Use, exchange, literary values and an American classic: Jack Kerouac's On the Road turns fifty

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After a lifetime of alcohol and amphetamine abuse, American writer Jack Kerouac died a sad death, vomiting blood in St. Petersburg, Florida, in 1969 at the age of 47. "He was a very lonely man," Kerouac's wife, Stella Sampas, said of her husband's twilight years in the *New York Times*obituary section. Kerouac died far from the many gangs and heroes that sustained him as a person and a writer.

There is in *On the Road*(1957)a New York gang and another out West, a hero assigned to each, the novel ending with a tug of war between them for Kerouac's attention. Elsewhere, there are the Greek and French-Canadian kids from the Greek and Little Canada neighborhoods of Lowell, Massachusetts in *Dr. Sax* (1959) and *Maggie Cassidy*(1959), then the Columbia University circle which drifted decidedly in the last half of *The Town and the City* (1950) off campus toward "the hipsters" of the bop era jazz clubs on 52nd street and to those who used "beat", without Kerouac's beatific spin, while sitting about in 42nd street cafeterias. After that came the San Francisco poets, the younger gang of *The Dharma Bums*(1958), and still around in *Big Sur*(1963), though seen by then through the haze of Kerouac's alcoholic delirium. By the time he joined the, now famous, "beat" friends in Tangiers in *Desolation Angels* (1965), he was sick of the whole scene and of life itself.

Soon after, Kerouac got to be less known in his hometown of Lowell as the mill town's writer, than as the town drunk, who was so often scraped off the sidewalks that Kerouac devotees walk—a map provided by a tourist-starved mill town in hand—on their way to Kerouac's modest grave reputedly strewn with offerings left by kids with packs on their backs, his everlasting gang. Kerouac today has a growing number of fans who admire the king of the road with a cult-like devotion. The Kerouac they have in mind is quiet, literate, "cool," as he appeared on the Steve Allen show in 1959 reading to jazz piano two lyrical excerpts, a supplication from *Visions of Cody*, followed by the achingly beautiful closing lines of *On the Road*, both created in three weeks, or so Kerouac proclaimed promoting "the legend" as he called his collected writings (YouTube).

On the Road is, among other things, about hero worship and its dangers. Kerouac as Sal Paradise follows his hero, Neil Cassady as the fictional Dean Moriarty, through four chapters of travel north, south, east and west, in no planned order. In Mexico, Sal, suffering from dysentery, is abandoned by his hero, Dean, who had earlier left the two women, Marylou and Camille, with whom he was alternatively and simultaneously involved, leaving the latter with a child once his buddy Dean, who couldn't find the gang in Denver, turns up.

Kerouac himself, the person, not the iconic image or the *persona* of his novels, proved in the end somewhat disappointing in his use value as a hero. Bad enough that the poet of freedom, kicks and the open road lived with his mother, Kerouac died a bloated alcoholic, a right-wing admirer of William Buckley and a drunken, reactionary guest on Buckley's television program the year before his death. While former associates like Allen Ginsberg and Gary Snyder had leading roles in hippie gatherings, Jack Kerouac, who named and sometimes spoke for the Beat Generation, died estranged from the youth of the 1960s at a time when going on the road and the drugs-and-whoopee scene were commonplace. In his last days, Kerouac spoke darkly of the Jewish Conspiracy and of its agents, like Allen Ginsberg. If the literary marketplace were compared to Wall Street trading, Kerouac's stock sunk at the time of his death to where companies specializing in sub-prime mortgages may be found today, in free fall. Clearly, value in literature is not produced as in other commodities by labor time, or else Kerouac would never have died with $65 to his name and his archives assessed for less than $30,000.

Since then, Kerouac's stock has been on the rise. Somewhere in America, a group of students is even now dressed in black, carrying bongo drums to school and writing spontaneous prose as a class exercise in imitation of the beat generation writers, at least as they are imagined. Shortly, before his passing, William Burroughs, Bull Lee of *On the Road*, had a chuckle when he was recruited to receive students of Jack Kerouac who were recreating Kerouac's first trip—on an air-conditioned chartered bus, with their professor taking notes for a book he would publish on the constructivist learning experience he designed. This cultish approach to Kerouac comes complete with a creation story, relics, artifacts, and sacred sites. A problem, though: like any opiate, this religious devotion distorts judgment and leads to error about Kerouac's actual mode of composition, and an important distinction that needs to be made in regard to the relationship between Kerouac's person and the *persona*of his writings.

It is very attractive to think of Kerouac sitting before an unwinding scroll on which *On the Road* is joyously, effortlessly, spontaneously pouring out, the author confidently translating experience into art, complete and perfect as it comes, the typewriter itself employed like a jazz instrument of "spontaneous bop prosody' in Allen Ginsberg's words. Of course, this myth of creation by spontaneous combustion allowed Truman Capote to call Kerouac's art most damagingly "not writing, it's typing." But Kerouac himself willingly posed unrolling the scroll, and liked to think that his "spontaneous prose" was his special contribution to modernist writing practices. The scroll version of the novel starts with the death of Kerouac's father and resolves the quest with his marriage, and that of his hero Neal Cassady, leading to a new and mature phase of their existence.

Kerouac's marriage did not survive the news that he brought into the world a child, along with the scroll, his smoking typewriter produced. He never acknowledged the child, Jan, and moved in with Lucien Carr of Beat Generation legend whose dog, Potchkey, ate the last section of the scroll, filled as it is with editorial marks, we now know.

In fact, the scroll was part of an archive Kerouac kept in good order all

his life. After his passing, Kerouac's third wife, Stella, was left with his aged mother to care for and his archive. There was a terrific 12-year fight over the archive which the Sampas family of Kerouac's third wife eventually won against Jan, the child Kerouac never acknowledged, supported by Gerald Nicosia, Kerouac's " critical biographer." Since then, the sale of Kerouac artifacts has become a small cottage industry with new items appearing on the market every year. The odd looking raincoat the late-period Kerouac was photographed in went to Sean Penn for $15,000. There was, incidentally, a loopy looking hat that went along with the raincoat for those whose appreciation of literature is enhanced by collecting relics of the writer.

Business is good at Kerouac & Co. Francis Ford Coppola has at last launched his long delayed project to film the book. BBC is cruising the highways and byways Kerouac traveled for a documentary of *On the Road*. The novel sells a hundred thousand copies a year. Judging from the cheat sites on the Internet featuring essays on Kerouac, the work has gained academic respectability and is routinely assigned in Beat Generation courses, among the most popular of the English department offerings. Most importantly, at a memorable Christie's auction, James Irsay, owner of the Indianapolis Colts, turned up in a Jay Gatsby outfit and purchased "the original scroll" of *On the Road*for a cool $2.43 million. The international media has run front-end features on Kerouac's "original scroll" which is being exhibited around the country to mass audiences like the holy text of a mystery religion, and presently on view in Kerouac's home town of Lowell. It is the centerpiece of its effort to promote the writer as its town's hero in the face of some resistance among its older citizens who have in mind a belligerent, nasty drunk, not the iconic images on countless fan sites on the Internet.

There is a precise meaning to "I am beat," first employed *by* Herbert Huncke, a junky hustler and Kerouac's Virgil to the underworld, to mean what it does in *On the Road* where it is first used to refer to an old sweater pulled out of a scruffy bag by a hoodlum on the road, and for marginal people and their dwellings afterwards. For its transcendental meaning, visit the New York Public Library's "Beatific Soul: Jack Kerouac On the Road" exhibition which will run from November 9 to March 16 of next year featuring "the scroll' and many other artifacts, including the railroad lantern from Kerouac's brief sojourn as a working man, eternally preserved in that beautiful piece of writing, "The Railroad Earth," from the collection *Lonesome Traveler* (1960). The New American Library is bringing out Kerouac's "road novels," a good sign as any that the long-ignored author is to be canonized among the classics of American literature. Indeed, *On the Road* itself has been raised to a timeless myth very supportive of American institutions for all the supposed rebelliousness, an example of the freedom and open road of American culture.

That times change, that the good times are not easily held to is a fundamental theme of *On the Road*, and the explicit meaning of the passages Kerouac read during his appearance on the Steve Allen show. As with Heraclitus's river, you cannot step on the same highway twice, especially when there is a barrier of sixty years intervening between the two steps.

Kerouac as Sal Paradise went on the road in 1947 during a period of rising American prosperity that would soon bring bridges and superhighways to the "one unbelievable huge bulge" which is America in the novel. The bulge is still there, huge as ever, but in 2007, the infrastructure is collapsing in unbelievable ways. Mexican or Black neighborhoods are not to rhapsodize about for their "fellaheen" joys and sense of community. Jobs manning fire stations and serving on railways are not easy to get. You can't live on next to nothing in Mexico because the American dollar will not go very far, and the war veterans of Iraq will be given no GI Bill with generous amounts of money to study at the New School for Social Research or to finance a road trip to Denver to visit college friends while completing a first novel. Bus rides are not cheap, and your companions on the "the greatest ride" while hitchhiking to Denver will not consist of Montana Slim and Mississippi Gene, the latter a black hobo with a blond white child running away from home yet. The "beat" hotels and cold-water flats have been turned into condos. The very apartment where the scroll version of *On the Road* had been produced is located in the fashionable Chelsea district of New York where no penniless writer could find an abode today.

It was not so long ago considered a fallacy in literary studies to confuse a verbal artifice with the living person who created the work of art, the man who suffers with the mind which creates, in T.S. Eliot's words. Sal Paradise of *On the Road* will always be 25 years old eternally, gleefully awaiting the next adventure, open to experience, capturing that unique period, the post-war years, with its permissions and possibilities so well that the novel speaks to young people in successive generations, a coming of age classic. Jack Kerouac, the author, has a different trajectory, predictable from *On the Road*, but forming no part in the novel where he is suffused by a sense of grandiosity and feeling of invulnerability characteristic of youth, not the feeling of emptiness, vulnerability and disorientation of his last decade. "We know time," Dean Moriarty often explains, suggesting that time's winged chariot may be outrun. Then came the winter at the end of the novel, betrayal and separation so different from how it all started.

This may be a very good time to read *On the Road* as literature, using the textual sources that have become available and following the path of its creation as a work of fiction, even if the novel is based on real people and events. Viking has brought out a 50th anniversary edition of *On the Road* for the many collectors who had driven up prices for the first edition to $10,000. Kerouac had left behind a rich paper trail for a reading of the work as literature, not a guide to the perplexed. For instance, Kerouac recorded in journals and workbooks his original plans and schemes for the road novel variously named "The Beat Generation," "The Hip Generation," and " On the Road." These have been edited by Douglas Brinkley and published by Viking as *Windblown World: The Journals of Jack Kerouac 1947-1954* (2006).

Out of these notebooks came the first complete version of the novel, the celebrated scroll recently published as edited by Howard Cunnell and as *On the Road: The Original Scroll* (2007). Now, that the scroll, like the Dead Sea Scrolls, has come out, it loses some of its mystery, but allows us all the better to appreciate Kerouac's artistry, and for that matter the superb editing that Kerouac had accomplished under Malcolm Cowley, a lost generation figure who championed *On the Road* and saw the work through publication.

In Bertolt Brecht's play *Galileo* a devotee of the scientist exclaims after the recantation, "Unhappy is the country that has no hero." The scientist answers, "Unhappy is the country that needs a hero." The State Department is looking for heroes to represent America positively. That is why the beat poet Gregory Corso's body was flown to Rome at State Department expense to lie beside Corso's beloved Shelley. There is talk that the US Postal Service is working on a Kerouac stamp and the state of Massachusetts on a Jack Kerouac day. Somehow, in all this, Kerouac's writings are tragically forgotten. Kerouac's works are often at odds with the Kerouac myth. There is danger that the works will be read falsely with the distorting glasses of mythology.