

The Denial of Dissent in John Clellon Holmes' *GO*

DRUE MACPHERSON

The self-proclaimed "Beat Generation" has long held a tense space in American literature. Often read as one part of the rebellious youth culture following WWII, still the writers and their works are often read as reproducing much of the dominant culture they supposedly rebel against. Likewise, while acknowledging "traditional" literary traditions as influences, the Beats were also heavily influenced by the aesthetics of jazz and the blues, and their work formally experiments with replicating these musical structures in textual form. This last fact also raises the question of cultural appropriation, and whether the Beats were challenging or reinforcing social hierarchies.

Drue MacPherson's essay tackles these contradictions head on, doing so through the oft-ignored, but truly foundational, Beat novel *Go*, by John Clellon Holmes. Lacking the formal experimentation of Kerouac's *On the Road*, Holmes' novel provides a more documentary approach to the same setting, characters, and actions of that latter novel (with both functioning in part as romans à clef). MacPherson expertly demonstrates how the novel's main character lives a life "dictated by a middle-class, post-war capitalist system he initially sought to renounce but ultimately cannot exist outside of."

— Dr. Jason Haslam

John Clellon Holmes' *GO* through both content and form ultimately denies any dissent from the dominant worldview and culture that its protagonist aims to escape from. Structurally, the novel is organized through preexisting, traditional frameworks that only serve to reinforce the hegemonic societal structures of a capitalist society with inherent middle-class values, contradicting

the movement fronted by the Beats that sought discontinuation of this system. This is why the character of Hobbes is unable to find new meaning in his life. The cognitive dissonance his character possesses represents how he longs to engage with the fringes of society, who exist outside of the dominant culture, while still taking comfort in the domesticity provided by the very society he hoped to elude. Dictated by the epigraphs that precede the novel and the development of the quest narrative through each of the three sections, Hobbes' inability to conclude his journey for meaning represents his inability to be at actual variance with the dominant culture and middle-class values.

The structure of the novel denies dissent from the conventional, hegemonic perspective that Hobbes wishes to foster. Holmes has this character take part in a quest-like journey for meaning, which ultimately leads him nowhere as he returns to a place of despondency. The novel begins with three epigraphs that relate directly to the three parts the book is divided into:

“The days of visitation are come, the days of recompence are come; Israel shall know it; the prophet is a fool, the spiritual man is mad...” - Hosea, 9:7

“But whereunto shall I liken this generation? It is like children unto sitting in the markets, and calling unto their fellows,

THE DENIAL OF DISSENT

And saying, We have piped unto you, and ye have not danced; we have mourned unto you, and ye have not lamented” -St. Matthew, 11:16, 17

“Fathers and teachers, I ponder ‘What is hell?’ I maintain that it is the suffering of being unable to love.” -Father Zossima (Holmes epigraph)

The epigraphs not only represent the development, or lack thereof, and focal point of each part but are themselves contradictory to the movement Hobbes is intent on taking part in. The objective of the Beat Generation was finding new meaning by existing outside of the dominant culture in society, however these three quotes represent the past and traditional frameworks from which writers and society receive their notion of values and understanding. The first two are quotes from the bible, while the final is from *The Brothers Karamazov* by Fyodor Dostoevsky, a classic Russian novel. The two biblical quotes acknowledge a sense of hope and ambition, while the Dostoevsky quote evokes a sense of dread in its questioning of the placement of hell and suggests Hobbes’ central struggle and the flaw in his quest for meaning: Hobbes is searching for inspiration in all of the wrong places, as what he feels is an adamant disconnection, far from love. Holmes uses epigraphs that are taken from traditional, dominant frameworks to highlight this fact, as new meaning or desire cannot be determined by old

traditions when those same frameworks have not found what Hobbes wanted. Holmes categorizes Hobbes' journey through epigraphs based on biblical texts and classic literature, symbolizing how he is unable to live free from the constraints of old societal structures which stops him from finding any new meaning.

Part 1 of *GO* is titled "Days of Visitation" directly lifted from the biblical quote that is the first epigraph. The promise of "recompence" creates a hopeful tone, implying that amendments will be made for past suffering, a fresh start for those who had been subject to the perils of the last war. At the beginning, Hobbes feels bored and aimless, searching for a new beginning that might grant him alternative meaning to "everything in sight" (Holmes 3) which "made Hobbes impatient" (Holmes 3). Clearly his impatience derives from a sense of desire outside of the normal structure of his life, the dominant structure that society as a whole is forced to live under. Hobbes is "filled with that heightened sense of excitement and restlessness that spring brings to New York, when everything becomes graceful and warm with promise" (Holmes 3) his emotions described in anticipation of something, this moment serving as the inception of his quest in the novel as his desire is made clear. Despite this, his heightened senses are coupled with the immense frustration as he does not know where to begin with his quest. Hobbes' feelings of "joy ebbed into frustration almost immediately because he did not know how to express it" (Holmes 3). This quote represents the entirety of Hobbes' struggle throughout the

THE DENIAL OF DISSENT

novel, as he is unaware of how and therefore unable to reconcile his many conflicting emotions, just as he is simultaneously excitable yet nervous and uncertain.

Holmes makes a conscious effort to show how these anxious beginnings that energize the senses and make life feel exciting to Hobbes are shown to be fleeting or met with inevitable disappointment nearer to the end of part 1, as Hobbes reminisces about the beginnings of his relationship with Kathryn:

But when he looked at them, he saw only the urgent passion of their guarded looks; that first, gnawing passion, when all real joys are ahead, which finds no adequate expression in words, and is a sort of compact against the situation in which it has arisen. He remembered his own feelings of the same thing with Kathryn years ago, and was shocked to discover that now they were only lifeless memories which time had embalmed. (Holmes 59)

Hobbes begins to long for that same feeling of initial passion that was present at the beginning of his courtship, the “first pure blush again” (Holmes 59) that made “the clichés of popular songs seem profound” (Holmes 59). This is an example of new meaning being born into a pre-existing subject, much like the efforts to find new meaning in a pre-existing world with long established structures. However, the fact that these feelings have now been resigned to “lifeless memories which time had embalmed” (Holmes 59) shows that Hobbes cannot find that same feeling he is so desperately searching for. This highlights

the misdirection in his quest, in how he cannot satisfy his eager lust for new life as the quest itself is flawed. However, Holmes shows that Hobbes is capable of this feeling, further demonstrating how the Dostoevsky epigraph is an acknowledgement of the character's inability to reconcile his passion by connecting it to the world around him. Hobbes is not really looking for what is meaningful, which is what derails him and only further enables his denial of dissent from the dominant culture. Moreover, the narrative is written in the third-person omniscient, showing the lack of immersion on the part of Hobbes. He and Kathryn observe and are compliant but never fully engage in the antics of those around them. The narrator describes events as looking from the outside in, creating an apparent sense of objectivity as well as judgement, highlighting an absence of the self in the narrative as Hobbes' self is absent in either world.

Part two of *GO* is titled "Children in the Market", referring again to the biblical epigraph which represents the section. The children in the market refer to the divide that existed within that generation, where many were buying into middle-class, White, hegemonic America and literally taking part in the market by purchasing suburban homes and finding complacency within it. Alternatively there were the Beats, who created a sense of tension by choosing to live among the fringes of society instead. This tension becomes audible in the second part, as more and more comparisons are drawn which show both the

THE DENIAL OF DISSENT

goodness and negative aspects of the character who epitomizes the movement, Hart Kennedy:

He stood by the phonograph in a stoop, moving back and forth on the spot in an odd little shuffle. His hands clapped before him, his head bopped up and down, propelled, as the music got louder, in ever greater arcs, while his mouth came grotesquely agape as he mumbled: "Go! Go!"

Hobbes wandered about nervously, feeling he should not stare at Hart, but when he saw Stofsky looking at the agitated figure with an adoring solemnity, he stared frankly with him... (Holmes 115)

Hart clearly embodies the momentum of the Beat Generation, as he is in constant motion despite all others around him remaining reserved. He becomes more and more enthused with the music as it becomes louder, as if rising with him. He even mumbles the title of the novel while doing so, symbolizing the constant movement and pushing forward beyond the constraints around him. In this passage Hobbes is evidently uncomfortable, as he "put on a bop record, hoping it would relax everybody" (Holmes 115) then begins to nervously look at Hart as he dances across the room. This symbolizes his own discomfort fully engaging in these actions that push back against social norms, which is why Hobbes has such a negative reaction to Hart's movement, despite everyone else in the room remaining still and not really taking part in life. Hobbes had wanted to become comfortable, an act

DRUE MACPHERSON

of complacency, while Hart is in direct conflict. His mouth becomes “grotesquely agape” (Holmes 115) as he states the novel’s title, because of the discomfort it produces for those in the presence of Hart. He represents movement and the Beats, while Hobbes comes to symbolize domesticity as he consistently denies dissent from the system and measures of society in place, including but not limited to adhering to the actions of the majority in a given space.

The culmination of Hobbe’s denial of dissent is most evident in the final passage of the novel, in Part 3 “Hell” as he and Kathryn board the last ferry of the night:

“You won’t let me fall off the boat, will you?”

And he held her closer, and gazed out across the dark, rushing water at New York, a fabulous tiara of lights toward which they were moving. For a moment he stood there in the keen gusts that came up in the middle of the river, and searched the uptown towers of that immense, sparkling pile for the Chrysler Building, so that he might look just north of it and imagine that he saw lights in their apartment. “Where is our home?” he said to himself gravely, for he could not see it yet. (Holmes 311)

The movement in this passage is significant as it takes place over a body of water. Kathryn and Hobbes are shifting across by boat, neither firmly in a single place the way they would be standing on dry land. The act of moving itself is pivotal as it represents changing or undermined placement that exists outside the constraints

THE DENIAL OF DISSENT

of structured society. Their motion on the river takes place within the fringes of society. However, the questions asked by Kathryn and Hobbes in this moment reveals the lack of certainty this motion produces. Kathryn's asking of "You won't let me fall off the boat, will you?" (Holmes 311) acknowledges the associated fear they feel in this absence of placement that was intended to invigorate their sensibilities. To live without certainty would require the removal of the domesticity they take such comfort in. Hobbes is unable to live outside of the structure of typical suburban, middle-class white America as his search for their home, both literally and figuratively, is blocked by the "Chrysler building" (Holmes 311), the ultimate symbol of the complacent, capitalist system he had previously tried to remove himself from. The "keen gusts that came up in the middle of the river" (Holmes 311) demonstrate how he is bound to middle America, as opposed to a life on the outskirts which he had intended to live at the novel's beginning. The winds represent his sense of direction, which seem to inevitably lead him back to such domesticity. He is neither in one place nor the other, unable to live a singular life as he finds dissatisfaction and codependent comfort in all facets of his own. This is why the New York skyline where the Chrysler building sits is referred to both as "sparkling" (Holmes 311), which implies its allure, and "pile" (Holmes 311), alluding to its existence being an assemblage of metal waste that embodies the material flaw of capitalism. Hobbes cannot or will not remove himself from the comfortable life he has

kept one foot in, as it provides security for him, which is why he asks "where is our home?" (Holmes 311). Hobbes' quest for meaning has led him nowhere, as he is unable to possess a plain sight of any destination, succumbing to the hell described in the epigraph as he is unable to make a real connection or love.

Furthermore, Hobbes asks this question to himself, highlighting his own alienation from Kathryn, whom he so frequently took comfort in throughout the novel. His cognitive dissonance about his partner is emblematic of his entire outlook on life. In Chapter 9, as he recalls his time in the service the "memory of that night watch stung him" (Holmes 79) as he "longed for Kathryn" (Holmes 79) just as he had that night "because, like then, she was away from him, remote and unreachable" (Holmes 79). Hobbes is distraught at the sense of disconnection he feels from her at that moment, to the point of comparing it to his time in the war when he was physically removed from Kathryn without any insight as to when he might see her again. What Hobbes longs for in this passage is consolation from Kathryn, as he feels a lack of resolve in his personal detachment. However, this is in stark contrast to his inclination to jump off the boat in the final chapter as "looking down into the current that swept just below him, Hobbes wondered for the only time in his life if giving up to death was really ignoble, foolish, mad" (Holmes 311) as he contemplates now physically separating himself from the entirety of this life he has created. Hobbes cannot reconcile his feelings in any case, which is why he is

THE DENIAL OF DISSENT

immediately drawn back into this domesticity by Kathryn “huddled against him, her hair blown soft up into his face” (Holmes 311). Holmes begins this sentence with “But then,” (311) Holmes’ narration clearly identifying a personal shift in Hobbes. This also applies to the final word in the passage being “yet” (Holmes 311), leaving the reader with as much uncertainty about Hobbes as he possesses himself. Hobbes characterized the meaning he was looking for with the passion he initially felt with Kathryn, which is why he continues to go back to the comfort of a domestic life, for he is “suffering” from being “unable to love” (Holmes epigraph) as he once did. He is experiencing a feeling of hell, unable to connect truly with any one place, person or mode of existence and sees no clear passage outside of it.

The structure, form and content of John Clellon Holmes’ *GO* all reveal how the character of Hobbes denies his dissent from the dominant culture by using old frameworks and a quest narrative that highlight his lack of placement. Holmes uses classic quotes to structure the separate parts of the novel, displaying how Hobbes’ quest is flawed from the beginning and explaining why he is unable to consummate it with new meaning: he consistently returns to the past, personally and societally. He remains situated between both the fringes of society and within the domestic comfort he finds in a conventional life, dictated by a middle-class, post-war capitalist system he initially sought to renounce but ultimately cannot exist outside of.

DRUE MACPHERSON

WORKS CITED

Holmes, John C. *GO*. Thunder's Mouth Press, 1952.