Jack Kerouac

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Famous enough to have been parodied by John Updike and The National Lampoon and popular enough to have cashed some substantial royalty checks, Jack Kerouac (1922-1969) was regarded during his lifetime as more of an eccentric promoter of a Bohemian cult than a serious writer. Although his writing was well received internationally, the consensus of American critical opinion never strayed far from Truman Capote’s quip: it “isn’t writing at all—it’s typing” (Janet Winn, “Capote, Mailer and Miss Parker,” The New Republic, February 9, 1959, p. 28). Even Seymour Krim, a sympathetic observer, concluded that Kerouac’s “ultimate value to the future” rested on the autobiographical nature of his work: he was the “social historian” of the Beat Generation (“Introduction,” Desolation Angels, p. 12). Since Kerouac’s death, a tentative recognition of his accomplishment has been emerging. In perhaps the most startling example of the reversal of critical opinion, George Dardess announced that “Kerouac may legitimately be, even on the basis of On The Road alone, a great American author . . .” (p. 201). In Naked Angels, the best book on the Beat Generation, John Tytell described Kerouac as “our most misunderstood and underestimated writer . . .” (p. 140). Whether these opinions portend a Kerouac revival is debatable. But whatever the ultimate fate of Kerouac’s literary reputation, his influence on American culture has been considerable.

Jean Louis Lebris de Kerouac was born into a close-knit French-Canadian family in Lowell, Massachusetts, in 1922. His
father, Leo, was a printer. A sports fan, he encouraged Jack’s ambition to be a football hero, which eventually resulted in an athletic scholarship to Columbia University. Gabrielle, his mother (mémère), lived with Jack most of his life, and she was a persistent moral influence. Gerard, five years older than Jack, and Caroline (Nin), three years older, completed the family. Gerard’s death at the age of nine deeply affected Kerouac’s life. At times Kerouac insisted that Gerard was the real author of his books. Kerouac also believed that Gerard was his guardian angel. In Visions of Gerard, Kerouac has Gerard say: “Since the beginning of time I’ve been charged to take care of this little brother . . .” (p. 64).

Lowell was a “salad bowl” of ethnic groups. Raised in the insular world of “Little Canada,” Kerouac did not speak English until he started parochial school. His immigrant background early branded him with a fierce patriotism and a passion for Americana. Another critical influence on Kerouac was the popular culture of the twenties and thirties. More than his family or his Catholic schooling, pop culture provided him with his earliest notions about America. In one of his many attempts to explain the Beat Generation, he devoted a long paragraph to its origins: “It goes back to the inky ditties of old cartoons (Krazy Kat with the irrational brick) . . . to Lamont Cranston so cool . . . to Popeye the sailor and the Sea Hag . . . to Cap’n Easy and Wash Tubbs screaming with ecstasy over canned peaches on a cannibal isle . . .” (“The Origins of the Beat Generation,” p. 71).

As Kerouac remembered it, he decided to become a writer while still a child: “At the age of 11 I wrote whole little novels in nickel notebooks, also magazines (in imitation of Liberty Magazine) and kept extensive horse racing newspapers going” (“Biographical Notes,” p. 439). In adolescence, he idolized two writers — Jack London and Thomas Wolfe. Their emphasis upon the unity of their own raw experience and the creative
impulse struck chords in Kerouac's sensibility. Yet Kerouac
never made a definitive pronouncement on the sources of his
need to write, though his father’s occupation, the Catholic
confessional, Gerard’s death, and the romantic image of the
writer in the popular culture must have contributed to his
fate. Whatever spurred him, Kerouac wrote regularly—some
might say obsessively—for the rest of his life.

In 1939 Kerouac left Lowell to attend Horace Mann School
in New York City preparatory to entering Columbia University
in 1940. Poor grades and his decision to quit playing football
led him to drop out of Columbia in the fall of his sophomore
year. After six months in the Navy he was honorably dis-
charged, because, according to the Navy’s verdict, he had psy-
chological problems and an “indifferent character.” Kerouac
worked the remainder of World War II as a merchant seaman.
When not at sea, he hung around Columbia with a group of
self-styled, decadent Bohemians who read Spengler, Gide, and
Rimbaud, thought ironical thoughts, used drugs, and prac-
ticed free love. William Burroughs, Lucian Carr, Edie Parker,
Allen Ginsberg, and other acquaintances showed Kerouac an
exhilarating world far removed from “Little Canada.” Despite
the distractions of Bohemia, Kerouac wrote two novels during
the war, “The Sea is My Brother” and, in collaboration with
Burroughs, “And the Hippos Were Boiled in Their Tanks.”

By the war’s end, Kerouac was bored with Bohemia. He
concluded that “the city intellectuals . . . were divorced from
the folkbody blood of the land and were just rootless fools
. . .” (Vanity of Duluoz, p. 273). Several factors contributed
to his change of mood. His first marriage, in 1944, had col-
lapsed after two months, and his father died in 1946 believing
that Jack was becoming a drug-addicted disgrace to the family.
On his father’s deathbed Jack swore that he would reform and
take care of mémère. However, early in 1947, Kerouac’s life
was again overturned. In New York, through his college friends,
he was introduced to Neal Cassady, and the frantic “road years” began.

A twenty-year-old reform school hipster-intellectual, Cassady was a product of the urban slums of Denver, but to Kerouac he was the personification of the cinematic West. Cassady’s intensity and excitability enthralled Kerouac, and he was everything that Kerouac’s New York friends were not. When Cassady returned to Denver, Kerouac made plans to follow him. In the summer of 1947 he hitchhiked to Denver and after a few weeks with Cassady moved on to explore California. Experiencing a world he had known only through books and movies, Kerouac was overwhelmed by the people and the land, but most of all by Neal Cassady.

During the next four years Kerouac traveled throughout the West, often with Cassady. When not on the road he lived in mémére’s apartment in New York, where he worked on The Town and the City, which was published in 1950. The novel depicted a large New England family whose stability crumbled as a result of the dislocations caused by World War II. It ended with Peter Martin, the Kerouac persona, “on the road again, traveling the continent westward . . . ,” a solitary individual in search of a new life (p. 498). Kerouac later dismissed The Town and the City as his “novel novel” in contrast to his spontaneous autobiographical fiction, but in 1950 he was proud of it. The novel boosted his confidence in his ability and calmed mémére’s fears that her son was a bum. Publication did little to settle Kerouac’s life. His most desperate, searching years followed.

Even before the completion of The Town and the City, Kerouac was uneasy about his approach to fiction. As he recalled: “I spent my entire youth writing slowly with revisions and endless re-hashing speculation and deleting and got so I was writing one sentence a day and the sentence had no FEELING. Goddamn it, FEELING is what I like in art, not CRAFTINESS
and the hiding of feelings” (Berrigan, p. 65). Ginsberg and Burroughs urged him toward more experimental prose, but it was Cassady who pointed him toward a new vision of his craft. In a series of letters that he wrote during 1950 and 1951, Cassady provided Kerouac with models of what Kerouac eventually labeled “spontaneous prose.” As Kerouac later theorized, spontaneous prose was an “undisturbed flow from the mind of personal secret idea-words, blowing (as per jazz musician),” allowing for “no revisions (except obvious rational mistakes, such as names or calculated insertions in act of not writing but inserting). . . . If possible write ‘without consciousness’ in semi-trance . . . allowing subconscious to admit in own uninhibited interesting necessary and so ‘modern’ language what conscious art would censor . . . .” (“Essentials of Spontaneous Prose,” pp. 65-67). Kerouac viewed the creation of spontaneous prose as a moral act. He apparently believed that God, Gerard, or some greater force directed his writing. Kerouac put the matter baldly to Charles Jarvis: “Once God moves the hand, you go back and revise it’s a sin!” (Visions of Kerouac, p. 7).

Cassady also pointed Kerouac toward his subject matter—Kerouac’s own life. Wolfe and London had impressed Kerouac with the power of autobiographical fiction, and certainly he had been following their example in The Town and the City. But Cassady, who had begun to struggle with his own autobiography, was aiming Kerouac at a more literal recounting of a life, a “straight case history” transcribed from the memory without the intervention of craft. Cassady explained to Kerouac: “Remembrance of your life & your eyeball view are actually the only 2 immediate first hand things your mind can carry instantly” (Cassady, p. 131).

The constraints of autobiography proved liberating, not oppressive, to Kerouac. He began in 1951 to spew out what he preferred to call “picaresque narratives.” Sometimes he insisted
that his books were fictionalized only by the changes necessary to avoid libel. On other occasions, he admitted to a selectivity that would enhance the tone of a book. Actually, Kerouac’s brooding, shaping memory and the drugs and liquor he used to prime himself for writing patterned all his work far more than fact. All of his writing reflects Kerouac’s knowledge that “memory and dream are intermixed in this mad universe” (Doctor Sax, p. 5). Perhaps the best evidence to bolster that argument is his treatment of his job with the Forest Service in the summer of 1956. He wrote of that summer in The Dharma Bums, Desolation Angels, and “Alone on a Mountaintop” in Lonesome Traveler. Factually, the accounts coincide, but in tone and spirit they hardly seem based on the same experience. Whether Kerouac’s work should be labeled autobiography, “picaresque narrative,” novel, or essay is often impossible to determine. Kerouac referred to only two books—Lonesome Traveler and Satori in Paris—as autobiography. They relate the adventures of Jack Kerouac, not a persona for Kerouac, but any other distinctions between these books and the others are difficult to perceive.

Kerouac’s espousal of Cassady’s ideas necessitated that Kerouac take a new approach not only to his craft, but also to his identity. If Kerouac was to write about himself, he would need to wrestle with that self. He was “John,” the rather staid, aspiring novelist who published The Town and the City. He was “Ti Jean,” his mother’s son. And Kerouac was also “Jack,” the big-city Bohemian, the Western adventurer. His commitment to spontaneous prose signaled the submerging of “John.” Although he continued to seek publication, Kerouac believed he was turning his back on literary success. “Ti Jean” and “Jack” not only coexisted, but there was a communion between them. Kerouac was not divided in any clinical sense, despite the belief of many of his friends that he was overly dependent upon his mother. His best writing was a fusion of the memory
and moral grounding of “Ti Jean” and the celebration of experience of rambling “Jack.” To be sure, his work can be divided between the “Lowell novels” and the “road novels,” but both aspects of Kerouac’s personality fired the creative process. As Howard Webb has argued, Lowell and the road were not antithetical worlds, for both represented the possibility of a tender, loving society which would shelter Kerouac from the impersonal universe.

The first proof of Kerouac’s new powers was On the Road (1957). It was banged out in three weeks of nonstop writing, and although Kerouac revised it in order to get it published as he did several other works, it stands as his first effort to grapple with Cassady’s advice. A novel of initiation, it chronicles the travels of Dean Moriarty (Cassady) and the narrator Sal Paradise (Kerouac). They ramble from New York to Denver, San Francisco, and Mexico City in apparent confusion: “What’s your road, man? — holyboy road, madman road, rainbow road, guppy road, any road. It’s an anywhere road for anybody anyhow. Where body how?” (p. 206). All the while, Sal, the naive Eastern college boy who lives with his aunt, is absorbing the meaning of the West.

When Sal first meets Dean, he places him in the context of Western movies; Dean is a “young Gene Autry . . . a side-burned hero of the snowy West” (p. 6). But as his initiation progresses, Sal learns that “Singing Cowboy Eddie Dean and his gallant white horse Bloop” are only the “Gray Myth of the West,” and when late in the novel he introduces Dean to a woman as a “cowboy,” he is fully aware of the absurdity of that label (p. 201). His intention is to promote Dean’s chances for a sexual conquest. Reality is neither the nineteenth-century West, nor the movie, nor tourist-trap versions of it. Finding himself in Cheyenne, Wyoming, during Wild West Week, he notes: “Big crowds of businessmen, fat businessmen in boots and ten-gallon hats, with their hefty wives in
cowgirl attire, bustled and whoopeed on the wooden side-walks of old Cheyenne. . . . Blank guns went off. The saloons were crowded to the sidewalk. I was amazed, and at the same time I felt it was ridiculous: in my first shot at the West I was seeing to what absurd devices it had fallen to keep its proud tradition” (p. 29).

The real West, Sal concludes, is the anarchistic, urban world of Dean Moriarty. His reckless, manic, optimistic, devil-may-care individualism makes him a walking catalogue of Western virtues. When Sal must recognize Dean’s imperfections, such as his propensity for stealing cars, he tries to find virtue in them: “his ‘criminality’ was not something that sulked and sneered; it was a wild yea-saying overburst of American joy; it was Western, the west wind, an ode from the Plains, something new, long prophesied, long a-coming (he only stole cars for joy rides)” (p. 11). Dean is versed in the practical skills of the West — everything from driving a car to seducing women to manual labor — but his foremost ability and solemn duty is to philosophize. Sal’s formal education stands in sad contrast to the primitive genius of the high school dropout. Moriarty may be the foremost Western thinker since Natty Bumppo: “Everything is fine, God exists, we know time. Everything since the Greeks has been predicated wrong. . . . We give and take and go in the incredibly complicated sweetness zigzagging every side” (pp. 99-100). Sal can only add an occasional homily (“we don’t understand our women”), but by the close of On The Road he has absorbed enough of Dean’s teachings to proclaim that “God is Pooh Bear” (pp. 101, 253).

Kerouac’s ragged, episodic prose and his footloose heroes embody the code of the West. They are “performing our one and noble function of the time, move” (p. 111). A willingness to move is the beginning of wisdom: “You spend a whole life of non-interference with the wishes of others, including politicians and the rich, and nobody bothers you and you cut
along and make it your own way. . . . No matter where I live, my trunk's always sticking out from under the bed, I'm ready to leave or get thrown out" (pp. 205-06). Only with that premise can one remain free and uncorrupted in a meaningless civilization.

Kerouac's second marriage (of seven months) broke up after the completion of *On The Road*, and he continued to tramp from New York to California, Mexico, and Rocky Mount, North Carolina, his sister Nin's home, where *mémère* occasionally resided. From 1951 to 1954 he seldom lived over three months in any locale, with the exception of two lengthy stays at Cassady's in San Jose, California. Surprisingly enough, Cassady was somewhat settled with a steady job and a wife, children, and home. Despite his nomadic life, lack of money, and numerous temporary jobs, during these years Kerouac wrote four novels, some short sketches and poetry, and a never-completed study of Cassady written in French. Under all circumstances and with little hope of publication he wrote prose that his friends assured him was dazzling. Their support confirmed Kerouac's view of himself as an avant garde, slightly mad genius.

*On The Road*, in Kerouac's estimation, illustrated the merits of his approach to fiction. His next work, *Visions of Cody*, was a more ambitious exploration of the life of Neal Cassady. Allen Ginsberg characterized *Visions of Cody* as an "in-depth version" of *On The Road*, but aside from the fact that they both center on Cassady, in intention, structure, and theme the two works are radically different (Charters, *Kerouac*, p. 148). *On The Road* is a slice of the autobiography of Jack Kerouac, even if Dean Moriarty dominates the book. *Visions of Cody* is a hodgepodge, at first glance resembling a writer's notebook more closely than a finished work. If it is to be taken as a unified work, which Kerouac insisted it was, it is best classified as an attempt to write the autobiography of Neal Cassady. Kerouac does not simply probe at Cassady's soul as an external
observer; he attempts to articulate Cassady’s apprehension of himself.

In contrast to the reportorial tidiness of a kindred study, Gertrude Stein’s *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, *Visions of Cody* is marked by a variety of techniques and angles of vision. Kerouac used the technique he had honed in *On The Road*, the spontaneous sketch from memory, but he also experimented with other approaches to Cassady. His access to Cassady’s letters and fragments of Cassady’s autobiography was helpful. Also, while he was living with Cassady, Kerouac apparently composed with his informal collaboration. Unwilling to rely simply on memory, he pursued a factual, historical reconstruction of Cassady’s life. Kerouac explored the limits of factuality in several tape-recorded discussions with Cassady, his wife, and some friends, the transcripts of which are included in *Visions of Cody*. Disappointed with the failure of the recordings to convey the essence of his subject, Kerouac located the problem in “the fearful fact that the damn thing is turning and you’re forced not to waste electricity or tape” (Berrigan, p. 68). He could not, or would not, comprehend that the Cassady he treasured resided in his mind and not in reality. Still searching for a factual basis for his vision, Kerouac wrote an “imitation of the tape,” but that section was also unsatisfactory.

As one might expect, Cody Pomeray (Cassady) has a good deal in common with Dean Moriarty. Born on the road, riding “a boxcar from New Mexico to L.A. at the age of ten,” maturing into a car thief, cowboy, philosopher, con man, and sexual athlete, Cody is at once a unique hero and “the average man . . . who works for a living and has a wife and kids, and worries about Taxes in March . . .” (pp. 397, 329). In *On The Road* Kerouac attempted to comprehend and define Dean, whereas in *Visions of Cody* he abandons understanding and resorts to Whitmanesque catalogues to expose Cody’s multiplicity: “Everybody got excited this year about Marlon Brando in *Streetcar*
Named Desire; why Cody has a thinner waist and bigger arms, personally knew Abner Yokum in the Ozarks (Marlon Brando is really Al Capp), . . . wears week-old T-shirts covered with baby puke, is like a machine in the night, masturbates five or six times a day when his wife is sick . . . writes with severe and stately dignity under after supper lamps with muscular bended neck . . . can run the 100 in less than 10 flat, pass 70 yards, broad jump 23 feet, standing broad jump 11 feet, throw a 12-pound shot 49 feet, throw a 150-pound tire up on a 6-foot rack with just one arm and his knee . . . was walking champ in the Oklahoma State Joint Reformatory, cuts and switches poetic old dirty boxcars from the Maine hills and Arkansas, holds his footing when a 100-car freight slams along in a jaw-breaking daisy chain roar to him, drives a '32 Pontiac clunker (the Green Hornet) as well as a '50 Chevy station wagon sharp and fast . . .” (p. 299). Cody is, Kerouac declares, “as mysterious as frost,” but Kerouac was certain that the key to Cody’s significance was that he was a Westerner (p. 330).

Although Cody and Dean are both modeled on Cassady, they symbolize opposing ideas about the West. In On The Road, years passed, but Dean, cars, women, roads could go on forever. In contrast, in Visions of Cody time is an ever-present, corrosive force which is destroying the Western values embodied in Cody. He is the last of a dying breed: “I see Cody’s face occupying the West Coast like a big cloud . . . because after him there’s only water and then China . . . he represents all that’s left of America for me” (p. 342).

Visions of Cody was Kerouac’s memorial to the last Westerner. The complexity, power, and ubiquitouslyness of the Western myth is celebrated for the last time. At one point, Kerouac depicts Cody imitating Gary Cooper talking to Tom Mix! The frontier had created a good society, but its passing heralded the rise of a more sinister state. The land of “beautiful piney islands
and Indian love calls and Jeannette MacDonald” was now one of “jailhouses, arrested fathers, distant moanings” (p. 80).

Although the book was not published in its entirety until 1973, selections from *Visions of Cody* appeared in 1960. That edition exhibits Kerouac’s craft, but the complete manuscript is more revealing of his ambition. He stabbed at the boundaries of autobiography, oral history, and the novel, and if he did not succeed, he produced one of the great failures in American prose. *Visions of Cody* was the high-water mark of Kerouac’s experimentalism. Thereafter, he retreated into the essentials of spontaneous prose—sketching from memory—and left the tape recorder for the coming generation. The book also signaled the abatement of his fascination with Neal Cassady. Although they continued to be friends, Kerouac and Cassady were never as close after 1952 as they had been in the five years before. Upon completion of *Visions of Cody*, Kerouac began to mine his memories of Lowell, writing in rapid succession *Doctor Sax* and *Maggie Cassady*.

Embarking upon *Doctor Sax*: *Faust Part Three* (1959), an excursion into his boyhood, Kerouac had no one to talk to, no scenes to inspire him (he wrote the book in Mexico City), and nothing but his memory and prodigious amounts of marijuana to aid him. Kerouac’s persona is Jackie Duluoz, a name he first used in *Visions of Cody* and the predominant one he used in subsequent books. The name is emblematic of his acceptance of the autobiographical mode. Kerouac accepts and glorifies his French-Canadian heritage in contrast to his creation of the Martin family in *The Town and the City*. In *Doctor Sax*, Kerouac dredged up memories of one-man baseball games, parochial school and superstitious old nuns, a spring flood on the Merrimac River, and a fantastic encounter between the Snake of the World and a Shadow-Wizard figure, Doctor Sax. The novel climaxes when Sax takes Jackie to a great cave to witness his attempt to destroy the Snake. Sax fails, but a huge
bird appears to carry off the Snake while Sax announces the moral: “The Universe disposes of its own evil!” (p. 245).

Kerouac’s fascination with the texture of his boyhood resulted in detailed remembrances: “In Blezan’s store twelve guys are massed at the pinball machine, tilting it—some are scanning thru the Shadows and Operator Fives and Masked Detectives and Weird Tales. . . . The Shadow Sax and I are hard against the alley wall between LeNoire’s and Blezan’s, watching, listening, a thousand ululating distractions in the living human night” (p. 207). Kerouac’s nostalgia for the certainties of childhood is evident. He notes that “the toys get less friendly when you grow up,” and Doctor Sax, peering in the bedroom window at one of Jackie’s friends, says: “you’ll never be as happy as you are now in your quiltish innocent book-devouring boyhood immortal night” (pp. 97, 203).

Out of his childhood world and Aztec myth, Kerouac fashioned a parable of the beneficence of the universe and a denial of orginal sin. Jackie learned that “the snake was coiled in the hill not my heart” (p. 17). Coming at a time of despair for his personal life, his career, and his country, Doctor Sax affirmed Kerouac’s belief that he could be an experiencer without being soiled by the world. His next novel, Maggie Cassady, continued his insistence on the innocence of Jackie Duluoz.

A narrative of Jackie’s teenage years, Maggie Cassady (1959) centered on the tension between the male gang and Jackie’s growing interest in girls. Maggie Cassady is embarrassingly romantic. It displays Kerouac’s persistent belief that his life would have been happier if he had married and settled in Lowell after high school. The novel is more conventional and less powerful than any of Kerouac’s other works in this period. Lacking the reverie of Doctor Sax, Maggie Cassady seems little more than a weak attempt to write a salable novel. Whatever the cause, the novel is of interest only as a document.

Sandwiched between the composition of Doctor Sax and
Maggie Cassady was the finest piece of prose that Kerouac wrote, “The Railroad Earth.” It is a celebration of Kerouac’s brief stint as a brakeman on the Southern Pacific Railroad in 1952. Despite such realistic detail as the descriptions of migratory laborers and urban dumps “of crap and rat havens,” Kerouac spills out a paean to a Western Eden in which machine and garden coexist (“The Railroad Earth,” Lonesome Traveler, p. 63). He couples them through a daydream about a voluptuous Mexican girl being laid beneath the grape vines that border the railroad track: “the sweet flesh intermingling, the flowing blood wine dry husk leaf bepiled earth with the hard iron passages going oer, the engine’s saying K RRRR OOO AAAW OOOO . . . out there Carmelity is coming, Jose is making her electricities mix and internun with his and the whole earth charged with juices turns up the organo to the flower, the unfoldment, the stars bend to it, the whole world’s coming as the big engine booms and balls by . . .” (pp. 80, 83).

Having worked for almost a year from July of 1952 to the spring of 1953 on Doctor Sax, “The Railroad Earth,” and Maggie Cassady, Kerouac was exhausted. Temporarily written out and still shuttling around the country, in August of 1953 he met a Negro woman in Greenwich Village, and their two-month liaison provoked his next novel, The Subterraneans (1958). When Kerouac fictionalized the affair, he set it in San Francisco, an appropriate choice because he had translated the experience into a Western. Because Kerouac’s narrator, Leo Perceptied, is acutely conscious of “blood” and race mixing, the violation of racial taboos adds intensity to Leo’s and Mardou Fox’s relationship, but it also insures its temporary nature. Mardou is Negro, but for Kerouac it is most significant that she has a “Cherokee-halfbreed hobo father,” about whom Leo endlessly fantasizes: “lying bellydown on a flatcar with the wind furling back his rags and black hat, his brown sad face facing all that land and desolation. – At other moments I imagined
him instead working as a picker around Indio. . . . I saw the
vision of her father, he's standing straight up, proudly, handsome
in the bleak dim red light of America on a corner, nobody
knows his name, nobody cares—” (pp. 28-29).

Through associating Mardou with her father, Leo does his
best to transform the urban, hip, sophisticated (she is under-
going psychoanalysis) Mardou into a primitive. Leo refers to
her as an Indian and dreams of moving to Mexico to live with
her: “consider a dobe hut say outside Texcoco at five dollars
a month and we go to the market in the early dewy morning
she in her sweet brown feet on sandals padding wifelike Ruth-
like to follow me. . .” (p. 51). Mardou is willing to play this
game for a time, but eventually shuts Leo up: “don't call me
Eve” (p. 124). The inevitable break-up occurs when Mardou
becomes interested in another Bohemian, a friend of Leo's.
Unwilling to share Mardou, Leo tells us in closing the book:
“And I go home having lost her love. And write this book”
(p. 126). Kerouac completed The Subterraneans in three nights
with the aid of benzedrine. The novel was, he wrote to his
eventual publisher, “modelled after Dostoevsky's NOTES FROM
THE UNDERGROUND . . .” (Charters, A Bibliography of
Works by Jack Kerouac, p. 23). With The Subterraneans,
Kerouac closed his most creative period. Never again was he
to equal Visions of Cody, Doctor Sax, “The Railroad Earth,”
or The Subterraneans.

By 1954, convinced that publishers would never again take
a chance on his novels, Kerouac had taken to reading Thoreau
and pondering a more complete retreat from society. However,
the next three years proved to be relaxing and personally ful-
filling because of two changes in his life. For the first time since
he began writing spontaneous prose, he broke the publishing
barrier in 1955 with two short pieces reworked from On The
Road, “Jazz of the Beat Generation” in New World Writing
and “The Mexican Girl” in The Paris Review. Also, in 1955,
Viking Press accepted *On The Road* for publication. The financial rewards were inconsequential, but the boost to Kerouac’s ego was essential.

The second alteration in Kerouac’s life came in 1954, when he began to study Buddhism. Although it never supplanted in Kerouac’s mind what he believed was the absolute truth of Catholicism, Buddhism was a practical guide for living aimed, Kerouac thought, directly at his situation. The first noble truth, “all life is suffering,” encapsulated his past. He viewed the remainder of his existence as an attempt to cope with the third noble truth: “the suppression of suffering can be achieved.” That goal would require a more disciplined life-style. Until he was introduced to Gary Snyder, Kerouac was at a loss as to how to translate his ideas into practice.

In the fall of 1955, Kerouac met Snyder in Berkeley, California. A poet, Zen Buddhist, anthropologist, and native Westerner, Snyder was studying Japanese and Chinese at the University of California to equip himself for a trip to Japan, where he planned to enter a Zen monastery. Kerouac fell as completely under his influence as he had under Cassady’s. With the enthusiasm of a convert, he subscribed to Snyder’s ideas about voluntary poverty, mountain climbing, self-sufficiency, and the need for physical labor. For his part, Snyder had read “Jazz of the Beat Generation” and admired Kerouac’s dogged practice of his craft. That fall they argued about Buddhism, went on a mountain climbing trip, and became intimate friends. Kerouac stood on the sidelines as the San Francisco Poetry Renaissance began with public readings by Snyder, Ginsberg, and other young poets. Then he left for North Carolina to spend Christmas with mémére, Nin, and Nin’s family. Kerouac was more optimistic about the future and in better physical condition than he had been in years. At Nin’s, he wrote, meditated, and, emulating Snyder, made plans to work for the Forest Service the next summer. In the spring, he returned to the Bay
Area, lived with Snyder until Gary left for Japan, and then went to work as a fire-watcher in the Washington Cascades.

In the fall, Kerouac came down from his cabin on Desolation Peak proud of his accomplishment — sixty-three days of solitude, meditation, sobriety, and writing — but hungry for human contact: “give me society . . . enough of rocks and trees and yalloping y-birds! I wanta go where there’s lamps and telephones and rumpled couches with women on them . . .” (Desolation Angels, p. 79). Since Snyder was in Japan, Kerouac slipped back into his habitual wandering. In the winter of 1956-1957 he passed through Mexico City, New York, Tangiers, Pasis, and London. Disgusted with his aimless life, he ended up back in America with mémère, but soon he again felt the pull of the Bay Area. Kerouac talked mémère into moving to Berkeley with him, but after only a few days there she persuaded Jack to take her back home. Forced to choose between his friends and his mother, Kerouac chose mémère. They returned east to await the publication of On The Road.

Kerouac’s writing as well as his personal life during these years centered on his fascination with Buddhism. Three of his works — “Some of the Dharma,” “Buddha Tells Us,” and “Wake Up,” a biography of Buddha — have not been published. The Scripture of the Golden Eternity (1960) is his only published treatise. It contains sixty-six statements of the truths he perceived: “Roaring dreams take place in a perfectly silent mind. Now that we know this, throw the raft away. . . . Everything’s alright, form is emptiness and emptiness is form. . . . Everything’s alright, cats sleep” (n.p.).

Aside from his Buddhist tracts, Kerouac completed two more novels, Visions of Gerard and Tristessa, almost all of a third, Desolation Angels, and a book of poetry, Mexico City Blues (1959). Kerouac scribbled poetry throughout his life but did not consider it as significant as his prose. Mexico City Blues was the only collection published during his lifetime; Scattered
*Poems* (1971) was compiled by Ann Charters. Kerouac compared the making of poetry to playing jazz. Like the musician, the poet must blow sounds without waiting for inspiration and without the possibility of revising the results. Also, as a musician must make his statement within a temporal context, Kerouac limited the length of his poems to one side of a piece of paper. *Mexico City Blues* ranges from a babble of sound to prose-like philosophical statements. The recurrent theme is the need to escape from the misery of life: “I wish I was free / of that slaving meat wheel / and safe in heaven dead” (p. 211). This obsession with death also permeates *Visions of Gerard* and *Tristessa*.

Gerard, Kerouac’s older brother who died at the age of nine, was born with a rheumatic heart and was ill most of his life. *Visions of Gerard* (1963) recounts his life and the anguish of the Duluoz family as they helplessly watch him suffer and die. Combining the memories of mémère with his own recollections and dreams, Kerouac depicts Gerard as a saint. Secure in his faith, Gerard has no fear of death, and he suffers his pain quietly so that the family can sleep at night. Showing compassion for the “little things on earth,” he gently rebukes his cat for killing mice (p. 124). Gerard shocks the nuns at school with his dreams of heaven and of conversations with the Virgin. When he is dying, three nuns gather at his bedside to ask him questions: “my mother sees the nun taking it down on paper—She never saw the paper again—Some secret transmitted from mouth to heart, at the quiet hour, I have no idea where any such paper or record could have ended or could be found today, lest it’s written on the rock in the mountains of gold in the country I cant reach . . .” (pp. 128-29).

*Visions of Gerard* reiterates Kerouac’s horror of being born to die. But overriding this concept, he finds a transcending reality in Gerard’s belief that “we’re all in Heaven—but we don’t know it!” (p. 68). Kerouac’s Buddhism and Catholicism
merge in Gerard, who brings the world his “one truth: All is Well, practice Kindness, Heaven is Nigh” (p. 14).

Unblemished by the sin of revision, Visions of Gerard is more interesting as a document than as art. The pain of remembrance is obvious throughout the book. Describing Gerard on his deathbed, Kerouac breaks the narrative to write: “I’m afraid to say what I really want to say” (p. 129). The fear that made Ti Jean too nervous to sleep after Gerard’s death except in his mother’s bed reverberates throughout the book. Perhaps only in 1956, when he was most confident about his religious convictions and his future, could Kerouac have written the book.

Tristessa (1960) is based on Kerouac’s life in Mexico City in 1955 and 1956 and his love for Tristessa, a Mexican prostitute and morphine addict. Of little consequence as a novel, Tristessa is interesting chiefly because it dramatizes Kerouac’s understanding of Buddhism. “‘La Vida es dolor’ (life is pain), . . .” the narrator tells Tristessa (p. 68). Yet the Mexicans, even in the nightmare of Mexico City’s slums, are able to move beyond the misery of existence: “Everything is so poor in Mexico, people are poor, and yet everything they do is happy and carefree, no matter what is . . .” (p. 37).

By 1957 the literary world was becoming curious about Kerouac and his friends. Kerouac’s publications in 1955 and the Bay Area poetry readings attracted some attention. The next year, Richard Eberhart wrote an article on the poetry readings for the New York Times (“West Coast Rhythms,” September 2, 1956, pp. 6, 18). Also in 1956 Allen Ginsberg published Howl and Other Poems (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1956). The attempt of San Francisco authorities to ban Howl and Other Poems resulted in a trial of national interest in 1957. That year also saw magazines as divergent as The Saturday Review and Life print articles about the San Francisco underground writers. A new journal, Evergreen Review, devoted an entire issue to the “San Francisco Scene” (Vol. 1, No. 2).
Included in that issue was a section of Kerouac’s “The Railroad Earth.” Still, these glimmers of interest gave no hint of what was to come, for with the publication of On The Road, Jack Kerouac found himself not only a best-selling novelist, but also a sociologist-prophet.

In September of 1957 what had once been a one-hundred-twenty-foot, single-spaced paragraph was released as a conventional-looking, heavily edited novel. Its publication was a “historic occasion,” wrote Gilbert Millstein; On The Road was “an authentic work of art” (New York Times, September 5, 1957, p. 27). Many critics agreed with David Dempsey that Kerouac had a “descriptive excitement unmatched since the days of Thomas Wolfe” (“In Pursuit of Kicks,” The New York Times Book Review, September 8, 1957, p. 4), but more emphasis was placed on the lifestyle of Kerouac’s characters. Dempsey confidently announced that “the freaks are interesting although they are hardly part of our lives” (p. 4). Thomas Curley labeled Dean Moriarty a “Major Hoope hipster” (“Everything Moves, But Nothing Is Alive,” Commonweal, September 13, 1957, p. 595). However, many commentators took the position that Kerouac spoke for more than a fringe group. Perhaps he offered a clue to the youth “who twitch around the nation’s jukeboxes and brawl pointlessly in the midnight streets” (“The Gansen Syndrome,” Time, September 16, 1957, p. 120). Kerouac might have the key to elucidating the mumbles of James Dean, the gyrations of Elvis Presley, the mood of those who swelled the juvenile delinquency statistics. And so Kerouac began to be asked: what is the Beat Generation?

Kerouac proved to be a disappointing soothsayer, because he was unintelligible, contradictory, and often drunk during interviews and on talk shows. The Beats, he proclaimed, were “basically a religious generation,” but it “includes anyone from fifteen to fifty-five who digs everything” (Holmes, “The Philosophy of the Beat Generation,” p. 15). On television he was
uncomfortable and apt to clam up completely. This came as no surprise to his friends, but it astounded those who expected a publicity-seeking yea-sayer. Despite Kerouac’s failures as an entertainer, offers for public appearances continued to pour in and publishers squabbled over his manuscripts. As a result, almost everything he had written was in print by the late fifties.

Malcolm Cowley had told Kerouac that Viking Press would accept another novel that was similar to On The Road. In November of 1957 Kerouac typed out The Dharma Bums in ten settings. Like Tristessa, it chronicled Kerouac’s life in 1955 and 1956, but it centered on his friendship with Gary Snyder. Kerouac’s attitude toward The Dharma Bums is evident from the copy he inscribed for mémère: “A third adventure to pay for the house, the cat food, the brandy and the peaceful sleep” (Charters, Bibliography, p. 26). The “potboiler” (Kerouac’s term) was the last novel he finished for four years.

The Dharma Bums (1958) is, like On The Road, a novel of initiation dominated by a heroic figure, in this case Gary Snyder. Japhy Ryder (Snyder) is a combination of Thoreau, Buddha, and Jedediah Smith. A true individualist, “brought up in a log cabin,” he rolls his own cigarettes, dresses in “rough working-man’s clothes,” and rides a bicycle: “his heroes are John Muir and Han Shan and Shih-te and Li Po and John Burroughs and Paul Bunyan and Kropotkin” (pp. 19, 11, 44). Japhy and Ray Smith (Kerouac) meet in San Francisco and become friends through their mutual interest in Buddhism. They attend poetry readings, go mountain climbing, and live together in a Mill Valley cabin before going their separate ways—Japhy to Japan to study Zen and Ray to the Cascades to be a fire-watcher.

Although Japhy respects and learns from Ray, their relationship is essentially one of master to novice. Japhy teaches Ray how to live as a “Zen Lunatic.” This involves a devotion to spiritual contemplation, physical labor, and voluntary poverty. The Zen life also includes mountain climbing, wine drinking
(in which Ray has had some previous training), and “yabyum.” Yabyum appears to Ray to be a simple sexual orgy, but Japhy explains that it draws upon the traditions of Tibetan Buddhism. Ray, who has been practicing celibacy in conformity with his understanding of Buddhism, is set straight: “Smith, I distrust any kind of Buddhism or any kinda philosophy or social system that puts down sex!” (p. 25). Although Japhy can direct Ray to the path, Ray’s final lessons must be learned alone. On Desolation Peak he finds: “The chipmunk ran into the rocks and a butterfly came out. It was as simple as that” (pp. 190-91). After two months of solitude, Ray, like a Bodhisattva, returns to “all that humanity of bars and burlesque shows” to spread his wisdom (p. 191).

Dean Moriarty in On The Road and Cody Pomeray in Visions of Cody were portrayed as unique and inimitable. In contrast, the message of The Dharma Bums is that what Japhy is, what Ray aspires to be, we all may become. Japhy foresees a “rucksack revolution” that will transform America into an anarchistic Eden. In place of the television addicts, the sullen “bluejeanened Elvis Presleys,” and the deer hunters that have destroyed paradise will be “thousands or even millions of young Americans wandering around with rucksacks, going up to mountains to pray, making children laugh and old men glad, making young girls happy and old girls happier, all of ‘em Zen Lunatics who go about writing poems that happen to appear in their heads for no reason and also by being kind and also by strange unexpected acts keep giving visions of eternal freedom to everybody . . . .” (pp. 36, 78).

The Dharma Bums was Kerouac’s last addition to his myth of the West. Beginning with On The Road, he had constructed a new interpretation of Western reality. Of course, his ideas were grounded in other popular theories. First of all, many of Kerouac’s notions evoke Frederick Jackson Turner. Whether Kerouac had read Turner is problematical and of little con-
sequence, since Turner's doctrines were part of national dogma during Kerouac's formative years. Second, along with Wolfe and London, it is also evident that James Fenimore Cooper and Walt Whitman inspired his imagination. Last, Kerouac's dependence upon popular novels, radio programs, and the movies is impossible to overestimate. His work abounds with references to Tom Mix, Zorro, the Northwest Mounted Police, and other folk heroes. What resulted from the amalgamation of all these influences within Kerouac was a new vision of the West.

At root, Kerouac offered a most venerable proposition: the West was, and is, different from the rest of America and the world. Unlike many Western writers, he did not lean on geography to prove his point; rainfall, elevation, and the growing season are of no consequence in his writing. Even the more abstract concept of wilderness was seldom used as a causal factor. The West contained wilderness, but it was not central to the formation of Westernness. Kerouac seldom extolled the natural beauty of the West, and when he did the results were less than satisfactory: "It was like the first morning in the world... with the sun streaming in through the dense sea of leaves, and birds and butterflies jumping around..." (The Dharma Bums, p. 129). His attempts to depict nature were usually marred by an urge to move from particulars toward philosophical abstractions—from "the wick wicky wick of a bird" to "the ever busy gnat of mind that discriminates and vexes differences..." (Desolation Angels, p. 68).

Kerouac's West was a collection of "urban oases" surrounded by space. In that description he was mirroring historical reality as Gerald D. Nash has described it in The American West in the Twentieth Century. Kerouac's people live in cities and, for the most part, merely travel through the rest of the terrain as swiftly as they can. The West is not an ecological condition but a culture, an exclusive realm of thought and behavior.
Everything about the people of the West signifies their uniqueness—their clothes, their smiles, even their graffiti: “in the East they make cracks and corny jokes and obvious references, scatological bits of data and drawings; in the West they just write their names, Red O’Hara, Blufftown Montana, came by here, date, real solemn...” (On The Road, p. 218). But the prime distinction between the West and the rest of the country is that it is a man’s world.

The only people of consequence in Kerouac’s West are male. They constantly struggle against the specter of “petticoat government.” Unlike a host of fictional Westerners, all of Kerouac’s characters have normal sex drives. Women prove to be necessary even if they hassle their men and try to cajole them into settling down. The only nonthreatening females are simple and earthy, such as Christine, “a beautiful young honey-haired girl... who wandered around the house and yard barefooted hanging up wash and baking her own brown bread and cookies...” (The Dharma Bums, p. 127). At another point, Kerouac notes: “she was a good strong girl and could climb hills with great burdens” (p. 168). The ideal woman serves and services without expecting anything in return. She is often explicitly referred to as primitive and she may be a Mexican or Negro. In On The Road Sal and Dean are invited to a Negro’s (Walter’s) house for a late-night beer: “His wife was asleep when we came in. The only light in the apartment was the bulb over her bed. We had to get up on a chair and unscrew the bulb as she lay smiling there. . . . Then we had to plug in the extension over her bed, and she smiled and smiled. She never asked Walter where he’s been, what time it was, nothing . . . . Dawn. It was time to leave and move the extension back to the bedroom. . . . Walter’s wife smiled and smiled. . . . Out on the dawn street Dean said, ‘Now you see, man there’s real woman for you’” (p. 168).

Kerouac’s males are infested with the entire catalogue of
Turnerian traits, but above all they are marked by “restless nervous energy” and “that dominant individualism, working for good and for evil” (Turner, p. 37). Restlessness is endemic in Kerouac’s world, as evidenced by the following exchange between Dean Moriarty and Sal Paradise: “‘Sal, we gotta go and never stop going till we get there.’ ‘Where we going, man?’ ‘I don’t know but we gotta go’” (On The Road, p. 196). The West is congested with drifters. Neal Cassady, who was literally born on the road, is the archetypal Westerner. To be sure, the West could and did provide an area for the sinking of new roots, but few of Kerouac’s men do so; they are “cowboys,” not farmers, and they live on wheels. When Cody is driving he is “calm and relaxed and perfect” (Visions of Cody, p. 71). When Dean “hunched over the wheel and gunned her,” he left “confusion and nonsense behind” (On The Road, p. 111). Of the many moments of brotherly companionship his characters share, almost all take place on the move. The automobile and to a lesser extent the railroad are essential to Kerouac’s West. Unlike most Western writers, he was able to utilize Hart Crane’s advice to “absorb the machine, i.e., acclimatize it” (Hart Crane, “Modern Poetry,” The Complete Poems and Selected Letters and Prose of Hart Crane, New York: Doubleday, 1966, pp. 261-62). Of all of Kerouac’s characters, only Japhy Ryder exhibits an awareness of the tension between the machine and the garden, a tension that throbs in American writing.

Restlessness is only the most pronounced surface manifestation of an all-consuming individualism. Kerouac’s males move, think, and act as they please. In The Subterraneans Leroy spells out their code: “ALWAYS DO WHAT YOU WANT TO DO AIN’T NOTHIN’ I LIKE BETTER THAN A GUY DOIN’ WHAT HE WANTS” (p. 55). Stealing cigarettes or cars, leaving a best friend dying in Mexico, or offering their women to other men, Kerouac’s males loathe anyone who
attempts to circumscribe their freedom. Their behavior strikes others, especially their womenfolk, as inconsiderate, if not criminal, but Kerouac portrays them as obedient to a higher law. Dean and Cody race from city to city, always trying to unlock the secret behind the red brick and neon, the ultimate "IT." In pursuit of "IT," law, morality, and even sanity may be violated. Japhy is considerably less excitable, but he too must defy society as he chases the dharma from the Sierra Nevadas to Japan. The nature of their quest is best explained by a Zen adage: "When you get to the top of the mountain, keep climbing."

Striding above the constraints of society, beyond sin, doubt, and complexity, Kerouac's heroes, who are in a state of grace that precludes any experience from soiling their souls, exhibit an antinomianism that in American literature is usually simply labelled innocence. But Kerouac's men are profoundly subversive of the tradition of Western innocence in one crucial respect—they are opposed to and commit no violence. Kerouac ignored the blood-soaked world of American literature and the notion of the saintly killer who is "regenerated through violence." Guns hardly exist in Kerouac's novels. His characters do not even get into friendly barroom brawls.

Kerouac's males would prefer to live outside society, but they are inexorably entangled within it. Marriage, divorce, speeding tickets, even jails encroach upon their lives, but they continue to search for a permissive, individualistic society, such as they believe existed in the nineteenth-century West. In *Visions of Cody*, that search appears fruitless. Cody is the last unbridled man in an oppressive society: "the holy Coast is done, the holy road is over" (p. 397). Only in Mexico does the spirit of the Old West survive. However, by the mid-fifties, Kerouac had become more optimistic. In *Desolation Angels* and *The Dharma Burns* he envisions a new, anarchistic, Western society to be spawned by the Bay Area Bohemians.
All of Kerouac’s characters celebrate America’s past. Japhy Ryder declares that “frontiersmen . . . were always my real heroes and will always be” (The Dharma Bums, p. 77). Bull Lee, a character based on William Burroughs, “had a sentimental streak about the old days in America, especially 1910, when you could get morphine in a drugstore without prescription and Chinese smoked opium in their evening windows and the country was wild and brawling and free, with abundance and any kind of freedom for everyone” (On The Road, p. 120). Most of Kerouac’s males believe America to be an overregulated, repressive society, although at times a more optimistic note is sounded: “America is free as that wild wind, out there, still free, free as when there was no name to that border to call it Canada,” says Jack Duluoz (Desolation Angels, p. 39). For most of them, however, the freedom of the Old West is preserved only in Mexico. Jack Duluoz realizes that the moment he crosses the border at Nuevo Laredo: “this must be the road the old outlaws rode when they spoke of Old Monterrey, here they’s come lopin on ghost horses to exile . . . ” (Visions of Cody, p. 377). Mexico is a macho world, a “magic land at the end of the road” of wild women and marijuana, “one vast Bohemian camp,” where even the police are friendly (On The Road, pp. 225, 248). As Wayne Gunn, generalizing about the Beat writers, noted: “they easily imagined existing there whatever conditions satisfied their needs” (p. 218). Mexico has, however, a significance for Kerouac beyond its preservation of the liberty of the Old West, for it also has the Indian.

Kerouac believed that the Indians gave Mexico a quality of joy and openness, but most important they symbolized the possibility of an equalitarian multi-racial society. Kerouac realized that the American West was a white man’s country won through killing. Evoking the cost of the conquest, he lamented: “you only have to dig a foot down to find a baby’s hand” (The Subterraneans, p. 30). In contrast, in Mexico he
found the freedom of the Old West without its racial limitations. There a good society was possible. There Leo and Mar-dou could make a life.

While allowing for a measure of individual freedom, the nineteenth-century West and Mexico were far from utopian societies. In both, a variety of constraints might be placed on behavior, but more crucial, in both there was violence. The Western paradise Kerouac projected into the future has none of these deficiencies. This West was to be created via a “rucksack revolution” that would be facilitated by the completion of the passage to India: “think what a great world revolution will take place when East meets West finally . . .” (The Dharma Bums, p. 160). Kerouac envisions an anarchistic community which spreads from the West to the rest of the world in which individuals will have total freedom, a Walden with many huts. In The Dharma Bums this community is sketched in differing ways by its prophet, Japhy Ryder. Often he alludes to oriental lifestyles as a guide for Americans, yet at other points he draws on the Christian tradition: “Yessir, that’s what, a series of monasteries for fellows to go and monastate and meditate in, we can have groups of shacks up in the Sierras or the High Cascades or even Ray says down in Mexico and have big wild gangs of pure holy men getting together to drink and talk and pray, think of the waves of salvation can flow out of nights like that, and finally have women, too, wives, small huts with religious families, like the old days of the Pur- itans” (p. 79). Or, on other occasions, Japhy looks to the Indians for guidance: “in our future life we can have a fine free-wheeling tribe in these California hills, get girls and have dozens of radiant enlightened brats, live like Indians in hogans and eat berries and buds” (p. 158).

In essence, Jack Kerouac dreamed two dreams of the West—it was to be a territory of unfettered individualism, but it was also to be a good society. John Cawelti, labeling these
two notions “Las Vegas” and “God’s Country,” judges them to be “in fundamental conflict with each other” (p. 275). Kerouac, working from a more exalted view of man, brought them together in an anarchistic or antinomian community. The potency of Kerouac’s myth of the West rests upon his willingness to imagine a moral community in which human nature would be given free rein. However fanciful that idea might be, it had a powerful effect on American thought and practice. Thousands went West in the sixties to act out Kerouac’s vision.

In 1957 Jack Kerouac was healthy, vibrant, and creative. Three years later he was a sick, broken man. Although there has been disagreement about the forces that destroyed him, the most conventional answer has been “success.” There is little question that several aspects of the best-seller status of On The Road and the rapid publication of most of his manuscripts did create problems for Kerouac. His desire for money led him to do television and radio shows, appearances at colleges, and poetry and jazz night club acts. All these activities conflicted with his personality and talents. Never comfortable among strangers, Kerouac was apt to arrive drunk and to act foolishly. Also, he edited an anthology on the Beat Generation writers and wrote articles for magazines such as Holiday, perhaps not realizing the toll they took on his energy.

More destructive, Kerouac engaged in other activities, not for money but for praise and flattery. He allowed himself to be winked and dined by people he despised. Kerouac may not have known how to avoid such situations. He had always been open to experience, and that left him defenseless against celebrity hunters and insipid interviewers. When he was able to socialize with his old friends, things were not the same, for they too were changed by his success. And Kerouac despised the self-anointed “beatniks” who had joined his circle of friends as if they constituted a bizarre fraternity.
Perhaps the worst result of the favorable reception of On The Road was that Kerouac came to believe that the money and attention were legitimate. When the praise became mockery and the reviewers turned in lockstep against him, Kerouac was at first dumbfounded and then embittered. Norman Podhoretz led the assault, claiming that Kerouac wanted to "replace civilization by the street gang" ("Where Is the Beat Generation Going?" Esquire, December 1958, p. 316). In another article he declared that there was a "suppressed cry" in Kerouac's novels: "Kill the intellectuals who can talk coherently, kill the people who can sit still for five minutes at a time, kill those incomprehensible characters who are capable of getting seriously involved with a woman, a job, a cause" ("The Know-Nothing Bohemians," p. 318). After Podhoretz cleared the path, others followed. Dan Pinck wrote an article in which his central thesis was that he doubted whether Kerouac possessed intelligence ("Digging the San Franciscans," The New Republic, March 3, 1958, p. 20). The Subterraneans, Donald Malcolm noted, was "the sort of material that other young men throw away on freshmen confidences . . ." ("Child's Play," The New Yorker, April 5, 1958, p. 121). The Dharma Bums, wrote Anthony West, read like "annotations on the margins of a Rand McNally road atlas" ("Young Man Beyond Anger," The New Yorker, November 1, 1958, p. 163). Barnaby Conrad criticized Doctor Sax on the grounds that "stringing dirty words together does not constitute courageous writing . . ." ("Barefoot Boy with Dreams of Zen," The Saturday Review, May 2, 1959, p. 24). Curiously, whatever the merits of Conrad's critical position, Doctor Sax contains no string of obscenities. By 1959 the reviews appeared to be mass produced without any acquaintance with the book under consideration. In 1960, when John Ciardi wrote an "Epitaph for the Dead Beats," he contemptuously dismissed Kerouac: "Whether or not Jack Kerouac has traces of a talent, he remains basically
a high school athlete who went from Lowell, Massachusetts, to Skid Row, losing his eraser en route” (p. 13).

Another factor in Kerouac’s decline was his growing ambivalence about the consequences of publishing autobiographical books. His exposure of his friend’s lives strained their relationships. Kerouac was especially concerned about the reaction of Neal Cassady to On The Road. When advance copies of it reached Kerouac in Berkeley and Cassady dropped by for a visit, Kerouac wrote that he was “caught red handed” (Desolation Angels, p. 368). Cassady left after thumbing through the novel, and “he for the first time in our lives failed to look me a goodbye in the eye but looked away shifty-like—I couldn’t understand it and still don’t—I knew something was bound to be wrong and it turned out very wrong . . .” (Desolation Angels, pp. 369-70). That was Kerouac’s remembrance of the event in the early sixties, and it accurately conveys his sense of guilt. When Cassady was arrested and imprisoned for possession of marijuana in 1958, Kerouac believed that the furor surrounding On The Road was the cause, and he was worried about being the next target of the police. Clearly, Kerouac discovered that there were unanticipated consequences in publishing autobiography. To what extent that inhibited his writing is unclear.

Certainly, success created numerous problems for Kerouac, but other factors that pre-dated the publication of On The Road were also instrumental in his destruction. Since 1954 the quality of his writing had been declining. His studies in Buddhism made Kerouac more interested in becoming a saint than in being a writer. Also, Kerouac’s drinking had been excessive ever since he became an adult, and by the mid-fifties, it was less and less controllable. Partially because of his drinking, mémère was exerting more influence over his life. She managed the money and tried to monitor his social life. Ginsberg, for example, was not welcome at the Kerouacs’ home, and
mémère almost always disapproved of Jack’s girlfriends. She forbade Kerouac to have drugs in the house after Cassady’s arrest; that left alcohol.

In addition, Kerouac’s decision to abandon the West and his nomadic lifestyle must be given considerable weight in any assessment of his subsequent troubles. For ten years the West had fueled his personal life and his writing. The delicate balance he maintained in his relationship with mémère was dependent upon his Western safety valve. Many of the problems caused by his success would have been lessened by Kerouac’s living in Berkeley or San Francisco. He would have been somewhat isolated from the media and its need to create news. Also, his friends might have been able to serve as a buffer between Kerouac and the world. It would be foolish to suggest that residence in the West would have been a panacea, but Kerouac might have been better able to cope with the strains of success.

By 1960 Kerouac’s life was a shambles. Verging on alcoholism, unable to live with or without mémère, nauseated by his public image as the “King of the Beatniks,” Kerouac felt that he had “hit the end of the trail” (Big Sur, pp. 1, 2). Lonesome Traveler (1960), a collection of eight short sketches written during the fifties, documents the alteration in his temper. Several of the pieces written during the early fifties, such as “The Railroad Earth,” celebrate his mythical West. “Mexico Fellaheen” depicts a trip to Mexico, a “Pure Land” of “timeless gayety” and innocence symbolized by a village toilet: “when I wanted to go to the john I was directed to an ancient stone seat which overlorded the entire village like some king’s throne and there I had to sit in full sight of everybody, it was completely in the open—mothers passing by smiled politely, children stared with fingers in mouth, young girls hummed at their work” (“Mexico Fellaheen,” Lonesome Traveler, pp. 22, 28-29). The selections from the late fifties convey a different message. In “The Vanishing American Hobo,” Kerouac provides a pre-
view of the theme of *Big Sur*. The West is no longer a free land; it is overrun with “five-thousand-dollar police cars with the two-way Dick Tracy radios . . .” (*The Vanishing American Hobo,* *Lonesome Traveler*, p. 181). Kerouac declares that he had to give up hoboing because anyone on foot is suspect, even in the wilderness. America has rejected its heritage of “foot-walking freedom going back to the days of Jim Bridger and Johnny Appleseed . . .” (p. 173). Kerouac’s answer to this loss is far from the “rucksack revolution” of *The Dharma Bums*: “I have no ax to grind: I’m simply going to another world” (p. 182).

Despite the sentiments of “The Vanishing American Hobo,” Kerouac had not completely given up on the West. In 1960, looking for a sanctuary in which to work, to moderate his drinking, and to get away from people, he looked West. Lawrence Ferlinghetti offered him the use of his cabin at Bixby Canyon on the Pacific Ocean. There, Kerouac hoped to revitalize himself while correcting the galleys of *Book of Dreams* (1960), a selection of notes on his dreams that Ferlinghetti’s *City Lights Books* was publishing. *Book of Dreams* provides some clue to Kerouac’s interior mood, although the sections are not dated and certainly cannot be used in any clinical fashion. Most of what Kerouac jotted down are nightmares of war, political uprisings, sexual frustration, and death. Though few are in any way pleasant, the most joyful is about “the Texas, the St. Joe and the Independence of the Old Real America” (p. 35).

At Bixby Canyon, Kerouac was unable to cope with the solitude. After several days he hitchhiked back into San Francisco, where he indulged in a series of drunken binges with old friends, including Neal Cassady, and in a brief affair with Cassady’s current mistress. The trip ended in a temporary mental breakdown, a combination of paranoia and delirium
tremens. Kerouac returned east to mémère. The following year he wrote *Big Sur*, the novel that chronicles these events.

*Big Sur* (1962), to borrow R. W. B. Lewis's description of Hawthorne's novels, portrays "the Emersonian figure, the man of hope, who by some frightful mischance has stumbled into the time-burdened world of Jonathan Edwards" (p. 113). Jack Duluoaz begins his trip West believing that his problems are caused by maturity, civilization, involvement with others, and fame. Through solitude, nature, and childishness he can regain his joy and health. He finds the West strikingly different from his memory of it, for now it is "one long row of houses" (p. 51). When he attempts to hitchhike, another change becomes evident—he sees nothing but station wagons of tourists dominated by "wifey, the boss of America" (p. 36). When Jack gets beyond civilization to Big Sur, he plays in the creek and spouts Emerson, but he discovers that even nature seems to have become sinister. Death confronts Duluoaz at every turn at Big Sur and in San Francisco. A friend is dying of tuberculosis. Duluoaz's mother writes to tell him that his cat died. Dead animals—otters, mice, goldfish—are ubiquitous reminders of Duluoaz's own mortality. The West is no haven from the world. Duluoaz considers moving on to Mexico with Billie, a woman he takes up with in San Francisco, but he gives up that notion. The problems he wishes to flee are within; there is no earthly paradise.

Incapacitated by his inability to believe in the Western myth, Jack Duluoaz describes himself as a "useless pioneer . . . the idiot in the wagon train" (p. 162). He believes that he is going insane, but his crisis is resolved through a vision of the Cross, to which he responds by praying, "I'm with you, Jesus, for always, thank you" (p. 169). Christianity, not the West, would sustain Kerouac for the remainder of his life.

Most critics have classified *Big Sur* as a study of alcoholism. However, the real problem, Duluoaz insists, is not his drinking
but “those pigeons.” In a conversation with Dave Wain, his principal drinking companion, Duluz makes a cryptic reference to college students “scrubbed with hopeless perfection of pioneer puritan hope that leaves nothing but dead pigeons to look at” (p. 140). Just as they did for James Fenimore Cooper in The Pioneers, dead pigeons serve Kerouac as a reminder of the flawed nature of man and the impossibility of a Western Eden. After Big Sur Kerouac turned away from Western themes. His West was ultimately like Boone Caudill’s West in A. B. Guthrie’s The Big Sky (1947): “all sp’iled.” In the nineteenth century, “go West” was a synonym for “die.” For Kerouac, going West had been an affirmation of human possibility. When he renounced his vision of the West, he committed intellectual suicide.

Big Sur was Kerouac’s last major work. Between 1962 and his death in 1969, he managed to complete three books—Satori in Paris (1965), Vanity of Duluz (1967), and Pic (1971). In all of them the lessening of his creative power was evident, although his failures were somewhat concealed by the publication of Visions of Gerard (1963) and Desolation Angels (1965). The one-two punch of Jack and Ti Jean no longer vitalized his work. Kerouac rejected the innocence, openness, and experiential energy of Jack. The increasingly reactionary voice of Ti Jean, obsessed with ethnic identity, Catholicism, and hatred of the present became dominant.

Of Kerouac’s publications in the sixties, Desolation Angels commanded the most critical attention. Detailing Kerouac’s life from his fire-watching job through his unsuccessful attempt to transplant mémère to Berkeley, it presents a useful overview of Bay Area Bohemianism complete with sketches of Cassady, Ginsberg, Philip Whalen, Robert Duncan, and Gregory Corso, among other personalities. Significantly, most of the book was written in 1956, with a concluding section added in 1961. Like
Lonesome Traveler, Desolation Angels reflects both Kerouac's myth and his rejection of it.

The section written in 1956 exudes the optimistic tone of The Dharma Bums. Early in the novel, Jack Duluoz exults: "Yeah, the career of Jack the Great Walking Saint is only begun . . ." (p. 112). Duluoz is confident that he has found the keys to happiness in his combination of Buddhism and Catholicism and his lifestyle of writing, praying, and wandering. A friend taunts him: "Who wants to ride freight trains! . . . I don't dig all this crap where you ride freight trains and have to exchange butts with bums—Why do you go to all that, Duluoz?" Duluoz sloughs him off: "But this is a first-class freight train" (p. 192). He is exhilarated about his life and the revolution in sensibility he sees in San Francisco, where "everything is going to the beat," and prophesies the possibility of a Western utopia: "everybody hand in hand in paradise and no bullshit" (pp. 138, 184).

In contrast, the portion of Desolation Angels written in 1961 is infused with the bafflement Kerouac felt about his crumbling life. By the end Duluoz can only lament "the dead Indians, the dead pioneers, the dead Fords and Pontiacs, the dead Mississippi" (p. 347). For reasons unclear to himself, Duluoz turns "from a youthful brave sense of adventure to a complete nausea concerning experience in the world at large . . ." (p. 309). He rejects his old life and friends. Duluoz's mother, who says, "California is sinister," sees no Eden, only fog and screwball Buddhists who are corrupting her son (p. 359).

Dan Wakefield, reviewing Desolation Angels, wrote: "If the Pulitzer Prize in fiction were given for the book that is most representative of American life, I would nominate Desolation Angels" (p. 72). But it could more easily be argued that Desolation Angels was the most unrepresentative novel of the decade. Jack Duluoz left the West to return to mémère and
traditional values, whereas in 1965 a social upheaval partially based on Kerouac's novels had already begun.

_Satori in Paris_ relates Kerouac's ten-day trip to Paris in 1965. In search of genealogical information about his ancestors and, evidently, something to write about, Kerouac boozed his way from Paris to Brittany to London and back to Florida. Kerouac's depressing insistence on furnishing a drink-by-drink account of the trip underscored his need to live a life worth recounting. The book cannot be salvaged by his comic posing or his claim that somewhere along the way he experienced satori. The trip was more notable than the book. It was his last major separation from _mémère_.

In the fall of 1966 _mémère_ was paralyzed by a stroke. Shortly afterward, Kerouac married Stella Sampas, an old Lowell friend, and moved, with _mémère_, back to Lowell. There he began a retelling of his youth, _Vanity of Duluz: An Adventurous Education, 1935-46_. It was shaped as an extended conversation with Stella: "All right, wifey, maybe I'm a big pain in the you-know-what but after I've given you a recitation of the troubles I had to go through to make good in America between 1935 and more or less now, 1967 . . . you'll understand that my particular form of anguish came from being too sensitive to all the lumpheads I had to deal with . . ." (p. 7). Kerouac does not deliver on his promise of a complete autobiography, because the novel ends with the death of Duluz's father and excludes almost everything except his football career and his life during World War II. Negligible as a novel, _Vanity of Duluz_ does offer some insights into Kerouac's understanding of his youth. He portrays himself as an uncomplicated, football-playing, patriotic Canuck, and he pays little attention to the development of his literary sensibility. Perhaps the ultimate importance of _Vanity of Duluz_ is its exposure of Kerouac's hatred of America in the sixties. In the opening pages he declares: "people have changed so much, not only in the past
five years, for God's sake, or past ten years as McLuhan says, but in the past thirty years to such an extent that I dont recognize them as people any more or recognize myself as a real member of something called the human race. . . . everybody's begun to lie and because they lie they assume that I lie too. . . . lying has become so prevalent in the world today (thanks to Marxian Dialectical propaganda and Comintern techniques among other causes) . . . you have the right to lie if you're on the Bullshivitsky side . . .” (pp. 7, 12).

Pic, Kerouac's last novel, was begun in 1951 but forgotten in his stampede toward spontaneity. He returned to it after completing Vanity of Duluoz. Noteworthy because it is not autobiographical and because of Kerouac's use of Negro dialect, Pic is the tale of a ten-year-old Negro boy, Pictorial Review Jackson. In 1948, Pic, a North Carolina orphan, is “adopted” by his older brother Slim and taken north to freedom to live with Slim and his wife. When Slim cannot find work in New York, he decides that the promised land is California. With Slim singing the praises of California, they hit the trail West: “All that sun, and all that land, and all that fruit, and cheap wine, and crazy people . . . you can always live some way if you even just eat the grapes that fall off the wine trucks . . .” (pp. 83-84). The West in Pic is nothing more than an ignorant Negro's delusion of abundance.

Hoping that the warmth would ease mémère's misery, Kerouac, Stella, and mémère moved to St. Petersburg, Florida, in 1968. In Lowell, Kerouac's social life had revolved around the Sampas family, especially Nick Sampas' tavern. In St. Petersburg he felt isolated. Various physical ailments troubled him, but he suffered the most from alcoholism. With an eye on his bank account, Kerouac tried to write a book about his life during the sixties. He did complete an exposition of his conservative political views for newspaper syndication before he died of abdominal hemorrhaging on October 21, 1969.
By the close of his life, Kerouac had come to see himself primarily as an autobiographer. Accepting the verdict of his critics, Kerouac believed that he would escape obscurity only because of his role as the chronicler of the Beat Generation. Kerouac told Ted Berrigan that “the only thing I’ve got to offer [is] the true story of what I saw and how I saw it” (p. 67). That judgment is inaccurate. He left not simply a multi-volume autobiography, but several pieces of prose that should be read and reckoned with by students of American literature. Above all, Kerouac should be remembered as a seminal and major contributor to a contemporary myth of the West. Conjuring up a free territory in which gentle, spiritual people live in harmony, this latest version of the Isle of Fair Women had an incalculable influence on Americans in the 1950’s and 1960’s. For dreamers of a Western paradise, Jack Kerouac’s books proved as indispensable (and often as inaccurate) as the guidebooks of the 1830’s and 1840’s had been for the original settlers. Finally, after a veritable epidemic of “Donner parties,” the myth was discredited, although some survivors continue to intone its dogmas.
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