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KEROUAC WAS HERE

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Although our culture is characterized by common traits which are distinctive enough, and of such kind as to entitle us to call it a "mass culture," it is not a homogeneous entity anymore than the people who bear it are a homogeneous mass.\*

Almost fifty years ago, Van Wyck Brooks (1) introduced a first intra-cultural typology independent of social and economic class. This was later amplified by Russell Lynes. (7) It has been dealt with most recently and

intelligently by Richard Chase. (3) He grouped people according to their selective participation in the common culture (including their selection of attitudes) as high, middle, or low brows. Although meant mainly to serve the purposes of literary criticism, Van Wyck Brooks' distinction was found generally fruitful. More recently, Clement Greenberg (12, pp.98-107) attempted to classify cultural products: modern art either is avant-garde (concerned with no subject but art and art-production itself) or Kitsch (an attempt to achieve imitatively effects associated with art by esthetically illegitimate means). Kitsch senti-

\*On the general nature, causes and effects of mass culture, see Ralph Ross and Ernest van den Haag. (13, Ch.15) See also the Rosenberg and White anthology. (12 passim)

mentalizes; avant-garde "de-humanizes."\*

These groupings shed some light on the differentiations and polarizations within our culture, but it is a spotlight which pulls matters out of shape by leaving large areas in obscurity.\*\* A more spacious scheme might be useful; while accommodating the two schemes mentioned above it would leave room for phenomena which find no place in them. In many areas our society is dominated by an immensely powerful mass of consumers who will extravagantly reward whoever produces diversions—entertainment—that they can effortlessly digest. (On this point, see Ross and van den Haag (13) and also Ortega y Gasset (9).) These diversions may include "thrills," or "fun," factual reports, or edifying material, but nothing much beyond that—particularly no art. Most artists are tempted, at least to some extent, by the immense rewards available for the production of mass culture. They thus tend to adulterate all or some of their work. Artists incapable or unwilling to produce for the mass of consumers are left alone in our society—left alone so much as to be isolated and driven to play games with their tools. (Some such games can be fruitful. But ultimately sterility follows from the absence of people who form enough of a community with the artist to be communicated to.) In short, the mass

\*Ortega y Gasset (9), anticipating Mr. Greenberg, defined contemporary art so as to make it coincide with the latter's avant-garde art.

\*\*Note that "Kitsch" (if it is used in the German sense—the nearest American paraphrase would be "corny stuff") applies to European mass art more than to American mass art. We sensationalize at least as often as we sentimentalize. Mr. Greenberg's polarization seems altogether more applicable to Europe than to America.

which includes middle and low brows fatally attracts the high brows and causes those that do not join to function not as an elite but as a marginal group.

However, many of the consumers of distraction are not distracted as soon as they are aware of merely being distracted. They want to take themselves seriously. And they look for a philosophy, preferably an esoteric one—provided it is easily digestible (or that they can pretend to absorb it)—to help them rationalize their life. Hence, the inchoate grasping for Zen Buddhism or existentialism. (Whatever the intrinsic value of these ideologies, we are here concerned only with the reasons for their acceptance or repute.) Others, while unable to understand or care for Greenberg's avant-garde or Van Wyck Brooks' high or even middle brow art, are yet neither low brows nor Kitsch consumers. There are high, middle, and low brows; but there are also cultural strata that do not fit this scheme, just as there are cultural products that are neither avant-garde nor Kitsch. A number of groups (and products) sprouting, as it were, laterally from the great mass consuming simple diversions can be observed.\*\*\* The success of James Gould Cozzens and, before him, of Herman Wouk, falls into the middle brow or Kitsch drawer (although to say as much does not explain but merely sets the stage for an explanation: why has the middle brow taste developed as it has?); but not the success of Allen Ginsberg or Jack Kerouac. They produce neither Kitsch nor avant-garde (if these terms are to retain a specific meaning) and are no more high or low than they are middle brows.

\*\*\*Note also that when we say "diversion" we indicate a direction (or a directionless meandering) but we do not say what diverts whom, when, why, or how.

I shall be concerned here with the group represented by the work of Jack Kerouac and the people celebrated in it, the "beat generation." Strictly speaking, the beat generation is a public. Members are linked by a common attitude and consumption of the same articles; but they need not know each other and are not organized nor act together. However, on occasion, segments of this public coalesce easily into groups displaying great solidarity against outsiders. I have observed members of this public or group informally over a number of years and my observations satisfy me that Mr. Kerouac's work is representative; and it is accessible (5, 6), whereas my undocumented observations could not be distinguished from the interpretations which they should validate.\*

No quantitative data are likely to become available. However, the "beat" group is sufficiently related to the hipsters, in turn related to the old bohemia to thrive in the bohemian quarters of major urban centers and in bohemian enclaves within working class districts and slums. (Whenever a quarter becomes known to be "bohemian" for any length of time, well-to-do groups of young executives who dream artistic dreams move in. They bid up rental values and the bohemians are chased to the slums. Greenwich Village in New York is a prominent instance.) Notice has been taken—for whatever it may be worth—of

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\*It is a pleasure to acknowledge the help received from my friend, Anatole Broyard, in perceiving and understanding many of the phenomena discussed. Some of the formulations I use undoubtedly originated with him in our discussions of the subject. I am grateful for his permission to use them without specifically investigating and acknowledging the source in each instance. Note, incidentally, that the *locus classicus* for the description of the hipster in its pre-beat incarnation is Broyard's *Portrait of the Hipster*. (2)

the "beat generation" in the "New York Times," "Harper's Bazaar," and "Mademoiselle"; "Evergreen Review" has published two issues devoted to it and the high and middle brow magazines all have taken note. The "New York Times" daily reviewer even praised "On the Road" extravagantly. The "beat" attitude is, apart from terminology, not confined to America. For instance, Philip O'Connor (8) had wild success in England with phrases such as "I was obsessed by my genius which I treated as a hot liquor to be expectorated on the world to its advantage." However Mr. O'Connor's book suggests some ability to transcend his condition whereas our own beat hipsters mainly indulge it.

One other English instance (though one may quibble about that: Donleavy is a Bronx Irishman; his book, successfully published in England, is banned in Ireland) is J. P. Donleavy. (4) His book, written by and about an American studying law on the G. I. Bill in Dublin, was greatly praised in England and treated with respect in this country. The book's "rollicking realism," its "earthy," "vital," "virile" attitude, its "high voltage energy" were hailed. The hero, drunk or sober, beats his pregnant wife whenever he feels like it. Later he drinks away the money needed to feed her and his baby son and brawls in bars. He cheats everybody in sight, including his landlords (whose furniture he sells or burns), grocers, hacks and also all his friends. He keeps himself in drink by sponging on a number of women, his wife among them. He takes their money mainly by fraud but is not above stealing it directly; and also their furniture or clothes. This is about all he is represented as doing. The question is why is this protagonist presented as a hero by the author and accepted as

a hero by the critics and the public at large?

The author seems to think that his hero is, in the words of one reviewer, "endlessly beguiling," because he gets drunk, doesn't wash and doesn't give a damn. He seems near exclaiming, "look, ma, no soap"—and perhaps he is applauded by many people who never got rid of their infatuation with the neighborhood bad boy. The more polite and clean people are brought up to be, the greater, perhaps, the vicarious appeal of dirt and irresponsibility? Possibly reviewers, too, are eager to demonstrate that they are no conventional stick-in-the-muds. Hence, their view of pregnant wife beating as "sheer excess of horse power."\* The only virtue Mr. Donleavy's hero has is that he has no virtue. Perhaps the English are becoming particularly susceptible to this kind of hero because of the timidity, love of cozy comfort and high sense of civic responsibility which Geoffrey Gorer found to be characteristic of them? The tamer the life, the wilder the fantasy? Is this perhaps the explanation for the aimless anger expressed by some English authors? Our own beat generation is not so much fenced in by suffocating and petty virtuousness as it is oppressed by endless vistas. Hence, perhaps, the contrast between "angry" and "beat." But let us return to the beat generation.

The group attracts people engaged in the occupations that since the nineteenth century have been related to bohemian styles: artists, writers, performers, *et al.* as well as—and mainly—those who hope to engage in these occupations or work in the no-man's

\*Unlike most reviewers I can find no literary merit in Mr. Donleavy's work which offers a tiresome miscegenation of vulgarized Joyce and vulgarized Henry Miller.

land between "art" and "commerce." Jazz musicians and their admirers are well represented, and marihuana, sex, and alcohol are consumed. However, the "beat" person uses these things; he is not addicted to them; they help him be "beat"; full addiction is not really "cool." Indeed, it is not that these things—or any others—吸引 him. They distract him from the futility he fears.

The beat hipsters (for the hipsters now are absorbed into the "beat generation") are unwilling or unable to accept discipline or impose it upon themselves. They sense that the norms observed by others have not led them to anything that would make it worthwhile to follow them. Perhaps as enthusiasts often do, they expect too much. Perhaps they react against the genuine boredom of mass culture which all too often has made work and leisure equally meaningless. But their reaction consists of an agitated boredom which they oppose to the routine or listless boredom characterizing other segments of mass culture. (14)

The beat hipsters are too much part of the mass culture society they reject to conceive of various high culture alternatives. These would require a discipline and a tradition which they lack. They frantically seek ways to endow their life with meaning without disciplining themselves, without indeed being able to accept and live a meaningful life. Thus, they are led to pretend to have found meaning in the mere act of rebelling. They work hard at relegating themselves beyond the pale. They make a positive virtue of the mere rejection of social norms and celebrate their normlessness (anomie). But being a talkative and gregarious lot, they must bind themselves together again; and they do. They talk

jive talk—the communication of the self-excommunicated, serving no purpose but to set them apart and bind them together (as do the secret languages children invent).

The cultural anorexia which the “beat” hipsters share and the consequent cultural starvation, and the few bonds which they permit themselves to continue with life, altogether tend not only to set them apart but also to stereotype the “beat” hipsters; individuation, though an apparent goal, is implicitly rejected with the rejection of discipline and learning. For individuation is autochthonous discipline arising from tutored sensibility and cultural selection. Otherwise one pair of tight jeans resembles the other no less than one gray flannel suit or sincere tie resembles another. Possibly the de-individualization among hipsters is both more willed and more complete: they are more in need of each other; and arranging, as they do, for a highly discontinuous life, their activities become monotonous; for the experience of variety is a fruit of continuous relationships. Unable to engage in sociability—individualized relationships—“beat” hipsters are compulsively gregarious, i.e., engaged in drowning their sense of isolation and the remnants of individuality identified with it by merging into a group. The “beat” hipsters try assiduously to dissolve by means of sex, alcohol and drugs, the “blocks” that inhibit their “true” personality. (They do not realize that what individuality they have mostly consists of these blocks.) Alcohol, sex, and drugs are consumed because they hold this promise. Those who remain conscious are disappointed; but they continue out of inertia: “what else is there?”

Reason and knowledge may not suffice to slake man’s immemorial

thirst for meaning. But they are indispensable even to recognize the nature of that thirst and of the human predicament which causes it. If one wishes to live a human life one can, perhaps, one must, perhaps, at times transcend the intellect. But one cannot avoid it; nor can one transcend the human condition by merely being angry or impatient with it. However the “beat” hipsters, some because they are, quite simply, too stupid to ever go beyond abysmal ignorance, others because they are kept ignorant by their intolerance of discipline, try to make a maudlin glorification of tawdry “thrills” into a metaphysical credo. And they succeed with people almost as ignorant and quite as bored with their own routine. To such people, the “beat” hipster who has discarded their routine becomes a hero. They do not see that one routine has been exchanged for another equally hopeless and mechanical routine. Nor do they see that the “beat” hipster who appears to be seeking and rediscovering the tension of existence is actually intolerant of it and drowns it and himself in meaningless brawls, jazz, drugs, and agitated travels.\*

The “beat” hipsters have quite literally a horror of standing still: they constantly exhort each other “go, man, go”—but it does not seem to matter where. Hence, they aimlessly cross the country back and forth, speeding in a vain attempt to overtake (or

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\*Some critics, notably Norman Podhoretz (II) have anxiously noted that the anti-intellectualism of the “beat” hipsters resembles the anti-intellectualism that prepared Hitler’s way in Germany. No doubt *qua* anti-intellectual, the attitude is the same. But the effect is not. “Beat” hipsterism seems an alternative to, rather than a preparation for, political action. Matters might be different if our traditions were, and if the “beat” hipsters were reacting to material misery and defeat rather than to prosperity and victory.

merely to catch up with) a life that they desperately hope is not passing them by. The low brow types elect the motorcycle as their symbol. The motorcycle has other all too fitting connotations: it is dangerous, daredevil, dizzying and, above all, a noisy symbol of virile potency much less equivocal than the automobile which is comparatively sheltering and effeminate.\* In one sense, the mania for motion is a continuation of a characteristic mass culture attitude, stemming ultimately from traditionlessness and the attempt to get ahead fast. "Dynamic" is a laudatory adjective; "progress" is an article of faith. And "progress" seems identified with motion *per se*. Americans have long been speed and motion hungry. All the same, their appetite was never satisfied any place they arrived at. "Go, man, go" thus is also a reaction—go where others have not been, go and take us along, go to the promised land; for the hipster knows that what the "squares" go for—more comfort, money, etc.—is not what is really wanted. Thus, instead of Veblen's "conspicuous consumption" of commodities, the "beat" hipster engages in a conspicuous consumption of the self. There is nothing else of value to him; and finally the self too is valueless, or acquires value only through herostratic acts, acts of conspicuous destruction. (However the Greek attitude toward the first "beat" hipster, Herostrates, who burnt the Temple of Diana of Ephesus to assure himself lasting publicity, was more sensible than ours: public mention of his name was made unlawful.) For the sake of really having the longed-for orgiastic thrill, the

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\*The symbolic significance of the motorcycle is most important where, for climatic and economic reasons, it is impractical, as in the United States; much less important in Italy where it has considerable practical significance.

extraordinary (crazy) experience—or of being able to pretend to himself that he felt it—the hipster is willing to risk his life or, at least, is willing to appear to risk his life. Above all, this convinces him of his own sincerity. But in risking or consuming his life, the "beat" hipster, unlike the saint (with whom Allen Ginsberg likes to compare him), does not have revealed and dogmatically buttressed redemption goals. Hence, there is more attitudinizing than there is actual sacrificing—there is no *sacrum* for the sake of which he can make himself suffer. The self injuries that occur are not so much willed as accidental, or incidental to stupidity and overindulgence.

Being "beat" is, then, in the first place an affectation. Affectations are, by definition, what replaces feelings and, in the ambitious, passions, when the affected want for them, but are unable to have them. They are feeling wished for and not felt.\*\* Since he is trying to convince himself, which in our culture is done largely by convincing others, the affected person is likely to be strident about his enthusiasms. Where actual feeling has been stunted entirely, the affected person, though longing for it, is unable to identify it. Hence, he is likely to confuse it with sentimentality and, on the other hand, sensation (kicks). The "beat" hipster does the former in his vague pseudo-biological, psycho-philosophical theorizing and the latter in his practice.

What entitles us to consider the "beat" attitude an affectation is that the frenetic desire, the will, the need to be excited, thrilled, impressed, and impressive is constantly confused with its fulfillment. For Kerouac, things

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\*\*The prototype for these enthusiasms, which, lacking conviction are rhetorical, is Augustine's *amabam amare*. But Augustine transcended it.

always are "the greatest"; or "crazy"; and the narrator seems on a perpetual frantic jag. But actually the narration contains nothing that is sensational, extraordinary or even mildly interesting. Thus in *On the Road*, Kerouac says "that night all hell broke loose" when some drunken sailors are rounded up by the police—something that would get a yawn out of even the most novice city editor—or, "this was the greatest ride I ever had" when all that happens is that someone urinating against the wind on a moving truck brings about the effects which six year olds learn to avoid. The Hollywood technique of movie advertising has entered the novel from within. There are relentless mutual invitations to "go, man, go" to have experiences and to make you experience them—to feel something—but all that ever comes is verbal flatulence and the most extreme banality of experience, articulation, and thought. The characters in *On the Road* and *The Subterraneans* (5, 6) are, as some reviewers have pointed out, not characterized at all; they could not be because they are bereft of character in the first place; they act instead. Perhaps it is true, as Clellon Holmes says, that "their real journey is inward." But they found that they had nothing inside worth reporting; in fact, nothing; wherefore the hunger for sensation, kicks, movement—one has to find some proof of one's own existence. Wherefore, also, the insistence on informal, direct and ungrammatical language: people often feel that such language makes things real (sex plays the same role). And it is reality the "beat" generation is seeking, and not finding, for it attempts to approach it by way of masturbation fantasies; Mr. Kerouac's wet dreams of grandeur, accepted as transcendent manifestos, are a prime instance.

There have been literary precedents: Baudelaire's "I cultivate my hysteria," Rimbaud's African journey, and Dylan Thomas' self-destructive fury may be cited. But there is a profound difference: Baudelaire and Rimbaud were poets. And Baudelaire, besides cultivating his hysteria privately, cultivated the French language in his published works. Their lives may have been sordid or self-indulgent (far too glib a simplification) but their work was neither. Mr. Kerouac cultivates his hysteria in public; he knows no language to cultivate. The jive he writes is a counter language: it removes all differentiation, all subtlety, even meaning and grammar, and involves a prolonged fantasy not fully intelligible to the reader because it has meaning only to the author and is put in language only his friends can pretend to fully grasp.\* To state the matter differently: Mr. Kerouac has nothing to say and he says it badly. The trouble is that he is absolutely sincere. What could be worse in such a case?

There remains a vexatious question: why this now? It is as hard to answer as: why do women wear chemises now? Intellectual and literary fashions are not much easier to explain than any others. To be sure, the socially conscious fashions of the thirties were associated with the depression; the political ones, later, with Hitler, one of the results of the depression. The jive fashion of the hipster and the "beat generation" would be inconceivable in similar circumstances. This fashion, according to my hypothesis, arises from an age of material prosperity and boredom with

\*There probably is not much to be grasped. The function of these verbalizations is strictly phatic in Malinowski's phrase: the personages shrilly assure each other: "I am here, you are here, too—wonderful."

it; from the moral depression of a life without problems which therefore becomes a problem itself; from an unsuccessful attempt to escape the routine of a meaningless life. On the lower levels, this may be one of the causes of one kind of delinquency, an attempt to provide kicks by violence, which, itself meaningless, provides distraction from peaceful boredom. Among the more timid (and perhaps schizoid) characters, self experience may be sought by the various forms of self-destruction that Mr. Kerouac celebrates. But this, too, as was pointed out, is only an affectation. They are not really going to consume themselves—they are going to be conspicuous for a while longer—as long as the public does not become bored.

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