeness, and bourgeois decency. Maybe the quintessential approach was that of Jackson Pollock, surnamed “Jack the Dripper” by **Time** magazine, on account of his peripatetic and dripping way of painting.

The imperative of paradox

All these instances lead to the conclusion that the Beats lived an insurmountable paradox. They modernized fiction writing – at the level of phraseology and narrative strategies –, but admitted to the formative influence of tradition. Alienated or self-exiled, they envisaged constituting an élite, despising commercial success. Simultaneously, their themes focused on the lives of cultivated or tormented outcasts. Their inspirational reality was placed at the outskirts of society. This savage and apparently incongruous élite was long despised and neglected by the representatives of mainstream culture. To be sure, the Beats were extremely sensitive, psychotic, and delirious. Weird enough, Allen Ginsberg, the most physically flawed between them, persisted most and was assimilated to a countercultural icon. Even he, the weak one, embraced a combative, masculine, and energetic stand. Often physically strong, but emotionally fragile, the Beats ignored Walt Whitman’s hymning and visionary artistry. Secluded and anti-social, they didn’t nurture paramount plans for their country. Actually, they never found the balance between art and life; in their case, the one consumed the other. That’s why the temptation to compare the American counterculture between the 40’s and the 60’s with other countercultures all over the globe is only a strenuous, not to say illusory, battle. Only the United States of that period created the atmosphere for such a complex, contradictory, and courageous phenomenon. Let’s not stretch our illusions behind the point where they may break! The Beats in the skies won’t credit us - not a snap!

¹² Gair, Christopher, *The Beat Generation: a Beginner's Guide*, Oneworld Publications, London, 2008, p. 11.

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