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Book Review

Stevenson, G. (2020). *Anti-Humanism in the Counterculture*. Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan. 223 pages. (ISBN 978-3-030-47759-2)

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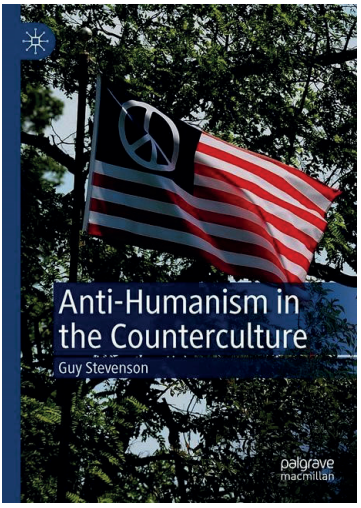

Certain authors of the twentieth century have without a doubt fallen out of popularity in our twenty-first century, depending on which socio-critical approach one brings to their texts. Among the list, we might include Henry Miller, Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, William Burroughs, and Norman Mailer—the primary subjects in Guy Stevenson's *Anti-Humanism in the Counterculture*. All five of these men have had their share of criticisms brought against them, in particular for their words involving gender discrimination, racial bias, and anti-Semitism. In any discussion concerning these authors, we cannot put these points aside, Stevenson states, and he goes to significant length to ensure that readers are cognizant of the three areas of legitimate

criticism against this group. Keeping these points in mind, Stevenson unveils what he considers is a fresh approach to understanding these individuals and the counterculture movement that grew around them. The presence of Henry Miller may seem misplaced with the other post-war novelists, but Miller's groundbreaking publications provides the basis for Stevenson's claims of an anti-humanistic theory stretching through this group's literature. Across six lengthy chapters, Stevenson examines perspectives on the "faith in the human potential for progress" (p. 3) that, it is argued, takes a variety of unexpected shapes in each of these writers' quest for individual enlightenment. *Anti-Humanism in the Counterculture* is a complicated text that attempts to pursue a new avenue into the complex cultural milieu surrounding Kerouac, Ginsberg, and Burroughs. The chapters on Miller and Mailer, while in-depth and essential, serve as opening and closing frameworks for the main premise, as the material of Miller and Mailer enables Stevenson to emphasize the ideological trajectories—both forward-thinking and patriarchally hindered—of the three powerhouses of the Beat Generation. Overall, the result is not as rewarding as anticipated, as the argument gets lost along the way.

Central to Stevenson's hypothesis involving this groups' literary output involves their underlying perceptions of the individual possibility to become aware of oneself—and potentially move the self forward in a positive direction. This progress, or at least the ability to learn about oneself to achieve self-awareness, comes about in two forms of anti-humanism. Stevenson defines anti-humanism as "a violent reaction against the perceived vanity in believing that people are fundamentally good" (p. 4). Violence is the key, as it plays a crucial function in the methods by which these writers empower themselves for release. As Stevenson works his way through their ideas, he emphasizes the function of violence, perhaps most apparent in the work of Norman Mailer, who "more than half seriously celebrates violence as a purgatorial means of human psychological evolution" (p. 14). The anti-humanism reversal, as Stevenson labels the second predominant trait, is the use of strong language and narrative variation "to feel more humane (more human also)" (p. 190); this trait appears strongly in Miller's writings but serves a specific function with Kerouac and Ginsberg, as well. Burroughs, Mailer, and Miller lean heavily toward a "productive type of anti-humanism," through which they create "writer-heroes" (p. 194) who capitalize on violent prosody. These two perspectives on anti-humanism fail to be sufficiently convincing or enlightening to create an impressive and noteworthy new perspective. As a result, the impact is stunted.

Attempting to draw these writers back into the academic discourse, Stevenson argues that the literature associated with the men has been drifting further and further away from "academic respectability" (p. 188), as modern-day critics too often attempt to "recover" their writings from the damning opinions concerning these five authors and their gender, race, and anti-Semitic errors. Defending these men has proven ineffective, therefore, Stevenson believes this alternate approach to negatively critiquing their efforts can help reincorporate these novelists and poets into a broader literary history of the United States. Of the five writers, Mailer incorporated the most traceable sense of academic association. Particularly important for Stevenson is Mailer's two books that deal with the work of Miller, *The Prisoner of Sex* (1971) and *Genius and Lust* (1976), as these works emphasize Miller's anti-humanism reversal. For Mailer, Miller's literature "suggested unrefined masculinity as the individual's assertion of autonomy—again physical, moral, but also spiritual—against collective puritanical American ethics" (p. 169). Further discussed below, Stevenson's incorporation of Mailer provides a look at the Beats and Miller from a near-contemporary peer, although Mailer was not highly regarded by any of the four other individuals. His material, however, helps draw attention to the anti-humanism within the artists. Unfortunately, Mailer, more so than the other authors, has been the most ostracized from the academic environment due to his cringe-worthy attempts to rebuff Second Wave Feminism.

A most fascinating chain of thought through Stevenson's monograph is his meticulous connection between the five writers. Miller, being the oldest and first published, is referenced across the entire book as a figure of importance but not always one of influence. Stevenson argues that it was Miller's *Tropic of Cancer* (1934), heavily indebted to Céline's *Journey to the End of the Night* (1932) and Oswald Spengler's *The Decline of the West* (1926, English version), that formed a basis for the appearance of post-war forms of individuality. Particularly, Stevenson views Miller's narrator's callousness to all other characters in the text as his form of anti-humanism. "Like Céline," Stevenson argues, "Miller expressed brutality in order to demonstrate its intractable place in human thinking and to ridicule the naivety […] of masking it" (p. 45). It is this inhuman language against others, exhibiting a lack of kindness for others, trying to disassociate oneself from society, all these are the ideas empowering Miller's employment of "callousness and obscenity to make himself less wretched" (p. 46). Disregarding the power of his words on other groups (women, minorities, Jews, etc.) boils down to one word: selfishness. Stevenson hypothesizes that the anti-humanism,

or selfishness, is the connecting factor between Miller, the Beats, and Mailer. Miller laid the groundwork through his "inhumane treatment of characters" (p. 49), and this theme was further extrapolated in Kerouac, Ginsberg, and Burroughs. Yet, Miller is shown to not have been highly influential on the Beats; in fact, Stevenson goes out of his way to demonstrate how the Beats did not consider Miller a significant precursor to their literary vein. Instead, we are shown that Oswald Spengler was a stronger binding factor across the literature of these men. Civilizations destroy the individual, Spengler suggested. Endeavoring to rise above this nullifying modern environment becomes the goal of the author searching for his identity. The search for the individual (for Mailer it would also include the heroic individual) becomes the momentum of their driving force. The anti-humanism running throughout their work requires them to disregard the larger body of society in order to liberate their individual self. In doing so, they "contributed to a mode of thinking that was abstract, dangerously absolutist and unaware of (or unconcerned about) the damage it could cause in practice" (p. 46). Here Stevenson highlights how these men believed they could justify—or not even consider—their blatant disregard for groups who shared their world.

Anti-humanism links these five figures and is particularly revealed in the two chapters dealing with the Beat writers. Early in their lives, Kerouac and Ginsberg were under the literary tutelage of the decade-older Burroughs, who encouraged them to read seriously Spengler's books. Stevenson uses Kerouac's *Visions of Cody* (1972, written in 1951–52) and *Tristessa* (1960), along with Ginsberg's "Howl" and "Kaddish" to display the Spenglerian influence on their works. Explaining his hypothesis, Stevenson believes that, "for young men exploring feelings of disaffection with modern life, with the codes they had been brought up to obey and the futile inner city frenzy they envisioned around them, Spengler provided historical coordinates for the present and runes through which to read the future" (p. 63). Spengler was mind-opening, and for Kerouac the impact on his writing took shape in imaging New York City a place where people are unable to achieve selfhood because the city drives them into hiding. For Ginsberg, Spengler projected a political influence, Stevenson posits, in that Spengler's prediction for the destruction of modern capitalism instilled in the poet a belief that the values endeared within a capitalist society needed to be rejected for the individual to protect themselves (p. 70). Céline, but also Jean Genet, are two French writers who influenced Kerouac and Ginsberg (Miller had no appreciation for Genet). The two Beats were often quick to highlight that Céline's use of language had more impact on them than Miller's publications. Céline expressed

little sympathy towards others in *Journey*, and he employed a "provocatively obscene treatment of the body as meat" (p. 33); this mode was expanded upon by Miller, and then further explored during the counterculture movement. The point Stevenson stresses encapsulates the anti-humanistic method through which the writer becomes self-liberated by ignoring everyone but themselves, allowing, for example, Kerouac to break into his "spontaneous prose" that contained no self-censoring.

As the oldest of these three Beats, Burroughs was interested in facts, and he "immersed himself in disciplines that were concerned with the harder and more objective study of human existence" (p. 111). This chapter contains a greater overlap between Miller and Burroughs, as each man was engaged in writing about forms of decaying humanity while giving readers a heavy dose of intellectual prose. They wanted readers to believe that they were writing "'the facts' of their down-and-out lives rather than engaging in the deception of art" (p. 119). The anti-humanism arises in the form of brutality, as Burroughs' novels depict the underworld of society in his novels *Junkie* (1953) and *Naked Lunch* (1959). Stevenson considers that *Tropic of Cancer*, *Junkie*, followed by *Naked Lunch* form a calculable procession toward an expected "narrative cruelty" (p. 123), furthering Miller's apparent approach of "brutality as a means of purgation: a way of feeling, thinking and behaving more compassionately in the long run" (p. 120). Stevenson posits that Burroughs' anti-humanism left him in a position where he could find no redemption. Miller, on the other hand, after publishing his *Tropics* and then the *Rosy Crucifixion* trilogy was finally able to achieve some form of individual development and therefore leave behind his destructive nature in his older age, which in turn left his later literature ineffectual. Stevenson believes Burroughs never achieved such deliverance. For Burroughs, the "obscene comedy" would be continual: there would be no escape (p. 127). This section on Burroughs and the previous one on Kerouac and Ginsberg are well paired in that the chapters progress forward, both chronologically, but also thematically. The Burroughs chapter ends by looking at his anti-movement ideology that stood in direct contrast to the consumer image the Beats acquired in the 1960s. The Beats' popularity appealed to the publicity-loving Norman Mailer, who infamously took upon himself to protect Miller and the Beats from the voices within Second Wave Feminism.

Discussing Mailer, Stevenson looks at two specific issues in his approaches to the counterculture: gender and race. Mailer was most certainly outside of the Beat movement; however, he was a keen observer of his peers and provided a critical

analysis of their actions. Particularly, Mailer latched on to an idea of an "undercurrent of violence" that surrounds "the Beat binary of authentic and inauthentic" (p. 155), a point that Mailer brings to light in his controversial 1957 essay, "The White Negro." Stevenson does not attempt to sugar-coat the racial inappropriateness of Mailer's text: "his cheap use of blackness to support a binary of 'hip' and 'square' types of people, of 'authentic' and 'inauthentic' modes of being, was shocking to many even in its day and looks increasingly embarrassing and offensive" (p. 151). Clearly, Mailer's misappropriation of a race-referencing comparison between the Beats and the mainstream culture completely ignores the realities that black people faced—and still face—in American society. In this chapter, Stevenson genuinely emphasizes the damage that the anti-humanist approach can have due to its selfish individual cause, the tacit tendency to ignore other groups. This obliviousness appears most obviously in Mailer's treatment of the scholarship being published by women in the early 1970s. Both Miller and Mailer were targets in Kate Millett's groundbreaking 1970 work, *Sexual Politics*. Mailer took it upon himself to rescue Miller by publishing a rebuttal to Millett in 1971 with *The Prisoner of Sex*. One of Mailer's positions was that the feminist attack on Miller risked undoing the progress that had been gained through the legal battles involving the profanity trials of numerous male authors in the 20th century. Mailer's view of Millett's productivity exposes the "evidence of her larger willingness to forego honest literary critical analysis in the service of ideological argument" (p. 171), thus Mailer demonstrates his affinity with Miller and the Beats in the self-focused view of the white male who strives to achieve his individuality at any cost to those around him.

Anti-Humanism in the Counterculture is a complicated manuscript, as mentioned. Stevenson attempts a new approach for considering the writings of these controversial authors within the context of the cultural transitions in the era of the counterculture. Unfortunately, there is no cataclysmic achievement here. I finished the book without feeling I had gained any great new perspective on the men discussed. Further complicating the impact of the book, the whole argument surrounding the anti-humanism and anti-humanism reversal becomes convoluted at various points, causing the flow of the prose to bog down within the numerous subsections that do not congeal into any significant point. The chapters are incredibly long (40-50 pages), and while there are numerous sections with clear subtitles, one wonders that if the structure were altered the trajectory might more clearly shine forth. Each section is closely interwoven, almost requiring a cover-to-cover reading

to follow the channel of thought. For instance, in the Miller chapter, all four of the other writers are extensively discussed. This intermixing of authors and topics continues throughout the book. As such, the manuscript is not terribly useful for just reading one segment about a particular person. It also may be that the book is lacking the utility necessary for an academic setting, as the material might not be considered significantly wide-ranging enough to enhance a graduate course. Stevenson has closely studied the words and meanings of these five men. He knows their material. What is not convincing is the anti-humanism approach to their writings, leaving the reader with some interesting points about the counterculture movement, but no eye-opening revelation.

Reference

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