

Gregory Corso's "The American Way": Then and Now

Richard A. Maher

グレゴリー・コールソの「ザ・アメリカン・ウエー」: その当時と今

リチャードA.マハー

*Niijima Gakuen Junior College
Takasaki, Gunma 370-0068, Japan*

Abstract

In the late 1950s Gregory Corso moved to Paris where he would spend most of the next thirty years, enabling him to write about the United States from a unique perspective as an expatriate. Despite his patriotism, he felt that the American Dream had morphed into a monster, which he dubbed the American Way, and he was deeply concerned about the nation's trajectory. In spite of being written fifty years ago "The American Way" remains relevant today. In the poem he castigates not only those who abuse their power, but also the willing masses who follow blindly. Yet Corso does not completely despair, instead he pins his hope on youth for the redemption of America.

要 旨

1950年代後期にグレゴリー・コールソは、国籍離脱者としてユニークな視点から合衆国について執筆できるように、彼が次の30年のほとんどを過ごすことになるパリに移住した。彼の愛国心にもかかわらず、彼はアメリカンドリームが怪物化した（このことを彼はザ・アメリカン・ウエーと表現した）と感じ、国の進路について憂慮を深めた。50年前に書かれたにもかかわらず彼の詩は今日も意味を失っていない。「ザ・アメリカン・ウエー」で彼は、自分の権力を乱用する人たちだけではなく、盲従する大衆をも厳しく非難する。それでもコールソは完全には絶望しない。その代わりにアメリカの贖罪のため、青年たちに彼の希望を託すのだ。

I. The View from Across the Pond

After a brief trip to Mexico in late 1956 Gregory Corso moved to Europe in February 1957 where he would spend a significant portion of the next thirty years. For the most part he was based in Paris, but he spent a lot of time as a classic wandering poet, frequently roaming the continent and taking extensive sabbaticals in England, Italy and Greece. As an expatriate he developed a complex viewpoint about his native land. On the one hand, he loved meeting European intellectuals, learning languages and experiencing the multiplicity of cultures that the continent afforded him, yet simultaneously he yearned for his friends, his native New York and the familiarity of the U.S.A. Despite an affinity for his homeland though, he truly enjoyed living overseas. As he wrote in a 1958 letter to Lawrence Ferlinghetti, his years abroad fostered a unique perspective of the States: "I have learned more about Americans and America here than in America" (AA 177). Indeed, living abroad affords a perspective that cannot be had at home; Corso was an insider writing about his homeland from the outside. Much of his poetry is commentary on the American way of life from the perspective of an expatriate.

Ever since Europeans began arriving en masse on the shores of North America the United States has stood as a symbol for personal liberty, innovative thinking and a new way of governing. For generations these ambitions alchemized into what is now known as the American Dream; the ideal that everyone is endowed with rights of equality, justice and freedom and that everyone has a shot at success. Whether the dream is true or not, over time a myth has been woven into the conscience of the American public that anything is possible and that all people should have the opportunity to better themselves and achieve the good life. In his 1955 book, *Protestant, Catholic, Jew*, Will Herberg summarized the American way of life.

The American Way of life is individualistic, dynamic, pragmatic. It affirms the supreme value and dignity of the individual; it stresses incessant activity on his part, for he is never to rest but is always to be striving to "get ahead;" it defines an ethic of self-reliance, merit, and character, and judges by achievement ... The "American Way of Life" is humanitarian, "forward-looking," optimistic ... The American believes in progress, in self-improvement, and quite fanatically in education. But above all, the American is idealistic. Americans cannot go on making money or achieving worldly success simply on its own merits. (quoted in "American Way")

More than fifty years later, many aspects of Herberg's thesis endure, although the idea that wealth and success should serve a higher purpose is woefully inconsistent with contemporary thought, and it is questionable if attitudes were radically different at the time of the book's publication. It is important to bear in mind that after the war wealth became more evenly distributed, thereby enabling a greater number of Americans to get ahead and pursue the American Dream, which helped to erode this conviction. "The American Way," then, must be read with Herberg's thesis in mind. For the most part, the poem has withstood the test of time; fifty years after it was penned it still feels relevant. Through a close reading this paper will examine Corso's views about American society in the late fifties and it will also assess how the poem applies to contemporary America. "The American Way" is imbued with Corso's disappointment and exasperation about the manner in which the country has developed as well as its trajectory, yet the poet does not completely fall into the abyss of despair, choosing instead to pin hope for change on the next generation.

Structurally, the poem consists of three parts: a succinct appraisal of the poet's attitude about America; a twenty-five line section deriding the perversion of Christianity; and a sprawling third section that comprises the bulk of the poem. Before focusing on the state of the nation the poem opens with five lines of self-reflection that indicate the poet's attitude toward his homeland.

I am a great American
I am almost nationalistic about it!
I love America like a madness!
But I am afraid to return to America
I'm even afraid to go into the American Express— (1-5)

Corso professes an ecstatic love for the states from the outset, going so far as to label himself nationalistic. In a 1972 interview with Michael Andre he retracted the statement saying, "that's not my true feeling. I really didn't understand what I meant, and thought of the poet as the universal being ... If you have feelings for America, that doesn't mean you are nationalistic" (144-145). Patriotic is a better description of his sentiments, although the word "madness" hints at the thin line that separates nationalism and patriotism and at the ease with which that line can be crossed. The opening lines' boastful tone, however, is followed by a Whitmanesque conceit affirming the poet's apprehensions, immediately calling into question his previous statements. Opining about the Beats in a 1959 letter to Willard Mass, Corso affirms

the paradox, “the Beat Generation is because truth rests on the contradictory rattans of the soul ... to be logical is contradictory. Contradiction is the basis of logic” (AA 192-193). Only nineteen years old at the time, Corso’s wavering hints that he is still formulating his thoughts about the U.S.A.

The earliest mention of the poem is found in a letter to Allen Ginsberg speculated to have been written in August 1959 (AA 204). If that supposition is correct, the poet had been based in Paris for two and a half years at the time the poem was written, though since it is dated 1961 it is certain that he “tailored” (Corso’s word for revised) it for some time after its initial conception. Corso writes about the United States from the viewpoint of an outsider with intimate knowledge about it, and lines four and five expressing his apprehension to repatriate explicitly enunciate this perspective. Undoubtedly, repatriation can generate a lot of anxiety, chief among which is the belief that home will not be the way one remembers it. The first section of “The American Way” sets the tone for the remainder of the poem; although the poet loves America and takes pride in identifying himself as a U.S. citizen he simultaneously expresses doubt about its current trajectory. This conflict plays out over the course of the seven page poem with the poet swaying back and forth between trepidation and a more hopeful vision.

II. Salvation under the Big Top

In part 2 the poet shifts focus from himself to the current state of religion in America; the section relentlessly attacks conservative Christian evangelists. It opens with one of Corso’s classic images, “they are frankensteining Christ in America” (6). Ingeniously transforming a part of speech from one form into another not regularly used, here a noun into a verb, is one of Corso’s linguistic trademarks. The unorthodox juxtaposition generates complex images, foremost of which is the notion that evangelists have created a scary monster; a creature that is unrecognizable to that of Christ in the Gospels. The shocking zombie image reflects the trend of right-wing evangelists to distort the Christian message; rather than celebrating Christ as an ambassador of love, peace and forgiveness, these preachers tout the fear card. Viewed in a different light the image is humorous, a device that Corso keenly uses to lighten the gravity of the preachers’ transgressions. The reader cannot help but chuckle at the caricature. As Michael Skau meticulously chronicles in *A Clown in a Grave*,

Corso's assumption of the role of the clown often undercuts didacticism. Regardless of the interpretation, the poet presents an image of Christianity that is far from sacred.

Utilizing the catalog technique, part 2 keeps up the attack on the clergy. Likening the early televangelists "televising the gift of healing and the fear of hell / in America under their tents in their Sunday / campaigns" to circus ringmasters hocking their clowns and freak shows under the big top, Corso offers a scathing indictment of Sunday morning television preachers (11-13). The poem continues with the evangelists moving from tents to stadiums, all the while begging and barking to their flocks "for a full house and all get out / for their Christ" (17-18). Initially, worship services are "Sunday campaigns," but in line nineteen they expand to include Saturday and finally to an endless, seven days a week crusade. For millennia Sunday has been acknowledged as the traditional day for Christian worship, yet at some point in the twentieth century religion became a full-time business. The poet recognizes the absurdity of this. While Corso's contempt for evangelists who abuse their authority and distort Christian doctrine is obvious, they alone are not to blame for the sorry state of religion. The aggressive, high pressure techniques of the product-peddling preachers are bad enough, but Corso also questions the willingness of the flock to believe the propaganda.

They are asking them to come forward and fall on their
knees
because they are all guilty and they are coming
forward
in guilt and are falling on their knees weeping their
guilt
begging to be saved O Lord O Lord (21-27)

The congregation's eager readiness to swallow the hucksters' spiels also contributes to the malaise that is the American Way. It is a case of the blind leading the blind that insults not only Christianity, but also individuality and the forward-thinking attitude that has made the country great.

Six lines into part 3 the poet briefly revisits the theme of religion and flatly rejects fire and brimstone posturing by injecting some level-headed sanity into the maddening religious whirlwind that is chronicled in part 2: "Man is not guilty Christ is not to be feared" (36). The poem continues to bemoan the commercialization of

religion; Christ has become just another commodity.

I am telling you the American Way is a hideous monster
eating Christ making Him into Oreos and Dr. Pepper
the sacrament of its foul mouth

I am telling you the devil is impersonating Christ in America (27-30)

In the same way that multinationals peddle junk food preachers under the influence of and in collusion with the Way market a distorted version of Christ that corrupts the mind and the soul. The preachers are wolves in sheep's clothing who subvert the truth, but in spite of it their flocks are growing.

Fifty years later Corso's prescience seems uncanny. The database of the Hartford Institute for Religious Research contains over 1,200 Protestant mega churches—those having 2,000 or more attendees for a typical weekly service—and it estimates the existence of an additional 3,000 Catholic mega churches. Robert Schuller's Crystal Cathedral, for example, seats 2,800 worshipers and accommodates 1,000 musicians. One wonders if Corso could have envisioned just how massive in size and how prominent in society that these mega churches would become. In addition, the increased popularity of cable and satellite television's religious channels, such as the Trinity Broadcasting Network and the Christian Broadcasting Network, has expanded the reach of conservative religion with its 24/7 programming. For many Americans, Christianity has morphed into another entertainment choice. As the prominence of these networks and mega churches has grown so has the appeal of becoming a minister. Over the past five decades the ministry has gone from a once pious vocation to a profitable career choice, propelling big name religion pushers into mainstream American culture. Not only have figures such as Billy Graham, Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson become household names, they have become very wealthy in the process as well. And while these celebrity ministers preach the Good News they also use guilt and fear to sustain their ministries. Be afraid of the devil and sin. Beware AIDS and homosexuality. Lament the loss of conservative traditions and "family values." Sadly, many contemporary brokers of religion have principally become "scolds" that focus on perceived ills of society, rather than spreading the uplifting message of Christ. Bully techniques practiced by contemporary fundamental evangelists have only worsened since the poem was penned. Corso must be rolling in his grave.

Taken literally, part 2 presents a scary portrait of conservative Christianity in

America. Corso's attitude toward religion is complex; while he respects tradition and is eager to learn about different modes of spirituality, he remains skeptical and ever vigilant not to endorse or "get hung on just one thing" (Andre 158). Having been raised in the Catholic tradition, he appreciates religion's moral clarity, but a healthy dose of doubt about the nature of the universe always remains. Corso is not opposed to religion per se, but clearly, he realizes the danger of being suckered by a breed of ministers who are more interested in big crowds—and brimming offertory collection baskets—than in doing Christ's work. Leery of anything or anyone that would limit free thinking, Corso cautions us to be wary of religious institutions that stifle individuality and creativity. Part 2 warns that even religion is not immune from corruption and being assimilated into the Way.

III. So Unlike America

The poem's lengthy final section defies any succinct summary. Undisciplined and seemingly random at times, it rambles about the American Way, its perpetrators, the strangeness of the country's history and people and the poet's future expectations for the nation. The tone is as varied as the subject matter, vacillating from pessimism, contempt and confusion to hope and redemption. The numerous shifts in focus and attitude reflect America's abundant ideologies and its schizophrenia, as well as the poet's scatterbrained days as an early expat. The quickly fluctuating images and diverse range of emotions often make the poem feel disjointed, but somehow Corso is able to keep it all together without letting things fall apart. "The American Way" is a metaphor for life in the modern age—an endless series of distractions that sweep us off our feet and rob us of the ability to think critically and concentrate on the truly important things in life.

Part 3 opens with a pessimistic assessment of contemporary America before proceeding to define the American Way and name its enablers.

It is a time in which no man is extremely wondrous
It is a time in which rock stupidity
 outsteps the 5th Column as the sole enemy in America
It is a time in which ignorance is a good Ameri-cun (30-33)

While it is unclear whether or not he was revising the poem in the summer of 1960, that August Corso wrote a lengthy letter to Ginsberg that parallels many of "The

American Way's" central themes. Referencing this important letter is crucial for understanding the poet's mindset regarding his homeland at the time. He writes, "I find [America] completely bereft of greatness, no great statements are said, no great adventure or grandness done, no purpose, no nothing, but decline, defensiveness, all so unlike America" (AA 256). While postwar America prospered with new technology and innovation, by the end of the fifties the novelty may well have been wearing off. Americans lived in fear of atomic annihilation and simultaneously McCarthyism aimed to sweep clean the perceived scourge of Communism. Corso recognizes just how misguided McCarthy's witch hunt is. Compared with complacency and ignorance, the threat posed by the 5th Column—a term used by the British to refer to groups who subverted government—is much less significant ("Fifth Column"). Although the U.S. emerged from the war as a superpower with unprecedented access to news and information, conformity and the status quo often impeded critical thought. The poem is an attempt to rebel against the mind-numbing conformity of the age. For Corso, simple-minded groupthink threatens America's progress and feeds the destructive flames of the Way.

Evaluating the country fifty years later, we see how little things have changed. The U.S.A. continues to wander in search of great leaders. Lured by high salaries, many of today's brightest, most gifted graduates pursue careers in banking and the financial markets rather than in public service, which has contributed to a talent vacuum in politics. Moreover, just as the fear-mongering of McCarthyism spread paranoia and prompted knee-jerk reactions in the fifties, the government's responses to the events of 9/11 and the threat of terrorism have caused the public to rethink, and in some cases abandon, traditional American values such as the presumption of innocence, due-process and free speech. Soon after the tragedy presidential press secretary, Ari Fleischer, denounced a comic's take on the incident by reminding Americans to watch what they say and what they do. Fear continues to be wielded as a weapon by the government against its citizens, leading to broad generalizations and misinformed attitudes toward Islam and people from the Middle East and to a new narrow-mindedness in the country's collective consciousness. As *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman noted six years after the attack, "9/11 has made us stupid ... our reaction to 9/11—mine included—has knocked America completely out of balance." Corso would certainly agree. Despite the country's economic and social progress the national mindset is still easily swayed by those in power who fan the flames of the

American Way.

IV. Enslaving the Minds of the Young

Over the course of the next thirty lines (41-71) Corso specifies those that he deems responsible for cultivating and maintaining the American Way. Heretofore the poet has fixated on the clergy, but now he includes educators and communicators, calling them "the mental-dictators / of false intelligence" who "enslave the minds of the young" (41-42, 47). He continues by specifically taking aim at academics, accusing them of holding back youth from realizing their full potential. The indictment continues with the acerbic accusation that U.S. schools are manufacturing expressionless clones devoid of ambition and independent thought.

The duty of these educators is no different
than the duty of a factory foreman
Replica production make all the young think alike
dress alike believe alike do alike
Togetherness this is the American Way (51-55)

The ideal of togetherness usually evokes positive connotations, yet in this context it enunciates the herd mentality that has taken hold of the country. Likewise, educators are typically viewed as individuals who make positive contributions to society, but here the poet turns conventional thinking on its head. Replication and togetherness are undermining the strength and autonomy of the individual and the ideals that have made the country great, as well as contributing to the groupthink mentality that has become the American Way. This kind of togetherness explicitly contradicts Herberg's thesis; America has become the opposite of what it has traditionally stood for. Corso rails against togetherness and conformity, suggesting that they do far more harm than good.

Corso tempers his attack by acknowledging the sheer force of the American Way. Even great academics are swept along by the all-encompassing tide, yet they too lack the feistiness needed to overcome it, and so they acquiesce rather than revolt. Such a mentality is likened to soldiers who blindly follow orders and disregard established moral codes, and readers are strongly cautioned about the resulting peril of failing to recognize the bankruptcy of this mode of thinking:

they are the most dangerous

Dangerous because their intelligence is not denied
and so give faith to the young
who rightfully believe in their intelligence. (60-63)

The sin of these great academics is that they “know but dare not speak their know” (66). Their silence has caused them to be whisked along by the Way, and such blind acceptance and lack of curiosity by students has resulted in the “rock stupidity” that plagues the nation (31). Akin to flocks that are led astray by their shepherds, blame is shared by students who allow themselves to be manipulated. It is at this point, however, that we see Corso’s first hint of optimism; change is in the air: “the young are willing slaves (but not for long)” (48). Despite the American Way’s all-encompassing devastation, the poet prophesies about the social changes that will occur during the 1960s. Clearly, the poet believes the grip that educators have on students cannot continue indefinitely.

It should be noted that Corso had a brief stint as a lecturer at SUNY Buffalo during 1964-65. He told his publisher, James Laughlin, that he really enjoyed the work, but the teaching gig was short-lived (AA 365). All faculty and staff were required to sign a “loyalty oath”—known as the Feinberg Certificate—that barred employment to “subversives,” a euphemism for communists, but Corso refused to sign it, and therefore he was quickly discharged (Hudson). In a letter to Laughlin a few months after the incident he wrote, “I suddenly realized what my muse’s name is: Principle. I used to think it was dignity, honor, etc.—but without principle a poet is nothing” (AA 371). If he was anything, Corso was a walking contradiction (“logical” he insisted), but he refused to be an educator who sacrificed principle and he was not one to let the state dictate what transpired in his classroom. In the seventies, he would revisit academic life at the Naropa Institute where he had substantially more leeway to engage in a more freewheeling style of teaching.

Viewed through Corso’s filter, contemporary American education suffers from similar ills. The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, with its emphasis on standardized testing, has led to a “teaching to the test” methodology and has been a disincentive to creativity in the classroom. Moreover, fewer class hours are devoted to social studies, science and the arts. In addition, federal efforts to standardize curriculum—which might fall under Corso’s banner of “togetherness”—not only subverts local control of classroom content, but also results in graduates who lack a unique viewpoint that is often fostered by alternative methods of education. The unquestioning attitude of the

younger generation is perpetuated by educators who blindly accept the dictates of the federal government and the establishment and in doing so both "uphold the American Way" (57).

Lack of curiosity contributes to the gullibility of the masses, who maintain a "who is to doubt the American Way / is not the way" attitude (49-50). Being brainwashed by the "life, liberty and pursuit of happiness" myth for so many years has resulted in the presumption that America is the preeminent country in the world. This misguided mentality is one explanation for the nationalist chants of "U.S.A. U.S.A. U.S.A." heard whenever the country flexes its military muscles and at times when America's intentions are called into question. Moreover, it is still true that U.S. citizens remain largely ignorant, or at least uninterested, about people and cultures beyond the border. According to 2010 State Department figures, only 68 million people, about 22% of the population, hold passports (Stabile). Those Americans exposed only to domestic lifestyle have difficulty understanding and truly accepting other cultures and modes of thinking, thus breeding more ignorance that the American way is the best, and indeed, the only way. Without experience abroad they have no place with which to compare, contrast and thereby evaluate their own society. Clearly, Corso finds this disturbing, as his expatriate experiences helped him to more fully understand and better appreciate his homeland.

For Corso, the plague of the Way perpetuates from generation to generation due to a systemic failure of education. The poet sees a dysfunctional institution that creates clones that blindly follow leaders, lack critical thinking skills and therefore acquiesce to the Way. While not entirely true today, education in the States is far from ideal; a system-wide reformation could do wonders to decrease the power that the American Way holds over the country's future generations.

V. Growth in the Wrong Direction

Growth emerges as a central theme in the next forty lines (74-114). While there is an initial nugget of hope, "America is always new the world is always new / The meaning of the world is birth not death" (75-76), this fleeting glimpse of optimism quickly shifts back to the menacing Way. "And what made America decide to grow? / I do not know I can only hold it to the strangeness in man / And America has grown into the American Way" (84-86). One usually interprets the word growth as having positive

connotations, but Corso twists its meaning: “to grow is to know limit purposelessness” (88). Corso repeatedly employs “old,” “growth,” “grown” and “grow” in these lines, but never as a compliment. Although “America is always new,” the poet insists that the country has grown “in the wrong direction” (75, 77). A similar idea is repeated in line 79 (“in this direction what grows grows old”) and culminates in line 81 (“it has grown into an old thing”). As Skau indicates, the technique of structural repetition intensifies emotion (118). More significantly, it leaves no doubt about the poet’s mindset; the country is aging, but not gracefully. Along with a dysfunctional education system, the country’s misguided postwar growth has contributed to the power of the American Way.

Contemplating contemporary America, one realizes that Corso is not far off base. Infrastructure conceived and built during the postwar boom is deteriorating before our eyes; reports of bridges in danger of collapse and decrepit sewer systems are common. While the nation invests in high speed internet connections, its outdated, inefficient power grid languishes. Due to the recent economic downturn a badly needed overhaul of the country’s aging skeleton has been put on the back burner, and meanwhile the framework of the nation is permitted to age. Akin to an overhaul of the education system, the country would benefit immensely from a concerted effort to revamp its decaying framework; replacing outdated systems with state-of-the-art, green technologies would improve not only the physical state of the nation, it might repair the American psyche as well.

Corso does not believe that technology will reverse the aging though. Undoubtedly, the line “rockets will not make it any younger” explicitly refers to the arms race during the Cold War (83). While America’s nuclear stockpile prevented a Soviet attack then, it has become quite clear that the country’s sixty year weapons buildup is much less of a deterrent in an age in which state-sponsored aggression has been supplanted by the very real threat of small cell terrorism. The line also pertains to the space race, not only the one fifty years ago, but to the current competition to return to the moon and send humans to Mars. Technology eventually filters down to the masses and can improve the quality of life, but it does not necessarily make us better human beings. Technology does not save souls and it will not rejuvenate the nation.

Corso perceives the mentality of the late 1950s as antediluvian. Although the world continually changes and evolves, contrary to common perception he sees America’s devolution. Despite being a relatively young country, its ideas are aging: “we are old

when we are young" (74). Rather than forging ahead, the country dwells on its past.

Do I say the Declaration of Independence is old?

Yes I say what was good for 1789 is not good for 1960

It was right and new to say all men were created equal

because it was a light then

But today it is tragic to say it

today it should be fact— (92-97)

The fifties was a tumultuous decade; by 1960 the country had witnessed *Brown v. Board of Education*, the Montgomery bus boycott and military-enforced school desegregation in Little Rock. Yet despite lip service to freedom and justice, equality wasn't a fact then and still it has not been fully realized. Progress has been made, but sadly, racial, gender and sexual equality are being realized at a painfully slow pace. Americans of color still face discrimination, women earn 20-25% less than men for doing the same work and hate crime aimed at lesbians, gays and Arab Americans is not uncommon. Corso holds that the country fails to truly progress because it constantly looks in the rearview mirror. Later in the poem he will summon a new generation to buck the Way and move forward, but for the time being the poet continues his attack on history.

Once again the government and religious institutions are knocked for the country's shortcomings.

Man has been on earth a long time

One would think with his mania for growth

he would, by now, have outgrown such things as

constitutions manifestos codes commandments

that he could well live in the world without them

and know instinctively how to live and be (98-103)

Ultimately, over-regulation and the race to get ahead have choked freedom, ingenuity and the pioneer spirit, and moreover, they have trumped human instinct about how to live sensibly and peacefully. Two centuries of the status quo have resulted in an uninspiring and outdated society. Likewise, religion often fails: "for what is being but the facility to love? / Was not that the true goal of growth, love? / Was not that Christ?" (104-106). Despite 75% of Americans identifying themselves as Christians, many people—and much of the government—operate contrary to the central message of Christ. Over the past thirty years the strong influence of the religious right and

social conservatives has propelled their views into mainstream politics. For example, the right tends to alienate homosexuals and ridicule differing viewpoints: the absolute antithesis of Christ's teachings. Rather than growing towards Christ, the country's "growth" is being corrupted. What has led to the perversion of religion and Christ's message? Corso chalks it up not only to over-zealous preachers and an uncurious public, but to the "strangeness in man," and he holds that "America rings with such strangeness" (85, 109). Contrary to Herberg's argument that the American way of life is progressive and forward-looking, the Way has caused the country to regress. Its growth is "mad" (111).

The oddity of man notwithstanding, Corso holds humanity in high regard. In the instructive missive to Ginsberg he notes that "man is great, I hold to that, ok, if he is great then he can do many things and be in soul filled with dreams and wonderment" (AA 257). Yet, the American Way has tarnished this triumph: "the victory that is man is made sad in this fix / youth can only know the victory of being born / all else is stemmed until death be the final victory" (67-69). As Stephenson notes, death has been one of Corso's major themes since his first publication in 1955, *The Vestal Lady on Brattle* (18). Indeed, in the same letter the poet believed it to be "the most important thing" and "that if man held to death he'd be very complete and meaningful," but he concedes in the poem that unlike the Aztecs who sacrificed youth in their prime, Americans who are swept along by the Way are denied this final victory. Instead, "the Americans are doing it by feeding their young to the / Way" (119-120). As the process repeats the country gradually contributes to its own demise: "America today is America's greatest threat" (73). Corso notes that all great civilizations have fallen, and that most—the Romans, the Greeks, the Aztecs—have collapsed from within. Likewise, the American soul is slowly metastasizing. The voracious Way has become "a monster born of itself existing of its self" (129), and it threatens to consume the nation.

Rather than growing up, America is growing in the wrong direction. The poet implies that the country has strayed off course and no longer abides by the laws of the universe (AA 257). Alluding to F. Scott Fitzgerald's "Benjamin Button," Corso humorously describes the country as having been born an old man (113-114). It is a strange, grotesque image suggesting that the country is over-the-hill, set in its ways and all the while immature, weak and easily influenced by the powerful.

VI. The Privileged shall Inherit America

Lines 127-142 echo the earlier theme about who to fault for the American Way, and here the sphere of blame is widened to include writers, politicians, entertainers and the wealthy. The poet views those responsible as misguided or ignorant, but he also cites greed as a major motivation: "most are in it for gold / They do not see the Way as monster / They see it as the "Good Life" (140-142). In the 1950s disposable income for the rapidly growing middle class mushroomed. Americans were bombarded with products and choices unlike ever before, and thus began an insatiable appetite that has fueled the economy for the past sixty years. A corollary is that the pursuit of wealth became a model upon which Americans planned their careers and their lives. Once again, Corso's prescience is uncanny. The 1980s ushered in an age of unprecedented materialism and the dream of living the good life became attainable for an even greater number of people. The decade's excesses were chronicled in the 1987 film *Wall Street* in which the antagonist, Gordon Gekko, defined a generation by not only celebrating the accumulation of wealth, but by deifying it.

The point is, ladies and gentleman, that greed—for lack of a better word—is good. Greed is right. Greed works. Greed clarifies, cuts through, and captures the essence of the evolutionary spirit. Greed, in all of its forms—greed for life, for money, for love, knowledge—has marked the upward surge of mankind. (quoted in Churchville)

The monster of materialism continued to balloon for twenty more years until the great recession drastically reduced fortunes, reclaimed homes and began to temper the appetites of a nation that had financially overextended itself. "The Way was born out of the American Dream a / nightmare" (144-145). What began as a desire to live the good life morphed into a culture that equates success with money and comfort. Contrary to Herberg's kind words, blind faith in and subservience to the dream of prosperity have nourished and nurtured the Way.

The poet notes, however, that Americans have not always been so obsessed with the good life, nor has the Way always commanded such tremendous power and sway. He recalls that in the distant past the public revered a different kind of hero.

The state of Americans today compared to the Americans
of the 18th century proves the nightmare—

Not Franklin not Jefferson who speaks for America today
but strange red-necked men of industry
and the goofs of show business
Bizarre! Frightening! The Mickey Mouse sits on the throne
and Hollywood has a vast supply— (146-152)

To be sure, Corso views the past through rose-colored glasses. He romanticizes politicians of the past, and in that letter to Ginsberg he reminisces about the “nobility” of FDR and muses that “the whole American heritage, from Washington to Hamilton, all those guys were poetic statesmen” (AA 256). But politics has changed during the last century and the government has become a formidable monster in its own right infiltrated with business bigwigs, Hollywood celebrities and members of a wealthy, permanent ruling class. These entities finance politicians and funnel billions of dollars into an endless campaign cycle that, arguably, has distorted Americans politics from the highly-principled and humble institution that it once was.

Money and power have played a part in politics for millennia, yet as multinational corporations wield ever greater influence industry leaders become political figures in their own right. Industry giants and multimillionaires such as Ross Perot and Steve Forbes have even vied for the country’s top job, and a slew of other CEOs have become mayors, governors and members of Congress. Michael Skau observes that the poem was published twenty years before Ronald Reagan’s presidency and five years before he was elected as California’s governor (40). Since then other celebrities such as Clint Eastwood and Arnold Schwarzenegger have thrown their hats into the political arena, projecting an image, however distorted it may be, that the likes of Dirty Harry and the Terminator are steering government. Images like these are certainly “bizarre” and “frightening.” Whether or not the country has benefited from the leadership of figures such as these is up for discussion, but compared with the founding fathers they appear downright comical. The strangeness of man is not limited to ordinary citizens.

Corso bemoans the loss of political dignity and the demise of government, but he might have been surprised by just how low politicians would sink. The recent popularity of the Tea Party can be viewed as a backlash to the politics of the past fifty years. Even the party’s namesake alludes to a simpler time when ordinary citizens rose up to participate in historic acts of patriotism, though only time will tell what will become of the fledgling movement. Perhaps Corso thought that American politics

could not get any more ridiculous, but in hindsight we know that it has sunk lower and will continue to worsen for the foreseeable future.

VII. Invocation

"The American Way" is Corso's portrayal of a nation that has strayed from its roots and founding principles, a country that has been "frankensteined" into an uncontrollable beast that is merely a shadow of its former self. Despite the sad state of the union the poet does not completely despair, but instead invokes the younger generation.

O that youth might raise it anew!
The future depends solely on the young
The future is the property of the young
What the young know the future will know
What they are and do the future will be and do
What has been done must not be done again (159-164)

Affluence during the 1950s gradually enabled middle class teenagers to achieve independence from their parents, gain mobility via the car and earn disposable income, and it all came to a head in the 1960s. Corso senses the change in the air. Dissatisfied with the status quo the poet calls upon the youth to remake America and renounce the Way. The repetition of "the future" and "the young" heralds the youth culture of the 1960s and prophesies the rebellion that would come. By employing such a prophetic tone Corso certainly lives up to his name.¹ Appraising the youth movement in 1968, Corso wrote to his publisher, "my wishes of years ago ... is come fulfilled; youth is arrived. I called for the young to come and set it straight. In the poem I awkwardly prayed that youth rise and slay the dragon once and for all" (AA 392). And come they did, revolutionizing the conscience of the nation. Granted, the poet's comments were made before the movement spiraled out of control and self-destructed, yet once again Corso's ability to foresee the future is significant. With the incantation of better things to come Corso proves that he is able to rise above the bleak tone that dominates the poem and that he does, indeed, believe that humanity is the "victory of life."

Can Corso's faith in the next generation be applied to contemporary America? Although the prospects of the next generation always inspire hope, one wonders how

the youth of today will fair. Many people are less sanguine than Corso was fifty years ago. The generation that is coming of age in the post 9/11 world, with its unending wars, distrust of different ideologies and economic downturn, is quite different from that of the late 1950s. However, these sad realities combined with technological advances may well inspire a generation tired of the doom and gloom to rebel against the prevailing downturn. Akin to the youth of the sixties, the children of today may well yet rise up against the beast that is the American Way. Only time will tell.

Despite his enthusiasm, the poet isn't entirely convinced that the younger generation will be able to break free from the Way; his optimism is short-lived and the poem revisits the notion that the Way has produced generations of American clones.

I see in every American Express
and in every army center in Europe
I see the same face the same sound of voice
the same clothes the same walk
I see mothers & fathers
no difference among them
Replicas
They not only speak and walk and think alike
they have the same face! (167-175)

Another result of postwar prosperity was increased international travel. With a laid-back demeanor and a more casual style of dress, along with a penchant for speaking English, there is no doubt that Americans stuck out overseas. Certainly, Corso and the other Beats abroad must have been conspicuous as well. No matter, these lines provide insight into the expatriate mind; after adjusting to a different culture it is quite tempting to poke fun at foreigners who misinterpret or fail to abide by local customs and modes of behavior and dress. That bias aside though, the expat perspective often incites poignant observations and questions. The poet queries, "What did this monstrous thing? / What regiments people so?" (176-177). They are legitimate questions, but he is truly dumbfounded and once again concludes that man is strange.

Mankind's peculiarity has enabled "Mama Way" to take control of American "babies" who allow themselves be led astray by its educators and the clergy (183). In a similar vein, the nation blindly follows the rich and the powerful. "Did not Ike, when he visited the American Embassy in / Paris a year ago, say to the staff—"Everything

is fine, / just drink Coca Cola, and everything will be all right” (184-186). The mention of Eisenhower dates the poem, yet this same mentality remains alive and well. A couple of weeks after 9/11 President George W. Bush implored the country to act and live normally, “Get on board. Do your business around the country. Fly and enjoy America’s great destination spots. Get down to Disney World in Florida. Take your families and enjoy life, the way we want it to be enjoyed” (Murse). Certainly, the president was trying to restore order and calm nerves about the airline industry after the tragedy, but this kind of talk also prolonged the credit-fueled consumer binge that would eventually crash some years later. Corso mocks over-simplified quick fixes; rather than addressing the root of the problem, public figures often offer only pretty words that don’t help much in the long run. Simply drinking Coke and flying do not significantly address the country’s challenges. America was built on hard work and innovative ideas, but the Way’s spellbinding power has robbed citizens of these basic values, the ability to think critically and the motivation to question authority. Instead, a zombified public makes due with meaningless politicking, slick slogans and sentimental entertainment.

Contrary to the country’s “think big” mentality and spirit of individuality, the masses have adopted a herd mentality: timid and easily spooked. Corso is flabbergasted by the power that the Way holds over people, and again he asks why the public has fallen under its spell.

What makes a people huddle so?

Why can’t they be universal?

Who has smalled them so?

This is serious! I do not mock or hate this

I can only sense some mad vast conspiracy! (196-200)

As expatriates are apt to do Corso questions the Americentric lifestyle and pleads for internationalism, yet he does so humbly and with humor. He even tips his hat to Ginsberg with an allusion to “America.”² But again, the poet can only conclude that the Way is unconquerable and inescapable; that all in its path are doomed to be swept along by its powerful force.

Helplessness is all it is!

They are caught caught in the Way—

And those who seek to get out of the Way

can not (201-204)

The poet's tone is far from accusatory; even Corso and his contemporaries are susceptible. Skau notes, even "the rebellious Beats themselves were unable to avoid engulfment by this omnivorous entity" (42). Although the Beats emerged as an alternative to the mainstream their familiarity and popularity increased in the late fifties; the movement was highlighted in popular magazines and lampooned on TV and in film. As a result, a couple of things happened. Due to the media's Beatnik moniker and stereotypical hype the Beats became yet another clichéd image in popular culture, one that was reviled by many. The November 30, 1959 issue of *Life* featured a less than favorable article entitled "The Only Rebellion Around" that enraged Corso. In a letter to his publisher he decries the portrayal of the Beats and attacks the magazine's publisher, Henry Luce. "The real sinisterism [sic] is the replica of Ginsberg. I know Ginsberg very well, that bearded picture in *Life* is NOT Ginsberg ... Luce has made a replica of him" (AA 229). Here Corso uses the word replica to indicate that Ginsberg's identity has been stolen and a "replica of Ginsberg" substituted in its place. The Way's enabler, Luce, distorts the true image of the Beats in order to sell magazines and oblige the conservatism of the age. The mainstream media (perhaps they are the "communicators" in line 45) robs the authors of their beatific individuality, supplanting their true nature with caricatures of stinky, law-breaking rebels devoid of contributing positively to society. Helplessly, the Beats, too, become "caught in the Way." On the other hand, an entire subculture sprung up that not only embraced the Beats, but shared their rejection of conventional values and sowed the seeds for the counterculture of the sixties. In both cases what began as a deviation from the norm eventually transformed into yet another commodity, oftentimes not entirely distinguishable from conventional standards.

Focusing on the Beats themselves, the poem explicitly insists that "they forsake the Way's habits / and acquire for themselves their own habits / And they become as distinct and regimented and lost / as the main flow / because the Way has many outlets" (206-210). In that indispensable letter to Ginsberg Corso observes how the movement succumbs to the Way. "Beat stresses so much on individuality, that that's what it ends up being, every soul for itself, expression, etc., that all individual expressions (and this can be seen by the writing) becomes similar" (AA 257). To illustrate his point, when Burroughs and Brion Gysin began working on their cut ups at the Beat Hotel, Corso and Ginsberg also experimented with the technique. The spontaneous writing style that the Beats shared is another example. Much to the

poet's chagrin, attitudes and behavior that are conceived out of the desire to rebel and assert individuality are eventually absorbed by and assimilated into the voracious Way. Corso acknowledges that there are some forces that not even the poet can escape.

Despite the inevitability of the Way and the eventuality of being consumed by it, the poet does not give into despair.

There is no getting out of the Way
The only way out is the death of the Way
And what will kill the Way but a new consciousness
Something great and new and wonderful must happen
to free man from this beast (212-216)

Once again the poet looks to the future and invokes the next generation to slay the beast. Corso opines to Ginsberg, "today something is definitely needed, and so with such feeling perhaps there will be that wild new birth of new revolutionaries to bring America to heaven" (AA 257). Corso decrees that the Way is "the condition of our minds," therefore with mindfulness and a concerted effort to overcome it there is a distinct possibility that it can be destroyed (218). Yet, nothing short of a revolution can accomplish the task. Each individual must free her mind from the shackles of convention and conformity. Corso deems this possible, "the Beat [sic] claim that it is possible for any man to write a poem, even a great one at that, if only he 'free' himself" (AA 228). Although the country is enslaved by the Way the poet's faith in humanity and in the U.S.A. supersedes his pessimism. There is a glimmer of hope.

At the end of the poem Corso's optimism shines though his negativity. Although the poem's overall tone is grave, Corso uses humor to lighten the mood. The ability to laugh at things, especially something terrible, enables one to diffuse the threat and undermine its power. In an interview Corso said, "if you can really laugh at something, especially the way the American mentality used to be, then it was out. You could see the truth through it, if it was laughable, and it is out" (Andre 132). Despite the devastation of the Way he is able to laugh at it.

God how close to science fiction it all seems!
As if some power from another planet
Incorporated itself into the minds of us all
It well could be! (119-122)

Corso's use of humor here has a couple of effects. First, it counters the severity of just

how hopeless things have become. Rather than merely dwelling on the nation's shortcomings, the reader chuckles for a moment. Secondly, instead of blaming ourselves, humanity can whimsically shift the onus of failure for its mistakes onto someone, or something, else. These lines read like a *National Enquirer* headline. Finally, the poet's ridiculous postulation reflects both the absurdity of the situation and our inability to overcome it. It is ludicrous that America cannot rise above the power of the Way. The line "it well could be" causes the reader to do a double take and question the poet's sincerity, yet she quickly sees the line's folly. Skau notes that Corso often employs humor as a coping device, and in this case that notion certainly holds true (93). Although the Way has power over America now, there is reason to believe that with time, thought and effort it can and will be defeated.

VIII. Victory over the Way

For more than 200 lines the poet decries the omnivorous power of the American Way, yet the poem's conclusion inspires hope for humanity's eventual triumph. In spite of those in power that misinform and corrupt and the gullible Americans who believe the tripe they are fed, Corso remains upbeat about the future. He restates his belief in the American spirit and invokes the people to break free of the Way's relentless grip.

Americans are a great people
I ask for some great and wondrous event
that will free them from the Way
and make them a glorious purposeful people once
again
I do not know if that event is due deserved
or even possible
I can only hold that man is the victory of life
And I hold firm to American man (225-233)

Keenly aware of the younger generation's brewing distrust of government and disillusionment with the system, Corso's visionary poetics herald the youthful rebellion against conventional ideologies and the rigid conformity of the age. Fifty years after the poem's inception we know that Corso's prophesy did indeed come to pass; and while not entirely successful, the youth rebellion of the sixties did change

the national conscience and, perhaps more importantly, focused the attention of the country on the injustice, corruption and hypocrisy that were preventing America from living up to its full potential. Reflecting on the decade, Corso wrote to Laughlin in 1968, "I feel that I as manstuff have played some part, having lived up to my name which means announcer, I think I sounded the changing via poetry" (AA 392). Surely, he did just that.

The poem's final sacred image is striking. Corso harbored conflicting emotions about religion, yet he never entirely rejected his Catholic upbringing, as spiritual allusions can be found throughout his work. The American Way is a problem of Biblical proportion for Corso and nothing less than an epic battle will settle the country's unrest. The soul, the very existence of America, is at stake.

I see standing on the skin of the Way

America to be as proud and victorious as St.

Michael on the neck of the fallen Lucifer— (234-236)

It is a powerful image; the poet pits the evil of the Way against a beatific America. Just as the archangel stands triumphantly over Satan, the younger generation will rise victorious from their battle against the Way. The struggle against evil is really a battle within America and within Americans themselves, and only through a revolution of consciousness can victory be achieved. Corso recognizes the spirit of courage and forbearance that is taking root among the youth and prophesies its eventual triumph. Ultimately, the poet has faith in America and its people. This hopeful vision enables him to place confidence in his fellow countrymen and transcend the Way's villainy.

Skau notes that the patriotism of the Beats "is of the brand that recognizes not only the right but also the responsibility to call attention to their country's failings" (46). Corso shares that belief; in "Columbia U Posey Reading—1975" he refers to the group as "Revolutionaries of the Spirit" (HA 2). Indeed, the poet never shies away from his responsibility to point out the nation's shortcomings, although at times he comes across as didactic. By calling attention to the corruption that is rotting the country's soul, the poet fulfills the role of a true patriot; one that dutifully serves the best interests of the nation. More than merely a critique of America's weaknesses, though, "The American Way" is a wake-up call to the next generation that was to rouse from its slumber a few years later. By poem's end Corso comes full circle. He embodies many of the positive qualities formulated by Herberg: forward-looking, optimistic and

idealistic. Corso is the “great American” that he boasts to be; a patriot who loves his country despite its shortcomings and failures. This trust in the future enables the poet to transcend the evil of the Way and rest peacefully, assured that the next generation will slay the beast.

Notes

- 1 Born Gregorio Nunzio Corso the poet explained his name in the following manner. “It means Greg, watchful; Nunzio, I was born on the annunciation, means announcer; and Corso means the way” (AA 351).
- 2 The first part of line 199, “This is serious!” is very similar to “America this is quite serious”: a line from Ginsberg’s “America,” which was written in 1956.

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