Ken Kesey

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Ken Kesey, one of the most talented young American novelists during the 1960's, reflects in his work and life-style some of the major literary and social concerns of his day and of American literature in general. Born in La Junta, Colorado, in 1935, Kesey moved with his parents to Oregon (where he now lives) in 1944. He married in 1956, took his B.S. at the University of Oregon in 1957, and studied writing at Stanford from 1958 to 1959. His two novels, One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest and Sometimes a Great Notion, were published in 1962 and 1964 respectively.

Kesey was arrested in 1965 and 1966 for possession of marijuana and fled to Mexico to avoid prosecution. When he returned to the United States some months later, he was apprehended and sentenced to six months in jail. After Great Notion he did little writing until 1973, saying cryptically that he would “rather be a lightning rod than a seismograph” (Tom Wolfe, The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test, p. 8). He helped edit The Last Supplement to the Whole Earth Catalog (1971) and plans to publish a new journal called Spit in the Ocean. His third and most recent book is Kesey's Garage Sale (1973).

A Westerner, Kesey is heir to a vast tradition of cowboy and frontier-hero literature which makes itself felt in his fictitious characters and in his thematic interests: he is preoccupied with investigating the possibility (if not the necessity) of heroism in the midst of an apocalyptic state of human affairs in this
country. At first he is rather optimistic that the individual can effect his own liberation from a viciously conformist society. In *Cuckoo's Nest* Kesey presents a world of moral extremes in which the Enemy and the Hero are clearly distinguishable; he shows us a society which, though it has not yet succeeded in stifling every individual, nevertheless controls most aspects of human behavior. In that world heroism, though very difficult, is both necessary and possible and can lead to the salvation of society.

Kesey soon becomes less confident that society can be changed. Instead, only individual liberation is even remotely possible. Perceiving the United States to be in an advanced state of decay and the Enemy to be a good deal more obscure than he had first thought, Kesey seems in *Great Notion* to abandon direct action in conventional terms. His own life-style comes to embrace, not to say invade, a new state of being, which for him remains unspoiled. In this virgin territory, which seems to be the last frontier (for outer space is already becoming a junk pile), the individual can establish his own rules and his own identity, free from external pressure. Here one can achieve a heroism, a freedom of action, that has become increasingly elusive in the world as most of us know it. But *Garage Sale* implies that Kesey is abandoning this utopian dream of a new world.

As Henry Nash Smith has pointed out in *Virgin Land*, these themes are central to American fiction. They are the stuff of Adamism, as David Noble asserts in his controversial book *The Eternal Adam and the New World Garden*. Kesey's first book shows us that the American dream is valid: one can be what he wants to be and can do what he wants to do. *Sometimes a Great Notion*, on the other hand, seems to adhere to that tradition in American literature which repudiates the American dream as being naive and ruinous to its believers. It suggests that strong direct action is futile if not impossible.

Like many recent writers, Kesey perceives the contemporary
situation in almost apocalyptic terms. Civilization is at a crisis—the power of the Enemy or, as a less secular time would say, Satan, is at its greatest; the forces of goodness are sorely tested. For many writers the future of America and of civilization in general is bleak. Instead of leading to the second coming of Christ, Armageddon will result in the end of things without later redemption. But in his first book, Kesey implies a view of the crisis which bears many striking resemblances to eighteenth- and nineteenth-century American “millenarian” and “millennialist” attitudes, as they are described by Ernest Tuvesson in Redeemer Nation (pp. 33-34). Kesey seems to envision a post-cataclysmic utopia of some kind. He hints in Cuckoo’s Nest, for instance, that the collapse of civilization will be followed by the establishment of a new kingdom founded by the new Christ, McMurphy.

In Cuckoo’s Nest the insidious system which represses the individual is rather simplistically characterized by what Charles Reich calls Consciousness II, the mentality of the Corporate State. It desires the subservience of the individual to our industrial economy, thereby transforming society into a part of the machine it adores, if not into the machine itself. The novel is set in an insane asylum (the cuckoo’s nest), which is at the same time a microcosm of the nation. The dominating figure in the asylum is Miss Ratched, the Big Nurse, whose name (Ratched—rachet) reflects her role in American society as a mechanic of the psychic machine.

The machine metaphor is proposed by Chief Broom—Bromden—a half-Columbian Indian who seeks refuge in madness from what he calls the “Combine,” a term he coins to characterize organized society. Like the agricultural combine, society cuts down those who flourish like the grain of the earth, and the social casualties are dumped into asylums. All of the patients in Cuckoo’s Nest are men. Most of them have delivered themselves into the hands of the hospital for rehabilitation so that they
may re-enter society; others, like Bromden, have come to escape society. To rehabilitate themselves they must abandon their desires, their spontaneity, and their idiosyncrasies; they must surrender, in short, all that separates them from the crowd.

The smoothly functioning machine is suddenly and dramatically confronted by Randle Patrick McMurphy, a drifter and ruffian, a man of profound “anti-social” behavior. He has entered the ward in the belief that he can escape the drudgery of a work farm, where he has been confined for battery. He looks for an easy way to serve out his sentence while making a profit by swindling the patients. Predictably, his anarchistic and egotistical attitude leads to a contest with Miss Ratched.

For Miss Ratched the struggle is waged to maintain control and to break the rebellious spirit of a misfit; for McMurphy it is undertaken at first simply to rattle Miss Ratched and later to preserve not so much his own independence as the basic concept of independence. Miss Ratched gradually provokes McMurphy into violence, thereby giving her an excuse to send him first to electrotherapy and then to the surgeon’s table for a lobotomy. When McMurphy is returned to the ward as a vegetable, Chief Broom, having learned to emulate his heroic behavior, in mercy kills what remains of McMurphy and flees with the other patients to spread the word of the new gospel in the corrupt land.

This thumbnail sketch of the novel unfortunately reduces the book to another sentimental story of the individual against the mass. But Kesey has much more in mind. He defines the good life and shows us that it is possible to lead it in spite of the power of the corrupt society into which we are born. The nature of this society is revealed to us through Bromden, who achieves through his malady not only escape from reality but, like madmen in many cultures, insight into it. Though preventing action, his madness facilitates vision, making his description of the Combine forceful and clear. According to Bromden—
and Kesey—the asylum is “a factory for the Combine. It’s for fixing up mistakes made in the neighborhoods and in the schools and in the churches, the hospital is” (One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest, Viking Compass edition, p. 38). Perhaps the crucial defect of this society is the absence of spontaneous, impulsive, natural action.

Since American men have resigned their proper roles, it is fitting that the ward is under the control of a woman who has all the men—staff as well as patients—totally under her authority, or, as McMurphy suggests, under the threat of castration: “that nurse ain’t some kinda monster chicken, buddy, what she is is a ball-cutter. I’ve seen a thousand of ’em, old and young, men and women. Seen ’em all over the country and in the homes—people who try to make you weak so they can get you to toe the line, to follow their rules, to live like they want you to” (p. 58). Kesey’s portrayal of Big Nurse recalls Leslie Fiedler’s description of the statue of Hannah Duston holding a hatchet (The Return of the Vanishing American, p. 91). Hannah Duston was the eighteenth-century American heroine who scalped several Indians, those “savages” who, along with the rest of American men, have finally surrendered their masculinity or had it taken from them.

Miss Ratched, who considers all misfits insane, is an imposing middle-aged woman who encases her femininity, symbolized by her enormous breasts, in her white mummy-like uniform. In describing McMurphy, she reveals her attitude toward all men: “He is simply a man and no more, and is subject to all the fears and all the cowardice and all the timidity that any other man is subject to” (p. 149). When she enters the ward, she creates a gust of cold air, suggestive of both her frigidity and her ruthlessness. Her white uniform suggests her sterility. She has repressed herself so completely that even in the grip of emotion she appears to Bromden to be a machine: “She looks around her with a swivel of her huge head . . . she really lets
herself go and her painted smile twists, stretches to an open snarl, and she blows up bigger and bigger, big as a tractor, so big I can smell the machinery inside the way you smell a motor pulling too big a load” (p. 5).

Part of her campaign to repair the defective patients consists of depriving them of their self-respect as both men and adults, and of making certain that they never regain it. By extension, the rulers of society have the same motives. Discovering Billy Bibbit, one of the patients, with a prostitute whom McMurphy had smuggled into the ward, Big Nurse reproaches him as if he were a toddler: “Oh, Billy Billy Billy—I’m so ashamed for you” (p. 300). Knowing the men’s susceptibility to motherly control, Big Nurse entreats her “poor boy, poor little boy” (p. 302) to think of his mother, a good friend of hers and a member of the hospital staff: “What worries me, Billy, . . . is how your poor mother is going to take this. . . . She’s very sensitive. Especially concerning her son. She always spoke so proudly of you” (p. 301). In remorse and fear, Billy commits suicide.

Billy Bibbit, the thirty-year-old stammerer who has been unable to achieve any satisfying relationship with women, is typical of the patients on the ward. As McMurphy realizes, many of their problems could be at least partially cured by sexual liberation. But the Combine has prescribed rules for love and sexual behavior that have prevented the men from attaining happiness. Billy’s mother had thwarted her son’s affair with his girlfriend because the girl presumably was socially inferior to him. Harding’s homosexuality has been mocked by his wife until this intelligent and sensitive man has become overwhelmed by humiliation and self-consciousness. He represses even his manual gestures lest they be interpreted as signs of his “peculiarity.” The other patients suffer at the hands of the Combine in different ways, but all, deprived of work, peace, or companionship, are unable to function nor-
mally. They have all ended up in the scrap-heaps for repair or death.

Bromden, the "vanishing American," is a schizophrenic who has pretended to be a deaf-mute for so long that he has denied himself active response to the world about him. Being a deaf-mute signifies Bromden's acceptance of his isolation from the rest of the world. The Combine has so long treated him as if he did not exist that he has come almost to believe that he is nobody. When Bromden was a child, for example, the federal government, the political arm of the Combine, sent representatives to his tribe in Oregon to obtain the Indians' land from their chief, Bromden's father. Aroused by the white men's conventional denigration of Indian life, Bromden attempts to enlighten them, but discovers "that they don't look like they'd heard me talk at all" (p. 201). The leader of this delegation, a woman, knows that the way to subvert the Chief's desire to stay on his land is to deal with his white wife. This method is designed to demean him by demonstrating that he has no power in a world run by the white woman. Mrs. Bromden refused to leave town to live with her husband amongst the Indians; she refused likewise to take his name, finding it "inconvenient" to be called Mrs. Tee Ah Millatoona. As a result, Chief Tee Ah Millatoona seemed to his son to shrink in stature while Mrs. Bromden grew: "He was real big when I was a kid. My mother got twice his size" (p. 207). Thus, Mrs. Bromden bears some resemblance to Big Nurse. Bromden feels that he has experienced the same physical deterioration after a lifetime of not-so-benign neglect and indifference, if not hostility.

Into this stronghold of the bad guys swaggers McMurphy. A free-wheeling loner and con-man, McMurphy has avoided the clutches of the Combine by virtue of his perpetual motion, suggested by the initials of his name, RPM. McMurphy resembles in his clothes and demeanor a cross between a Hell's Angel and the cowboy-gunfighter come to do battle on behalf
of the little man against the cattle barons: "I hear him coming down the hall," says Bromden, "and he sounds big in the way he walks... he's got iron on his heels and he rings it on the floor like horseshoes. He shows up in the door and stops and hitches his thumbs in his pockets, boots wide apart, and stands there with the guys looking at him" (p. 10). Bearing the scars of a lifetime of brawling as if they were battle decorations, the huge McMurphy exudes self-confidence and good humor: "'My name is McMurphy, buddies, R. P. McMurphy, and I'm a gambling fool.' He winks and sings a little piece of a song: '... and whenever I meet with a deck of cards I lays... my money... down,' and he laughs again" (p. 11).

His words sound like the bragging of the archetypal mountain man or frontier hero. Somewhat later, McMurphy and Harding engage in a round of lying and bragging about who is the crazier, a mock contest which resembles the way in which pioneers exaggerated the terrors of frontier life to make them unreal, comical, and bearable.

At least one other reader has noticed that there are several similarities between Cuckoo's Nest and the Southwestern tradition of American humor. One of the main traits of the tall tale in the Southwest that Cuckoo's Nest employs is the tradition of oral narration which reproduces dialect. Moreover, the narrators in both the Southwestern tradition and the Cuckoo's Nest rely heavily upon exaggeration. The tall tale was also replete with stereotyped characters like the gambler represented by McMurphy in Cuckoo's Nest. Characters in the tall tale identified themselves with animals, as McMurphy is associated with the whale, the goose, and the dog (cf. Ronald Billingsley, "The Novels of Ken Kesey," unpub. diss., 1971, and Constance Rourke, American Humor). When the show-down between McMurphy and Miss Ratched at last arrives, McMurphy is described as the TV cowboy confronting the villain on Main Street at noon: he "hitch[ed] up his black shorts like they were
horsehide chaps, and push[cd] back his cap with one finger like it was a ten-gallon Stetson, slow, mechanical gestures—and when he walked across the floor you could hear the iron in his bare heels ring sparks out of the tile” (p. 305).

McMurphy does not at first possess a sense of responsibility toward anyone but himself. With the revitalized Bromden as his Tonto, he is ultimately transformed into a combination of the heroic Lone Ranger and Christ as the redeemer and victim. Initially, however, he approaches the contest casually, underestimating Big Nurse and his own status as a patient. While the other patients are for the most part voluntarily committed, McMurphy has been sent to the hospital to be rehabilitated; that is, the other men can leave when they wish, but McMurphy must await Big Nurse’s certifying that he has been cured. When he makes this discovery, the con-man feels conned. He then decides to conform in order to save himself. But the men will not let him nor will he let himself. Though aroused from their lethargy, the patients begin to relapse into their former weakness.

McMurphy’s sense of fair play and his compassion for his friends prevent him from remaining the model inmate for long. As Terence Martin points out, the death of Cheswick, who because of McMurphy has at least begun to assert his manhood, shocks the self-serving McMurphy into an awareness of the difference between being sentenced and being committed. While the other patients have voluntarily committed themselves to the hospital, McMurphy commits himself to others (“One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest and the High Cost of Living,” pp. 50-51; cf. also Raymond M. Olderman, Beyond the Waste Land, pp. 44ff.). Soon he reasserts himself, restoring the men’s happiness and dispelling forever the fog of schizophrenia in which Bromden has been forced to hide. McMurphy intends to play the game to the end, knowing, subconsciously at least, that to play the game to the end means his death.
McMurphy has assumed the other men's burdens. He discovers, perhaps, that he loves these fellow victims. He is no longer entirely his own man, but a representative of a value system. He is the standard-bearer of humanity against the System. He is Christ, or, perhaps more accurately, Pound's Goodly Fere—not only a cowboy Christ but a Teutonic one as well. Like Christ raising Lazarus, McMurphy miraculously returns Bromden to the world of the living, restoring Bromden's self-esteem by titillating him with stories about women and causing him to have an erection. The fishing trip itself has numerous religious overtones. McMurphy, like a fisher of men, leads twelve others on the trip of restoration. On the sea, the ultimate source of life, the men rediscover living. As Bromden puts it, “. . . I was getting so's I could see some good in the life around me. McMurphy was teaching me” (p. 243).

The Christian imagery becomes more pronounced toward the end of the novel. When McMurphy and Bromden are provoked into a fight with the orderlies, they are subdued and taken to the Disturbed Ward for shock treatment. An old patient remarks like Pilate, “I wash my hands of the whole deal” (p. 264). Though he is in no way personally responsible for the fate of the two heroes, he serves to alert the reader to the nature of the punishment the hospital is about to mete out under the guise of rehabilitation. Moreover, his words suggest the complicity of the other patients; by their own inability to be responsible for themselves, they force McMurphy to act as he does. Bromden says it was the patients' “need” that forced McMurphy to act. Furthermore, the old patient's washing his hands reflects McMurphy's abandonment and, in a sense, betrayal by all the patients except Bromden. By this time, aware of the function he fulfills, a suddenly articulate McMurphy says to the attendant who prepares him for electroshock, “Anoint my head with conductant. Do I get a crown of thorns?” (p. 270). Then McMurphy is bound by his hands and ankles on a
table shaped like a crucifix. He thus becomes both savior and victim or scapegoat for the patients. He has suffered for their sins in that they have compelled him to take their part, and at the same time he has willingly accepted that responsibility.

When McMurphy returns from Electro Therapy, his sacrifice is incomplete—he must again confront Big Nurse. After the suicide of Billy Bibbit, the Judas who blames the riotous ward-party on him, McMurphy is dressed only in his black shorts, which are decorated with white whales (suggestive of his identification through Moby Dick with the life force). He attacks Big Nurse, trying to strangle her and perhaps rape her—in effect trying to kill the monster and restore Big Nurse to womanhood. McMurphy is captured, given a lobotomy, and returned to the ward an empty shell. The notion that McMurphy is in part a sacrificial victim gains credence through the title of the book, which is derived ultimately from a counting-out rhyme. Folklorists remind us that counting-out rhymes were originally used to select the human sacrifice offered to appease a wrathful god.

The novel does not end on a note of death and pessimism, however. McMurphy, though dead, lives on in the spirit, especially for Bromden, who escapes from the hospital and presumably returns to the land of his fathers. He escapes by throwing the Big Nurse's massive control panel—symbol of the world of authority—through the window. The faithful Indian, in short, survives his white companion and becomes another McMurphy, having learned to lie and boast as readily as his mentor, having learned to travel light, to survive by his wits, and to live a good life.

Like the Teutonic hero, or Pound's Goodly Fere, McMurphy is also characterized by a boisterous sexuality. His main weapons against the Big Nurse are laughter and sex. When he enters the ward, Bromden tells us, he "stands looking at us, rocking back in his boots, and he laughs and laughs. . . . Even when he isn't laughing, that laughing sound hovers around
him, the way the sound hovers around a big bell just quit ringing . . .” (p. 11). Gradually McMurphy restores to the men the ability to laugh; with the change comes a sense of proportion. But when laughter fails to convert Big Nurse, McMurphy turns to the act symbolic of affirming life. Perhaps motivated like Christ by love, he rips Big Nurse’s uniform to expose her breasts. She has concealed them in order to deny her own sexuality, just as the patients have denied theirs. By exposing her sexuality, McMurphy reveals her to be a human and not a machine. Most important, she is a woman, though she has tried to deny the obvious fact.

In some ways, Kesey’s notion of the proper role of a woman resembles the attitude of Hemingway. That the good women in Cuckoo’s Nest are prostitutes is not to say that Kesey considers women to be mere sexual objects; on the contrary, his good women acknowledge their physical natures and derive great pleasure from a physical life. That they should be prostitutes is consistent with the general pattern of extremism and exaggeration that prevails in the book. They lead a primary life in that they are in touch with primary forces in human existence. This way of life used to be the province of the Indian or the savage, but in America it is virtually lost. The women in the book are hardly clinging vines. Candy wrestles a salmon as fiercely as do any of the men, and Sandy leaves her husband because he is a pervert. For Kesey, then, sexual activity is a sign of life; bizarre sexuality or any perversion of abstinence is a sign of death. Both extremes are products of an existence ruled by the Apollonian or intensely intellectual and rational element in human nature rather than by the Dionysian or impulsive element.

To associate one’s hero with Christ is hardly new in fiction. What is innovative in Kesey’s imagery is his portrayal of McMurphy also in terms of the frontier hero of popular culture and of the TV cowboy hero. Harding perceives this resemblance
clearly. Commenting on McMurphy’s momentary deflation because of his failure to get the muzak turned off, Harding says, “Gentlemen, already I seem to detect in our redheaded challenger a most unheroic decline of his TV-cowboy stoicism” (p. 77). Entering the Disturbed Ward for Electro Therapy, McMurphy announces his arrival with his typical bravado: “McMurphy’s the name, pardners,’ he said in his drawling cowboy actor’s voice, ‘an’ the thing I want to know is who’s the peckerwood runs the poker game in this establishment?’” (p. 264). For Kesey, then, mythology is not at all remote. Rather, our viable myths are derived from popular culture as much as, if not more than, from Christianity.

Tom Wolfe writes that Kesey also referred to “the comic-book Superheroes as the honest American myths” (Kool-Aid Acid Test, p. 35). The Combine closely resembles the evil world as it is pictured in cartoons and comic books: “The low whine of the devices in the walls gets quieter and quieter, till it hums down to nothing. Not a sound across the hospital—except for a dull, padded rumbling somewhere deep in the guts of the building, a sound that I never noticed before—a lot like the sound you hear when you’re standing late at night on top of a big hydroelectric dam. Low, relentless, brute power” (p. 82). Bromden envisions a fat black attendant who “twists a knob, and the whole floor goes to slipping down away from him standing in the door, lowering into the building like a platform in a grain elevator!” (p. 83). And so on. Big Nurse, as we have seen before, is machine-like. McMurphy sometimes resembles a Deus ex machina descending to challenge the monster: “... McMurphy was a giant come out of the sky to save us from the Combine that was networking the land with copper wire and crystal...” (p. 255).

One of the features of popular culture is the frequent rendering of the world in terms of moral absolutes. In Cuckoo’s Nest there is no ambiguity concerning the Combine—it is irredeem-
ably evil. None of its actions or intentions is viable. But like-
wise, McMurphy is assuredly good. Comic-book culture also
asserts the triumph of good over evil, a triumph manifest in this
novel as Bromden becomes, in effect, a masked stranger and
Superman who will ride into one community after another to
restore the values of life to the inhabitants. The mode of nar-
rative reflects this moral assurance. In spite of Kesey's use of
"sordid" realism, the heroes for all their worldliness are inno-
cent. Bromden's perceptions are simple and childlike, and
from Kesey's point of view, accurate. The tale's tight organiza-
tion reflects the certainty of the author that the world is under-
standable in terms of actions that have a beginning, middle,
and end. Reality for Kesey can be comprehended and organized
relatively easily; so there are no loose ends. In short, Kesey
"has the world's number," and he can render his Weltans-
schauung in terms of moral certainties about experience which
he manipulates into a tightly organized plot.

Notions of moral rectitude and of the possibility of suc-
cessful action against overwhelming odds are central to the
Adamic myth, which holds that America is the land of oppor-
tunity, the land of innocence, of milk and honey. The believer
in Adamism assumes that America in its essentially prelapsarian
state is unlike the rest of the world, especially Europe. In an-
other form, Adamism asserts that the Western United States
is superior to the Eastern part. The myth denies the validity
of history. What else is Kesey's use of the mythology of popu-
lar culture but a reflection of this very notion? For Joyce the
dominant mythology was Homeric; history was cyclical. For
Kesey, such ancient myths are no longer relevant, for history is
discontinuous. It does not repeat itself. The past has little, if
anything, to tell us about human nature. That the world of
the Combine is so bleak does not weaken the Adamism or Uto-
pianism of the book; the bleakness makes these concepts strong-
er.
McMurphy, for all of his breaking the laws of conventional morality, is in fact as primary a character as one could want. One may forgive him his excesses, if he has any (our thinking he has any may reveal that we are warped by the Combine), on the grounds that his opponent is even more extreme. For a contemporary hero, he suffers startlingly few moments of doubt; and when he does, he resolves the conflict between self-preservation and idealism by opting for the second without enduring a modicum of Angst. He simply suffers fatigue.

In two years, however, Kesey's ideas changed a great deal. By the time of Sometimes a Great Notion his belief in heroics became qualified: action may be ultimately futile and meaningless; and the Enemy is no longer necessarily irredeemable.

Great Notion is so massive in scope that only the barest outlines of the plot can be given here. Leland Stanford Stamper, a graduate student in English at Yale, receives during a bungled suicide attempt a postcard from his half-brother, Hank Stamper, urging him to return to the family home in Oregon to help in the logging business. Their father, Old Henry, has been laid up with an injury and cannot work. Besides, this is an especially crucial time, for the Stamper mill has a contract to deliver lumber to Wakonda Pacific, a gigantic company nearby. Haste is necessary, for they have much work to do. Seeing in this summons a chance to avenge his mother's suicide, which he blames on Hank (she and her stepson, Hank, had been lovers), Leland accepts, planning to seduce Hank's wife, Viv, in revenge. Thus, one of the major conflicts is between Hank and Lee.

The other conflict is between Hank and the town of Wakonda, for the townspeople have gone on strike against Wakonda Pacific and do not want the Stampers to succeed in meeting their contract. Failing to argue the Stampers into joining them in their strike, various men sabotage the Stampers' logging operation. But even sabotage fails. Hank is momentarily checked by the death of his jovial cousin, Joby, followed
by another injury to his father and by the infidelity of his wife, but he recovers his fortitude and, as the book ends, begins the trip downriver with a boom of logs for Wakonda Pacific. Lee, finding his victory over his brother to be hollow, discovers himself and abandons his whining weakness to join Hank.

This novel is vastly different in construction, technique, and tone from Kesey's first book. In *Cuckoo's Nest* Kesey allowed no member of the Enemy camp to speak in his own defense, but in *Great Notion* he abandons strict first-person narration in exchange for multiple and simultaneous viewpoints. The effect of this change is to show us that those in the Combine are not the automatons of the comic books, but are individuals with feelings, obligations, and desires. Conversely, the hero is made to appear more like the other members of society. Since Kesey is concerned with portraying all of the characters in some depth, he has probably organized the book more loosely than he did the first. Its view is not only deeper; it is broader too. We see the generation of the parents and occasionally that of the grandparents of the characters.

Through this method of narration Kesey seems to imply that the behavior of most of the characters is not only explainable but perhaps ultimately justifiable. Hence in this book there is a diminution of the attitude of *Cuckoo's Nest* which implies that characters exist without antecedents and possess relatively free will. The simplistic belief in historical discontinuity has been replaced by a more mature if a more pessimistic and perhaps a more realistic appraisal of the human situation. By changing his attitude toward history, Kesey addresses both the specifically American condition and the human condition in general.

The looseness of the novel has occasionally been criticized, and perhaps rightly so; yet, that looseness reflects a loss of assurance on Kesey's part that experience is readily comprehensible and malleable. There is no certainty about what is "relevant"
in a man’s biography; so details that may not appear at all necessary to the main action of the book are included almost for their own sake. Kesey’s point here seems to be that experience and life are not in fact simple to understand. Patterns are not so easy to perceive as they were in Cuckoo’s Nest. We may say that the second book qualifies the confidence and optimism of the first: even if action is possible, it may be futile and meaningless. Certainly the action of Cuckoo’s Nest is tainted to some degree by the injurious effects it has on others.

In Great Notion Kesey continues to be interested mainly in America and in the possibility of heroic action. In technique, at least, Kesey somewhat resembles Joseph Conrad, whose use of multiple narrators in Lord Jim enforced the notion that the meaning of a man’s action is fuzzy at best. Just as Jim’s death may be suicide from despair instead of martyrdom, just as it may be another desertion, so Hank’s deciding to run the logs down the river to the Wakonda Pacific lumber mill may lead to death or to victory. That is, the action may be futile. On the other hand, its futility may be irrelevant, since the action itself is meaningful, having significance from a much narrower frame of reference than McMurphy’s did. It is only Hank and perhaps Lee to whom the action may have heroic meaning.

In studying the contemporary American situation, Kesey once again draws on standard American images and myths. In the main lines of the plot can be seen the basic elements of many Western movies, dime novels, and television shows: Hank Stamper, individualist, vs. the unionized town of Wakonda, whose men are on strike and want him to conform. If Great Notion were fashioned after the mode of Cuckoo’s Nest, Hank would clearly be the McMurphian hero, while the union and the town would be the Combine. And so Great Notion appears to some critics. Yet in Cuckoo’s Nest Kesey never permitted us to see the minds and hearts of the Combine, for in fact they had none. The Combine was perceived from the
point of view of the inmates, and for Kesey at that time, that seems to have been the only possible viewpoint. The Combine was simply evil. Nothing could explain or justify what it did to the individual.

This uncompromising view is clearly not the case in Great Notion. Kesey puts us inside the minds of the “villains” here, with the result that we sympathize with them to some extent. There is, in other words, another point of view besides Hank’s. The other townsmen, most of whom are members of the union, are seen to be human, not the comic-strip robots of the Combine in Cuckoo’s Nest. Floyd Evenwrite, the head of the local, is allowed his moments of reverie, in which we discover that he is not at all devoid of intelligence and humanity. Were the view of society here the same as in Cuckoo’s Nest, we would see Evenwrite as nothing more than a union toady, but we discover that his heritage is hardly less nobly individualistic than Hank’s. Floyd’s grandfather, a member of the IWW, was an idealist who resented the encroachment of the logging companies against individual rights and dignity. He would not be exploited or manipulated any more than Hank will now or than McMurphy would. Evenwrite’s grandfather died in the struggle on behalf of his idealism. Evenwrite’s father then took up the cause with great fervor. But when the Wobblies were superseded by the AFL-CIO, he became a broken-hearted alcoholic who only rarely showed the passion of the idealist. Whenever he espoused the cause, he also aroused young Floyd on behalf of the ideals. When his father died, Evenwrite was forced to go to work, but he would not support the union. Like Hank, he was fiercely individual, though he bitterly resented being exploited. And gradually he too took up the cause, not so much to support the new union which had crushed his father, but to support the workers who were being crushed, as he saw it, by the companies. So Evenwrite’s opposition to Hank is not without its attractions.

Jonathan Bailey Draeger, troubleshooter for the union, is
also shown to be human. In spite of his arrogance, which is incompatible with his presumed devotion to a union, Draeger has certain redeeming qualities, not the least of which is his desire to understand Hank Stamper. The Real Estate Hotwire, like many others in Wakonda, is weak and timid. He may even be despicable, but Kesey makes him human by recounting his unfortunate encounter with Eisenhower in World War II. In his hatred of Hank, he resembles many other townspeople. Like him, they despise Hank because he is stronger than they are, and they need someone on whom to blame their failures. Indian Jenny is another enemy; she desires to see the Stampers suffer in atonement for a remark Old Henry had made years earlier which she thought was racist in intention.

Our attitude toward Hank, then, is much more complex than it is toward McMurphy. On the one hand, we respond sympathetically to his struggle against those weaklings who wrongly blame their own misery on him; on the other hand, we respond to the idealism of the common struggle against a massive company. Hank’s world is a kind of northern Yoknapatawpha County in which even the Jason Compsons have perversely logical justifications for their behavior. We understand them better than we understand the opponents of McMurphy. Understanding them, we cannot so easily condemn them.

I do not want my analogy between Kesey and Faulkner to be misunderstood. I have asserted that this novel transcends the specifically American condition, while here I seem to be suggesting that Kesey is a regionalist. There is no contradiction. Like Faulkner, Kesey exploits regionalism to speak to a larger concern. My point is that both Kesey’s and Faulkner’s worlds are dark, inhabited by primal forces and by exceptionally dramatic and stark characters and events. Great Notion is particularly Western or Northwestern, however, in that the West and Northwest are the locales of mighty physical forces—rain, rivers, gigantic trees, gigantic men. The themes, though, are Western, not South-
ern. As Leslie Fiedler points out, in the Western the hero becomes “Indianized,” while in the Southern he becomes “Whitey” (Return of the Vanishing American, p. 24). The Western hero accepts a primitive way of living; the Southerner appears to reject it. Southern homes, haunted by spectres of a romantic and heroic past, resemble the West, haunted also, as we see in Kesey, by spectres of a past in which heroic action was once possible. The characters in Kesey’s world are haunted by characters typical of television shows and comic-strips—heroic cowboys who fulfill the American dream.

What further distinguishes the Western from the Southern, Fiedler suggests, is that in the latter both the whites and blacks are strangers in a new land. In the Western, the white stranger confronts the Indian, the man whose home America is. Kesey’s first novel shows us the process of Indianization. But in his second book the primitive life is much more difficult to live. Kesey is regional not in the manner of H. L. Davis but in the manner of Wallace Stegner. He is not writing primarily about the West or the Northwest in either of his novels. Rather, these locales are rich historical metaphors for a state of mind. The Western region is a state of consciousness that has changed physical locales as the country has grown up. For Kesey, we shall see, the new West is a region of the psyche—not terrestrial at all.

Our sympathies with the townspeople make an uncritical acceptance of Hank as hero impossible. This difficulty is increased by the novel’s focusing on two Stampers of very different temperaments: Hank, a new version of McMurphy, and Lee, his half-brother, who despises him. What distinguishes Hank from most of the others is that while his antagonists want to win something, he simply wants to win. They are materialists; he an idealist. The purpose of a strike is to win tangible concessions of a generally material nature. Hank resists the strike not because he sympathizes with the employers or wants to make a killing while his fellows are down and out. He wants to
determine his own fate; he wants independence; he wants to act rather than do nothing.

This idealism goes a long way toward explaining his restlessness and dissatisfaction after the Korean War. Having fought presumably on behalf of American virtues—the independence, the individuality, the values of the West, of the frontier—Hank returned to a lethargic country. To his mind the people did not live up to the idealism of their country. They were sheep, bored and boring. Thus Kesey portrays the vanishing American here as not only the Indian; rather, he is the idealist, the champion of virtue, the primitive.

Hank is such a vanishing American in many ways. He is intensely physical: he was all-state fullback, swimming champion, and so on. His strength, though, is not merely physical accident; it is also willed. Big Newton should easily beat Hank in their fight in Teddy’s bar, since he is much larger and presumably more powerful. But Hank will not back down. Nor will he allow himself to be beaten. He is a pint-sized Paul Bunyan. As his cousin Joby remarks, “I know how unnatural stout Hank is. He can hold a double-edged ax straight out arm’s length for eight minutes and thirty-six seconds. The closest I ever seen anybody else come to that was four-ten, and he a rigger thirty-five years old, big as a bear” (Sometimes a Great Notion, p. 327). Recalling an encounter between Hank and another student during their high school days, Joby describes Hank as “smiling . . . just like in the Westerns. Hank looks up and says yeah, like in the Westerns” (p. 326).

Yet where McMurphy was in tune with nature, where he obeyed impulse and at the same time accepted the forces of nature and aligned himself with them, Hank fights them. Where McMurphy would doubtless have accepted the might and unpredictability of the Wakonda Auga, Hank will not. Instead of moving his family to a home less threatened by the torrential river, he grimly reinforces the bank each night with
miscellaneous boards and cables until he has created a monstrosity. If the frontier may be conceived of as that point where civilization confronts nature and savagery, the Stamper house is at that very point. Yet the house is maintained through devotion not to nature but to self. It stands as an assertion that no one and nothing can push Hank around.

Hank has something of the fanatic about him. McMurphy’s lust is not merely harmless but therapeutic. Hank’s on the other hand is destructive. His affair with his stepmother has ramifications which he was long indifferent to. This virtual incest may be accounted for by recognizing that Hank is Old Henry’s son—that they are both individualists who, in their self-assertion, frequently think of no one but themselves. Hank’s adultery also derives from a curious interpretation of the proverb which Old Henry lived by and which he hung in his son’s room—“never give a inch.” To do one’s filial duty to Henry Stamper, therefore, means paradoxically not to do that filial duty. The motto has an ironically ribald meaning which Hank seems to see in it just before he makes love to his stepmother. Little Leland watches the sordid affair through a hole in the wall separating his room from his mother’s, and he understandably suffers psychic damage. Moreover, Lee’s mother, who later leaves Oregon to return to her native New York City, is ultimately a suicide, and Lee associates this calamity with her affair with Hank.

Thus Kesey has presented us with a hero whose idealism is to some extent reprehensible. Hank resembles the cannibal Holy Terror Robinson in Lord Jim—a strange idealist, Marlow calls him. In satisfying his own demands, Hank, like Robinson, violates a cardinal truth of human existence: we are all in the same boat. This is part of the lesson he learns from Lee.

Where Hank is physical, Lee is paralyzed by self-doubt and paranoia. At the beginning of the story, unable to take constructive action of any kind, Lee attempts to destroy himself.
When he fails, he answers the summons to return to Oregon. Confronting Hank as another antagonist, Lee shows us that Hank is truly tainted. Like many in the town, he hates Hank for being the Champ, since Hank seems somehow more than human. “My Captain Marvel brother,” Lee calls him (p. 524). Fearing the invincibility of his opponent, Lee searches for “my magic word” (p. 143), which will transform him into one who acts, one who is powerful enough to face the Champ, just as Billy Batson in the comics uttered “Shazam” and was transformed into superman. Abandoning the world of fantasy, Lee makes his modus operandi the emphasis of his weakness, his paralysis, his indecisiveness. He seems successful, for he “wins” Viv.

Hank is momentarily checked when Lee appears to achieve his victory and revenge. Hank is also badly shaken by the death of Joby, the perpetually optimistic devotee of the local crackpot evangelist, Brother Walker. At the hands of some perverse god of irony, Joby dies laughing. At least one critic has suggested that, as Joby lies pinned by a log under the water, he must laugh or lose his senses entirely in the face of horror, in the face of nothingness. What he has implied is that Joby’s optimism is equivalent to frontier boasting, that one must laugh or go crazy if one is to endure such a harsh existence. But Joby does not “grin the bar to death.” His death also implies that Kesey’s book is dark indeed; for it is Joby who in many ways resembles McMurphy more closely than Hank does. Like McMurphy, Joby is in tune with primal forces. But unlike McMurphy, he leaves no apostle to carry on his work or to perpetuate his belief in going with the flow.

In his brief paralysis which results from Joby’s death, from his father’s terrible injury, and from Lee’s seduction of Viv, Hank comes to resemble his stepbrother. Earlier he had stood up resolutely to Big Newton. Like Hemingway’s Santiago, who says that a man can be destroyed but not defeated, Hank had
thought: “I ain’t running out to sea from him. I don’t give a shit how big he is he can whip my ass but he can’t run me out to sea. . . . And if he don’t run me he don’t ever really whip me . . .” (pp. 340-41). But Hank’s indifference to the threat from Big Newton is not matched by his indifference to the fates of Joby and Old Henry. The terrible knowledge of weakness and vulnerability supplants the frontier boasting that one can grin a bear to death: “Weakness is true and real. I used to accuse the kid of faking his weakness. But faking proves the weakness is real. Or you wouldn’t be so weak as to fake it. No, you can’t ever fake being weak. You can only fake being strong” (p. 527). He then decides to quit his struggle.

But the town, instead of rejoicing at Hank’s surrender, suddenly is wrenched by what Teddy the saloon-keeper calls “absolute, unspeakable, supreme terror” (p. 572), for they have seen now that even the strongest cannot withstand everyone and everything indefinitely. They fear, for when Hank stood up against them he represented human possibility. They may have resented him, but they needed him, for he showed them what they could be. When the strongest has fallen, human possibility is at an end. So the town needs Hank just as the inmates needed McMurphy. He is symbolic for them all, not just for Lee. They need Hank to fight them, to oppose the weakness in themselves. When he capitulates, their own weakness stands forth the more clearly.

But Hank’s spiritual defeat is momentary. A few gloating townsmen offer him charity, while Lee stands by savoring his humiliation. But Hank is not quite ready to admit that he is in no way different from the others, even if he is mortal and weak; so he assumes his warrior role again. He has been shown that men can never defeat nature. Lee has shown him the necessity of accepting one’s limitations, says W. D. Sherman (“The Novels of Ken Kesey,” p. 195). Hank’s acknowledgment of the omnipotence of primal forces and his awareness
that he must flow with them rather than fight against them becomes obvious when, during his fight with Lee, he appears to accept without anger the destruction of the boathouse by the river. However, his insistence on running the boom of logs down the river with only the inexperienced Andy as his helper seems to belie the assertion that he has found wisdom.

In any case, just as Hank has acquired some aspects of Lee’s perspective, so Lee assumes some of Hank’s qualities. Intending to submit to Hank’s beating in order to elicit sympathy from Viv, Lee curiously fights back in spite of the hysterical warnings of his paranoid inner voice. Talking later with Viv, he exclaims: “... for a while there, do you see? out on the bank? I was fighting for my life. I know it. Not running for it. Not merely to keep it, or to have it, but for it... fighting to get it, to win it” (p. 622). In other words, he at last meets Hank on Hank’s turf; he resorts to direct physical action. Shortly thereafter, when Hank, with a gesture of defiance that stuns the town, decides to make the run with the logs for Wakonda Pacific, the emotionally reconstructed if physically battered Lee joins him.

With this resolution of the conflict between Hank and Lee the book ends. One might think the novel is optimistic, since Hank does not accede to the desires of the town and the union, and since he does not surrender to Lee’s despair and paralysis. Also, Lee is converted to Western values and joins in the struggle during a river trip which takes place at Thanksgiving, a time associated with American values at their earliest and purest. Yet at least one critic thinks that Hank, Lee, and Andy die on their trip down the river. That is, Hank, unlike Joby and like McMurphy, has converted a disciple, but both master and disciple die, leaving no one to carry on the struggle against conformity, dependence, sloth, and compromise. However, they may not die after all. That Kesey is indefinite about this matter suggests that it is unimportant. Whether they live or die
does not matter so much as that they have acted on the basis of certain principles. While we may be forced to say that in this book Kesey is not certain that heroic action can be successful, he at least seems to say it is possible.

But this notion must be examined more closely. In order for us to respond warmly to the action of Hank and Lee, and in order for us to call it heroic, we must force ourselves to believe that their opponent is the evil Combine or at least that Hank is pure. But Kesey has taken great care to make us see that Hank is confronting humans, not cartoon monsters, and that Hank is impure. Hank’s action, justified perhaps from an abstract point of view, means real suffering to the townsfolk. And surely Kesey is not so bold in this novel as to suggest that these people count for nothing. Kesey, like Hank, is in a dilemma. To act or to advocate action means often to bring hardship on many others; yet not to act is to deny oneself, to commit a kind of suicide. Like Hank, Kesey wants to act; like Lee, he is suspicious of action. The novel shows us that Hank learns of human weakness but recovers strength and converts Lee to the true path. Action is finally taken.

But is it proper, given the direction of the novel and given his new knowledge, for Hank to act as he does at the end? Is Hank’s action at the end in fact affirmative or despairing? Does he not in some senses turn his back on his new knowledge and perform his action almost out of frustration at not knowing what else to do? From this point of view, the ending appears to be forced. Hank’s action is not warranted by the discoveries he is supposed to have made earlier. Perhaps Kesey means to assert that Hank, in spite of the kind of knowledge he gains, must act; but to assert this is to accept with a shrug of the shoulders the misery that action brings on others, and Kesey has worked hard to make this acceptance impossible. It is quite clear that the main character in the book is not Hank, but Hank-Lee, or actually Kesey, who would seem to be trying
to suggest in the ending that meaning and significance in life come through action and confrontation. But the ending contradicts the rest of the book, which asserts through technique and content that heroics are impossible.

*Great Notion*, though flawed, is perhaps a more powerful if a grimmer book than *Cuckoo’s Nest*. Hank’s life, unlike McMurphy’s, is joyless, and the hero brings misery to others. He even suffers considerably himself. If Hank does not care about the town, he at least cares about Joby. He feels responsible for Joby’s death, as of course to some extent he is. But McMurphy would never have doubted in this fashion. Bill Bibbit’s suicide is not really McMurphy’s responsibility in any way. The blame lies with the Combine. If Hank were McMurphy, he would blame Joby’s death on the union, but unlike McMurphy he recognizes personal culpability.

The myth of the new world Adam takes a hard blow in this novel. That newest and most popular of the Adamists, Charles Reich, praises the book extravagantly as an example of Consciousness III. Yet Adamists are often given to seeing things that are not there and not seeing things that are there. Reich does not see that Kesey has taken great pains to establish the validity of the viewpoint of the townsfolk. To Reich, Hank is merely an employed McMurphy, a man with responsibility for himself alone. Kesey repudiates this notion. He has shown that the struggle between a man and his enemies is more difficult than it had first appeared. And he has also shown that the enemies are not without their merits.

Because we in the United States are brought up to believe in the necessity and desirability of independence and self-reliance, and the inevitability of opportunity, one might have expected that Kesey would, after *Great Notion*, investigate further the nature and manifestations of the contemporary Americans’ desire to act—but the difficulty of his doing so. This view of the human condition is similar to that of the great moderns. In other
words, one might have expected that like other major American writers, especially in the twentieth century, Kesey would have investigated the abyss, the shadow that falls between the will and the act, and the confrontation with nothingness that Joby experiences. But for about nine years he wrote virtually nothing, except for occasional letters and articles for underground papers. In fact, he probably still very much wanted to be able to act, to find some place, some situation, in which it would be possible to be heroic. In what circumstances heroic action would be possible was hinted at in his novels and later manifested full-bloom in his life-style during the middle and late 60's, a period during which he experimented with hallucinogenic drugs.

Drugs appear in both of Kesey's novels. In Cuckoo's Nest they are a tool of the Combine for subduing patients. In Great Notion they are a means of release. Lee smokes marijuana and carries a private stash of uppers and downers, some of which he takes after his suicide attempt, presumably to relieve his tension. Indian Jenny reads The Tibetan Book of the Dead and uses peyote in her rituals, thereby employing drugs to make action possible that is impossible in the here and now. Kesey has remarked that parts of his first book were written with the aid of drugs (see, for example, Kesey's Garage Sale, p. 7). While he was a student at Stanford he volunteered for experimentation by the Veterans' Administration on drugs, and thereby was able to portray Bromden's hallucinations and paranoia.

But drugs play a much more important role in the two books simply as aids to Kesey's portrayal of certain psychic states. W. D. Sherman suggests that both books are metaphors for the drug experience. Cuckoo's Nest is dedicated to the man who had introduced Kesey to psychedelic drugs: "To Vik Lovell, who told me dragons did not exist, then led me to their lairs." This dedication seems to suggest that, if one is not fond of non-existent dragons, he should avoid drugs. Not so, according to Sherman:
"In his two novels . . . Kesey has described that sense of the disintegration and death and ultimate rebirth of the ego which lies at the heart of the LSD 'trip.' Both books are metaphors for psychedelic experiences" ("The Novels of Ken Kesey," p. 185). Sherman then argues that in Cuckoo's Nest Kesey is first showing how a mentally ill Indian is transformed by witnessing the confrontation of McMurphy and the repressive Combine. Second, "Kesey is suggesting that one path to psychic liberation lies in the psychedelic experience" (p. 187).

According to Sherman, Bromden enters the world of the Combine and experiences "psychic death." His resulting paranoia and madness resemble the dream state described in The Tibetan Book of the Dead, "which precisely describes a stage in an LSD trip" (p. 186). That is, Bromden's psychic death, a necessary step in his journey to health, is equivalent to certain psychedelic experiences. In this state, Bromden can experience truth unencumbered by the web of his confining and distracting confrontation with the Combine. It is only after having experienced this trauma that Bromden can be liberated from the Combine. Quoting Jung, Sherman remarks that Bromden's submersion in the dream state, which is like a bad trip, "illuminates the estrangement of consciousness from the liberating truth as it approaches nearer and nearer to physical rebirth" (p. 186). Only after having experienced this crisis can Bromden be psychically reborn, and this rejuvenation is signaled by his physical rebirth.

In Great Notion the importance of psychic rebirth is even more clear. As Sherman points out, the journey of Lee to Oregon, like that of Bromden to the land of his fathers, is a metaphor for the drug trip—a journey of discovery or rediscovery. Lee, afraid in New York that he was going mad, was reassured by his psychiatrist that "You, and in fact quite a lot of your generation, have in some way been exiled from that particular sanctuary. It's become almost impossible for you to 'go mad' in
the classical sense. . . . you are too hip to yourself on a psychological level. . . . you may be neurotic as hell for the rest of your life, and miserable, maybe even do a short hitch at Bellevue and certainly good for another five years as a paying patient—but I'm afraid never completely out'' (p. 71). According to Sherman, Lee's problem is that he cannot go mad. He has so repressed himself that he will get no further than an occasional trip to the madhouse.

Kesey wants the death of the ego and the rebirth of the id—a state which can be accomplished through the drug experience (Sherman, pp. 191-92). This psychic death and rebirth is presumably suggested by the title of the novel which the epigraph elaborates:

Sometimes I live in the country,
Sometimes I live in the town;
Sometimes I get a great notion
To jump into the river . . . an' drown.
—Huddie Ledbetter (Leadbelly)

One must submit, that is, to the waters of the unconscious, those deep, powerful currents of what we now call the id (Sherman, p. 196). We can see that even at this early date Kesey is conceiving of the Adamic myth not merely in sociological terms but in psychic ones as well. And after Great Notion the sociological and political aspects of the Adamic myth become less relevant for Kesey. If one is to continue to believe in Adamism in the present world, he cannot limit it to the concrete here and now. He must conceive of it as operating in a new area entirely.

As Leslie Fiedler has suggested, Kesey seems to have stopped writing Westerns in order to live them. For some years after 1964 the use of psychedelic drugs became a major aspect of life for him and the Merry Pranksters. They dressed in fantastic costumes, frequently those of comic-strip heroes. It seems clear that what Kesey was doing, at least in part, was going into un-
explored territory, a new frontier, where heroism was possible. This notion gains credence when we recall that during 1964 Kesey and the Pranksters made a trip through the Southwest, through the South, and up to New York in a day-glo-painted bus with the word “FURTHUR” [sic] on its destination sign. On this journey the Pranksters made an eighty-hour film, capturing people in their “games” or patterns of behavior and devising their own games. The destination sign on the bus inevitably suggests the prime force behind the Pranksters—a desire to move beyond ordinary states of consciousness into a new realm where all kinds of games would be possible, not just the political-economic games in which the United States was engaged.

The journey’s being a metaphor for spiritual passage recalls Jack Kerouac’s utopian quest in On the Road. Kesey has called Kerouac “a prophet” (Garage Sale, p. 220). And, significantly, the greatest Beat saint of them all, Neal Cassady, was the driver of Kesey’s bus. That Kesey’s trip began in the West and went to the East should not mislead us. Its physical movement could have gone in any direction. It was the moving that counted, a physical moving, a traveling light, which parallels a spiritual traveling light—a readiness to encounter new states of being.

Taking drugs or otherwise experimenting with consciousness has of course been common among artists for generations. Kesey appears to have inherited it to some degree from the Beats. Like the Beats, Kesey advocated a surrender of the ego—a loss of self—in submission to the group consciousness. Both the Beats and Kesey, abandoning the limitations of the individual ego, wanted to experience the moment as purely as possible. Both the Beats and Kesey have been vociferous in identifying society as the Enemy. Both have desired the I-Thou relationship with others described by Martin Buber (cf. Kesey’s remarks in The Last Supplement to the Whole Earth Catalog: The Realist, 89 [March-April 1971]; Garage Sale, p. 174). Both have
had as hero of their work a Dionysian rebel-victim who is revolutionary and jester, devil and Christ, criminal and saint. Both derive from a tradition in American literature epitomized by Walt Whitman. And both the Beats and Kesey have suffered at the hands of society.

Someone has suggested that hippies are simply Beats plus drugs (see Bruce Cook, *The Beat Generation*, p. 196). But Kesey differs from some of the Beats in at least one way. The Beats, like Timothy Leary, who is more their extension than Kesey is, frequently used drugs to return to an older almost passive consciousness characteristic of the Orient. Their direction, in a sense, has been backwards. Kesey disavowed this facet of Leary’s drug culture, claiming that he and the Pranksters, on the contrary, were going not backwards but forwards, FURTHUR, not into an older state of consciousness but into a new one altogether. In this sense we may see Kesey’s physical and spiritual trips as perhaps more like those of Kerouac in *On the Road* than like Allen Ginsberg’s or Gary Snyder’s explorations of Buddhism, but since both directions are ultimately primitivistic, we are perhaps needlessly splitting hairs in making this distinction. In any case, Kesey desires to experience the moment NOW and with as much intensity as possible. He therefore does not abandon technology as does Leary. Instead, he uses it during the late 60’s in his movies, light shows, and acid music.

The idea that in *Cuckoo’s Nest* and *Great Notion* the Indian or the primitive is the Vanishing American may need to be expanded somewhat. The concept of the Vanishing American provides an opportunity to be heroic. In large part, this is the opportunity Kesey was seeking during the heydays of the Pranksters. Having apparently decided that no unexplored physical territory remained, or that there was none which would not sooner or later be perverted, Kesey abandoned physical territory in favor of a new world—a new state of consciousness. Kesey’s emphasis upon games during this period reflects his discovery
that the United States is organized around a set of rules which virtually everyone has agreed to abide by. Kesey therefore insisted that the Pranksters play different games. But Kesey appears to believe that only in a world such as that opened by hallucinogens can one be free to structure his life the way he pleases.

Having entered such a world, one must continually restructure it, make new games, create new roles, lest one become rigid and establish in that new world a culture as stifling and inflexible as the old one. As Tom Wolfe points out, however, Kesey seemed a bit of a tyrant amongst the Pranksters, occasionally forcing them to play the games he devised. The uncharitable might say that Kesey’s embracing, and to a great extent founding, the drug subculture was motivated by nothing more than a desire to rule, to be the leader, in some culture. Having discovered it impossible to be a leader in America as most of us know it, he explored a new territory and to a considerable degree established a new culture.

To Leslie Fiedler, Kesey was both writing and living the ultimate Western. We have already seen that Kesey’s heroes are sometimes portrayed as cowboys and gunfighters; and in Cuckoo’s Nest we find the Lone Ranger-Tonto motif. Kesey’s first book, more than the second, is Western in the Cowboy sense. We discover in Great Notion that as Kesey’s vision of the human plight becomes more complex he makes less use of comic-book mythology. Such a change perhaps confirms René Wellek’s assertion that attacks by Fiedler and others on great and serious literature from political, linguistic, and anti-aesthetic points of view will not prevail (“The Attack on Literature,” p. 41).

Though the complexity of Cuckoo’s Nest removes the novel from the sentimental mire of many Westerns, like most Westerns it portrays a hero in conflict with some sort of impersonal, life-denying, dignity-destroying outfit of “bad guys.” Such a group of self-proclaimed masters who demand conformity is essentially
Eastern or European in its attempt to establish the rule of the dilettantes, the snobs, the “cultured.” Against this pressure the cowboy hero rebels on behalf of independence, tolerance, and variousness. The cowboy hero is thus a culture hero. And if he bends the law, if he is a rogue, so much the better, especially if he fights for the ultimate triumph of law and order; for he assures compassion and justice for all at the hands of the law. The cowboy fights, then, for justice, not anarchy; but he usually fights for the minimum amount of law. There is, too, an uneasy truce between the desire for ultimate freedom and the belief that law is needed to prevent chaos. The frontier is the land, that place in time and space where these two values confront each other.

In the America of 1964 this kind of frontier no longer existed for Kesey. Kesey’s use of a Western scene for his first novel points out the nature of the conflict between values. As we have seen, Kesey is actually portraying a new and different kind of frontier—the boundary between sanity and insanity. The frontier is a new level of consciousness, a territory that exists in another dimension. It is “insanity,” as the “sane” world of the Combine would define insanity. It is the world of the bad trip, to borrow the drug culture metaphor. Here, in this world, the white man encounters the Indian once more. And this encounter with the Indian makes Cuckoo’s Nest a Western. For, according to Fiedler, “The heart of the Western is not the confrontation with the alien landscape . . ., but the encounter with the Indian, that utter stranger for whom our New World is an Old Home” (Vanishing American, p. 21). And the archetypal confrontation between White and Indian results in either some kind of transformation of the White or the death of the Indian. When the White has been transformed, according to Fiedler, a new type of Western is possible, involving the experiences of this new man (p. 24). Remembering that Bromden is only half Indian, we can conclude from Fied-
ler's remarks that we might hope to discover Kesey exploring in the second book the adventures of such a person as the Chief, the hybrid. And perhaps we do, though not in the way that Fiedler might have predicted.

According to Fiedler, then, Kesey has virtually rediscovered the Western, opening it up to new possibilities after a period of stagnation. In the new Western, Fiedler says, the White man casts his lot with the Indian and unites with him against prejudice and racism. Big Nurse is defined in terms of her whiteness, and the black attendants also adopt her white garb.

Another way of characterizing this new Western is to say that it advocates a Dionysian state of being, typified by yielding to impulse, both creative and destructive. This Dionysian state is opposed to the Apollonian, the rational, the self-controlled aspect of the personality. It plumbs the depths of the mind and spirit, discovering in its journey new energy, a new part of the being that had lain dormant or in chains at the hands of a repressive Apollonian psyche. This state of being is close to madness. As we have seen, Kesey advocates in both of his novels and in his life-style an exploration of consciousness through LSD. Moreover, much of this exploration takes place at the edge of madness and insanity.

Tony Tanner describes Kesey's activity as a "flowing out of self" (City of Words, p. 389). At first, attempting to break out of the patterns of contemporary society by creating their own movies, Kesey and the Pranksters moved beyond movies—even their own threatened to entangle them in the web of static existence—further into drugs, searching for what Tanner calls "the absolute NOW, the pure present" (p. 389). After writing Great Notion, Kesey concluded that the only place in which the West exists is in a state of consciousness attained through drugs which enable one to throw off the fetters of conditioned behavior and thinking. According to Fiedler, this is the only territory "unconquered and uninhabited by palefaces, the bearers
of 'civilization,' the cadres of imperialist reason; . . . into this
territory certain psychotics . . . have moved on ahead of us—
unrecognized Natty Bumppos or Huck Finns, interested not in
claiming the New World for any Old God, King, or Country,
but in becoming New Men” (p. 185).

Kesey has revived the archetypal Western by portraying anew
the relationship of the Indian and the White man and by de-
fining the frontier as a state of consciousness. Fiedler reminds
us that the Old Western dealt with the “alteration of con-
sciousness” (p. 175) just as the new one does. So drugs are not
an escape but an embrace.

But Fiedler’s way is not the only way to look at Kesey. It
might also be concluded that Kesey’s search for a new con-
sciousness poses as a forward-moving, courageous encounter, but
is actually escapism, retreat, regression. If we look, as indeed
we must, at Cuckoo’s Nest as optimistically embodying the myth
of the new world Adam and at Great Notion as pessimistically
re-examining Cuckoo’s Nest and concluding, as many great
American books have concluded, that the myth of the new world
Adam is unviable, we can see that Kesey’s embracing the drug
culture is motivated by a desire not to move forward at all.
Rather, Kesey may have wanted to believe that you can go
home again, as the journey metaphor suggests. He may have
wanted to revert to a mental state in which it is possible to be-
lieve in the myth of the new world Adam. His difficulty with
the ending of his second novel confirms the existence of this de-
sire. His lifestyle in the 1960’s and early 1970’s indicates that
he may have been longing for naiveté but was convincing
himself that he was looking for experience. Just as when con-
fronted by Father Arnall with the terror of hell, Stephen Dedau-
lus regresses to his childhood piety, so too Kesey, when con-
fronted by the abyss, may have retreated to a world of comic-
strip cause and effect, where saying “Shazam” would transform
him into whatever he wished.
Like many other Adamist movements, Kesey's assumed that history has little to teach us. David Noble has argued that this assumption is naive. He suggests that the major American writers have demonstrated that Adamism is wishful thinking. According to him, by the mid-nineteenth century the Americans felt they had "transcended the human condition to achieve a perfect freedom in harmony with redemptive nature" (*The New World Adam*, p. 4). That is, weakness, servitude, timidity—in short, all those flaws in the human being which distinguish him from angels—had been obliterated in the new garden. Confronting this metaphysics, says Noble, the American writer asks: "Is it possible that Americans are exempt from the human condition?" (p. 5). The answer, he believes, is obvious: the major American writers, from "James Fenimore Cooper to Saul Bellow" (p. 5), show that the American dream "is an impossible enterprise which twists the heart, blights the mind, and results in social sterility" (p. 225). In *Great Notion* Kesey was moving toward an awareness of this notion. Though critics have accused Noble of being too general, they frequently agree that the impulse he describes exists in some writers. It appears safe to say that this impulse is central to Kesey's first two books. In the light of Noble's arguments, Kesey's embracing drugs seems to be motivated to some degree by a reluctance to face what he has discovered in *Great Notion*. In a sense, Kesey seems to be attempting through his "acid tests" to create a new race. If Americans are like everyone else, he suggests, let us be supermen in a different dimension of awareness.

In his introduction to *Kesey's Garage Sale*, Arthur Miller expresses similar reservations about the psychedelic age. In fact, Kesey is critical of himself in his new book. Miller is uncertain too about the quality of *Garage Sale*: "This is, of course, a chaotic volume, and cynics will easily dispose of it as a transparent attempt to capitalize on twice-published material, plus stuff lying at the bottom of the drawer." But though *Garage Sale*
seems at first glance to be nothing more than the random "trash" that the preface facetiously though perhaps justifiably calls it, the book nevertheless has some degree of order. Its importance is that it may be a transitional work, inasmuch as Kesey reveals at times an intensely perceptive and self-critical intelligence which contemplates and perhaps exorcizes the past.

The book is divided into six main sections called “5 Hot Items” and “The Surprise Bonus.” Hot Items 1-3 may be seen as a kind of record of Kesey’s growth from 1962 through 1971. The first section (“Who Flew Over What”) concerns the writing of *Cuckoo’s Nest* and contains several excerpts from that novel. Hot Item 2, called “Over the Border,” deals with Kesey’s sensibility during his fugitive days in 1966, as well as with the psychedelic sensibility in general. Hot Item 3, called “Tools from My Chest,” is a reprint of much of *The Last Supplement to the Whole Earth Catalog* (*The Realist*, March-April 1971), which Kesey helped Paul Krassner edit. It reveals how Kesey’s concerns widened to include, among other things, Women’s Liberation, ecology, and what has been called the Jesus movement.

At this point the book becomes more loosely organized. Hot Item 4, “Miscellaneous Section,” is a grab-bag of interviews with Kesey and of work by him and others that appeared in underground newspapers during the late 60’s and early 70’s. Though it seems chaotic, it is perhaps designed to parallel Hot Item 3 and to show the relationship of Kesey to other figures in the psychedelic movement or its aftermath. Hot Item 5, a long interview with Kesey by Paul Krassner, may be seen as a recapitulation of Kesey’s current position on a wide range of topics, from religion to ecology to writing. In the final part, Kesey expresses his distrust of critics and reviewers by means of a very short story. This story is called “The Surprise.” I suppose, because it is told in a conventional manner, a manner surprising given the rest of the book. While hinting at some anxiety about the re-
ception of *Garage Sale*, it also seems to ask for tolerance on the part of "professional" readers.

One of Miller's complaints against the psychedelic sensibility is that its social conscience has vanished, a claim not entirely supported by *Garage Sale*, though perhaps evident in other ways in our culture. His other more vital complaint is that the psychedelic sensibility has a fundamentally wrong conception of the nature of evil:

This book and the mindset it speaks for posit a destiny of utter truthfulness; by letting it all hang out by means of drugs, prayer, or whatever, the flood of impulses merge [sic] into a morally undifferentiated receptivity to life, tropism pure. As though evil were merely a fear of what we have within. And so it is that Manson becomes an ambiguous villain, for he went the whole way, and if repression is the only enemy then Charley was incarnate liberation. (p. xviii)

Miller recognizes that Kesey returns from this territory, especially in "Over the Border," which, though it provides biographical information supplemental to *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*, is far more important as a rigorous and critical self-portrait. Portrayed as Devlin Deboree, Kesey shows himself as possessing enormous ego and as demanding almost slavish and humiliating obedience from the Pranksters. He apparently expects his wife and his lovers not merely to tolerate each other but to get on well together. There is no evidence to suggest what he gives in return for devotion. He seems to have given little attention to his children and at least twice to have abandoned them and his wife, once in a foreign country when he sneaks off with some friends and discovers that he seems to be able to control lightning.

The climax of the section occurs during a drug trip, when *Voice in the Sky*, the mediator between the audience and the
actors, announces that to leave the earth and its limitations one must cut the "superfluous Kitestring of Compassion" (p. 156). Having returned to the main group of Pranksters, Kesey asks them to give themselves once more fully into his hands. There is little doubt that he likens himself here to Charles Manson, demanding the total submissiveness of his followers' wills as with their aid he takes his revenge upon his enemies, hurling lightning bolts upon them from his stance outside conventional moral norms. When at the height of this trip his son Quiston is killed, Deboree refuses to accept blame and to feel compassion. His horrified friends reject him and his ideals, mockingly referring to him as Mr. Charles and Charley and forcefully reminding us of the similarity between Manson and Deboree. That Voice in the Sky seems also to be referred to by even bigger voices in the sky as Mr. Charles perhaps implies that evil has an independent existence and is not merely repression. The title of the section thus refers not only to Deboree's being in Mexico, but also to his being in a foreign territory of the mind and spirit, to his having crossed the border of the permissible and humane. Monroe Spears reminds us in Dionysus and the City that successful art demands a fruitful tension between Dionysus and Apollo. So too, Kesey says, does life.

But in spite of the merits of "Over the Border," it is marred by excesses like the rest of the book. It is too long, the language is flat, and many characters are long-winded. Worst of all are Paul Foster's cartoons, which, flowing along the margins of each page, presumably reflect the content of the screenplay that "Over the Border" purports to be. But they are frequently in bad taste, and only rarely do they aid our reading. Usually they limit our understanding, just as movies can limit our range of response to literature. Doubtless, they are intended to bombard our senses into awareness, just as light shows were designed to aid acid rock in aiding acid. The result is fatigue. Still, "Over
the Border” is not without its merits, if only as a document of Kesey’s self-understanding.

In some ways, the rest of the book undermines whatever strength “Over the Border” may possess. Whatever organization it has is loose, and the latter parts of the book look suspiciously as if they were included simply to fill space. Moreover, even though Kesey remarks in an interview in Garage Sale (first published in The Realist, May-June 1971, p. 53) that he is tired of waiting for the “millennium” (p. 225), and even though he seems to recognize the naiveté of Adamism, he is nevertheless still crusading. He is now so concerned with ecology that he says he considers the major issue of Great Notion to be Women’s Liberation, by which he means that the book shows how Mother Earth, like Viv, like all women, is exploited. Likewise, his trite account of his conversion to Christianity casts some doubt upon the strength of the insights which “Over the Border” suggests that he has gained.

In an interview in Rolling Stone Kesey said that Americans have “a sense of space” (March 7, 1970, p. 30). As Terence Martin points out, Kesey implies that, unlike Europeans, Americans have a sense of possibility (p. 54). This line of thinking closely resembles Adamism. Kesey also complains in Garage Sale that though he is unqualified to make many of his assertions, especially those he makes in interviews and in articles he wrote for The Last Supplement, people insist on taking him at his word. It is perhaps this inclination to talk without reflection and without respect for language that lies at the heart of the troubles of Garage Sale. Though Miller thinks that Kesey is saved by a sense of form from the Dionysian chaos of Charles Manson, the book intimates that on the contrary Kesey has failed to find a sustaining vision.

“Over the Border” suggests that Kesey has returned to contemplate the validity of Adamism. This is the territory explored by much serious American fiction, such as Wallace Stegner’s
All the Little Live Things. Stegner's protagonist, Joe Allston, discovers that it is naive and perhaps dangerous to reject the ordinary world as brutal and to try to fashion a private Eden in California. One must recognize that the world is both beautiful and ugly and that one must accept it as Marian Catlin does. In his attitude in "Over the Border" Kesey resembles the enlightened Joe Allston. But in the latter part of Garage Sale he ominously resembles Allston's drifting, rootless thirty-seven-year-old son Curtis.
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