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Robert Anson Heinlein: An Overlooked Sci-Fi Beatnik

Abstract: The primary goal of the following article is to track the philosophy of the Beat Generation in the science fiction writing of Robert Anson Heinlein. The analysis is driven by the unique and unusual character of Heinlein's novels, which is their emphasis on issues of rebellion, a critique of middle class culture, and negative commentary on the institutionalized Christian religion. The findings indubitably prove that Heinlein was in some way, directly or indirectly, affiliated with the ideology of the Beat Generation. The major themes that appear in his novels perfectly align with the issues raised by the Beatniks. Heinlein focused heavily on the search for identity, redefinition of the self in relation to the middle class background, and affiliation with the common and lowly. He also devoted much of his attention to the extensive analysis and critique of middle class culture, consumption and conformity. Finally, he rejected the legacy of the Christian religion and made negative comments on its conservative aspects. Respective sections of the paper focus on each of these major themes. The analysis concentrates on extracting those attributes that correlate to the major issues — rebellion against authority, middle class, and Christianity — and juxtaposes them against the ideology of the Beat Movement in search of parallels and similarities.

Keywords: Beat Generation, science fiction, Golden Age, post-war literature, counter-culture, non-conformity

Beatniks — the new breed of urban adventurers “who drifted out at night looking for action with a black man code to fit their facts” (Mailer 1992: 587), who breached taboos, defied the rose-coloured reality of the post-WWII era, and rebelled against the Cold War, the containment policy, the military industrial complex, and the middle class sensibility — almost certainly deserve a place in the Hall of Glory of American Literature. Among them are the founding fathers like Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, William S. Burroughs, Gregory Corso and Herbert Huncke, as well as contributors and associates like Kenneth Rexroth, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Michael McClure, Gary Snyder, or Philip Lamantia, primarily affiliated with the San Francisco Renaissance. While they are the indisputable deities of the Beat Movement, one could ask a question if there is among them a place for “the

god unknown.” It is my claim, which I intend to defend in this paper, that Robert Heinlein, an American writer of speculative fiction, is an overlooked Beatnik, the *Agnostos Theos* worthy of being acknowledged as a member of the Beat company.

Assuming that the above assertion is right, it seems unclear why critics should fail to notice the characteristics of the movement in Heinlein’s writing. A possible answer to the query is the fact that Heinlein was a writer of science fiction, a genre rather unpopular among mainstream audiences and scorned by academia. Yet, if either of them had looked beyond the SF costume of Heinlein’s stories and investigated their content, they might discover that the author had all the requisites of a Beatnik proper.

Indeed, it may be difficult to fit Heinlein in the background associated with the Beat Movement. After all, as he stated himself, SF authors are concerned first and foremost with “interpreting the changing, head-long rush of modern life” (Heinlein, qtd. in Seed 2005: 2). The Beatniks, on the other hand, represent the opposite part of the spectrum, embodying “the Dionysian impulse towards the primitive, the ecstatic, and the unconscious, and the Apollonian tendency towards culture, education, and the ego” (Bartlett 1981: 115). After all, Beats were the underground reaction to the emerging military industrial complex, the Cold War, the consumerism of the middle class, and the conservative Christian mentality which they countered with permissive lifestyle, experimentation with drugs, violation of sexual mores, and exploration of a religious and geographical terrain foreign to their upbringing (Cusatis 2010: 25). They were the embodiment of a counter culture, characterized by their anti-intellectual and anti-hierarchical views that accepted “madmen and outlaws,” as Francis Scott Fitzgerald would call them, as their prime role models. Early Beat writers intentionally decided to emulate such “Secret Heroes” as Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespie, Arthur Rimbaud, Dylan Thomas, and Kenneth Rexroth to show their disregard and detachment from the widely accepted modernist tradition (Chartes 1992: 17). Their refusal to conform to the “staid formalism of the mainstream American culture” (Weinreich 2004: 72) resulted in a spree of works characterized by spontaneity, unwillingness to revise, and an anarchist spirit. The impact of such anarchistic sentiments was massive, causing a shift in the tone of the culture “from the caution, irony, and impersonality of the critical intellectual to the daring commitment, and diversity of the creative artist” (Holmes 1992: 620). Beatniks were thus two things, a reemergence of the Dionysian spirit which is best summed up by a phrase “I don’t know, I don’t care, and it doesn’t make any difference” (Everson 1981: 181) and a return to romantic sensibilities “that rejected defunct standards and beliefs resulting in a creative freedom of mind and spirit” (Cuddon 1998: 767). All of these attributes distinguished Beatniks from other anti-establishment writers such as Chandler Brossard, George Mandel, or Jerome David Salinger, and successfully closed access to their inner circle to all but a few chosen individuals who believed in the same ideas, individuals like members of the San Francisco

Renaissance and, interestingly, the previously mentioned science fiction author Robert Heinlein.

Not unlike the others, Heinlein, the unacknowledged Beatnik of the SF Golden Age, showed a profound interest in tackling the issues of the post-war years, beginning with a critique of the political establishment, through a rejection of middle class beliefs, and ending with a rebellion against the established Christian religiosity. He focused on presenting hostile planetary environments, societies, cultures, and civilizations that coerced his characters to adopt conformist attitudes and follow the dictates of political authority. These served Heinlein as a background, corresponding to the American reality he did not accept, that his protagonists rejected liberating themselves from its constraints and defining their identity as rebels, outcasts and nonconformists. Free thinking, freedom loving and anarchistic, the SF characters parallel the protagonists created by the seminal Beat figures, confirming Heinlein's ideological affiliation with the movement.

The critique of the political establishment and the attitude of rebellion against authority in order to define oneself are the most prevalent Beatnik themes present throughout Heinlein's work. His juvenile novels, written in the period between 1948 and 1959 are a clear reflection of that tendency. These novels are largely devoted to the notion of opposing an oppressive government. Furnished with SF paraphernalia, they tackle various political problems of the post-war period, from the hypocrisy of the government, through the communist paranoia to racial segregation and the discrimination of women. Their characters often defy authorities and rebel against the rules imposed by the political establishment in order to achieve higher goals and preserve personal freedom. Since, as a science fiction writer, Heinlein conveys contemporary issues under the guise of science fiction fabulation, in his narratives, the American government is often represented by a Terran or Earth government, racial minorities take the form of various alien races and the United States is transformed into an interstellar federation or a unified world government.

In *Between Planets* (1951) Heinlein abandons the idea of big wars and commodification, and instead embraces the concept of acquiring a new identity and opening oneself to new experiences by living the life of the lower classes and social outcasts (Kerouac 1992: 46). Similarly to the likes of Kerouac and Burroughs, Heinlein creates a protagonist who rejects middle class conformity of "Daddy Warbucks," and chooses to fight the post-war Moloch "the incomprehensible prison!... whose love is endless oil and stone" (Ginsberg 1992: 62). He sets his novel on Venus, a Terran colony where the working class, hobos, vagabonds, and criminals all come together to form a unique community that fights against the oppression of the militarized, middle class driven, conformist authority of Earth. With the establishment of a setting that reminds the reader of post-war America, Heinlein toys with the idea of acquiring a sense of freedom by abandoning current beliefs and embracing the life of the alienated members of society. His protagonist — Don Harvey — similarly to Kerouac's Sal Paradise and Burroughs' William Lee,

embraces the existence of the dispossessed, exploring new ways of living and learning, and discovering new sensations and experiences in the process. He perceives a marked difference between the two planets: the contained, militarized, and highly authoritarian world of Terra, and the poor but free and exhilarating world of Venus. Ultimately, Harvey turns away from the authoritarian Earth and decides to remain a nonconformist, living on the fringes of society and challenging the political and social order. With *Between Planets* Heinlein not only directly expresses his negative attitude towards the military industrial complex that dominated the post-war era, but also sympathizes with the alienated, the rebels of the era, establishing a minor but nevertheless visible link to the Beat movement.

Heinlein's *Tunnel in the Sky* (1955) focuses on "the search for identity, community, and spiritual knowledge" (Stephenson 2009: 17), further strengthening his connection to the Beatnik movement and establishing the author as a critic of the authoritarian aspect of post-war American culture. The novel focuses on a group of young rebels who depart from their conformist, middle class life and establish a close connection with nature. Their experience of the wild and primitive inspires them to abandon their homes and reject the authority of their parents in order to join something of a "great rucksack revolution" described in Kerouac's *Dharma Bums* two years later. Heinlein, as any other Beatnik, emphasizes the importance of self-reliance, independence, anarchy, and rebellion against oppressive authority. He challenges the universal post-war pursuit of the ideal of affluent middle-class society comprised of educated white collar workers whose lives centre around consumption, and instead celebrates living close to nature away from the influence of the state established authority that dictates how one is supposed to live and think. Following in the footsteps of the Beat Generation, Heinlein turns away from the dehumanization and formality of the Cold War establishment (McClure, qtd. in Chartes 1992: xxvii) and focuses on the search for a new symbiotic, natural, and independent way of life.

Heinlein's rebellious views concerning any form of established authority are not constrained to his juveniles only; in the later part of his career he revisited the theme in one of his most important novels, *The Moon is a Harsh Mistress*, published in 1966. On the one hand, the novel may be interpreted as a retelling of the American Revolutionary War, but on the other hand, the story bears an uncanny resemblance to the rise of the Beat Movement and its belief that in order to become free and unique one must become free from the influence of one's forefathers (Kerouac 1958). The novel focuses on the theme of a nationwide social awakening that some time in the past led to a great schism in the Terran culture. The inhabitants of Luna, the unwanted and alienated members of society — lower classes, former criminals, vagabonds — decide to separate themselves from an Earth governed by a federal government resembling that of the present United States. "Loonies," as they are called, feel that their unique identity is threatened by the exploitative politics of the Terran authorities. In an act of desperation they decide to revolt against their

former masters in order to free themselves from their power. As their rebellion is launched, they create a social order that opposes the consumption driven society of Earth. They challenge the Terran family model, the conservative approach to education and career, unfair treatment of women, and Earth's Cold-War-like militarism. The novel reiterates Heinlein's persistent emphasis on the importance of rebellion, self-reliance and commitment to one's independence — thus retelling the story of Beatnik strife with authority and contributing to the rich legacy of the Beat Generation.

Rebellion against authority presented in the previously mentioned novels and his other books such as *Sixth Column* (1949), *Double Star* (1956) or *Citizen of The Galaxy* (1957), was only a first step in following the Beat path. With his early 1950s novels, Heinlein further established his connection with the Beat movement. His juveniles were followed by a major novel that became a loud rebellious voice attacking both the middle class and the religious conservatism which further, if not definitely, affiliated Heinlein with the Beats.

Stranger in a Strange Land (1961) is an all-out offensive against the fabric of the post-war culture as “it centres around sociological implications for change in religion and spirituality, politics and government, economics and the distribution of wealth, social relationships and lifestyles” (Kelleghan 2002: 516), aligning itself perfectly with the doctrine of the Beat Movement. In this particular novel, Heinlein proves to be a very open minded and adaptive writer, who despite his militaristic past and conservative, pre-war upbringing, boldly rejects widely accepted bourgeois values and chooses to promote individuality and rebellion over conformity and containment. Akin to the seminal Beats like Kerouac, Ginsberg and Burroughs, he condemns the white collar world and the suburban family model voicing a devastating critique of post-war United States.

The story of *Stranger in a Strange Land* features Valentine Michael Smith, a survivor of the Envoy expedition to Mars, who was rescued and raised by native inhabitants of the Planet. This unusual development at the very beginning of the story leads to the creation of a very unique and special individual raised in an extraterrestrial culture. Smith, as he is introduced in the novel, is referred to as “not a man” but “an intelligent creature with the genes and ancestry of a man ... He thinks like a Martian, he feels like a Martian. He has been brought up by a race which has nothing in common with us ... He is a man by ancestry, a Martian by environment” (Heinlein 2005: 7). Smith's unique background is extensively used throughout the novel to juxtapose the conservative and consumerist culture of man — which resembles the American culture of the post-war years — against the egalitarian, individual-centred, unconstrained freedom-loving civilisation of Martians who resent war, poverty, greed, racism, consumerism, money and mind-muddling religion. Such juxtaposition exposes all fake aspects of American post-war culture — conformity, hypocrisy, conservatism, illusion of freedom — and forces readers to perceive its degradation (Karl 2004: 45), which is very much similar in tone to

what William S. Burroughs was striving to achieve with his *Naked Lunch* and *Nova Trilogy* (1961–1964).

The critique of consumption driven society is most evident in the second part of the novel where two crucial characters — Jubal Harshaw and captain von Tromp — both admit they cannot live without money and its spending, considering the need of acquisition a part of human nature. “I... have no interest in money other than to spend it,” (Heinlein 2005: 225) says Jubal admitting that consumption plays a vital part in his life, thus reflecting the prevailing materialistic attitudes of post-war America. Heinlein casts popular materialism in a negative light, seeing it as a threat to human freedom. A critique of consumerism is expanded in the fourth part of the novel when Valentine Michael Smith establishes the Church of All Worlds, a counter-cultural organization which rejects all the aspects of the affluent culture presented in the novel. The Church challenges the pursuit of consumption by emphasizing spiritual growth over physical gain. Its members act against the logic of Earth’s bourgeois society driven by consumerism and capitalistic principles. They encourage people to break free from the limitations imposed on them by the capitalist system, and embrace “moneyless communism of the Martian culture” (Heinlein 2005: 334) which stands in contrast to the doctrine of the bourgeois society and which perfectly aligns with the mentality of the counter-cultural movements such as the Beat Generation.

Aside from its anti-consumerism, *Stranger in a Strange Land* stands out as the epitome of Heinlein’s anti-conformist views, which is very evident, once again, in the fourth part of the novel when the Church of All Worlds is introduced. This particular organization comprises former members of the middle class who have abandoned their homes and decided to live in a free-thinking, individualistic, and money-free community. Their attitude directly opposes the contemporary bourgeois society that encourages passiveness, opportunism and frowns upon rebelliousness. Theirs is an explicit rebellion against the system that forces the individual to submit and be integrated into a culture that thrives on similarity and collective thinking. By presenting nonconformist characters that reject the post-war culture of submission, Heinlein, along with the Beat Generation openly expresses his disapproval of the obedience-driven culture of the American middle class.

Naturally, *Stranger in a Strange Land* is not the only novel by Heinlein which focuses on a critique of middle class culture. The same theme also appears in *Space Family Stone* (1952), *Star Beast* (1954), *Time for the Stars* (1956), *The Door into Summer* (1957), *Orphans of the Sky* (1963), and *Podkayne of Mars* (1963). In *Podkayne of Mars* and *The Door into Summer*, Heinlein tackles the issue of middle class consumerism, criticising mindless desire to buy and consume products for the sake of satisfying human vanity. In works such as *Space Family Stone* and *Orphans of the Sky*, he, on the one hand, attacks middle class conformity and its destructive influence on one’s identity and independence and, on the other hand, focuses on the glorification of self-reliance and promotion of nonconformist attitudes. Finally, in

stories like *Star Beast* (1954), *Time for the Stars* (1956) and the previously mentioned *Moon is a Harsh Mistress*, Heinlein challenges the widely accepted middle class family model, criticising its abuse of parental authority and the emphasis on maintaining the low social position of women. Nevertheless “the articulated critique of the myth of progress and the ethnocentrism of Western technical culture” (Csicsery-Ronay 2005: 50) elevate *Stranger in a Strange Land* above all other works by Heinlein as the epitome of his Beatnik views. It is without a doubt the most direct and visible example of his disapproval of the middle class culture and also a confirmation of his ideological affiliation with the Beat Movement.

In order to complete Heinlein’s image as an avid Beatnik writer, one cannot fail to notice his critique of the Christian religion and the conservative values it propounds. Like the Beats, Heinlein renounced stifling and morally restrictive Christianity, turning instead to alternative forms of spirituality sought in Eastern religious philosophies (Watts 1992: 609). Just like Kerouac’s *Dharma Bums* (1958) and Burroughs’ *Nova Trilogy* (1961–1964), Heinlein’s novels, such as *Stranger in a Strange Land*, and to a lesser extent *Job: A Comedy of Justice* (1984), and *Have a Space Suit — Will Travel* (1958) depart from Western spirituality in favour of ideologies that celebrate individual divinity and personal freedom.

Stranger in a Strange Land once again stands out from all other works by Heinlein as the most decisive and visible exponent of the writer’s Beatnik views. The story of Valentine Michael Smith is much more than just a critique of the middle class; it is also a religious story about “the ideal man of Indian Buddhism, a superman, “a yogi,” with absolute mastery of his own nature (Watts 1992: 609). Smith is an ideal Beatnik not only in terms of his social, but also his religious views. In the course of the novel, drawing on his non-human, non-Western upbringing, he creates a religion that subverts the idea of a monotheistic God and establishes individual divinity of all beings that exist in nature, similarly to Buddhist ideology which was strongly represented in Beatnik writing — “Footnote to Howl” (1956) for example. Smith’s religion starts with a revolutionary philosophical statement: “Thou art God!” Mike repeats serenely, “That which groks. Anne is God. I am God. The happy grass are God, Jill groks in beauty always. Jill is God. All shaping and making and creating together is God” (Heinlein 2005: 148). His simple celebration of man as godhead develops into a nationwide religious movement — the previously mentioned Church of All Worlds — that challenges all established dogmas of Western religion. But Smith’s — or Heinlein’s — rebellion does not end with undermining the idea of monotheism; it goes beyond that, affecting all aspects of life, becoming a libertarian philosophy which partially embodies Heinlein’s private, Beat-like, views on social taboos. Smith’s religion starts questioning property, undermines the validity of other religions, rebels against sexual taboos, promotes homosexuality and promiscuity, and finally celebrates matriarchy, rebelling against the essence of the Western cultural paradigm. Smith’s Church is thus a symbol of counter-cultural beliefs with its rebellion against the established Western religion,

the society that supports it, and post-war social restrictions maintained by both the middle class and religious institutions in order to condition society into conformity. All of those features are perfectly in line with the spiritual philosophy of the Beat Generation and its negative attitudes to limitations imposed on individuals by conservative society.

With *Stranger in a Strange Land* and its heavy emphasis on religion, Heinlein proves that he was a writer whose interests extended beyond the frame of escapist speculative fiction. His novel constitutes a critique of the Christian religion in the spirit of the Beat rebellion. Heinlein's challenge of Christianity's crucial features — conservatism, discrimination of women and subjection to one omnipresent spiritual authority — situates him among the seminal figures of the Beat Generation such as Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, Gary Snyder, and Lawrence Ferlinghetti.

Considering Heinlein's remarkable aggregate preoccupation with the issues of rebellion against the political establishment, middle class culture, and Christian tradition, his image as a peculiar science fiction Beatnik stands out in sharp relief. His novels, among them, *Between Planets*, *Tunnel in the Sky*, *Moon is a Harsh Mistress*, and *Stranger in a Strange Land* confirm the presence of rich and varied ideologies that parallel the philosophy of the Beat Movement. Heinlein focuses heavily on the search for identity, the redefinition of the self in relation to oppressive authority, the affiliation with social outcasts, the rejection of the dehumanized military industrial complex, and the acceptance of Zen and Buddhist philosophies, replicating the ideology of the Beat Generation. And although one might argue that the origins of Heinlein and the Beats are different, the fact remains that their ideology, spirituality, and the governing purpose remain the same throughout all of their respective works (Stephenson 2009: 172).

All of these mentioned characteristics unanimously point in the direction of the Beatnik ideal — the rejection of the artificiality of American culture and submergence in the nonconformist and authentic life of the rebel (Wilson 2002: 78) — providing definite proof of Heinlein's opposition to the formalism of American culture and his membership in the Beat Generation.

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