

Kerouac's Confession:
A Response to Spence Dew's "Devotion to Solipsism:
Religious Thought and Practice in Jack Kerouac's *Tristessa*"

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*Mark 13:11 -- But when they shall lead you, and deliver you up, take no thought
beforehand what ye shall speak, neither do ye premeditate: but whatsoever shall be given
you in that hour, that speak ye: for it is not ye that speak, but the Holy Ghost.
(The New Testament, King James Version)*

In consciousness,

we all die alone,

we are all born alone.

What exists in between is mystery.

Jack Kerouac struggled with these precepts most of his life, and it was a struggle that generated an impressive body of literature, one that continues to inspire, baffle, and, yes, sometimes repel readers. I have argued that the result of Kerouac's epistemological and spiritual journey en-visioned as the Duluoz Legend is wisdom literature, and I find in Spencer Dew's essay on *Tristessa* a kindred interpretation. Dew takes seriously the intensity with which Kerouac met head on human existence in his effort to understand the being-here of life. Concluding that Kerouac revealed a deep-seeded solipsism, Dew structures an argument that portrays the Kerouacian narrator as unable to extend himself in empathy to others but instead attaches meaning only to his own emotions, thoughts, experiences, and beliefs. This reading of *Tristessa* and, by extension, much of the Duluoz Legend strikes me as legitimate: Kerouac's intensely focused "I" projects that psychological and philosophical stance, which has troubled a number of critics. Take, for instance, this small subset of responders: Seymour Kim threaded an otherwise praise-filled introduction to *Desolation Angels* with direct pleas to Kerouac to change aesthetic direction, finding the omniscient "I" overused and a bore to many readers; Regina Weinreich called it "its [own] demise" (148); and Oliver Harris contended that "Kerouac fell victim to the absolutism of his own artistic principles, and this manifests itself in the

troubled self-consciousness of the first-person narrator . . . his artistic principles resulted in troubling self-consciousness and victimization of others” (12). It seems to trouble Dew as well, who finds the “I” of *Tristessa* a harbinger of the later Kerouac – admittedly a disturbing and pathetic figure.

But I’d like to consider another way of interpreting that “I,” one that may parallel the interpretation of solipsism, or may complement it, or may redirect it. At the very least, it will add complexity to an already complex presentation. Acknowledging, then, that the narrator of *Tristessa* appears solipsistic, I wonder why that is the case. Is it because, as Harris states, Kerouac fell victim to “his own artistic principles”? That seems a reasonable enough place to start.

Harris bases his conclusion on Kerouac’s self-described narrative principle of confessional writing, what Harris calls “autobiographical spontaneity” (9), and this point of departure augments Dew’s focus on Kerouac’s sketching method. The development of sketching as a narrative tool, instigated by his friend Ed White in 1951, allowed Kerouac to engage the material world as a point of meditation, freeing him from the anxiety of influences under which he had written *The Town and The City*. But his earlier discovery of confessional writing opened an even more significant artistic reality for him. As he wrote on Dec. 28, 1950, in an often-quoted letter to Neal Cassady, “There is nothing to do but write the truth” (*Selected Letters* 248). Now this truth was not that of the reporter or the reviewer or the reverend. It was the truth of the penitent who knows at a deeply emotional level that one must repeatedly purge oneself of guilt if one is ever to achieve forgiveness. For Kerouac, a French-Canadian Catholic, that purging process was the confession, most immediately the lived practice of speaking *privately* to another, the ordained priest, of one’s sins. Kerouac began his practice of confessional writing in just this way, jump starting his *Duluoz Legend* as a private confession to Cassady, who served as the intermediary, literally, to God: “. . .this confession is for YOU, and through you to God, and God back to my life, and wife, whatever and what-all” (*Selected Letters* 246). Like many confessors, the process brought him both relief and apprehension: “My report to you in the pit of night, and to God in the pit of night, will carry me through. . . . Still another thing: I hate to begin: I fear” (248). But he plunged forward to compose a stunning account of the early years of his life that concluded with the death and burial of his older brother Gerard.

Kerouac’s personal adaptation of the Catholic confession replicates in some respects the conventional proscribed practice. He tells his story to someone he knows (a parishioner will often know the priest who hears the confession, although he may be hidden behind the confessional screen) and respects as better than he: “no one is as great as you,” he told Cassady, “nor humbler” (*Selected Letters* 247). However, contrary to the institutionalized hierarchical priest/parishioner relationship, it is the tight bond of familiarity through friendship that opened the door to God and forgiveness – not the formal relationship of inferior speaking to superior. Kerouac replaced private confession to a higher, spiritual intermediary with private confession to a bosom confidante, a distinct secularizing of the confessional relationship. This act is consistent with and a legitimate precursor of his serious turn to Buddhist studies in the early 1950s.

Of course, Kerouac did not remain cloistered in the private confessional with Neal Cassady. His missive became the building block for his method of literary construction, in the process eradicating what he called the disturbing need to write “with the mysterious outside reader, who is certainly not God, bending over [his] shoulder” (*Selected Letters* 247). As the seminal text for his literary method, the confessional letter extended the privacy of the confessional into the greater public realm. Kerouac codified variations of this method as “Essentials of Spontaneous Prose” and “Belief & Technique for Modern Prose,”¹ and for the most part his writing remained confessionally driven throughout his Buddhist period, which includes the writing of *Tristessa*, and for the rest of his life.

If I’m reading Kerouac thoughtfully, he seems to be saying that one tells the truth, whatever that may be at that moment, to the confessor, and one can go back and re-tell the truth as one has come to know it or admit that it was. In terms of spiritual salvation, the confession is an open-ended, serial process; so too is literary construction.² Thus Kerouac’s fusion of spiritual and literary practices transitioned from Cassady as listener to an unknown/mysterious reader or “you” that remains linked to Cassady but is also the “you” to whom Kerouac addressed many of his journal entries: another secular and presumably intimate auditor but simultaneously an enhanced version of the mysterious “you” that he tried to escape via confession to Cassady. Following this equation, the response to Kerouac’s texts must be multiple and from not only readers/auditors (mysterious as in both the human and the divine), but also other writers, whom he hoped would follow his method to create a newly invigorated American literature. In other words, he yearned intensely not only for spiritual forgiveness from the Others to whom he confessed, but also for existential communication and artistic recognition.

This complex state is more than solipsism, I believe, since the self Duluoz offers us is inextricably bound to what must have been in his mind both greater *and lesser* Others, and the “I’s” reality is nothing without them, God or human. Here, Kerouac suggests a constructivist understanding of self that I connect with that of philosopher Judith Butler. Butler argues that in the physical act of speaking to another – and I extend this to the physical act of writing – the self is not an isolated, unified reality but instead is “elaborated” in the relational discursive experience” (173). This reality is predicated upon a fundamental recognition that one’s “persistence as an ‘I’” depends upon “the sociality of norms that precede and exceed [one]” since one comes into this world “on the condition that the social world is already there” and immediately meets established norms by which one’s reflexivity is both mediated and constituted. In other words, Butler tells us, “I am outside myself from the outset, and must be, in order to survive, and in order to enter into the realm of the possible” (32).

We see such negotiations in *Tristessa* where, while focused on the narrator’s self, including his obsession with sex and death, the self is inextricably bound to the Other(s) – Tristessa and Old Bull – who become part of his confession because he knows that he has somehow wronged them. In fact, a great deal of the narrative is devoted to describing their physical world, a world to which Duluoz well knows he, unlike Tristessa and Old Bull, is *not* inextricably bound, and this guilt permeates his experience with and of them. In particular, it is Duluoz’s recognition that he wants to, or believes he should, love and learn from Tristessa, but cannot, that drives his guilt. Duluoz as a self is also bound to the

invisible recipients of the narrative who anchor it in the experiences and relationships about which he must confess; these mostly nameless readers simultaneously pave the way to a better life, be it Christian Heaven or Buddhist nirvana. His story becomes truthful only in its linguistic representation *to* the Others, who receive, reflect, and reify it in the act of reception. Kerouac basically declares this in *Tristessa*'s concluding sentence, a direct invitation to Others to respond to the confession: "This part is my part of the movie, let's hear yours" (96). In effect, Duluo, speaking from an autobiographical standpoint of epistemological truth that acknowledges the illusionary state of subjective existence (life is a movie after all), reconfigures the religious act of confession as a secular and literary two-way conversation.³ What this means is that Kerouac constituted a highly complex, if not contradictory, set of respondents, including friends, anonymous readers, known critics, Tathagata, and the Christian God, all expected to recognize the confessional method and respond in kind.

Within this relational mode, the speaker may actually drop from the equation as the reader enters the confessor's space to become the one envisioning reality.⁴ In *Tristessa*, for instance, Esmerelda Tercedera and Bill Gaines are Others to whom Duluo confesses; in *The Subterraneans*, it is Alene Lee; in *Dharma Bums*, Gary Snyder; in *Desolation Angels*, Allen Ginsberg et al.; in *Visions of Cody*, Neal Cassady. I don't know if Gaines or Tercedera ever read *Tristessa*, but public record provides substantial evidence that some who received his confessions did not respond positively to seeing themselves through Duluo's eyes, finding his representations vastly different from theirs. Such reactions should not be surprising: confessions are often ugly, subjective realities and never absolutely true; Kerouac's never were as he played with (or re-membered) reality beyond mere name changes to ward off libel suits. Neither are confessions easy to receive, even if one is simply in silence letting the confessor unburden the soul, which is the case with Kerouac's anonymous readers.

As a cognitive act of trading places, the relational mode that Duluo calls for not only transforms the Others into confessor *but also the narrator into responder*, that is, one with the power to minister to others. Consequently, Duluo's narratives spit forth in repentance often unsavory truths about himself, while verbalizing the discourse of the one who provides relief. Ben Giamo concludes that Kerouac's "overall purpose in writing was to glorify life and *offer comfort and sustenance to readers* despite the antagonisms, hostilities, defilements, contentions, and sorrows weathered on the road and in town and city" (emphasis mine, xvi). I'm not convinced that it was his overall purpose, but it drove much of his writing in tandem with confession. In the role of comforter, Duluo illustrates Michel Foucault's early analysis of the confession, secularized as the institution of psychoanalysis, as a form of discursive control over those to whom one ministers. Since it is Butler whose work is guiding this discussion, I will use her interpretation of him: "Implicit within the Christian notion of the pastor, according to Foucault, is that such a person has sure knowledge of the person to whom he ministers, and that application of this knowledge to the person is the means by which that person is administered and controlled" (161). The confessor in turn comes to speak about him/herself through the same language of control used by the one who ministers, thus increasing his/her own power over others. Such discourses permeate Kerouac's writing – whether it be axioms such "All is well," "You can't fall off a mountain," "No more rebirth," "I am God," "Why travel if not like a child?," "Life is a dream," or "All is

vanity” – the discourses of Buddhism, Christianity, British and American Romanticism, psychoanalysis, and others of hegemonic power function to tell others how to live. In *Tristessa*, the Foucauldian perspective on the control of sexuality gains traction via Duluoz’s frequently use of Christian, Buddhist, and psychoanalytic discourses to shape his attempts at celibacy, his persistent objectification of females as evil yet pretty grave makers, his intense desire to save Tristessa through his touch and his love, and his obsession with the literal disappearance, or wasting-away, of her material body, which attracts yet terrifies him – he must have it, avoid it, save it. Granted, he is speaking about his own beliefs and actions. However, the discourse of the minister, be it Christian or Buddhist, testifies to both the internalization of the Others’ control over him and his subsequent verbalization to Others of those truths. Butler calls this process “desires muted by repressive rules” (163).

In my own thinking, this reading of Kerouac through the Foucault/Butler lens makes sense, but what is even more interesting is to take Foucault’s revised analysis of the confession, which as Butler summarizes it removed the element of repressive rules as well as the need to reveal desires. Instead, the confessor uses speech to “transform pure knowledge and simple consciousness in a real way of living” (Butler quoting Foucault, 12). Here truth doesn’t correspond to reality but is “a force inherent in principles and which has to be developed in a discourse” (Butler quoting Foucault, 163). As Butler explains, “[t]he role of the confessor within pastoral power is no longer understood primarily as governed by the desire to enhance his own power but to facilitate a transition or conversion through the process of verbalization, one that opens the self to interpretation and, in effect, to a different kind of self-making in the wake of sacrifice” (164). In the Catholic context, this sacrifice is the giving up of the body and desire through attachment to the non-human God. Butler sees the possibility of social control in this paradigm, yet understands that it deviates in that the comforter’s role is not to identify preexisting truths but to “facilitate a detachment of the self from itself” (164), which could well be an extremely different mission. In serial confessions, the confessor, then, transforms the self into “a field of interpretation” (164), which seems an apt descriptor of the Duluoz Legend. Kerouac in his various guises repeatedly confesses his personal story, itself assuming various guises, to many Others, including himself, who enter into dialogue with him upon that field of interpretation, where we can clearly see his persistent movement toward a self that is freed from the material world of Luciferian evil and Buddhist samsara to be aligned with the Christian God or with the Buddhist sunyata.

Interestingly, this act calls back into question, and even foregrounds, the very body from which he attempts to escape, since by telling the story one evokes the physical body that did the act. Butler contends, and I agree, that in the physical act of speaking or writing a confession, either “*before* another [or] *obliquely to* another,” the body that did the deed acts again, even in a diminished version of the prior act, and in so doing asserts its own capacities as a material, sexual self. Again, interestingly, with the case of Kerouac and novels such as *The Subterraneans*, *Desolation Angels*, and *Tristessa*, this repeated verbalization of the deeds that reify his body may actually produce narrators who feel perpetually guilty, unable to attach themselves to the non-human. In a formal psychological counseling setting, the listener could help through language to redirect and ameliorate this feedback loop syndrome. However, in an author/reader relationship, the chances of the confession being transformed through intersubjective discourse becomes almost moot; most readers, whether lay or professional, don’t dialogue in any consistently productive way with authors, even in our current cyberworld of blogs, Twitter, and Facebook. And, of course, once an author is deceased, the confession, ironically, continues, but the listener has no one to whom to respond. Consequently, what we see in Kerouac is one reaction to the absence of a viable two-way conversation: the increasingly heightened sense of his own inadequacies, as if the louder and more truthful he speaks, the greater likely hood that Others will respond. But

they do not, and the sense of guilt increases exponentially – the “I” must be obliterated/sacrificed; God must be found; the “I” can never live up to Christ’s sacrifice or Buddha’s wisdom; the “I” has failed on many levels, even that of being a good son and extending love to others such as Tristessa; and the books he writes as confession and comfort fall short or at the very least are misunderstood. The penitent eventually finds himself trapped in a material and linguistic world that refuses to offer relief.

For those who serve as listeners, Butler asks a pertinent question: “what would be the reason for someone listening so hard to desires that are so difficult for the other person to bring forth?” (164). She never convincingly answers her own question, but I posit that one can listen to the confession, whether in a religious, secular, or literary setting, with a genuine desire to help the Other, but such help can only be effective if the listener is trained in the act of listening and understands how to parse the rhetorical nature of confessional language. Few have sufficient training to succeed in any meaningful psychological way. The average reader and average literary critic are even more poorly prepared—and, rightly so, don’t see that as their job. Deriving pleasure through voyeurism may explain their motives, as might the desire to use the discourse of critical analysis to exert power over others. No wonder that Kerouac became progressively frustrated with his reception: many Others, including some of those closest to him, publicly vented their opposition rather than providing the recognition and absolution that he sought and that confession requires. Perhaps he sought the shelter of solipsism, but it was in this world of mystery that Kerouac spent his life – bound by the desires and norms of self and Others generated intersubjectively but with conflicting understandings of the nature and power of these realities.

Endnotes

1. See George Dardess for an insightful explication of Kerouac’s spontaneous prose method.
2. See Tim Hunt’s essay “Hidden Roads: Improvisational Textuality and *On the Road*” in which he analyses Kerouac’s “The Mexican Girl” published in the *Paris Review* and compares to a similar passage from *On the Road*. Hunt concludes: “[W]e can, I think, see that Kerouac’s recasting of “The Mexican Girl” for its *Paris Review* appearance was not a matter of creating a revision of the piece but was, instead, a new performance of it. And in this new performance, this new improvisation, he drew on, but was not bound by, his prior performances of the material, including the scroll and the typescripts that followed it” (11-12). This method nicely parallels the confessional process by which one may tell and then retell an act to a minister in a slight different way. See also “Typetalking: Voice and Performance in *On the Road*” in “*What’s Your Road, Man?*” As I said in my review of the collection, “Advancing the work he did in *Kerouac’s Crooked Road* (Archon Books 1981), Hunt presents Kerouac’s style as ‘an aesthetic of enactment,’ which draws upon jazz improvisational techniques to emphasize process and performance to enact/reenact the past through what he calls “typetalking,” or the performance of the act of oral storytelling in a literary context. The narrative configures the past as a ‘fluid text

shaped by the simultaneous processes of recalling and presenting it in the real time of performance' (181). The performance enables the narrator not only to reflect on the past from a privileged position in its future, but more significantly to experience the past in new ways" (2-3); in essence, fragments from various experiences are retold in new literary forms.

3. Seymour Krim saw something similar in Kerouac's work, writing that his "[t]wo way communication is fading because during the last ten years he taught us what he knows. . . and now we can . . . read him too transparently" (xxviii).

4. Hunt made this point in a paper titled "Kerouac's Dialogue."

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