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Counterculture, Counterpower? 'Disengagement: The Art of the Beat Generation'

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Through their works, the Beats articulated the clear perception that the contemporaneous conditions of reality in America, right there and right then – the Cold War and the restrictive policies that stemmed from it but also heteronormativity, domestic comfort, social conformism as well as artistic and literary conventions – constituted an essential menace for the creative self. Kenneth Rexroth, prolific poet, essayist and spokesman for the Beat generation, declared in 'Disengagement: The Art of the Beat Generation' (1957) that 'it is impossible for an artist to remain true to himself as a man [or a woman], let alone an artist, and work within the context of this society'.

In this short presentation, I will unravel the dialectical interplay brought forward by Rexroth in his essay between dominant power – a power ingrained in the sociohistorical and cultural environment of the post-war moment – and the strategies for resistance deployed by the Beat movement, conceived as a major countercultural force of the 1950s.

The Beat collective response to the post-war status quo was interpreted by Rexroth as a strategy of *disengagement*: taking the form of a disaffiliation from social reality and from its main institutional relays, a seditious revolt aspiring to self-liberation which remains highly ambivalent. While this disaffiliation may constitute a privileged position of autonomy and even a source of artistic serenity, its most radical form cultivates a deliberate alienation from contemporaneity, an alienation so extreme that it borders on a solipsistic condition largely detrimental both for the self and for the collective. It is this balancing act between power and the (in)capacity to subvert its sway without running the risk of self-collapse that I will seek to trace in this paper, a reflection initiating a broader discussion of the politics of resistance of the Beat counterculture.

There is a case to be made about what actually brings the Beats together under the same label. Although vastly heterogeneous, the Beat movement finds its common denominator – arguably – in a shared disagreement with the conditions of contemporaneous reality; the reality of a mid-century America whose founding genius had been traded for a prosperous economy, a devouring mania for social control and a mortiferous lifestyle. This reality, often mechanised and standardised, was devised by the Beats as cold and spiritless: a reality which, they thought, jeopardised the integrity of the self and liquidated the singularity of human existence.

This disagreement with the modern predicament – a mainstay of Beat writing – is what brings a darker tonality to many of their works. It carries a sense of disappointment, repeatedly reaffirmed, with the national ideals of liberty and of the pursuit of happiness – reconfigured in the Beat imaginary as a quest for transcendence. What the Beats identified as the moral failure of these ideals, stems in great measure from the regulations and restrictions forced upon the individual by the historical agents of power – be they economic, social or cultural. Viewed as thoroughly alienating, they are thought to tame the intuitive energies of the self and to hamper action – whether individual or collective; ultimately, these constrictions thwart the very promises that America vowed to deliver in the first place.

Although fundamentally heterogeneous, the huge majority of Beat literary works manifest, in their own ways, a will to escape social conditioning and reclaim one's own authority over that of society; a recurrent fixation for Beat writers which they shared not only with the Existentialists, but also with the Transcendentalists a century before them. As John Tytell contends in *Naked Angels*:

The Beats [...] had to find new ways to remind their culture of the dignity of self-reliance and to provide an Emersonian awareness of the tyranny of institutions.

Execrating the worldly, dreading the implications of control, they chose to consecrate the whims of the individual.¹

While most Beat writers did not so much execrate the worldly than seek to subvert its profanity, their works foreground a rebellious impulse against the institutions and the conventions of daily reality. They viewed these conventions as mediocre, vitiated and self-repressing, infringing more or less insidiously upon the elemental liberty of the self. This emphasis on the singularity of individual character – and on the unlimited resources of the self – is key in Beat writing: it typifies the desire to retrieve a form of ethical, ontological and even epistemological authenticity, seen as under attack in the hostile environment of the post-war era. This urge is predicated on a search for radical subjectivity and self-fulfilment that the main ideologies of the twentieth century, from totalitarian systems to rampant commercialism, have crippled.

Kenneth Rexroth in his essay ‘Disengagement: The Art of the Beat Generation’, identifies the struggle to reclaim control over the potency and the legitimacy of the self in the adverse conditions of the post-war era as a hallmark of the Beat movement. For Rexroth, any individual in his right mind has no other choice than to withdraw from social reality in order to preserve the integrity of his deeper self. For him, ‘[T]he youngest generation is in a state of revolt so absolute that its elders cannot even recognize it. The disaffiliation, alienation, and

¹ John Tytell, *Naked Angels: The Lives and Literature of the Beat Generation* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1976), p. 259.

rejection of the young has [...] moved out of the visible spectrum altogether'.² Conceived as a corollary to the conditions of 1950s America, such a type of revolt is viewed by Rexroth as not only legitimate, but necessary. Crucially, it is implemented via an act of *disengagement* from sociohistorical reality through which the individual may create a space which is in principle preserved from the most alienating aspects of the latest historical developments of the post-war moment. As Rexroth reckons, '[i]t is impossible for an artist to remain true to himself as a man, let alone an artist, and work within the context of this society'.³

This strategy of disengagement may be envisaged as an attempt to eschew the matrix of post-war modernity – an insurrection against the temporal through which the access to a more private sense of transcendence may be re-established. This is what provides a romantic touch to this revolt: a proclaiming of the imperious need to rescue the truth of the self by pitting the individual against both history and society. Meanwhile, by deserting the historical field of an America whose normative discourse tends to prevail upon the most intimate desires of the individual, this revolt is also intrinsically political. It enables the individual to effectively consume the American myth of self-reliance through his or her own alternative system of values, encapsulating anticonformism, radical autonomy and self-sufficiency, which all run counter to the status quo. For Rexroth, 'Against the ruin of the world, there is only one defense – the creative act'.⁴

Nevertheless, Rexroth draws a red line between a moderate form of disengagement, potentially virtuous, and a more radical one, which can be more deleterious and toxic for the self, and through which the slip towards solipsism becomes unavoidable:

² Kenneth Rexroth, 'Disengagement: the Art of the Beat Generation' [1957], in *The Penguin Book of the Beats*, ed. by Ann Charters (London: Penguin Books, 1993), pp. 323-38 (p. 324).

³ *Ibid.*, p. 331.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 325.

The disengagement of the creator, who, as creator, is necessarily judge, is one thing, but the utter nihilism of the emptied-out hipster is another. [...] Between such persons no true enduring interpersonal relationships can be built, and of course, nothing resembling a true 'culture' – an at-homeness of men with each other, their work, their loves, their environment. The end result must be the desperation of shipwreck – the despair, the orgies, ultimately the cannibalism of a lost lifeboat. I believe that most of an entire generation will go to ruin – [...] voluntarily, even enthusiastically.⁵

Here Rexroth recognises that the deliberate self-alienation from society, as romantic as it may be, fosters a radical form of individualism that can quickly turn into a nihilistic deviance – a pitfall viewed as a major threat for the counterculture. The danger with this type of individualism is that it risks becoming counterproductive for the individual by subverting the empirical status of factual reality and replacing it with his or her own entirely subjective perceptions: a reality which becomes more and more self-legislating, established not through the facts of a communal reality but by one's own fancy. Accordingly, such a type of individualism is detrimental also for the collective, because the radical freedom that it proclaims is transacted at the expense of social responsibility.

This brand of individualism constitutes a tendency in American literature that forms the substratum of literary lineage signalled by writers such as Jack London, John Dos Passos, Henry Miller and Norman Mailer. In his essay 'The White Negro', also published in 1957, Mailer promotes a similar type of estrangement from social reality. This estrangement, which is entirely intentional, professes 'the liberation of the self from the Super-Ego of society'⁶ – a

⁵ Ibid., pp. 337-38.

⁶ Norman Mailer, 'The White Negro' [1957], in *The Penguin Book of the Beats*, ed. by Charters, pp. 582-605 (p. 601).

liberation envisioned as an act of rebellion that manifests the repudiation of the moral and cultural standards of his time. As Mailer puts it, 'Hip abdicates from any conventional moral responsibility'.⁷ Nonetheless, the type of revolt that Mailer advocates is the nihilistic revolt of the anarchist, because it has no social relevance: it is the by-product of an extreme form of individualism which, in its obsession with immaculate forms of liberty and of autonomy, subdues all practical possibilities for social action, which in turn becomes counterproductive for the emancipation of the self.

While Mailer's revolt is largely provocative and caricatural, it pivots on a process of disengagement from society which echoes the strategy of resistance deployed by the counterculture, as discussed by Rexroth in his essay. Conceived as a *sine qua non* for preserving selfhood and maintaining an existential sense of authenticity, the strategy of disengagement features a major flaw: it fails to realise an alternative political project that is socially relevant – a failure which, in turn jeopardises the possibility for liberation on an individual level. The shortcomings of this strategy also testify to the difficulty to articulate a form of revolt which simultaneously *empowers* the community; an empowerment of the collective which may demand an adjustment of the whims of the self for the sake of a resistance properly *counter-cultural*.

Works cited:

Charters, Ann, ed. *The Penguin Book of the Beats*. London: Penguin Books, 1993

⁷ Ibid., pp. 599-600.

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