

“Sympaticus Tristessa”

Kerouac was not a systematic thinker. His Catholic Buddhism was a personal vision, an amalgamation of concepts, images, and beliefs—a religious perspective—that gave him a more encompassing language for the ineffable. The vision allowed him to crossover in his prose art from the natural to the supernatural, from human existence to the divine, and vice versa, giving velocity to his pilgrimage from the cross to the void, back and forth, at times superimposed. Of course, he was taking liberty with inherently contradictory metaphysical conceptions of the transcendent. More importantly, however, his vision of Catholic Buddhism was functional—a protective device that enabled Kerouac to confront and escape the death-taint that marked him, to release him from the burden of time and its gloom-shroud, and to allow him to sidestep the tormented state of transient desire. His experience of French-Canadian immigrant Catholicism was deeply ingrained, and his intense study of Buddhism was a very serious undertaking. Although his embrace of Buddhism never led Kerouac to transformative practice—a turning about—it did combine with his Catholicism to produce a fruitful mashup. The result of this can be seen in novels, poetry, and scripture. In short, the enlarged vision was productive, giving him more creative freedom to translate empirical reality into a dynamic transcendental realm.

In his article, “Devotion to Solipsism: Religious Thought and Practice in Jack Kerouac’s *Tristessa*,” Spencer Dew is well attuned to Kerouac’s fusion of Catholic Buddhism. He understands Kerouac’s background and the importance of his religious worldview to his prose art. However, he seems less in sync with Kerouac’s evocation of the Buddhist marks of existence: suffering, impermanence, and egolessness. According to Dew, Kerouac’s penchant for regarding the world as illusory “leads to solipsism, offering a religious justification for

dismissal of the material reality of other people's suffering." He provides a consistent, if not selective, argument for viewing Kerouac's notion of emptiness as a vehicle for disregarding the Other. Moreover, in the novella Kerouac appears to Dew like a poseur, hankering after salvation and offering proofs that all this misery at the bottom of the world south of the border in the junkie streets and spaces of Mexico City is but a dream fueled by Mind Essence—nothing more, nothing less, nothingness abounds. "We are *nothing*," Tristessa intones, and Jack agrees (57). *Shunyata* is the Buddhist notion that all beings are empty, impermanent, devoid of an essence, and characterized by suffering. It permeates all phenomena. Technically, *shunyata* does not denote nihilism; things do exist, but they are regarded as appearances. (Today, all of yesterday slips away. We experience it as illusory. Last week seems like a dream, and 20 years ago might just as well have been another incarnation of ourselves that we barely recognize in photographs.) Nonetheless, Dew selects passages that offer evidence of Kerouac's use of emptiness to suggest nihilism—nothing is real. But such passages result from Kerouac's careless metaphysical stance; the representation of his personal experience and his relationship to poor, sick, junk-racked Tristessa belies such a facile reading of the novella as an unethical form of solipsistic disengagement.

Kerouac's practice of enlightened detachment does not keep him from meeting Tristessa and engaging with her life. He may be self-absorbed, he may be narcissistic, but he is not solipsistic. He does not dismiss but rather registers her marginality and misery. "The pain is real," he states in connection with her morphine sickness (22). He is sympathetic, and such feelings are not a projection of his own pain, some abstraction from inner experience. The sympathy expressed throughout for Tristessa's suffering is not inferential—in keeping with the enclosed solipsistic self—but experiential and intersubjective. Consciousness is extended and

shared through observation, interaction, language, and love. Kerouac sees Tristessa as a person in her own right with thoughts, experiences, and emotions. She has her own pain and cross to bear. And there is Kerouac's involvement with the communal element, that is, the junkie community of Cruz, El Indio, and Old Bull that also militates against the charge of solipsism—that “Jack can't know anyone because he's so deeply insulated in his *self*.” Kerouac does fall into the romanticized trap of racialized authenticity in perceiving Tristessa—a member of the fellaheen—as an angel, saint, and Virgin Mother. If he errs here, it is on the side of reverence and not caricature. This is quintessential Kerouac, for he takes the notion of the Other to an extreme, not just racially, but socially, economically, and culturally as well. Exploitation and dispossession complement addiction and affliction and, as such, define the proper conditions for Kerouac to meet, engage, and love another. He must operate among the lower depths, far removed from the specious comforts of bourgeois materialism that enslave the spirit. This in itself is an ethical stance that allows Kerouac to roam freely within his Catholic Buddhist perspective to meet the Other (himself an Other too) and offer terms for the ineffable, thereby crossing over to an altered spiritual state.

In Part One of the novella, Kerouac signals his interest in crossing realms: “There is only the unsayable divine word. Which is not a Word, but a Mystery. . . . At the root of the Mystery the separation of one world from another by a sword of light.—” (43). Whether framed by the Sacrificial Son or the Enlightened One, he offers up words for the mystery—terms for the ineffable—that attempt to alleviate the suffering associated with an impending mortality and the present troubles experienced by Tristessa and her motley crew—including the birds and animals, for they too are sentient beings. These terms are meant primarily for the audience of readers. (Because of the language barrier, most of the communication between Jack and Tristessa is

rudimentary or nonverbal.) After he acknowledges that her “pain is real,” Kerouac evokes both God and a Buddhist Nirvana to translate her horror into reward—“Tristessa will not be cause of further rebirth” (22-23). Her karma will burn out instantly. This provides us with some assurance that “recompenses all that pain with soft reward of perfect silent love abiding up and down and in and out everywhere past, present, and future in the Void unknown where nothing happens and all simply is what it is” (33). Of course, Kerouac is addressing himself as well. The most striking statement that combines his Catholic Buddhism is one that leaves the residue of the earthly in its crossover to the divine: “Soul eats soul in the general emptiness” (34). In this translation of the empirical to the transcendent, all is not well. There is contamination: in this crossover, we see traces of the food chain, the competitive social system (dog-eat-dog world), and vestiges of the “harsh and stupid earth” (16). Dante’s medieval cosmology also comes to mind. Recall, for instance, Count Ugolino and Archbishop Ruggieri neighboring together in the second ring of the ninth circle of hell, the former gnawing on the back of the latter’s skull. In the main, however, Part One of *Tristessa* tends toward benevolent crossovers from lower to upper realms, and from cluttered to empty spaces.

Curiously, in Part Two of the novella Kerouac’s crossovers are put in reverse, and we witness the divine translated into the human. In keeping with this treatment, Tristessa turns into a “sad mutilated blue Madonna” (73). The abiding love and uplift expressed in Part One turn into mutual hatred and self-recrimination. Troubles persist and deepen: “O there’s been pulque and vomiting in the streets and groans under heaven, spattered angel wings covered with the pale blue dirt of heaven—Angels in hell, our wings huge in the dark, . . . and from the Golden Eternal Heaven bends God blessing us with his face which I can only describe as being infinitely sorry (compassionate), that is, infinite with understanding of suffering” (74). Here the face of God

peeks through the barrier, bending downward from His realm. Throughout this season in hell, Jack is present for Tristessa, decides to keep company with her, even if it means sleeping in the streets, which it does. Clearly, he manages to land rock bottom. When he attempts to catch Tristessa rather than meet her, he realizes his limits and faults. (Do we *catch* a body comin' through the rye, or do we *meet* a body, coming through the rye?)

Kerouac is no Mother Theresa. He realizes that he cannot save Tristessa, for he cannot even save himself. What can he show her that would improve upon the ecstasy or simple solace of death? Although he wants to care for her, he knows he lacks courage. It is an honest self-assessment, replete with self-reprisals for his sense of bad faith, but there is also an implicit critique of masculinity in his failure, for Kerouac is “not much the figure of the man, The Man Who Leads The Way” (82). Nevertheless, despite the fact that he can't give Tristessa what she needs, and she wouldn't accept it anyway, he remains present, he bears witness, he testifies to this fall from grace. And he testifies to it with tenderness. The gentle kiss that Tristessa gives Jack, and the one he returns in kind, attests to a form of engagement—of presence as opposed to absence. But reality sets in: “Quiet evenings at home” with Tristessa—“I'd have to be a junkey to live with Tristessa, and I can't be a junkey” (92-93). After all, like anyone, Kerouac knew his limits. He had more heart than guts.

Kerouac's fundamental orientation—that suffering leads to pity (sympathy) and to universal love—accommodated both his spiritual perspective on Catholic Buddhism as well as his secular belief in tragic humanism. Dew's take on Kerouac in *Tristessa* tends toward the cynical and dismissive: Kerouac's posture of meeting and not catching Tristessa is viewed as unethical, his vow of celibacy reduced to fear of rejection, his later self-realization that such an arbitrary ascetic notion was injurious to Tristessa framed in terms of mood swings, and his

preference for testifying tantamount to indifference. According to this appraisal, even Buddha himself would be regarded as a deadbeat dad. Furthermore, the discussion of Kerouac's late period seems ill-considered. The context for his further dive into alcoholism, which engendered reactionary feelings and bigoted remarks, should be viewed in relation to the disease and his utter disillusionment with self and society. And his continuing struggle to keep the quest alive—even after it had turned into a crisis—needs to be examined. Kerouac's prose art was based on intersubjectivity, embedded within a cultural and linguistic context. This saved him from sliding into solipsism. The fact that he “finally nailed” Tristessa and “got [his] little nogood piece” speaks not only to the lustful male beast in him, but—in a final crossover—to noGood Friday itself. In that natural act one can glimpse something else, for in nailing Tristessa to her cross, Kerouac impaled himself on it as well. “It's the end All is tragic.”

Take heart, holy Tristessa, holy Jack.

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