

On the Avenue of the Mystery

The Postwar Counterculture in Novels and Film

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Chapter 1

After the Rebellion: The Postwar Counterculture and Its Legacy

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1 After the Rebellion: The Postwar Counterculture and Its Legacy

Thus will tomorrow's mysteries be born from the ruins of today's.

Aragon, *Le Paysan de Paris*

One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest (1975) enjoys as secure a place in the history of American cinema as any film of its era, and its virtues were hardly overlooked at the time. The recipient of all five major Academy Awards, it was the most lavishly honored of what would come to be known as the “New Hollywood,” “American New Wave,” or just “seventies” films—studio productions that, following the decline of the studio system, departed conspicuously from the conventions of Golden Age Hollywood cinema. Not only did it establish the American reputation of its director, Miloš Forman, it also showcased a wealth of memorable supporting turns, unveiled one of the great movie villains in Louise Fletcher’s Nurse Ratched, and provided the defining role of Jack Nicholson’s early career. Rarely has an actor inhabited a part as irresistibly as Nicholson did that of Randle Patrick McMurphy; and with his captivating energy, effortless range of emotion, and inexhaustible supply of smiles, smirks, winks, and stares, he won only the highest praise.

An interesting thing happened when the critics came to sort out their feelings about the film, however—they didn’t entirely like it. The script’s treatment of mental illness was cavalier and unserious, they felt. Patients don’t just cure themselves through high spirits, and although the filmmakers appeared to have aimed for a kind of comedy, there was nothing funny about electroshock treatments, especially administered as punishment. By such means, it seemed that the viewer was being manipulated into an emotional reaction beyond the legitimate parameters of the drama. For example, Roger Ebert, who thought the film was trying to make “larger points than its story really should carry,” observed the response that *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* drew from the audience at its premiere and testily noted that the director’s “ultimate failure” was so far from being recognized that McMurphy’s final assault on his stone-faced tormentor was greeted by “sophomoric cheers and applause.”¹ And for his part Vincent Canby

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sounded a bit like one of the wary psychiatrists onscreen: “I suspect that we are meant to make connections between Randle’s confrontation with the oppressive Nurse Ratched and the political turmoil in this country in the 1960’s.”²

It’s tempting to imagine the émigré director, who once described his antiauthoritarian blockbuster as “a Czech movie,” raising an eyebrow over that last comment.³ By 1975, the counterculture was a global phenomenon, having emerged into the mainstream about a decade earlier, and its politics were so ambiguous that the overbearing routines of a psychiatric hospital could as easily suggest a heavy-handed communist regime as recall the government that was just then wrapping up its involvement in Vietnam. It wouldn’t be long before others would level those criticisms and more against *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*, noting that it isn’t a terribly progressive gesture to represent coercive authority as an assertive professional woman backed up by angry minorities or to recommend the health-giving benefits of an alcohol-soaked fraternity bash graced with dimwitted but accommodating female revelers. Yet no one would deny that the film derived a large measure of its success from the facility with which it tapped into the spirit of rebellion that characterized the global counterculture of the preceding decade, however various the battles its audience may have been fighting in the privacy of their own minds. It owed this aspect of its appeal to something that it did *not* share with most other New Hollywood films: its adaptation from a decidedly nonconformist novel of the previous era. For that period, too, had a counterculture, less populous and visible than would later be the case, which, to distinguish it from the global counterculture of the late sixties and early seventies, might be called the postwar counterculture, although its adherents were more likely to be called a host of other names: Beats, bohemians, or hipsters as well as less colorful ones like junkies, delinquents, or bums.

This book is concerned with a group of novels that date from that earlier period, with the films that were made from them much later, and, more distantly, with the direction of narrative filmmaking in the twenty-first century. Some of these novels have been conventionally grouped together from the time of their publication, and their authors either knew one another well or at least moved in the same circles in locations that figure prominently in the novels themselves: New York, San Francisco, Mexico City, Paris, and Tangier. Beyond the superficial social and geographical connections, what they have in common is a deliberate effort to rebel against the mainstream cultural norms of their era and, in at least some cases, to model alternatives. This effort was anything but systematic, and it would be fruitless to search for a unifying program or set of values among them. To an extent, their affinities with each other have been underscored by the ensuing cultural upheaval that they, in their different ways, seem to anticipate. We read these books on the farther shore of a flood that their authors could not have known was coming, a period whose controversies are still being debated

to this day; and our reading is inevitably touched by an awareness of those crucial intervening years, which divide the postwar era from the world that has come into being since the splintering and waning of the global counterculture in the 1970s. Thus, while one issue in the chapters that follow is the complex and interrelated ways that the major themes of the postwar counterculture figure in the novels themselves, I am also concerned with the afterlife of these novels in history—indeed, as the main business of this book is to offer interpretations, it is a part of that afterlife, along with all the other interpretations that have been put forward over the years. Because the novels anticipate a certain strain of the global counterculture, each new reading of them is unavoidably concerned with how the whole of the counterculture in its postwar and global phases is now understood, a question that is still something more than an academic concern. The novels remain with us as unsettled presences because so many emanations of the counterculture continue to haunt the contemporary world.

How to summarize something so large and various? Perhaps it's judicious to admit at the outset that it can't be done and to begin by acknowledging the limits of one's project. For many, the counterculture will immediately call to mind "political turmoil," as it did for Vincent Canby; but the counterculture was much more than politics alone and, as the word suggests, can be better described as an episode of rapid, large-scale *cultural* change, one in which politics was far from irrelevant but also not the whole of the matter. As such, it took many forms, some lasting, some ephemeral; and there is now a visible tendency to identify the entire episode with its more trivial exhibitions, making it easier to rope off and consign to the past. Instead, this book concentrates on the earliest appearances of a deeper strain in novels of the period immediately preceding the rise of the global counterculture. With only one exception, these novels are American because from the end of the Second World War through the era of the global counterculture, the United States was at the forefront of cultural change in what was already well on the way to becoming a globalized world. Unlike Europe, the Soviet bloc, China, and the developing countries, where Marxism remained a major influence or anti-imperialist struggles took precedence, the United States met the future without the example or the burden of an institutionalized radical culture and without the need to throw off a resented foreign presence.

The strain of the counterculture first glimpsed in these novels is religious in the broadest sense of the word (and here the word must be understood broadly enough to accommodate forms of philosophical atheism as well as the continuing influence of ancient religious traditions).⁴ In this respect, the counterculture was a response to perhaps the single most distinctive feature of modernity: the desacralization of the world, the decline of organized religion, and the resulting displacement of spiritual life onto other areas of endeavor, like political activism and the making of art. The first of these statements—that the counterculture expressed a religious impulse—will

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strike no one as controversial, but the second takes us a step closer to the concerns of this book; for the abandonment of traditional forms of institutionalized religious worship has continued and even accelerated in the half-century since the apogee of the counterculture, as has the advance of science, technology, and the kind of managerial techniques that so troubled its first proponents.⁵ That which can be known with a high degree of certainty has an obvious utility in an uncertain world, despite the uses to which it has sometimes been put, and I have no intention of renewing the assault on science mounted by some of those early advocates. But vast regions of experience lie outside of what can be understood and managed by rational methods, and at this moment in history the unwillingness of some to recognize the authority of science even in its own sphere points to difficulties in areas where science cannot be expected to solve our problems. One may accept that, at any given time, science offers the most reliable knowledge of what *can* be known yet still feel that it is what remains unknown and perhaps unknowable that is most in question.

While the subject of religion inevitably raises questions of belief and faith, the effort to understand the religious dimension of the counterculture as a complex and various phenomenon with its own internal tensions calls for a concept that can stand in a meaningful relationship to the precise knowledge and pragmatic effectiveness of science and technology. Belief and faith are sufficient only to those who have them. What is needed is a term that evokes the large areas of experience currently inaccessible to reason but does so without requiring submission to the irrational. The claim of this book is that *mystery* is just such a master concept—that it is the defining theme of the postwar counterculture and the thread that leads to a key emphasis of the counterculture during its global phase in the years 1965–75. It is, of course, a term that looks backward as well as forward, an ancient idea that predates even the Greek mystery religions and the Judeo-Christian tradition with which it is commonly identified; and that long history lends resonance to its appearance in more recent contexts. For my purposes, however, it is the formal structure of the concept that will be primary: a sense of the unknown, an intimation of something hidden and as-yet unnoticed, a feeling that there may be more to the world than meets the eye. To cite only one distinguished antecedent in American thought, one might recall William James' insistence on the crucial importance of recognizing "an ultimate opacity in things, a dimension of being which escapes our theoretic control."⁶ Understood in this nondenominational fashion, the awareness of mystery involves a principled openness and humility, an attitude toward experience that is fundamental to the humanities and calls for responses beyond scientific investigation, one of which is represented by these novels. Faced with the unknown, we tell stories about it.

This perspective is inseparable from the historical issue of the standing that these books enjoyed during the period of the global counterculture and their uncertain fortunes since then. If the counterculture was marked by a

depth of feeling that deserves to be called religious, then for a while at least the novels in this study had the status of something like a body of religious myth, a kind of extra-literary distinction that has not outlasted the period, despite the ongoing reverence accorded them by some readers. The rising and falling arc of the novels in the culture at large accounts in part for an uncommon feature of these chapters: they present readings of the books together with their more recent film adaptations, an approach that acknowledges the mythical component of their popular career by treating them as narratives apart from any one medium, while at the same time recognizing a historical and cultural shift so large that it is often simply ignored. This is the unquantifiable but indisputable effect of technology on the telling of stories, a development so consequential that, since the period of the counterculture, literature has been displaced by film and television as the dominant narrative medium in the modern world.

Many factors come into play here, and I will not pretend that it's possible to account for all of them in detail: the breakdown of the distinction between high art and popular culture, the substitution of a visual and dramatic form for a linguistic one, even the collective nature of the filmmaker's enterprise, a feature of the medium that makes it more akin to architecture than to painting or photography and forces one to use the name of the director as shorthand for a whole stable of talent. In such an art form, the possibility that individual creative decisions by a variety of people may have an outsized effect on the material is incontestable. Nevertheless, it is also surely worth noting that these films are the work of some of the most celebrated figures in the industry, and without discounting the complications involved in drawing comparisons between different media, one is still struck by a general trend in the record of their efforts. It is a record of partial successes at best, a sequence of diminishing achievements that, taken as a whole, feel as if they were executed in the face of accumulating cultural resistance. And this, finally, is the justification for devoting close attention to the details of the relationship between these films and their literary models: they are instances of myth in the latter stages of decline, a visual chronicle of the eclipse of mystery.

Here, too, one can identify various precipitating factors, some of which belong to the heritage of the counterculture itself, like the advent of modern feminism; and I certainly don't mean to imply that the cinema has been without any other viable models than the novels of the postwar counterculture, which show their age in ways that the following chapters duly record. Still, the centrality of mystery to the legacy of these novels makes the limited success of their cinematic adaptations an especially revealing example of a more general problem. The waning influence of organized religion and of literature itself, together with the proliferation of narrative forms made possible by technology, have combined to bring about what is, in effect, a religious vacuum. Narrative is more available than ever, to those who rarely pick up a book no less than to those who have been formed by literary

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culture; and as a result, it has been devalued, reduced to a means of manipulation or distraction rather than a transformative response to contemporary life. The legacy of the postwar counterculture demands another look in part because the question of whether film and television will continue to offer narratives capable of delivering an experience that can be called religious is far from settled.

Much depends, therefore, on how the many strains of the counterculture are received, and this book ends with a few examples that suggest a way forward and a rethinking of mystery in the most vital of contemporary terms. As my language suggests, that effort of critical review will involve encounters with ideas as well as narratives, especially in this introductory chapter, which attempts a kind of intellectual history by reviewing the major conceptual and aesthetic influences on the postwar counterculture in the strong form of their earliest statements. These influences are far from obscure; however, there are at least three reasons for going back over them here. One is to demonstrate that each has at its core a form of mystery and that even those schools of thought that break most decisively with the Judeo-Christian tradition nevertheless preserve and recast this central theme. The second, taken up in the latter part of the chapter, is to propose a framework within which the diverse currents of influence might be understood—the traditional distinction between cataphatic and apophatic theologies—for as often as they have been discussed, the ways in which the counterculture is marked not only by their commonalities but also by the tensions between them have never been given a thorough exposition. Third, there is the obligation to adopt a critical perspective on both the period itself and the influences that touched these writers, a project that must be taken up anew in each subsequent period. Insofar as the counterculture has shaped the contemporary world, this will be a critique from within; and the reader will have no trouble detecting my own sympathies among those influences, including elements of Buddhist tradition and certain late developments in continental philosophy, which are themselves late developments in the central tradition of the West—what Emmanuel Levinas liked to call “the Bible and the Greeks.” The postwar era saw the emergence of the very idea of a counterculture, and this book treats ideas as no less worthy of study than works of art, provided they are studied critically and in the long view of history.

Finally, the chapter concludes by returning to the exemplary novel and film with which I began and demonstrating in detail that they are at once the most and the least typical of the novels and films discussed in this book. The experience of narrative is the reason why books like this are written; and no matter how much attention one devotes to ideas, nothing can take the place of close engagement with the texts, an effort that I hope will be an enhancement of that experience rather than an account of shortcomings handed down from some would-be superior intellectual vantage point. It is perhaps a sign of our current condition that such hopes have

an old-fashioned ring to them. If so, it can't be helped. The sentiment is genuine.

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In later years, reflecting on the youthful experiences of his generation, Allen Ginsberg gave characteristic utterance to a defining feature of the postwar era. It was, he noted, a period marked by awareness of the Bomb, an external cataclysm that had its counterpart in the release of comparably potent internal forces:

The absoluteness of the Bomb . . . invoked an absoluteness of inquiry into the nature of consciousness. Because, after all, that year, '45, was the same year that Dr. Albert Hofmann discovered LSD, an equally important scientific opening up—in fact, maybe more important than the Bomb in terms of—it's the mind bomb, the bomb that opens up the mind.⁷

The neatness of the symmetry is conveniently fudged. Hofmann first synthesized LSD in 1938 and became aware of its effects on human consciousness five years later when he accidentally ingested traces of the drug and found himself involuntarily embarked on the world's first acid trip.⁸ Still, one can forgive Ginsberg the minor historical inaccuracy for the sake of a suggestive analogy. The year 1945 saw the appearance of a weapon of overwhelming destructive force, which raised the possibility that modern Western culture, far from tracing an ascending curve of progress, had instead brought into being the vehicle of its own destruction and perhaps the rest of the world's as well. That once unimaginable possibility, a horror that gave new urgency to the feeling that the official culture had somehow gone awry, was met by a correspondingly forceful eruption of mental energies—in this case embodied by a powerful mind-altering substance but by no means limited to pharmaceutical innovations, however important LSD may have been to Ken Kesey's original version of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1962) or, for that matter, to Ginsberg's own verse. More remarkable than any drug, the underground creative explosion of the postwar period would be both an inspiration to the global counterculture of the subsequent decade and an irresistible challenge to filmmakers of a later era.

Such is the dichotomy that recurs throughout the literature and social commentary of the day: a mainstream culture, described as superficial, mechanical, regimented, morally obtuse, secretly malign, or frankly insane; and an opposing culture, often credited with an extraordinary degree of imaginative power, vitality, honesty, or insight. It was during the postwar era that the word *counterculture* began to appear with some regularity in the sociological literature, and the concept was first formally theorized at that time as well, although in comparison to the heady remarks

of the poets and novelists, that initial formulation was the very model of academic sobriety. In 1960, J. Milton Yinger published a paper entitled "Contraculture and Subculture" (the unfamiliar variant was his preferred coinage, which he later reluctantly relinquished in a concession to widespread use of the more common term). Reviewing the substantial literature on the subject, he distinguished between his proposed concept and the closely related one of subculture, recommending the use of the term *contraculture* "wherever the normative system of a group contains, as a primary element, a theme of conflict with the values of the total society, where personality variables are directly involved in the development and maintenance of the group's values, and wherever its norms can be understood only by reference to the relationships of the group to a surrounding dominant culture."⁹

For those not versed in the language of the social sciences, the part of this definition that needs unpacking is the stipulation that "personality variables" will be "directly involved in the development and maintenance of the group's values." Acknowledging an overlap between the domains of sociology and psychology, the statement implies that this is not the sort of group that shapes the minds of its members to a preexisting ideology but rather that the group's ethos will itself be shaped to some extent by the disparate personalities it attracts. A counterculture is not a tightly organized institution like the military, which inducts new recruits into a well-established set of values and a sharply defined code of behavior. It is, by contrast, a loose-knit affiliation or "near-group," with an informal membership, imprecise roles, and minimally specified norms.¹⁰ General and neutral though this definition may be, few would object to it as a characterization of the relationships that the writers of the postwar counterculture maintained with each other and with the larger society. They were a group whose individual personalities were at least as vivid as their collective identity.

Although Yinger aimed to develop the concept in such a way that it could be applied to the broadest possible range of examples, from seventeenth-century Quakers and Ranters to his own bohemian contemporaries, one case was foremost in the minds of his fellow sociologists, who had had a good deal to say about subcultures and countercultures over the preceding decade. In fact, the latter term had actually appeared in passing as early as 1951 in the pages of one of the dominant figures in the discipline, Talcott Parsons, who spoke of the urban street gang as a "counter-culture"; and the subject of delinquency would become a significant point of reference in discussions of the Beat Generation, if only because some of its most prominent personalities, like Jack Kerouac, so strenuously objected to the association.¹¹ Disavowing any kinship with "fellows in jeans with snap-knives and sweatshirts and swastikas tattooed under their armpits," Kerouac declared his allegiance to a pacifism that dated from his earliest years, thus anticipating a major emphasis of the global counterculture of the late 1960s: "in my childhood I'd been famous as an eccentric in my block for stopping the

younger kids from throwing rocks at the squirrels . . . I have never had anything to do with violence, hatred, cruelty, and all that horrible nonsense.”¹²

Yet one can't help but feel that Kerouac here protests too much—that a pronounced vein of *nostalgie de la boue* runs through much Beat writing and that the work of Alexander Trocchi and William Burroughs in particular betrays an undisguised fascination with criminality. It's evident, for example, in the high regard accorded to representative figures from the French tradition of the outlaw writer, like Rimbaud, Céline, and Genet; and others were more willing than Kerouac to blur the line between the beatnik and the delinquent, as did Norman Mailer in his much-discussed essay “The White Negro” (1957). This famously off-putting piece is probably best remembered for advancing an analogous comparison between the hipster and a creature of Mailer's imagination called The Negro, who “could rarely afford the sophisticated inhibitions of civilization, and so he kept for his survival the art of the primitive, he lived in the enormous present, he subsisted for his Saturday night kicks, relinquishing the pleasures of the mind for the more obligatory pleasures of the body.”¹³ Not surprisingly, many living, breathing African Americans declined to recognize themselves in this portrait, notably Ralph Ellison (“the same old primitivism crap in a new package”) and James Baldwin, whose reaction to the essay is discussed in Chapter 5.¹⁴ Similarly, as Kerouac's example shows, more than one beatnik would be affronted by Mailer's effort to draw a related parallel between their kind and the delinquent—“two strong eighteen-year old hoodlums, let us say,” who “beat in the brains of a candy-store keeper,” thus violating private property, entering into “a new relation with the police,” and introducing “a dangerous element” into their lives (312). One is almost grateful he didn't specify the complexion of his deviant exemplars.

A calculated outrageousness is, of course, a prominent feature of Mailer's style, and it's advisable not to be distracted by his provocations from the substance of his argument, which has at its core an idea—or perhaps an ideal—that appears in various forms in the work of more than one writer of the postwar counterculture. It's hinted at in a phrase from the passage quoted above: “the enormous present.” “The White Negro” opens strongly, assessing the psychological damage wrought by the awareness of concentration camps and atomic weapons, which has led to a supreme irony: the citizens of a civilization that has organized itself with maximum efficiency by mastering time are compelled to live with the apprehension that history itself has ceased to unfold in meaningful fashion now that death has become automated and meaningless. Cringing fearfully before the ominous self-image reflected by these catastrophes, most have opted for a depressing conformity, “at what damage to the mind and the heart and the liver and the nerves no research foundation for cancer will discover in a hurry” (304)—most, but not all. For there has come into being a new species of dissident, the hipster, who has chosen “to explore the domain of experience where security is boredom and therefore sickness, and one exists in the present, in

that enormous present which is without past or future, memory or planned intention" (304). The theme of immersion in the present moment, which is credited with a validity and freedom from neurosis unavailable to the timorous mainstream, is a constant in countercultural writing of the period, having already been taken up by Alexander Trocchi and by Kerouac himself, who was the unnamed recipient of a resonant tribute from Mailer: "on the avenue of the mystery along the road to 'It'" (316).¹⁵ The wealth of the moment is undisclosed, available only to those willing to spend it without reserve.

"The White Negro" pursues a cartwheeling variety of subjects—along with primitivism and deviance, an incomplete list would include jazz, bullfighting, faith, slang, psychoanalysis, miscegenation, and orgasms good and bad—to some of which I will return. For the moment, however, it seems preferable to stick with the central theme as it is developed in the work of a polymathic writer with a keen interest in the challenge of living in the moment. Paul Goodman, whose most widely read book, *Growing Up Absurd* (1960), also yoked together the delinquent and the beatnik as perfectly understandable junior and senior products of the same dismaying social circumstances, was a novelist, a playwright, and a poet as well as a philosopher, a literary and social critic, an urbanist, an economist, a sociologist (though he blasted the discipline as morally comatose), and a practicing analyst, who advocated a brand of Gestalt psychology that offers a notable contrast to Mailer's breathless talk of uninhibited negroes and "philosophical" sociopaths.¹⁶ By turns clear-eyed, eloquent, and hopelessly dated, his impassioned critique of American society remains worth the attention of anyone seeking to understand the intellectual atmosphere of the postwar period.

In his contribution to the theory of the Gestalt school, Goodman offered a view of human experience oriented in romantic fashion toward a behavioral ideal, which he presented as entirely achievable. Although one commonly distinguishes between the individual human organism, the cultural factors that shape its view of its surroundings, and the environment in which it exists, these categories are merely heuristic. Experience itself, when it is adequate to human needs, knows no such distinctions; rather, it is characterized by a sense of wholeness in which there is no awareness of a distance between oneself and the world. In fact, the mark of a satisfying human experience, one that has the potential to lead to growth, is precisely this feeling of harmonious completeness or "good gestalt." Such experiences need not be physical, yet one comes away with the impression that unselfconscious physical activity was always the model that Goodman held in mind, as if he were translating Wordsworth's "glad animal movements" into the language of theoretical psychology; and the feel of these experiences is invoked by a prose that mobilizes whole glossaries of incantatory phrases hung between quotation marks: "final contact," "in touch with," "organism/environment field," etc.¹⁷ Many commentators, including Goodman himself, have noted

the resemblance of his position to Eastern schools of thought like Taoism and its later relative Zen Buddhism; however, for the purpose of the analyst, it matters little how one conceptualizes the process of overcoming alienation, only that one enjoy a fullness of experience sufficient to satisfy the demands of what he was entirely willing to call “human nature.”

About this last item Goodman was canny enough to realize that one can say nothing, that it can't be described apart from the experiences in which it participates. So how do we know it exists? His answer provides the link between his theoretical convictions and the social criticism that won him legions of readers among the young: we know it when it's been thwarted. Under healthy circumstances, the relationship between the organism and its environment is mutually constitutive, creative, and self-regulating; it's a developing process, an ongoing dance between partners so close as to be inseparable. But under unhealthy ones the subject retreats into itself, frustrated, alienated, and self-destructive. If that subject is a young male, it takes to shoplifting, wearing a leather jacket, and carrying brass knuckles; if a slightly older one, it grows a beard, frequents coffee houses, and disdains regular employment. And Goodman regarded pretty much everything about American society as unhealthy—jobs, entertainment, education, politics, sex, religion. Each was roundly excoriated in an exuberant display of the quality that makes large portions of *Growing Up Absurd* a delight to read even today, namely the sheer zest with which he assails the guardians of the official culture (“And *then* these baboons have the effrontery to declare that they give the people what the people demand”).¹⁸ As a freelance voice in the wilderness, no more connected to any established institution than the large part of his readership then poised on the verge of adulthood, he was refreshingly beholden to no one.

Despite the broadly romantic orientation of his thought (and in conspicuous contrast to Mailer), Goodman was not inclined to romanticize deviance. Boys and young men whose desire for experience has been stifled make choices that are “rarely charming, usually stupid, and often disastrous; we cannot expect average kids to deviate with genius” (13). Yet this is not to say that he had no blind spots or eccentricities of his own. The problem the beatniks were facing, he maintained, is simply that “there is in fact no man's work for them to do”—hence their pursuit of hopped-up substitutes (282).¹⁹ The adjectives “man's” and “manly” appear with some regularity in the pages of *Growing Up Absurd*, indicating that the human nature with which Goodman was concerned was masculine, and he informs us at the outset that marriage and children are more or less sufficient for the realization of the feminine variety. The book's utterly traditional view of gender roles pairs oddly with the author's steady allusions to the subject, not only yanking the reader back into the unthinking assumptions of sixty years ago but also raising the question of why Goodman was so sure it was relevant at all. For his most compelling declarations make it apparent that his criteria for the evaluation of society have nothing to do with gender. They are aesthetic

and moral: given the right environment, the human nature that Goodman was concerned to foster becomes capable of “behavior that has force, grace, discrimination, intellect, feeling” (6); and it’s the failure of an affluent society to create such an environment that he cannot abide. If one feels moved to observe that there is nothing inherently masculine about those excellent qualities and that the rest of humanity might very well want to cultivate them too, one is equally inclined to suspect that this observation had never crossed the author’s mind.

For Goodman, then, the project of seeking an unmediated absorption in the moment was a masculine one, and in this respect he is entirely representative of his contemporaries. Among the novelists considered in these chapters, Kerouac and Trocchi combine an interest in the theme of “the enormous present” with unmistakable and sometimes startling flourishes of sexism, and William Burroughs’ distaste for women was so extreme that it hardly needs pointing out (he once suggested that they represent an evolutionary error).²⁰ Even the suavely sophisticated Paul Bowles acknowledged in retrospect that, in the later chapters of *The Sheltering Sky*, his main female character “is and remains an object.”²¹ It’s a larger question than this book can answer why so many men of the mid-twentieth century, including these otherwise unconventional and idiosyncratic representatives of the postwar counterculture, could view self-realization only as the achievement of a traditionally gendered masculine identity and, even more confounding, why that achievement so often involved denigration of the feminine one. The initial glimmerings of a widespread feminist awareness would have to await the global counterculture of the succeeding era, and the ensuing shift in attitudes toward gender roles is among the greatest challenges that filmmakers have had to face in adapting these novels to the screen. During the postwar years, the literary expression of the counterculture was an enterprise conducted by and about men to a degree that can only seem glaring in retrospect.²² In the work of so many of these writers, there is no oppositional value—not even sanity—that cannot be swept up in the catch-all of a heroic masculinity.

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In his reflections on the shared characteristics of countercultures, Yinger observed that “countercultural movements often use foreign norms and values for their contrast conceptions; and the production and use of goods from another culture can, under some conditions, have a powerful dissolving effect on the established ways of doing things.”²³ For years after the heyday of the global counterculture, one had to look no farther than the nearest secondhand shop to find illustrations of these remarks in the form of discarded Mao suits and Nehru jackets, and I have already noted the passing resemblance of Goodman’s theoretical position to Taoism. There is much more to be said about the attractions of the non-Western world for

writers of the postwar counterculture; however, I would first like to review some of the cultural goods imported from other Western countries, and among these none is more important than France. At various times, Paris was home to the majority of the novelists whose work I will be discussing (the so-called Beat Hotel at 9 Rue Git-le-Cœur in the Latin Quarter has attained a legendary status reached by few other establishments with its flea-bag pedigree); and even one of the non-residents, Jack Kerouac, was steeped in French culture, visited the French capital late in his career, and used that visit as the basis of a novella, *Satori in Paris* (1966), whose title suggests the comparable status of Eastern and French influences on his work. For several others, the Parisian cultural milieu was even more significant, and its presence can be felt in elements drawn from a pair of well-known sources: existentialism and surrealism.

About the first of these it's difficult to say how much was acquired directly from books and how much was simply in the air during the postwar era, resulting in such period curiosities as the lecherous Gallic charlatan in Stanley Donen's *Funny Face* (1957). In the case of an early adopter like Paul Bowles, there is evidence of a comfortable familiarity with the literary models, as he was the first translator of Jean-Paul Sartre's *Huis Clos* (1944) and is responsible for the title, *No Exit*, by which the play is still usually known in this country.²⁴ The same can be said about Alexander Trocchi, who, in contrast to the truant narrator of *Young Adam*, had completed a master's degree in literature and philosophy, giving him the unlikely honor of being the most formally educated of the Beats.²⁵ Along with his residence in France during the early 1950s and involvement with Paris-based literary projects like the journal *Merlin*, the obvious influence of Camus and the less obvious one of Céline on *Young Adam* leave little doubt that he was at least broadly conversant with French literature of the period. In other cases, it's less easy to demonstrate a direct acquaintance with the literary and philosophical sources, but there is no question that the major ideas were almost unavoidable in the postwar literary world.

The title of Goodman's best-known book makes allusive reference to the most familiar of these intellectual imports. In contrast to the created universe of the Judeo-Christian mainstream, the hallmark of French existentialism was to regard the human condition as "absurd" in the sense that humanity was understood as having come into being as the product of no intention and with no plan for its subsequent existence (Goodman's point was that postwar society, despite its unprecedented affluence, did nothing to mitigate this aimless state of affairs). In Sartre's writings of the 1940s, the world is described as existing in a state of "facticity," and events are spoken of as "contingent"—that is, determined by no overriding design but simply *there* with an unshakable force that can be called fate as long as the word doesn't imply the interference of some deity. This is the philosophical background against which narrative developments like the typhoid infection in *The Sheltering Sky* or Cathie's unfortunate slip on the dock in *Young*

Adam take place. They are hardly without meaning, but such meanings as one might assign them can only be human.

Those human meanings are inseparable from human choices, although for characters in the novels of the postwar counterculture choice is often as much a matter of intuitive drift as of rational decision-making. Nevertheless, whether or not our choices are made in full awareness, they inevitably come to define us, as our actions slip into the finality of the past; and we move, with a consciousness of our own finitude, into a future realized out of nothingness—a future that is, in short, a mystery of a decisively different character than the one presented by providential views of human existence. This crucial feature of existentialist thought, an emphasis intrinsic to the phenomenological tradition that was so important to Sartre, is explicit in the work of Martin Heidegger, who was far and away the most important of Sartre's own influences. Beginning in "What Is Metaphysics?" (1929), Heidegger uses the concept of "the mystery" (*das Geheimnis*) to designate the concealed regions of Being, those hidden dimensions of possible experience that are currently unknown to us and include not only one's own future but also the whole range of alternative cultures that are mysterious as a result of one's having been "thrown into the world" within a particular cultural heritage.²⁶ If "the enormous present" represented one form of mystery to the writers of the postwar counterculture, the sense of the future as a choice among possible worlds represented another, and the incompletely knowable experiential fields of cultures beyond one's own added a host of further possibilities. The latter, to be sure, were possibilities that held little interest for the culturally chauvinistic Heidegger, but they would prove irresistibly attractive to writers like Paul Bowles and Peter Matthiessen.

Along with these key tenets of existentialist thought, Mailer, who was perhaps the most assertive among American novelists in proclaiming himself an existentialist, alludes in "The White Negro" to two related ideas, both of which he shares with other countercultural writers of the period. First, there is the distinction, also characteristic of the phenomenological tradition, between mathematical or "clock" time and the inward feel of the temporal dimension as it is experienced by human consciousness, dragging heavily through stretches of arid boredom or rushing ahead and even lifting entirely as one becomes absorbed in the moment. Not only does this distinction hover in the background of Mailer's observations on the condition of American society in the postwar era—in absolute command of mathematical time but bereft of anything but unenlivening options for how to occupy one's days—it was also formulated independently and given a memorably influential, if ultimately more traditional treatment in *On the Road*. Second, there is the distinction between authentic and inauthentic experience or what Sartre called "bad faith," which he explained with the help of an example that would become a regular point of reference in discussions of the idea: the waiter who does his job so solicitously that he gives the impression of a man impersonating a waiter. Both a model employee and an

object of contempt, Sartre's annoyingly demonstrative *garçon* carries out his duties with an artificial precision that reveals not how good he is at what he does but how far gone he is in transforming himself into something that he isn't: the social equivalent of an inanimate object.²⁷

To countercultural writers, it seemed that America had become a society of obsequiously phony waiters. The figure of "the organization man," which Goodman viewed as the remaining option available to young males after the beatnik and the delinquent, was the homegrown poster boy of postwar inauthenticity, the choice that offered security and material comfort at the cost of having to bend one's desires to the confining shape of a supporting role in the drama of profit and loss.²⁸ One not only had to play the part, one had to pretend, however half-heartedly, to like it; and in many cases the pretense was sufficiently captivating that multitudes of young men not only accepted the terms of the deal but even convinced themselves that they were getting a bargain. This self-deceived and "other-directed" social world was the subject of a passing reference, tossed off by Mailer in the course of recounting a conversation ("other-direction . . . do you really believe in that?"—315), to David Riesman, Nathan Glazer, and Reuel Denney's *The Lonely Crowd* (1950), the most widely read sociological analysis of the consumer culture that was becoming an increasingly prominent presence in American society during the postwar era. It was a world in which people drew their gratifications from a display of appearances, a parade of materialism in which, as Emerson put it, "Things are in the saddle/And ride mankind."

Those who opted out of this disheartening spectacle chose travel to far-flung places, fast cars, and fast living, refusing security and profit in an effort to intensify the experience of the present and to realize a less inauthentic future. Or they turned inward, exploring the depths of the psyche in search of hitherto unsuspected energies lurking among the mental refuse of an affluent society. For the most senior novelist in the group, Paul Bowles (b. 1910), the formative influence of French surrealism during the interwar period was decisive, and that influence would continue to be felt throughout the postwar era and into the global counterculture of the late 1960s and early 1970s. One of Frank O'Hara's most widely anthologized poems, "A Step Away from Them" (1956), ends with the lines "My heart is in my/pocket, it is Poems by Pierre Reverdy"; a decade later, a signature album of the psychedelic era was entitled *Surrealistic Pillow* (1967). At this point, it may seem that Ginsberg's outlandish analogy between LSD and the Bomb has once again raised its head, as there is an evident continuity between the surrealists' "investigations" and the early literature of psychedelia, like Aldous Huxley's *The Doors of Perception* (1954), Henri Michaux's *Misérable Miracle* (1956), and William Burroughs' *The Yage Letters* (1953–63), which in turn constitute what one might call the scholarly background of the role of *yagé* (ayahuasca) in Peter Matthiessen's *At Play in the Fields of the Lord*. The larger point, however, is that the enterprise of opening up the mind had gotten under way long before Dr. Hofmann's laboratory

mishap, and although the heritage of this dimension of the postwar counterculture is predominantly French, it is a multifaceted influence with at least three distinguishable currents, only two of which can be traced to Parisian sources.

The first of these is the most familiar. Adopting Reverdy's definition of the poetic image as the arbitrary juxtaposition of two distant and unrelated realities, the mainstream surrealists of the circle around André Breton aimed to awaken desire into a freedom from the hankering after commodities to which it had been condemned by the bourgeois world.²⁹ In distinct contrast to the political ambiguities of the postwar counterculture, their project included an avowedly left-wing politics (Breton was a card-carrying Communist until his expulsion from the party in 1935, as was Paul Bowles until he tried to resign on the eve of the Second World War), a politics that resonated sympathetically with German contemporaries like Walter Benjamin, whose 1928 essay on surrealism provides the most visible link to the Frankfurt School and the influential later work of Herbert Marcuse. Although technically a product of the postwar era, Marcuse's *Eros and Civilization* (1955), along with its home-grown complement, Norman O. Brown's *Life Against Death* (1959), would become something like the theoretical ur-texts of the global counterculture and would find their widest readership in the later period. For his part, Breton sought to tap the energies of the Freudian unconscious through unreflective methods of composition, denouncing "the odious crossing out of words" and thus anticipating Kerouac's hostility to revision.³⁰ There is, moreover, a strong family resemblance between his collage poems, assembled from the verbal detritus of the advertising world, and William Burroughs' technique of the cut-up, whereby pages of text were scissored into pieces and reassembled in new configurations, the amputated parts reattached like the conjoined halves of one of Hans Bellmer's surrealist *poupées*.³¹

The feverish imagery of Burroughs' novels would be unimaginable without the example of his surrealist precursors, although his strongest affinity is rather with the so-called dissident surrealists—Georges Bataille, Michel Leiris, and Antonin Artaud, among others—whose interest in the disruptive power of profanation would eventually exert a direct influence on French post-structuralism (as would Burroughs himself).³² By contrast, the impact of surrealism on the novel is not so straightforward, as Bataille's narratives were not widely known in the postwar period, and the most enduring mainstream surrealist prose meditations, like Louis Aragon's *Le Paysan de Paris* (1926), are not so much novels in the traditional sense as evocations of sites within the denatured modern city where the *merveilleux* can still be discovered. For this reason, Paul Bowles' *The Sheltering Sky* is especially noteworthy as the case of a novel that draws together the two major strains of French influence, offering a realistic surface narrative organized around existentialist themes but interpenetrated in dissident surrealist fashion by an unsettling brand of poetic imagery. It is the point at which the most vital

currents in midcentury French culture first touch the nascent counterculture and hence a natural subject for the first of these case studies.

Aragon's *paysan* is also a *païen*, who embodies the search for a myth-making paganism concealed in the heart of the modern metropolis, and a broadly ethnographic orientation is a regular feature not only of French surrealism but also of its New-World equivalents.³³ The "Southern Gothic"—a genre that is neither exclusively southern nor in any meaningful sense gothic—can be understood as a variety of American surrealism, although it is perhaps better described as what the Cuban novelist and erstwhile surrealist Alejo Carpentier called *lo real maravilloso*—not just a literary genre but a more general cultural tendency of the largely rural, premodern, and racially mixed societies that developed in the harsh natural and economic conditions of the Americas. The folk music revival of the 1950s and early 1960s, an effort to reconnect with that bleaker but more honest-seeming world in a period of rapidly increasing suburbanization and corporatization, is most commonly identified with a resurgence of leftist populism in the wake of the McCarthy era; however, it is equally marked by an appetite for songs of disaster and lonely death culled from sources both white and black: murder ballads, tales of floods, train wrecks, and the sinking of the *Titanic*; haunting standards like "Man of Constant Sorrow"; and touchstones of the Delta blues like Robert Johnson's "Hellhound on My Trail" (1937). These were sounds that spoke of another America, unnerving and violent but possessed of a wealth of naked emotion; and while they provide the most obvious link to the music of the global counterculture in the persons of Bob Dylan, Jimi Hendrix, the major figures of west-coast psychedelia, and the many British students of the blues, they also prefigure other cultural artifacts that are instantly recognizable to anyone familiar with the collage aesthetic of the surrealists. Among the most representative is the historian Michael Losey's *Wisconsin Death Trip* (1973), a book composed of turn-of-the-century clippings from a small-town midwestern newspaper detailing incidents of suicide, arson, and marauding tramps, the text interspersed with groups of photographs drawn from the rediscovered life's work of the local photographer: dead babies in their coffins, a grinning woman draped with snakes, a horse so white that in its muddy surroundings it seems like the harbinger of a transfigured world.

That better world may be the one that the characters in Carson McCullers' fiction long to enter, but the sadness of the one they are condemned to inhabit is unmistakably that of the folk songs to which the title of *The Ballad of the Sad Café* alludes. Faulkner is the dominant literary presence in this tradition (much as Hemingway looms behind Mailer's account of "the enormous present"); but it is McCullers' narrator, a quaintly mannered and ambiguous personality offered as native informant and guide, that sets her novella apart from its precursors and identifies it as a kind of ethnography, submitting insights gathered from a backwoods dreamworld, a melancholy

wisdom about gender and love that midcentury America was not entirely ready to receive.

*

Though resolutely anticlerical—a photograph in one of the early surrealist publications entitled *Our Collaborator Benjamin Péret Insulting a Priest* immortalizes the poet in the act of doing just that—Breton and company reserved for those privileged moments when desire is released into the light a word straight out of the religious vocabulary: *mystère*.³⁴ Others were equally willing to adopt religious language but less quick to abandon religion. Arguably, the most far-reaching political development of the postwar era was the civil rights movement, and the complex relationship between that heroic undertaking, the African-American church, and the early work of James Baldwin is perhaps the most influential of the challenges to the mainstream social norms of the period. Yet it would be a serious disservice to describe Baldwin himself or the struggle for racial justice as just another instance of the postwar counterculture. The history of opposition to racism long predates the civil rights era and continues to this day, whereas the counterculture, in its postwar and global phases, had a relatively clear beginning and end, and Baldwin was among its earliest and most eloquent critics. Nevertheless, he has a place in this book for two reasons. The civil rights movement, with which Baldwin maintained intricate and evolving relations, was a model for the many later countercultural political initiatives organized around issues of identity, and the common background of the movement and of Baldwin himself in the African-American church made him an inevitable spokesman for its cause. More to the point, his account of a Pentecostal visitation in his first novel, *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, is among the richest evocations of visionary experience in the literature of the postwar era, and it suggests a deeper kinship between Baldwin and some of those same contemporaries whom he publicly criticized.

In a less public vein, Kerouac admitted his reluctance to abandon the idea of a personal god, famously glossing the word *beat* as connoting not only “down-and-out” but also “beatific”; and Mailer, true to form, declared his belief in a pugnacious deity who was forever sparring with other gods.³⁵ Distinguishing his own version of existentialism from Sartre’s, he insisted that, to be a “real” existentialist, “one must be religious”—that “a life which is directed by one’s faith in the necessity of action is a life committed to the notion that the substratum of existence is the search, the end meaningful but mysterious” (306–07)—and strikingly similar sentiments had already been expressed five years earlier by a rather different kind of novelist, the thoughtful John Clellon Holmes, in his widely read *New York Times Magazine* essay, “This is the Beat Generation.”³⁶ To all these writers, the need to believe was crucial, even if *what* one believed was a work in progress.

Writing only seven years after the end of the war, Holmes could not have predicted just how wide-ranging the search for new creeds would be or how far outside the traditional belief systems of Western culture it would take some members of his generation. Travel in physical space would become a hallmark of the postwar counterculture, and their search would take them into the doctrinal precincts of every major religious group. Among the novelists discussed in this book, Paul Bowles would become identified with his extended residence in the Islamic world, even though his considerable experience of the region didn't include an embrace of the dominant religion; and William Burroughs also spent periods of time in Tangier, absorbing if not actively studying that city's unique mix of Western and Eastern cultures. Other important non-Western cultural and religious influences touched not only those two writers but Jack Kerouac and Peter Matthiessen as well; at different times, all four travelled in Latin America and studied (or at least took in) the indigenous cultures of the region. Of even greater significance for the last two was Zen Buddhism, and these non-Western influences form a complex of interrelated elements that contributes to the distinctive flavor of their writing.

Buddhism was a subject of intensive study for Kerouac, who did much to advance its popular image in *The Dharma Bums* (1958), and even more so for Matthiessen, who would eventually become a Buddhist priest.³⁷ It holds a position of special importance among the major themes and influences of the postwar counterculture in that it highlights a tension that in various ways runs through all of them. For Buddhism, along with certain early Hindu texts like the *Mukhya Upanishads*, is among the oldest expressions of the *via negativa* in human history, one of the most venerable examples we possess of an apophatic theology—the view that the divine can be described only in terms of what it is not. The doctrine of *anatta*, the non-self, is central to Buddhist soteriology and refers to the condition that is its aim: relief from suffering (*dukkha*, more precisely “unsatisfactoriness”) through a release from misperceptions of *samsāra*, a master concept that designates the cyclical mutability of existence in all the major Indian religions. *Samsāra* includes the related idea of *maya*, meaning “appearance” and referring to the transient or illusory surface of the world; and it is the impression of false permanence created by mistaking appearances for essences that is understood to be the source of suffering, condemning the deceived individual to increasingly desperate episodes of repetition as he or she tries to hold onto something that is necessarily impermanent. The illusoriness of the world has its counterpart in the most basic of illusions, that of a stable executive self, insofar as the habit of attributing essences is an effort of possession, an attempt to endow appearances with fixed and permanent meanings in relation to an ego that is neither fixed nor permanent.

For Buddhism, then, the fundamental mystery is that of experience itself, which becomes a moment-by-moment procession of potentially infinite richness once the illusion of the self and its unsatisfying addictions to

wealth, power, status, and gratifications of one kind or another have been relinquished. Whether the passage into a state of selfless awareness and acceptance occurs as a moment of sudden insight—in Zen Buddhism often identified by the Japanese words *kenshō* and *satori*—or gradually, through the practice of meditation, it is conceived primarily in negative terms as an apophasis. And the advantage of the perspective afforded by this distinction is that it exposes a tension inherent in the very idea of a counterculture, one that in the long view appears as a recurrent feature of modern thought. It is the tension between the apophatic philosophy of Schopenhauer and the affirmative, self-creating, cataphatic philosophy of Nietzsche—or, if an American and less overtly irreligious example is called for, the Emerson of “The Divinity School Address” and “Self-Reliance.” No less than the *Übermensch*, the Emersonian individual opposes a positive alternative to the conformist culture that he or she rejects—in the case of the postwar counterculture, a hipster self to counter an other-directed culture and a deity within to supersede the sky-god whose place has been usurped by the Bomb. At the opposite extreme, the apophatic politics of the civil rights movement, which also drew inspiration from an Eastern source—Gandhi and his brand of Advaitist Hinduism—promoted a kind of action that defined itself by what it was not, meeting police brutality with a strategy of non-violence and negating existing laws seen as unjust in the name of a higher law identified only as *agape* or Christian love (and, of course, the efficacy of those actions had much to do with their having been caught on camera, a historical fact indirectly relevant to the concerns of this book). Similarly, the counterculture would find it less difficult to say what it was not than what it was.

For example, considered in the light of this distinction, the familiar counsel to be “present in the moment,” nowadays reiterated by every species of pop guru, can be seen to harbor a basic ambiguity, which is evident in the contrasting expositions of the idea by Goodman and Mailer. Apart from the talk of human nature, Goodman’s version of Gestalt psychology is indeed close to the apophatic emphasis of Eastern tradition, although the romantic or utopian tendency of his thought becomes apparent when it is set alongside a remark by a practicing Buddhist, Peter Matthiessen, to the effect that, even after much meditation, anyone who manages to be fully present in the moment for just a few minutes a day is doing well. The advice is good, no doubt, but easier given than executed. On the other hand, Mailer’s celebration of “the enormous present” is another sort of animal altogether—not a discovery of the illusoriness of the self and the divinity of passing experience but an assertion of divinity within the self and its advancement to the station of a god, unfettered by morality and possessed of a primitive energy reminiscent of animist religion. The intoxicating, charismatic effects of this experience of the moment are by now all too well known, as are its proximity to narcissism and the violence enacted by Mailer’s youthful hoodlums.

Classical existentialism, too, owed its critical force to the negations it proposed, from the godless universe to the characteristic Heideggerian

imagery of human experience as a sunlit clearing in a forest of unknowing and Sartre's portrait of the human subject confronted with the challenge of realizing its existence in the face of nothingness. But while the forms of failure represented by the irresistible notions of inauthenticity and bad faith received a vivid conceptual elaboration—human beings turned thing-like as a result of their own weak choices—the question of what an authentic existence might be has proven harder to answer. Both Heidegger and Sartre were aware of the problems involved in trying to understand authenticity as the realization of an achieved selfhood out of some pre-established disposition or “true” self concealed *in potentia* within the individual. In fact, Sartre almost entirely avoided the word; in the whole of *Being and Nothingness*, it appears only twice. How could any such idea be admitted by a philosophy that describes human beings as having come into existence without a planned future? Heidegger's solution, which remains a subject of debate among philosophers down to the present day, was to conceive of authenticity as a convergence between a person's choices and proposed destiny: one consciously forms a life project from among the various possibilities offered by one's cultural heritage and then takes care to live up to it, modifying that project as historical circumstances demand. This is not the place to enter into the details of the contemporary debate on the concept of authenticity except to point out that this Heideggerian solution is exactly what is depicted in Matthiessen's *At Play in the Fields of the Lord*—with the important difference that the cultural heritage in question is not single and monumental but multiple and riven by conflict.

Finally, the tension between bold negations and a more problematic positive ideal is also endemic to surrealism and its inheritors. The hypothesis of the unconscious, which throws into question the authenticity of any choice, was integral to the mainstream surrealists' celebration of a liberated desire as well as their understanding of the prisons from which desire was in need of liberation. Capitalism, the common sense logic of the business world no less than logic itself, materialism, not to mention a large part of the material universe—all were anathema to Breton and his group, who reserved much of their scorn for bourgeois values and proprieties. Everyday reality and its conventional satisfactions were negated; instead, they extolled another reality in the depths of the psyche, an alternate world of desire, which, following Freud, they understood as existing in a state of flux below the level of consciousness. Yet, much like the human nature identified by Goodman as the driver of all our social needs, desire cannot be represented in its pure condition, so the surrealist project became one of seeking *figures* of desire: images, objects, and practices that draw together the conscious and unconscious realms in an explosive and, they hoped, revolutionary release of energies.

It should be obvious that these mainstream surrealist doctrines not only stand in direct conflict with the Buddhist objective of freedom *from* enslaving desires but in effect transform desire itself into a substitute divinity, one

whose politics are reassuringly assumed to be left of center. Even the sophisticated postwar versions of the repression hypothesis offered by Marcuse and Norman O. Brown display a measure of naive optimism about the progressive potential of desublimated desire; and it is an irony of modern leftist political thought that Marcuse himself was among the first to raise doubts about whether the matter could be so simply conceived with his concept of “repressive desublimation,” although many preferred to read quickly past that idea while savoring thoughts of a liberated desire. But from the observation that the free expression of desire can be an ally of political repression, it was only a short step to the later arguments of Michel Foucault and others that power does not invariably operate by repression but more often *encourages* the exercise of desire in forms that reinforce existing social relations—an idea that is implicit in William Burroughs’ central metaphor of addiction as a means of control.

Along with its major legacy of a certain kind of uncanny imagery, the surrealist project of elevating desire over reason, *eros* over *logos*, anticipates the distrust or even outright rejection of reason, science, and technology that would characterize some versions of the counterculture. By contrast, Marcuse’s Hegelianism aims for a synthesis of *eros* and *logos*, albeit one that would be achievable only in some as-yet-unrealized non-repressive society; and his effort to reaffirm the ongoing potential of reason to contribute to human freedom by means of what Hegel called “the labor of the negative” represents the other side of a controversy that has never quite gone away. In France, however, it was what Hegel had to say about power and negation that would have a decisive influence, above all on dissident surrealists like Georges Bataille, whose work has suggestive parallels in the novels of the postwar counterculture. Although Hegel’s dialectic of the master and the slave represents an unsatisfactory stage in the unfolding of consciousness, it offers perhaps the single most memorable illustration of the basic principle of his philosophy: that which is negated in the movement from thesis to antithesis is preserved in a subsequent synthesis. This is the so-called ruse of reason by which negation and “sublation” (*Aufhebung*) ensure that the strife-ridden course of human history will be, in the end, progressive. And so, in Hegel’s famous vignette, the slave, who has surrendered freedom and power for the sake of preserving life, acquires a hard-earned expertise in the process of production, while the master, who lives a life of consumption, finds that his mastery depends on the labor of the slave. The master has judged life to be not worth living without power and the freedom to exercise it, so he has gambled his life to obtain mastery; however, he discovers that his mastery is dependent on the recognition of the slave and that his authority is undermined by his dependence. Eventually, the slave will become a master himself but one who retains a memory of the slave he used to be, and history will have taken a step forward on an ultimately positive trajectory, which, despite the brilliance of the analysis, has struck many as also requiring a measure of faith.

Bataille approached this ingeniously optimistic little narrative from an unexpected angle, lingering over a single key moment in Hegel's exposition: the would-be master's understanding of the irony that life must be put at risk for the sake of more life. It's in the nature of a gamble, Hegel had acknowledged, that one may lose—that the expenditure may be profitless—however, he had viewed this possibility as a dead end and given it a suitably uninspiring name: “abstract negation.” For Bataille, however, it became the occasion for a line of thought that was echoed by American writers of the postwar period, one that would later be formulated independently by the English anthropologist Mary Douglas and would emerge as an important influence on French post-structuralism. It amounts to a recognition that the ultimate object of desire is death and the “sovereign” experience that comes with the approach to a condition outside of life, an experience that Bataille accurately described as “the impossible” and, in language inherited from Nietzsche, “assenting to life up to the point of death.”³⁸ This would indeed be a negation beyond negation, a self-effacement or “emptiness” (to use the preferred Buddhist term) that can't be recovered by the logic of any dialectic, for it would be a point beyond positivity and negativity—which, after all, are logical terms, and logic belongs to life. It is the point at which language fails, though not, for all that, just a hypothetical or an imaginary possibility. It is also the point at which mystery, a sense of the unknown, becomes mysticism, but a mysticism that does not involve access to any positively envisioned divinity.

In the experience of sovereignty (as opposed to the experience of mastery), all dialectical opposites collapse into one another: profanity and holiness, anguish and laughter, or—the pair most relevant to the novels of Paul Bowles and Peter Matthiessen—abjection and purity. All are caught up in an excess that Bataille considered fundamental to earthly life, as evidenced by the boundless energy of the sun and the blind fecundity of nature. Such excess demands expenditure without profit, a disbursement that can go as far as death but is also apparent in eroticism, crime, and ritual sacrifice, wherein the participants figuratively experience their own deaths through the death of an animal, as in Haitian *Vodou* ceremonies. Bataille was even more fascinated by the thought of human sacrifice, which he described as the definitive profitless expenditure, the most vivid illustration of what he called “general” economy as opposed to the “restricted” economy of production and consumption, profit and loss. Here one might imagine that something along the lines of Mailer's “enormous present” is in the offing, although rather than concern himself with garden-variety delinquents, Bataille preferred to concentrate on world-class criminals like Gilles de Rais and the Marquis de Sade. In fact, his interest in ritualized violence is perhaps even a point of contrast with the American *real maravilloso*, as Bataille argued that the regular eruption of violence in our daily lives is attributable to the dogmatic or rational suppression of profitless expenditure, which he considered integral to any functioning economy. Instead of photographs

like those in *Wisconsin Death Trip*, he preferred to contemplate the horrifying photograph of a turn-of-the-century Chinese public execution by gradual dismemberment (the *lingchi* or “death of a thousand cuts”), which he obtained in the 1920s and eventually inflicted on the public in *Les larmes d’Eros* (1961)—a book that might be classified as a sort of Parisian death trip. Bataille, a tormented man who took up yoga in his fifties and even penned a *Method of Meditation* (1947), is among those Western thinkers whose ideas most resemble certain aspects of Eastern thought; however, one searches his pages in vain for anything comparable to the serenity promised by Eastern religions. In response to queries about what might be had in return for the disconcerting images he brought before his readers’ eyes, he almost certainly would have replied that his work offered nothing more than clarity of vision.

The Buddhist alternative is an altogether gentler one. It, too, aims at a point beyond logic (and for this reason the classification of Buddhism as a negative theology must include at least that much qualification), but it holds that selflessness can be sought without violence and that it is a necessary concomitant of the ethical instruction summed up in the “noble eightfold path,” and especially in the emphasis on compassion (a broadly similar ethical turn occurs within Bataille’s own philosophical tradition in the work of his younger contemporary Emmanuel Levinas). This is not a ruse of reason so much as an effort to work out some much-needed guidance for living—much-needed, that is, by anyone who prefers not to opt for an immediate violent death and feels the need for something more than regular doses of its figurative approximations. The goal is not just clarity of vision but the practice of dharma, which is the way of life that one cultivates upon overcoming the illusion of selfhood and accepting the impermanence of appearances, an effort to regulate one’s behavior so as to live in harmony with a fleeting world.

In speaking of Buddhism, of course, one speaks of a 2,500-year-old tradition with a wide variety of emphases in different times and places, and the Zen Buddhism that came to popularity in the postwar United States was itself a various phenomenon, as Alan Watts observed in a well-known essay.³⁹ The cultural need it satisfied was so far from requiring doctrinal specificity that it extended even to Native-American traditions and the parallels they offer to Eastern religions (see Chapter 8). Nevertheless, in the work of well-informed figures like Gary Snyder and Peter Matthiessen, the ideal of a life lived in harmony with the earth would turn out to be among the most enduring contributions of the postwar counterculture, one whose influence has reached far beyond the scope of its inspiration in non-Western religious traditions. Modern environmental science has since caught up with it; however, as Freud once observed in a different context, the poets got there ahead of the scientists—a fact attested by the opening poem in Snyder’s first published book, “Mid-August at Sourdough Mountain Lookout” (1959), in which the speaker, his selfhood dispersed in classically

Buddhist fashion among the sensations of drinking from a cup of melted snow and the Olympian regard of the final lines, contemplates nature as a mutable, interrelated whole. From such insights, Snyder cultivated a respect that is integral to dharma and a way of life that stands decisively apart from the prevailing culture of acquisition, consumption, and display. It is akin to the radical innocence that Kerouac believed he had glimpsed, also on a mountaintop, among the native peoples of Mexico, a culture utterly different from the one that had produced the Bomb. “The phenomenal world experienced at certain pitches is totally living, exciting, mysterious, filling one with trembling awe, leaving one grateful and humble,” Snyder has written: “The wonder of the mystery returns direct to one’s own sense and consciousness: inside and outside, the voice breathes, ‘Ah!’”⁴⁰ Or, as a kindred spirit from another era put it in an even more influential meditation on the negative, the best among us are “capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason.”⁴¹ Whether their inclinations leaned east or west, the writers of the postwar counterculture were entirely at ease before such mysteries.

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Having reviewed the themes and influences that characterize the literature of the postwar counterculture, I want to return to the example with which I began, as it has the merit of pairing a highly successful film with a novel that is entirely representative of its era—so much so that its precocious ticking off of each item on the agenda of the postwar counterculture is as responsible as anything for its current reputation as a period piece, just as it made for the great popularity of Kesey’s book in its own day. In fact, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* is virtually a paradigm: the novel takes up every one of the signature countercultural themes that I have enumerated, and the film effectively translates a host of them to the cinematic medium, most unforgettably in the character of the protagonist, as embodied in Jack Nicholson’s classic performance. On the page and even more so onscreen, McMurphy is the very personification of “the enormous present.” He radiates freedom and self-sufficiency from the moment he steps onto the ward, and the novel evokes his force of personality with the help of a quasi-religious metaphor that the narrator, “Chief” Bromden, introduces at the end of the opening chapter. “I been silent so long it’s gonna roar out of me like floodwaters,” Bromden says of the story he is about to relate; then, when McMurphy arrives on the scene, his initial gesture of defiance is the symbolic one of refusing the mandatory admission shower, perhaps because he himself is a figurative source of floodwaters. Like a cataract, his voice seems to come from fifty yards overhead, and when he laughs, “it’s free and loud and it comes out of his wide grinning mouth and spreads in rings bigger and bigger till it’s lapping against the walls all over the ward.”⁴² He commits himself to his performance without letting on that it *is* a performance—Bromden is

reminded of a pitchman or used car salesman—and the film builds on this description when Nicholson follows his effusive cackle with a spontaneous overflow of another kind: he plants a kiss on his flustered, cigar-chomping handler, and the viewer can't be sure whether or not it's an act. This is, one gathers, a man who makes it up as he goes along.

That McMurphy gives an exuberant but ambiguous performance is an expected part of his self-advertised profession. He is, as he says, "a gambling fool" (11), and the reader quickly learns that the improvisational style, the ability to play the other players as much as one plays the game, is at the heart of his approach to life. He is also an apparently incorrigible delinquent, the veteran of numerous brief jail terms, and is therefore in danger of being dismissed as a mere con man, although the amount of money to be won on a psychiatric ward is so small that financial gain is plainly not the only driving force behind his behavior. As Harding says late in the novel, "We've all certainly got our money's worth every time he fleeced us, haven't we?" (229). And Bromden, returning to the imagery of floodwaters from the opening scene, makes the point more eloquently when he tells us that, during the fishing trip, he felt himself gliding overhead, "high above myself," as McMurphy seemed to do at his first appearance, so that Bromden could gaze down on him, "surrounded by his dozen people, and watch them, us, swinging a laughter that rang out on the water in ever-widening circles, farther and farther, until it crashed up on beaches all over the coast, on beaches all over all coasts, in wave after wave after wave" (214–15).

Many have noted the frequent and obvious Christian allusions in the novel, and although the protagonist and "his dozen people" make an unlikely messiah and apostles, it's important to acknowledge what manner of gospel the author is spreading. For this is, just as obviously, a religion of masculinity, and at times it seems as if Kesey were preaching the converse of Emerson's dictum: for him, whosoever would be a nonconformist must be a man.⁴³ The equation of mental health with a hearty masculine fellowship and mental illness with an infantilizing maternal regime is the most jarringly patriarchal relic to be discovered here, the Kennedy-era equivalent of an unearthed chastity belt, and these identifications are advanced with such unremitting crudeness that one is tempted to use the film's success in at least partially playing them down as a measure of its advance over its literary model. The spirit of Hemingway hangs so heavily over the novel that this alone would seem to place the book firmly in the postwar era rather than in the subsequent period, when the social acceptance of gender roles had begun to loosen (as anyone with memories of the latter period can attest, the bitterest complaint of the older generation was that boys were beginning to look like girls). But there are still other reasons to emphasize the book's representative relationship to the earlier period.

Appearing in 1975, during the waning days of the global counterculture, the film naturally sought to link McMurphy's crusade to the rebellions of the preceding decade, as its censorious early critics immediately recognized, and

the issue of the historical dating of the action is a small but telling example. Kesey's novel was published in 1962 but had been begun two years earlier, when the author was a student in the Stanford creative writing program.⁴⁴ It's not surprising, therefore, that internal evidence places the action of the narrative in the fall of 1960, as Kesey knew from his firsthand experience as an orderly that the dreadful conditions in the psychiatric hospital described in the book were all too real at the time. By the period of the film, however, the worst abuses were in the past, so the filmmakers were forced to treat their material as historical (they could hardly have enjoyed the participation of the Oregon State Hospital's chief psychiatrist, who took an onscreen role in the film, if they had done otherwise). Nevertheless, they dispatched their task so unobtrusively that only a minority of viewers ever noticed. As in the book, the detail that fixes the date of the action is the World Series, but in the film that date has been pushed forward by four years to the fall of 1964. Why? One can only speculate, but it's at least an interesting coincidence that 1964 was also the year of Kesey's proto-hippie cross-country bus trip, which would be transformed into legend in Tom Wolfe's *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* (1968)—one of those symbolic events, like Bob Dylan's going electric the following year, that is often cited as fixing the real beginning of the sixties around the midpoint of the decade.⁴⁵ The date of the film's action and the date of its release thus mark the dawn and dusk of the period in which the counterculture became a worldwide phenomenon.

By contrast, the novel belongs to the previous era in more respects than just its gleefully reactionary gender politics. It is, for example, an anthology of all the existentialist themes that I have reviewed, culminating in McMurphy's fatal choice, on the morning after the party, to pass up an escape opportunity, thus defining himself conclusively as a sacrificial savior rather than a self-interested con man (the film leaves it uncertain whether he has actually chosen his fate—not so the novel).⁴⁶ Likewise, the concept of bad faith receives an extended illustration in the personnel of the psychiatric facility, notably in the character of "Public Relations," whose anxious laugh is specifically contrasted with McMurphy's rippling flood (11). He has been, it appears, so thoroughly absorbed by his professional persona that he can no longer help himself, and his laughter comes "high and fast like he wishes he could stop" but can't:

What he sees that's so funny he don't ever let us in on, and the only thing I can see funny is him spinning round and around out there like a rubber toy—if you push him over he's weighted on the bottom and straightaway rocks back upright, goes to spinning again. He never, never looks at the men's faces.

(33–34)

The public servant in bad faith exhibits an automaton-like quality, as Sartre observed, noting the "perpetually unstable, perpetually broken equilibrium

which he perpetually re-establishes . . . his gestures and even his voice seem to be mechanisms."⁴⁷

Mechanisms are, of course, a prominent part of the novel's imagery, not least of all in the passages that take up that other major existentialist theme, the phenomenological experience of time. "The Big Nurse is able to set the wall clock at whatever speed she wants just by turning one of those dials in the steel door," Bromden tells us. In his afflicted perception, time on the ward moves either with a hectic forward motion or at a vegetative crawl, so that even the natural world is immobilized, and "not a leaf on a tree or a blade of grass in the pasture shimmers" (68). Although the dominance of this "fake time" eventually begins to recede under McMurphy's influence, the novel's descriptions of the controlling and essentially mechanical power of "the Combine"—the paranoid invention of a madman submitted as an ironic truth about American society—remain among the most evocative passages in the book. These descriptions are a hodge-podge of disparate elements. Some, like the robot workers in Bromden's dream vision, display the marks of Kesey's infatuation with science fiction; others, like the effeminate bosses waving cigarettes in long holders, add a heavy-handed homophobic dimension to the novel's masculinist agenda. But what is most striking about Bromden's evocations of the machinery of the Combine is that they reverse the associations of New Deal-era imagery of heavy industry from sacred to sinister, for the images that Bromden's mind summons up to characterize life on the ward are the very subjects celebrated in the paintings and photographs of Charles Sheeler—the factory, the grain elevator, the turbine, and (most significantly, in view of the book's water imagery) the hydroelectric dam—here offered not as cathedrals of a rational future but as fiendishly elaborate prisons of a dystopian present.⁴⁸

It isn't strange that these images should have suggested themselves to a westerner of Kesey's generation, although their prominent place in the novel indicates the extent to which *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* reaches back to the interwar period for its most arresting imagery (naturally enough, as Bromden's earliest memories also date from that time). When it comes to the elements of surrealism in the book, however, we are almost certainly dealing with a homegrown counterpart rather than a case of direct influence from the earlier period, despite the coincidence that one of the first statements of what would eventually be called anti-psychiatry came from André Breton, who had studied psychiatry and then delivered his verdict on the profession in *Nadja* (he declared that, if he were a madman, he would use one of his intervals of sanity to murder a psychiatrist).⁴⁹ Having evolved independently of its French precursors, Kesey's American surrealism is both an original creation and a missed opportunity, which the film, to its credit, succeeded in finding a way to exploit.

In the novel, the strain of native-born surrealism manifests itself through another group of images, which also seem to gesture toward an earlier era. Distinct from the nightmare visions of heavy industry, this imagery belongs

instead to the world of the penny arcade and traveling carnival. “Powerful magnets in the floor maneuver personnel through the ward like arcade puppets” (28), Bromden informs us; later, following a momentary disruption of the machinery, we learn that “[t]he clean, calculated arcade movement is coming back: six-thirty out of bed, seven into the mess hall” (155). Similarly, Harding describes the effects of electroshock treatment as “a wild carnival wheel of images, emotions, memories” (163). In this antiquated and slightly seedy environment, Nurse Ratched is figuratively envisioned as a mechanical tarot card reader (170), an arcade gypsy (276), and, most intriguingly, a porcelain doll: “She nods once to each. Precise, automatic gesture. Her face is smooth, calculated, and precision-made, like an expensive baby doll, skin like flesh-colored enamel, blend of white and cream and baby-blue eyes, small nose, pink little nostrils” (6). The immediate (and plainly intended) effect of this imagery is to depict McMurphy’s adversary as a component part of the inhuman mechanism, identifiable as a woman only by her oversized bosom: “A mistake was made somehow in manufacturing, putting those big, womanly breasts on what would of otherwise been a perfect work” (6). In Kesey’s reductionist conception, the unnatural thing about Nurse Ratched is simply that she has become a machine, whereas the truth about her is indicated by the female body imperfectly concealed beneath her uniform.

What is most interesting about the last of these images, however, is the way that it exceeds the author’s apparent intention. This is a *baby doll*, crafted to evoke maternal fondness and care, exquisite and, in contrast to its surroundings, precious—a commodity, but one whose enchanting features compel attention as an uncanny simulacrum of humanity. It’s just this sort of doll or mannequin, a human presence transformed into a commercial object, touching one’s desire with its impassive blue-eyed gaze, that fascinated the surrealists, whether as an accidental discovery in some run-down quarter of the city, as an unnerving sculpture by Bellmer or Yves Tanguy, or as a literary *tour de force*, like the *sirène* episode in *Le Paysan de Paris*.³⁰ This complex, haunting sense of a mechanism or manufactured thing that retains the aura of a human being—a quintessentially modern kind of mystery—is precisely what is elided in the author’s insistence on establishing the truth about Nurse Ratched as merely a female body to be exposed and mastered.

Although the film abandoned the machinery of the Combine over Kesey’s objections, sacrificing some of the most potent material in the book for the sake of maintaining a realistic surface, it also wisely dropped the novel’s jejune focus on Nurse Ratched’s breasts (a subject better suited to a Russ Meyer than a Miloš Forman) and instead substituted Louise Fletcher’s remarkable performance, which against all odds managed to reveal the traces of a human being behind the machine. In the film, Nurse Ratched is not just a female body trapped in a uniform but a woman trapped in a role. Whereas the surrealists had conjured up a world of commodities

in which evidence of an imperfectly commodified human presence could still be felt, Kesey imagined a mechanized world of inverted and polarized gender roles—women hardened into artificial rigidity and men reduced to enervated flaccidness, desperately in need of an infusion of virility from the irrepressible McMurphy. It remained for the film to present a comparably rich female character, one who has been warped into a forbidding figure of coercion but is still painfully recognizable as a woman struggling to fulfill her obligations; and perhaps the most striking mystery it has to offer is the actors' ability to realize not just the male hipster immersed in "the enormous present" but also this flawed but identifiably human female caught up in the mechanism that she ostensibly controls.

The final piece of the book's anti-machinery, a theme conspicuously underserved in this and every other film made from a novel of the postwar counterculture, is provided by the third of the major characters, Bromden himself, along with his memories of the world of his childhood. Although these passages lack the ethnographic authority of a Peter Matthiessen (Kesey admitted that he had never met a Native American when he invented the character), they are put forward as an alternative to the mechanical environment of the Combine and evoke the possibility of a renewed capacity for responsiveness to the natural world. Freed from Nurse Ratched's time controls, which either sent the sun racing across the sky or fixed the view from the window in a state of suspended animation, nature once again becomes a *process*, which can be sensed by humble and decidedly non-mechanical means: "I smelled the breeze. It's fall coming, I thought, I can smell that sour-molasses smell of silage, clanging the air like a bell—smell somebody's been burning oak leaves, left them to smolder overnight because they're too green" (141). In this key nocturnal scene, when Bromden discovers that for the first time in years he enjoys an unmolested perception of the outside world, his newly reawakened vision fixes on a dog—the species most renowned for its sense of smell—which recalls the other dogs that his memory has summoned up in Faulknerian fashion over the course of the novel, including one that his father once borrowed for a hunting trip long ago because, unlike the "no-'count mongrels" in their village, "he got *insteek!*" (7). An unlikely avatar of psychic health, this gifted dog becomes an emblem of the instinctual attentiveness, common to dogs but also available to undefeated human beings, that Kesey opposes to the alternative of submission to the machine.

Bromden owes his renewed instincts to McMurphy, who gives off a "smell of dust and dirt from the open fields, and sweat, and work" (90). McMurphy, in turn, recalls Bromden's father in the years before he was broken by the Combine, and the reader is eventually given the materials to piece together the events that led to his father's decline and initiated Bromden's own descent into madness: the government's campaign to commandeer tribal land for a WPA dam on the Columbia River. The traditional culture of this tribe was organized around spearfishing from scaffolding built over

a waterfall, and the dam is the original of the nightmare images with which Bromden describes the Combine and spelled the end of a way of life that now exists only in his memories:

I still hear the sound of the falls on the Columbia, always will—always—
hear the whoop of Charley Bear Belly stabbed himself a big chinook,
hear the slap of fish in the water, laughing naked kids on the bank, the
women at the rack . . . from a long time ago.

(71)

The evocation of the interdependence of the human and natural worlds here is in the spirit of Gary Snyder's poetry, and the same can be said about the water imagery throughout the novel: the illicit party on the ward is recalled by the patients the way people remember "a dam bursting" (268), and when Bromden finally escapes by crashing through the window, he tells us that the broken glass "splashed out in the moon, like a bright cold water baptizing the sleeping earth" (280). Traceable to the central place of the river in the long-lost world of Bromden's childhood, water is the emblem of a reality that is understood to be fluid and uncontrollable, the figurative counterpart to the stifling rigidity of Nurse Ratched's domain.

One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest ends on a note of uplifting uncertainty about the future, although the novel offers a handful of additional details that specify the terms of that uncertainty. Bromden, we have already been informed, is not a full-blooded Native American but a half-breed, the son of an Indian father and a white woman; and the marriage of cultures turns out to have been toxic, a microcosm of the destruction of the Native-American way of life by the Combine, here once again predictably represented by a belittling female. The question posed in the concluding pages, however, has to do with the possible future relationship between the mainstream culture and a counterculture composed of both traditional and newly invented elements. What we are offered by way of an answer is a rumor: "I've even heard that some of the tribe have took to building their old ramshackle scaffolding all over that big million-dollar hydroelectric dam, and are spearing salmon in the spillway. I'd give something to see that" (280–81). The image captures the gist of Kesey's ethos: the counterculture takes the form of a retrograde, unruly, but stubbornly creative accretion on the expensive face of American society. It is ultimately more a vehicle for survival with one's psyche intact than anything else, and if one were to mount a defense of Kesey, it would want to emphasize this modest negation of the machine alongside the swaggering, self-assertive figures with whom he is more often identified.

While Kesey's novel sounds every notable theme of the postwar counterculture, the film version stands apart from the other films discussed in this book in at least two ways. Appearing as it did in the latter days of the global counterculture, it is among the very few films of its period to bring the spirit of rebellion to the screen with conviction (the persistent failure

of Hollywood to do justice to the counterculture was as widely recognized then as now) and one of even fewer to do so by using a major novel of the postwar counterculture as its source material. It is also by a considerable measure the most successful film, in terms of artistic accomplishment no less than popular acclaim, ever to have been made from an important countercultural novel and therefore became the default example that later filmmakers would repeatedly try to equal in their own efforts to turn the novels of the postwar counterculture into films over the ensuing decades. The details of their successes and failures are one focus of the chapters that follow; the other is the intricacies of the novels themselves, a subject that rewards careful attention to a greater extent than common opinion is nowadays willing to allow.

More than anything else, therefore, this is a book of readings; and as such it is based on the implicit assumption that, despite their faults, eccentricities, and dated gestures, these novels remain *worth* reading, and not just reading but reading closely, with an eye on history and input from a range of adjacent disciplines. And the continuing interest of the novels means that much the same can be said about the films, whose very existence is proof that others have found the novels worth reading too, whatever their success in translating them to the screen. The quality of our encounters with narrative is the mystery with which this book is finally most concerned, and even in those pages that approach the novels through the lens of film it remains a traditional undertaking, one that foregrounds the central activity of literary criticism: close reading. Its premise is that reading a novel or watching a film is a rich, complex, and subtle experience; that this unique activity has an intrinsic worth capable of being enhanced by reflection, description, and interpretation; and that our experience of both novel and film can be further enriched by comparison and contrast. For some members of the postwar counterculture, it was once possible to expect literature to “change life,” in Rimbaud’s electrifying words, deliberately quoted out of context by a rebellious generation. This book is based on the more modest conviction that, by reading novels, by watching the films that have been made of them, and by thinking hard about both, we can, in however small a way, change a part of ourselves.

Notes

- 1 *Chicago Sun Times*, January 1, 1975. In later years, Ebert grudgingly moderated his opinion.
- 2 *The New York Times*, November 28, 1975.
- 3 Forman’s remarks are recorded in the documentary *The Making of One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*, which is included in the 2002 DVD release of the film.
- 4 This understanding of the counterculture is nothing new. For a recent statement of the position, see Jackson Lears, “Aquarius Rising,” *The New York Review of Books*, LXV.14 (September 27, 2018): 8–14: “‘Religion’ may be too solemn a word for many 1960s radicals, but it helps to capture the depths of

- their motives: above all, their longing for a more direct, authentic experience of the world than the one on offer in midcentury American society.” The adjectives “direct” and “authentic” allude to two of the most important—but only two—of the themes of the postwar counterculture discussed in the following pages.
- 5 On the decline of institutionalized religion, see, for example, the data collected by the Pew Research Center at <https://www.pewresearch.org/topics/religiously-unaffiliated/>.
 - 6 *The Will to Believe* (1897) (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979), 143.
 - 7 Ginsberg offered these ruminations in Maria Beatty’s documentary *Gang of Souls: A Generation of Beat Poets* (1989).
 - 8 See Albert J. Hofmann, “LSD Ganz Persönlich,” a speech delivered to the 1996 Worlds of Consciousness Conference in Heidelberg, Germany.
 - 9 J. Milton Yinger, “Contraculture and Subculture,” *American Sociological Review*, 25.5 (1960): 629. See also Yinger’s later reflections in “Countercultures and Social Change,” *American Sociological Review*, 42.6 (1977): 833–53, as well as his full-length treatment of the subject in *Countercultures: The Promise and the Peril of a World Turned Upside Down* (New York: The Free Press, 1982).
 - 10 On the concept of the “near-group,” see Lewis Yablonsky, “The Delinquent Gang as a Near-Group,” *Social Problems*, 7.2 (1959): 108–17.
 - 11 Talcott Parsons, *The Social System* (Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1951), 522. On the culture of street gangs, see Albert K. Cohen, *Delinquent Boys* (Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1955), which contains a chapter on subcultures that anticipates Yinger’s view of the interplay between personalities and group norms in a counterculture.
 - 12 Jack Kerouac, “The Origins of the Beat Generation,” *Playboy*, June 1959.
 - 13 Norman Mailer, “The White Negro: Superficial Reflections on the Hipster,” in *Advertisements for Myself* (New York: Signet Books, 1959), 306. All further citations appear in the text.
 - 14 Ellison’s reaction comes from a letter to Albert Murray dated September 28, 1958. *Trading Twelves: The Selected Letters of Ralph Ellison and Albert Murray*, ed. John F. Callahan and Albert Murray (New York: Modern Library, 2000), 193–98.
 - 15 On the cultural politics of the construction of presence in Beat writing, see Erik Mortenson, *Capturing the Beat Moment: Cultural Politics and the Poetics of Presence* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 2011).
 - 16 The descriptors applicable to Goodman could be multiplied almost indefinitely. On an episode of *Firing Line* from 1966, William F. Buckley, Jr. introduced the pipe-puffing author, sitting enveloped in a cloud of smoke, as “a pacifist, a bisexualist, a poverty cultist, an anarchist, and a few other distracting things.” Goodman hastened to object—he was not a poverty cultist. The clip serves as the introduction to Jonathan Lee’s documentary *Paul Goodman Changed My Life* (2011).
 - 17 Frederick Perls, Ralph F. Hefferline, and Paul Goodman, *Gestalt Therapy: Excitement and Growth in the Human Personality* (1951) (New York: Bantam Books, 1977), 268.
 - 18 Paul Goodman, *Growing Up Absurd: Problems of Youth in the Organized System* (New York: Random House, 1960), 28. All further citations appear in the text.
 - 19 The comment is directed specifically at the main characters of Kerouac’s *On the Road*. He also scolded them for eating too many sugary desserts and, in classically parental fashion, suggested that their overstimulated behavior was the result of their not getting enough “solid food to grow on” (283)!

- 20 See William Burroughs, *The Job: Interviews with William Burroughs* (1970) (New York: Penguin, 1989), 116–22; and *The Adding Machine* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1986), 124–26.
- 21 Paul Bowles, Preface to *The Sheltering Sky*, 65th Anniversary Edition (New York: Harper Collins, 2014), xix.
- 22 It is a depressingly difficult task to locate female novelists who can be plausibly described as representatives of the postwar counterculture as well as sources of cinematic material. One possibility is Jane Bowles, but her one novel, *Two Serious Ladies* (1943), predates the period and has never attracted attention from filmmakers (and, in view of the book's reliance on its unique tone, probably never will). For reasons detailed below, I believe that the most viable candidate is Carson McCullers, who belonged to the same circle as Paul and Jane Bowles for a time and produced novels that have served as the basis for several films.
- 23 "Countercultures and Social Change," 847.
- 24 See Paul Bowles, *Without Stopping* (New York: Harper Collins, 1972), 257; and Virginia Spencer Carr, *Paul Bowles: A Life* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2009), 178–80.
- 25 See Andrew Murray Scott, *Alexander Trocchi: The Making of the Monster*, 2nd revised ed. (Edinburgh: Kennedy & Boyd, 2012), 19–20. Trocchi's academic study of the history of philosophy culminated in an enthusiasm for the positivism of A. J. Ayer, but Scott says that during his Paris years he became familiar with Sartre, Jaspers, Heidegger, and Kierkegaard (31).
- 26 See also Heidegger's later development of the concept of "the mystery" in "On the Essence of Truth" (1943), the "Letter on Humanism" (1946), "The Question Concerning Technology" (1953), and "Building, Dwelling, Thinking" (1954). Martin Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, ed. David Farrell Krell (New York: Harper & Row, 1977).
- 27 Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology* (1943), trans. Hazel E. Barnes (London: Methuen and Co. Ltd, 1969), 59. The chapter in which Sartre introduces this example is notoriously ambiguous. By the end of it, he seems to be saying that *good faith* is all but impossible—that every waiter is necessarily guilty of bad faith—and at least one critic has concluded that the philosopher therefore deserves to be refused service and shown the door. See D. Z. Phillips, "Bad Faith and Sartre's Waiter," *Philosophy*, 56.215 (1981): 23–31. These complications are discussed below.
- 28 See William H. Whyte, *The Organization Man* (New York: Doubleday, 1956).
- 29 See Pierre Reverdy, *Le Gant de crim* (1927) (Paris: Flammarion, 1968), 32.
- 30 André Breton, "The Automatic Message" (1933), in *What Is Surrealism? Selected Writings*, ed. Franklin Rosemont (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1978), 97. The comparison with Kerouac's ideas is, however, so obvious that its importance can be easily overstated. There is no evidence that Kerouac had Breton's example in mind when he elaborated his own jazz-inspired theory of spontaneous prose.
- 31 "The proportion of half one text half the other is important corresponding as it does to the two halves of the human organism." William Burroughs, *The Ticket That Exploded* (1962–67), ed. Oliver Harris (New York: Grove Press, 2014), 65. The differences between Burroughs' practice and that of the surrealists are, however, as notable as the similarities (see Chapter 7).
- 32 The relationship between surrealism and the Beats has been studied in depth by Joanna Pawlik, who emphasizes the importance of Artaud among the influences that shaped Beat writing and notes that, by the postwar era, Breton and the mainstream surrealists were often regarded as sellouts. See "Artaud in Performance: Dissident Surrealism and the Postwar American Avant-Garde," *Papers of Surrealism*, 8 (2010): 1–25; and "Surrealism, Beat Literature and the San Francisco Renaissance," *Literature Compass*, 10.2 (2013): 97–110.

- Artaud and Burroughs are two of the most prominent presiding spirits in the major works of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus* (1972) and *A Thousand Plateaus* (1980).
- 33 James Clifford has written interestingly about the affinity between surrealism and ethnography in the France of the interwar years. In a culture whose authority had been thrown into question by the First World War, the surrealist project of seeking another reality in the depths of the human psyche had its counterpart in the ethnographic project of seeking another reality in the geographically and culturally remote. As exemplified by certain key figures like Georges Bataille, Michel Leiris, and Roger Caillois, these two projects would overlap. See "On Ethnographic Surrealism," in *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), 117–52.
 - 34 See, for example, his early collage poem "Le Corset mystère," the final piece in a volume with a similarly loaded title: *Mont de piétié* (1919). The photograph of Péret and his clerical target appeared in *La Révolution surréaliste* 8 (1926).
 - 35 Kerouac, "The Origins of the Beat Generation." Mailer explains his unusual religious views in Joseph Mantegna's documentary *Norman Mailer: The American* (2010).
 - 36 John Clellon Holmes, "This Is the Beat Generation," *The New York Times Magazine*, November 16, 1952.
 - 37 Much of the enthusiasm for Zen Buddhism in the postwar counterculture can be traced to the efforts of four influential figures: D. T. Suzuki, Eugen Herrigel, Edward Conze, and Alan Watts. Their most widely read works are Daisetz Taitaro Suzuki, *Introduction to Zen Buddhism* (Kyoto: Eastern Buddhist Society, 1934) and the essays in *Zen Buddhism*, ed. William Barret (New York: Doubleday, 1956); Eugen Herrigel, *Zen in the Art of Archery* (1948) (New York: Vintage Books, 1971); Edward Conze, *Buddhism: Its Essence and Development* (1959) (New York: Dover, 2003) and his translations of the major *prajnaparamitra* texts; Alan Watts, *The Way of Zen* (New York: Pantheon, 1957) and *This Is It and Other Essays on Zen and Spiritual Experience* (New York: Collier Books, 1960).
 - 38 Georges Bataille, *Eroticism: Death and Sensuality* (1957), trans. Mary Dalwood (San Francisco, CA: City Lights Books, 1986), 11.
 - 39 "Beat Zen, Square Zen, and Zen," in *This Is It*, 77–110.
 - 40 Gary Snyder, "Poetry and the Primitive," in *Earth House Hold* (New York: New Directions, 1969), 123.
 - 41 Keats on "negative capability." Letter to George and Thomas Keats, December 21, 27, 1817, *Letters of John Keats*, ed. Robert Gittings (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), 43.
 - 42 Ken Kesey, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (New York: Penguin Books, 1962), 9–11. All further citations appear in the text.
 - 43 So much has been written about both the Christian allegory and the misogyny in Kesey's novel that it seems unnecessary to offer yet another point-by-point demonstration. For a detailed tallying up of the novel's masculinist gestures, see Daniel J. Vitkus, "Madness and Misogyny in Ken Kesey's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*," *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics*, 14 (1994): 64–90.
 - 44 See the reminiscence of the fall 1960 semester contributed by another distinguished alumnus, Larry McMurtry, in "On the Road," *The New York Review of Books*, December 5, 2002.
 - 45 The bus trip signaled a temporary shift of emphasis in Kesey's creative work from novel writing to filmmaking, as he and his fellow travelers shot hours of footage, which he repeatedly tried to edit into a coherent whole over the subsequent decades but without success (that footage has since been transformed by

Alex Gibney and Alison Ellwood into the 2011 documentary *Magic Trip: Ken Kesey's Search for a Kool Place*). The whole episode speaks to an unresolved tension in Kesey's work between writing and performance. In the reminiscence cited above, Larry McMurtry notes that Kesey's writing, always deft in catching the rhythms of American speech, seemed better than it does on the page when the author himself read it aloud, performing all the voices. Despite his lack of success as a filmmaker and eventual return to writing, the choice to take up filmmaking testifies to the shrewdness with which Kesey anticipated the cultural shift toward visual media in the period of the global counterculture.

- 46 It is Harding, the character most inclined to forgive McMurphy's "chicanery" in the name of "the dear old capitalistic system of free individual enterprise" (229), who urges him to seize the chance to follow Turkle and Sandy out the window; but McMurphy firmly refuses (269), keeping him present for Billy's Judas-like betrayal and suicide, which precipitates McMurphy's (rather unchristian) attempt to strangle Nurse Ratched. His existential choice to let himself become a Christ-figure apparently does not include an embrace of the earlier messiah's value system.
- 47 *Being and Nothingness*, 59.
- 48 "In a period such as ours when only a comparatively few individuals seem to be given to religion, some form other than the Gothic cathedral must be found. Industry concerns the greatest numbers—it may be true, as has been said, that our factories are our substitute for religious expression." Quoted in Theodore E. Stebbins and Norman Keyes, *Charles Sheeler: The Photographs* (New York: Little, Brown, 1987), 26–27.
- 49 Breton's essay, first published in *Le Surréalisme au service de la révolution 2* (1930), is of interest insofar as the anti-psychiatry movement is generally understood to have begun only around the time that Kesey's novel appeared with works such as Erving Goffman's *Asylums* (1961) and Thomas Szasz's *The Myth of Mental Illness* (1961). See André Breton, "Surrealism and the Treatment of Mental Illness," in *What Is Surrealism? Selected Writings*, 62–64.
- 50 One of Tanguy's sculptures, a stern-looking mannequin captured in a photograph by Man Ray (1938), seems to speak to Kesey's brand of male hysteria. Above her own breasts, she sports a pair of alarmingly pointy appendages, which look more than capable of putting out the eye of the male gaze.