MAILER AND BROSSARD AT THE ROOTS OF HIP

WILLIAM CRAWFORD WOODS

Chandler Brossard and Norman Mailer share membership in the same literary generation, and there their resemblances largely cease. But there was a time in the mid-1950s when their paths crossed. Both men had published novels that explored the phenomenon of Hip, and Mailer was about to publish an essay that would define it. Brossard, for his part, had written off the hipster altogether. So if their subjects were similar, their minds were hardly attuned. But they made some marks on each other.

Brossard recalls a visit to Mailer's Connecticut house in 1956 or '57 that was marred by the usual macho posturing and finally spoiled by Mailer's insistence that they box. "No, Norman, " Brossard told him, "what you really want is for us to fall into each other's arms and cry and hug, covered with blood . . . I don't like blood, and also it sounds kind of homosexual to me" (Manso, *Mailer,* 245). Mailer laughed the moment off, but it may have been in his mind a year or two later when he entered a mixed judgment on the competition in *Advertisements for Myself.*

> Chandler Brossard is a mean pricky guy who's been around, and he'd have been happier as a surgeon than a novelist, but he is original, and parts I read of *The Bold Saboteurs* were sufficiently interesting for me to put the book away—it was a little too close to some of my own notions. Brossard has that deep distaste for

Reprinted by permission of the author. This essay was originally published in the Review of Contemporary Fiction.

THE MAILER REVIEW. VOL. 7, NO. 1, FALL 2013. Copyright © 2013. The Norman Mailer Society. Published by The Norman Mailer Society.

> weakness which gives work a cold poetry. I like him as a man but I think there are too many things he does not understand. (469)

It's the perfect combination of hugs and blood.

Brossard, for his part, was to be offered a second shot many years later in a remark quoted by Peter Manso in *Mailer.* "In a terribly paradoxical way, there's a very usable emptiness in Norman. The fact that he assumes these various accents . . . he's got the Chandler Brossard one too, which at one point made me think: You, Norman, really are an unemployed actor looking for a big role" (327). The remark is critically intended, but, as we'll see, the play of self against role is a defining characteristic of Hip. And the brief exchanges between these writers, no more than literary gossip at one level, have a role to play in introducing the subject at hand, in part because Hip is the art of encounter and such moments offer a fine display of the art: writers at war with the gloves off (one bow to Papa Hem), letting their match subside into the brittle nuance of one or another literary form.

Under all this something more serious was stirring. It looks like a waxworks now: the sharp suits and shades, the gliding walk, the pot, the bop, the language! But Hip was not some passing fad to be lost in the pages of *Life.* It's still around—as a mournful humanism, an ethical nihilism, a fact in life and a possibility for fiction that's far from exhausted. Brossard and Mailer were present at the creation. Some notes on their connection follow.

Norman Mailer's essay "The White Negro" first saw print in *Dissent* in 1957, was embedded in the quickie anthology *The Beat Generation and the Angry Young Men* a year later, and was finally published, together with a clutch of related documents by Mailer and others, in *Advertisements for Myself* in 1959. The essay thus offers its own definition of Hip well after Chandler Brossard had introduced the figure of the hipster into his first novel in 1952, a fact Mailer himself was ready to note, though, interestingly, he saw Brossard's achievement as more lexical than literary: "Hipster came first as a word—it was used at least as long ago as 1951 or 1952, and was mentioned in the New Directions blurb on Chandler Brossard's *Who Walk in Darkness*" *(Advertisements* 372). But for both writers the type was less invention than discovery.

While Hip as a term and the hipster as a figure may be difficult to date precisely, both are easy enough to trace. Linguistically, the term derives from "hep, " the prewar jazz musician's sobriquet for an alert and intuitive per-

former; historically, the figure may have taken his name from Harry "the Hipster" Gibson, a postwar pianist in New York. This immediate identification with jazz, a music first mastered by blacks and long associated with drug use if not addiction, provided both Brossard and Mailer with three of the key images they needed, the one to record a social subculture, the other to craft a street-smart philosophy whose gnarled argument may be condensed to something like this sequence of ideas: out of the era of conformity enforced by the postwar American peace would emerge the American existentialist, a new man driven by private imperatives to model his prospects on the plight of the American black, whose skin had sentenced him to alienation from the wider social order. This fate the "White Negro" reads as a declaration of freedom, in that it separates both black and hipster from a poisonous official culture best met by rebellion—sometimes creative, sometimes criminal, and often productive of the "philosophical psychopath" (Mailer 343). The hipster in fact might serve society by countering its totalitarian drift with the example of his liberation, though often at terrible cost, since that liberation could sometimes require violent action against the status quo.

Thus did "The White Negro" evolve its captivating metaphor into an intricate analysis of the unsentimental education that black experience might offer alienated members of white society. Brossard had sketched these possibilities in *Who Walk in Darkness,* but had failed to provide them with a convincing theoretical base; he had, however, set at the center of his circle of characters a man to whom the term "white Negro" literally applied, though twenty years would pass before many readers could know this. In the meantime, no black character would seem to hold the novel's center stage, and those who do appear are treated with no special sensitivity. Mailer himself, given his noble savage treatment of the "Negro," was seen by some as subscribing to an inverted racism, but a close reading of the essay suggests he was less interested in offering reactionary sociology than revolutionary image: from the black bank of jazz, crusading sex, bold dope, and private languages, the white man at odds with his official culture might draw the psychic funds he needed for survival. (Left unanswered in "The White Negro" is the question of the black hipster — a self-reflexive mode, or an impossibility?)

There were, to be sure, other elements in the mix: "The bohemian and the juvenile delinquent came face-to-face with the Negro, and the hipster

was a fact in American life" (340). What may interest us in the sentence now is the way it names four categories that have all but vanished from the language; but in its time it proposed as fact what Mailer, more than Brossard, went on to celebrate in his fiction—most notably, perhaps, in the characters of Stephen Rojack in *An American Dream* and Gary Gilmore in *The Executioner's Song:* two murderers, one real and one fictitious, but both fully imagined and both illustrative of the homicidal and suicidal tendencies of Hip.

This deathward drift of the philosophy is something neither Mailer nor Brossard failed to see, though while the one put it in his books, the other sensed it in their author. "That was the scary thing about [Norman], " Chandler Brossard has observed. "He was willing to become a victim of ecstasy. He was capable of the ultimate act" (Manso 328). Which capacity "The White Negro" locates as much in history as in psychopathology: in a postwar world witness to the concentration camps and the threat of nuclear war, "the only life-giving answer is to accept the terms of death" (359). This view is classic existentialism, and it licenses both Mailer's claim that the hipster is the American existentialist—a national style derived from an international, though largely French, model—and Brossard's assertion that *Who Walk* is an existential novel, though hardly, as he hopes, the first such tale to come out of this country (Hawthorne's "Wakefield" and Melville's "Bartleby" come to mind).

Indeed there must have been times when Chandler Brossard could hardly be certain *Who Walk in Darkness* would ever be published at all. He has discussed its history in an unpublished essay in which he also tells something about its composition:

> For several months before starting on it, I had committed myself to the discipline of writing one imaginary episode a day . . . in doing so, I was learning the feel and control of a certain kind of chaste fiction language. . . . I felt confident about what I could do with the language and the fiction I planned to create. As a result of the almost religious preparation I wrote the book with a certain amount of ease. . . . It was about what people do to one another when their sustaining sociological context collapses, and it was done with the aesthetic sensibility/form of a documentary hallucination. (24)

The book was turned down all over New York for a year and a half before being picked up by the French novelist and editor Raymond Queneau for Gallimard in Paris. Queneau also passed along the manuscript to James Laughlin at New Directions, which brought it out to largely incomprehending reviews in the United States only after an editorial controversy that leaves the author understandably bitter to this day. In Brossard's version of the tale, the poet Delmore Schwartz, a consultant to the publisher, objected to the book on the grounds that it included libelous portraits of two recognizable people. In the end, the author agreed to a relatively small number of changes, but one was of great importance. It occurs in the first line of the novel: "People said Henry Porter was an illegitimate" (7). The manuscript had used quite another term.

"I ended up changing a few words here and there, " Brossard writes, "but the substantive change was to remove two words five times: those two words were 'passed Negro, ' a characterization, as I employed it, of total inauthenticity" (25). One has to locate this thinking in its era. Today the very notion of a "Negro" needing or seeking to "pass" seems both offensive and deeply dated, but in the 1950s this unhappy phenomenon must have been real enough—and evocative enough for Norman Mailer to invert the phrase in finding a title for his essay.

In any case, since authenticity is the key to all existential being, inauthenticity—whether Sartre's "bad faith" or Heidegger's "forfeiture"— effected a transformation, not corrected until a much later edition, that did substantial damage, which was to be compounded by the book's weak American reception and by—in the author's view— the devious path along which it finally gained a wider readership and a precarious place in literary history. The problem may be traced to that publisher's blurb, a gem of defensive misreading: "*Who Walk in Darkness* is . . . one of the best books about the 'Beat Generation,' 'hipsters, ' and their girls in New York's Greenwich Village." *Who Walk's* advertisement for itself goes on in the same coy vein, evoking an obligatory image of the "underground" while continuing to hedge its summary with a flurry of distancing quotes—all of which can hardly have pleased Brossard, who disclaims any Beat connection. Moreover, it misleads the reader, who encounters hipsters in his pages only in passing and only from the point of view of a narrator who shares the author's posture of disdain.

The attitude is one Brossard has insisted on all along. In "The Dead Beat

Generation," an essay published a year after "The White Negro, " he was to call hipsters "the gentle jackals of the Village" (7) and to conclude that their swelling presence could best be accounted for by seeing them as "the natural products of an urban middle class that has lost its nerve" (9). And many years later he would again seek to sever all ties between himself and his presumed companions, remarking to an interviewer, "I have absolutely no affinities with the Kerouac group" (4), and citing (in the same unpublished essay) links to a different tradition altogether: "No matter what version you've heard, I was not a member of that euphoric troup of highway buskers. . . . [They] got their act together several years after a far less romantic, perhaps less huggable, and certainly less publicized group of pioneers" (2). But the historical project Brossard claims for his own elect—America—is identical to the one taken on by the self-professed Beat writers, and it's hard in any case to separate his early work from its shared historical field. "Despite [Brossard's] protest, " one critic has reasonably noted, "his novel will continue to be discussed as a document of the early Beat movement, if not as an example of Beat writing, then for the glimpse it gives of emerging Beat consciousness" (Charters 44).

Still, this persistent attempt to link Brossard's early work to the art of the Beat Generation, while understandable, is fundamentally flawed, as may be shown by a fuller excerpt from the same article:

> Although Brossard's writing has covered a wide range of styles and concerns, he is often associated with the early Beat writers for his first novel . . . [which] drew from his own experiences living in Greenwich Village in the 1940s, and the milieu of the novel covered some of the same general terrain as sections of Kerouac's first novel *The Town and The City* (1950), and John Clellon Holmes's novel *Go* (1952). . . . The novel was essentially plotless, and Brossard deliberately used a language that was rhythmically monotonous and unliterary (44).

This description forces an association Brossard would likely have disowned. Kerouac's book has much more to do with his boyhood in Massachusetts than his young manhood in New York, and while some (by no means all) of his work may have been plotless, it was never unliterary; given its stated ori-

gins in improvised jazz, rhythmic complexity was the very essence of Kerouac's style.

The problem here is a common one: the confusion of Hip and Beat, something the mass media were repeatedly guilty of, but a distinction both Mailer and Brossard, if for very different reasons, were ordinarily careful about. Indeed, Mailer feels that a Beat (and particularly in the corrupt form of "beatnik") is a failed hipster, a rebel with energies grown so passive that he can no longer act against society but can only vanish from it: "This is the terror of the hipster—to be beat" (352). But the terror of those who, in Brossard's fiction, choose instead to observe the hipster is something very different. The characters of *Who Walk in Darkness*—often typified as "empty" or "spiritually incommunicado" (168)—lack the restorative energies of Hip and sometimes even question the style's legitimacy; as one remarks, "I don't know when to take this underground business as a laugh or when to take it as a real thing" (73).

The author himself is more certain. He knows it's real, and he knows where it comes from—Dostoyevsky's *Notes from the Underground*, a "formidable document," as Brossard was to put it in "Tentative Visits to the Cemetery: Reflections on *My* Beat Generation."

"[It] was so . . . beguilingly characteristic of our demonic, dedicated group: to metamorphose an intellectual European horror story into our proud, embattled cry" (3). Mailer doesn't cite Dostoyevsky as a source, but the Hip life he calls for, with its repudiation of positivist thought and social controls and its insistence on the authority of individual experience, is an effort Dostoyevsky's underground man would readily endorse—just as he would, for example, second the case both Mailer and Brossard make against psychoanalysis,[1] whose reductive enterprise may, for the former, be supplanted by the hipster's dangerous explorations ("the associational journey into the past . . . lived out in the theater of the present" [347]). This view finds its parallel in Brossard's protagonist's own objection to the method: "I'm afraid it will make me just like everybody else" (71).

But Hip also risks making its proponents just like everybody else—hipper than thou, in a phrase of the time. Programmatic rebellion is simply a form of negative obedience, something Brossard's characters see a bit more clearly than Mailer's new man. There's a rigidity hiding in the drama of Mailer's thought that may be what Brossard had in mind when he observed that the more famous writer "had no central sensibility. He's a kind of intel-

lectual hermit crab, looking for the cast-off shell of other animals to throw himself into their house" (Manso 372). This is wrong, but not completely. It might carry more force were not Brossard much given to uncharitable judgments on other writers, one of which is of special interest when seen in the light of *Who Walk in Darkness,* a book which is as much literary parody as social study of Hip and anti-Hip routines.

The object of the parody, surprisingly, is Ernest Hemingway—to Brossard, "a catatonic dreamer with an affected and unfortunate Castilian lisp" ("Tentative" 2).

What's strange about this particular injection of venom is that one reads no more than a few pages into *Who Walk* before recognizing it as a second *Sun* rising, the rebirth of a generation less Beat than Lost. Not only do the truncated sentences and mannered speech forcibly remind us of their famous original, specific scenes and characters are paralleled and malign social attitudes—racist, sexist, and homophobic—mark both books as well.

The parallels run deeper. *Who Walk* has the same discursive, random feel of *The Sun Also Rises;* it is centered on sport, with boxing replacing the bullfight; it assesses the impact of jazz; it even sends its characters to the seashore for relief from the city, just as Jake Barnes and his friends head for the mountains to get Paris out of their pores. Both novels have first-person narrators more likely to observe than participate in their actions; both specify a wound to their narrator's sexuality, physical in one instance, psychic in the other. And even in small details there is specific mimicry: Brossard's dialogue on "involved" echoes Hemingway's famous comic use of "utilized." (To make matters stranger, there's a Gatsbyesque "old sport" thrown in here and there for good measure.) Just so, on the terrain of meaning, we note a complete consonance of theme: both books propose a milieu of public and private malaise from which their protagonists can make temporary escapes only along the paths of sex, drink, drugs, and sometimes violence.

Given all this, *Who Walk in Darkness* might simply be written off as labored parody, Brossard gutting Papa just as the latter did Sherwood Anderson in *The Torrents of Spring.* But it's also true that many of the figures in *The Sun Also Rises* are early hipsters under other names, and one must cede the later writer a certain seriousness and even inspiration in his choice of models used in reflecting on America after the Second World War. Moreover, the author has made for his work still larger claims that must command attention if not unqualified belief, calling it "the first existential novel to come

out of America" as well as "the first anti-novel," and a book "done with the aesthetic sensibility/form of a documentary hallucination" ("Tentative" 26). Such a self-assessment suggests transatlantic sources, which Brossard was quick to acknowledge in his *Gargoyle* interview: "I can say that I was very taken by European writing . . . and not at all interested in American writing. I never really felt American, to tell you the truth. So you might say that my sensibility developed in response to reading and identifying with European sensibilities" (4).

Brossard's intriguing view of himself as a displaced European novelist may derive as well from his odd fortune in having first found a French publisher, but his claim to the authorship of the first "anti-novel" has some basis in truth. Many of the doldrums of *Who Walk* are dispelled if we grant its flat style, faded story, affectless actors, and Brownian motion to be the products of the author's stated intention to produce a "documentary hallucination"—an effect Robbe-Grillet and other theorists of the *nouveau roman* would strive for only some years after Brossard had achieved it. But in the exploration of Hip the issue is less the book's spot on a literary timetable than its role as an hallucinatory document, an exercise in social forecasting in which the fifties hipster first mounts the literary stage, as there can be no doubt he does; for not only does Brossard adopt the term, he also, *pace* Mailer, introduces the man:

> "What happened to that underground man you came in with?"
>
> "He's casing the joint, " Porter said. "He'll be back."
>
> "What do you mean by the underground man?" Goodwin asked.
>
> "The man who will do anything. He's a spiritual desperado."
>
> "He means Max Glazer, " Porter said. "He's a smart guy. Really very hip."
>
> "I didn't say he wasn't. He is a desperado, though. Do you know what his ideal is?"
>
> "His ideal is to look like a street-corner hoodlum and be the finest lyric poet in America at the same time." (65)

To look like the one, to be the other: this need for a countervailing mask to play against the fundamental role is characteristically Hip, and, again,

classically existential, in that authenticity is achieved not through public display but by contact with the core of one's most deeply-guarded being, which is what Mailer calls for in directing the hipster on an "uncharted journey into the rebellious imperatives of the self" (339), and what Brossard finds lacking in his less-favored characters insofar as they fail to achieve it. "I'm so tired of everything being reduced to a kick," a young woman remarks at one point (189), when the repetitious kicks have failed to produce any depth to her relationships; though other characters, dreaming of a more rebellious time, conclude the fault to be not in themselves, but in their stars, that they're not having one hell of a lot more meaningful fun:

> "Makes me feel wild, like the Twenties," said Joan.
>
> "That must have been a great time, " said Harry. "I wish I had been around."
>
> "Why don't you stick in your own time?" I said. "What's wrong with now?"
>
> "Something," he said. "But I don't know exactly what it is." (22)

Brossard and Mailer both knew, exactly, and they explored well past the catch phrases—"Eisenhower," "cold war," "conformity"—so often used to sum the era up. Both directed their efforts toward finding a readership whose own rebellions they could nourish, though at the cost of an irony of which they could hardly have been unaware: by introducing into their pages the hipster they found in the street, they reproduced his echo in the world again—the death of the cool, as it were, with men making motions they'd first read about in books and so forswearing the very authenticity they mimed; life imitating art, the most common of predicaments, and hardly to be urged against either author. But it does add a dimension to the debate that may have led Brossard to his "gentle jackals" dismissal, and Mailer to his insistence that man must be not only character but context—in this instance, the context of a character produced partly by a book.

For Hip and the hipster, however, the influence of art on life may matter less than that of art on art. Both figure and philosophy seem dated today, but the passions they embody have traveled on into our letters in the last sixty years, and there are few contemporary novelists who don't owe at least some

small debt to Norman Mailer and Chandler Brossard for the ideas mulled over here. Which takes me past, and so ties off, my discussion.

Leave it that in the patterns traced above, we may see that Brossard and Mailer had something to give each other in their parallel developments of Hip, a sensibility at once inherited and invented by both. But what finally matters here is probably less the old easy question of "influence" than the fact that at the same time and in something like the same way, two serious writers were working to record a new type in their fiction and define him in their critiques. Though "new" here is a little misleading, for Hip by any other name sends its tendrils back in time as well as forward. The figure of the rebel, in flight from the horrors of history, haunted by dreams of salvation or apocalypse, and answerable only to his own inner lights, is hardly a newcomer to American fiction. In that sense, hipsters crowd the pages of Hemingway, Hawthorne, Faulkner, Fitzgerald, James M. Cain, Flannery O'Connor, Melville, and Poe. But Hip and the hipster as Brossard and Mailer proposed them were indeed new to the American fifties, and if their titles have faded, their continuing claim to a hold on our imaginations have not.

The author would like to thank Professor Steven Moore of Rutgers University for his kindness in supplying many of the documents referred to.

NOTE

1. No anachronism here. The underground man is a permanent type, not a local character.

WORKS CITED

Brossard, Chandler. "The Dead Beat Generation." *Dude* July 1958: 7-9.

_____. Interview. "Politics and Libidos: The Irreverent World of Chandler Brossard." *Gargoyle.* With Eric Baizer and Richard Peabody. 14(1980): 3-8.

_____. "Tentative Visits to the Cemetery. Reflection on *My* Beat Generation." Unpublished essay. N.D.

_____. *Who Walk in Darkness.* New York: New Directions, 1952.

Charters, Samuel "Chandler Brossard." *Dictionary of Literary Biography,* 1983 ed.

Mailer, Norman. *Advertisements for Myself.* New York: Putnam, 1959.

Manso, Peter. *Mailer His Life and Times.* New York: Simon and Schuster, 1985.