The Conservative Kerouac

Beat novelist, Catholic, Republican—do you know Jack?

by ROBERT DEAN LURIE

Someone's gonna give you wings
You'll think it's what you need
You'll fly, man, you'll be so high
But your history acts as your gravity

—Joseph Arthur

For someone who documented just about every moment of his life in torrents of breathless, "spontaneous" prose, Jack Kerouac—the late author of *On the Road*, *Big Sur*, and other stream-of-consciousness, hyper-autobiographical novels—remains surprisingly up for grabs ideologically. The hippies claim him as an inspiration, as do many western Buddhists; a biography called *Subterranean Kerouac* attempts to out him as a homosexual; a new film adaptation of *On the Road* starring Kristen Stewart opens the door for the *Twilight* generation; and I wouldn't be surprised if there aren't more than a few Occupy Wall Street protestors hunkering down in their tents with battered copies of Kerouac's *The Dharma Bums* stuffed in their jacket pockets.

Each of these groups is absolutely sincere in its self-identification with Kerouac. Each sees its concerns and agendas reflected in his roiling ocean of language. Yet this bopping, scatting, mystical jazz poet who almost singlehandedly willed the 1960s counterculture into being was himself a political conservative and a Catholic.

How can this be?

The key to understanding Kerouac lies in a close examination of his roots, for it was in the small French Canadian community of Lowell, Massachusetts that the future author was inculcated with the values that would carry him through his life. He did indeed go on to lead a wild existence filled with alcohol, drugs, and perpetual shiftlessness; he fled from monogamy as from leprosy. Yet one cannot grasp the soul of Kerouac unless one understands his fundamentally traditional core. He never wished to foment a revolution. He did not desire to change America; he intended to document, celebrate, and, in the end, eulogize it.

Jean-Louis ("Jack") Kerouac was born in Lowell, Massachusetts in 1922, the son of French Canadian immigrants. His father Leo, like so many immigrants, fiercely loved his adopted country. This belief in the land of opportunity remained with him even after his Catholicism lapsed in the wake of devastating business failures. Jack's conservatism, like his father's, was the conservatism of the old ways: of hard work and even harder drink, of big blue-collar families passing down oral traditions. Above all, it was a conservatism of the natural world: of the large, solid, protective trees, of the perpetually roaring Merrimack and Concord Rivers—all combining to cast that crucial illusion of unchangingness that, in the best of circumstances, cradles and fortifies a soul for its journey beyond childhood. Late in life Kerouac would tell William F. Buckley Jr., "My father and my mother and my sister and I have always voted Republican, always." This had nothing to do with party planks and everything to do with family identity, with holding onto something, no matter how arbitrary, in an otherwise disorienting world. *We're Kerouacs and this is what we do.*

Hand in hand with the politics was the pre-Vatican II Catholicism that saturated Lowell's tight-knit French Canadian community. Gabrielle Kerouac—Jack's mother—matched Leo's civic pride with a fervent religious faith, which if anything intensified after the death of Jack's older brother Gerard, whom Jack would later eulogize as an unheralded saint in the novel *Visions of Gerard*. This was that majestic, fear-some Catholicism that now exists purely in the realm of imagination for most modern practitioners: the Catholicism of the Latin mass, of all-powerful priests, of God as the unknowable, awe-inspiring other. To

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New England’s mostly impoverished French Canadians, the Catholic Church served as de facto government, educator, extended family, and cultural arbitrator. Perhaps as a result of this spiritual immersion, both Gabrielle and Jack saw signs of God and angels everywhere.

“The Catholic Church is a weird church,” Jack later wrote to his friend and muse Neal Cassady. “Much mysticism is sown broaddspread from its ritual mysteries till it extends into the very lives of its constituents and parishoners.” It is impossible to overstate the influence of Catholicism on all of Kerouac’s work, save perhaps those books written during his Buddhist period in the mid-to-late 1950s. The influence is so obvious and so pervasive, in fact, that Kerouac became justifiably incensed when Ted Berrigan of the Paris Review asked during a 1968 interview, “How come you never write about Jesus?” Kerouac’s reply: “I’ve never written about Jesus? ... You’re an insane phony ... All I write about is Jesus.”

Berrigan ought to have known better. But casual readers can be forgiven for failing to grasp the religiosity in Kerouac’s writing. After all, his version of Christianity esteemed visions and personal experience over doctrine and dogma. He felt a special affinity for such offbeat souls as St. Francis of Assissi, St. Therese of Liseux (“The Little Flower”), and Thomas Merton, all of whom to some extent de-emphasized legalism in favor of a direct union with God. Beyond the confines of the Catholic Church, the influence of the painter and ecstatic poet William Blake loomed just as large and perhaps fueled Kerouac’s disregard for what he perceived to be restrictive sexual mores.

Of course, Kerouac is best known not for his lovely Lowell-centered books but for On the Road, a breathless jazz-inflected torrent of words initially typed out onto a “scroll”—actually hundreds of pages of tracing paper taped together and fed continuously through his typewriter—during one epic coffee-fuelled writing session in 1951 and ultimately published in 1957. The book, now considered an American classic, documents the author’s real-life adventures traipsing around the country in his mid-20s with friends Allen Ginsberg, William S. Burroughs, and Neal Cassady who, together with Kerouac, would comprise the core of “The Beat Generation,” the last great American literary movement. Much drinking, drugging, and fornicating ensues over the course of Road’s 320 pages. Not surprisingly, these prurient elements did not endear Kerouac to the mainstream right of his time, which irked the young author, as he felt no affinity for the left.

He never saw the impartial documenting of his own reckless youth as license for others to drop out of society. If anything, the downbeat ending of Road, in which Kerouac predicts the frantic, kicks-obsessed “Dean Moriarty’s” (Neal Cassidy’s) eventual slide into oblivion, as well as his unflinching depiction of his own nervous breakdown from alcoholic excess in the follow-up novel Big Sur, make quite clear the inevitable outcome of a “life on the road.” But Kerouac should not have been surprised by the right’s reaction; this was, after all, not conservative writing. The books did not follow the established standards of the novel and, in reality, were not novels at all but something else entirely: “confessional picaresque memoirs” (a phrase coined by Beat scholar Ann Charters), with the names of the participants changed to avoid accusations of libel. The conservative critics, missing the deeper themes of loneliness and the yearning for God,
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lambasted Kerouac for encouraging delinquency, while critics of all stripes complained about his sloppiness and occasional incoherence.

These commentators had a point: as novels, the books could be frustratingly uneven. Readers often found themselves bewildered by the sheer number of characters drifting in and out of the pages, unable to keep track of all the “mad ones” that Kerouac strained to include in his storylines. Why, the critics wondered, couldn't Kerouac simply create a few composite characters embodying his friends' most noteworthy traits? By any standard such an authorial modification would have vastly improved the readability of the books.

But that was not Kerouac’s aim. He wished to capture the truth, his truth, as best and as purely as he could. And he wanted to do this spontaneously, like a jazz musician wailing on his horn during an onstage improvisation. Revision, in Kerouac's eyes, would only dilute the purity of the original performance. Furthermore, since he viewed his writing vocation as rooted in the Sacrament of Reconciliation: revision was tantamount to lying in the confessional. It might have have resulted in better novels, but they would no longer have been “spontaneous” and “true” novels. And it is the spontaneity and the emotional truth of these books, more than anything else, that continue to speak to readers.

It's easy to approach On the Road with cynicism: an almost rapturous naïveté, or idiocy, permeates throughout. Yet this wide-eyed quality is actually one of the book's great strengths; it evokes the exhilaration of being young, of leaving home for the first time and venturing out into the wider world with an open heart and credulous mind. Kerouac had the beguiling ability to find the admirable and holy in every soul he encountered on his travels, just as he had seen angels and the Holy Mother emerging from every corner in Lowell. And who has not experienced the sweet rush of moral transgression or the anguish of having to accept the consequences of such behavior? On the Road captures those emotions expertly.

Kerouac’s self-destructive nature, which led to his premature death from alcohol-induced hemmorraging, is perhaps the most curious aspect of his life story. Why would a man who worked so relentlessly at his craft, who endured 15 years of obscurity and rejection before his triumphant breakthrough, and who seemed to derive blissed-out enjoyment from even the most mundane aspects of life methodically destroy everything he had worked so hard to attain?

The answer may lie in a combination of near-crippling shyness and the very emotional openness that gave his writing such warmth. A fundamentally quiet, sensitive soul, Kerouac was woefully ill-equipped for the spotlight and had very little tolerance for criticism. Alcohol bolstered his confidence to speak in public and partially anaesthetized the sting of the many bad reviews his books received. Yet it was not enough. His friends watched helplessly as he barrelled onward to his demise, spurred ever faster by the hostile media.

As the apolitical Beat Generation metastasized into the heavily politicized hippie movement, Kerouac’s despondency and sense of alienation deepened. “I made myself famous by writing ‘songs’ and lyrics about the beauty of the things I did and ugliness too,” he said in a heated exchange with political activist Ed Sanders on Buckley’s “Firing Line.” “You made yourself famous by saying, ‘Down with this, down with that, throw eggs at this, throw eggs at that!’ Take it with you. I cannot use your refuse; you may have it back.”

He allowed political differences to play a part in the demise of one of his greatest friendships. “I don’t even particularly wanta see [Allen Ginsberg],” he wrote his friend John Clellon Holmes in 1963, “what with his pro-Castro bullshit and his long white robe Messiah shot. ... He and all those bohemian beatniks round him have nothing NEW to tell me.” This was a one-sided breakup. Ginsberg, by then a famous poet, remained intensely loyal to Kerouac even after Kerouac started publicly denouncing his old friend and hurling anti-Semitic insults in his direction. Ginsberg was wise enough, and big-hearted enough, to understand that Kerouac’s flailing out at him was a symptom of larger issues.

Kerouac’s sad final years were spent in an increasingly frantic quest to find a true home for himself and his mother. On an almost yearly basis he oscillated between Florida and New England, always following the same cycle: purchase a home, move in, grow restless, sell it; purchase another one, move in, sell it; and so on. Tragically, even when he returned to Lowell for a brief time, he found that the nurturing community he had written about so fondly for so many years now existed only in his books. He yearned, as the fictional Odysseus had during his wanderings, for the familiar, for something real and stable in his life. His mistake lay in looking for these things outside of him. Nevertheless, that desire is a good, true, worthy desire, and it permeates all of Jack Kerouac’s writing. It is the reason why the Beat movement could not last. Allen Ginsberg, the poet visionary, pined for utopia and spiritual revolution. William S. Burroughs, the outlaw libertarian, pined for anarchy and gay liberation. Neal Cassady, the exiled cowboy, pined for girls and cars. Jack Kerouac, the mystic, pined for God and home.