

“...A HIDEOUS MONSTER”: SOCIAL REPRESSION AND REBELLION IN
GREGORY CORSO’S “THE AMERICAN WAY”

BY

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Abstract

The writing of Gregory Corso (1930-2001) has received little critical attention when compared to that of his contemporaries. This thesis investigates the cause of that discrepancy through Corso's poem "The American Way". In reading "The American Way", we discover Corso's worldview and goals via a primarily New Historicist methodology. The first section of this thesis, "A Factory of Sludge: The Inhibiting Systems of the American Way", explores the poem's depiction of a corrupt national system. The thesis's second section, "Battle Plans: Imagined and Engineered Weapons Against the American Way" explains Corso's in-poem proposals to revive the United States. Finally, the third section, "Corso and the Way: How and Why the Poet Disdains 20th Century America", foregrounds these abstract concepts in evidence from the author's life and historical context.

Introduction

In his 2000 book *Deliberate Prose*, poet Allen Ginsberg described his friend and protégé Gregory Corso as "...a poet's poet, his verse pure velvet...exquisitely delicate in manners of the Muse" (Weidman). These sentiments led Ginsberg to introduce Corso into his literary circle and to champion Corso's work. Unlike Ginsberg, however, Corso has rarely been considered a successful writer in the mainstream. His poems, plays, and novel won acclaim among artists and academics, and they are still read by enthusiasts of the so-called Beat Generation. Yet, Corso is decidedly less famous than most of his contemporaries, including Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac and William S. Burroughs. Few book-length analyses have been published about Corso. Those that have been published, including Gregory Stephenson's *Exiled Angel: A Study of the Work of Gregory Corso* and David Skau's "*A Clown in a Grave*": *Complexities and Tensions in the Works of Gregory Corso*, delve into the intricacies of Corso's work, but they generally do so within the framework of the wider Beat Generation. Stephenson begins his book by defining Corso as "...one of the founding members of the Beat Generation", a label that, while correct, hinders consideration of Corso beyond Beat involvement (Stephenson 7). Few, if any, scholars have published comprehensively and individually about Corso. In contrast, over thirty books have been published about Allen Ginsberg, several by Ginsberg himself. Though Ginsberg celebrated Corso, his friend has not garnered much attention from major 20th century American literary critics.

This lack of critical acclaim can be attributed in part to a certain self-distancing enacted by Corso. While writers like Ginsberg courted fame, Corso rejected and even sabotaged praise as often as he desired it. A disruptive, offensive persona cost Corso

recognitions and invitations, and it sometimes got him into situations requiring financial, legal, and cultural bailouts from his friends. In 1989, Ginsberg confessed that he hesitated to nominate Corso to the American Academy of Arts and Letters because Corso might “...cause some scandal at the dinner” (Pettet). Personal qualities aside, Corso’s struggle to obtain a positive reputation reflects an internal uncertainty over how he might fit into what he perceived as a mysterious and dangerous world. Corso’s writings throughout his life include these questions. In perhaps his most famous poem, “Marriage”, Corso’s speaker questions not only “Should I get married?” but also “Should I be good?” (“Marriage” 1). Social and moral norms are, then, separate systems to interact with. Corso questioned his surroundings and, by extension, his position in them. The rest of this poem contrasts ideal conceptions of marriage with their realities, discrepancies, and weaknesses. Many writers have questioned their surroundings, but Corso never comes to a resolution. Popular narratives come into question in “Marriage”; they do the same in such poems as “Mutations of the Spirit” and “Hello..”. All of these poems by Corso *ask* questions rather than answer them. Most writers receive some measure of critical consensus, but it for Corso has rarely extended beyond his own, vague statements. Corso’s self-effacement in uncertain writing and an unmoored lifestyle leaves him ambiguous in scholarship.

The author faced many struggles, including parental neglect and abuse, poverty, and discrimination. These struggles became implicit in his writing. The pattern of problems lends itself to a probing if not negative outlook. However, Corso began to challenge, rather than simply mourn, issues he perceived in society after traveling internationally in the 1950s. Time spent in Morocco, France, Germany, and elsewhere

widened Corso's perspective and caused him to consider the mores and values of a given society as constructed, not inevitable. He realized the impermanence of any one system, opening all systems to criticism. The poems of his 1970 collection, *Elegiac Feelings American*, bemoan and investigate the failings of the 20th century United States. In one of these poems, "The American Way", Corso presents a deeply cynical picture of the country. The poem details the mechanisms of "Growth gone in the wrong direction" before suggesting countermeasures to it ("The American Way" 77). At no point in "The American Way", though, does an exact definition of the nefarious "Way" appear, nor does the poem ever instruct how, realistically, it might be defeated. It presents a nation on the brink of dystopia, requiring dramatic change that the poem does not concretely explain. The poet's trauma underlies his foreboding impression of his country and world, consolidating into the horrors of "The American Way". Understanding Corso as a product of his social experiences becomes integral to understanding this poem, as the poem functions to explain his worldview. In fact, the poem's free-verse, didactic form contextualizes it as a vessel to communicate through, not as a singular, artistic piece. This format echoes the deviation from traditional form popular among Beat writers, but Corso's use of it in "The American Way" transcends Beat constraints. He rejects the Beat movement in-poem, and he uses the poem to, at some points, literally argue his points, not only literarily represent them. Meanwhile, self-defined Beats relied on the constancy, if nothing else, of their upfront rebellion against existing, definable traditions and teachings. Corso focuses on his abstract questions, but Jack Kerouac, named "the Beat Generation" because he felt its writers had all been "beat down" by the events of the mid-20th century. Kerouac, Ginsberg, and others contextualized "Beat" as a result of the

faults of modern society (Holmes). Conversely, Corso resists *reacting* to the Way in “The American Way”. He refuses to spell out problems and solutions, instead using the poem to open the United States toward reform. “The American Way” does not reform its country; it suggests a collaborative reinvention of the nation. The lack of clarity in this ideological call to action differentiates Corso and “The American Way” from most other Beat phenomena. The speaker of Allen Ginsberg’s 1956 “Howl”, for instance, lists individual and realistic examples of oppression before transitioning to judge specific contemporary figures, feelings, and experiences. “Moloch! Moloch! Robot apartments! invisible suburbs!”, Ginsberg writes, “...we are great writers on the same dreadful typewriter” (Ginsberg 88-99). Even the things he does not pinpoint—like the presumably several “invisible suburbs”—receive some kind of naming; Corso’s themes lack these contextualizations. Images in “The American Way” may connote definable subjects but are never styled in the poem *as* those subjects. It is Corso’s poetic uncertainty that here separates him from the other, accusatory, and revealing so-called Beat writers. The author, as an amalgamation of his experiences in and beyond a group, is inseparable from the writing. Gregory Stephenson examines Corso’s work on its face and as a part of the Beat Generation. He does not, however, delve as much into Corso’s writings as the product of the poet’s own personal experiences. Neither does *Corso: The Last Beat*, a 2009 documentary film following the author’s life but also defining him as a Beat. These texts, including “The American Way”, require a directly New Historicist approach to be appropriately criticized.

This poem represents Corso’s abstract, sometimes spiritual interpretation of the country surrounding him. It reads similarly to a philosophical diatribe, thinking through

and then around the non-physical problem of the Way. In “The American Way”, Corso bemoans commercialized morality and calls instead for dynamic, individual spirituality. This thesis investigates how Corso arrived at the understandings he chronicles in “The American Way”, exploring why these opinions matter and what they mean for future literary and social trends. Examining the poem’s themes provides insight into Corso’s worldview and vice versa. Corso’s life experiences created Corso the man and, in turn, shaped his writing. Analyzing “The American Way” requires also analyzing Corso’s experiences within the backdrop of the mid-20th century Western world.

A Factory of Sludge: The Inhibiting Systems of the American Way

“The American Way” charts Corso’s perceived corruption of values within the 20th-century United States; he broadens that analogy to suggest that all civilization founded on physical desires and goals will self-destruct. He asserts in the poem that every purely manmade idea contains implicit imperfection as a byproduct of its human creators’ limits. Since no human can achieve omnipotence, each human has incomplete resources to contribute to their inevitably incomplete civilizations. The ideas supporting human cultures, thus, always contain faults. “The American Way” separates these bad ideas from the generalized promise of “America”, a vision of opportunity that the poem actually celebrates. In the first stanza of “The American Way”, Corso’s speaker makes clear that he is “...a great American / I am almost nationalistic about it! / I love America like a madness!” (“Way” 1-3). He identifies with and supports the country itself to an extreme. Conversely, however, the next stanzas delve into horrors the speaker finds in modern America. None of the corruptions he focuses on, ranging from that of religion to that of the economy, have consumed the country entirely. Instead, they limit America’s promise through enforcement of small-minded, dangerous systems. Each mentioned corruption comprises a human system pushed into the opportunity of America. At no point does Corso write that any of the exact, word-for-word oppressions in the poem have completely and individually impacted him. Instead, they are usually abstracted and always in service of theoretical concepts. Though the author-insert speaker (identified through direct though not exact allusions to Corso’s experiences) approves of American ideals, he rejects their perversion from physical, human attempts at realization and growth.

The second section of the poem follows the speaker's patriotism with a menacing "They are frankensteining Christ in America" ("Way" 6). The action here does not imply inherent wrongness in an ideology, but in its use by the characters referenced as "They". That we never learn the identities of these figures, despite clues, increases their threat by making them faceless and therefore universal. Corso always capitalizes "they" and uses them as subjects of sentences, rendering them as active as they are shadowy. The apparent evangelists of this stanza piece together Christian phenomena to advance their own narratives, largely based upon fear and guilt. Like most faiths, Christianity has been historically used, among other things, for a variety of political goals, but Corso grounds its appearance here in "...campaigns..." causing people to kneel to "...their Christ" ("Way" 19-22). These Americans do not kneel to Christ, but to a *version* of Christ created by "Them". This Christ disempowers people into "begging to be saved...", leaving them open to exploitation by "Them" ("Way" 27). That "They" structure their fear-mongering as "campaigns" indicates manipulation through inducing vulnerability toward "Their" goals. An ominous authority uses Christianity to prey on Americans in this section, warping an ideology that, on its own, seems at least neutral. This manipulation enables the ominous "They" to promote unknown narratives with dangerous potential.

That this poem was written about and in the decades following the Second World War provides details and intensity to those persuasions. During the Second World War, the United States found itself for the first time fighting for a national ethos in direct opposition to those of other nations. The country had fought wars before, of course, but never in such an organized, unified way against threats to a constructed, singular national

ideology. Unlike the Revolutionary War, the Civil War, or even the First World War, the Second World War featured a unified nation defending its existing culture. Americans experienced "...a psychological feeling of unity...a shared sense of commonality (that) grew with the war..." (Wynn). World War Two provided the country with a sense of cultural unity. The lingering, subsequent role of the United States in this war contrasted that of isolationism and distance from the political machinations of the First World War. To defend a joined culture, however, Americans needed to define that single culture. The United States could only oppose Naziism if it knew itself in opposition to Naziism. Thus, dominant national norms combined into a defensible and sometimes exclusionary system (Raskin). Individuals' inability to fully embody each other, given their different backgrounds, speaks to the inability of groups of individuals to encompass every aspect of each member of the group. This process in the United States created disaffected minorities and sometimes dangerous power-leveraging by authorities. Scholars of empire have found that human civilizations "...no matter how magnificent, are condemned to decline and fall" by implicit human weakness (Ferguson). No society can fulfill all of its inhabitants' needs and desires. Rather, the bigger a group, country, or empire grows, the farther it must stretch its incomplete appeal. The bigger problems that result translate to bigger consequences. "The American Way" details the country of the United States, itself arguably an empire as it held and/or defended numerous external territories. The heightened intensity of the post-Second World War United States' norms exaggerated its faults. Those norms, though, lingered as the United States sought to capitalize upon its victory and lead in the more subtle Cold War. "They" would not need to evangelize unless they had significant reason to persuade masses of people to support them.

Exclusion of minorities comprises a prominent fault of this civilization, contextualizing Corso's negative vision of the mid-20th century United States.

Corso, the poor and unestablished son of troubled teenage immigrants, did not fit into the image of an ideal American man, so he numbered among those disaffected by that idea's rise to prominence. Preference toward a lifestyle Corso did and could not embody grew after the conclusion of World War Two:

The America that emerged from World War II stood tall as victor, the first modern superpower of both the Atlantic and Pacific. Increasingly through the 1950s and 1960s...the writ one of Main Street and suburban nuclear family...replete in consumer durables... (Blinder 28-29).

The martial nature of these ideas' rise qualified them as "good" and therefore worthy of patriotic devotion, so it rendered differences like Corso "bad". Though Corso was a child during the Second World War, its resulting hierarchy continued to exclude him. While abroad in 1959, he conceded that "...I didn't know whether I wanted to come home or not...it takes great strength to live in America" (Corso, Morgan 219). His problem here emerges not from living but from having to live in a war-induced, exclusionary America. Alternatives to living in America, living elsewhere, include cultural differences that may have lessened the pressure Corso felt. Regardless, he does not move in this poem to name those desired differences, leaving them instead in his characteristic uncertainty. These observations perhaps lent an edge to Corso's conclusions about the machinations behind this new American Way. The Christianity described in the second section of "The American Way" functions to weaken American individuals and to bring them under

control. To achieve the control and unity required to succeed in World War Two and the Cold War, American leaders had to push a cultural narrative onto their country's population, which they accomplished through promotion of guilt, fear, and self-doubt to make the population ideologically vulnerable. Those in power can manipulate a vulnerable populace into accepting and participating in their directives through the absence of public clarity or confidence to oppose them (Ferenczi, Erős). Much of Corso's earlier work took issue with existing American power structures, but he did not author this poem that frames them as manmade and changeable until his exposure to other systems prevailing among other populations elsewhere. The religious strong-arming he describes seems to serve penitents but in fact limits them, discouraging actual, complete spiritual fulfillment on national or individual levels. The author himself was at times a devout Christian, but he felt conventional American conceptions and worship of God to be outdated or incomplete. The second section of "The American Way" does not include any of the citizens affected by the evangelists gaining closeness to God or enlightenment. "The American Way" finishes envisioning a victory over the Way in Christian, but not church, terms: "...as proud and victorious as St. / Michael on the neck of the fallen Lucifer—" ("Way" 234-235). Corso clarifies the Way's use of Christianity, not Christianity itself, as problematic. He objects specifically to the Way that excludes him, not to America itself.

Finally, the bulk of the poem's third section expands upon the artificial and harmful methods maintaining the American Way. It emphasizes each of their roles in perpetuating systemic brainwashing. In this section, "They" appear not just in religion but also across education and government. At the center of all these arenas lies

communication, which has been corrupted, the poem says, to indoctrinate Americans into the Way. The poem refers to communicators perpetuating the Way as “preachers”, “educators”, “politicians”, various wealthy and famous figures, and, later, industrialists. (“Way” 41, 45, 133-135, 149). The breadth of this list suggests the Way’s manifestation in each of these characters’ spheres. The Way has infiltrated religion, education, the government, celebrity, and the economy. That is, all these mechanisms have been warped into a singular, entrapping Way. To function in a society, one must abide by that society’s rules. An individual’s birth does not innately confer adherence to any set of rules beyond the physical. The society in which someone grows up or lives must teach them. Corso identifies this goal as that of corrupted 20th century American education, noting that “The duty of these educators is no different/ than the duty of a factory foreman/ Replica production make all the young think alike” (“Way” 51-53). Educators, who can be understood not only as teachers in schools but as anyone interacting with another person, do not, in this case, educate others through teaching fact or critical thinking skills. On the contrary, Corso says they teach “...rock stupidity” and “...ignorance...” to prevent Americans from thinking independently (“Way” 31-33). Americans in these educator roles, themselves products of the same system, pass it onto the next generation, who pass it to the next, and so on. The teachers of each era teach not creativity but suggestibility. The resulting Americans, unable to think for themselves and made vulnerable through fear and guilt associated with a need for unified patriotism during the Second World and Cold Wars, absorb rather than create. *What* they absorb lacks restraint as they cannot question it; average Americans can no longer control their own worldview. The poem gestures at the danger of this void through mention of “...strange red-necked men of

industry / and the goofs of show business” making decisions for the country instead of leaving these decisions to the citizenry or elected officials (“Way” 149-150).

Industrialists and entertainers in a capitalist society need, in order to sustain their positions, to promote themselves, while politicians in a democracy must self-promote to win elections. Their ideas or creations may or may not be useful, important, or good, but they must sell them nonetheless. The vapid populace created through the religious and other methods highlighted in “The American Way” seem overwhelmingly susceptible to the dubious objects and ideas marketed to them by a shadowy, power-hungry, and implicitly flawed national normal.

Battle Plans: Imagined and Engineered Weapons Against the American Way

Despite that grim prognosis, “The American Way” indicates an alternative to this societal decay forced by human limits. That alternative’s promise lies in its openness, which paradoxically prevents clear definition. Defining it precludes it from encompassing the diverse perspectives of individuals. That is, it must itself remain uncertain to remain effective. The poem’s speaker refutes the American Way in, especially, the poem’s third section, arguing “Man is not guilty Christ is not to be feared / I am telling you the American Way is a hideous monster” (“Way” 36-37). These lines invalidate the Way’s manipulations. If Americans did not suffer the manipulation inflicted on them by industrialists, communicators, and government, they would lose the vulnerability such guilt created in them. Citizens could think independently. The Way remains a negative construction and not an objective reality; therefore, it can be destroyed.

The poem emphasizes the potential of youth to oppose or separate from the Way through recognition of its impermanence. As mentioned, human beings have no instinctual allegiance to any system. Their experiences shape their self-understandings and worldviews, teaching them in one way or another to recognize a “good” and a “bad” as socially-determined. In Corso’s United States, the Way overtakes Americans’ youth to train them into *its* system, hindering through unified, manipulative advertising their potential to conceive of alternatives. “To be young is to be ever purposeful limitless/”, Corso writes, “To grow is to know limit purposelessness” (“Way” 87-88). Were youth able, somehow, to recognize and break free from their training, they might create any lifestyle or idea different from and therefore without the same problems as the Way. Their alternatives would still contain imperfections, as not even these young creators

could find an objectively and completely positive replacement system. Yet, they would not be beholden to the Way. Further, the potential involved in creating these new ways does not fit permanently into any of them and could return to fix or change its own creations. Youth of one generation may introduce a new practice, and the next may refine or change it. Corso declares that “The meaning of the world is birth not death /...The true direction grows ever young” (“Way” 76-78). To Corso, the young, less indoctrinated, and therefore most potentially creative Americans of any given time have the most power to steer the country to progress. Corso’s youth would utilize their potential as undefined beings to stay undefined, creating and changing ideas instead of latching onto one. The poem highlights this promise as a goal for the United States, encouraging Americans not to mature but to explore.

However, the temporality and impurity (per Corso’s own guidelines) of youth hinders its realistic ability to enduringly mold culture. At the moment of birth, a person *begins* to have experiences that form that person into a limited individual. No single human can know every emotion, fact, and possibility; their brains merely consolidate what they do learn and are prompted, however indirectly, to conceive of (Berger). Each person therefore begins to lose Corso’s envisioned limitless youth from the first moment of their realized existence. The experiences they do have preclude alternate experiences of those moments. While it is true that some human beings may achieve more creativity or critical thought than others, it seems improbable for even the most creative to envision anything entirely devoid of external influence. Also, to enact a new idea, individuals must have the resources and ability to do so. In terms beyond the individual, this enactment requires communication across a group, necessitating a shared language or premise.

Social invention negates individual potential. So, while youth-created alternatives to the American Way could solve the Way's flaws, the full extent of Corso's ideal youth cannot exist.

It follows that individuality, incompatible with unity, also obstructs the Way. "Bulges" of individualized youth, somehow not fitting into the dominant system, have been linked to political changes across periods and cultures (Urdal). People like Corso, different from their society's norms, experience the negativity of those norms and so have direct understandings of the norms' imperfections. Groupings of these people create their own systems, which may be alternative but still contain faults per the continued social inability to achieve total unity of individualism. The poem exemplifies this conundrum with the Beat literary movement, explaining that in "...forsak(ing) the Way's habits / (they) acquire for themselves their own habits / And they become as distinct and regimented and lost" ("Way" 206-208). Corso has been understood as a member of the Beat Generation, but he marks his philosophy here as individual and separate from the "regimented and lost" Beat ethos. The Beats reject the Way, but in reaction create their own system involving their own limits, norms, and styles. That their ideology derives from a desire to react against the mainstream preserves the mainstream's influence and therefore stagnates Beat innovation. An idea incorporating mainstream 20th century advertising, for example, would have been incompatible with Beat ethos. Corso deeply admired the British Romantic poet Percy Bysshe Shelley, who he felt had achieved an individual iconoclasm beyond his Romantic associations. He identified with Shelley's conception of "...the poet as someone who had dedicated himself to the spirit of intellectual beauty", a channeling of something beyond the human world (Olson 52).

Finally, creation involving more than one person still requires standardized communication. The Beats experimented with abstract communication, as did others before, contemporary to, and after them, but no method exists to translate or enact abstract ideology without, at a minimum, defining it. Individuality encourages Corso's vision of infinite creation, but it cannot promote progress in a country.

While youth and individualization have no actuality or dominance in society, they are, within Corso's worldview, achievable mental states that can work outwards to impact society. Youth and individuality oppose physical progression and sociality. Yet, patterns of separation from a culture's standard path demonstrate a history of rebellion.

Coinciding with the writing of "The American Way", for instance, was the American youth revolt of the 1950s-1970s. Young people (for the most part) disaffected by post-Second World War conformity, the Korean and Vietnam Wars, or related political, social, and economic practices embraced their differences and enacted a "...cultural rebellion..." in which "...all forms of authority were being questioned" (Vandermelon). The problems implicit in social change continued but were limited by the goal not of creating an opposing system but of questioning the old. These reformers encouraged new, young ideas (Johnson, Feinberg). Corso takes the goal a step further as he manages it into Christian context. He does not suggest any church or dogma as the flame needed to incite his ideal rebellion. Rather, he declares "...the true goal of growth..." and "...Christ" to be "love" ("Way" 105-106). People embodying this Christ would have no need for the trappings of any social convention as they innately act from a center of love, an external yet not necessarily unifying/melding concept. Their society would be inherently community-focused and progressive. Corso's Christian Americans maintain their

freedom through individualism and youthful potential, and they avoid losing the societal scale. With Corso's Christianity, Americans would unlock sociality and creativity without having to lose their individuality or stability. Corso's worldview facilitates the use of individual, unlimited potential against the American Way.

Large-scale rebellion to change the Way, though, needs first to inspire deviation from the Way. The poem at no point rejects the abstract United States itself, in fact lamenting the loss of founding fathers like Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson in favor of "...strange red-necked men of industry" ("Way" 148-149). Though Corso does not idealize those figures in this poem, he finds their burgeoning enthusiasm for freedom and equality "...a light then / But today it is tragic to say it / today it should be fact" ("Way" 95-97). Again, Corso does not condemn American ideals or origins; he takes issue with their modern corruption. Instead of building upon the premise of love for individual creation, 20th century Americans have become trapped into a Way that discourages love and creation in favor of control and repression. Corso asserts that the country's post-war status quo brainwashes youth into the Way, hindering their ability to change it. So, he decrees that something must reverse that brainwashing to make youth aware of and interested in their potential for change. Though some have already achieved degrees of change through social, political, or economic disillusionment, change on a societal scale needs as many devotees as possible. Corso calls

...for some great and wonderous event
that will free them from the Way
and make them a glorious purposeful people once
again ("Way" 226-229).

The poem explains that a large-scale disruption would interrupt Americans' lockstep within the American Way. He describes this disruption as a positive thing, "great" and "wondrous", which leads to the elimination of problems like war or racism. In other words, it deconstructs the Way. It could be that, to Corso, the ends justify the means, and even violent or anarchic disruptions become positive when they prompt social change. Alternatively, he could mean a spiritual or other type of disruption would achieve his goal, or he may not know himself what event would best reach his goal. It is the directness of asking for it that clarifies the role of this poem. The poem itself does not destroy or change the American Way. Rather, it is an explanation and call to action for others to do so, perhaps an attempt at the disruptive event. In much of his writing, Corso envisioned himself as a messenger, not an actor, sometimes literally writing of a self-insert poet-character transmitting concepts from the divine to the human world (Calonne). In "The American Way", Corso communicates to readers what the dominating Way does not: its flaws and its need for replacement. He establishes the problem of ignorant, defined unity as well as proposes an alternative to it. To achieve that alternative, however, the poem notes that a dramatic event must inspire enough Americans to criticize the Way.

Corso and the Way: How and Why the Poet Disdains 20th Century America

The vigor and the abstraction of Corso's diatribe emerge from his pattern of escaping hurtful reality through an imagination augmented by religious and artistic themes. As mentioned, the poet's identity did not fit his surrounding norms, leading to his awareness and eventual criticism of those norms. He had little to no reliable support throughout his life. His mother's apparent abandonment haunted him for decades and was complicated by his neglectful father claiming Corso's mother's departure had somehow been caused by Corso. Foster families and temporary living situations proved unstable if not harmful, and Corso found himself in adult prisons and in an adult psychiatric ward while a teenager (Corso, Morgan). All these experiences showcased the dark side of the so-called American Dream: that those without the prerequisites to succeed in it could suffer punishment and blocking, through no fault of their own, from social achievement and happiness. As an adult, Corso followed the transient path shaped by his youth, moving through five marriages, periods of homelessness, and a nebulous stream of allies and enemies (Reininger). The instability of his lifestyle and the trauma associated with some of its specifics molded Corso's anger toward the Way, encouraging his irritation with it and call to rebel against it.

Corso's experiences in social contexts further refined his opposition to the social status quo. Though he considered himself Christian and had early familiarity with the Catholic Church, he did not, for the most part, support the Catholic Church. He explored alternative spirituality while reading, traveling, and learning from friends. In "The American Way", he does not define any one denomination as the "They" he so despises, leaving "Them" to mean any denomination. Other poems in *Elegiac Feelings American*,

the 1970 book containing “The American Way” include Corso’s “Geometric Poem”, a half-visual investigation of creation and history through the lens of Egyptian mythology. “The Geometric Poem” distinguishes “The Physical Geometry” as a separate section than those of abstract thought or feeling like “The Council Reports in 8 Fragments”. This poem, usually printed in Corso’s original script, can be difficult to read even beyond the symbols and drawings accompanying its text. Those symbols and drawings, in fact, have been understood as part of the text, making this poem a hybrid-poem before popularization of that genre. It blurs the traditions associated with this type of text, expressing non-physical themes through abstract, innovative methods. This premise speaks to the new creation encouraged in “The American Way”. “The Geometric Poem”, “The American Way”, and Corso’s other writings demonstrate independent methods and themes; he rarely, for instance, used pre-existing conventions. Other writers, including the Beats, also experimented with form and content, but Corso does so in this poem for the sake of experimental openness, freeing this poem to act as a nebulous, abstract vehicle of meaning. Simultaneously, he separated from the pre-existing social conventions that disadvantaged him. To escape the trauma of such experiences as his juvenile incarceration at Clinton State Prison, Corso relied mentally and emotionally on “...revelations of an interior world...to provide him with psychic sustenance” (Stephenson 7-8). Dreams and fantasies of alternatives to his drab reality became important to Corso, who did not grow into embracing the prevailing norms of American adulthood. Instead, the negativity of his experience with those norms led him to create his own, individual ways of thinking and living. His texts convey a consistent desire to make something new. The struggles Corso faced prompted him not only to reject social norms

but to construct an inner world not unlike the individualization he promotes in “The American Way”.

Significantly, Corso’s own ways of thinking, feeling, and creating were separate from *but not reactions to* the Way; he interpreted them as having instead stemmed from the open Christianity he came to prioritize. It seems unlikely that he somehow created them by himself with no influence at all from the rest of the world. Had he not been disaffected by the American Way, he less likely would have opposed it. Without a negative view of the 20th century United States, Corso would not have developed the philosophy he presents in “The American Way”. Nevertheless, Gregory Stephenson details Corso’s rich inner life as having always been present since his earliest psychological impulse to separate from the circumstances of his childhood (Stephenson). To cope with physical abuse, Corso imagined alternatives. He did not *consciously* do so to escape reality, though, especially at an age unequipped mentally to understand and address his own psychological needs. He accepted his imaginings at their surfaces, learning as he matured to associate their positivity not with physical influences but with his own mind and interpretation of Christianity. More so than any existing denomination, Percy Shelley’s “...discover(y) in poetry (of) some last vestige of the divine” appealed to Corso, encouraging creation as holy/good (Olson 53). As a pre-teen, Corso stole money to buy a ticket for the Christian movie *Song of Bernadette*. Years later, Corso stated that he had “...thought seeing the movie would bring about a miracle wherein he would be reunited with his mother” (Wills et al. 48-49). This desire indicates his reliance on the divine as well as his vulnerability. It also quickly resulted in Corso’s first prison sentence. The coinciding of Christian and what he believed to be original thought with Corso’s

moments of reprieve linked the two for him, resulting in the Christian if not church-related, individualized philosophy displayed in “The American Way”.

Conclusion

Gregory Corso found some success as a poet, playwright, and one-time novelist in the mid-20th century. Celebrated writer and eleventh Consultant in Poetry to the Library of Congress Randall Jarrell was so enthusiastic about Corso's poetry that he allowed Corso to live with him and his wife; they financially supported the erratic poet for several years (Corso, Morgan). Yet, Corso has not enjoyed the lasting fame credited to even some of his biggest fans like Jarrell and Allen Ginsburg. Despite the depth of Corso's writing, he has never fit into the mainstream literary taste of the United States. This discrepancy manifests in Corso's diatribe of "The American Way", distancing himself, his worldview, and, as a result, his writing from that environment.

The poem describes an almost dystopian United States, decimated morally and stunted intellectually by a controlling sociopolitical system set up alongside national goals during the Second World War. The need for susceptible, national unity prompted what Corso calls "Growth gone in the wrong direction" ("Way" 77). His perception of America achieves unity not through any general agreement or progress by its citizens but through factory-like reproduction of the same thoughts, opinions, and lack of creativity. Organized American religion works with fear-based political rhetoric to increase Americans' vulnerability, priming them for manipulation that hindered their capacities for independent thought.

Conversely, though, the poem asserts that the United States could solve these problems through a large-scale, individualized youth revolution based on Corso's open conception of Christianity. Corso calls for a significant event of some kind to inspire young and therefore limitless Americans to realize the imperfections *he* has been exposed

to in the American Way. This realization would inspire those youths to pursue changes or alternatives to the Way. However, Corso clarifies in the poem that the existing social movements have not succeeded in finding an alternative Way because they merely reacted to the Way. They had certain, concrete ties to the world at hand. Corso's proposal has no relation, he claims, to the Way. To create a society totally independent of the Way, Americans must think for themselves from a basis of love and kindness, which is for Corso centered in Christ.

These ideas all emerge from Corso's unique and sometimes tragic life. A lack of stability in his childhood led to the same in his adulthood and to an active and valued imagination. His good experiences with some Christian thought and charity encouraged the incorporation of that ethos into his perceived good version of what the United States or any nation could look like. He hoped to write as a messenger to inspire movement toward this kind of improvement, and he attempted to do through writing and publishing "The American Way". The poem moves through sections that first explain Corso's horrific interpretation of the 20th century American status quo and then suggest his vision to replace it and how that vision might be brought about. This premise exposes Corso's unique, trauma-induced separation from society, which underlies the argument of "The American Way". This poem describes the darkness of the American Way, which Corso follows by opposing it with a dramatic, youthful, and individual state of potential. The structure of these sections allows the poem to function persuasively, making points that build upon each other to detail and encourage Corso's perspective on America and the American Way.

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