favor of increased government involvement in the energy field, even suggesting that energy prices be kept low as part of our national energy policy. That is analogous to a prescription for a pint of arsenic if a cupful didn’t do the job.

It will undoubtedly take more than Dr. Reisman’s work to eliminate the ignorance which must be at the base of such suggestions, but we at least have in his book a significant contribution toward that end. |

Co-opting the Beat Generation

Dennis McNally: Desolate Angel: Jack Kerouac, the Beat Generation, and America; Random House; New York.

by Gordon M. Pradl

Soaring across his symbolic landscape of the American experience, questing for evapored essences in the modern blade of grass, comes Sal’Paradise, self-proclaimed reviver of those vanished visions that had once sprung out of that ego originally residing in the body of a Mr. Whitman. Halfway across America, Sal soberly confides in his readers, “I was at the dividing line between the East of my youth and the West of my future.” Sadly, because it was a youth that never was, it is a future that never will be.

In Desolate Angel, Dennis McNally recounts the saga that was Jack Kerouac, alias Sal Paradise, peripatetic hero of the Beat Generation, On the Road’s savior of an upright America. It is a tale of talent and of dissipation, of dreams and of nightmares, of community and of alienation. And it is a tale with a moral: Don’t cross the liberal corporate structure or it’ll eventually destroy you by buying a piece of your action.

Kerouac’s beginnings in Lowell, Massachusetts set the themes for the restless journey of his life toward its own destruction. Of French-Canadian descent, he grew up an outsider to the

disained the encroaching welfare state and espoused a patriotic “America First” during the red scares of the fifties.

The surprisingly conservative message of Kerouac’s writing, despite its radical trappings, is really only understood when these frustrations, contradictions, and yearnings of his youth are made explicit. Without writing another glib psychohistory, McNally has given us enough background material and commentary on the early years for us to be able to see that Jack’s ongoing sense of disorder and dislocation resulted largely from the unsatisfactory nature of his initial object relationships. In attempting to recover love and establish a youth that might reasonably extend into mature adulthood, Jack ended by becoming his own worst enemy. Because of his early hurts he ironically felt most potent in the role of his bad self, a self that undercut his continual cry for community and relationship by staying in perpetual motion on the road. For to get too close to others, especially women, was to expose the void in oneself. Yet the longing in his writing remained true to the central American vision of self-determination. The message soured, however, because the community roots of responsibility and predictability were never established. The merry band frantically roaming the countryside could never hope to sustain itself because it was not willing to commit itself to anything beyond the moment. And thus the dream of a new America literally drowned for Kerouac in the despair of alcoholism.

Alcoholism, Menninger tells us, is a defense against “internal dangers.” Unable to solve the existential problems of living, unable to face the destructive elements of being, the alcoholic commits a convenient self-indulgent suicide, and this has profound implications for the substance of the art created by the alcoholic. It is just this connection between a poet’s “ontological insecurity” and the manifest content of the created poems that has, for example, been explored by the critic David Holbrook in his
studies of Dylan Thomas. Like Kerouac, Thomas killed himself with the bottle because he was unable to resolve the hurts and conflicts of his youth. In On the Road, Kerouac unwittingly reveals this dilemma, "The one thing that we yearn for in our living days, that makes us sigh and groan and undergo sweet nauseas of all kinds, is the remembrance of some lost bliss that was probably experienced in the womb and can only be reproduced (though we hate to admit it) in death." Failing to resolve such an issue, there can be little hope for a future, or for an art that affirms, not denies, the realities of the human condition.

At first writing provides some means of relief for Kerouac, but increasingly it becomes a desperate howl calling for the death that will be the only release from the pain that existence has always provided for him. His writing at this point has the potential to seduce us by offering us false solutions to the problems of living, especially in times of instability and cultural fragmentation. We should, however, take a different stance and recognize that at least the writing can force us to come to terms with the complexities of existence. Although lost himself, Kerouac does put his finger on the key issue of our lives in a bureaucratic technocracy: How do we re-establish our own individual initiative? How do we regain responsibility for ourselves?

The literary generation that Kerouac helped bind together included names that still receive homage from the underground counterculture: Allen Ginsberg, William Burroughs, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Gary Snyder, Philip Whalen, and Gregory Corso. Unbridled inspiration, not disciplined dedication, seemed to be their password. Loosely grouped under the "beat" label, the actual story of the commercial canning of the Beat Generation is a remarkable case study of how the dominant liberal culture can twist potentially legitimate protests for autonomy into the newest conforming fad.

By coining the term "beat" Kerouac had obviously set the stage for ambiguous interpretations. What he intended to encapsulate in "beat" was the sense of being in touch with one's original sources, of fulfilling one's own aspirations on one's own terms, independent of the baggage and protocol of consumerism. The intuitive life-force rhythms that made up black jazz provided the Beats with their key image, while reinforcing the mystique of improvisation and spontaneity. The raw energy, the rough edge of honesty cut loose by this artistic credo, which became indistinguishable from a frenetic lifestyle, is distinctly highlighted by Kerouac's thumbnail sketch of George Shearing, before and after: "Shearing smiled; he rocked. Shearing rose from the piano, dripping with sweat; these were his great 1949 days before he became cool and commercial."

Naturally enough the Beat credo posed a substantial threat to the literary intellectuels already concerned with the dissolution of the stable values that supported their hierarchically ordered version of society. The new critics, the false values of science bearing down upon them, had come to a curious impasse. By turning poems into aesthetic objects they were, as McNally relates, suggesting that "the study of art was superior to its practice." Art dominated by the academy was elitist art. "As a working-class Canuck, Jack didn't emulate the WASP values these high priests of culture certified." Thus when Kerouac's writing began to be published, the official reception was icy at best. His vitality was grudgingly acknowledged, but this, too, was finally discredited because the message could not be seriously entertained, nor the shapelessness easily pardoned.

What follows Jack's bursting innocently on the professional literary scene is one of the early instances of media lionizing, the voguish rush to define and become part of a new sensibility before it gets thrown on the trash heap of yesterday. And here was a sensibility that appeared to cast off the chains of social responsibility. Unfortunately, Jack's talent with words had never been transformed into a permanent craft. His stream-of-consciousness style was literally the result of marathon bouts of creativity, words flowing onto his sacred scrolls, the continuous rolls of paper speeding through his typewriter, rather than of deliberate daily discipline. Thus he was vulnerable to criticism and rejection, and as the liquor washed over him, the writer disappeared, replaced by a fearful public self, part truculent showman, part spoiled child. The reigning critical chiefs had extracted their revenge from an upstart who dared, like Walt Whitman before him, to suggest that the natural, untutored voice might again sing songs to the people. Yet without the secure roots of youth to sustain it, the unrestrained artlessness which Jack so valued had dissolved paradoxically into the cold sweat of inarticularness.

But the final ignominy to be visited upon Kerouac's talent was the inversion of the term "beat" and of the artistic renaissance Kerouac had intended by the concept. Marketed through the slick efforts of the media mongers, "beat" in the popular imagination became synonymous with "beatnik," Kerouac's restless journey in praise of language and primary experience ended being portrayed as the inarticulate, fingersnapping social dropout, perhaps best identified in the public mind with the ineffectual, and thus harmless, Maynard G. Krebs, costar of the Doba Gillis show.

The writings of the Beats, of course, painted a brash, solipsistic reality completely at odds with the everyday life of the mainstream society. This played conveniently into the hands of those who would discredit them, especially because of their experimentation with hard drugs, their seeming disregard for any stable work ethic, and their open disrespect for all pronouncements of the academy. How easy it was to mis
represent the mad dash for inner truth as a know-nothing attack on convention and rationality. Thus the Beats were held up to ridicule while at the same time their plastic image was safely being embraced in the slogans printed on endless T-shirts. In sterilizing the Beat proclivity, liberal culture once again established its inaccessibility, its imperviousness to intellectual dialogue from outside itself.

McNally’s service is to have provided us with the information necessary to create our own significance of the life of Jack Kerouac. This despite the obvious hero worship on McNally’s part: “I regard these alienated American prophets as my spiritual and intellectual ancestors. In a world that faces potential ecological and spiritual apocalypse, I respectfully submit that the legend of these psychic pioneers is necessary in order that we might understand our present reality.” Clearly the rhythms and hyperbolic nature of Kerouac’s own prose has entered McNally’s veins, and thus we must contend with a continually overblown language: “In fact, there were only a very few threads in any level of the culture that were not part of the grey flannel weave.” Or, “There was no escape from the pervasive fog of the technocratic culture.” Rather, a trip such as theirs was like stepping off a cliff—and flying; ultimately their road led within.” This posturing even reaches McNally’s outward presentation of self. If we are to take his dust-jacket photo seriously—a hip, alienated young man hiding behind shades with just the right length of ash poised on the end of the cigarette extending from a carefully cupped hand. Seeing such images made me wish for a road map along with the text to plot out Kerouac’s truly amazing number of transcontinental trips, or for a bar graph gallon count of the prodigious volumes of alcohol Kerouac is supposed to have consumed.

But beyond these excesses and blemishes lies the overarching value of the tale itself. In reliving the sorrows of Kerouac, McNally allows the reader a glimpse at the kind of malaise 20th-century man faces in the presence of a bureaucratic world that would deny him the validity of his own intentions.

Perfectly Awful


by Joseph Schwartz

Because each novel since J. P. Donleavy’s first grew progressively worse, *The Ginger Man* now has a more imposing reputation than it deserves. It was good enough to begin with, but in contrast to what has followed, it appears, retrospectively, to possess virtues larger than its real values warrant. *Schultz*, Donleavy’s eighth novel, will certainly contribute to this curious state of affairs.

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Chronicles of Culture