

“Making More Maya”

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Why do we care about Jack Kerouac? I suspect that for most of us born after the sixties, we come to know of Kerouac, and come to read his work, because of its literary status, and through institutions concerned with the maintenance of literature as a category, rather than because he was a religious thinker. If the original edition of *Tristessa* was published as an Avon Originals paperback in 1960, it was because at that time he was a popular writer and resonated with the spiritual and social restlessness abroad in the land. It is today published in paperback by Penguin, respected supplier of the textbooks our students haul around, and it comes furnished with a forward by the poet Aram Saroyan.

The blurb from Ginsberg on the back, circa 1991, testifies to what is at stake in the difference. He tells us that the “rich natural prose” is “a synthesis of Proust, Celine, Thomas Wolfe, Hemingway, Genet, Thelonious Monk, Basho, Charlie Parker, and Kerouac’s own athletic sacred insight.” Ginsberg thus makes a bid (as he routinely did in the last decades of his life) for the position of Beat writing in a somewhat hipper version of T. S. Eliot’s “tradition.”¹ The individual talent of Kerouac was, for Ginsberg, to give us “prose set in the middle of his mind,” each book a “telepathic diamond.” Ginsberg is smart as ever here, even in a little book blurb: savvy not only about the marketing future of Beat writing in the classroom, but also about Kerouac’s literary form. He crafted the *process* of writing (rather than finished texts), and the writing was made to enact, stylistically, the spontaneous interior language of the man. Though this “telepathic diamond” looks to be in the rough compared to the stream of consciousness style of his Modernist predecessors (Virginia Woolfe or James Joyce, for example) it is nevertheless another experiment in the direction of making writing feel like unmediated expression of interior states.

I would argue that no one would care about Kerouac’s religious thought were it not for the way his writings are thus understood as literature by the various institutions that maintain literature—Penguin Press, the school, we scholars. If not for what we take to be the literary, or literary-historical, value of the *writing* we would have little interest in the religious *thought*, messy as Spencer Dew, Benedict Giomo, Omar Swartz, and the rest of us admit that his religious thought is. To Dew’s credit, he intermittently places the emphasis on the writing as such, suggesting that Kerouac saw writing as the practice of a sort of kindness that would be effective—as teaching—in the context of a world where suffering is irremediable. Surely Dew is right that suffering for Kerouac is simply the fabric of maya, sensuously real, but ultimately remediable only when the veil of maya is finally torn away at the moment of death.

But Dew’s essay does not maintain the focus on writing as such, instead seeking to take seriously the content of the religious thought on display in *Tristessa*. And it comes as little surprise that as religious thought, or as the articulation of religious ethics, the work comes up short. It is this falling short that Dew describes as the solipsistic result of the way Kerouac seeks, through the prose, to collapse the distance between himself and the other—the other mainly being the girl Tristessa. Giomo follows suit, though he arrives at the opposite evaluation of those religious

ethics. He suggests that that Jack really does care for Tristessa as a suffering being separate from himself, and that in an act of sympathy Jack put himself next to her—was “present” for her—in the rock-bottom street for as long as he could humanly stand it. Swartz suggests, in a different way, that Dew is too hard on Jack, that by asking Kerouac to be true to the humane best of both his Catholicism and his Buddhism, we “essentialize” religious life and deny the complexity of its interpretive manifestations, its practice, in flawed and individual human lives. The endings of both Swartz and Giamo’s responses suggest a recuperative investment in Kerouac the Beat Saint—an investment in finding the opportunity to “celebrate” such a counter-cultural hero one more time, to call him and his “holy” again.

For when Giamo admonishes “holy Tristessa, holy Jack” to “take heart,” that’s what he is doing: calling him and *his* holy. The first mistake here is to take the protagonist of *Tristessa* as being Jack Kerouac the writer, and to evaluate, for good or ill, that man’s treatment of his beloved. The second, and more troubling, mistake is to take Tristessa as the human being Jack Kerouac finally boasts of “nailing.” The post-script revision of the story’s ending reveals it *as* a story, as a made thing—Dew points this out when he calls the written version, in which Jack remains celibate, a “happy ending,” implicitly suggesting the ways that the novel bows to, and makes use of, the conventions of its genre. And so when we call “Jack” and “Tristessa” holy we are calling holy an author and his fictionalized creation. “Tristessa,” holy or not, is a tissue of verbal style, a character in a novel.

I’d like to try briefly to push forward, then, Dew’s partly-realized effort to understand Kerouac’s writing as a religious practice, for indeed that is what it was, and it certainly did depend, in this sense, on what Kerouac took to be the communicative power of the practice. But the communication, much as Kerouac generously wanted it to reach out to the whole of humanity, was quite narrowly, in a historical sense, directed at a coterie, comprised of like-minded men, most of them white or Jewish, who assiduously read and promoted one another’s work. This is not a criticism but a fact: it is not, for instance, to say that they promoted each other’s work disingenuously. Indeed, in writing about Ginsberg I have been profoundly moved by his love for his friends, his fearless immersion in the messiest elements of the human condition, his rejection of disgust as a category of response to the world. That he is still writing blurbs, and supplying the cover photo (no doubt for no pay) for his dead friend’s book in 1991 is testimony to the deep loyalty built up through the lives and writing practices—entwined as they were—of this coterie. While the evidence of Kerouac’s life suggests that he was less able as a man to deliver on this sort of generosity, he nevertheless harbored some of the same impulses that Ginsberg did, and we need not take his desire to represent fellow-feeling toward a figure like Tristessa as completely co-opted by whatever solipsism the final writing of that effort suggests.

The fact remains, though, that books like *Tristessa* or *The Subterraneans* were written for coterie readers rather than for whomever that woman is that he met in Mexico and who inspired the character of Tristessa. *Tristessa* was an Avon Originals paperback in 1960, reminding us that by that time the Beat brand, and Kerouac more specifically, was popular enough to be marketed to the new kinds of readers that such paperbacks addressed. In this sense the marketing already suggested the niche but also sufficiently mass audience of the nascent counter-culture that began to come together around City

Lights in the fifties, and that books like *Howl* (City Lights, 1956) and *On the Road* (Viking Press, 1957) had made popular. And the very fear that the woman upon whom Mardou of *The Subterraneans* is based might sue Kerouac for libel suggests the problems Kerouac imagined would follow should the character be held accountable by the actual person that inspired her. But Tristessa, he doesn't need to worry about; whoever she is, she's unlikely to pick up a copy of his book; she is not part of the readership.

Libel is the crime of knowingly disseminating lies about a real person; Kerouac's worry about *The Subterraneans* suggests, to put it bluntly, that lies were being told. To put it less bluntly, it suggests that fiction was being made. Kerouac understood that his fiction was such that it was not inconceivable that one who knew the history would argue that the representation was posing as truth but was not truth. Kerouac was writing at a time when the publishing world had a less highly developed tolerance for the seepage between fact and fiction—in 1960 Joan Didion, who by 1968 was inventing the New Journalism, was still writing photo captions at *Vogue*. (The worry's trace persists in the now-routine disclaimers about resemblance to the real that accompany memoirs and fiction today.) We might think of the grief Richard Wright got for episodes he took from others' memories of their lives and added to his own memoir, *Black Boy* (1945); he'd not thought to protect himself with a disclaimer like the ones we find in, say, Dave Eggers's *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* (2000).

All of which suggests that Kerouac understood his writing to be doing some kind of work in the realm of the real, or in relation to the realm of the real, even while he recognized it as being something created, with the independent status of fiction. He had, in short, made more maya. While I sometimes think, with Dew, that Kerouac treated actual people in his life as simply and only the objects of his shifting thoughts and desires, the solipsistic mistake at issue for us as readers may be our own: we have taken the maya of literary character as the spiritual real and have set about judging it on that basis.

If we resist that mistake, there is so much more to do than to argue about whether or not Kerouac in *Tristessa* is self-centered or caring, solipsistically absent or sympathetically present, a failed Buddhist-Catholic, or a hero of religious synthesis worthy of celebration. For one thing, we can begin to ask what it means to make literature, and in particular, this autobiographically grounded fiction, into a form of religious practice. I argue elsewhere that the desire and effort to do so is in keeping with even the most conservative tendencies in American literary culture from the 1950s right up to the present. As Kerouac was writing his Avon Originals in 1960, the New Critics were describing the act of reading John Donne's poetry around the college seminar table if it were an act of worship. Closer to the Beats, J. D. Salinger made the representation of the human voice—with all its ranges of intonation, detectable in Salinger's highly crafted verbal style—another version of maya, which, as the narrator of *Franny and Zooey* (1961) says, is on a continuum with the state of being with God *before* God said "let there be light."²

Literature of the latter half of the twentieth century is a kind of religious thought, but can't be understood as such without the simultaneous realization that it is already embedded in a newly powerful set of social institutions, including churches, that were changing what literature, and literary form, could mean and do. Ultimately the investment in form as a religious practice—which for Kerouac means the formal *process* of

composition he cultivated in his writing life, made manifest in the form of the writing—had the dual effect of grounding literature’s authority in religious authority (this still works whenever the literature is celebrated as literature because of its religious tone), and of deemphasizing the demands on specific doctrine, ethics, or other content we associate with the stuff of religious teaching. To focus on the latter is not so much to essentialize religion as it is to forget that the religion in question here is the religion of literature, of literary form as sacred.

¹ Think, for instance, of Ginsberg’s late-career publication of the manuscript drafts of *Howl*, which echoes, as a scholarly edition, the publication of the manuscript drafts of *The Waste Land*, by which literary scholars set so much stock in their reading of that foundational Modernist poem.

² For the full argument on this subject, as it relates to popular American Christianity from Vatican II Catholicism to Pentecostalism, and as it comes to bear on literary figures from Salinger and the Beat writers, to DeLillo, Morrison, Cormac McCarthy, Marilynne Robinson, and the *Left Behind* novels, see Amy Hungerford, *Postmodern Belief: American Literature and Religion Since 1960* (summer, 2010, Princeton University Press).