

TRISTE TRISTESSA

by Eric Ziolkowski

In finding Jack Kerouac's novella *Tristessa* (1960) to betray its author's "solipsism, offering a religious justification for dismissal of the material reality of other people's suffering," Spencer Dew admits being "hardly the first to consider Kerouac's religious worldview as a motivating factor for his work." Ben Giamo, Nancy Grace, John Lardas Modern, among others, have done so. Shifting the focus slightly, I would like to consider Kerouac and *Tristessa* in relation to a deep-seated motivation underlying the academic study of religion: what might be called romancing the "strange."

Qualities of extreme strangeness, mystery, and otherness are ineluctable in any study of perceptions of the divine. This has been true from Lucretius, who wrote of the terrifying crushingness of the gods' "concealed power" (*vis abdita*),¹ up through Rudolf Otto's talk of *das ganz Andere*. But I have in mind something different, an impulse to which F. Max Müller provided a decisive rationale when, playing upon the Goethean saw about the need to cultivate polyglottism, he insisted that to know solely one religion is to know none. Müller's credo made the quest for knowledge of the alien, the strange, the "other," an epistemological imperative for his comparative "science of religion." Moreover, in confronting limitless alien religious data, aspiring "knowers" of religion were to render the strange familiar. "Whether listening to the shrieks of the Shaman sorcerers of Tartary," declared Müller, "or to the odes of Pindar, or to the sacred songs of Paul Gerhard; whether looking at the pagodas of China, or the Parthenon of Athens, or the Cathedral of Cologne; whether reading the sacred books of the Buddhists, of the Jews, or of those who worship God in spirit and in truth, we ought to be able to say, like the

Emperor Maximilian, ‘Homo sum, humani nihil a me alienum puto;’ or, ... ‘I am a man; nothing pertaining to man I deem foreign to myself.’”²

Of course, Müller’s quotation originated not with Maximilian, but with the dramatist Terence, or, more precisely, with a character in one of his comedies. The saying has become a cliché through its repetition by countless historians of religions and other humanists, most of them regarding it more or less as did Gerardus van der Leeuw, who described it as “the triumphant assertion that the essentially human always remains essentially human, and is, as such, comprehensible.”³ For several successive generations of scholars, the conviction was that no matter how foreign or strange the religious outlooks of “Oriental” or “primitive” peoples seemed to “us,” they all would ultimately prove not so alien—whether, as Müller urged, by our confronting the “parallels” between those outlooks and ours, and realizing that “all religions spring from the same sacred soil, the human heart”;⁴ or by our joining James G. Frazer on his “voyage of discovery, in which we shall visit many strange foreign lands, with strange foreign peoples, and still stranger customs,” to discover that “our resemblances to the savage are still far more numerous than our differences from him”;⁵ or by adopting the hermeneutic stance of Mircea Eliade, who proudly spoke of his ability to “recognize myself, as a human being, in the existence taken upon himself by an Australian aborigine. And that is why his culture interests me, and his religion, his mythology.... I want to *recognize* myself ... in my fellow man.”⁶

However, despite the burgeoning vogue for “otherness” among humanists and social scientists in the period since Eliade’s death (1986), few of them now would construe themselves as cohabiting with *alienum* under a universal canopy of *humanum*. While not explicitly denying the humanness of the “other,” scholars today tend to stress the other’s otherness, strangeness, alterity—or *Altarity*, the neologistic title of Mark C. Taylor’s 1987 book which “rethink[s] the

difference and otherness that lie ‘beyond absolute knowledge.’”⁷ A far cry from the old *humani-nihil-a-me-alienum-puto* sentiment, the assumption underlying much contemporary discourse on otherness, meant largely to promote a concentration on the particular and the local as opposed to the general and the universal, crystallizes in Edith Wyschogrod’s claim that “the term ‘other’ loses its force unless self and other are radically incommensurable.”⁸

Which brings me back to *Tristessa*, whose titular subject is based upon the drug-addicted Indian prostitute Esperanza Villanueva with whom an infatuated Kerouac was amorously involved in Mexico City during the latter half of 1955. That same year, Claude Lévi-Strauss’s *Tristes tropiques* appeared in Paris. I mention this because Kerouac’s romanticized, sacral portrait of Tristessa, this sorrowful, emaciated, “sad mutilated blue Madonna”⁹ with a “sacrificial sick body” (53), who declares herself “sad because all la vida es dolorosa” (18), oddly reminds me of Lévi-Strauss’s exaltation of the “primitives” of the Amazon; anyone who visits them, remarked the French anthropologist, will return “sanctified” (*sanctifié*).¹⁰ Yet there is a crucial distinction. Lévi-Strauss, despite all his theoretical divergences otherwise from Müller, van der Leeuw, and Eliade, shares with them the yearning to bridge the gap between his scholarly self and the observed “other.” Kerouac’s Buddhist-Catholic narrator, in contrast, for all his romanticizing of the other in the person of Tristessa, finds her separation from him utterly unbridgeable. Unlike the actual Kerouac with Esperanza, he ascetically refrains from knowing Tristessa in the biblical sense. And, far more importantly, unlike Lévi-Strauss with the Amazonians, he never obtains much if any other sort of meaningful knowledge or understanding of her, as the rhetoric of “strangeness” in which he enshrouds her image from beginning to end reveals perhaps more about him and his solipsism than about her: “I’d come out ... with a vision of Tristessa in my bed in my arms, the strangeness of her love-cheek, Azteca, Indian girl” (8); “I

agree with her, I feel the strangeness of that truth,...I forget what she said ... all lost in the beauty of her strange intelligent imagery” (57); “I keep staring and wondering at this strange woman” (73). His friend Old Bull’s explication, three pages from the story’s close, seems hardly epiphanic: “Junkies are very strange persons” (p. 94).

To the very end, the sad *humana* who is Tristessa clearly remains *aliena* to Kerouac’s narrator, as self and other in their case do indeed prove “radically incommensurable”—to echo Wyschogrod. In this respect, *Tristessa*, if ostensibly an account of unfulfilled love, might also seem the parabolic confession of a failed hermeneut.

¹ *De rerum natura* 5.1233.

² “Lecture on the Vedas, or the Sacred Books of the Brahmans” (1865), in *Chips from a German Workshop*, 4 vols. (New York: C. Scribner, Armstrong and Co., 1870-71), 1:3.

³ *Religion in Essence and Manifestation*, trans. J. E. Turner (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), p. 675.

⁴ “Opening Address ... at the International Congress of Orientalists” (1874), in *Chips*, 4:329.

⁵ *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion*, abr. ed. (London: Macmillan, 1922), pp. 10, 307.

⁶ *Ordeal by Labyrinth: Conversations with Claude-Henri Rocquet*, tr. Derek Coltman (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), p. 137.

⁷ *Altarity* (Chicago 1987), p. xxvii.

⁸ “Value,” in *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*, ed. Mark C. Taylor (Chicago 1998), p. 380.

⁹ *Tristessa* (New York: Penguin, 1992), p. 73.

¹⁰ *Tristes tropiques* (Paris: Plon, 1955), p. 42.

