

Lighting Out for Nirvana, and Kerouac's *Tristessa*

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Were Jack Kerouac's Buddhist beliefs solipsistic? Did Kerouac adapt, formulate, and apply his spiritual beliefs in order to justify, even unconsciously, his apparent disregard for the sufferings of others while salving his own fear of death? On what might we base our analysis? How ought we to regard his literary works? Is Jack Kerouac a novelist? Is *Tristessa* a novel? Ought we to read it as a kind of "how-to" book on living a Buddhism-inspired life?

Are we to model ourselves on *Tristessa*'s narrator (named Jack)? Or ought we to be aware of some subtle self-remonstrance going on in the narrator's guise, a distancing between the narrator and the author (also named Jack)? I haven't heard anybody over the age of twenty argue that we ought to emulate Huckleberry Finn's behavior at the end of his book, or even to accept his often naïve conclusions. After all, one can't take responsibility for the wellbeing of others *and* make like Huck and light out for the Territory. And isn't this in some sense what narrator Jack is doing, metaphorically and metaphysically, shucking off the yoke of sivilization (what he calls *maya*) and lighting out ahead of the rest (into *samadhi*), aware that all's an illusion anyway? And is author Jack letting us know that's what he's doing, all the while aware of the shortcomings of this move? My understanding is that there is art, and then there are artists. I know that Kerouac embodies a Romantic conception of the artist-is-the-art, as when Whitman wrote "Who touches this [book] touches a man," and the Beat dictum, "Mind is shapely, art is shapely," that one achieves artistic or holy (or beatified) sensibility, and then art can't help but to flow out. But there is the old-fashioned Kerouac, too (or especially), the one who loved to see the typed pages pile up, to work on galley proofs, to hold the published book in hand. I hear a voice in Kerouac's novels that is different from the voice I hear in his journals and in his letters. Does this mean his novels are not representing the *real* him, but instead are an artistically crafted revisioning of his self? But as Jack (narrator and author) constantly reminds us, it's all just *words* anyway. It makes no sense to attribute more truth to a novel than to a letter, or an interview. They're all words. Words represent *maya*, the illusion of reality, right? Isn't this his great frustration, after all?

I can read Kerouac for only about twenty or thirty pages before I want a beer, at which point I usually go ahead and get one. Which brings me to another question: what do we mean when we say "reading Kerouac"? My Kerouac bookcase is packed with novels (well, they are categorized as novels by the publishers), as well as poetry, letters, and journals. Oh, and the dozen-plus biographies. And two books of interviews, and while we're at it, several videos of interviews and also ten cassette tapes of recorded interviews. Does "reading Kerouac" mean opening up his books willy-nilly, passing through the borders of the book covers and video tapes and getting at the man's thoughts and beliefs, via a compendium method, as we might when we read the sixty-

some books of the Bible? Some Christians rely on this method: “Well, the Bible says . . .” Kerouac readers perform a similar act of blending: “Well, Kerouac believes that . . .” and we paste together a collage of his novelistic prose, thoughts to friends in private letters, random jottings in journals, and drunken blurtings to interviewers, and each inclusion carries comparable weight. Fans and scholars alike: we seem incapable of looking at one work, such as *Tristessa*, and taking it as a whole, on its own terms. Instead, start on page one of one book, and we get the Kerouac Show. Kerouac himself started this with all his multi-referencing and overlapping characters and his writing-from-life and his announcement that all of his books form one book, the Duluoz Legend.

Spencer Dew concludes his article by recounting the closing scene in *Tristessa*, then adding his own coda:

Jack slumps away, at the bottom of the novella’s last page, to “go light candles to the Madonna . . . paint the Madonna, and eat ice cream, benny and bread.” All empty actions in an empty world, of course, but tasty and exhilarating in their own cheap, temporal way – on the way to the grave, alone.

Dew’s damning verdict on the narrator’s (and author’s) philosophically solipsistic posture completes the opening paragraph’s introduction to “the formalities of the tomb.” To get there, Dew conducts a close reading of *Tristessa* and also brings in various Kerouac sources to support the contention that Kerouac’s Buddhism is not fully satisfying, not an end to suffering, but is instead at best working at dual purposes: when Jack writes about death, he does so to help others cope with the apparent finality of separation, but he also does so to ease his own fears of mortality; when he promotes celibacy, he does so to encourage purity, but also to avoid disease; when he claims that life itself is illusory, he wishes to convince “everybody” that heaven is pervasive, here and now, but also to persuade himself that since the suffering of others isn’t really real, then he need take no action to alleviate it. On this last note, scholar Erik Mortenson comes to a similar conclusion: “Kerouac typically employs Buddhism as a means of avoidance,”¹ and he goes on to cite two women who knew Kerouac intimately. In a panel discussion Joyce Johnson said that Kerouac “misused Buddhism as a way of rationalizing,” and Carolyn Cassady agreed: “He could say, ‘Oh, it’s all an illusion.’ That’s how he sort of resolved things.”²

In *Tristessa*, narrator Jack seems to bring the matter to a close: “There is only the unsayable divine word. Which is not a Word, but a Mystery.”³ This is the same claim he makes in *The Town and the City*, his first published novel completed years before beginning his Buddhist studies. Kerouac wrote about an omnipresent and insidious mystery, maybe because he really sensed a mystery, or maybe because he really wanted there to be one. This is a Romantic notion,

but even more Romantic is the notion of searching for it, of heading out “on the road” toward the ever-receding idea of . . . of what? . . . of utter realization, once and for all, the place beyond beyond, the world past hope and fear. But if you were to get there, where’s the fun in that? It’s the searching that we readers identify with. I for one have always sided with the spiritual seekers who meet frustration along a Sisyphean path. When Hermann Hesse’s Siddhartha achieves enlightenment, he essentially leaves the stage for me, exit stage left, while I continued to identify with his sidekick, Govinda, the guy who didn’t quite get all the way there. William Burroughs resented not being able to bring his typewriter to a Buddhist retreat hosted by Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche because he would rather write than be enlightened; in fact, he resented the whole idea of a writer trying to achieve the cessation of suffering: “Indeed existence *is* the cause of suffering, and suffering may be good copy.”⁴ Isn’t this one reason so many of us identify with Kerouac, because he is *trying* so darn hard to get there, to find the idealized life, and to help us find it too, and we know that he isn’t going to make it and we aren’t either except for those delightful moments when we’re engaged thoroughly in the moment’s enterprise, writing a spontaneously-composed novel, or reading one? I should mention that Burroughs was antithetical to enlightenment for other reasons, too: “The purposes of the Boddhissattva and an artist are different and perhaps not reconcilable. *Show me a good Buddhist novelist.*”⁵ He wrote this in 1976, seven years after Kerouac’s death. Kerouac was painfully aware of the futility of his desire to end desire, of his ego-driven writing actions (who doesn’t want to be known as a great writer) even as he wrote about trying to lose the ego. Dew sympathetically understands these dilemmas. Finally, I’d like to ask, What about the Beatitudes? What about “Blessed are the poor” and “Blessed are those who are weeping” and “Blessed are the hungry”? We don’t see a cessation to their suffering in a here-and-now way, but only in the to-be-redeemed-in-a-life-after-death way. Kerouac is offering cessation of suffering here and now, and he believes in the possibility of it, and, as Dew acknowledges early in his essay, Kerouac envisions his acts of writing as acts of kindness, designed to tell us that everything is really all right.

I am pretty sure that Kerouac was not capable of devising a system of beliefs written out in a set of rules that could withstand much scrutiny. In 1956 he mused on the possibility of opening up a monastery; he had the dream location, Mexico, but that’s where he ran out of ideas: “I can’t imagine what my rules would be, what rules would conform with pure essence Buddhism, say. That would be, I spose, NO RULES.”⁶

To close, I’d like to offer a beautifully sad haiku by the great and tender Japanese poet, Issa (1763-1828). After Issa’s much-loved daughter, Sato, became, at a very young age, the third of his children to die, he wrote this haiku (translated by Lewis Mackenzie):⁷

Tsuyu no yo wa tsuyu no yo nagara sari nagara

[*Dew-world / as-for / dew-world / while-it-is / so-be / while-it-is*]

The world of dew –

A world of dew it is indeed,

And yet, and yet . . .

Issa knows better, but he still suffers. That's human stuff, and Kerouac too is a human writer, not a fully enlightened master. But I get bored reading the works of fully enlightened masters; I don't think that I benefit from them, and this is solipsistic of me, too.

¹ Erik Mortenson, "Keeping Vision Alive: The Buddhist Stillpoint in the Work of Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg" *The Emergence of Buddhist American Literature*, ed. John Whalen-Bridge and Gary Storhoff (Albany: SUNY Press, 2009) 125.

² Mortenson, 129.

³ Jack Kerouac, *Tristessa* (New York: Penguin Books, 1992) 43.

⁴ William Burroughs, "The Retreat Diaries" (excerpt), *Big Sky Mind: Buddhism and the Beat Generation*, ed. Carole Tonkinson (New York: Riverhead Books, 1995) 298.

⁵ Burroughs, 298.

⁶ Jack Kerouac, *Jack Kerouac: Selected Letters 1940-1956*, ed. Ann Charters (New York: Viking, 1995) 547.

⁷ *The Autumn Wind: A Selection of the Poems of Issa*, trl. and ed. Lewis Mackenzie (Tokyo: Kodansha International, 1984) 5.