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Sanciticity or commodity? : Nature as interpreter by American counterculture

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SANCITICITY OR COMMODITY? NATURE AS INTERPRETED BY AMERICAN COUNTERCULTURE

Świętość czy Towar? Natura w interpretacji Amerykańskiej kontrkultury

Abstract

At first, earlier ideas of the relationship between man and nature within the American culture are concisely restated: above all, the transcendentalist view upon this relationship, expressed by Emerson and Thoreau, and then basically questioned from the perspective of existential alienation or cognitive skepticism (Poe, Dickinson, Crane). Then, American counterculture, in the literary/artistic sense represented by the Beats and later by the Hippies, is presented, both in its unfortunate attempt at returning to Emerson's concept of divine harmony between man and nature and in its literary/artistic representatives being alienated in the "disenchanted world" of the mid-20th century America (see at least by Kerouac's *Big Sur* or *Easy Rider*, a classic film of the Hippie era). Eventually, an analogy is suggested between Kerouac and his Polish acolyte, Edward Stachura (chronologically belonging to the Hippie generation), who showed in his writings hypersensitive individuals, fatally alienated both from nature and humanity – which, ultimately, was hardly the case with the Beats or their Hippie followers.

Key words: transcendentalism harmony paradise beaters hippies bohemia alienation scepticism existentialism

Streszczenie

Na początku dokonano skrótovej rekapitulacji historycznych poglądów na temat natury w literaturze i kulturze USA, ze szczególnym naciskiem na poglądy transcendentalistów amerykańskich (Emerson, Thoreau), później zakwestionowane z perspektywy, romantycznego dekadentyzmu, naturalizmu czy też egzystencjalizmu i właściwego mu sceptycyzmu poznawczego (Poe, Dickinson, Crane). W części zasadniczej ukazano amerykańską kontrkulturę XX wieku – w sensie artystycznym i literackim reprezentowaną najpierw przez beatników, a później przez hipisów – niezdolną do powrotu do Emersonowskiej koncepcji boskiej harmonii między człowiekiem i naturą oraz dramatycznie wyalienowaną w "odczarowanym świecie" cywilizacji amerykańskiej połowy XX wieku (patrz powieść Kerouaca *Big Sur* albo *Easy Rider*, sztandarowy film epoki hipisowskiej). Pod koniec zarysowano analogię między Kerouacem a jego polskim wyznawcą Edwardem Stachurą, należącym raczej do pokolenia hipisowskiego – akcentując zarazem wymowne różnice między nimi.

Słowa kluczowe: transcendentalizm harmonia raj beatnicy hipisi cyganeria alienacja sceptycyzm egzystencjalizm

1. Introduction

In this essay, we will attempt to present a necessarily selective, chronological recollection of American literary encounters with nature, with special stress on transcendentalists, their Romantic dissenters (Hawthorne), or adversaries (Poe). Still, in the first place we shall concentrate on the Beats and their Hippie successors, generally considered spokesmen for the countercultural, or “alternative” lifestyle, initiated by Thoreau’s Walden experience and transcendentalist communes that flourished all over the USA in the first half of the 19th century. We shall also try to establish whether for Jack Kerouac or Jim Morrison the choice of living „outside of society” (as Patti Smith, their rock successor, put it later) meant returning to the realm of nature in Thoreau’s footsteps. We shall also present this issue in a wider socio-cultural context, stressing little known, though relevant nonetheless, Polish reflections of the Beat/Hippie phenomenon.

2. From the divine virginity of nature to its undivine indifference

Two basic assets of nature from the point of view of human needs, i.e. its beauty and fitness for exploitation, are highlighted already in the earliest document of the European consciousness of America, Christopher Columbus’s *Journal*, originally written in Spanish and published in English only in the 20th century. Due to the quality of translation by William Carlos Williams, a leading American modernist poet of Latino genealogy, and to the relevance of socio-cultural observations, this text may be included in the canon of English-language works describing the first European encounters with the New World. The author stresses both the virgin, “paradise” charm of its vegetation [Columbus, 1984, p.18], and the inferior status of the original inhabitants, satisfied with “things of little value” [Columbus, 1984, p.18] and thus prospectively considered as cheap work force.

In the 17th century, the concept of people exploiting nature for their needs was developed by John Smith in *A Description of New England* [1616], presenting the North America as a land of greater material promise than the author’s native England [Smith, 1984, p.20]. Only a little later, in *History of Plymouth Plantation* (written in 1630-1650), William Bradford highlighted the initial hostility of the New World’s natural environment to Puritan settlers [Bradford, 1984, p.24-25], in the 20th century restated e. g. by Charles Reich [Reich 1976: 40]. Still, as the colonization of the continent progressed, this gloomy perspective remarkably changed in favour of the idyllic vision of pastoral America, to be found in Washington Irving’s short stories, such as “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow” [1820].

This blissful vision may be considered, arguably, as one of the sources of the more universal system of American Romantic transcendentalism, informed by the native tradition of Unitarianism, German transcendental idealism and, last but not least, perennial philosophy, based upon the ancient Indian principle of the individual self (Atman) and the Universal Mind (Brahman) being identical. This principle was restated by Ralph Waldo Emerson, the leader of the movement, in his famous essay *Nature* [1836]: “I am nothing, I see all... I am part or particle of God” [Emerson, 1984, p.161]. Simultaneously, however, the serene pantheistic “gospel” of unity of God, nature, and man, preached by this prominent member of the Transcendental Club in Concord, was not totally accepted by Nathaniel Hawthorne, for some time belonging to the most famous transcendentalist commune, Brook Farm Institute of Agriculture and Education. Aware of evil as intrinsic to human nature, probably owing to his Puritan ancestry, he deconstructed, to some extent, the aforementioned idyll in a short descriptive passage of 1844, showing the pastoral silence of “Sleepy Hollow” in Concord, Massachusetts (Irving’s one being located in the present state of New York), significantly disturbed by “the whistle of the locomotive” [Marx, 1977, p.13], i.e. technology.

If Columbus's original vision of American paradise was historically "disenchanted", to use Max Weber's sociocultural terminology, by the colonial exploitation, then Hawthorne's "disenchantment" of the transcendentalist "gospel" was significantly developed, in philosophical terms, by Edgar Allan Poe. In his non-fiction work *Eureka* [1848], subtitled "A Prose Poem: an Essay on the Material and Spiritual Universe," he demonstrated that Emerson's bold statements concerning the divine union of the Over-soul, nature, and man were in fact arbitrary, given the obvious, unavoidable limits of human cognition. Quite significantly, as well as surprisingly, similar doubts resonate in the words of a prominent English representative of Romantic transcendental idealism, William Wordsworth, expressing his skepticism about the Spirit really rolling through the Eternal Thing, i. e. nature [Graff, 1983, p.62]. However, Poe went remarkably further, proposing a relativist, if not "deconstructionist" view upon nature and the whole universe [Valery, 1966, pp.106-107], and finally stating: "My whole nature revolts at the idea that there is any being in the universe superior to myself" [Matthiessen, 1941, p.8].

F. O. Matthiessen, one of greatest authorities on American Romanticism, quotes these words, paradoxically, as an example of extreme solipsistic consequences of transcendentalist philosophical approach – if we recall Emerson's declaration "The individual is the world" [Kadir, 2010, p.20] - failing to notice "a certain rhetorical ambiguity and epistemological complexity in Poe's reasoning and ironic diction" [Kadir, 2010, p.20]. Indeed, Poe's provocative statement invites the interpretation rather in the spirit of decadent Romantic dandyism, flavoured with nihilistic self-mockery and inclined towards narcotics or alcohol as "medicines" for the numbness of the soul and senses. Towards reaching the highest spiritual elevation via a biochemical "short cut," rather than through time- and effort-consuming mystical meditation – which was only natural under the conditions of burgeoning modern urban civilization, with its imperative of consumption to possibly quick effect. Towards "artificial paradise" – to use the classic phrase coined by the French poet Charles Baudelaire, one of Poe's most talented followers.

As shall be stressed later, the replacement of genuine mystical initiation into the divine essence of nature with the "artificial" one was of seminal importance also for American Beats and Hippies, who appeared around one hundred years later. Meanwhile, however, let us briefly recall the subsequent stages of American transcendental pantheism becoming consistently undermined and increasingly "disenchanted."

Thus, in the works of American writers who were relatively close to transcendentalism, one may hear more and more distinctly the note of cognitive skepticism, generated by the growing consciousness of the limitations of human understanding. Consequently, the pantheistic unity of man and nature started falling apart, which was to find its conclusion in existential pessimism.

The skepticism in question may be identified already in the poetry of Frederick Goddard Tuckerman (1821-1873). Though sometimes compared to Keats, he goes, in fact, against the tradition of his Romantic predecessors, stressing that the voice of nature is practically incomprehensible to human ear: see "The Cricket," arguably his most appreciated poem, published only in the 20th century. This discrepancy assumes more dramatic proportions in *Moby-Dick* [1851] by Herman Melville, a writer of obvious transcendentalist connections. He proposes here something of a dialectical opposition of Emersonian "gospel," presenting an archetypal Romantic rebel in ultimately unsuccessful pursuit of the alien force of the Absolute, disguised as an ambiguous phenomenon of nature. In the story "Bartleby the Scrivener" [1856], the writer goes even further, creating a mysterious Romantic anti-hero. Utterly passive and, consequently, alienated in a big city that has already replaced the natural environment, he finds himself drifting towards existential nothingness and, finally, suicide – to some extent because of the lack of characterological essence (to refer to existentialist terminology once again).

Emily Dickinson (1830-1886) follows quite closely stating “I dwell in Possibility-” [Dickinson, 1984, p.262], which, basically referring to her poetic profession, may also invite associations with being plunged into existence of any kind – whereas the implication of her hands being too “narrow... to gather Paradise” [Dickinson, 1984, p.262] in the same poem approximates the aforementioned note of cognitive skepticism that culminates in “‘Nature’ is what we see.”¹ In “Apparently with no Surprise,” the poet extends this perspective; probably inspired by the theories of naturalism, increasingly popular at the time, she metaphorically shows human being as redundant in the face of indifferent nature.

The latter idea becomes more thoroughly articulated in Stephen Crane’s “The Open Boat,” which stands in direct opposition to the transcendentalist concept of pantheistic harmony of the universe. This autobiographical story of four survivors floating upon the icy Atlantic waters near the Florida coast in a rescue boat that may swamp any time exemplifies not only nature’s cold indifference towards man – with God, by then, largely absent from the picture – but also man’s condition of a potential victim of blind chance, or even the absurd of existence. It may also suggest the affinities between two aforementioned trends of “deconstruction” of Emersonian “gospel,” i.e. the growing cognitive skepticism of its followers and its replacement with the mirage of “artificial paradise” - considering that “God is cold” [Crane, 1976, p. C276], the refrain of “A Man Adrift on a Slim Spar” that poetically sums up this story, quite closely corresponds e. g. to Poe’s “The Raven.”² Moreover, having been published in 1900, “The Open Boat” symbolically foreshadowed the mood of existential uncertainty, if not sheer pessimism, that came to define a large number of literary and philosophical milestones of the 20th century, such as Hemingway’s *The Sun Also Rises* [1926], probably the definitive Lost Generation novel. It was also in the century that, in the USA, the Beats and the Hippies marked their artistic and intellectual presence.

3. The Beats and the Hippie: natural paradise out of reach

1. The Beats could be paradoxically identified as the mid-20th century incarnation of both the Lost Generation and transcendentalists. With the former, they shared the feeling of alienation, or even oppression (see their anarchic lifestyle and political sympathies in the 1950s’ conservative America), which obviously involved existentialist connotations, expressed in the famous opening line of Allen Ginsberg’s *Howl* [1956]: “I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness starving hysterical naked... [Ginsberg, 1989, p.205]. With the latter, including closely related Walt Whitman, they were more profoundly linked: *vide* their stress upon Zen Buddhist meditation practices that vaguely resembled contemplating nature in the manner of Thoreau, or global poetic perspective, in *Howl* extending from the Rockland madhouse to “the ancient heavenly connection to the starry dynamo in the machinery of night” [Ginsberg, 1989, p.205], as well as free-verse form. Both these traits, inherited from the author of *Song of Myself*, are perfectly exemplified in “Footnote to *Howl*,” where Whitmanian enumerations and obsessive, quasi-shamanic repetition of the word “holy” combine to convey the mystical, Blake-inspired vision of universal holiness, quite in line with Emersonian “gospel.”

There is, however, an important difference, as in the Beat literature transcendental spiritual adventures are frequently presented in the psychedelic or narcotic context: *vide*, first of all, the second part of *Howl*, inspired by the author’s peyote phantasmagoria of “the facade of the Sir Francis Drake Hotel as the grinning face of Moloch” [Ellmann & O’Clair,

¹ “Nature is what we know-/Yet have no art to say” (Dickinson 1984: 263) – to quote the poem further.

² Not to mention Baudelaire’s *Flowers of Evil*, with their prevailing mood of “empty spirituality” (Friedrich 1978: 72-75).

1973, p.1120]. Or the line from its first part, about those “who... hollow-eyed and high sat up smoking... contemplating jazz” [Ginsberg, 1989, p.205] – where “high” and “smoking” obviously referred to marijuana or hashish consumption.

The stress upon contemplation being regularly [necessarily?] assisted by drugs is only natural, considering that the Beat movement was seen as a belated American reflection of European *fin-de-siècle* bohemia: vide at least the second chapter of *Down and In*, Ronald Sukenick’s story of New York artistic underground after WW II, entitled “Bohemia Is a Country in Europe” [Sukenick, 1995, pp.55-108]. This book plainly demonstrates that the movement in question was born under the conditions of American modern urban culture: remembering that those who contemplated jazz in *Howl* were “floating across the tops of cities” [Ginsberg, 1989, p.205]. The rural America of Thoreau’s Walden Pond, or of the Brook Farm Institute of Agriculture and Education, established in 1841, was far behind: it was, after all, Walt Whitman, an immediate follower of Emerson and Thoreau, who saw himself as “one of the citizens” [Whitman, 1984, p.249] of the New World conceived as “the city” [Whitman, 1984, p.249]. Consequently, it was only logical that the Beats should follow their 19th century bohemian predecessors into the elusive realms of “artificial paradise,” away from the pantheistic union of God, man and nature. However, one may hardly claim that the latter was reduced in their works merely to the background of searching “a unique narcotic” [Burroughs, 1982, p.253], in Burroughs and Ginsberg’s *The Yage Letters* [1963] called “yage,” or to quick landscape changes behind the windows of cars in which the characters of Kerouac’s *On the Road* [1957] chase the thrill of narcotic or sexual adventures.

Among the works of the latter writer, there are, in fact, at least three novels where nature is assigned a more prominent place. Still, the scenarios of the characters’ encounters with it are significantly different from Emerson’s or Thoreau’s spells of solitary contemplation.

Thus, in *The Dharma Bums* [1958], Ray Smith, i. e. Kerouac himself, and Japhy Ryder, i. e. Gary Snyder, a poet considered by the Beats an authority in Zen Buddhism, follow the teaching of Siddhartha Gautama renouncing the “supermarket” of contemporary American consumerism and preaching the art of facing “only the essential facts of life,” as Thoreau would have put it [Thoreau, 1984, p.173]. Still, as “bums,” i. e. dissolute tramps seeing themselves as the seekers for spiritual illumination, they freely take advantage of consumer goods, drinking huge amounts of wine and devouring salami, cheddar cheese, or Hershey chocolate. Thus, they approximate to some extent the characters from Hemingway *The Sun Also Rises*, even though the latter are driven to empty hedonism by the sense of existential and emotional aimlessness. In this context, even Ryder’s peyote-inspired vision [Kerouac, 1994, p.34], hardly transcends the level of consumption, while Smith’s solitary spell of meditation on Desolation Peak in the Cascade Mountains in the state of Washington finally appears to be quite ambiguous from the perspective of transcendental wisdom in the Buddhist version.

This ambiguity is even more clearly visible in *Desolation Angels* [written also in the late 1950s, though published only in 1965], sharing with the former novel both the subject matter and the setting. Kerouac, this time as Jack Dulouz, in the opening section describes the time he spent as a fire lookout on Desolation Peak – becoming, however, increasingly less angelic in the Buddhist sense, as well as tempted by narcotic pleasures [after a large dose of opium, his mind becomes profoundly confused]. Ultimately, having chosen to live in the world of nature, he finds himself alienated from it: in obvious contradiction to Emersonian “gospel.”

Quite significantly, Dulouz goes through this unwelcome experience once again in *Big Sur* [1962], which may be considered as the Beat tentative equivalent of *Walden*. He escapes from the intensity of bohemian life in San Francisco to his friend’s cabin in the Big Sur woods, on the rocky Pacific coast of California, to live in complete solitude. He indulges in long walks around this wild though enchanting area, contemplating birds, flowers, or trees.

The analogy to Thoreau's Walden experience is reinforced by mystical insights into the divine harmony of nature, where "the leaf is paradise... the man is paradise... the sea is paradise" [Kerouac, 1963, p.29], as well as by references to Emerson and Whitman [Kerouac, 1963, p.24].

Still, the American Paradise of harmony both between man and nature and within man himself may be regained only for a while: differently from Thoreau, who spent more than two years on the Walden Pond, Kerouac/Dulouz already on his fourth day at Big Sur "began to get bored" [Kerouac, 1963, p.24]. Thus, he opted to follow his "DESIRE" [Kerouac, 1963, p.33], i.e. to return to the common bohemian pleasures of alcoholic/psychedelic/narcotic consumption. The latter's effects are presented here as mind-boggling rather than mind-expanding: excessive drinking results in delirium "horrors," whenever "the bottle is gone" [Kerouac, 1963, p.89], while marijuana puts the narrator/main hero into a paranoid mental condition [Kerouac, 1963, p.103]. Consequently, his final illumination of being "perfectly normal again" [Kerouac, 1963, p.177], and, in line with the Buddhist principle of *tathata*, reconciled to common reality, his friends and the woman he hardly harmonized with, becomes even more debatable than Smith's meditation on Desolation Peak. In other words, in the world consumed by existential anxiety, along with increasingly unrestrained hedonism, the noble transcendentalist idea of harmony of God, nature, and man appears to be little more than a passing fancy.

2. Even though Lawrence Ferlinghetti, a famous Beat poet, contemptuously considered the Hippies as a product of "a nonliterate age" [Wright, 1985, p.36], there were, nonetheless, important links between these two movements, both of which originated in California, traditionally known for liberal socio-cultural atmosphere. First of all, however, they rejected the same middle-class America [in the counter-cultural jargon of the 1960s defined as "square"] in favour of alternative [bohemian] values and lifestyle – even though, with the Hippies, it was rather a case of "bohemianism for the masses," according to Czesław Miłosz's ironic remark [Jarzyńska, 2013, p.136].

Still, as far as the attitude towards nature was concerned, the Hippies seemed to be definitely closer to the tradition of American transcendentalism. Additionally inspired by Fourier's version of utopian socialism³ and, first of all, by the works of the German philosopher Herbert Marcuse, who in *Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud* [1955] questioned the conflict between Freudian pleasure and reality principles, they widely practised living in communes, in harmony both with natural environment and their own instincts. Simultaneously, while opposing the conscription for the Vietnam war, they directly referred to Thoreau's philosophy of civil disobedience. To what extent, however, did their anti-establishment communal experiment prove efficient?

The answers provided by the movement's literary legacy are rather ambiguous, to say the least. Even Richard Brautigan, described as "one of the youngest members of the Beat Generation and one of the oldest members of the Hippie Thing" [Welch, 1983, p.24], in the majority of his writings remained rather skeptical about the possibility of the alternative utopia being actually implemented. The best example here is, arguably, presented in his first published novel, *A Confederate General from Big Sur* [1964], whose main hero decides to challenge the contemporary American establishment by settling down in a cabin, in the place mentioned in the title, and establishing a commune there. The reference to Kerouac's *Big Sur* is evident, not only in terms of the setting. Strictly speaking, the effort to rediscover the American Dream in the pantheistic sense of transcendentalists fails once again, becoming pathetically reduced to fruitless marijuana-smoking and alcohol-drinking sessions, as well as to collecting cigarette butts along the highways of California.

³ Fourier's falansters being notorious for free-love practices.

In his most appreciated novel, *Trout Fishing in America* [1967], Brautigan largely discarded this rather subtle irony in favour of a depressing vision of “the Cleveland Wrecking Yard” [Brautigan, 1967, p.164], i.e. industrial “waste land” where one can buy e. g. a bathroom, or encounter a trout stream that has already been used. Painting this picture of American Paradise being technologically “disenchanted,” to some extent in line with Eliot’s or Fitzgerald’s pertinent imagery, he simultaneously provided the answer to Jim Morrison’s dramatic question: “What have they done to the Earth?/What have they done to our fairest sister?” in The Doors’ song “When the Music’s Over” [1967]. The question was actually more audible than the answer, as it was songs of this kind that, rather than any piece of poetry or fiction, represented the mainstream of the Hippie culture, articulating itself primarily through music and film.

As could be reasonably expected, the answer provided by Morrison himself in the aforementioned song was strikingly similar. Elsewhere, he occasionally referred to the original American Paradise of harmony between people and nature, showing it as dramatically violated by modern technological civilization: see his childhood memories of Indian workers lying along the motorway and bleeding to death after a car accident, as marginally referred to in the song “Peace Frog” [1970] and thoroughly recalled on the posthumous poetry/music album *An American Prayer* [1978]. At the same time, however, as a keen observer of the contemporary American reality, Morrison hardly saw any viable solution in the youthful revolt against “the Moloch” [to refer to the famous metaphor from *Howl*], describing the members of a Hippie commune in the realm of Nature as “stoned immaculate” in the song “The WASP [Texas Radio and the Big Beat]” [1971]. And, despite straightforward praising the unspoiled “country” as infinitely superior to the hectic, polluted “city,” e. g. in Canned Heat’s “Going Up the Country” [1969], the irreversible decay of American Paradise was almost just as often observed by other leading Hippie rock artists from this country. One of the classic examples is Steppenwolf’s epic “Monster” [1969], impressively reconstructing the process of idyllic pre-Columbian America turning into an inhuman oppressive technocratic “monster,” as the new rebellious generation renamed Ginsberg’s “Moloch.”

To conclude the present section of this essay, let us recall one of the most relevant sequences of the film *Easy Rider* [1969] whose two main heroes, one of them significantly nicknamed “Captain America,” embark on a motorcycle odyssey, smuggling cocaine from Mexico to Los Angeles and attempting to rediscover the original American Paradise: the tanks of their Harley-Davidsons being proudly painted in the Stars and Stripes. In the sequence in question, they are having a marijuana-smoking session with a counter culturally-oriented lawyer who, having joined them on their journey, reflects upon the continent’s pristine, pre-Columbian past, concluding that once this land was beautiful and friendly. The lawyer being killed soon afterwards by blood-thirsty “squares,”⁴ as well as subsequent deaths of both main characters, suggest that this is “no country for open-minded men,” to paraphrase the title of Cormac McCarthy’s later novel. Men who at least try to live in harmony with themselves and the world around them, even though they ultimately fail to revive the traditional American idealism of nature.

4. Polish appendix to the Beat/Hippie interpretations of nature

With reference to the Beat literary movement, the very notion of “beat” has a number of contradictory references mirroring the complexity of the writers’ perspective upon themselves. On the one hand, they preferred to be seen as “beaten,” e. g. by the “Moloch”

⁴ In the countercultural jargon, “square,” commonly used to identify the middle-class attitudes or values, basically meant “conventional” and “materialistic.”

of corporate post-WWII American state – on the other hand, though, they rose to the level of “beatitude,” owing to their exercises in [psychedelically inspired] meditation. Thus, with respect to our topic, one may wonder whether the outcome of their encounters with nature ought to be summed up as being admirably “beatific” or shamefully “beaten.”

Taking into account the Hippie sequel of these encounters, as exemplified by *Easy Rider*, the second option would be more plausible, since “Captain America” and his partner, apart from being literally “beaten” to death by the “Monster’s” slaves, conclude earlier that they “blew it:” finding their ambition to rediscover the American Paradise reduced to drug-smuggling or visits to brothels. As for the classic Beat writers, such as Kerouac, the issue in question appears to be more ambiguous, considering at least Dulouz’s final illumination in *Big Sur*. This novel would also suggest that, for anyone identifying with the Beat *credo* and its practical consequences, nature was rather an asylum from the excesses of “alternative” lifestyle than a source of divine consolation or universal harmony; rather a commodity than a sanctity. Thus, in contrast to the eternal pantheistic presence in Emerson’s sense, enveloping every human being, here it was assigned almost the function of a hotel one could always leave: feeling the need to return to bohemian pleasures (as in *Big Sur*), or finding oneself alienated (as in *Desolation Angels*), and ultimately proving the Beats to be “disaffiliated,”⁵ not only from the “square” middle class, but, paradoxically, even from their own transcendentalist heritage.

Still, approaching the latter issue from the perspective of existentialism, which remarkably affected the literary/philosophical profile of the first half of the 20th century (to mention, once again, Crane or Hemingway), we shall notice that the problem of alienation may hardly be solved by moving somewhere else, in accordance with the “on the road” pattern. Being alienated in the existential sense is not likely to be appeased by any fleeting pleasures; instead, it seems to be inwardly directed towards its own absolute, i.e. nothingness. The latter perspective, largely absent from the classic works of Beat literature, quite unexpectedly marked its presence in a Polish novel, obviously inspired by Kerouac.

With respect to the thematic perspective of this essay where, apart from the Beats and Hippies, we devoted some attention to transcendentalists, it may be worthwhile recalling, at this point, the philosophical and spiritual affinity between Emerson/Thoreau’s circle and the leading poets/thinkers of Polish Romanticism: to mention only Adam Mickiewicz’s correspondence with Margaret Fuller. In the 20th century, Zbigniew Uniłowski’s *Wspólny pokój* [“Common Room,” 1932] accidentally came quite close to the formula of *roman a clef*, regularly exploited by the Beat novelists [radical differences in style and mode of narration notwithstanding]. Nevertheless, the first genuinely conscious example of receptiveness towards this American literary trend in Polish literature was, arguably, the aforementioned Kerouac-inspired work: Edward Stachura’s *Siekierzada* [“Axerezade,” 1971].⁶

This affinity may seem quite surprising: considering that, at the time, Kerouac’s works were unavailable in Polish translation, and Stachura was hardly familiar with English.⁷ Born in France and well-acquainted with this country’s literature, as a later student of Romance languages at the University of Warsaw, he must have read *On the Road*, *The Dharma Bums*, or *Desolation Angels* in French: it is particularly the latter novel that is reflected in

⁵ The term originally used by Kenneth Rexroth – a poet and jazz essayist, strongly “affiliated” with the Ginsberg-Kerouac circle, though remarkably older – in Lawrence Lipton’s *The Holy Barbarians* (1959), a highly relevant publication on the Beat phenomenon.

⁶ This literal English equivalent of the Polish neologism, produced by the fusion of “siekiera” (“axe”) and “Szecherezada” (“Sheherazade”), could be possibly replaced by more descriptive – and, arguably, more informative – “One Thousand and One Tree-Cutting Nights.”

⁷ According to Krzysztof Karasek, a leading Polish poet and Stachura’s, as well as this author’s, close friend.

Siekierezada, along with such features of Kerouac's writings as autobiographical approach and "freely improvised" syntax.

Its main character, Janek Pradera, a sensitive, poetically inclined loner [as the author's porte-parole], arrives in some wild area of Polish mountains to work as a wood-chopper. The analogy to Dulouz's occupation and place of residence in *Desolation Angels* is immediately evident – even though Pradera, living in the communist Poland, can hardly afford opium, satisfying himself with vodka at the local inn. Another difference, in spite of his being always "on the road," is that the Polish equivalent of Dulouz may not be considered a "dharma bum," as he abstains both from Buddhist meditation practices and bohemian orgies. Similarly to Melville's *Bartleby*, representing a classic, already existential case of alienation, he is fundamentally different from everybody: both primitive, though friendly fellow wood-choppers, and his only friend, whom he ultimately leaves. The reason is that the friend, despite difficulties and depressions he has experienced, finally finds himself on the side of life and its unpredictable beauty – whereas Pradera, again similarly to *Bartleby*, is instinctively driven towards nothingness, experienced via suicide.

The latter means, naturally, the conclusion of the alienation in the realm of nature from the perspective of existentialism in its nihilistic variety. The perspective that was quite natural for Stachura – well-versed in Heidegger and especially Sartre, as well as displaying suicidal tendencies that caused his premature death in 1979 – and fundamentally alien to the Beats. Being to some extent heirs to transcendentalists and their "gospel," in the minimalist variant summarized by Thoreau as "However mean your life is, meet it and live it..." [Thoreau, 1984, p.175], they naturally were, despite any self-destructive bohemian excesses, too strongly devoted to life and its diverse charms to allow themselves to be seriously tempted by nothingness. Thus, they appear to be rather close to Pradera/Stachura's friend from *Siekierezada*, or, first of all, to their Hippie successors, such as Janis Joplin or Tim Buckley, famous acid-rock⁸ artists.⁹ Let us recall here that both Joplin and Buckley died of accidental heroin overdoses, following the lifestyle of their generation that largely consisted in having as much "fun" as possible, i. e. in hedonism that apparently outdistanced even the one of the Beats. After all, both heroes of *Easy Rider* also die by accident, i. e. obviously against their will.

5. Conclusion

Recollecting the history of American literary encounters with nature, one may notice that its status of a pantheistic transcendental sanctity, promoted by Emerson and his associates, was gradually "deconstructed": either by the bohemian quest for "artificial paradise," or, more systematically, by naturalism, stressing man's redundancy in the eyes of indifferent nature, and existentialism, highlighting the absurd of his being as undetermined by any metaphysical factors. The American Beat movement that came later was frequently considered as transcendentalism reborn in the mid-20th century – though, as has been observed, its representatives were generally more inclined to discard the genuine pantheistic mysticism in favour of the decadent searching for "artificial paradise" and, consequently, treating nature rather as a commodity, i. e. temporary asylum from the intensities of bohemian lifestyle. On the other hand, the Beats, as well as their Hippie successors, were rather reluctant to follow the path of alienation from nature to its suicidal end – as was the case under the extreme

⁸ The term synonymous with "psychedelic rock" ("acid" being a slang name for LSD), and thus defining the music of the Hippie Generation.

⁹ Considering real-life examples alongside the ones from the realm of literary or film fiction is justified by the Beat/Hippie artistic productions being heavily reliant on the lives of pertinent writers and musicians; for example, Stachura used to define his approach to writing as "zyciopisanie" ("real-life writing"), to which Kerouac, or even Burroughs could readily subscribe.

philosophical conditions of existentialism in its nihilistic version (Melville's *Bartleby*). Incidentally, this alternative route was chosen by the writers from other countries, such as the Polish poet and novelist Edward Stachura, influenced both by Kerouac and by French and German existential thinkers.

The question why this pessimistic scenario remained only potential for the contemporary American followers of transcendentalism is obviously open for discussion. Trying to provide an answer on the basis of the above discourse, we would have to pay special attention to this philosophical/sociopolitical movement's attractive power that, despite Emersonian "gospel" having been effectively questioned by naturalist/existentialist "deconstruction", survived until the second half of the 20th century (as, at least, Thoreau-inspired civil-rights protest actions were to demonstrate).

Arguably, the apparent timelessness of the transcendentalists' heritage is due to its being, ultimately, an affirmation of life – no matter how clichéd, controversial, and arbitrary, under [post]modern philosophical conditions, the latter concept might appear to be. As we have seen, it was this particular affirmation that, in the century increasingly marked by skepticism, ironic deconstruction, and transience of literary/philosophical fashions, American Beats and Hippies remained faithful to, despite their seemingly suicidal hedonistic excesses. And, possibly, this is what fundamentally defines the aforementioned dialectics of being "beatific" and "beaten."

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