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OPPONENT'S REPORT:

re *"The New America in Beat Literature: Spontaneous, Far Out, and All That Jazz"*
by Tereza Novická
(BA dissertation, 2014)

The goal of Ms Novická's BA thesis is an ambitious one: nothing less than "a reevaluation of [the Beat movement's] position in the American literary canon" (6). This is attempted via a threefold focus: two chapters contextual, one textual. Chapter 1 is devoted to overviewing the political and cultural background of the 1950s in America, which gave rise to the Beatniks, while chapter 3 similarly surveys the critical perception and media portrayal of the Beats. Inserted between these two expository sections is Chapter 2, devoted to the interpretation of the "Literary Innovation in Beat Writing," which is traced through the central intertextual relation explored in the thesis – that of Beat fiction (Ms Novická's main author is Jack Kerouac) and bebop/jazz music.

The "Introduction" succeeds in laying out the central concerns of the work while also providing the overriding rationale. Thus, jazz is chosen on the basis of its status—shared with the Beat movement—of a "form of dissent" (3). The timeframe of the thesis is also clearly delineated, enabling Ms Novická to keep the argument cogent and concentrated, its attention limited to the decade between the emergence and peak of the Beat literary movement and counterculture, from the late 1940s to the late 1950s, respectively. This is further, and cleverly, substantiated in the thesis Conclusion – it is during this decade that "the incorporation of the Beat avant-garde into the radical counterculture movement" takes place, a period in which occurs the progression "from hipster to beatnik to hippie" and so "the historical recurrence of cultural icons comes full circle" (71).

Chapter I presents a useful and informed account of the grips of McCarthyism upon early-50s U.S. politics, its Cold-War craziness and cultural conservatism. However, the literary/cultural context provided by Ms Novická is somewhat less convincing. The picture of the development of "postmodern experimentalism" vs. "the mainstream" is done in some very clumsy brushstrokes (cf. 12-13). To lump together Confessionalists with the Black Mountain School is as absurd as casting W. H. Auden as a representative of the "poetic mainstream" vs. Wallace Stevens the "experimenter." Nor is it quite clear what is meant by the "traditional formalist verse" (14) against which the Beats reacted.

Still, Chapter III, which sticks more to the Beatnik point, is a well-researched piece detailing the famous 1955 Six Gallery reading, the pre-publication history of Ginsberg's *Howl* (1957) and the ensuing obscenity trial – especially illuminating is Ms Novická's survey and contextualisation of contemporary criticism (cf. 57-9: Norman Podhoretz & other obscurantists). It is to her credit that Ms Novická doesn't settle for merely textual analysis, but her approach also concerns itself with the recordings of Beat readings and lectures.

The highpoint of the thesis, however, is Chapter II, an in-depth analysis of the thematic and structural influence of modern jazz on Beat literature, tracing “the synchronicity of bebop and Kerouac’s experimental literary methods” (6). The primary focus on Kerouac is substantiated convincingly by Ms Novická as follows: whereas Ginsberg “mainly portrayed jazz as subject-matter in his poetry,” Kerouac went further, “tapp[ing] into the literary possibilities of artistic expression that modern jazz offered” (21). These possibilities included jazz not only as theme, but also “structural technique.” The pièce de résistance of this chapter is the phonetic analysis (47-9) of the sound of Kerouac’s poetry in *Mexico City Blues* and prose in *On the Road*, showing both to be directly inspired by bebop and jazz compositional techniques.

The theme itself, of course, is nothing new under the sun, a fact Ms Novická is well aware of, perhaps too much so. Throughout, poets are oftentimes read through critics: Ginsberg is read through Stephenson, Kerouac through Skerl and Townsend, and the jazz/Beat intertext is explored through Hrebeniak and Weinreich. Regrettably, the critics are oftentimes used to complete thoughts Ms Novická could have reached and expressed on her own. Again, the strong point of the thesis is where she writes in her own voice: her “Conclusion” succeeds in making of the Beats a case of the familiar “Marginal-Becomes-Mainstream” process within literary history – the process by which, “while rejecting the literary and critical authorities of the 1950s,” the Beats “have become ingrained into the canon of the present-day literary establishment” (74).

There are three points to be raised for further consideration:

1. Though keeping a notoriously low and elusive profile, William Burroughs is, for many, *the* pivotal Beat figure. Though most commonly associated—via his friendship with Brion Gysin—with fine arts rather than music (and thus downplayed in the thesis), the question still remains: where does Burroughs fit in the Beat/jazz/bebop intertext? Is, for example, the cut-up purely visual, or are there sonic and rhythmic concerns at play, too?
2. The “foundations of the bop aesthetic come to fruition” in Kerouac’s novel *Visions of Cody*, a text written in the early 1950s, yet published in its entirety only posthumously in 1972. Given Miss Novická’s acute attention to prepublication history of e.g. “Howl” or *On the Road*, it’s a pity she misses the opportunity to provide a more detailed account of the reasons and implications of this text’s almost 20-year clandestine or apocryphal existence.
3. What, apart from her informed survey of the recent critical revisitation of the Beats, is Ms Novická’s *own* “re-evaluation of the Beat’s position in the American literary canon,” i.e. how is the goal of her thesis achieved? Although implied implicitly, the defence could provide a platform for a clearly articulated statement on this matter.

Ms Novická’s thesis is a well-written, clearly structured and persuasively argued work. I recommend that it be graded excellent.