

Introduction

From Avant-Garde to Counterculture

On October 4, 2009, I flew from Iowa City to New York to conduct interviews for this book. Everyone I contacted had agreed to meet with me except Barney Rosset. In a series of e-mails, his fifth wife, Astrid Myers, had firmly but politely resisted fixing a date, telling me that it all depended on how Barney was feeling. I had made all my travel arrangements, set to coincide with the fiftieth anniversary celebration of the publication of William Burroughs's *Naked Lunch*, without knowing whether I'd be able to interview the legendary owner of Grove Press, which had published Burroughs's masterpiece along with an entire canon of postwar avant-garde literature, and editor of the *Evergreen Review*, the premier underground magazine of the Sixties counterculture. I was eager to meet the man who bought the fledgling reprint house for three thousand dollars in 1951, built it up into one of the most influential publishers of the postwar era, and then was summarily fired after selling it to Anne Getty for \$2 million in 1986. I checked into my room at the Chelsea Hotel, called Astrid, and succeeded in scheduling an interview for the following day.

I knew that Rosset liked martinis, so I bought a bottle of Bombay Sapphire gin at a liquor store around the corner from the East Village walk-up he shared with Astrid. Rosset was spry and loquacious; though his body was bent over with age, his motions were animated and he spoke with assurance. He emerged from behind the glass-brick partition separating the kitchen and living quarters from the long, narrow front room lined with bookshelves, and when he saw the blue bottle of gin, it immediately evoked the past. Without preamble or introduction, he launched into a lengthy memory of shipping out from New York through the Panama Canal and around Australia to Bombay. His ultimate destination was China, where he'd received a commission, through his father's government connections, as a photographic unit commander for the Army Signal Corps. At the opening of the voyage he'd been given a blue plastic

canteen, which he filled with gin instead of water. By the time he arrived in Bombay, the plastic had melted into the gin, turning it blue. He drank it anyway.

It took more than ten minutes for Rosset to mention Grove Press, and when he did, it was in order to dismiss everything that had been written about it: “Something you have to understand about how Grove Press came about—nothing like what seems to be written down . . . It’s really a big problem. People write about Grove . . . they think I came out of an egg or something.”¹ I was later to discover that this has been an ongoing complaint. For Rosset, the roots of Grove Press penetrate deep into the soil of his childhood, and he dismisses any account that would attribute its success to others who worked with him or to larger historical and cultural forces. Rosset’s reservations notwithstanding, this book will do both of those things: it will analyze Grove as a collective endeavor enabled by specific historical conditions. But Rosset was the president and owner, and his aesthetic tastes, political convictions, and entrepreneurial spirit were central to the identity of the company. It is thus appropriate that any history of Grove Press start with the story of Barnet Rosset Jr.

He did not come out of an egg. He was born and raised in Chicago, the only child of a Russian Jewish father and an Irish Catholic mother, and he attended the progressive (and private) Francis Parker School, which he credits with instilling in him the passionate left-wing convictions he maintained throughout his life. At Parker he made his first foray into radical publishing (along with his childhood friend Haskell Wexler) with a mimeographed newsletter called the *Sommunist* (a mash-up of communist and socialist), soon renamed *Anti-Everything*. His favorite writers were Nelson Algren and James Farrell. Chou En-lai was his hero. Rosset stood out at Parker—he was class president and captain of the football team—and its principal, Herbert W. Smith, recognized his promise. In a document obtained by US Army Intelligence (and then retrieved by Rosset himself through the Freedom of Information Act [FOIA]), Smith declares that Rosset is “one of the very best: a strong leader, a keen and habitual analyst; decided in his opinions without being intolerant of people who do not hold them; impetuous, courageous, and popular.” The letter concludes: “Potentially, since he is an extremist, he is an outstanding fascist or a fair, sensitive democratic leader.”²

In fact, Rosset saw himself as an enemy of fascism, and his greatest regret was that he was too young to fight in the Spanish Civil War. After graduation, he went to Swarthmore College, partly because its recruiter had been an am-

balance driver for the Spanish Republicans and partly because he thought it was close to Vassar, the college his high school girlfriend attended. She broke up with him, and he found solace in reading *Tropic of Cancer*, purchased under the counter from the legendary Gotham Book Mart in New York City. “I didn’t even notice the obscenity,” Rosset told me; “I noticed two things: one, he’d had a terrible breakup with a girlfriend. And that struck home to me . . . And also Henry’s anti-American stance: all Americans looked alike, talked alike . . . etc.” As evidence, he gave me a copy of a paper he wrote at Swarthmore, “Henry Miller vs. ‘Our Way of Life.’” Written on the eve of America’s entry into World War II, when “drums are rolling” and “men are marching,” the paper openly wonders what in “our way of life” is worth fighting for.³ Noting that Miller, as an expatriate, might have a singular insight into this question, Rosset focuses on the author’s comparison between Paris, where Miller found “greater independence” and became “a completely self-sufficient being,” and New York, “a land of the dead” where he saw “only automatons.”⁴ Rosset approves of the critique but takes exception to Miller’s individualism, arguing that “we must participate in action with our neighbors if we ever wish to achieve any of the freedom which Miller so covets.” He concludes that “perhaps our salvation lies in all of us becoming artists.”⁵

Rosset gave me a copy of this paper, which he had once used as evidence in court that his interest in Miller was not pecuniary, in order to refute yet another argument: mine. In an article for *Critical Inquiry*, “Redeeming Value: Obscenity and Anglo-American Modernism,” I had argued that “the end of obscenity was also a triumph for modernist formulations of the literary, insofar as texts previously valued by an elite intelligentsia were finally being granted mainstream cachet.”⁶ Much of the article focused on Grove’s battles against censorship in the 1960s, which I argued had brought late modernism into the mainstream; I intended this argument to be central to my book. Rosset would have none of it: “This is based much more on aesthetics,” he argued, shaking his copy of my article in the air disdainfully, “to me it’s like quibbling between Catholicism and Protestantism . . . None of them really interest me . . . I looked at *Tropic of Cancer* from a political, and social, point of view.” But, as his conclusion affirms, Rosset wanted to make the freedoms Miller found in art available to everyone. With Paris as Rosset’s primary resource, New York as his home base, and the booming American university population as his audience, his signal achievement with Grove Press and the *Evergreen Review* would be to take

the avant-garde into the mainstream, helping to usher in a cultural revolution whose consequences are with us still.

Rosset got a B- on his Henry Miller paper and lasted less than a year at Swarthmore. He decided to run off to Mexico but made it only as far as Florida. He wandered back north and enrolled at the University of Chicago, before leaving again to attend UCLA, intending to study film, only to discover that the university did not yet have a film department. In the fall of 1942 he enlisted in the US Army. With a copy of *Red Star over China* close at hand, Rosset ran the only American film crew in the region. After the war, he returned to Chicago, joined the Communist Party (he left two years later, in 1948, after a visit to Czechoslovakia), and hooked up with a Parker schoolmate, the painter Joan Mitchell, a key figure in Grove's early history. Rosset followed Mitchell first to New York, where she introduced him to her circle of friends, the abstract expressionist painters who were in the process of revolutionizing the art world, and then to France, where the two were married. According to Rosset, witnessing Mitchell's development as a painter transformed his understanding of the visual arts: "If I have any taste today, or any emotion about art, and if the Grove book covers show any consistency, it's all thanks to Joan."⁷ When they returned to New York in 1951, they began to drift apart but remained friendly; when Mitchell heard about Grove, she encouraged Rosset to purchase it.

At the time, Rosset was attending the New School on the GI Bill (taking classes from Wallace Fowlie, Alfred Kazin, and Meyer Shapiro, among others) and living off a stipend of eight hundred dollars from his father, who refused to give him access to the trust funds from which the stipend was taken. At twenty-nine, Rosset objected to being treated like a child, and he wrote to his father: "I am still in the position of a . . . minor, who receives a monthly stipend, who has no power in the [determining?] of its size, and who has no clear idea of where the money is coming from, how much of it there is, and who does not know if this river of gold will continue to flow."⁸ Barney Rosset Sr., a highly successful investment banker, had never been in good health and died only three years later at the age of fifty-five, leaving his son as president of the Metropolitan Trust Company of Chicago. Rosset's father had specialized in government bonds, and, according to Rosset, "I suddenly had \$50 million worth of these bonds and I knew almost nothing about them."⁹ He noticed that the bonds were losing money, so he sold them all at a huge loss. In Grove's annual report for the year 1955, the Metropolitan Trust Company is valued at \$1.5 million, which

means, if Rosset's figures are correct, that he lost more than \$48 million in a single year. The annual reports from the 1950s also affirm that Rosset essentially incorporated the bank into the publishing company, allowing him to operate at a loss without going under into the mid-1960s, when Grove began to make money. Rumors of Rosset's great wealth, which helped the company get credit in its early years, were founded in truth.

Rosset also began to acquire real estate on Long Island, starting in 1951 with a Quonset hut designed by Pierre Chareau, which he bought from Robert Motherwell for twelve thousand dollars; with his inheritance he expanded his holdings into more than a mile of oceanfront property in Southampton, purchased at forty dollars per foot. Rosset's Hamptons estate became a weekend social center for Grove employees and the writers and artists with whom they associated, and he provided vacation houses on the property for his closest associates. As Rosset remembers, "I moved a lot of people out there. I got a vision of all the Grove people living out there—and we did, or almost! I went and got houses that were abandoned, and we moved them on wheels and rebuilt them."¹⁰ In the 1960s, when the press was mired in litigation across the country, he sold much of this land to keep the company afloat. If he had kept even a small piece of it, he would have remained a very wealthy man. But Rosset squandered his entire fortune on Grove Press; when I visited him, he was living in very modest circumstances. According to at least one obituary, he was almost broke when he died in March 2012 at the age of eighty-nine.¹¹

By all accounts, then, Rosset was a reckless and impulsive man motivated by strongly held political convictions. He was also closely watched, and government surveillance of him dates to his years in the army. In 1943, US Military Intelligence, suspecting him of "disaffection," interviewed an informant who had been a classmate at the Francis Parker School.¹² The informant characterizes Rosset as "a headstrong individual, completely lacking in the spirit of compromise, refusing at all lengths to give up on his version of a particular issue." The informant continues that Rosset "was very radical in his views; that his views were definitely 'leftist' in character," and that he "was dissatisfied with the present organization of society and felt that the social organization that gives to people all the luxuries and comforts that he himself had and enjoyed is a corrupt one and should not exist." The informant comments extensively on Rosset's impulsiveness, noting that he "totally lacks sound judgment; he is incapable of appraising people, all of his impressions and judgments are based upon emotional reactions."¹³

Everyone I interviewed agreed with this appraisal. Fred Jordan, Rosset's longtime colleague and managing editor of the *Evergreen Review* throughout the 1960s, called Rosset "extraordinarily impulsive," adding that the company was "driven by Barney's moment-by-moment impulses."¹⁴ Jeanette Seaver, widow of Grove's executive editor Richard Seaver, agreed that Rosset was "irrational," adding that he was also "very generous."¹⁵ According to Herman Graf, who joined Grove as a salesman in the mid-1960s, Rosset "made most of his major decisions in seconds and spent the rest of his life regretting them."¹⁶ Purchasing Grove Press was not one of those decisions.

Indeed, though Rosset developed a reputation for having an "iron whim," he in fact pursued his career in publishing with shrewd determination, and his instincts tended to be sound. He intuited that the obscure experimental dramatists whose work he acquired in the 1950s would become steady sellers once their reputations were established, and he realized early that the market for their printed work would be in the expanding American university system. He sensed that the regime of censorship established under the Comstock Act was collapsing and that challenging it could therefore become profitable. He saw the hypocrisies and contradictions of America's Cold War consensus in the 1950s and was therefore able to exploit the rise of student activism when that consensus began to unravel in the 1960s. And, possibly most important, he had exceptionally good instincts for finding other people who shared his vision and whose talent and expertise could help him realize it.

These people did not conceive of Grove as a business. As Fred Jordan told me, "If you take a publishing company to be a commercial enterprise, Grove never was." "It wasn't a business," his son Ken interjected. "It was a project driven out of passion, which Barney completely self-identified with." If Grove wasn't a business, what was it? "We just called it Grove. Because it was just its own thing," Ken replied. Jeanette Seaver had likened it to a family; Morrie Goldfischer, who had been in charge of promotion and publicity, repeatedly used the term "team" to describe Grove's core group. Nat Sobel, Grove's sales manager, told me that Rosset compared the company to a football team, adding, "I'm the quarterback, and I'm calling the signals." What about a rock band? "It's more like a band than anything else," Ken agreed. And then he added, "The relationship was not so much from one person to another. It was one person to Barney, and then Barney to everybody else." And Sobel confirmed, "If we had any personal relationship, it wasn't with each other; it was with Barney."

My interviews with Rosset's coworkers, all of whom remembered him with a combination of affection and aggravation, led me to conclude that Grove, before Rosset decided to take the company public in 1967, was what the sociologist Max Weber calls a "charismatic community," a small group of people who come together out of loyalty to a figure whose authority is based in his charismatic appeal. From 1960 to 1970, Grove Press was run not by Rosset alone but by a cadre of men and women who were unwaveringly loyal to him even as he made decisions that put the press economically at risk. Weber claims that "charisma rejects as undignified all methodical rational acquisition, in fact, all rational economic conduct," and Rosset's impulsive decision-making style and reckless disregard for money perfectly illustrates this quality of the charismatic leader, whose very irrationality is central to his appeal.¹⁷

Not surprisingly, most people who have written about Grove understand it as an expression of Rosset's personality. One of the first articles published about the company, "Grove Press: Little Giant of Publishing," characterizes it as "a dynamic expression of [Rosset's] own personal likes and tastes in literature . . . Grove's editors are little more than extra-sensory . . . extensions of the master's personal literary tastes."¹⁸ And S. E. Gontarski, one of the few academics to write about Grove, affirms that Rosset "had personalized publishing, made it an extension of his own will and psyche."¹⁹ Understanding Rosset as a charismatic leader, and Grove as a charismatic community, allows me to reframe this reductive (and seductive) interpretation and to understand Grove not as an expression of his personality but as a community enabled by it.

This community—which was to play a crucial role in the creation of the counterculture—has been neglected by literary and cultural histories of the 1960s. As James English attests, most cultural criticism and cultural history neglect the "middle space between acts of inspired artistic creation on the one hand and acts of discerning consumption on the other."²⁰ English focuses on the increasingly significant role of prizes in the circulation of literary prestige, but his claim applies equally to publishers and editors, whose role in generating literary value and meaning is equally important, if not always equally neglected. Like those who administer and fund prizes and awards, publishers function as gatekeepers, mediating the text's passage from author to reader and populating the expanding zone between them.²¹

Publishers, however, are only part of the story. As book studies pioneer Robert Darnton affirms, all books must pass through "a communications circuit that

runs from the author to the publisher . . . the printer, the shipper, the bookseller, and the reader.”²² Although I will not be dwelling at all the stops on this circuit—the printer and shipper do not play significant roles in the pages that follow—I will be emphasizing the multiple agents involved in establishing Grove’s unique niche in the postwar field of cultural production. Rather than see this process in terms of a circuit, however, I choose to understand it as a network extending out from Rosset and his crew and linking authors, academics, editors, readers, and activists around the world. The Grove colophon became a kind of quilting point enabling this network to coalesce around a distinct set of aesthetic sensibilities and political affiliations.

The publisher’s colophon is in fact one of the more undertheorized symbols in our cultural landscape. It started out as a “finishing touch” on the last page of a book, where the printer provided a description of the volume and the place and date of its manufacture. Gradually this material migrated to the title page, and in the twentieth century the term came to designate the publisher’s emblem and to play a role analogous to that of the trademark or brand name in other industries. However, the unique nature of the book distinguishes the publishing industry from others and inhibits consumers from recognizing a colophon to the same degree they would a brand name like Coca-Cola or a trademark like the Nike Swoosh. As affirmed in “The Cult of the Colophon,” an article that appeared in *Publishers Weekly* in 1927, establishing brand recognition is more difficult for publishers because they “have to promote one title after another, most of which can have but a few months’ attention, while the producer of other merchandise markets the same product with the same appearance, year in and year out.”²³ Thus, the article concedes that “while there is a small bookish public which really knows imprints, by far the larger number of book buyers do not carry along with them any remembrance of the publishers’ name.”²⁴

“The Cult of the Colophon” discusses how modern publishers were attempting to enhance the visibility of their colophons through creative graphic design, and it concludes by noting that “modern art has not failed to influence the colophon,” listing Norman Moore’s work for Modern Library and Rockwell Kent’s design for Random House as preeminent examples.²⁵ This emphasis on the aesthetics of the colophon accompanied an increased attention to jacket design, which also frequently borrowed principles and elements from modern art. Through a complex synergy of title selection, graphic design, and promotional

rhetoric, modern publishers were attempting to garner the public recognition and customer loyalty that was already standard practice in other industries.

They were only modestly successful. As influential editor and cofounder of the *New York Review of Books* Jason Epstein noted twenty-five years later, “Publishers’ imprints tend not to mean much to the people who buy books.”²⁶ Despite the sustained efforts of copywriters and graphic designers, the identity of individual publishers remained, for the most part, of little concern to the book-buying public. Grove became the crucial exception to this rule. By focusing on a series of niches increasingly associated with the emergent counter-culture, Grove developed a loyal following of writers and readers who bought books simply because they prominently displayed the Grove or Evergreen (and later Black Cat) colophon on the spine. The company was the central node in what could be called a colophon network. If you owned books by Grove Press, if you read the *Evergreen Review*, you were hooked into this network.

In order to map this network, I’ve turned to Pascale Casanova, whose groundbreaking study *The World Republic of Letters* has generated considerable conversation and controversy, particularly since its translation into English in 2004. Casanova has little to say about publishers, but her ambitious thesis—that Paris has been the “Greenwich Meridian of Literature” for the past four hundred years—not only implicates them in the international game of literary competition that her book anatomizes but also foregrounds the networks through which Grove established its literary reputation in the United States.²⁷ A substantial proportion of the authors upon which Grove built its “avant-garde” reputation—most notably Samuel Beckett, Alain Robbe-Grillet, Eugène Ionesco, Henry Miller, and Jean Genet—were originally published in Paris, and Grove relied heavily on its French connections, and the prestige they afforded, in the first decade of its existence.

In this regard, *Counterculture Colophon* extends and elaborates the provocative thesis propounded by Serge Guilbaut in his important study *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art: Abstract Expressionism, Freedom, and the Cold War*. Focusing on the emergence, and astonishing success, of abstract expressionism in the years immediately following World War II, Guilbaut convincingly shows how New York City was able to appropriate the status of culture capital previously held exclusively by Paris. Abstract expressionism, Guilbaut affirms, became America’s first internationally recognized avant-garde, permanently shifting the center of gravity of the art world.