

Zita, Antonín

Conclusion

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CONCLUSION

The successes of Ginsberg's *Howl and Other Poems* and Kerouac's *On the Road* led to a highly publicized phenomenon known as the Beat Generation. Even though John Clellon Holmes used the phrase several years before the two texts were published as a rather broad term describing the feelings of his generation, popular media greatly changed the scope of the phrase. Anyone with a mild interest in poetry or jazz could be "beat" and Kerouac's lament that "beat" stands for "beatitude" was ignored. Soon the devout Catholic had been pigeonholed by popular media into a category which was portrayed in such a stereotypical fashion that it soon led to the creation of the parodying term "beatnik." The members of the Beat Generation caused outrage by their open homosexuality, history of drug use, or their disregard for conventions regarding taboos in general. Furthermore, they divorced themselves from the revered literary traditions of the era, thus representing a major stylistic as well as ideological shift from the mainstream. Even though they were part of a larger Bohemian scene in San Francisco or New York, the Beats were often singled out from this context and put into the public spotlight and accused of causing the sudden rise of juvenile delinquency, advocating drug abuse, being against intelligence itself as Norman Podhoretz famously said, or just being "nasty fellows" in general. As Parkinson points out, this publicity had a negative impact that tarred all experimental writers with the moniker "Beat" and that seemed to suggest that the only valid experimental writers were the Beats (280). Nevertheless, the Beats also had their supporters: individuals such as Lawrence Ferlinghetti of *City Lights* or Barney Rosset of *Grove* significantly supported the writers through the publication and subsequent defense of their work. The support from these and other figures further sharpened the divide between the generally-accepted culture and the emerging counterculture.

The Beats also made a serious dent in Czechoslovak society. While restricted in their ability to discuss the Beats at the beginning, the translators Igor Hájek and Jan Zábřana heavily affected the tumultuous 1960s by promoting the Beats whenever possible. One of the attractive aspects of the Beats was their critical yet not markedly ideological commentary on American society; for Czechoslovaks, who were living in a country where everything was explicitly political, this was not only a great novelty, but also a significant fount of inspiration. Thus poetry readings and cafés came into existence, and Beat poetry could also be heard on the radio. Ginsberg's presence during the 1965 Majáles festival was also a crucial event, since the American's election as the King of May became a significant political act of defiance which marked the growing disillusionment of people, and especially students, with the government. Ultimately, the Communist regime played a vital role in the reception of the Beats in Czechoslovakia: it served as an antagonist to readers, which in turn allowed them to identify with the Beats' social criticism and subsequently aim it at the regime. At the same time, it also helped spread the works of the Beats by controlling public discourse, thus effectively acting against its own best interests. Ultimately, this schizophrenic status emblemizes life in Communist Czechoslovakia, which Beat literature in the minds of Czechoslovak readers protested against.

The interpretive communities of today are less likely to produce readings in direct opposition to one another; the extremely divided and politicized discussion of the fifties is a thing of the past, as the concretizations of the Beats have become stabilized in both the United States and the Czech Republic. The current popular reception emphasizes the social impact the Beats had in both countries. This difference also goes hand in hand with a significant change occurring in American academia. New Criticism as a tool of academic inquiry was abandoned in favor of readings focusing on ideologies, and this change enabled a different, more revealing view of the Beats. The rise of scholarly as well as popular interest is compounded by a constant flow of new and revised editions of Beat literature, which in turn further engrave the presence of the Beat Generation in American consciousness. Albeit with difficulties, this interest proves that the Beats have become canonized writers in the literature discourse of both countries.

However, the approaches of readers to the Beats in the two countries differed, as they stemmed from different contexts and different initial impressions of the Beat Generation and what it stands for. For one, readers often decoded the texts in a different manner: while the Beats in the USA were often read in terms of social revolt, the Czechoslovak reading instead emphasized their resistance to any forms of oppression, namely the totalitarian practices of Communist Czechoslovakia. As a result, Beat texts and subsequently the Beats themselves manifest themselves as different works. Context cannot be divorced from the process of interpretation; ultimately, context not only shapes the initial reception of a work,

but through this reception it also forms the overall discourse surrounding its subject matter. The creation and subsequent proliferation of a discourse is especially impactful if the first intermediaries of a literary work operate in a context in which access to information is otherwise limited. Access to information does not necessarily have to mean censorship, but may also mean distribution of information or rather its limitations; relying on printed matter, early critiques such as Podhoretz's "The Know-Nothing Bohemians" or Mailer's "The White Negro" thus leave a substantial impression on the discourse as a whole and therefore on other texts that follow.

Yet these impressions are not fixed. Unless all copies of a text are destroyed, they remain in existence, and therefore can be reread and reinterpreted. Ultimately, the texts of the Beat Generation have not changed; the readers have. And many of them have found in these texts a set of practices to follow and live by.