

Jack Kerouac and the Liberal Tradition

by

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THOMAS GORDON BEVERIDGE

**A Thesis/Practicum submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies of The University
of Manitoba in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the degree
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Abstract

Jack Kerouac and the Liberal Tradition

After World War II, many writers found that the pre-war version of American liberalism was unable to explain the horrors of the war and the subsequent rise of communist hysteria; nor could it account for the failure of politics to provide solutions to those realities and for the sense of alienation that prevailed in spite of economic abundance. Therefore, the narrative of liberalism seemed in need of revision. This dissertation takes as its thesis that Kerouac's writing reveals the presence of his attempt to refashion liberalism for himself, that is, to configure the world into a form that made sense to him; through this revision, Kerouac reassesses both his relationship to America and his role as a writer. The thesis begins with a discussion of the cultural and historical conditions in which the need for a new narrative of liberalism arose and looks at several writers in whose work an older liberalism is apparent, including William Saroyan. Subsequent chapters explore Kerouac's early writing in *Atop an Underwood* and *The Town and the City* to locate the presence of that older liberalism and also the emergence of a more accurate liberal vision. The thesis also shows how *On the Road* provides evidence of Kerouac's changing vision; and, by discussing bebop jazz in several texts and Buddhism in *The Dharma Bums* and *Some of the Dharma*, it argues that jazz and Buddhism can be possible models by which liberalism may be revised. The final section of the thesis looks at *Big Sur* and examines Kerouac's role as a cultural icon; it concludes that, at the end of his life, Kerouac had come to a position from which he could understand and accept the complexity of the world and still maintain a sense of wonder.

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Chapter One

American Post-war Liberalism and Jack Kerouac

However much human ingenuity may increase the treasures which nature provides for the satisfaction of human needs, they can never be sufficient to satisfy all human wants; for man, unlike other creatures, is gifted and cursed with an imagination which extends his appetites beyond the requirements of subsistence.

Reinhold Niebuhr

Introduction: The Liberal Narrative

Reinhold Niebuhr's statement above is taken from his 1932 essay *Moral Man and Immoral Society* in which he refers to an irony inherent in modern culture. According to Niebuhr, society enables freedom and allows for the attainment of material goals and appeasements, but society is also its own "nemesis" (1) because, in order for humanity to flourish as a collective and still provide the gratifications that people demand from life, limitations must be placed on human freedom and action. As Niebuhr explains it, the reason for the necessity of these restrictions is simple: "men have not yet learned how to live together without compounding their vices and covering each other 'with mud and with blood'" (1). All of "human ingenuity" –science, technology, art, education, economics, politics, history–cannot prevent the human subject from desiring to fulfill its insatiable "appetites" for acquisition and satisfaction beyond its basic needs, and that

inability is innate and unavoidable since humans are both “gifted and cursed” with a powerful “imagination.” In Niebuhr’s view, any change for the better is not likely to occur in the human character because the probability of that imaginative power manifesting itself in acts of self-interest was simply too great. Further complicating the issue is that the will to satisfy the individual appetite for more than is fundamentally necessary for living is exacerbated in the context of the group; as Niebuhr says, these desires “achieve a more vivid expression and a more cumulative effect when they are united in a common impulse than when they express themselves separately and discreetly” (xii). In other words, individuals will allow the anonymous and considerable power of the collective to do for them what they would never do for themselves.

Niebuhr’s essay was written at the beginning of the New Deal and his assertions about fallen humanity could easily appear to be cynical and nihilistic, especially during a time in which liberal notions of progress, cultural inclusion, rationality, and universal ideals provided hope for a way out of the economic and cultural depression that gripped America and the world. But Niebuhr was far from a prophet of doom. Coming from a theological background, Niebuhr accepted the fallen condition of humanity; he envisioned that a possibility existed for an improvement in the quality of life by the recognition and acceptance of human failing and by the acknowledgment that evil existed along with the good in all human beings. If these all too human characteristics were not entirely reconcilable with the views of the current pre-war liberal culture, then perhaps it was liberalism itself which was in need of reformulation. However, most liberal critical thinkers and writers (Edmund Wilson would be an exception) did not come to the conclusions

about the world that Niebuhr had expostulated years earlier until after the horrors of World War Two—and the subsequent knowledge of human depravity—had become painfully obvious to liberal writers like William Saroyan; by then, American society was beginning to move forward blissfully on a wave of economic abundance. Only after the fact of the War did Niebuhr's prophetic words finally resound so harshly.

Suddenly, writers, like Saroyan or Thornton Wilder—two of Jack Kerouac's models—who had considered themselves liberal politically and culturally prior to the outbreak of the Second World War found themselves on shaky intellectual and moral ground after the cessation of hostilities, when they felt compelled to question many of their assumptions about the political state of the world; they also questioned the limitations of rationality, universalism, and human progress, and even the chances of the long-term survival of humanity itself. As Edmund Wilson cautioned throughout the essays in *Classics and Commercials*, many of the more idealistic liberals needed to reconsider what they meant by the term "liberalism" and therefore, what they meant when they called themselves "liberal," because the earlier pre-war version of the terms seemed incredibly naive in hindsight and could no longer hold in a world that had fallen apart from its center. Thomas Hill Schaub in *American Fiction in the Cold War* says of the period, "[a]s the unwelcome realities of war and politics became unbearably present . . . , the narrative of chastened liberalism that emerged as a result of confronting them [those realities] sought to redefine liberalism and liberal hope along more realistic lines" (7). Obviously, Schaub is referring to several interrelated events that brought those "unwelcome realities" to the surface and made a refashioning of liberalism inevitable and necessary. Among these

formative events were the apparent failure of politics and political negotiation to prevent the war or to provide a workable solution to stop the horrors that ensued; also, the nuclear devastation of Hiroshima and Nagasaki had placed all Americans in complicity with their government in the annihilation of thousands¹, and created a fear of global annihilation that mushroomed during the Cold War. As well, the era spawned the epidemic of reactionary McCarthyism which itself was a response to the threatening presence of international communism and the “domestic redscare” (Hartz 13) that the political right connected with “New Dealism” and interpreted as a direct threat to the internal security of the United States. Liberalism, as it manifested itself in its pre-war dimensions, was not able to explain away these “realities” as simple aberrations of human behavior.

After the War, Niebuhr’s influential views found expression in the revision of that so called outmoded form of liberalism, because writers and critics, anxious to distance themselves from an idealism that seemed reluctant to acknowledge a radically changed world in which human beings may not be fundamentally good or perfectible, attempted to fashion a new and, to them, more realistic vision of post-war America. Schaub calls these expressions the “liberal narrative,” the imaginative reassessment of pre-war conceptions of history, politics, and human subjectivity, and also, a reevaluation of the role of the writer within that “narrative.” Among writers who faced the new realities were the Beats², and my study will examine the way in which a form of “liberal narrative” appears in the work of the most well known Beat writer, Jack Kerouac. The project takes as its thesis that, although Kerouac’s work seems often to be misunderstood as culturally and politically unpatriotic (or not involved with cultural issues at all), and also aesthetically outside the

limits of artistic licence, his writing reveals the presence of an experimentalism not unlike that of Franklin Delano Roosevelt; Kerouac attempts to refashion his relationship to American liberalism for himself, a desire that is motivated in part by contemporary political and cultural upheaval and uncertainty, and through which Kerouac reassesses both his cultural position in America and his role as an American writer³. Following the War, he struggles with the ghosts of an idealistic liberalism, as embodied specifically by William Saroyan and Thomas Wolfe, in a series of experimental attempts to discover a mode of writing that can express his individual experience more adequately than could previous forms of writing, such as Dos Passos' *USA* or Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*, that subscribe to and derive an acceptable order from a pre-war version of liberalism. There is an immense shifting about in Kerouac's post-war writing between the poles of idealistic liberalism and a despairing nihilism, but generally he works toward a vision which we, from our perspective, can see embodied in an American writer like William James who in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* affirms the need to pursue liberal ideals while recognizing the hard truths he had learned from Darwin. Kerouac and the Beats tended to see themselves in opposition to conventional critics and readers rather than in any communicative dialogue with them because the accepted and expected mode of writing was not able to express their own lived experience. Rather, conventional criticism seemed determined to force the literary expression of individual experience into a mold that did not fit the actuality of that experience, and Beat writers were suspicious of any convention that dictated the form that writing could take.

Discussions of liberalism accord in tracing the philosophical roots of liberalism to

Kant's insistence that the individual be seen as the end of political projects, rather than as a means of political action. This celebration of individual value becomes mixed in Jeremy Bentham's political program of Utilitarianism which measured any political act according to the degree in which such an act provided the most happiness for the most people. By the time at which Gladstone forms his political liberal party, liberalism came to mean a belief in the basic goodness of man and a belief in the rights of everyone, with no consideration of race, class, or gender, to enfranchisement in the progressive "good" society. In America these notions seeped into the discourses of both Ralph Waldo Emerson and the early socialists (who founded a community called the North American Phalanx which still exists today).

The liberal ideology⁴ that Kerouac comes to resist in his writing seems to have its literary counterpart in modern American romanticism as it figures in the work of such writers as William Saroyan, Stephen Vincent Benét, Eudora Welty, the early Saul Bellow, and Thomas Wolfe, and this romanticism has at its root the Emersonian faith in the imagination and its capacity for wonder. Kerouac, for instance, seems to be attempting in his first novel *The Town and the City* to emulate not only the style of his literary models Wolfe and Saroyan, but also to embody their liberal notions of wonder, inclusion, progress, universal and knowable truth, and the belief in the ongoing promise of America. However, that novel also reveals a resistance to those conventions in the appearance of Kerouac's emerging new liberal attitude, which was soon followed by his rejection of the traditional novel form as inadequate to his own subjective experience. Tony Tanner in *The Reign of Wonder* examines the preference for "wonder" over "analysis" that characterized

the nineteenth-century and that appears so prevalently in American literature, especially in Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman, and the idea of wonder also appears in varying forms in Kerouac throughout most of his career. Tanner locates the prevalence of wonder in the early American writers in the necessity “to recognize and contain a new continent. The wondering vision was adopted as a prime method of inclusion and assimilation” (10). The sense of wonder led naturally to the “naive vision” in American narrators like Huck Finn (and in *Sal Paradise*, as well), “that deliberate attempt to regard reality with minimum reference to previous familiarity and interpretative knowledge, that enduring preference for wonder over analysis” (11). Tanner comments on Emerson’s own naivety: “[i]t is hard to feel that he has deeply registered some of the more rigorous paradoxes of existence; hard to feel that he ever experienced the chaos within. . . . Thus the problem he addresses himself to is not how to retrain what is dark in man, but rather how to maintain a sense of the enveloping, involving divinity of the world” (26). Emerson’s reluctance to recognize the existence of human evil, as Niebuhr does so effortlessly, would not be out of place in pre-war liberal writers; and it is not out of place in Kerouac, for Emerson’s need to feel the “divinity of the world” manifests itself in Kerouac as a need to see everything as “holy”; however, more than Emerson’s, Kerouac’s writing reveals the dawning realization that everything is not as “holy” as he wishes it were. That sense of wonder at the world coupled with a “naive vision” seems to underwrite the pre-war liberal vision and appears in many writers of the time.

Tanner also refers to the need for inclusion and enfranchisement in Emerson that speaks to a matching need in pre-war liberalism. According to Emerson, if the universe is

present in everything, if the whole is represented by each of its parts, “[t]here is no hierarchy of value or significance operative: *all* details are worthy of the most reverent attention because all are equally perfect and equally meaningful” (37). This uncritical vision, according to Tanner, leads Emerson to miss the complexity of existence, an omission in liberalism that becomes more apparent after the Second World War: “[w]hat is completely absent [in Emerson’s idea of vision] is any sense of a scale of relative complexity, any feeling that small clusters of selected facts can yield a restricted amount of wisdom, any notion of a gradual increase of intelligence, any awareness of various modes of classification, any reference to the accumulating density of experience” (37). In Tanner’s description of Emerson is the indiscriminate nature of American liberal inclusion⁵. Tanner finds a problem with Emerson’s view of experience as being one of passivity which allows the vision to enter the “transparent eyeball,” because without some transformation into words or other medium, communication of those experiences is impossible. As Tanner says, “[a]rt is indebted to the natural given world for its materials: but it adds to nature new arrangements which reveal significances. It forcefully separates things from chaos and flux and sets them in new contexts, new configurations which radiate and preserve values and insights” (358). That attempt to provide those “new arrangements which reveal significances” parallels the attempt to reconfigure liberalism after the War.

Kerouac’s own quest to refashion his representation of liberalism in his writing quickly becomes one that will invest authority in his own narrative voice and also in the validity of his own experience as the inspiration for and subject of his writing. Contrary to

the view of many of his critics, Kerouac was generally not an unapologetic denigrator of American culture; behind his apparent dissent lies a desire to see America recover some of its symbolic and originary ideals, the same ideals that were held sacred by the critics.

While Kerouac's writing is not only or necessarily one of discontent and dissent aimed at the assumptions of the dominant culture and, while it does reassess the role of the contemporary writer, his writing also reveals itself to be one of consensus, unavoidably and heavily invested in what Sacvan Bercovitch calls the symbology of America and enmeshed in the very assumptions of the culture that he would critique. He cannot help, as Bercovitch says of previous critics of American culture, "conforming to a ritual of consensus that defused all issues in debate by restricting the debate itself, symbolically *and substantively*, to the meaning of America" (*Rites* 49; italics in original). As a member of a culture in which liberalism is the dominant ideological perspective, Kerouac could present a critique of that culture by critiquing liberalism and the literary expression of liberal ideals; according to Bercovitch's idea, he "opposed the system in ways that reaffirmed its ideals; . . . dissent was demonstrably an appeal to, and through, the rhetoric and values of the dominant culture" (20).

Kerouac found the dissenting form he sought in the (almost) spontaneously written, thinly-veiled autobiographical fiction that becomes his *oeuvre*, an artistic decision that went against the grain of much current American writing and was subsequently perceived wrongly as cultural radicalism. But, like other writers in the new liberal mode, Kerouac seems to have recognized the importance of acknowledging the subjectivity of individual experience, and the inevitability of human fallibility, weakness, and evil. He also

saw the necessity of creating characters in his writing, including his first-person narrators, who confront or are forced to confront those realities, and therefore, he needed to employ narratives that allow for the presence of human evil, while still leaving room for hope, faith, and the potential for positive, constructive ideas. His most well known work *On the Road*, for instance, is filled with episodes of the main characters' exciting and enervating experiences during their travels, of attempts by Sal to include everyone he meets on his vision of the American road; but the novel also presents many scenes of failure and destructive behavior, of want, hunger, deprivation, and loss on the part of Sal and Dean, and also for others with whom they become involved. As did other Beat writers, Kerouac also saw the need to present alternatives to conventional modes of living in a radically-changed world, and to question the prevalence of materialism and conformity that both dominates and threatens American culture, even as he was being drawn into that culture as an icon of mass media attention⁶. Also, Kerouac takes various paths in responding to and in representing the mix of despair and joy, good and evil, that are products of life in the modern world. These possibilities included going 'on the road' in search of meaning and a sense of his own subjectivity; locating in bebop jazz the sense of spontaneous and creative freedom that he felt was missing in the conformity of America and in the formalist critical apparatus of academia; experimenting with the effect on the imagination of drugs and alcohol; and, becoming involved in Buddhism. But all of those possibilities are subsumed under one form: narrativizing his personal experience as a means of understanding the diversity and complexity of what once was considered universal homogeneous experience; that is, he creates a form of fictionalized narrative from his own experience and shares that

experience as a way of representing the complexity of life in post-war America. I contend that Kerouac struggles with the inadequacy of pre-war liberal ideals as expressed in literature throughout much of his life, although he may not have always been aware that he was doing so; but that struggle manifests itself in his work from the beginning as an uncomfortable dissatisfaction and alienation in the midst of American opportunity and success.

To qualify the scope of my argument, I will state here that, while the terms “liberal” and liberalism” are obviously terms associated with politics and political thought, and while this study does consider the political aspect of changing liberalism as a major element, my main concern here is with liberalism as a cultural point of view that is expressed literarily by Kerouac and others. I am concerned primarily with liberalism as a literary discourse—with how certain writers, whether rightly or wrongly, interpreted liberalism. Therefore, the transformation of liberalism, for my purposes, is best considered as a cultural and literary transformation rather than as a political one, for any ideological change must first be effected through the reorientation of cultural perceptions and modes of conceiving of the world. So, while a new narrative of liberalism can influence the way in which an individual sees the world, a particular vision of the world can also help to create the impetus for a new liberal narrative. As Leonard Williams points out in regard to the perceived need for cultural change, “[w]hen these old [cultural and social] rules no longer hold, when our expectations are not borne out by our experiences, in short, when significant anomalies have accumulated, people then try to create cultural, theoretical, and ideological innovations that would reorient their lives and practices” (92-3). Here,

Williams rightly refers to the possibility of rewriting the liberal narrative as a cultural process. Also, a new narrative of liberalism must arise from the old, because, as Williams says, “for any ideology to be jettisoned in favor of another, the new one must fit with previously held values, beliefs, and ideas. In other words, the new ideology must be ‘congruent’ with those previously held views in order to avoid producing significant cognitive dissonance among, and to have any chance of being acceptable to, the members of society” (37). Like Bercovitch, Williams notes that, “[e]ven the fiercest opponents of an orthodoxy must use its conceptual and cultural materials in order to construct a meaningful and acceptable alternative” (125). I contend that Kerouac expressed his transformed vision of liberalism and of America through his writing, and therefore he attempts to effect that change culturally, rather than politically.

In the following chapters of this project, I will examine texts written by Jack Kerouac at various stages of his career to track his experimental movement toward a rewriting of the narrative of liberalism. Chapter Two will look at his earliest work in *Atop an Underwood* and in *The Town and the City* to locate the presence of both an older form of liberalism and also the emergence of a newer more accurate form. Chapter Three examines Kerouac’s most well known work *On the Road* to show what I believe is his attempt to set up a contrast between an older liberalism represented by the narrator Sal Paradise and a newer form represented by Dean Moriarty. Chapter Four looks at Kerouac’s fascination with bebop jazz and his connection to Buddhism to show how he attempts to form a new vision of the world by employing these two competing discourses. The final chapter discusses *Big Sur*, written after the advent of Kerouac’s fame, to show

his recognition of his unavoidable involvement in the dominant liberal culture as a result of his absorption into mass culture. By that stage of his life, Kerouac is better able to admit the imperfect nature of humanity having experienced the ordeal of notoriety, but he still maintains a sense of wonder and fascination with the world.

This opening chapter begins by discussing briefly the liberal vision that was extant before and just after the Second World War and that informed Kerouac as a citizen of America; certainly Franklin D. Roosevelt's "New Deal" is a formative element of modern liberalism as are Reinhold Niebuhr's exposition of human failing and his critique of potentially destructive naivety and sentimentalism. Niebuhr's ideas also surface in the writing of the so-called New York Intellectuals of the post-war era, Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., Louis Hartz, and Lionel Trilling, and I will summarize their contribution to the renovation of post-war liberalism. My intention is not to attempt a recreation of the post-war "world view" by exhuming the era's prominent voices, nor do I propose to collapse diverse points of view into a seamless discourse of artificial consensus, for such agreement did not exist; my hope is to establish the presence of certain cultural conditions that gave rise to the necessity of a revised liberal narrative and to look at some of the literary and cultural criticism that manifested itself in response to those conditions. The last part of this first chapter provides a discussion of selected works by several writers in which a pre-war version of liberalism seems prevalent. The writing of William Saroyan and Stephen Vincent Benét offers examples of that pre-war liberalism which seemed, after the War, to be in such need of an update; Eudora Welty presents the dilemma of the Southern writer's struggle with new versions of liberalism and presents a picture of a world in which

all are enfranchised; Saul Bellow presents the transition between old and new versions of liberalism in his early novel *The Victim* when Asa Levanthal seeks inclusion within a culture that he alternately rejects and embraces. A discussion of these selected works will pave the way for a similar inquiry into Kerouac's short novel *Tristessa*, in which the narrator's engagement with liberal attitudes is balanced by the ultimate failure of those attitudes to provide a meaningful or satisfying resolution to his desire to include the title character in his world.

The New Deal, Reinhold Niebuhr, and Liberalism

The form of liberalism that comes under scrutiny following the War seems to arise from Roosevelt's New Deal of 1933 and the so-called "Second New Deal" of 1935. These initiatives were installed to ease the economic effects of the Depression, and we must remember that they were more acts of experimentalism than ideologically motivated intervention. Liberal economist John Maynard Keynes, in fact, was one of Roosevelt's advisors, but was not always successful in persuading the President to follow this or that course of action. F.D.R.'s policies appear in retrospect to conform themselves to liberal ideology much more than they probably did at the time to F.D.R. himself who was in effect fishing for anything that would work to cure the economic ills of the Depression. According to historian John A. Garraty, F.D.R.'s policies actually had less to do with bringing the country back to its feet than did the economic benefits that followed the onset of the Second World War. Still both of Roosevelt's deals did institute lasting social

programs that have benefitted the country in large measure. Garraty's claim reveals the kind of duality that Niebuhr noted about liberalism; as Garraty says, "[i]t is a truth still ominous for the future of the American system that no convincing reply has ever been devised to the argument that modern capitalism cannot flourish without the stimulus of massive military expenditures" (329). The New Deal became, itself, an amplification of traditional liberalism, though F.D.R was often skeptical about the liberal philosophy that underwrote the program. Leonard Williams says of the legislation, "whereas liberty once meant the individual's independence from social ties, it would now denote the fulfillment of one's human potential. Whereas equality once referred to mechanical identity or simple equivalence, it would now signal equality of opportunity. And whereas fraternity either was lauded as noble ideal or was ignored as vague sentiment, it could now refer to the sharing of social goods in a participatory community" (49).

Briefly stated, the New Deal, through a series of experimental moves like those of a fiction writer, established wage regulation, labor codes, and the right to collective bargaining that enormously increased the membership and thereby the power of the trade unions, and it provided subsidies and a form of price control for agriculture. It placed under the aegis of the federal government huge national projects like the Tennessee Valley Authority, reducing the ability of Big Business to profit from such interstate endeavors that affected the public interest so profoundly; such projects were enormously beneficial in creating jobs and in bringing cheap electricity and roads to rural America. It ended the monopolies of holding companies that controlled public utilities, and instituted more controls over the operations of banks and over interest rates by federally-insuring those

banks, and it created a system of social security that was paid for by taxes on payroll and wages; it also instituted policies against racism although truly effective initiatives did not appear until the 1960s (Garraty 316-23).

Such programs had the immediate effect of causing "a spirit of bustle and optimism" (319) in Washington and among the general public⁷, while causing great concern within capitalist America. As Eric F. Goodman says in *The Crucial Decade - and After*, Americans "joined in a zest for legislation in favor of lower-income groups, for questioning and nose-thumbing, for chipping away at the crust of social castes" (6). But Roosevelt's Constitutional battles with the Supreme Court over the Court's reluctance to increase governmental powers, even in such desperate times, eventually weakened support for his Administration. Also, the militancy and violence of the labor unions reduced public support for those unions left unchecked by an administration that once counted on their vote; and the President's ill-considered reduction of relief payments in the light of a marginally improved economy put the gradual recovery into a nosedive that further reduced support for his policies. Again, these dualisms that follow such liberal programs seem to support rather than to refute the claims of Niebuhr: self-interest increases within the collective. Liberalism as it appeared prior to the War reveals an acceptance of increased government involvement in the lives of the citizens and in the daily operation of Big Business; an increase in social programs for a greater number of people; and, an opening of racial and economic barriers to allow greater participation by more people. Citizens would have increased opportunity to reach their potential, financially and emotionally, and would feel a greater sense of involvement in the community. The key

concepts in this pre-war version of liberalism become inclusion and enfranchisement for all people, a Saroyan-like sense of innate human goodness, a universality and absolutism in determining precisely what is best for all, and trust in others (including the government) to do the right thing even if doing so meant disregarding self-interest. Following the War, these ideas would seem incredibly naive and utopian, and it is worth noting that the new adjusted ideas which followed them could in fact have been found in William James or George Santayana or even literary critics like Paul Elmer Moore whose vision of a divided human soul had inspired T.S. Eliot.

According to Goodman, Harry Truman was elected by carrying the vote of "labor, Negroes, and most white minority groups," and on the support of half "the farmers and all of the newer middle classes— precisely the segments of the population which had benefited most from the Half-Century of Revolution" that had reached its maturity in Roosevelt's New Deal (90). Truman tried to install what he called the "Fair Deal" (90), but he was not able to push the necessary legislation through Congress (Garraty 390). Truman tried to stake a claim for the distinctiveness of his program, but the Fair Deal was not a great remove from the New Deal except in what Truman called "pace and personnel," jettisoning the "frenetic" activity and the "professional liberals" of Roosevelt's plan (Truman's words, cited in Goodman 92). Truman soon faced a new global political reality that needed a new form of liberalism and that would be the beginnings of what would become the Cold War: in 1949, America was faced with the Communist take-over in China, the knowledge that Russia had nuclear armament capabilities, and the revelations of the Alger Hiss trial that supposedly revealed the presence and influence of Communists at

the highest levels of the government. The rapid change in American life over the preceding years had left most people in a state of suspicion and mistrust of the intellectualism and privilege they saw in Roosevelt's and Truman's administrations, and that apprehension manifested itself in what became known derisively as "New Dealism" (Goodman 120), a questioning of old liberalism and of intellectualism, in general. Goodman describes New Dealism as

an emphasis, a climate of opinion, a collection of attitudes. It was the assumption that the new was better than the old; that intellectuals ought to be leaders; that morals and religion as well as economics and politics were constantly to be re-examined; that progressive education and Freudianism and planned parenthood were to be furthered; that the cocked eye was man's most proper expression. (120)

In short, the resistance to a form of liberalism perceived to be outmoded, dubbed "New Dealism" by the critics, was a rejection of the overly idealistic liberalism of the New Deal (especially as it existed in such popular culture forms as radio, popular song, or in the *Human Comedy*-style works of a William Saroyan) and a movement on the part of the American populace toward a form of liberalism that acknowledged the realities of the new world that America inhabited. This new liberalism was in a sense a resuscitation of 19th-century ideas (Pierce, Holmes et. al.) which had apparently been forgotten, though not by William Faulkner, of course.

Arguably the most audible voice in the reevaluation of post-war liberalism was that of Reinhold Niebuhr⁸. In *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, Niebuhr takes issue with those

naive “moralists, both religious and secular, who imagine that the egoism of individuals is being progressively checked by the development of rationality or the growth of a religiously inspired goodwill and that nothing but the continuance of this process is necessary to establish social harmony between all human societies and collectives” (xii). He restated his thesis in the Preface to the second edition of the book twenty-eight years later in 1960 (and after at least two wars), when he concludes, “I have changed my mind about many things, but I am inclined to think that all of our contemporary experience validates rather than refutes the basic thesis of this volume” (ix)⁹. Niebuhr determines that, since a complete harmony between individual desire and collective action is always impossible, the solution to the dilemma is “to accept a frank dualism in morals” (271). Indeed, the creation of a new narrative of liberalism is an effort to acknowledge that “frank dualism,” and to work toward the understanding and acceptance of that reality. But, he is also careful to point out that, “[t]he needs of an adequate political strategy do not obviate the necessity of cultivating the strictest individual moral discipline and the most uncompromising idealism” (273). An individual acting under the guidance of a strict and thoughtful moral code can only benefit the culture as a whole. Niebuhr’s apparent reading of Emerson leads him to conclude that “the most effective agents [of social redemption] will be men who have substituted some new illusions for the abandoned ones. The most important of these illusions is that the collective life of mankind can achieve perfect justice. . . . It must therefore be brought under the control of reason” (277)¹⁰. Jack Kerouac eventually realized what Niebuhr had stated years earlier: complete collective unity or vast social improvement can only be considered an illusion, but correct action and

the moral improvement of the individual is possible, and individual progress can lead to cultural reform. Kerouac remained loyal to the idea of the sanctity of the individual in creating a personal spirituality that could benefit the world at large.

In *The Irony of American History* (1952), Niebuhr modifies his ideas to suit the new actualities of the Cold War as he recognizes the ironic situation that, although America was more powerful than it ever had been, the country and its people were more insecure about their position in the world and of their safety than they had ever been. As he says,

Our dreams of a pure virtue are dissolved in a situation in which it is possible to exercise the virtue of a responsibility toward a community of nations only by courting the prospective guilt of the atomic bomb. And the irony is increased by the frantic efforts of some of our idealists to escape this hard reality by dreaming up schemes of an ideal world order which have no relevance to either our present dangers or our urgent duties. (2)

Niebuhr notes the attempt of liberalism to explain away these “dangers” and “duties” as anomalies, as products of a temporary human condition that would surely pass. He finds such utopian notions as at least naive, at worst, dangerous; further, this utopianism “has immersed the spirit of the age in a sentimentality which so uncritically identifies idealism with prudence that it can find no place in its scheme of things for heroic action or heroic patience” (145). Such “sentimentalism” appears in the writing of Saroyan, Benét, and at times, in the writing of Kerouac. However, Niebuhr notes that the ironic circumstances in which America finds itself are not insurmountable and can be alleviated “only if American

idealism comes to terms with the limits of all human striving, the fragmentariness of all human wisdom, the precariousness of all historic configurations of power, and the mixture of good and evil in all human virtue. . . . That idealism is too oblivious of the ironic perils to which human virtue, wisdom and power are subject” (133). In spite of these seemingly overwhelming odds, Niebuhr retains his faith in humanity to reinvent itself along liberal lines.

Post-war American Liberalism and its Disciples

Niebuhr’s ideas helped to force those who considered themselves liberals to face the implications of that designation. A counter-argument to liberal naivety appears in the writing of certain New York Intellectuals, Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., Louis Hartz, and Lionel Trilling, whose work helped to promote a more realistic form of liberalism, a project in which, as I argue, Jack Kerouac was also engaged indirectly. In *The Vital Center* (1949), Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. echoes the ideas of Niebuhr in his view of the old liberal vision of the world:

Official liberalism had long been almost inextricably identified with a picture of man as perfectible, as endowed with sufficient wisdom and selflessness to endure power and to use it infallibly for the general good. The Soviet experience, on top of the rise of fascism, reminded my generation rather forcibly that man was, indeed, imperfect, and that corruptions of power could unleash great evil in the world. (viii-ix)

Like Niebuhr, Schlesinger laments hopefully that, in recognition of the fact of human imperfection, “[w]e can act . . . only in terms of imperfect alternatives. But, though the choice the alternatives present may be imperfect, it is nonetheless a real choice” (7).

Schlesinger’s attack on older liberalism includes a very direct and accurate exposition of the kind of liberalism that Kerouac and other social critics found most in need of revision.

Like Niebuhr, Schlesinger finds most disturbing and prevalent in liberal attitudes the “sentimentality,” the avoidance of “responsibility,” and the underestimation of human susceptibility to power (36) that comes from “its sentimental belief in progress” (38). He points out its “fatal weaknesses”: a belief “that history will make up for human error”; a belief “that man can be reformed by argument”; a belief “that the good in man will be liberated by a change in economic institutions”; and a dependence on “an act of faith in order to survive the contradictions of history” (40-1). These weaknesses are exacerbated by the evasion of responsibility for the “concrete consequences” of its “concrete decisions” (41). According to Schlesinger, liberal rhetoric is predicated on “the idea that man, the creature of reason and benevolence, has only to understand the truth in order to act upon it” (41), but such a *non sequitur* coupled with a misunderstanding of human history and a false belief in human perfectibility requires the liberal to explain away why humans do not always act as if they are on the way to perfection (45).

Louis Hartz’s *The Liberal Tradition in America* (1955) offers an evaluation of liberalism from Revolutionary times to the post-World War II era in an apparent attempt to face the actualities of the Cold War and of America’s place in the new World Order, in effect, to create a new narrative of liberalism. But, Hartz, like Niebuhr, recognizes “an

appalling complexity” (7) about any innocence based on idealism, on a faith in absolute morality, and on the failure to recognize the inherent mix of good and bad that constitutes the human subject. Because conformity seems to suggest the cultural control of totalitarianism, Hartz sees it as “the basic ethical problem of a liberal society: not the danger of the majority which has been its conscious fear, but the danger of unanimity, which has slumbered unconsciously behind it” (11). Here, he speaks the language of Kerouac and the Beats who also critique the uniformity and conformity that they saw in post-war America: “The decisive domestic issue of our time may well lie in the counter resources a liberal society can muster against this deep and unwritten tyrannical compulsion it contains” (12)¹¹. Hartz takes note of the public will to force conformity on what Herbert Marcuse calls “defamed humanity” (xxi) and that the existence of such a will was made more obvious to Hartz by the cultural reaction to the Cold War. He says, “in a time of ideological war the judgement of others by our norms brings, by automatic reflex, the passionate and fearful intensification of those norms as they apply to ourselves as well” (Hartz 302). In a time when people direct their own sense of moral absolutism toward others, especially toward other nations, they are also bound to be more aware of those norms and demand their replication in their own culture. They are more willing to rely on moral absolutes and universals in times in which the efficacy of those absolutes should be questioned. Like Niebuhr, Hartz seeks a solution in a transformed liberalism, in “a new level of consciousness . . . in which an understanding of self and an understanding of others go hand in hand. . . . [T]he hope for a free world surely lies in the power for transcending itself inherent in American liberalism” (308-9). In *The Liberal Tradition in*

America, Hartz rewrites the liberal narrative into a form from which it can transcend its old inherent limitations, into a form that attempts to face squarely the realities of his times.

In *The Liberal Imagination* (1950), Lionel Trilling, like Louis Hartz, advocates the necessity of transforming liberalism, but Trilling transposes those polarities onto the aesthetics of literature, and therefore his attempt to refashion liberalism is in the same vein as that of Kerouac. Trilling was acquainted with earlier forms of American liberalism, and because of that fact, his advocacy of change serves to suggest the degree to which, for the average intellectual, an idealistic liberalism had come to replace the earlier Jamesian form. According to Thomas Hill Schaub, Trilling follows Niebuhr in the realization that “both politics and art must subscribe to or recognize the complexities and difficulties of life” (Schaub 21). Trilling questions the absolutes and universal truths that liberalism considered beyond debate and that recently had been exposed as naive; and, he refers cautiously to liberalism not as a well-defined ideology, but as “a large tendency” (x) that in its ambiguity must certainly somewhere manifest “weak or wrong expressions” of which it needed to be made aware so that it might adjust itself to its “advantage” (xi). He posits the connection between literature and politics as a necessity in a world in which “it is no longer possible to think of politics except as the politics of culture,” and since literature concerns itself with issues of “the quality of human life” (xi), it is, by definition, political. His purpose for writing is “to recall liberalism to its first essential imagination of variousness and possibility, which implies the awareness of complexity and difficulty” (xv). But, he also warns that a liberal culture must be wary of its motivation in wanting to create a better world: “Some paradox of our natures leads us, when once we have made

our fellow men the objects of our enlightened interest, to go on to make them the objects of our pity, then our wisdom, ultimately of our coercion. It is to prevent this corruption, the most ironic and tragic that man knows, that we stand in need of the moral realism which is the product of the free play of the moral imagination" (221-2)¹². And, where Hartz and Niebuhr see possibility for cultural change through a transformed liberalism, Trilling sees the novel as the means through which liberalism can be transformed. The novel "at its greatest is the record of the will acting under the direction of an idea, often an idea of the will itself" (266); while the novel cannot "change the world" (278), it can change the way that people think about the world. Like Niebuhr who emphasizes the power of the imagination in determining the shape of the world, as the epigraph to this chapter indicates, Trilling believes that people can change the world if they have a "moral imagination" (222). Kerouac adopts a similar idea for his own work; if people could be shown a more meaningful relationship with the world, perhaps a cultural change could occur. But, such a deeply-embedded view of the world as is liberalism is difficult to depose¹³, and Jack Kerouac never entirely disposes of an idealistic liberalism though he bemoans for years the failure of the promise of such liberalism to be maintained or fulfilled. Kerouac's mature writings are to some degree an arena in which the claims of ideal liberalism compete with his increasing sense of human failure and ineptitude. His style, once a kind of supermarket grab-everything, becomes more of a shifting pattern of grabbing only to let go, of letting go only to grab again, and a sort of liberalist brass ring whose promises of bliss cannot entirely be rejected. Also, we understand that Kerouac's seeming embodiment of liberal visions is not a matter of his conscious choice (he always

claimed to be a Herbert Hoover man), but rather the virtually unconscious absorption of a writer picking up on an American tradition that life is holy, itself possibly stemming from a Roman Catholic tradition, and then forming a lifelong discussion with that tradition. His religious terminology sounds much more like a Whitman than it ever does anything remotely Roman Catholic.

Literary Liberalism: Benét, Welty, Saroyan, Bellow, Kerouac

The expression of liberalism appears pervasively in many American writers who wrote before and after World War Two, and a brief look at some of their work will cast light on the attempts made by Jack Kerouac to refashion the expression of that older form of liberalism in his own writing into a more workable form. Stephen Vincent Benét in his short story "Too Early Spring" (1933) offers a coming-of-age narrative and a lament for a lost past that attempts to resist the uncertainty of change in an age that has suffered immeasurably from uncontrollable change. The story also serves as an example of the pre-war liberalism that Niebuhr questioned. The narrator, Chuck Peters, tries to "write down" the events of his last summer as a boy "because I don't ever want to forget the way it was." He tries to record the events as they happened to him, to preserve and isolate the good memories of the past, and to form a narrative that more closely represents his own experience, because others' versions of the events have "smashed it forever—but it wasn't the way they said" (261). One of the dominant themes in the story is that change should be resisted in favor of a more secure past, and Chuck's attempt to record the events is also an

attempt to protect the narrative from further tampering, to preserve and purify a memory that has been adulterated. Benét's nostalgic story establishes Chuck and his first girlfriend, Helen Sharon, as innocents seeking inclusion in an adult world which they dream of entering "too early." When Chuck notices that Helen is no longer the little girl she once was and begins a friendship with her, he discovers that, "It was like finding something. I hadn't imagined anybody could ever feel the way I did about some things. And here was another person, even if it was a girl" (264). Chuck is no longer alone in the world; he has discovered a feeling of connection and belonging. Mixed with the idyllic situation at the summer resort is a vision of America removed from the hardship of the Depression era in which Benét writes; it is a time more pure and optimistic, but, in Chuck's hindsight, it is also one that has lasting memories of sadness because, as he says, "it's the last happy one I'll ever have" (262). But the Depression need not trouble the vision of America that Benét offers because both Chuck's and Helen's families are wealthy; they have large houses with servants, country club memberships, summer holidays at the lake, and all the trappings of success absent from the lives of most Americans. It is a picture of success to which all can aspire although not one with which many can personally relate. In an attempt to present a story of inclusion that would trigger a remembrance of the lost sense of innocence in readers, Benét's story is one of exclusion masquerading as the life of Every American Boy.

The two teenagers are in a hurry to grow up so that they can begin their new life together and be included in the inevitable success that upper middle-class life in America can offer; but, as Chuck says, ". . . we knew we had to be educated. You don't get as

good a job, if you aren't. Or that's what people say" (265). The tagged-on line at the end of his sentences negates the didacticism of the lines that precede it which present the liberal notion of education as a cure for the ills of society and as a pathway to success, but Chuck's vision of success does not require hard work or knowledge. It is predetermined, at least in his view, because of his position of social and economic privilege. In one scene, the two pretend to be husband and wife when they picnic in an abandoned house. Chuck, impersonating the older husband, says, "'Well, the country's perfectly sound at heart, in spite of this damnfool Congress, I said like Father'" (267). He has absorbed the class assumptions of his parents in regard to the government's interventionist policies without an understanding of the political ideology of the New Deal that forms and reinforces those assumptions. The two imagine living the good life, with servants, children in boarding school, and "radios in every room" (268). The sense of hope and progress follows a pattern of pre-war liberal confidence, a confidence not supported by the actual economic conditions of much of the country in the early stages of the New Deal. Further, their choice for a picnic spot, the abandoned house, is a telling symbol that economic prosperity is not as universal as Chuck's father would suggest. The country may be "perfectly sound at heart," but it is not so robust closer to the skin.

After playing a major role in winning an important basketball game, Chuck goes late to Helen's house while her parents are at a function at the country club. He and Helen fall asleep in front of the fire cuddled together when her parents come home "too early" and make a great scene about the apparently compromised position in which they find the young people. Chuck says, "I don't want to think of any of it. And it is all spoiled now.

Everything is spoiled” (272). The experience of the adult world infringes on the innocence of the young people’s world and instantly destroys any hope they had of happiness together and of their inclusion into adulthood, but it also taints Chuck’s fragile memory of the closeness he felt with Helen. Convicted without trial, Chuck is ostracized from his society, but his trusted teacher, Mr. Grant, speaks to him later and blames the culture for the demise of their relationship: “‘It’s civilization,’ he said. ‘And all civilization’s against nature. But I suppose we’ve got to have it. Only sometimes it isn’t easy’” (273).

Although, in Grant’s view, civilization is not natural, it is inevitable and necessary. What he means is that the conventions of upper middle class America are not natural nor “easy” to accept, but he has internalized those conventions easily enough and has no trouble passing his faith in society along to Chuck so that the young man might internalize them as well and be included in that society. Grant can easily blame the collective for the individual false morality of its members, but he is right in another way, but perhaps not for the reasons he thinks. American culture has led the young people to expect and to hope for too much, too soon, a “too early spring.” As Helen says at the old house, “It takes so long to get old . . . I wish I could grow up tomorrow. I wish we both could” (269). As the story shows, such youthful impatience leads to disastrous consequences. One must wait one’s turn for the spoils to work their way down. Benét’s story is a didactic attempt to set the bar for those Americans who aspire to improve their lot, but at the same time, the story tries to temper the acquisitive nature of American society beginning with its young people, especially those young people who are not (yet) among the wealthier classes, for these are hard economic times. Benét is as aware as Niebuhr that humans have “appetites”

that extend "beyond the requirements of subsistence," and such desires need to be controlled but not extinguished altogether.

Chuck's youthful innocence and sense of wonder has been shattered by the cynicism of the adult world, for the teenagers have done nothing as vile as the adults would like to believe; there is no evidence that Chuck and Helen have consummated their relationship. In contrast to the lost wonder of the young people, Benét seems to attach a flawed morality to the idea of economic success, for although the Sharons are wealthy, they fight and are unhappy for the most part. Further, it appears that the adults have transposed their own questionable morality onto the children, for Mr. Sharon's initial response when he finds the two sleeping is to glare in an accusatory manner at his wife and mutter, "Bred in the bone" (272). But the altercation raises an aspect of the story that Benét's narrator seems not to have noticed and that omission reveals the subtle presence of anti-Semitism behind the inclusive tone of the story. While Chuck's surname is a generic "Peters," Helen's is distinctive in its racial signature: "Sharon." At one point in the story, Chuck's parents express concern about his relationship with Helen, when his mother says to Mr. Peters, "Really, George, how long is this going to last? Sometimes I feel as if I just couldn't stand it. . . . It isn't natural." Peters replies, "The boy's all right. He's just got a one-track mind" (266), insinuating precisely the "one-track" on which Chuck's mind is traveling and revealing his own lapsed moral attitude. Chuck, in his innocence, does not seem to notice or care that Helen is Jewish, and perhaps Benét uses that innocence to present the potential for a young American culture that valorizes inclusion above all else and in which racial prejudice is absent, for this is a culture that includes the

Jewish family into the American good life; the Sharons are, after all, members of the “country club” set. However, the element of naturalism that underwrites the presentation of Eva Sharon as the progenitor of Helen’s fallen morality undercuts the attempts at inclusion. She, too, seems to have been named with some consideration as the scapegoat for the cause of the fall. While Benét attempts to provide an inspiring look at the good life in America, his story exposes the flaws that America needs to keep hidden.

Like Stephen Vincent Benét, Eudora Welty also represents the liberalist vision of inclusion while she resists the sense of exclusion and alienation from contemporary liberal America that is inevitable given her status as a Southern writer. As Louis Hartz says, “[t]he Southerners were thrown into fantastic contradictions by their iconoclastic conservatism . . . and after the Civil War for good historical reasons they fell quickly into oblivion” (8). Because they cannot fully recover the romanticism of a feudal past that never actually occurred in America, Southerners can be particularly sensitive to feelings of alienation while expressing a desire for inclusion in mainstream America. Because the South fits neither the European Old World model nor the liberal American model, “[i]t has been an alien child in a liberal family, tortured and confused, driven to a fantasy life” (8). Welty’s writing reveals the presence of a “fantasy life” while it attempts to place the South and its people within the scope of American liberalism, as if to bring the romanticism of the South under the liberal parasol of the rest of America. Her collection of short stories *A Curtain of Green* (1936-41) exudes the presence of pre-war liberalism throughout, and a look at several examples from the collection will make those liberal attitudes apparent.

The first story in the collection, “Lily Daw and the Three Ladies,” offers a vision

of liberalism in action, but certain events tend to undermine that positive vision. The “three ladies” are the subjects of the story while Lily Daw is the not-unwilling object of their desire to do the right thing. Lily is mentally-challenged and seems to need some degree of care, but not as much as the ladies want to provide. They have arranged to send Lily to a state home where she can receive long-term supervision, but Lily has other plans; she claims that she is about to be married as soon as her beau, a traveling musician, returns for her. The ladies are shocked as “[t]he possible reality of a lover descended suddenly like a summer hail over their heads” (11), perhaps because they have never really considered Lily Daw as deserving of equal participation in their culture. She serves a better purpose for them as the object of their philanthropic, pseudo-liberal attitudes, and, just as “a summer hail” never arrives ‘out of the blue,’ the ladies were clearly never expecting Lily to demand her share of inclusion; they seem to want to rid themselves of her. Appropriately, given the conventions of Southern gentility, their first reaction is one of moral outrage disguised as concern for Lily’s apparently tarnished reputation and no doubt for their own as possible flawed care-givers. However, as they prepare Lily to board the train to the state home, against her protestations, the lover returns, serious about his promise, and Lily is escorted back “down the aisle” (19) of the train to her soon-to-be groom while one of the ladies summons her husband the minister as fast as she can to the musical accompaniment of “Independence March.”

Lily is about to be included in the married world of the “three ladies,” a world of independent living; or more accurately, she is about to become the responsibility of someone other than the collective “three,” even if that someone is somewhat socially-

challenged himself and may not be capable of providing much of a life for his bride; he apologizes, “I don’t hear well” (17), certainly a disadvantage for any musician. Lily’s life has taken a turn, but whether for the better is left unanswerable, as the train “disappeared around a curve” carrying Lily’s previously stowed “hope chest” with it (20), while she remains behind on the platform facing her new life. The three ladies profess a concern for their charge individually, but when they act as a collective, they can convince themselves easily that Lily will “be tickled to death” (3) to go to the home. And, their desire for Lily to live a ‘normal’ life, like their own, seems motivated by their desire to relieve themselves of the responsibility for her; that is, to remove from sight her imperfection and suppress the awareness of evil that she recalls. The story embodies the ideas of Niebuhr on the morality of the group, as well as the liberal quest for the equal enfranchisement of all, even if that inclusion does not bode well for the recipient. Welty shows her endorsement of Lily’s right to be included as an independent member of the ladies’ world; Lily secretly amasses the contents of her hope chest and later agrees to marry the musician without first consulting the “three ladies.” However, their decision to send Lily away and their subsequent quick response to attach her to the stranger reveal the falseness of their concern for someone they have previously subjugated, ostensibly in her own best interest. Their misguided liberal philanthropy leaves Lily essentially bereft of hope watching the train leave the station, although she is now included in the culture, for better or worse.

The expressed desire for inclusion in society at large appears frequently in Welty’s stories as a desire for inclusion within the family. In her widely-anthologized “Why I Live at the P.O.,” the neurotically-funny narrator configures family life as one of competition

for attention rather than as a cooperative effort; however, if one member receives attention and feels included, another must be excluded because there is precious little human kindness to go around in her dysfunctional, extended family. As the prodigal sister and her "adopted" (90) daughter receive more and more consideration, the narrator feels more and more excluded; in the inverted liberal world of Welty's story, it is the victor not the needy who receives the spoils. Finally, out of a distorted version of spite, she excludes herself by moving all she owns and everything she has ever contributed to the family to the tiny post office where she works, "the next to smallest P.O. in the entire state of Mississippi" (92). Rather than admitting defeat, the narrator turns her rejection into a victory of sorts; she has come out in second place in her family squabble and now lives in the second smallest post office in the state. But, after just "five solid days and nights," she can confidently declare her happiness in the separation: "It's ideal," she says (109). However, her tenuous grip on sanity and the other family members' equally spiteful refusal even to pick up their mail, send a letter, or buy a stamp from the office undermines the pleasure she takes in living alone at the "P.O." and also the ideal nature of her self-chosen exile. Her affirmative response in dealing with her family is an effort to be treated as the capable and effective human being that she wants to consider herself; but, although she can convince herself that she has succeeded, her victory is hollow and further alienates her from the world. If read as an example of a liberal world in reverse, the narrator's ironic actions clearly transmit the positive lessons of inclusion, and of cooperation and sharing, attributes that do not enter into the narrative except by their absence. Also, the post office as a government institution functions in the story to support Welty's message of the virtues of a liberal culture. Rather

than as a stable system run by organized and capable people that facilitates community relations, the post office serves to distance and separate people even further *because* of its employee; as the narrator says, "Some of the folks here in town are taking up for me and some turned against me. I know which is which" (110). As Niebuhr indicates, people will not be held together without some measure of external coercion, but Welty uses the refusal of community as an example in her story to extol the benefits of inclusion and fraternity while the story itself shows no reason why people would want to be together in the first place given the disagreeable relations they share.

Family inclusiveness also appears in "Death of a Traveling Salesman," in which Bowman has returned to his sales route following a serious illness; not fully recovered, he is overcome by "the worn loneliness" (233) from his empty life on the road alone, and he becomes disoriented and lost, eventually rolling his car off the road into a ditch. He seeks and receives help from an isolated, rural married couple who are also "alone" (239), but by choice, and not in the sense of the self-inflicted isolation of Bowman. He is once again overcome, but this time by the human closeness of their extremely poor but "fruitful marriage," a "simple thing" (251) from which he has always been excluded. Bowman finally realizes what he has hunted for, but he cannot express it openly, only to himself: "I have been sick and I found out then, only then, how lonely I am. Is it too late? My heart puts up a struggle inside me, and you may have heard it, protesting against emptiness" (243). In the recognition of his exclusion from the comforts of ordinary life, he leaves surreptitiously in the night and runs to his car, but he suffers a heart attack and dies alone, clutching his chest to prevent anyone from hearing his 'protest,' "But nobody heard it"

(253). The unavailability of another human being, even at the moment of death, is the price of the isolation that Bowman has purchased in his life. While Bowman's compassion for the couple and his gift of money for them reveals his need for inclusion, he still suffers the consequences of refusing the comforts of the group, of society, and of human kindness. The story presents the liberal predilection for inclusion as a means of defeating the alienation and loneliness that is inevitable in the modern world, without acknowledging the complexity of life that makes inclusion unlikely or even possible for certain people.

The title story in the collection, "A Curtain of Green," reveals other elements of pre-war liberalism: the desire for order in apparent randomness and for rational explanations to historical circumstance. But here, perhaps uncharacteristically in pre-war liberal writing, Welty seems to acknowledge and accept randomness and complexity as an essential part of life. Mrs. Larkin has lost her husband to an unfortunate accident in which a large tree blew down and crushed him in his car as she watched, helplessly willing him protection from the house, certain that "her love for her husband was keeping him safe" (214). But the two separated, even by a short distance, are not as effectual as they were together, and the randomness of the event has left her in a state of disconnection and alienation. She grows and tends faithfully a garden that, unlike the world of liberal ideals, accepts chaos and randomness as its ordering principle; it is "slanting, tangled . . . , more and more over-abundant and confusing" but one that to her is "familiar" (210), as if she is trying to explain the arbitrary death of her husband by embracing the chaos of the garden. She tries to make up for her sense of futility and loss by cultivating plenitude in "a sort of jungle" (212), but the ongoing struggle only serves to remind her of the impossibility of

establishing order in a random universe. The climax of the story comes when Mrs. Larkin gives in to the arbitrariness and historical inexplicability that she has attempted to face, and she raises her garden hoe menacingly above the head of her young, oblivious helper, as if accepting the randomness of all action, including her own, "too helpless to defy the workings of accident, of life and death, of accountability" (216). Her act seems to challenge the innate orderliness of the world to show itself, as if, like a mad Ahab, she is calling for a sign that order exists, that there is a reason for the apparently random events that occur. And, at that precise moment, "the rain came" (217) at the same time that it always did, "a regular thing" (209), and the boy's life is spared. Mrs. Larkin receives the sign she needed and she hears in the drops, "the sound of the end of waiting" (217); that is, she sees that there is order in the universe, that everything is part of a plan, and that she is part of that plan also. Where Mrs. Larkin had feared a world of chaos, she finds order and comfort. The "curtain of green" that she hid behind and cultivated to explain away the ineffable has been raised. Although Welty seems to be suggesting initially that chaos and the random act are part of life, she hedges in the final analysis and seems to postulate the existence of a sense of order where perhaps there is none. Welty returns the average reader comfortably to the surety of an explainable and understandable world.

Among the writers for whom Jack Kerouac held great fondness was William Saroyan, whose name appears reverently throughout *Atop an Underwood*, a collection of Kerouac's earliest writing dating back to 1936. Kerouac also mentions "reading Saroyan" (probably *My Name is Aram*) in a postcard to his friend Sebastian Sampas sent in October 1940 when eighteen-year-old Kerouac traveled as a member of the Columbia football team

to a game in New Jersey (Charters, *Selected Letters, 1940-1956*, 3). In another letter to Sampas in 1941, he tells of borrowing library books by “Wolfe, Saroyan, [Albert] Halper, Dos Passos, and William James,” and refers to the group as “What men!” (Charters, *Selected Letters, 1940-1956*, 18). Saroyan’s name would appear more than ten years later in *On the Road*, when the narrator Sal describes driving into Fresno, California, “Saroyan’s town” (80). In *The Human Comedy* (1943), Saroyan creates an almost stilted example of liberalism with gushing optimism and faith in the inherent goodness of the human species, in its exclusion of no one and its attempts to find beauty and wonder in everyone and everything, and also in its faith in the moral perfectability of humanity. It uses melodrama extensively in offering a lesson in growing up properly in America, especially from the male point of view. No human is undeserving of love and the world can only be made better for the attempt to love everyone. The novel does not acknowledge self-interest or evil as motivating forces, but only as elements of the human species that can be overcome by kindness, understanding, education, and progress. The novel also blends the cultural diversity of America and the author’s own Armenian heritage into one homogenous mass of humanity, reducing everyone in the process to a generic American-ness. Along with that of Thomas Wolfe, Kerouac would adopt Saroyan’s authorial voice in much of his early writing¹⁴.

Saroyan sets the novel in Ithaca, California, a mythological utopia that is inhabited by charming and loving people, and he focuses on the Macauley family, particularly fourteen-year-old Homer who works tirelessly after school as a telegraph bicycle messenger to support his fatherless family while older brother Marcus is away serving in

the war; younger brother Ulysses (age four) is precocious and full of wonder, but functionally mute. The allusion to ancient Greece and Rome in the naming of the town and the boys connects them to a sense of timelessness and to the faith in universals and absolutes that Saroyan accepts as given. Sister Bess seems present primarily to be the recipient of her brother's patriarchal attitudes; Mother is selfless, caring, philosophical about life, and concerned only with her children but, by extension, with all humanity. As Homer delivers telegrams to the people of his town, he witnesses life in all its glory and pain; his is an odyssey from innocence to knowledge without the accompanying loss of that innocence. The world is a perfect place in Ithaca; it is the universal home and a representation of the possibility inherent in the symbol "America." Homer's supervisor, the aging, crusty, alcoholic telegrapher Mr. Grogan (who dies at the end of the novel as he receives the telegraph report that brother Marcus has been killed in action), gives Homer the opportunity to express the main sentiment of the novel when he asks, "Do you feel this world is going to be a better place after the War?" Homer thought a moment and then said, "Yes, sir" (16). The sense of hope and certainty seems naive and ironic in hindsight.

Homer's ancient-history teacher Miss Hicks also provides a lesson on human compassion and understanding, and offers what could be considered a primer in liberal doctrine and inclusiveness, beginning with the idea of moral equality¹⁵; however, Miss Hicks extends the meaning of moral equality to a Jeffersonian "all men are created equal":

"In a democratic state every man is the equal of every other man up to the point of exertion, and after that every man is free to exert himself to do good or not, to grow nobly or foolishly, as he wishes. . . . Whether one of

my children is rich or poor, Catholic or Protestant or Jew, white or black or yellow, brilliant or slow, genius or simple-minded, is no matter to me, if there is humanity in him—if he has a heart—if he loves truth and honor—if he respects his inferiors and loves his superiors. . . . I want my children to be *people*—each one separate—each one special—each one a pleasant and exciting variation of all the others.” (71-2)

Miss Hicks seems to have absorbed the philosophies of Locke and Jefferson, and she offers them up as an example of healthy individualism and inclusion while disregarding the conformity that her statement promotes. But the novel situates her as an authoritative voice that presents truth which can only be taken by the reader as universal. Later, Mr. Grogan explains his theory of war and reveals his own embrace of liberal ideas; humans are a blend of good and evil qualities, but the evil is really an illness that can and will certainly be cured, not innate as Niebuhr maintains. Human perfectability is simply a matter of time:

“Let me tell you that in war or in peace, nothing is for nothing—least of all dying. . . . All people are one,” he said, “as you are one. Now, as there is mischief in you along with good, there is mischief and good in *all* people. It is mixed in all of them, the millions of them of all nations. Yes, *our* nation, too. As a man’s conscience struggles with the opposites in his own nature, so do these opposites struggle in the whole body of the living—in the whole world. And that is when we have a war. The body is fighting off its diseases. But don’t you worry about it, because the good endures forever

and the evil is driven away every time it appears. The sick body and the sick spirit are always restored to health. They may take sick again but they will always get better, and as each fresh disease comes and is driven off, the body and spirit strengthen until at last they are powerful, as they were meant to be, cleansed of all decay, refined, gentler, nobler, and beyond corruption." (128-9)

As the novel does with Miss Hick's viewpoint, it also presents Grogan's millennial philosophy in an attractive and believable way, for Grogan's vision is liberal America's and has been since the time of John Winthrop's "city upon a hill." Homer shows that he has internalized these lessons when he mentions, "The ideas I get . . . A different world, a better world, a better people, a better way of doing things. . . . I didn't used to know anything. Now I'm beginning to learn—just a little. Just a little more every day" (141).

The positive nature of the immigrant experience in America stands as one of the novel's most endearing characteristics in terms of liberal thought, and probably appealed to Kerouac as a descendent of French-Canadian immigrants. Ara the Armenian grocer comments on life in America:

"We wear good clothes. We put on good shoes every morning when we get up from sleep. We walk around with no one in the streets to come with guns or to burn our houses or to murder our children or brothers or fathers. We take rides out into the beautiful country in automobiles. We eat the best food. Every night when we go to bed we sleep—and then what are we? We are discontented. We are *still* discontented. . . . [to his young son]

Be happy! Be happy! I am unhappy, but *you* must be happy.” (182-3)

Ara’s unhappiness seems to come from some existential sense of aloneness that Saroyan explains earlier as part of the human condition: “Naturally there was a loneliness in each of them, but no one could know for sure that the same loneliness might not be in them had they been seven thousand miles away, back home” (176). Later, Spangler, Homer’s boss, observes the cultural mosaic of Ithaca in a Sunday afternoon park where several different not yet fully assimilated nationalities picnic separately, each with its own music; but the most impressive of the groups to Homer is the last group that Spangler identifies for him: “It was the *wildest*, surely. The music was swing, jive and boogie-woogie, and the dancing was terrific. ‘Americans!’ Spangler said. ‘Look at them. Americans – Greeks, Serbs, Poles, Russians, Armenians, Germans, Spaniards, Portuguese, Italians, Abyssinians, Jews, French, English, Scotch, Irish – look at them! Listen to them!’” (270-1). There is a decided absence of color in the panorama, but the music of America echoes as Spangler waves the starry banner of cultural assimilation and inclusion to signify that it is merely a matter of time until the other excluded groups can be allowed in. As Sacvan Bercovitch says, such apparent exclusion is really “a strategy for absorption. Like the Puritan concept of errand, it was a way of saying ‘not yet’ so that finally one could say ‘you, too’” (*Rites* 50).

Finally, after his older brother’s death, Homer reaches a stage from which he can take his rightful role as head of the family, and he demonstrates how well he has inherited his culture’s patriarchal attitudes when he argues with his sister and her friend who want to work outside the home:

“Never mind finding a job,” Homer said. He was angry now. “You don’t have to find a job, Bess, or you, Mary. Any work that has to be done around here, men can do. Girls belong in homes, taking care of men, that’s all—just play the piano and sing and look pretty for a fellow to see when he comes home. That’s all you need to do. . . .” He was so bossy, his sister Bess was almost proud of him, because never before had she seen him so concerned about *anything*. (232-3, italics in original)

Both males and females alike can “almost” be proud of Homer because at last he can feel openly passionate about an issue, even though that issue expresses an attitude of protective inclusion that actually serves to exclude women from participation in the American good life, despite the wartime example of Rosie the Riveter. Once again, Homer’s attitudes are presented as a form of cultural didacticism, as universals that are already or soon will be obvious to every American youth. Homer and Saroyan have returned order to the universe by the end of the novel; as the narrator says, “The evil color of wrong had been lost in the bright color of right, and together they had become a color more beautiful than the color of right alone” (255). I believe that Saroyan presents a vision of America that reflects the attitudes of liberalism which prevailed before and during the Second World War; his is an attractive world that would appeal sentimentally and effectively to Americans, especially those who have so recently benefitted from F.D.R.’s New Deal ideas.

Unlike Saroyan’s *The Human Comedy* which operates clearly within the pre-war liberal vision, Saul Bellow’s *The Victim* sets up the difference between the old and the new

liberalism by creating a character, Asa Leventhal, who sees himself as a victim rather than as an actor; Bellow then opposes that character with his nemesis Kirby Allbee, almost his exact opposite in terms of liberal attitude. The novel begins with a reference to the "fellahin," the primitive inheritors of the world after the fall of crumbling civilization that Spengler postulated in *The Decline of the West* and that Kerouac would adopt in his own work. In the oppressive heat of a New York summer are "the people, thronging the streets, barbaric fellahin among the stupendous monuments of their mystery" (3). Into that "fellahin" throng, alights Asa Leventhal from the commuter train, forcing his way through the closing subway car doors and into the world, having almost missed his stop. But Leventhal has no possibility or desire of inclusion into that group of chosen ones; he has his mind on a more utopian world. He feels he has escaped falling in "with that part of humanity of which he was frequently mindful . . . , the part that did not get away with it—the lost, the outcast, the overcome, the effaced, the ruined" (20), the victims. But Leventhal is a Christ-like figure who makes himself the victim of any misfortune that falls near him; and, as a victim, he can more easily explain away any evil that affects him. In him is the liberal who wants to belong, to be included, but he uses his Jewishness to separate himself from society when it suits him, feeling he is persecuted because he is Jewish rather than because he is human, and therefore like all humans, prone to error and inexplicable behavior. He cannot recognize in himself the mix of good and evil, and he strives instead to explain away all misfortune in terms of God or fate, or on simple prejudice.

His view is similar to that of pre-war liberalism in his inability to admit the

existence of evil, but he begins to question the tenability of his version of the world when his nephew is taken seriously ill. Leventhal glimpses, but quickly dismisses, a vision of the universe that does not coincide with his experience: he imagines an all-powerful, evil, animalistic overseer of humanity that he cannot associate with God, "something inhuman that didn't care about anything human and yet was implanted in every human being too, one speck of it, and formed a part of him that responded to the heat and the glare . . . all things difficult to stand" (51). And, as a liberal, he finds disconcerting the possibility that a universal and everlasting truth may not be available. He thinks, "Either the truth was simple or we had to accept the fact that we could not know it, and if we could not know it there was nothing to go by. . . . No, the truth must be something we understand at once, without an introduction or explanation, but so common and familiar that we don't always realize it's around us" (169-70). He assumes the presence of unquestionable truth and certainty, but not the presence of evil, even when his own experience tells him otherwise.

But Leventhal gradually begins to recognize a paradox in his ideology that does not match his vision of progress and of the American promise; he thinks, "In a general way, anyone could see that there was great unfairness in one man's having all the comforts of life while another had nothing. But between man and man, how was this to be dealt with?" (79). He also begins to see the limitations of his view of the world, and seems to suggest that some compromise must exist:

You couldn't find a place in your feelings for everything, or give at every touch like a swinging door, the same for everyone, with people going in and out as they pleased. On the other hand, if you shut yourself up, not

wanting to be bothered, then you were like a bear in a winter hole, or like a mirror wrapped in a piece of flannel. And like such a mirror you were in less danger of being broken, but you didn't flash either. But you had to flash. That was the peculiar thing. Everybody wanted to be what he was to the limit. (98)

His interaction with Kirby Allbee makes clear that he cannot possibly be all things to all people, as much as he wants to assuage his guilt over the distinct likelihood that he has cost Allbee his job; but Allbee does push Levanthal to confront a more accurate vision of the world. Arguing with Levanthal about the capricious nature of his God, Allbee says, "But I'll tell you something. We do get it in the neck for nothing and suffer for nothing, and there's no denying that evil is as real as sunshine. Take it from me, I know what I'm talking about. To you the whole thing is that I must deserve what I get. That leaves your hands clean and it's unnecessary for you to bother yourself" (146). But Levanthal really learns nothing; he cannot make the transition from his older vision to one based on the inevitable presence of evil in the world, on the complexity of modern life, and on acceptance and self-understanding.

Although he does not realize it, Levanthal is quick to pass judgement on people, to categorize them as more or less than human when he really has no idea what to be really human means. Over brunch in a deli, he listens to the elder Schlossberg express sentiments that are hardly liberal, but rather than understanding, Levanthal can see the discussion only as a "joke" (135). As Schlossberg says, "I am not a knocker. I am not too good for this world. . . . It's bad to be less than human and it's bad to be more than human" (133). To

try to appear as more than human, like the desire of Caesar to attain godhood, reveals a disregard for human life; to be less than human reveals the same disregard, like the cold acting of a movie starlet who has just killed her on-screen husband for the insurance money. To be human is to recognize what Levanthal as a liberal cannot; Schlossberg explains: “A man is nothing, his life is nothing. Or it is even lousy and cheap. But this your royal highness doesn’t like, so he hokes it up. With what? With greatness and beauty. Beauty and greatness? Black and white I know; I didn’t make it up. . . . If a human life is a great thing to me, it *is* a great thing. Do you know better?” (134, italics in original). Accepting life as he finds it and understanding the difference between illusion and reality are skills Schlossberg has mastered as a talent scout for Hollywood; therefore, to him, “Good acting is what is exactly human” (133), nothing more or less. Levanthal cannot accept such a “black and white” vision of the world; he continually tries to ‘hoke it up’ by looking for the grand scheme behind all human action.

At the end of the novel, he again encounters the now happy and successful Allbee, who has accepted that “The world wasn’t made exactly for me. What am I going to do about it? . . . Approximately made for me will have to be good enough” (294). But Levanthal, still concerned with making the world over as he would like it to be, is still in need of guidance. In the movie theatre, he must be shown to his seat as the lights go out, still calling to Allbee, “Wait a minute, what’s your idea of who runs things?” (294). He remains a victim, but not the victim of an uncaring God or of a society that perpetuates itself by treading on the “follahin”; Levanthal is a victim of his own inability to reconcile his ideology to the realities of a new and changing world.

Bellow deals again with issues of liberalism in *The Adventures of Augie March* (1953). Unlike Levanthal's, Augie's view of humanity does not coincide with the liberal view of the perfectibility of humanity and the progressive move toward enlightenment; he thinks, "You see those marvelous things [art, architecture, ceremonial events] and you think that everything savage belongs to the past. So you think. And then you have another think, and you see that after they rescued women from the coal mines, or pulled down the Bastille and got rid of Star Chambers and *lettres de cachet*, ran out of Jesuits, increased education, and built hospitals and spread courtesy and politeness, they have five or six years of war and revolutions and kill off twenty million people" (82). Augie's philosophy of recognizing and accepting the vagaries of life contradicts the attitude of endless possibility that characterizes the early post-war period; through Augie, Bellow is essentially creating a narrative of liberalism with which his character can view the world, a view that takes into account imperfection and complexity as inevitable and yet still maintains a sense of wonder; he says, "But I had the idea also that you don't take so wide a stand that it makes a human life impossible, nor try to bring together irreconcilables that destroy you, but try out what of human you can live with first. And if the highest should come in that empty overheated tavern with its flies and the hot radio buzzing between the plays and plugged beer from Sox Park, what are you supposed to do but take the mixture and say imperfection is always the condition as found; all great beauty too, my scratched eyeballs will always see scratched. And there may be gods turn up anywhere" (260).

The difficulty of reconciling a liberal philosophy with the realities of the world appears as a prominent theme in Jack Kerouac's short novel *Tristessa*, which he wrote at a

crucial juncture in his writing career, at least, crucial for the purposes of my present study. He began the book during a stay in Mexico in 1955, when he became involved with a group of drug addicts, one of whom was a beautiful, vulnerable woman he named Tristessa. He finished the book after his second stay there in 1956, just before he was summoned back to New York by Allen Ginsberg to await the release of *On the Road*, the novel that would make him famous and that was already “making him a media celebrity” (French 15). After *On the Road*, Kerouac would quickly come to detest publicity and the hangers-on it attracted, and he quickly abandoned most of the idealistic notions about writing that had impelled him from the late-1940s into the early-1950s. When *Tristessa* was finally published in 1960, it “was simply ignored by reviewers” (French 19), in part, because Kerouac had repelled most of the reviewers with his unconcealed disdain and his drunken antics. But it was also “ignored” because of the media hype about the Beat Generation that had flooded American cultural sensibilities and obscured its literary merits behind the sensationalism about the Beats’ largely-embellished adventures and their non-existent threat to the stability of American society. *Tristessa* represents, then, Kerouac’s final novel written before he was struck by fame, just before he was included and quickly rejected by the culture he professed to care for so much. As Barry Miles says, the book reveals “Jack at his descriptive best, his infectious energy still burning” (204). *Tristessa* contains elements of pre-war liberal attitudes that are not drastically different from the writers discussed above while, at the same time, the novel reveals Kerouac’s growing doubt about the viability of those attitudes.

From the beginning of the novel, the narrator Jack Duluoz tries to see the Mexican

people variously as worthy of his attention and himself as worthy of theirs; both he and they a part of the “fellaheen” world that he finds so fascinating because closer to the “pure” nature of the earth. Duluoz sees the Mexican people in a very patronizing and wrong light, as if he absolutely needs them to be representations of the fellaheen, a world that differs from the America that he finds so corrupt. As John Lardas says in *The Bop Apocalypse*, Mexico for Kerouac became “an imaginary space on which he projected his cultural fantasies” (184); but Kerouac allows Duluoz to inhabit the “imaginary space” he has constructed for the novel, a space that reflects attitudes of inclusion and cultural patrimony. To maintain the ‘cultural fantasy,’ Kerouac has Duluoz comment upon, but ultimately overlook, the horrible conditions in which the people live and the deplorable state of their lives of addiction; he seems to find in that squalor a manifestation of a Saroyan-esque style of suffering which he considers as proof of God’s presence. Also, he imagines God looking at him and Tristessa, and “blessing us with his face which I can only describe as being infinitely sorry (compassionate), that is, infinite with understanding of suffering” (*Tristessa* 74). In his manufactured desire to be a member of the fellaheen, Duluoz associates his own “suffering” as an American in Mexico with that of Tristessa and the poor Mexican people he meets. What he sees as “carefree” in the Mexican people is more likely a resigned despair. He says, “Everything is so poor in Mexico, people are poor, and yet everything they do is happy and carefree, no matter what it is—Tristessa is a junky and she goes about it skinny and carefree, where an American would be gloomy—But she coughs and complains all day, and by the same law, at intervals, the cat explodes into furious scratching that doesn’t help” (29). The cat can ignore his flea-bitten

state only so long, then he must react violently, as does Tristessa later in the novel when she is without drugs and suffering from withdrawal. But Duluoz is not yet able or willing to see the corruption and devastation caused by the drugs. He trivializes the life he finds in Mexico City by considering it as just another part of his quest for experience, “the whole of Mexico a Bohemian Adventure in the great outdoor plateau night of stones, candle and mist” (40). His words suggest that he thinks the country exists for him as the wide-eyed tourist, rather than having any inherent subjectivity of its own. He is distinctly middle-American in his attitude and condescending toward people he admires as a curiosity.

Duluoz professes his love for Tristessa, but that love seems to be based on his idealized reconfiguration of her as a mixture of saint and tragic figure, as a figure both less and more than human from another culture who is in need of inclusion. Even her name is an abstraction, Spanish for “sadness.” Ben Giomo in *Kerouac, the Word and the Way* refers to her as an “icon” who “combined the verities of the invisible world (humility and piety) along with the afflictions of the visible world (poverty and suffering)” (101). Duluoz describes in iconic terms:

that face so expressive of the pain and loveliness that went no doubt into the making of this fatal world . . . the fragile and holy countenance of poor Tristessa, the tremulous bravery of her little junk-racked body . . . the bundle of death and beauty—all pure Form standing in front of me . . . And all the concomitant lovelinesses of a lovely woman a young man in a far-off country should yearn to stay for—I was traveling around in circles in North America in many a gray tragedy. (52)

But he also holds the same compassionate attitude toward the many animals in the first part of the story, and they, like Tristessa, do not reciprocate his affection. The Chihuahua would "squeal in pain" (13) when he touched her; the hen refuses his touch and "just stares at my hand reasonably and doubtfully" (20); he says, "I wanta make friends with the rooster too" (21), but the animal only "screams, he howls" under the bed (13); of the dove, he simply says, "I can't touch her" (26). Only the kitten allows some limited contact but only, it seems, because it is hungry. Duluoz's attempts at inclusion are rejected, but he continually refuses to see the rejection as such, preferring unrealistically to consider himself as one of the suffering "angels in hell" (74). The "gray tragedy" he finds as part of his travels is not his to partake in; he is an observer of the tragedy that is Tristessa's life.

Duluoz seems to need Tristessa to be the fellaheen princess corrupted by the evils of the Western world so that he might ease his own vaguely motivated sense of guilt and save her from that fallen world, restoring the sense of innocence he finds lacking in his own life and in America. But, throughout the novel, Duluoz exists from one drugged and drunken binge to another. He says, using one of Kerouac's most consistent images of America: "The sun comes up orange over piles of red brick and plaster dust somewhere, it's the wee North America of my Indian Dreams but now I'm too gone to realize anything or understand, all I wanta do is sleep, next to Tristessa" (77). But here, the "red brick" is not in the form of buildings or walls but in unconstructed or destructed "piles" and "dust."¹⁶ He also acknowledges his vision of Mexico from his "Indian Dreams" but that particular Mexico is corrupted by his persistent intoxication. Here Kerouac begins to reveal the irony of the novel: while Duluoz has been chasing the mistaken ideal of

fellahen Mexico and its physical representation in Tristessa's innocent purity, he is too corrupted himself by his vision to see that Tristessa is anything but innocent (in the end, she chooses to marry the elderly drug addict Bull Gaines and wed herself to his access to morphine rather than become Duluoz's wife). His tragic misreading of Tristessa parallels his misreading of Mexico as a place of spiritual renewal, for it is anything but that; later, he is robbed by a group of Tristessa's friends, an action which exposes his own innocence and gullibility. To them, he is the ugly American mark. Also, Tristessa, who has "come to visit" him in his room (53-9) has actually come to him for money to buy drugs, for which she offers herself, but Jack does not see that she is quite willing to prostitute herself to him for drug money. He still says of her, "I'd run across a Saint in Modern Mexico" (58). Mexico is no more a place of regeneration for Duluoz than is Tristessa a saint, but in the end, Jack seems to have seen what he needs. He ends the novel, "I'll write long sad tales about people in the legend of my life—This part is my part of the movie, let's hear yours" (96). His experience on his "Bohemian Adventure" has allowed him to believe that he has discovered an innate spirituality in even the most diminished creatures; all is holy and full of wonder; but he has failed to see the mix of good and evil in his saint, Tristessa. His failure is, in a significant sense, a failure of the liberal vision to differentiate between those who can and want to be included and those who cannot and do not want to be; as Niebuhr suggests, the imagination can liberate or it can succumb to its own excesses, as does Duluoz's.

The "long sad tales about people in the legend" of Duluoz that make up the major part of Kerouac's writing come from his experience, as does *Tristessa*. The story that Jack

Duluoz tells of his fascination with Tristessa and her world reveals his absorption of attitudes of enfranchisement and inclusion, an attempt to bring the addict into a mythology of spirituality to which she has no proper claim; his vision of her does not match her own self-construction. Duluoz wants to include her just as he wants to include the animals, as representations of the suffering of human existence, but ironically, it is Duluoz himself who is excluded because he cannot understand the life of a drug addict as can Bull Gaines. Also, his attempted inclusion of himself into the fellaheen world fails as do his misguided attempts to provide help for someone who does not want that help. Toward the end of the novel, Duluoz expresses directly his internalized attitudes when he says, "Tristessa needs my help but wont take it and I wont give it—yet, supposing everybody in the world devoted himself to helping others all day long, because of a dream or a vision of the freedom of eternity, then wouldnt the world be a garden?" (89). But Duluoz has devoted himself to helping Tristessa, and the world he sees is anything but a garden. Within the frame of the novel, Duluoz seems genuinely surprised by his inability to find inclusion in Tristessa's world and by her reluctance to seek inclusion in his; but, all his attempts to embrace such notions are undercut by his vision of selfless devotion to the underprivileged.

However, Duluoz is a literary construction of the author Jack Kerouac, and not Kerouac himself. Outside the narrative frame of the story, Kerouac seems to have been well aware of the futility in trying to include everyone and everything. He chose to omit certain events from his two Mexican stays with the person on whom Tristessa was modeled, Esperanza Villaneuva, seemingly because the events did not reflect the attitudes

that Duluoze attempted to impose on the Tristessa. As biographer Barry Miles said of the second *Tristessa* period in 1956, "Jack's use of her [Villaneuva] was much more self-serving this time around and he only saw her when he wanted something new to write about" (219). Miles also notes how Kerouac said crassly, "I didn't write in the book how I finally nailed her" because he was advised by a female friend that "it would spoil it" (219). Kerouac's reluctance to "spoil" or diminish the story by revealing a sexual relationship speaks to his recognition that his narrative of Duluoze and the suffering saint as an example of liberal enfranchisement would be spoiled, as well. In *Tristessa*, Duluoze wants to save the woman and to include himself among the suffering fellaheen of the world, not to brag that he "finally nailed her." The "gray tragedy" of *Tristessa* is that such attitudes of inclusion can be so easily applied to the unwilling.

In the following chapter, I will move back in time from *Tristessa*, to examine some of Kerouac's early writing, specifically *Atop an Underwood* and *The Town and the City*, to locate attitudes of pre-war liberalism in those texts. While the young Kerouac displays his complicity with those attitudes, the beginning of his moving away from them appears also, often within the same passage.

Notes to Chapter One

1. Tom Engelhardt says in *The End of Victory Culture: Cold War America and the Disillusioning of a Generation* that the American people, assured of certain victory in all enterprises, faced a “victory” that was transformative in its horrifying destructive power: “The atomic bomb that leveled Hiroshima also blasted openings into a netherworld of consciousness where victory and defeat, enemy and self, threatened to merge. Shadowed by the bomb, victory became conceivable only under the most limited of conditions, and an enemy too diffuse to be comfortably located beyond national borders had to be confronted in an un-American spirit of doubt” (6). The “victory as atrocity” (56) over the Japanese was, in a way, hollow because the ferocity of the “defense” unleashed an enemy that could not be contained: the recognition that human cruelty had no limits when it was underwritten by political necessity and national self-interest. Further, the will of the collective was far greater than the will of the individual, and suddenly, each person was made aware of an overwhelming sense of powerlessness within a system that guaranteed the rights of the individual. Engelhardt sees the realization of ambiguous and uncertain victory as “a collapse of story” (15); the narrative of victory that attached itself to the narrative of liberalism had to be rewritten to coincide with modern actuality.

2. The term “Beat Generation” is ambiguous and “regrettably imprecise,” as David Sterritt notes, however, “it suggestively evokes a youth-centered ethos that felt the weight of conventional social norms as a burden at once punishing and exhausting – inflicting on individuals a sense of being both ‘beaten,’ or assailed and tormented, and ‘beat,’ or worn down and defeated.” Sterritt also says that the Beats were compared to the European Existentialists in that “[b]oth groups were driven by a commingling of alienation, anxiety, idealism, and intellectual energy, and both rejected the social given in favor of an aggressive insistence that humans must define themselves and their reality through their choices, decisions, and actions” (2). Ann Charters says, “The word ‘beat’ was primarily in use after World War II by jazz musicians and hustlers as a slang term meaning down and out, or poor and exhausted.” Kerouac came in contact with the term through William S. Burroughs and Allen Ginsberg who heard it in the street talk of Herbert Huncke, “a Times Square hustler” who was a drug connection for Burroughs (Charters, *Beat Reader*, xvii). “Beat Generation” as a phrase came out of late night conversations between Jack Kerouac and John Clellon Holmes in 1948 which took as its subject the generation of young people who came of age after the Second World War, a generation that Holmes says possessed “a new sort of stance toward reality, behind which a new consciousness lay. . . . Whatever the reason, everyone my age had a look of impatience and expectation in his eyes that bespoke ungiven love, unreleased ecstasy and the presence of buried worlds within” (*Nothing More to Declare* 106). Holmes credits Kerouac with first using the phrase: “‘It’s a sort of furtiveness,’ he [Kerouac] said. ‘Like we were a generation of furtives. You know, with an inner knowledge there’s no use flaunting on that level, the level of the “public,” a kind of beatness – I mean, being right down to it, to ourselves, because we all

really know where we are – and a weariness with all the forms, all the conventions of the world. . . . It's something like that. So I guess you might say we're a *beat* generation” (107, ellipses in original).

Kerouac says that the term describes “a generation of crazy illuminated hipsters suddenly rising and roaming America, serious, curious, bumming and hitchhiking everywhere, ragged, beatific, beautiful in an ugly graceful way . . . solitary Bartlebies staring out the dead wall window of our civilization” (“Aftermath: The Philosophy of the Beat Generation” in *Good Blonde and Others*, 47). But perhaps, for my purposes here, the term is best defined by Holmes in “The Philosophy of the Beat Generation”: “Everyone who has lived through a war, any sort of war, knows that beat means not so much weariness, as rawness of the nerves; not so much being ‘filled up to *here*,’ as being emptied out. It describes a state of mind from which all unessentials have been stripped, leaving it receptive to everything around it, but impatient with trivial obstructions. To be beat is to be at the bottom of your personality, looking up; to be existential in the Kierkegaard, rather than the Jean-Paul Sartre, sense. . . . It was Kerouac’s insistence that actually they were on a quest, and the specific object of their quest was spiritual. Though they rushed back and forth across the country on the slightest pretext, gathering kicks along the way, their real journey was inward; and if they seemed to trespass most boundaries, legal and moral, it was only in the hope of finding a belief on the other side” (*Nothing* 117). Kerouac notes the difficulty of conducting such an inward spiritual journey, of “trying to love all life, trying to be utterly sincere with everyone, practicing endurance, kindness, cultivating joy of heart. How can this be done in our mad modern world of multiplicities and millions?” (*Good Blonde* 51). How, indeed, is one of the subjects of this study.

3. Typical of such criticism leveled at the Beats is that of historian and cultural critic Roland N. Stromberg who says that Beat writing is “[n]ihilistic in form and content alike to the last degree of nothingness,” and that it “is a literature not of revolt nor even of despair, [but] it seems beyond despair” (259).

4. While my focus is not, strictly speaking, the political, the concept of “ideology” must still be addressed in terms of politics and of culture. Hayden White sees ideology as “a process by which different kinds of meaning are produced and reproduced by the establishment of a mental set towards the world in which certain sign systems are privileged as necessary, even natural, ways of recognizing a ‘meaning’ in things and others are suppressed, ignored, or hidden in the very process of representing a world to consciousness” (White, *Content*, 192). Leonard Williams follows White’s view; he notes that ideology functions as “a cultural template,” a model that allows us to understand the world by comparing the ideological model to the actuality of experience. According to Williams, ideology is a cultural necessity, “a means for ensuring social integration, for maintaining group identity from one generation to another, and for justifying authority’s claims to legitimacy” (33). Ideology serves a “pragmatic” function in that it can “constitute, adjust, and/or transform social subjects” (Kavanagh 314). Ideology also forms the basis of perception for the social subject in that it is through individual ideological

perspectives that a person views the world.

Frederic Jameson sees ideology as an “imaginary relationship” to “transpersonal realities such as the social structure or the collective logic of history” (*Political* 30). This relationship means that a writer cannot be separated from his or her ideology, except, according to Jameson, if that writer subscribes to a liberal point of view: “Such a separation is possible only for a world-view—liberalism—in which the political and the ideological are mere secondary or ‘public’ adjuncts to the content of the real ‘private’ life, which alone is authentic and genuine. It is not possible for any world-view—whether conservative or radical and revolutionary—that takes politics seriously” (289). Jameson’s statement may help to explain the reluctance with which many liberal writers seem to address the political directly in their work. But if Jameson is read in terms of White’s idea stated above, the ideology of a particular culture is already present in the cultural conditioning of the subject, and therefore, the political and ideological can never be “secondary” to the “real ‘private’ life.” In that case, whether Kerouac recognized it or not, the political nature of his work could not be separated from that work; although to him, the “private life” of the individual is “authentic and genuine,” it is also political because the pressure of ideology was unavoidable to an American in the post-war period. Hayden White says of Jameson’s view, “Ideology is not, for Jameson, a lie, a deception, or a distortion of a perceivable reality but rather an attempt to come to terms with and to transcend the unbearable relationships of social life” (White, *Content*, 154).

In America, the term “ideology” has traditionally carried with it negative associations with communism and totalitarianism, as a description of a methodical and inflexible political system. According to William Barrett, America is a country that has in the past considered itself to be exempt from ideology, in effect, of possessing no ideology at all. Barrett says, “This country, which has a tradition of anti-intellectualism, finds itself ill at ease in a contest of ideas. In its innocence it cannot grasp that an ideology is taken so seriously and practiced with such duplicity by the adversary. America cannot grasp the passion of an idea . . . or its malignancy” (*Illusion* 356, ellipses in original). Exemplifying Barrett’s observation, Daniel Bell proclaimed “the end of ideology” (301) in the 1950s because he saw nothing from which to dissent. “Today, intellectually, emotionally, who is the enemy that one can fight?” he asks. Most of the attacks by modern radicals “are essentially cultural and not political, and the problem of radical thought today is to reconsider the relationship of culture to society” (313). Therefore, Bell mistakenly criticizes the impetus behind the Beat movement as “the denial of growing up” and says that it is “an apolitical movement” (301, note).

Curiously, when Kerouac himself enters into the debate in a letter sent to his sister Caroline, March 16, 1948 on the possibility of a war with Korea, he echoes similar sentiments to those of Bell: “However, a war against Communism, if and when it comes, is a war against the *real* enemy of American life: the psychology of the malcontent” (*Charters, Letters 1940-1956*, 144). “All that is none of our business if we stand here laughing at them and armed. When they [Japan, Russia, Korea] settle their issues, we could join them in the only *real* ‘ideology’ the world will ever know—the Livelihood of Man instead of their so-called hypocritical ‘brotherhood of man’” (145). Arguably,

Kerouac seems to adopt a more 'conventional' tone in his letters to his sister, but his attitudes in this example seem to appear throughout much of his published writing.

5. Tanner refers fleetingly to Kerouac in his discussion of the sense of wonder at the world without the concomitant analysis: "It is just worth noting, however, that once the hero (and this applies now to many American books) has opted for this stance of reverent wonder to the exclusion of all other forms of response, there is very little he can do except reiterate his sense of wonder. This can lead to the repetitious and ultimately boring, even unconvincing enthusiasm of a Jack Kerouac" (354-5). Tanner seems to have missed Kerouac's irony, probably because he cannot disconnect Kerouac from his narrators.

6. Kerouac was not intentionally rejecting an older form of liberalism as the property of a past generation only to fall in with a new form that would put him in league with the culture of consumerism and conformity that prevailed in America in the 1950s. That culture, too, was a target of his critique. As Daniel Belgrad says in *The Culture of Spontaneity*, "Beat opposition to the dominant culture focused on communicating subjective experience in a way that revealed the ideological contradictions of corporate-liberal society" (198). In their aesthetic and artistic choices, the Beats strove "to unmask the ideological contradictions by which they lived, turning their expressions of subjective reality into criticisms of corporate-liberal America. . . . [T]he beat writers understood themselves as participant-observers within American society, not just as rebels against it. Their cultivated neurosis was meant to serve as a profound cultural query" (Belgrad 228). The "cultural query" and expression of "subjective experience" is the Beat "liberal narrative," an attempt to construct a version of liberalism that would serve a more realistic function for them; theirs is a unique form that could, as Belgrad claims, expose the contradictions inherent in corporate liberalism and in the pre-war liberalism that emanated from the New Deal, and also provide a meaningful and more accurate vision of America as they saw it. However, as Bercovitch states, although that critique was a "fundamental challenge," it could only take place within the "the rhetoric and values of the dominant culture"; that is, by embracing a form of liberal ideology however different from that of the dominant culture. As a result of this inability to dissent outside of the conditions established and maintained by the dominant culture, Kerouac cannot avoid being coopted into that culture while still offering a critique of it, as I will argue in the concluding sections of this thesis.

7. Interestingly, among the most popular radio programs of the day in America were "The Jack Benny Show" and "Amos and Andy," both of which promulgated FDR's liberal attitudes of inclusion and enfranchisement. Benny's butler Rochester was African-American and usually maintained the upper hand in the running of the household and over Benny's character himself. Rochester was not merely employed by Benny's character, but seemed on equal footing with his boss. Amos and Andy were likeable African-American characters although ironically, they were played by white actors. Roosevelt's policies of enfranchisement also brought African-American singer Marion Anderson into the public eye where she thrived as one of the most popular performers of her time. Eleanor

Roosevelt herself embodied the anti-racist discourse of liberal America in her handling of the Marion Anderson affair in which the singer was prohibited by the Daughters of the American Revolution from performing at a particular venue. Mrs. Roosevelt arranged a concert elsewhere.

8. Niebuhr's view of the human character came from his theological training, and, as Thomas Hill Schaub says, that background made simple his need to be "deeply committed to ideas of innate human corruption and inherent limitation in the ability of men and women to control history" (10). Schaub also notes Niebuhr's corrective to liberalism and his significant contribution to the formation of political process following the Second World War: "Because Niebuhr opposed the realities of human corruption and an irrational history to the utopian illusions of science and secular humanism, elements of his Christian realism became essential components in the 'end of ideology' rhetoric and in exhortations for a more modest and realistic foreign policy" (12-3).

James Hoopes, in *Community Denied: The Wrong Turn of Pragmatic Liberalism*, says of the centrality of Niebuhr's thought to any discussion of modern liberalism, "By taking this more realistic approach to social reform, Niebuhr is supposed to have created a defining moment in the history of liberalism. His realpolitik would survive his thirties radicalism and, tempered by the Second World War, it would set the mood for pragmatic liberalism in the Cold War" (137). Hoopes also claims that Niebuhr's "essentialist" view of humanity gave him "no reason to expect an originally sinful humanity to do better in the future than in the past" (139).

9. Niebuhr's ideas seem to follow those of John Stuart Mill in *On Liberty*; when Mill says, "[u]nfortunately for the good sense of mankind, the fact of their fallibility is far from carrying the weight in their practical judgment, which is always allowed to it in theory; for while every one well knows himself to be fallible, few think it necessary to take any precautions against their own fallibility, or admit the supposition that any opinion, of which they feel very certain, may be one of the examples of the error to which they acknowledge themselves to be liable" (Gray and Smith 37-8). Mill's statement reflects the individualism that is central to his thought and which made his writing so attractive to post-Revolutionary America as the people struggled to remain federated while still thinking of themselves as individuals. However, behind Mill's individualism is a blindness to personal failing that is key to Niebuhr's critique of humanity. Mill's liberalism had gradually evolved into a form of American individualism that had inevitably led to a situation in which the primacy of the individual took precedence in all things, including belief, religious or otherwise. As James Hoopes says, "Niebuhr's assertion of the inability of groups to act morally was owing to his belief that spirituality stopped with the individual" (131).

10. In *The Children of Light and the Children of Dark*, from 1945, Niebuhr addresses further the issues he raised in *Moral Man and Immoral Society* when he notes "the confidence of both bourgeois and proletarian idealists in the possibility of achieving an easy resolution of the tension and conflict between self-interest and the general interest"

(12-3). He differentiates between “the children of darkness,” those who “know no law beyond their will and self-interest,” and “the children of light,” those who “believe that self-interest should be brought under the discipline of a higher law.” It is “the children of light” who have created modern liberal society and whom Niebuhr calls “virtuous,” but “foolish” because they “underestimated the power of self-interest” (14-5), not only in “the children of darkness” but, more significantly, in themselves. He refers to “the error of a too great reliance upon the human capacity for transcendence over self-interest” (33) which “the children of light” overlooked, and which formed the thesis of *Moral Man*. But here, Niebuhr shows he is not under the dark cloud of nihilism and presents a solution: “The children of light must be armed with the wisdom of the children of darkness but remain free of their malice. They must know the power of self-interest in human society without giving it moral justification. They must have the wisdom in order that they may beguile, deflect, harness and restrain self-interest, individual and collective, for the sake of the community” (34). The hope and optimism inherent in the passage seems, itself, somewhat unrealistic and incongruous in light of Niebuhr’s acknowledgment of innate human imperfection, but it also shows the depth of his own faith in a liberal point of view, adjusted, of course, to suit a world at war.

11. The issue of conformity was and continues to be one that coincides with discussions of liberal culture, and the importance of avoiding such conformist ‘tyranny’ is reflected in other social critics. Paul Goodman in *Growing Up Absurd* refers to the Beats’ resistance to conformity as following a “narrow conformity” (65) of its own because, in their choice to live in relative poverty, “they cannot inwardly tolerate anything that hints that their own image of perfection is questionable. . . . In this respect, the Beats are more like the old-fashioned poor, and this of course makes it easier and more profitable for them to be poor” (65). The circularity of the reasoning is evident but accurate; the Beats conformed to a different value system. However, Goodman sees the Beat subculture’s rejection of conformist attitudes as “motivated by good sense rather than resentment,” as an act that is “natural” in that “most people would choose [the Beat lifestyle] if they got wise to themselves” (171).

Barbara Ehrenreich in *The Hearts of Men*, also refers to the issue of conformity in her discussion of the “male revolt” (13) against the “breadwinner ethic” (11) that began in the 1950s. In her discussion of the Beats, she notes “two strands of male protest—one directed against the white-collar work world and the other against the suburbanized family life that work was supposed to support” (52); both “strands” moved in a direction away from conformity. In the conformist Fifties, no precedent existed in the middle-class for the male who abandoned his responsibilities to job and marriage; “[t]he new bohemianism of the Beats came from somewhere else entirely, from an underworld and an underclass invisible from the corporate ‘crystal palace’ or suburban dream houses” (55-6). That is, it came from the African-American subculture and the Times Square hipsters that Ehrenreich and Goodman mention. The image of the lower-class, working-class male took on a certain subversive texture as “the last repository of defiant masculinity” (57). But more importantly, like Goodman, Ehrenreich notes that, as cultural spectators, the Beats mirrored what most males felt about their own unsatisfying lives: “Men looked to the

Beats for a vision of themselves and, even after the imagined viewers had been discredited, the vision remained compelling. What the media said that the Beats thought about everyone else was, after all, not too far from what many men already suspected about themselves” (63).

Herbert Marcuse in *Eros and Civilization* locates the issue of conformity within the psychoanalytic theories of Freud. To Marcuse, the pressure to conform is not only prevalent and powerful in modern culture, but that pressure is applied by the subconscious as well as by the external culture. The repression of the pleasure principle in favor of the reality principle, which occurs with the process of socialization and therefore acts as a means of societal control, is not only traumatic, but self-inflicted. Conformity lies deeply embedded in the individual psyche because “repression from without has been supported by repression from within: the unfree individual introjects his masters and their commands into his own mental apparatus. The struggle against freedom reproduces itself in the psyche of man, as the self-repression of the repressed individual, and his self-repression in turn sustains his masters and their institutions” (16). However, the repression of the pleasure principle is not entirely complete because the pleasure principle not only “survives in the unconscious but also affects in manifold ways the very reality which has superseded the pleasure principle. The *return of the repressed* makes up the tabooed and subterranean history of civilization” (15-6, italics in original). Marcuse suggests that the *return* is manifested in marginalized social groups like the Beats, whose protest against the old order includes the usual actions, “but also the refusal to speak the dead language of affluence. The new bohème, the beatniks and hipsters, the peace creeps – all these ‘decadents’ now have become what decadence probably always was: poor refuge of defamed humanity” (xxi).

12. Alfred Kazin in *On Native Grounds* says of Trilling’s connection to radicalism and to liberalism: “Lionel Trilling’s importance on the American literary scene is probably explained by the fact that he has solidified . . . that reaction against the false liberalism of the thirties that most intellectuals will accept only from someone whose own spiritual experience has been on the left” (409).

13. The naivety that Niebuhr finds so dangerous in post-war liberalism seems not to have evaporated in more recent times, in spite of the events of world history since the War. In his book *Liberalism, Equality and Cultural Oppression*, Andrew Kernohan extrapolates the Utilitarian notions derived from Mill that every person is of equal moral value and that the state must be morally neutral to false and good, allowing its citizens to make the choices that bring them the greatest happiness; in other words, a neutral state allows for the possibility of the free expression of its citizens. But, here, Kernohan departs from Mill, claiming that some forms of cultural expression can be harmful to certain members of society, and therefore, these so-called harmful aspects of free expression need to be curtailed or restricted because such expression does more than simply offend those societal members; it can interfere with their “interest in forming a conception of what is meaningful and valuable,” and such a form of oppression is “equally important, more pervasive, and even more difficult to detect” (viii).

Kernohan concludes that the state must take an active role, what he refers to as an "advocacy strategy" (viii), in reforming the "cultural environment" (vii). The kind of moral liberalism expounded by Kernohan makes assumptions that would cause post-war liberals to cringe, for how does the state decide what is false and what is good, especially after Niebuhr is finished with his dissection of the human collective? Can any liberal society trust the state to decide for it what will be acceptable and what will not? Kernohan says it can and he has accepted the power of the state as the means by which such decisions will be implemented; he has fallen into the overly-optimistic mentality of pre-war liberalism. His essay in defense of state control becomes a peon to the liberal hope for the universal inclusion of all people while overlooking with ease the possibility that those who wield that power may not do it with complete disregard for their own self-interest or for the further implementation of cultural oppression. He depends on the innate goodness of people, which Niebuhr has shown to be specious at best.

Also, an argument such as the one Kernohan offers operates within one of the basic assumptions of liberalism, the belief that universal truth is possible and that simply stating that truth is enough to bring nods of agreement from all. Kernohan presents a supporting example of a man who is "persuaded, not forced" to change his attitudes toward patriarchal culture. Unfortunately, the man may suffer a crisis of identity as the convictions on which he has formed that identity are modified by such "egalitarian cultural reform." But, although the man "may not like the process, . . . his conception of the good will nonetheless improve" (113). Since the attitudes of the man do not coincide with those of the culture, the man must change in a prescribed way, because the dominant culture knows what is best for those affected by his attitudes, for the society as a whole, and curiously, for the man himself. These truths are held self-evident and therefore need no justification.

Further, Kernohan contends "that the egalitarian liberal state should adopt the advocacy strategy toward any inegalitarian culture, be it a minority culture or the majority societal culture" (114), paving the way for the spread internationally of the same type of exceptionalist ideas that spawned the Cold War mentality fifty years previous. Such a 'persuaded' change is hardly an example of the liberalism that Kernohan raises as a panacea for a culture that does not allow all people to find the greater happiness. It seems closer to a totalitarian system of state control made possible because of the naive supposition that humans will do the right thing and avoid self-interest. Reinhold Niebuhr and the history of the world following World War II make arguments like Kernohan's seem like idealistic sentimentality, but that a proposition like Kernohan's exists at all is evidence of the pervasiveness of liberal ideas and also of that ideology's short-term memory loss as it tries to bend the shape of the world to match its own desire and vision.

14. Edmund Wilson says of Saroyan's *Human Comedy*, "nobody was ever cross or mean even when you might for a second have thought they were going to be; everybody was perfectly lovely; the whole thing was just a big chummy junket, and even when a good fellow got killed, he wasn't really dead, because his spirit was still able to return . . . and stay on with the people he loved" (328).

"William Saroyan and his Darling Old Providence" 327-30 *Classics and Commercials: A*

Literary Chronicle of the Forties. Farrar NY 1950

15. In *Second Treatise on Government*, Locke describes “[a] state also of equality, wherein all the power and jurisdiction is reciprocal, no one having more than another, there being nothing more evident than that creatures of the same species and rank, promiscuously born to all the same advantages of Nature, and the use of the same faculties, should also be equal one amongst another, without subordination or subjection, unless the lord and master of them all should, by any manifest declaration of his will, set one above another, and confer on him, by an evident and clear appointment, an undoubted right to dominion and sovereignty” (Chapter II, “Of the State of Nature,” par. 4).

16. The “red brick” image appears in many of Kerouac’s works, but most frequently in *Visions of Cody*. Kerouac seems to use the “brick” image variously to represent the foundation of America in the physical past, as a representation of the holiness of the everyday and mundane, and as a representation of sadness and of possibility. Duloz speaks of “the redbrick wall behind the red neons; it was everywhere in Denver where he went and everywhere in America all his life where he was” (79). He will also use the image to describe Cody’s hopefulness and excitement: “and so seeking rushing all dreams into the heart of it, always the redbrick wall behind the red neons, waiting. . . . But Saturday night is to be best found in the redbrick wall behind the neons Saturday night is when those things that haunt us beyond our speech and the formations of our thoughts suddenly wear a sad aspect that is crying to be seen and noticed all around and we can’t do anything about it and neither could Cody” (80-2).

Chapter Two

Kerouac's Early Writing and the Liberal Narrative

Alas
I believe
I might have become
a great writer
but
the chairs
in the library
were too hard

- Diane DiPrima, "Three Laments"

As the title indicates, this chapter examines selections from Kerouac's earliest available writing, beginning with *Atop an Underwood*, a collection of his work written between 1936 and 1943, just before he met William S. Burroughs and Allen Ginsberg at Columbia University in New York and began to form the vision that would become central to the Beat movement. The collection, therefore, is of considerable value to this thesis in that it offers many examples of Kerouac's writing before and during the Second World War, and can serve as a source of his engagement with those liberal literary values from which he attempted to distance himself after the War. As would be expected, because of the early age at which he began to write and the young writer's need for literary experimentation, the quality, subject matter, and style of Kerouac's early writing in *Underwood* varies dramatically, from a story about football written when he was sixteen, a short play written at age nineteen, poetry at twenty-one, to an excerpt from his first attempt at a novel, *The Sea is My Brother*, written when he was in the Merchant Marine around 1943. Kerouac said later that the collection was "not worth reading nowadays [1967], or repeating here, but a great little beginning effort . . . [written] in the Saroyan-

Hemingway-Wolfe style as best as I could figure it at age nineteen" (*Vanity of Duluo* 96-7). However, despite Kerouac's self-deprecation, behind the youthful experimentation with words, form, and the search for a suitable and meaningful subject lies a "beginning effort" that contains many examples of the same ideas present in other writers of the time, such as Thomas Wolfe, William Saroyan, and Stephen Vincent Benét; but, the collection also hints at Kerouac's recognition that those ideas were somehow not enough to completely match his own vision of the world. My intention in this section of the chapter is to locate in *Atop an Underwood* Kerouac's internalization and expression of pre-war liberal literary ideas also common to writers like the three named above. By finding the presence of those older ideas, I will be able to track Kerouac's development of a new form of writing that begins in earnest following the War, although whether he is successful at creating such a narrative that works consistently for him provides one of the main incentives for my project here. Like the speaker in Diane DiPrima's poem in the epigraph above, Kerouac became less interested in sitting on the hard "chairs in the library" learning to mimic the canonical writers than was in modifying into his own form and style what he found there.

The second part of this chapter will explore Kerouac's lengthy, first-published novel *The Town and the City* to find connections between it and the pre-war liberal narrative that manifests itself in one of Thomas Wolfe's most well known novels, *Look Homeward, Angel*. I intend to show how, toward the end of Kerouac's novel, especially in the "New York" sections, a different narrative voice appears that more closely reflects the new narrative of liberalism that was forming in the criticism of intellectuals like Arthur

Schlesinger, Jr., Louis Hartz, and Lionel Trilling; yet, Kerouac still seems to be trying to hang onto the romantic notions inherent in the older version. I will conclude that, before the end of the War, Kerouac embraced not only the style of his models, Wolfe and Saroyan, but also their endorsement of liberal idealism, and further, that he continued to express those attitudes well into the writing of *The Town and the City*. However, Kerouac's acceptance of those sentiments was not entirely unqualified, because behind those ideals lie traces of doubt about their correspondence to the world that Kerouac experienced directly, even as a young man. His sensibility about post-war America was already changing, forming into a more realistic one along the lines of the ideas that Hartz, Schlesinger, and Trilling would express after the war.

Kerouac's over-riding structural concept through much of his writing is his use of autobiographical material as the source for his narrative; in other words, he narrativizes the events of his own life, giving them an order and a meaning they might not otherwise exhibit. Most of his writing after *The Town and the City* "comprises one vast book" that Kerouac calls *The Duluoz Legend*; he explains on the introductory page to the posthumously published *Visions of Cody* that, "[t]he whole thing forms one enormous comedy, seen through the eyes of poor Ti Jean (me), otherwise known as Jack Duluoz, the world of raging folly and also of gentle sweetness seen through the keyhole of his eye" (n.p.)¹. The novels that make up the Legend can be read chronologically from *Visions of Gerard* through to *Satori in Paris*, although they were not composed or published in that order. As Ann Charters points out, Kerouac "regarded the prose works making up the parts of the Duluoz Legend as episodic, picaresque narratives"; and, that "he was at once

the dedicated chronicler of his own story as well as its most important participant . . . , a true original, stubbornly going his own way as a writer to hew a path that paradoxically left him more committed to the act of creating literature out of his life than he was to living it" (*Portable Kerouac* xviii-xix). That paradox will reach a nexus later in his career, as the discussion in my final chapter will indicate. Through the persona of Jack Duluoz, Kerouac describes his experience of the world, as he did in *Tristessa*. However, by the time of Kerouac's last novel *Vanity of Duluoz*, he has largely dropped that persona, and operates, if not openly as "Jack Kerouac," then at least as both "Kerouac" and "Duluoz," using the names almost interchangeably. While *Vanity* must still be called a novel, the autobiographical component is arguably more clearly predominate there than in other novels that comprise the Legend².

In *Vanity of Duluoz*, Kerouac describes to his auditor, whom he addresses only as "wifey," "the troubles I had to go through to make good in America" (9). By his own account, the book describes his journey on the way to becoming a writer, using the persona of Jack Duluoz, from his early years in Lowell, Massachusetts up to the time of his writing *The Town and the City*, and it provides a compelling description of the significance of those early years as the beginnings of his later depiction of struggle and suffering that appears in much of his writing. Although the narrator speaks in and of the historical present, the narrative of *Vanity of Duluoz* finishes just as Kerouac is about to begin writing his first published novel around 1947; therefore, with its focus on the period from about 1935 up to 1947, *Vanity*, in conjunction with Kerouac's letters written during the period, can function as an annotation to Kerouac's early writing.³ Significantly, in this

early section of *Vanity*, Kerouac seems to be questioning in hindsight the transformation of post-war culture of which he was a part when he acknowledges his sense that his “anguish as I call it arises from the fact that people have changed so much . . . in the past thirty years to such an extent that I don’t recognize them as people any more or recognize myself as a member of something called the human race” (9). His current disconnection and alienation from the culture that he once sought to make so inclusive and universal reveals his experimental movement away from the narrative of pre-war liberalism as his life unfolded, a process that I will discuss below. Because *Vanity of Dulouoz* deals in retrospect with that early period of Kerouac’s writing career, I will allow that text to inform my search for his expression of liberal literary ideas in *Atop an Underwood* and later in *The Town and the City*.

One of the ways that Kerouac chose to make sense of experience, as I have been suggesting, was his decision to use that experience as the subject of his work, and that choice was formed, as Hayden White would suggest, “out of a desire to have real events display the coherence, integrity, fullness, and closure of an image of life that is and can only be imaginary” (*Content*, 24). That “image of life,” for Kerouac at that particular time, could only be created through an imaginative fictional narrative, because, as White points out, “the narrative figurates the body of events that serves as its primary referent and transforms these events into intimations of patterns of meaning that any literal representation of them as facts could never produce” (*Content* 45); interpretive meaning is absent in the events themselves, but present in the narrative reconstruction of those events. Even in his early work, Kerouac considers the relationship of writing and experience along

similar lines. He says in "Odyssey (Continued)" (1941) from *Atop an Underwood* that "[a] writer wants to cut a slab out of the whole conglomerate mass-symphony of nature and life and present it to his readers. Why? Because, Art is a readjustment of perception, from physical actuality to a perception expressed by the artist" (116). He considers art the "differentiating faculty" between humans and the lesser biological orders, "the act of readjusting perception, from reality to a new objectification and revaluation, thus exhibiting a religious desire to worship what we have about us, which is Life" (116). Here, Kerouac's idea of presenting his readers with a "slab" of "nature and life," and then "readjusting perception" to a new, more objective and more accurate form reveals a didactic purpose behind his writing, but it also connects him to the desire to construct a new mode of representing experience. At this stage of his career, however, that mode is one that speaks to the heart of liberal idealism with its "worship" of "Life" as it presently exists "about us," and not of a world in need of change.

The ideas of Arthur Schlesinger on liberal attitudes warrant a brief reiteration here before I begin to search out those ideas in Kerouac's early writing. Schlesinger finds the liberal regard for sentimentality, the reluctance to assume responsibility for difficult decisions, and the liberal misjudgement of the possibility for human corruption by discourses of power as troublesome and dangerous. He recognizes that these shortcomings arise from an unrealistic faith both in human perfectibility and in the progress that comes from the application of rational thinking. According to Schlesinger and also to Niebuhr, liberals believe erroneously that human failings will be subsumed by the passage of time, that is, by history; that humans can be convinced by rational argument

alone rather than by physical or moral force; that human institutions operated by conscientious and altruistic human beings can free the human subject from the unjust vagaries of the dominant culture; and, that through an eventual act of faith, the world will avoid the devastation of upheaval that history shows is inevitable. To quote Schlesinger's key phrase: liberal idealist logic is innately flawed because it is based on "the idea that man, the creature of reason and benevolence, has only to understand the truth in order to act upon it" (41). His conclusion that the alterations to the older narrative of liberalism in his time in the middle of the century have led to "an unconditional rejection of totalitarianism and a reassertion of the ultimate integrity of the individual" (ix), would garner agreement from Kerouac, especially as the forties reached its end and Kerouac finished his first novel. But as a young man writing the works that appear in *Atop an Underwood*, Kerouac would likely find the earlier literary sentimentality more to his taste, although, at times, his own experience in the world seems to contradict those sentiments, which is the reason that both old and new ideals appear in various works in the collection, often within the same text.

"Do I contradict myself?": Kerouac's *Atop an Underwood*

Paul Marion, the editor and commentator of *Atop an Underwood*, says of the text: "From the start Kerouac's writings usually centered on his experience" (xiv). Marion's qualified "usually" belittles Kerouac's method, because even when he seems to be creating a fictional text using a fictional character, Kerouac's personal experience informs the writing, at the very least, when it is not, in fact, directly the subject of the work. Because

Kerouac seems to put himself and his experience into the writing, locating examples of his expression of pre-war liberal literary ideas is very possible. In *Football Novella*, written when he was sixteen in 1938 but left unfinished, Kerouac uses his experience as a local football hero in Lowell, Massachusetts to form the basis of the narrative. The story follows a wandering, orphaned, former college student named Bill Clancy who finds himself in Brierville on the local college football team after drifting into town, appropriately enough, along the railway tracks. Certainly many of these images – the railway, the drifter, small towns, football – appear again and again in Kerouac's writing, even in his later years. Clancy's "charming smile" (10) makes him instantly likeable to everyone he meets, except to McCoy, a teammate and his rival for the affections of Barbara; he is self-reliant and individualistic to the extreme and, until he comes to Brierville, he has been content to "stick to drifting until I feel like settling down on a permanent job" (11). He, like everyone else in the story, is either blissfully unaware of the economic state of Depression era America, or the New Deal has rejuvenated America into a land in which a young man can be "drifting" only because he wants to, not because a lack of work makes travel a virtual necessity.

However, in *Football Novella*, as in other of Kerouac's writings, football acts as the catalyst under which people come together; the sport unites and conjoins people who would otherwise have little reason to meet, seemingly denying that any distance separates people in pre-war America and instilling an idea of inclusiveness. Even McCoy is pacified by Clancy's outstanding performance on the gridiron when Clancy's skill as a lineman allows McCoy to score five touchdowns. As Kerouac wrote in a synopsis of the story for

a potential publisher: "The human solution is everyone forgetting grievances, and rival lovers finding themselves appropriate mates" (9). In the sentimental world of the novella, everything works itself out without the need for human effort or intervention, everyone is united by the universal appeal of the American game, and the dedication and stamina of the unsung hero become qualities for all to emulate. Clancy's proximity to perfection and his talent for displaying "truth" through his football skill to his townspeople recall other pre-war liberal writing like that of William Saroyan, and also Schlesinger's description of the liberal as one who seeks an attainable human perfection and a knowable truth. Kerouac employs football often as a unifying force and symbol of purity in an America lacking in simple universal notions that could be available to all classes. Later, in *Vanity of Duluo*, he describes his time as a player at Columbia and his decision to leave the team partly because he would not be a starter, but also because of his general despondency and his desire to become a writer. He says, "They could have had a good team but the war was coming up" (92), which meant that many of the good players were already or soon would be enlisted in the Armed Forces. The external world impinges on the world of the game, but Kerouac seems to want football to exist outside of world affairs, exempt from corruption and favoritism, a pure game played in a defined space according to explicit and obeyed rules, unlike the game of life. Ultimately, his disillusionment in the game manifests itself as a resistance to running a particular play, "the KT-79 reverse deception"; he says, "as if I'd joined football for 'deception' for God's sake" (92). His irony does not entirely negate the incongruity of a play of "deception" existing within the honesty of football. Also, in *The Town and the City*, Kerouac will write of Peter Martin's changing sensibility

about football: "Suddenly it seemed to him that college and football were no longer important, and suddenly he thought of war And all the suitcases and college banners and sharp sports jackets and pipe-smoking, quipping, wry mannerisms of college life were ridiculous as he thought of them" (238). The impending war, like the "KT-79 reverse deception," takes away from the purity of the game and makes it seem unimportant as Martin's vision of the world moves away from its earlier romantic purity.

In another story, *Raw Rookie Nerves*, Kerouac uses the Great American Pastime, baseball, as his unifying principle. He, like many other writers, seems to consider the sport as integral to American culture; his article "In Mid-June My Ideas About the Major League Races" written for the St. Petersburg [Florida] *Independent* June 16, 1965, Kerouac says, "Every American is interlocked with Cooperstown," the home of Major League Baseball's Hall of Fame (*Good Blonde* 134). In his earlier story, Freddy Burns is a rookie player replacing grizzled veteran Nick Vickers who has been "barred from playing for a week" and fined for some unstated infraction (55). When young Burns strikes out, makes fielding errors, and generally tries to adjust himself to life in the Big League, Vickers harangues him constantly, saying, "'Wassamatter, bush leaguer. Don't you feel at home'" (55). In the story, home and belonging is as important to ballplayers as it is to liberal writers. But, behind Vickers' "biting sarcasm" (55) and Burns' youthful crisis of self-confidence, hovers a larger more comfortable issue: "All over the country, rabid baseball fans clung to their radio sets" (52) and packed the grandstands. Baseball is bigger than the struggles of one Freddy Burns and serves to bring the nation together. The conflict between Burns and Vickers comes to a head a few games later when Vickers tries

to intimidate Burns into leaving the ball club, but Freddy refuses to knuckle to the threats because he knows that by following respectfully the directions of his manager, "*Mister MacNeill*" (56, italics mine), order will be maintained and right will prevail. But Vickers continues his threats and Burns, pushed to the limits of human endurance, responds by punching Vickers, knocking him unconscious. Burns gets the ultimate victory later when he "sparks a triple play that gives his Blue Sox a place in the World Series" (52, editor's note). In this story, as in *Football Novella*, everything works out, but this time, a little human intervention is necessary: Burns' swift uppercut to the jaw of Vickers solves his problem of inclusion.

While the story seems to valorize the sentimental attitudes of Burns toward the Great Game of Baseball, Kerouac also allows a more pro-active element to enter in. Burns can easily move between the character of a respectful and obedient "raw rookie" on one hand and a self-reliant, athletic Natty Bumppo on the other because he can negotiate the difference between a discourse that requires him to suffer the abuse of his esteemed elders as he pays his dues, and one that allows him to register his dissent from the unjustified harassment by tapping into what Sacvan Bercovitch calls, "the rhetoric and values of the dominant culture" (*Rites* 20, cited previously). John Lardas, in *The Bop Apocalypse*, says that, during the Cold War, the liberal narrative required modification to fashion America as "a symbolic garden space of vast potentialities," but such a revision required also a revision of the American into one who is "innocent yet experienced in sin, ever hopeful for new adventures yet grounded in the rich traditions of the past" (211). Burns becomes that new American. He can save face and retaliate only by reverting to the kind of behavior

that fits the historical typology of an archetypal American hero like Bumppo. As Geoffrey Rans says, Natty Bumppo from James Fenimore Cooper's *Leather-Stocking Tales*, has been regarded as an American hero because he seems to embody "an ideal of conduct and a harmony between man and his environment not easily to be found in the 'real' world. In fact, that vision most frequently exists for Natty and Chingachcook only in memory, rarely as a present reality or possibility; it is always threatened by the consequences of colonization, the development of European civilization in America. It is a myth surrounded by an elegiac sadness and more than a little guilt" (Lauter 1281). The actions and characterization of Kerouac's Burns follow that of a "hero" like Bumppo in that the harmony that should exist between teammates under the conventions of baseball is not present in the "real" world of the story; it exists only in the idealized cultural conception of the game.

Also, while Burns is portrayed as an example of the moral neophyte entering his "civilization" and obeying the conventions of his position, his ultimate physical response to Vickers is not acceptable within the moral conventions of that culture, that is, within the discourse of the sport itself. However, his action is tolerated as the proper, i.e. unavoidable, historical response to intolerable conditions. Such a point of view falls easily within what Donald Pease calls "the Revolutionary mythos" (20) of America. As Pease says, Cooper's writing demonstrates that "Americans characteristically identified a leader's ability to lead with the power of his personality, and they defined that power as the ability to transcend the limitations of a local past" (23), even if that transcendence requires the use of force or violence, which is one of the functions that Burns fulfills in the

story. However, there is a price to be paid for this violence. Bumppo serves a similar function for his civilization; he functions as “a moral exemplar for the society that cannot, in the end, stomach him” (Lauter 1282). D. H. Lawrence says of Bumppo in *Studies in Classic American Literature*, “Natty is a saint with a gun” (50), and he is representative of the “essential American soul . . . hard, isolate, stoic, and a killer”(59). Sacvan Bercovitch in *The American Jeremiad* would agree; he says, “In virtually every one of the countless biographies of American heroes [from the mid-19th century], for example, the author insists that ‘true individualism’ is not something unique – not a Byronic or Nietzschean assertion of superiority – but an exemplum of American enterprise: a model of progress and control that typifies the society as a whole” (156); however, in the case of Bumppo, and perhaps of Burns also, the hero also risks the derision of the culture.

But, rather than being excluded because of his resistance, Burns is absorbed into the culture of the team and ably demonstrates his right to be there. The resort to fisticuffs becomes what Bercovitch calls “a strategy for absorption” (*Rites* 50) into the baseball culture within the narrative scope of Kerouac’s story and within the scope of an American culture that venerates a hero willing to follow the rules and yet violate them at the same time if necessary. In contrast to Burns, Vickers, who has been suspended and fined, is only a rule violator and has no respect for the game or for those in a different class than he. Kerouac’s story expresses an idealized liberal attitude as long as it uses baseball as its forum and the rookie’s struggle for acceptance within the discursive formation of the individual’s progress toward perfection. But Burns’ resistance to the proscribed patterns of the baseball culture shows a movement on the part of the author toward a different

liberal attitude, one in which dissent is tolerated and even rewarded as long as it operates using the terms of what Seymour Lipset calls "Americanism" (31). This changing attitude, actually a movement back to the individualism represented in much writing from the American Renaissance of the previous century, harkens forward to post-war literary ideals which value the individual as an agent of social power and change in ways that the pre-war version did not; previously, the individual was considered most effective as part of an altruistic collective which, after the War, smacked of totalitarian control and loss of self.

Two of the themes that Kerouac returns to often in *Atop an Underwood* are notions of inclusion and universality, that no one should be excluded from human understanding and compassion no matter how minor a role he or she plays in society or no matter how ordinary he or she seems in the grand scheme of things; everyone and everything can be covered by the cultural protection of America. Also, throughout his writing career, Kerouac asserts the holiness and wonder of the ordinary and mundane, and the intrinsic value in the everyday that seemed to have been lost in the heady rush of economic success following the War. That valorization of the ordinary also appears elsewhere in Beat writing; for example, in Allen Ginsberg's evocative "Footnote to Howl," the speaker reiterates: "Everything is holy! everybody's holy! everywhere is holy! everyday is in eternity! Everyman's an angel!" (*Collected Poems* 134); and, the idea appears again in Kerouac's "life is holy and every moment is precious" from *On the Road* (57). The idea of an over-riding holiness in everything is an offshoot of the spiritual nature of the Beat project, but in Kerouac, the possibility that perhaps not every part of life is as "holy" as all of the others enters in even in the earliest of his works. In the short

composition "Concentration," Kerouac writes of his fascination with the details of life on "Moody Street" in his home town, and of his involvement as a chronicler of what he sees: the smell of beer, the sound of steaks cooking, the noise, the gutters full of the detritus of everyday life, the "[y]oung men very young with life and being men and living and walking and breathing and most of all thinking and talking. . . . And I espied another and I took him by the lapel and I say, And you too are God. All of you are, but you do not realize it. Laugh and smile, and close your eyes. But do not weep for your own sakes. You are all Gods" (31). The passage evokes Whitman and might be considered an example of the young writer searching for a subject and emulating a mode of expression that suits the particular moment. But while he writes from the memory of what he has seen and expresses the vision spontaneously before it can vanish, he also attempts to include everything and everyone as the potential subject of writing, and to establish the importance of the picayune details of life in the remembering process, no matter how gritty or vulgar those details may be. In everything and everyone that the writer includes, he finds equal value and raises those objects and people to the highest of "holy" levels, that of "Gods."

As the writer notices and records the objects in the world, he places value on those objects as objects in and of themselves; their very recognized presence in the world of the writer raises them to "holy" status. But those objects also take on a familiarity and comfort which is immediate and personal, and which acts as a kind of objective correlative for the memory; the ideas are indeed in the things themselves in Kerouac's early stories. In "Where the Road Begins," from 1940, Kerouac addresses the reader directly while

speaking indirectly of his own "Voyage" (57) away from home; but more meaningful is not the voyage out but the voyage back home again. As the traveler nears his familiar destination, objects take on a significance that went previously unnoticed, and he sees the world with clarity as if for the first time; but Kerouac promises the reader, "There is more to come, more miracles to behold, and more wonders to stun him!" (58). And, it is the site of the once familiar made new that causes the traveler to feel that strong pull of inclusion and universal happiness as elements of the "holy"; as the speaker says, "You see a group of old familiar faces, and you think of God as you watch the radiance and warmth sing up to your very soul. . . . You see God before you, emblazoned in all those loved faces like a starry tarpaulin. The all-encompassing, all-loving God" (59). Home, "the place where the road began" (59), becomes more than a place to which one might return; under the spell of such sentimentality and nostalgia, home represents for the young writer, "the soul of Man, . . . a mixture . . . of all the ideals of Man, embodied upon one portion of the Earth's crusty integument . . ." (60). The inclusive nature of the observer's fondness for home and his connection of home with "all the ideals" of humanity speaks to a desire that manifests itself eagerly in the pre-war liberal writing of Saroyan and here, of the youthful Kerouac.

But while eighteen-year-old Kerouac can so fluidly overstate such liberal idealism, he can also write against the grain of its assumptions, which suggests that he also feels a certain dissatisfaction in those ideals that seem to mean so much to him when he finds them in the writing of Saroyan and Wolfe. In "New York Nite Club," written around the same time as the previous story, the speaker hears music from a club which "fills [him] with yearning for some intangible joy" (61). But, when he enters, the faces he sees in the

bar are not the familiar faces of home that fill him with a powerful sense of connection and belonging; like Ezra Pound's "petals,"⁴ these faces are merely "a gallery of faces, each as interesting as the other." In other words, they are not distinguishable from each other nor are they interesting at all. These are "dark mysterious faces, . . . drunken dull-eyed faces" that reflect "a certain look of hectic suspicion" (61). There is no inclusion here. But the speaker's presence in the club recalls to his memory another time when he was sitting in a soda fountain in his hometown and watched a truck driver come in to buy cigarettes. If the reader expects the sense of inclusion and welcome that was present in the previous story, Kerouac disappoints, because in the soda fountain, the speaker's attitude does not reflect such an ideal in the least. He is put off by the driver for what he sees as his "false preoccupation" and curtness, and he demeans the man in his imagination. To the waiter's question of "Just pull in," the speaker thinks snidely, "Just pull in, the hero. Wearing drivers' clothes, just pull in, and the rain. . . . Oh boy, I sneer to myself. The great man, just pull in." The speaker's indignation at the driver's preoccupation "with his paltry truck universe, as if it were the only universe in the place" (62) suggests that the speaker too is preoccupied with his own "paltry" universe and angry that the driver does not recognize his self-importance. Rather than feeling a sense of brotherhood with the common folk who earlier had given the returning traveler a glimpse of God and with the working person as he claims for himself in other stories in the collection, the speaker rejects the driver's concerns as insignificant and artificial when they over-shadow his own. Ironically, the speaker asks, "Where is the naked unquestioning sincerity in this world today?", failing to notice his own lack of "sincerity" in the statement. The story ends back in the New York

“nite club” where the speaker sits alone at “a table in an obscure corner” (62), alienated apparently by his own choice. Kerouac seems to work both sides of the ideals of inclusion and universality in the two stories. In the first, he praises the sense of belonging he finds at home, yet, in the second, he rejects the outsider on the basis of a casual observation. While he acknowledges the positive feeling of inclusion in the first story, he describes a set of experiences in the second story that fails to support such an ideal, as if the writing of his literary models does not always match his experience in the world when he is not *Atop* his typewriter.

In several stories in *Atop an Underwood*, Kerouac seems to express a certain kinship and compassion for the working people with whom he comes into contact, but those stories also exhibit a recognition that all is not as inclusive as it at first appears. In “The Birth of a Socialist,” (a story he is “proud to admit, is against the Capitalists. But it is also against the Communists. It is against any form of slavery” [86]), he describes a job he had in a cookie factory. As he watches the workers trudge through the early morning streets to their jobs, he thinks, “my blood shall always boil for them . . . even though it may be too late for all of them” (87; ellipses in original); his empathy seems over-powered by his despair, but his tone is one of distance and removal, as though he is *among* them but not *of* them. When he quits the job, he finds himself laughing at the plight of the workers, “not with contempt, but with genuine compassion and pity. And so goodbye my factory friends. I am leaving you forever, and I am sorry that George Bernard Shaw was never divulged to you” (91). His pity is misplaced because it is not as “genuine” as he claims, and his connection to the common person is further distanced by his differentiation

of himself from the workers: "I'm a man – with brains – and not a dumb animal" (92). Interestingly, the young speaker has come to this conclusion after only two hours on the job, by his eight o'clock work break on his first day! His sympathies, like his Fabianism, do not run as deep as he may think. He admits later in "The Good Jobs," "I am a shiftless fellow myself, you know. I am rather proud of that" (135). While Kerouac claims an identification with the working world, and indeed works his share of menial jobs even as young man, in the early stages of his adult life, he sympathizes with the working person only provisionally and in the abstract.

In "The Mystery," Kerouac again contemplates the innate unfairness of Capitalism as he walks home from work near a railway crossing. While the "railroad kings" savor their rich life in New York, he wonders why the railway employee "wasn't working for himself and for his fellow man" rather than to make rich people even more wealthy. He asks, "'Are we not all men living alone together on a single earth?'" (200). His thinking is decidedly liberal in its inclusiveness and in its rejection of Capitalist oppression. He decides then that "this must not go on, that this must surely and would surely end" (202), but that is as far as his budding socialist idealism takes him. He concludes by expressing "[s]ternly" his desire for "an explanation" (203). Arthur M. Schlesinger would be critical of such liberal rhetoric which expresses the belief that any Capitalist institution, especially one operated for profit and defended by government policies, should and could be run altruistically for the benefit of the workers, or that simply demanding an answer for a social problem would solve it; as he says, it is unrealistic and naive to assume that, simply because people understand the truth, that they will act on it (Schlesinger 41). Yet,

Kerouac's story attempts such a feat; without offering a solution, the speaker expects some response or action merely on the "truth" of his observation.

Kerouac expends some of his most focused literary energy in *Atop an Underwood* on writing about America itself, but even then, his apparent pre-war liberal attitudes also seem to point ahead toward a needed revision of those very attitudes. In the poem "This I Do Know," Kerouac cites some of his influences: "That I shall be influenced by / Wolfe, Saroyan, [Albert] Halper, Whitman, / and Joyce in my writings" (169; lines 1-3). His debt to Walt Whitman becomes abundantly clear in the short untitled prose piece [I Have to Pull Up My Stakes and Roll, Man] when he says, "I'll tell you what I am, first. I am part of the American temper, the American temperament, the American tempo" (113)⁵. By situating and defining himself within the idea of America, Kerouac, like Whitman (and perhaps also like Woody Guthrie in a later era), sets himself up as a citizen of all that is American and also as a model American citizen. When he says, "I love America" (114), readers can confidently assume that he means it, because they have seen the genealogy of that literary form before in, for one, Whitman's "Song of Myself": "I celebrate myself, / And what I assume you shall assume, / For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you" (Whitman 2727, lines 1-3); he is, "Walt Whitman, an American, one of the roughs, a kosmos" (2746, line 499). The second half of Kerouac's piece is made up of a list, in the Whitman tradition, of all Kerouac loves about his country, from "a retired Yale professor; . . . André Kostelanetz and his sobbing string section; . . . a street in Vermont, dusty and lined with discolored shacks; . . ." to "Hollywood," "New York," "Chicago," and "Saroyan and Fresno." He ends with the refrain, "I love America, yes I do. I love the

White Sox, the Dodgers, Ted Williams and Pete Reiser; I love America, I tell you I do" (114-5). Kerouac seems to be in agreement with Whitman's much-quoted phrase from the 1855 Preface to *Leaves of Grass*, "[t]he United States themselves are essentially the greatest poem" (2713). And as a text to be read and interpreted, America contains the items from Whitman's lists as well as those on the young Kerouac's. The inclusiveness and idealized optimism in the list reflects certain literary attitudes of pre-war America that Kerouac has apparently internalized and also reveals little evidence of the young writer's awareness of social injustice or the troubled lives of his "holy" listing.

Kerouac's vision of America in other early writings also reveals this more negative and less than optimistic point of view, one that seems more in tune with the actualities of the world as reflected in post-war writing and thought. In [Here I Am at Last with a Typewriter], Kerouac notes the tendency for America "to overlook her own defects," especially in terms of its war preparation, which seems to be "propelled by greed" (130); he sees that "America is sick as a dog," and he wants to write "about America's awful sickness and about some individual sickness I see in men" (131). In ". . . A Kerouac That Turned Out Sublime," the writer dismisses the subjects of cultural intellectualism, "all those things that have no relation whatsoever with life, here in this world, life from day to day" (148). His reading of such meaningless writing leads to a further critique of liberal idealism; what he finds is "only a lot of oratory about the American Dream, freedom for all peoples at all places at all times, (let me tell you, Sir, freedom is an inner thing, and do not underestimate that remark, by all means); a lot of Rooseveltian (excuse me) blarney about the immense ideal of freedom which the world seeks today" (149). He is aware that

“people have become insane, blind, foolish, they have gone off on a foolish tangent, you lose faith in them” (149). The inclusiveness of the previous piece seems to be contradicted or even negated by his observation of the world that he finds around him, the real world of real people. Kerouac registers his disappointment and yet still reveals his capacity for hope and wonder in spite of what he sees, when he recalls his aunt who became a nun; he says, “there is only the love that I know must still reside in the hearts of men, the kind of love that we are losing, the kind of love that I am trying to cling to” (149). While, at one time, Kerouac overflows with sentimentality about his country, at another, he is capable of noting its defects and its reliance on attitudes that do not seem to coincide with what he sees in the world around him.

In *Atop an Underwood*, two separate and contradictory Kerouacs seem to be under construction. One seems to embrace the attitudes and the stories of human suffering and joy that he finds in Saroyan and Wolfe; the other notes the disparity between the world of those novelists and the world that he, as a young man in an America facing the horror of war, sees everywhere around him. Even before the War, Kerouac seems to be struggling with sentiments that will not appear until later in the work of the likes of Hartz, Schlesinger, and Trilling. Like Whitman, Kerouac might well ask and answer, “Do I contradict myself? / Very well then I contradict myself; / I am large I contain multitudes” (Whitman 2777, lines 1314-6). This contradictory Kerouac appears again in his first published novel *The Town and the City*.

***The Town and the City*: “the sum and substance and crap of everything”**

After the death of his father in 1946 and his promise to look after his mother, Kerouac set out to make sense of his recent experience by writing about it in the form a fictional narrative; in *Vanity of Duluo* written near the end of his life, he describes his youthful decision “to become a writer, write a huge novel explaining everything to everybody . . . and I settled down to write, in solitude, in pain, writing hymns and prayers even at dawn, thinking, ‘When this book is finished, which is going to be the sum and substance and crap of everything I’ve been thru throughout this whole goddam life, I shall be redeemed’” (*Vanity of Duluo* 266-8). Those words were written in 1967 and reveal the retrospection enabled by twenty years of literary and cultural disillusionment for Kerouac; therefore, the hope of personal redemption he claims to have sought as a young man in 1946 can only be considered sardonically in the hindsight of 1967, since none was immediately, if ever, forthcoming. But, what is significant about his decision is that Kerouac chose to write about the events he had experienced personally, although those events were fictionalized and transposed onto the Martin family. As Victor-Lévy Beaulieu says in *Jack Kerouac: a chicken-essay*, “Jack simply rewrites the story of his own Franco-American clan – (the people in his family are divided among the numerous characters in the novel)” (50). Kerouac uses Peter and Joe to represent different aspects of his own character; his sister is a composite of the Martin sisters; and, his dead brother Gerard appears as Peter’s twin, Francis. Beaulieu may be forgiven for his overstatement that the novel is “nothing more than . . . an endless account of the Father’s downfall” (54), as if that were not enough for the subject of a novel; however, *The Town and the City* deals

with issues far beyond only the decline of George Martin. In *The Birth of the Beat Generation*, Steven Watson says of *The Town and the City* that “Kerouac’s ambitions were impossibly large: to prove that he was not the failure that his father considered him; to capture all of America; to express the New Vision in an autobiographical narrative; to throw out ‘all this overlaid mental garbage of “existentialism” and “hipsterism” and bourgeois decadence’ [from *Vanity of Duluo* 262] and replace it with directly observed experience. He wanted to write the Great American Novel his first time out” (97-8). As a result of those ambitious goals, Watson continues, “The novel read like the work of a writer trying both to create something new and simultaneously to impress his teachers and evoke his literary models. His intricate interweaving of motifs, his repetition of key symbolic words, and his adjective-ridden prose earnestly strained for lyricism” (99).

The Town and the City was the “huge novel” that Kerouac named in his statement from *Vanity of Duluo*,⁶ and it was modeled, in part, on Thomas Wolfe’s *Of Time and the River* but especially, on *Look Homeward, Angel*, and I will discuss some resemblances of Kerouac’s novel to Wolfe’s *Look Homeward* below. As the later words from *Vanity* indicate, Kerouac had high hopes for his first novel that apparently extended beyond explaining “the sum and substance and crap of everything.” In a letter to his friend Hal Chase dated April 19, 1947, shortly after he had started to work on what would become *The Town and the City*, Kerouac wrote, “I have begun a huge study of the face of America itself My subject as a writer is of course America, and simply, I must know everything about it” (*Charters, Letters, 1940-56*, 107). Kerouac had been preparing himself for the daunting task of knowing everything about his subject for some years,

copying the styles of his favorite authors, experimenting with subject matter and genre, reading extensively, and generally, living life as he found it in America. Understandably, the narrative voice of *The Town and the City* echoes the sound of the pre-war liberal ideas of writers like those mentioned in the preceding chapter, Benét, Welty, and Bellow, and also of Kerouac's literary models, William Saroyan and Thomas Wolfe⁷.

Throughout the novel and even in the description of Peter Martin's relationship with his friends in what amounts to a "pre-Beat" New York sub-culture in the later sections are traces of belonging, inclusiveness, and universality that seem typical of an earlier literary form. Peter's fascinated meditation on the new world that he has recently discovered in the city reveals the nature of his inclusive leanings: "Something silent, beautiful, inscrutable had made all this for sure, and he was in the middle of it, among the children of the earth. And he was glad" (360-1). As he stands in the rain in Times Square, Peter describes his inclusive vision of America:

He looked about him at the people passing by – the same people he had seen so many times in other American cities on similar streets: soldiers, sailors, the panhandlers and drifters, the zoot-suiters, the hoodlums, the young men who washed dishes . . . the hitch-hikers, the hustlers, the drunks, the battered lonely young Negroes, the twinkling little Chinese, the dark Puerto Ricans, and the varieties of dungareed young Americans in leather jackets who were seamen and mechanics and garagemen everywhere. (361)

Peter accepts the world and the people in it as he finds them because "all the lives in the

world came from the single human soul and his soul was like their souls. He could never turn away in disgust and judgement" (364).

But, at the same time that it expresses a sentiment associated with an older liberalism, the narrative also exposes the characters' feeling of disengagement and alienation from conventional wartime American society: "All the cats and characters, all the spicks and spades, Harlem-drowned, street-drunk and slain, crowded together, streaming back and forth, looking for something, waiting for something, forever moving around" (362). While the vision of New York includes everyone, those characters that he includes in the novel are generally in a state of estrangement. Kerouac seems to be using a form of literary expression common to writers in pre-war America at the same time that he asserts the need for a new form that would offer a more accurate representation of his experience. Peter Martin's depiction of New York's Times Square as the melting pot of a city that is itself a melting pot of America establishes his need for universalism and inclusion while it acknowledges the sense of disengagement that separates the people in Peter's world from the rest of society, and yet unites them in their exclusion from that dominant culture⁸. While, in his first published novel, Kerouac was at times trying to mimic the style of writing that he had read and found impressive as a younger, less worldly person, he was also forming a new world vision influenced by his new relationship with Ginsberg, Burroughs, Lucien Carr, and Neal Cassady, and by his own experience of post-war America.

So in *The Town and the City*, if both an old and a new manifestation of liberal ideals seems to appear, Kerouac is not necessarily attempting to play both sides against

each other, but, as the discussion of *Atop an Underwood* reveals, his view of the world and of his role in it as a writer was changing. Also, it is important to consider that the novel was written in the late-1940s, and that it depicts the formation of a new vision of the world as it diverges from the older view. Kerouac would, from time to time, reveal his adoption of ideas that seem somewhat less than liberal. In a letter to his friend Hal Chase, Oct. 19, 1948, he describes one of the three novels that he was currently working on along with what would become *Dr Sax* and *On the Road* as “‘The Imbecile’s Christmas’ . . . the imbecile who believes everybody, believes in everything, makes no judgement of good and evil . . .” (169-70). The lack of discernment that Kerouac notes in liberalism, he attaches here to an “imbecile.” Later, he writes to Allen Ginsberg, August 19, 1955, that he is considering a “sequel to *Town & City*, with all the brothers gone mad” (508). He writes more directly of liberalism to Ginsberg, August 23, 1954; speaking of “Al H_,” unnamed, Kerouac writes, “you shouldnt encourage on his really simpleminded and ignorant commie kick, you shouldnt be such a fool Bourroughsian liberal saying he really represents good old American dissent— ‘traditional American dissent’ you called it, we don’t call 18th Century Toryism, siding with the national military enemy, a ‘healthy dissent,’ it’s really treason against the government and the army, what else? Let Al go to Russia if he can git there” (433).

But, in *Vanity of Duluo*, Kerouac describes his youthful attachment to “the immortal words of Tom Wolfe” in 1940, and he borrows an idea from Walt Whitman to describe the importance to his literary career of the discovery of those words: “he just woke me up to America as a Poem instead of America as a place to struggle around and

sweat in. Mainly this dark-eyed American poet made me want to prowl, and roam, and see the real America that was there" (75). Like the main character of *Look Homeward, Angel*, Eugene Gant, Kerouac's character Peter Martin is a type of "Gant the Far-Wanderer" (Wolfe 71), who "turns his eyes upon the distant soaring ranges" (626). In his biography of Kerouac, *Desolate Angel*, Dennis McNally notes that Kerouac found similarities between himself and Eugene Gant, and those connections are transposed onto Peter, as "fellow 'outsiders' enthralled by the majesty of the American dream . . . for they were *American dreamers*" (McNally 44). Wolfe also echoes Kerouac's and Martin's desire to travel, to search for a sense of place, when he writes of "the Gant men who would always know hunger, the strangers on the land, the unknown farers who had lost their way. O lost!" (Wolfe 292). The Gant family is attached to the earth, to home, timeless and "smelling of the earth . . . more enduring than life, more strong than death. And as Eugene looked, he felt again the nightmare horror of destiny: he was of them—there was no escape. Their lust, their weakness, their sensuality, their fanaticism, their strength, their rich taint, were rooted in the marrow of his bones" (574). Eugene's sense of attachment and belonging to family may be, to him "the nightmare horror of destiny," but it also grounds him and provides him with a sense of identity and place, as does the return trip home and the vision of the area in which he was raised for Peter Martin, and as it did for the narrator of his short story in *Atop an Underwood*, "Voyage," discussed above.

Kerouac also echoes the emotive power of Wolfe's writing in *The Town and the City* when he writes, "Nothing that the university taught him [Peter Martin] could match for him the power and wisdom of his own kind of people, who lived and drew their breath

in this rugged land joyous with tidings of towns, plain, homely, genuine and familiar, that he saw rolling by him again" (147). Wolfe also reflects Peter's sense of loneliness in a crowded world when he says of Gant the observer, "In nakedness and loneliness of soul he paced along the streets. Nobody said, I know you. Nobody said, I am here. The vast wheel of life, of which he was the hub, spun round" (585); in the passage, he expresses similar thoughts to those of Peter Martin in Times Square. Also, as a newspaper carrier, fourteen-year-old Eugene Gant was fascinated by the African-American life of the subscribers to whom he delivered; but, like Martin, he found especial interest in the outsiders among them, the subterraneans. As Wolfe says, "But another part—the part in which his desire and wonder met—were 'floaters,' young men and women of precarious means, variable lives, who slid mysteriously from cell to cell, who peopled the night with their flitting stealth" (303). His fascination reflects his desire to include all people in his world; not just white people, but African-Americans, also; and not just African-Americans, but the "floaters" among them, those who were not included in any version of middle America.

Wolfe's novel replicates many of the ideas found in the pre-war writing of Saroyan and Bénézet, and those ideas also appear in *The Town and the City*, but, as in Kerouac's novel, the reader finds passages in Wolfe that seem to contradict the liberal ideas that dominate much of the novel:

Yet, Eugene was no rebel. He had no greater need for rebellion than have most Americans, which is none at all. He was quite content with any system which might give him comfort, security, enough money to do as he liked, and freedom to think, eat, drink, love, read, and write what he chose.

And he did not care under what form of government he lived— Republican, Democrat, Tory, Socialist, or Bolshevist—if it could assure him these things. He did not want to reform the world, or to make it a better place to live in: his whole conviction was that the world was full of pleasant places, enchanted places, if he could only go and find them. (588-9)

Gant's lack of political awareness or concern and his apparent contentment with the world as he finds it seem to refute the concepts of liberal thought as it appears in other writers that I have discussed; however, Gant's resistance to change or to any real involvement with his society is actually a reflection of his desire for the safety of stasis and of his belief that the world is already approaching a state of perfection with or without his involvement. He does not feel a need to care which orthodox political ideology he lives under as long as he has "comfort, security, enough money," and positive freedom "to" partake in the good things of life, rather than a negative freedom "from" the problems of modern America. In short, the passage which on the surface seems to reveal a strongly conservative sense of the world, is actually a manifestation of Gant's internalization of liberal attitudes. If anything, the passage reflects a certain sense of denial and regret on the part of Gant, a refusal to notice that the world may not be as comfortable as the contentment located in the example of his own life would suggest. As Wolfe's words indicate, Gant operates under the "conviction" that the world is indeed made up of "pleasant places," but they are not available to him because he is unable to "go and find them."

In Love and Death in the American Novel, Leslie Fiedler finds Eugene Gant to be

one of “the avatars of self-pity” in American literature, and that “Gant finally becomes neither heroic nor Gargantuan, but remains a great panting, blubbing hulk of an adolescent, who can age but not grow up” (475). Fiedler also claims that Gant uses “nostalgia” as one of his “protective devices,” like “the lonely child, who wants really only to recapture his lost, unknowable Mother” (475). Wolfe’s novels, to Fiedler, are stories of “search and frustration; and beyond them, the books reveal the love of that frustration and the seeking self” (475). Fiedler’s criticism of Wolfe’s novels and the themes they contain is really a criticism of the liberal ideas he finds there, for behind Wolfe’s character’s search for a sense of self and a place in the world, lies the desire for stasis, for a return to a time of safety in an idealized past.

Kerouac’s novel reflects Gant’s desire in many ways, but in many other ways, it challenges those liberal ideas, for it sets up a tension between the town, which exists essentially in memory and, therefore, outside of time, and the city, which represents change and movement. It is easy to consider that the town is privileged over the city if the novel is read as a representation of the sentimental desire to recover a comfortable past; that is, if it is read as an example of Kerouac’s desire to emulate both the style *and* the substance of Wolfe’s (and other liberal writers’) novels. However, the most positive and affirmative passages in terms of the character’s ability to form a new vision of his place in the world occur once Peter Martin meets Leon Levinsky, Will Dennison, and Kenneth Wood in New York.⁹ Although Martin’s father reaches the lowest financial and physical depths of his life in the city, Peter’s experience of that decline and his new connection with his friends allows him to move beyond the town life and into the world of post-war

America.

The Town and the City begins by positioning the town within the flow of time, which is represented by the river: "The town is Galloway. The Merrimac River, broad and placid, flows down to it from the New Hampshire hills, broken at the falls to make frothy havoc on the rocks, foaming over ancient stone [T]he river is continually fed and made to brim out of endless sources and unfathomable springs. The little children of Galloway sit on the banks of the Merrimac and consider these facts and mysteries" (3). The river becomes a metaphor for change and the "endless" passage of time, as if it speaks a language that needs to be heard and understood, but the river is also a graphic representation of the movement of human experience and of the desire to resist the movement away from a secure and certain past, as if to resist the decay of society.¹⁰ The tangible presence of the town itself provides a ground from which to begin the outward journey into the world, physically and philosophically, but the town itself is not outside of time as is the river; the town and its inhabitants are subject to time's movement.

John Lardas, in *The Bop Apocalypse*, recognizes the importance of time in the novel; his study of the Beats takes Spengler's *The Decline of the West* as its informing model and focuses on Spengler's emphasis on the cyclical and therefore, inevitable nature of history and change. Accordingly, Lardas refers to *The Town and the City* as "a prolonged meditation on decay" (73). Certainly, Lardas is correct, especially in terms of Spengler's philosophical presence in the text, because loss and decay are inevitable byproducts of the cyclical movement of time. Kerouac's novel may well be the "meditation on decay" that Lardas finds it to be, but it is also an attempt to come to terms with the

inevitability of decay by placing time front and center as a dominant motif, at least at the beginning of the text; in a way, Kerouac is also reconciling for himself, the desire for stasis that he finds in writers like Wolfe with the actuality of his own lived experience, an experience that demanded an acceptance of the inevitability of change.

The river does confer a cyclical reality on the life of Galloway, and the beginning of the novel attempts to connect the cyclical nature of time as represented by the river with the town in an effort to decrease the caustic power of time, as if attempting to hold time temporarily in check and even to move outside of time if only as a momentary stay¹¹ against that power. Mircea Eliade, in *The Myth of the Eternal Return*, discusses the way in which archaic peoples ritualize the repetition of an archetypal act as “the cyclical recurrence of what has been before, in a word, eternal return” (88-9), because such a repetition and return “confers a reality upon events; events repeat themselves because they imitate an archetype – the exemplary event” (90). Through such a ritual is revealed and confirmed “the cyclical structure of time” (88). “Furthermore, through this repetition, time is suspended, or at least its virulence is diminished” (90). However, over the course of Kerouac’s novel, the effect is the opposite; the “virulence” of time becomes more evident with each successive loss for the Martin family. The beginning sections of the novel establish this cyclical nature of time and the seasons, but each repetition brings more suffering rather than a cessation of suffering.

Issues of time appear throughout the novel and logically are usually intertwined with the process of living. Early in the novel, the narrator says, “[l]iving continues in Galloway like the seasons themselves, nearer to God’s earth by these weathers, through

which life pulses processionaly in moods and leaps and bounds, while the moods of the universe flank across the skies endlessly" (*Town* 22). The sentence recalls the "eternal return" theorized by Eliade, but the attempts to stop or to escape from the effects of time by the remembrance of the past as are always undermined by time itself and by the strong connection to place. Like Fitzgerald's *Gatsby*, the people of Galloway are "borne back ceaselessly into the past" (Fitzgerald 189), as is the narrator, by their romantic attachment to the idyllic town and its people, and are therefore unable to escape the inevitable decline that time demands. While the town itself may serve as the mnemonic device that keeps the past in check and the present and future safely removed, it is the people of the town that render that safety questionable. When Peter's father experiences business difficulties, a "clique of men," Martin's competitors, force him into bankruptcy, "[a]nd the motives of greed and spite which these men were exhibiting were enough to eat up Martin's soul" in his recognition of "the ultimate corruption of ordinary men," fellow citizens of Galloway "who had been former close associates of his, two men he had always habitually trusted as a matter of course" (200). It seems that the failure is not of the town but of the people, and that type of failure, Niebuhr has pointed out, is one that is outside of time, but rather, inherent in the human subject. Apparently, neither the town nor its people are safe from the decay of the cyclical nature of time. While Kerouac may seem to be positioning Galloway as another version of "Saroyan's town" with its unquestioning inclusive sense of community (*On the Road*, 80), instead he allows Galloway to represent a different and perhaps more realistic form of thought, complete with the potential for human failing and evil, and yet one that still provides the grounding function of home.

While home is all important in the novel, Peter's brother Joe represents the questing, searching young American; he works as a truck driver for a time before the war, "a job that suited him wonderfully" (*Town* 64). Certain descriptions of Joe place him comfortably beside other characters in pre-war liberal writing: he is "indefatigable in his pleasures, wonderfully liked by everyone, coveted by women of all kinds, strong and responsible at his work, spendthrift with his time and money and laughter" (64). In Saroyan, such a character would arguably be happy beyond belief and destined for greatness, but Kerouac is following a different version of liberal idealism here. Joe, "in his inmost soul," is also "restless and dissatisfied and always look[ing] to the future as a challenge and a sad enigma"; and, he also realizes "that he was lost and forgotten by that sublime meaningful world that gleamed in his vision" (67). Joe can follow the pattern prescribed by society for a young man in that he can work and play vigorously, but he also envisions a more expansive view of the universe, one that includes a sense of alienation in spite of all that is available in America. And, he is not alone; as the narrator says, "A kind of lyrical ecstasy possesses certain young Americans in the springtime, a feeling of not belonging in any one place or in any one moment, a wild reckless longing to be elsewhere, everywhere, right now!" (89). Behind the romanticism of their "lyrical ecstasy," some young people do not feel the same sense of inclusion in their society that others have felt before them. Later in the novel, those same young people will experience a sense of inclusion among themselves, among those who feel as they do. Joe's longing is not unusual when he sees the "dim lights burning far off on the highway, on the river. There were lights even beyond those, stretching miles off in the night; he wanted to go there, to

see what was there” (97). This new vision includes both romantic sensibilities of wonder and a sincere attachment to life while at the same time it acknowledges the sense of loss and alienation that somehow makes the attachment more poignant and important.

Peter’s more cerebral brother Francis also experiences feelings of alienation and exclusion; where Joe operates in the working world, Francis is an intellectual and feels out of place in quaint Galloway. It is in the city that he finds what he needs to actualize himself as a person, for it is there

that for the first time in his life he heard spoken – and spoken in the articulate fluent language of ‘contemporary thought’ – all the misty indistinct feelings that he had been carrying around with him for the last few years in Galloway. At last he realized that he had not been alone in these feelings. Elsewhere in the world other men and women lived and felt and reasoned as he did, other men and women were dissatisfied with the way things were, with society and its conventions and traditions They, like him, had been frightened and alone at first, before discovering there were others. (115)

The sense of community and inclusion with the outer world is here replaced by a sense of community and inclusion within a much smaller circle. Being a citizen of the world is not enough for membership in this new liberal culture; here, one is included on the basis of a shared perspective on individual experience. Francis finds himself belonging to “this restless, intelligent, determined trend, this gentle, invisible revolt in America” (115). His friends share a Socialist vision of the new order, but their revolution is “gentle” and

“invisible,” and offers a sense of “hope” that Francis’ friend, the appropriately-named Engels, suggests has arisen because of the Depression: “Americans were frightened and sick – and like sick men they slowed down a pace – and new ideas moved right in and quite admirably promoted this change in all directions” (116). The sense of community and fellowship these people share is based on a common hope for the spiritual health of the nation, and as such, it reveals a political and culturally involved sense of community, not one based on the rejection of orthodox ideologies. It is also not a community that could exist in the town; it is “an America that was not at all like the futility he [Francis] had always known in Galloway” (117). In the city, Francis can “partake in all the thousand excitements that made up the brilliant surge and rush and style of life in New York” (145).

Peter, the character who seems most closely to reflect Kerouac himself, is a dreamer and spends much of his time staring out the window where he tries to imagine the shape of his future path to success. For Peter, “[t]here was never anything else that could hold his dreaming attention: all was the fulfillment of himself, the future, greatness, a heroic struggle and overcoming of all obstacles.” But, his younger brother Mickey, also shares “the same burning vision of life as triumph” (120); as Warren French notes, Mickey “is strongly reminiscent of the sentimental characters in William Saroyan’s *The Human Comedy*” (29), and it is Mickey, the first character presented in the novel, who “kneels at his bedroom window and listens to the river’s rush, . . . and ponders the wellsprings and sources of his own mysterious life” (*Town* 3). His is a world “perfectly ordered” because most of it is “imaginary” and self-created (120); he looks only to the future where all is possible and all is safe because it has not yet happened. As the novel progresses and the

Martin family faces financial hardship, death, and the scattering of the family unit, the idealized “perfectly ordered” world forms a sharp contrast to the realities of disorder and loss. In the city, Peter, like Francis, “realized that other people were also strangers to themselves, and were lonely and troubled like him, and sought each other out cheerfully and with friendship” (127). Later, Peter will meet Levinsky, Dennison, and Kenneth Wood, and discover the sense of community and intellectual kinship that was missing for him in Galloway. Like Francis, he finds the inclusion he seeks in a group that is passionate about what interests the group’s members and about their mutual concern for each other, rather than maintaining a sense of inclusiveness for the whole world. Their attitudes are tempered by the immediate world in which they live and the loyalties they feel for each other. David Amram, a musician who collaborated with Kerouac on several projects including the film *Pull My Daisy*, says that such a feeling of connection, fleeting as it may be, within a small group of like-minded individuals was not uncommon in the world in which he, Kerouac, and their peers moved; he says, “This was the part of New York where Jack and I felt most at home, in an environment that was inclusive, almost rural, temporarily created for a few hours in the midst of the vast skyscrapered metropolis where we miraculously found temporary cocoons of warmth and camaraderie. These party environments made for magical, spontaneous gatherings” (123-4).

In the city, Peter experiences a new sense of incredulity about the world; the narrator describes how “[h]e was seeing it all for the first time with eyes of wonder. He was amazed because of life, because of sheer human presence on earth” (251). But that sense of awe is always darkened by a perception of sadness and loss. As Peter leaves

Galloway for the last time, he has the feeling that “something else was approaching. He was ready for new things and sick of soul with the old haunted vanished ghosts of life” (312). The War is raging and Peter’s sense of loss is greater than merely a feeling of the loss of his boyhood locale; he feels the “dark mystery and ghostly sorrow. . . [of] the world as it had become to him since the beginning of the war.” For Peter, “[e]verything that he had ever done in his life, everything there was— was haunted now by a deep sense of loss, confusion, and strange neargrief” (359). Like the novel’s author, Peter’s emotional response to the world is formed by real events, and those events form the cultural context of the novel. Dennis McNally mentions Kerouac’s elation after completing *The Town and the City*: “He had written as brilliantly as his master Wolfe, but Jack’s book was also informed with a historical consciousness keyed to the war that lent it additional weight” (103). McNally also notes that *The Town and the City* was published in the midst of “[s]uspicion, paranoia, and dull fear” that followed the Alger Hiss trials (about which Kerouac’s close friend Lucien Carr had reported for UPI), the Communist victory in China, the rise of Eugene McCarthy’s fear-mongering, and the beginnings of the Rosenberg spy case (124). All of those events provide the context for the sections of the novel in which Peter meets the characters modeled after those who would become the Beats.

Leon Levinsky, the character based on Allen Ginsberg, explains Peter’s “deep sense of loss, confusion, and strange neargrief” in terms of a larger cultural malaise, “the great molecular comedown . . . an atomic disease” (*Town* 370). In trying to force Peter into acknowledging openly his sense of alienation and cultural discomfort, Levinsky says,

“Admit it at last. . . . That you feel guilty of something, you feel unclean, almost diseased, you have nightmares, you have occasional visions of horror, feelings of spiritual geekishness – Don’t you see, everybody feels like that now.” To which Peter replies, “I have a feeling like that . . . but I don’t know, it’s the war and everything, I think . . . things aren’t like they used to be before the war” (370). Each of the “Beat” characters seems to have a unique method of coming to terms with the way that the world seems to them. Levinsky has developed a theory which seems to be a modification of Spengler’s idea of the fall of the western world; according to Levinsky, “Everybody is going to fall apart, disintegrate” (371), as he foretells the end of civilization. Dennison, the character based on William S. Burroughs, has developed “a morphine habit” (372), and most of the rest of the group are involved in drugs. All are seeking a cure for the “atomic disease” of modern life that has left them feeling alienated from conventional culture, and, it is because of this common sense of estrangement that the characters come together. The narrator describes “all the strange young people whose lives had become mingled with his in New York” who looked at each other “with that sadness that always happened when they looked at each other—as though there was something they knew that nobody else knew, a crazy sorrowful knowledge of themselves in the middle of the pitiable world” (395-6). They have discovered a sense of community and attachment based on their common perception of what they consider is the tragic state of the world, and that connection has removed them from the margins of the culture; now they are “in the middle” of their own portion of the world. In a way, they have reconfigured their own culture to reflect more closely the actualities that they see in the world.

However, Peter's father recognizes the attitudes of Peter's friends as the symptoms of a young generation in moral decline; he has seen those signs before after the First World War. He says, "With that other war we had, a lot of things changed, a lot of them to the better – like the standard of living and a decent job and so on and some good unions among the bad ones, better working conditions. But a lot of things changed to no good, like this business of ignoring the simple right and wrong of living" (408). He describes and accepts the sea-change of the economy that occurred after the first war, but cannot understand the apparent change in moral values even though he knows that "you can't expect much more with the country turned upside down the way it is. Kids just don't have anything to lean on, any sort of faith, I guess" (408). But Peter and his friends have located in themselves a sense of community that works for them, and the ideas of the past over which Mr. Martin reminisces no longer hold in an age that suffers from the "atomic disease." Peter comes to an understanding about the passage of time and his place in the changing world when he thinks later of succeeding generations each seeking answers to over-whelming philosophical and moral questions, only to reject the older versions as inadequate:

he only found that his father's way was not enough And yet, that children and fathers should have a notion in their souls that there must be a way, an authority, a great knowledge, a vision, a view of life, a proper manner, an order in all the disorder and sadness of the world – that alone must be God in men. . . . The *should-be* in their souls powerfully prevailed, that was mightily so. (424)

It is the search for life-affirming answers that all people have in common which instills a sense of continuity in the movement of time and that the novel describes in its opening pages; however, at the same time, the disparity between the questions each generation asks and the answers that each discovers severs the connection of one age to the next. Kerouac is here describing the rewriting of a meaningful narrative for each age, one that removes itself from the preceding narrative by its particular and singular relevance to the new.

Armed with a new philosophy with which to face the world, Peter is better able to handle the immanent death of his father and his emotional return to the town for his father's funeral. He thinks, "[a] sharp knowledge had now come to him of the tragic aloneness of existence and the need of beating it off with love and devotion instead of surrendering to it" (468), as he had in the past. The experiences of his life in the city have forced him to reconsider the way in which he has been viewing the world, just as the recent cultural and political experiences of post-war liberals had forced them to attempt to rewrite their narrative of liberalism to more closely match their changing views of that world and its occupants. The novel ends with Peter going out into the world at large, embarking on "a long journey . . . traveling the continent westward," as he takes to the road, "alone again in the rainy night" (498). His experience in the city has allowed him to choose neither the town nor the city, but the whole "continent," that is, life itself; he has re-written his cultural view of life into something more relevant to him and he can now look toward the future, "alone by the waters of life, alone, looking towards the lights of the river's cape" (498), like Gatsby, "content to be alone" beckoning across the bay at the

“single green light” at the end of Daisy’s dock (Fitzgerald 25-6). And, like Gatsby, Peter could be considered a figure with “an extraordinary gift for hope, a romantic readiness” (6), although given Gatsby’s failure to reconcile the grandeur of his hope with the reality of his life, the reader must also be aware that Peter’s quest may also be unsuccessful, or at least the goal may need revision somewhere along the line¹². For it is noteworthy that nowhere in the short final section of *The Town and the City* does Kerouac use the word “hope.” And, unlike Eugene Gant at the end of *Look Homeward, Angel*, Peter is not one who “turns his eyes upon the distant soaring ranges” (Wolfe 626); his vision is set on closer targets. The truck driver who drops him off directs him to look ““a quarter mile down the road, just follow the river, till you get to the railroad overpass”” (*Town* 498). In other words, Peter can find what he seeks directly in front of him, on the roads of America.

If Kerouac seems to be leaning toward the sentimental style of writing of Wolfe or pointing toward a hopeful vision of the future only apparently to pull back in the end, perhaps he has modified the view of pre-war liberal writers like Wolfe into a vision that might be achievable, not situated in “the distant soaring ranges.” While he seems to connect to the pre-war liberal view of the world in its desire for unity and inclusion, a sense of wholeness and hope, and in the innate goodness of humanity, Kerouac also connects with a new version of that liberalism, one that recognizes the possibility of human failing and suffering, and in the awareness that the world is not as open to human ambition and hopefulness as an older liberalism would suggest. His first novel becomes more clearly accessible when read as an attempt to form a new vision of a changing world

rather than simply as a young writer's inability to distance himself from his literary models.

Conclusion: On the Road to *On the Road*

Describing the period before he started work on *The Town and the City*, Kerouac says,

I began to understand that the city intellectuals of the world were divorced from the folkbody blood of the land and were just rootless fools, the permissible fools, who really didn't know how to go on living. I began to get a new vision of my own of a truer darkness which just overshadowed all this overlaid mental garbage of 'existentialism' and 'hipsterism' and 'bourgeois decadence' and whatever names you want to give it.

(*Vanity of Duluo* 262; part of the passage appeared above in the citation from Steven Watson)

The "new vision . . . of a truer darkness" of which he speaks is what helps Kerouac to revise the ideas that appear in much of the writing of his literary models, whether or not he was aware that he was doing so at the time. It appears that he was trying to write in a "truer" way; that is, "truer" to a vision of the world that made sense to him rather than to the "city intellectuals of the world" who were out of touch with the version of reality that spoke to Kerouac.

Following the publication and subsequent poor reception of *The Town and the City*, Kerouac returned to New York from a promotional tour to his hometown of Lowell, Massachusetts, but, as Dennis McNally points out, "his return to the city made the chasm

between the *Partisan Review* intellectuals and the natural hipsters all too obvious” (126). The “intellectuals” that Kerouac and McNally deride could well be some of the Columbia professors under whom Kerouac studied, including Mark Van Doren, and others of the New York *intelligentsia*, Alfred Kazin and Lionel Trilling among them, as well as some of the same liberal thinkers that I mentioned above who were attempting to form a new liberal narrative; if so, and if as I contend, Kerouac was trying to create his own liberal literary narrative, then he was not following the lead of those liberal intellectuals, but was doing so in his own particular ways. After the dismal retail performance of *The Town and the City* and its encouraging but not ecstatic reviews, Kerouac would abandon the idea of trying to create a fictional work, even such a type of narrative history like his first novel which was based loosely on his own experiences fictionalized to follow conventional narrative form. He would use the actual events of his life as the source and substance of the fictional material itself; that is, he stopped creating fictional characters and events to represent or to act as a surrogate in place of the actual events of his life, and instead used those actual events as the basis of his fiction.

As James Campbell points out, *The Town and the City* “was begun before Kerouac met [Neal] Cassady, before he [Kerouac] understood that he was being gifted a new aesthetic of speed and spontaneity, a talk aesthetic, a buddy prose” (103). But although the writing of that first novel was initiated pre-Cassady, it was completed after Kerouac met Cassady, which is why it begins to reveal some of that “new aesthetic” that would appear later in *On the Road* and in *Visions of Cody*. The ending of his first novel, nods toward the beginning of *On the Road*, with Sal Paradise seeming to begin at the same

point of his cross-country journey as Peter Martin. But, perhaps coincidentally, it also seems to nod toward the ending of *On the Road*. At the end of *The Town and the City*, Peter Martin hitchhikes alone in the rain and heads down the road with what appears to be determination and purpose, and perhaps with a sense of the spiritual nature of his quest: "He put up the collar of his jacket, and bowed his head, and hurried along" (499). At the end of *On the Road*, as Sal and Dean part for the final time, Sal describes Dean, "ragged in a motheaten overcoat he brought specifically for the freezing temperatures of the East, walked off alone, and the last I saw of him he rounded the corner of Seventh Avenue, eyes on the street ahead, and bent to it again" (309). But Kerouac and his vision of the world were changing by the time he began to write the first versions of *On the Road* in the late 1940s. His financial situation seemed to be improving; where once he could say "Everything belongs to me because I am poor" (*Visions of Cody* 33), by 1949, after receiving an advance from his publishers for *The Town and the City*, he would say ironically in a letter to his friend Alan Harrington, "I am no longer 'beat,' I have money, a career. I am more *alone* than when I 'lurked' on Times Square at 4 A.M., or hitch-hiked penniless down the highways of the night. It's strange. And yet I was never a 'rebel,' only a happy, sheepish imbecile, open-hearted & silly with joys. And so I *remain*" (*Charters, Letters, 1940-1956*, 188, italics in original). But, as public response to his novel cooled and no further moneys were forthcoming, the "open-hearted" Kerouac began to embrace a different point of view. He would not "*remain*" so "open-hearted" for long.

As a means of comparison, it is interesting to note the way in which Kerouac's movement away from his earlier mode of writing, following the models of Saroyan and

Wolfe, manifested itself in later years. As he did in *The Town and the City*, Kerouac describes the New York of the late 1940s and early 1950s in "New York Scenes," an article collected in his 1960 work *Lonesome Traveler*. The representation of the New York of the Beat Generation in the article reveals a similar combination of old and new liberal philosophies as does the description from *The Town and the City*, but, written more than ten years later, the piece also reveals a more developed tone of irony and bitterness. As Kerouac describes it, "This is the center of the greatest city the world has ever known and this is what beatniks do here" (108). His immediate group is small and unique, but Kerouac also recognizes their intermingling with "the normal New Yorkers, looking ridiculously out of place and as odd as their own neat oddity" (109). He seems to evince a sense of inclusiveness in that it takes both the "beatniks" and the "normal" to make up a comfortable and familiar New York; as he asks, "Why does Times Square feel like a big room?" (111).

But, Kerouac's irony becomes apparent, when he reveals that, with the mixture of "normal" and "Beat," comes a sense that life in the city is not as blended and inclusive as it appears. Kerouac laments what he sees as a decline in the former openness and inclusiveness of the jazz scene, one of the elements of New York that once served to connect the people of the counter-culture. He blames the decline on those with money when he notes the presence of many jazz clubs, but adds, "you've got to have mucho money and it's not so much that you've got to have mucho money but the sad commercial atmosphere is killing jazz and jazz is killing itself there, because jazz belongs to open joyful ten-cent beer joints, as in the beginning" (114). Success breeds exclusivity in the

jazz business, but Kerouac prefers that the music stay accessible to all and not be restricted on the basis of admission fees. But most tellingly, among the last images of the city in the essay are of "New York Women's prison that looms high and is folded in silence as the night itself" and of Allen Ginsberg's companion Peter Orlovsky buying groceries from a corner store ("wormy cabbage by mistake") before he goes home to fall asleep in front of a "horror movie" on television. Kerouac seems to be undercutting his own idealization of New York and the Beat scene, and also of the possibility of the mixing of culture and counter-culture; it is difficult not to notice the sarcasm of his final line: "And this is the beat night life of New York" (117).

Notes to Chapter Two

1. Kerouac chose the pseudonym "Duluoz" during his days spent in Hartford, Connecticut where he wrote many of the pieces in *Atop an Underwood*. The name bears a rhythmic similarity to James Joyce's character Stephen Dedalus, and Kerouac mentions the choice of name in a letter to Neal Cassady dated January 10, 1951: "In those days I was writing a Joyce-like novel in which I was the Dedalus; and called myself Duluoz" (Charters, *Selected Letters, 1940-1956*, 296).

2. Kerouac's decision to make the events of his life the subject of his writing recalls what Hayden White has termed historiography. In *The Content of the Form*, White defines the term as a process by which "our desire for the imaginary, the possible, must contest with the imperatives of the real, the actual" (4), a process to which Kerouac seems to be deeply committed as he uses the "possible" of his life to inform his literary creation of what is "real." That is, he allows the "real" to be modified by the "possible" if it suits his literary purpose. In representing in written form actual historical events, "[t]he events must be not only registered within the chronological framework of their original occurrence but narrated as well, that is to say, revealed as possessing a structure, an order of meaning, that they do not possess as mere sequence" (White 5). That "structure" must employ the same conventions we understand and accept in fictional writing in order to be understood as narrative.

Kerouac's autobiographical Duluoz Legend attempts to generate that "order of meaning" for himself and for his readers. However, problems can arise from the choices the writer makes in constructing the narrative; as White explains, "narrative is not merely a neutral discursive form that may or not be used to represent real events in their aspect as developmental processes but rather entails ontological and epistemic choices with distinct ideological and even specifically political implications" (ix). On one level, these choices are made on the basis of narrative efficacy, but on another level, they reveal the narrative's complicity in the ideology of the culture in which it is written, whether or not the writer is aware of that involvement. Therefore, Kerouac's narrative choices for his own narrative of Duluoz cannot help but be informed by the ideology of his culture.

White also says that narrative, as a reflection of cultural ideologies, allows individuals to form "an unreal but meaningful relation to the social formations in which they are indentured to live out their lives and realize their destinies as social subjects" (x). Therefore, Kerouac's use of autobiographical material for his narratives allows him, in a way, to form a "meaningful relation" to those "social formations," one of which is liberalism in its pre- and post-war incarnations. Kerouac's use of his own life as the subject for his writing is his attempt to provide form and meaning to the essential formlessness and chaos that seemed to be a part of his existence, "to have real events display the coherence, integrity, fullness, and closure of an image of life that is and can only be imaginary" (White 24). In the process of turning his experience into a narrative by following the conventions of fictional writing, Kerouac is effecting what White refers to as

a mediation between that actual experience and a created fiction in an attempt “to endow unfamiliar events and situations with meanings” (White, *Tropics*, 88).

Further, because narrative can act in ways that a simple chronology or chronicle of events cannot, “the narrative represents the aspects of time in which endings can be seen as linked to beginnings to form a continuity within a difference” (*Content* 52). In linking the beginning with the end through the narrative, any events that occur in between take on added significance because they are read retrospectively. Following Ricoeur, White says, “the meaning of history resides in its aspect as a drama of the human effort to endow life with meaning. This universal, human quest for meaning is carried out in the awareness of the corrosive power of time, but it is also made possible and given its distinctly human pathos by this very awareness” (181). An understanding of the paradox cannot be grasped directly, but “it can be grasped in all its complexity and multilayeredness in symbolic thought and given a real, if only provisional, comprehensibility in those true allegories of temporality that we call narrative histories” (181).

3. For Kerouac, letters and letter writing constitute a significant mode of communication as well as a means of putting ideas into a written and semi-public form at a time in the mid-1940s when official publication appeared a remote possibility; that significance increases into the 1950s when Kerouac was largely unsuccessful in placing his work with a publisher. As Oliver Harris says, “for the Beats the letter represented a technology of self-expression and intimate communication opposed to the impersonal relations of commodity exchange and the controlled uniformity of modern mass media. Put another way, the value of Beat letters is the product of their position as not just unpublished but unpublishable writers: the likes of Ginsberg and Kerouac invested essential energy in correspondence during the early Cold War years, when their social marginality was also economic and cultural. For those undesirables denied voice or place by Cold War discourses, the letter embodied postwar American dreams of an alternative personal and social space.” Harris notes that the Beats considered letter writing an example of “close communication”; he says, “as a mundane practice, the letter was a natural medium for writers committed to the representative value of the commonplace: a near-universal form of personal communication through which to recognize how the universal is communicated by the personal”(n.p.).

4. Ezra Pound’s “In a Station of the Metro” presents an image of individual alienation within the collective that I find duplicated in Kerouac’s story. Pound notes only the “apparition” of the “faces” of the people in the “crowd,” rather than the faces themselves, like “Petals on a wet, black bough” (1236).

5. Kerouac also uses as a starting point for a short poem Whitman’s lines from the 1855 version of “Song of Myself,” starting with “I know I am August” (Whitman 2742, line 409), in which Kerouac yawns such pseudo-Whitmanesque lines as “My food is often that of books, / For in them I find the steak and the beef for my famished brain; / And oftentimes, for dessert, I nibble at some sweet Saroyan” (*Atop an Underwood* 43).

6. Originally, according to critic James Campbell, the manuscript was more than 1800 pages in length before the editors at publisher Harcourt, Brace reduced it to a manageable 500 (75). But Campbell's claim that the original manuscript of *The Town and the City* topped 1800 pages is only one version of the enormity of the book. Kerouac says in a letter to Allen Ginsberg on January 2, 1948 that the novel is "280,000 words at present and will wind up at 330,000 wds" (142). In another letter to Ginsberg dated April 1948, he counts "380,000 words" (147). And, in a letter accompanying the manuscript to Columbia professor Mark Van Doren on March 9, 1949, Kerouac says that he has sent "1,100 ms. pages" (184). In *Vanity of Duluo*, Duluo says the novel is "1,183 pages" (268).

7. Kerouac's affection for writers such as Saroyan and Wolfe is well documented as is his desire to write using them as a model, as the previous discussion has indicated. Kerouac mentions Wolfe and Saroyan throughout his works. In the "Author's Introduction" to his collection of stories and articles *Lonesome Traveler*, Kerouac lists under "early literary influences Saroyan and Hemingway; later Wolfe (after I had broken my leg in Freshman football at Columbia read Tom Wolfe and roamed his New York on crutches)" (v). In his interview with Ted Berrigan, Kerouac says, "As for Saroyan, yes I loved him as a teenager, he really got me out of the nineteenth-century rut I was trying to study, not only with his funny tone but also with his neat Armenian poetic—I don't know what . . . he just got me . . . Hemingway was fascinating, the pearls of words on a white page giving you an exact picture . . . but Wolfe was a torrent of American heaven and hell that opened my eyes to America as a subject in itself" (Plimpton 116-7).

8. The term "melting pot" has, in many ways, become synonymous with the idea of American assimilation, multiculturalism, and ethnic diversity. I use it here as a metaphor for the liberal sense of inclusion and pluralism that I find in the cited passages from *The Town and the City*. The idea first appeared, to my knowledge, in Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur's *Letters from an American Farmer* published in 1782, and has been used with varying degrees of accuracy, irony, and ideological purpose ever since. In "Letter III," de Crèvecoeur writes that the new American, "leaving behind him all his ancient prejudices and manners, receives new ones from the new mode of life he has embraced, the new government he obeys, and the new rank he holds. He becomes an American by being received in the broad lap of our great Alma Mater. Here individuals of all nations are melted into a new race of men, whose labours and posterity will one day cause great changes in the world" (Lauter 897).

9. As he did in most of his writing, especially the early works that make up the "Duluo legend," Kerouac used pseudonyms for the names of the characters that he modeled on actual people to avoid legal complications, usually on the advice of his publishers. In *The Town and the City*, Leon Levinsky is Allen Ginsberg, Will Dennison is William S. Burroughs, Kenneth Wood is Lucien Carr, and Junkey is Herbert Huncke (see the table in *Charters, Portable Kerouac*, 619). In a letter to Malcolm Cowley on September 20, 1955, before the publication of *On the Road*, Kerouac outlines the "provisions" and

“precautions” he has taken “to avoid personal injury” to any recognizable people. These “provisions” included changing details of people’s lives, altering names and places, changing the races of certain characters, and “carefully trimming it of unpraiseworthy libelous touches” (Charters, *Letters, 1940-1956*, 518-9, and 520, note 3). His intention for the future of the Duluo legend was always to replace the pseudonyms with the actual names; as he says in his introductory page to *Visions of Cody*, “In my old age I intend to collect all my work and reinsert my pantheon of uniform names, leave the long shelf full of books there, and die happy” (n.p.). None of those projects came to fruition.

10. Although there is no evidence that Kerouac ever read the poem, William Carlos Williams uses the metaphor similarly in his introduction to *Paterson*; he says, “The noise of the Falls seemed to me to be a language which we were and are seeking and my search, as I looked about, became the struggle to interpret and use this language. This is the substance of the poem. But the poem is also the search of the poet for his language, his own language which I, quite apart from the material theme had to use to write at all” (xiii). Later, he describes Part Four: “the river below the falls, will be reminiscent of episodes – all that any one man may achieve in a lifetime” (253). Williams begins by establishing “a local pride” (2) in place, then prefaces the poem: “To make a start,/ out of particulars/ and make them general, rolling/ up the sum, by defective means. . . . For the beginning is assuredly/ the end – since we know nothing, pure/ and simple, beyond/ our own complexities” (3). Kerouac uses the fictitious Galloway as Williams does Paterson; that is, he uses his relationship with his hometown of Lowell, the “local,” as a way of beginning the exploration of the “complexities” of his own life and of the world at large; that is, as a way of using the “local” to represent the universal.

11. Robert Frost, in “The Figure a Poem Makes,” uses the phrase “a momentary stay against confusion” to express one of the great benefits of reading poetry. He says, the poem “begins in delight and ends in wisdom. . . . [I]t inclines to the impulse, it assumes direction with the first line laid down, it runs a course of lucky events, and ends in a clarification of life – not necessarily a great clarification, such as sects and cults are founded on, but in a momentary stay against confusion” (xxx). Frost’s experience of reading coincides with what Kerouac seems to be attempting in *The Town and the City*, not necessarily to provide “a great clarification,” but at least to create a space outside of time that allows the reader and the writer to re-assess the “confusion” they experience in modern life.

12. Ann Douglas notes the affinity of Kerouac and Fitzgerald: “Like F. Scott Fitzgerald, Kerouac had an infallible eye for the cultural detail that served as a harbinger of important social change” (26). She notes Fitzgerald’s comment that, unlike the successful Hemingway, Fitzgerald felt that “he represented ‘the authority of failure’ and this authority, the authority, one might say, of non-authority, seems the logical goal of Kerouac’s project, a project in which every presence was always shaded by a host of absences” (34). Douglas H. King also draws parallels between *Gatsby* and *On the Road*. While King’s short essay takes the form of a listing of similarities, significantly for my

purposes, King makes a nice connection of the closing sections of each work: "The last paragraph of *On the Road* mimics the last page and a half of *The Great Gatsby*; both narrators reflect on their experiences of the United States. Fitzgerald and Kerouac divide their final pages into (a) the setting for meditation, (b) the places meditated on, (c) the time of day when each meditation takes place, (d) the meditation on America's history, and (e) a reflection on the American people" (n.p.).

Chapter Three

On the Road: The Spiritual Journey Toward a New Liberal Narrative

You road I enter upon and look around! I believe you are not all that is
here;
I believe that much unseen is also here. . . .
Now I reëxamine philosophies and religions,
They may prove well in lecture-rooms, yet not prove at all under the
spacious clouds, and along the landscape and flowing currents.

Walt Whitman. "Song of the Open Road" (ll.5-6; 84-5).

As the epigraph from "Song of the Open Road" indicates, for Walt Whitman, the road provides a place to "reëxamine philosophies and religions" pragmatically, in practice in the world, rather than as simply as theories or abstractions removed from the world to which they should connect. What appears cogent and workable in "lecture-rooms" may "prove" otherwise on the open road. According to Whitman, the traveler must take those "philosophies and religions" out into the world with the intention of putting them into practice and calling them to the test, and the road can function as the proving ground from which they can be reexamined, that is, looked at again and revised accordingly. The road allows the traveler to see what has been previously "unseen," to engage with the world in new, more meaningful ways. Whitman's idea is applicable also to Jack Kerouac and to the characters he creates in *On the Road*; certainly Sal and Dean take their unique visions of the world on the road and find much that they have not seen before, but whether they are able to "prove" or verify anything by what they encounter is another matter. For Kerouac, outside the narrative frame of the novel, the road and the novel in which the road figures so prominently also provide a site in which to "reëxamine" his vision of America and of

the world, in effect, to create a new relationship with liberal ideals in the “flowing currents” available only on the open road.

This chapter will locate in Jack Kerouac’s most well known novel evidence of the author’s changing vision of the world and of America in particular in light of the cultural and political events that accompanied the aftermath of the Second World War. Since America was changing economically, culturally, and politically as were writers’ observations of those changes, the expression of individual experience in writing must therefore reflect an America in a state of flux. Any mode of representation that could adequately express individual experience and the cultural conditions in which writers found themselves must take into account a new America and acknowledge it as a departure from what went before. Older forms of expression no longer held in the changing culture that had seen many disturbing and devastating occurrences as well as a meteoric rise in the economic condition of the country. Like other new visions that preceded it, this emerging American culture required a new version of liberalism to better coincide with the times, one that would break with the older forms and recognize the changed world in ways that the previous version could not.

As I have argued in the previous chapters, Jack Kerouac was one of those writers whose work displays an underlying experiment to refashion literarily the dominant concept of liberalism, whether or not he was aware that he was doing so at the time. Accordingly, *On the Road* reveals the development of a type of new liberal narrative, and that narrative is revealed in Kerouac’s vision of life as an individual spiritual journey, one that could rejuvenate the soul of the traveler in a world in which belief and faith had become

increasingly hard to come by. Such a journey opens the possibility or, perhaps more correctly, the necessity of a separate narrative for each person. I will argue that in positing an individual path toward spiritual self-understanding, Kerouac is, in effect, stating his belief that the individual could form an independent and workable philosophical position from which the world made sense. Also, I will demonstrate that, by the time Kerouac wrote *On the Road*, he was beginning to see Mexico in its fundamental Otherness from America as a site from which a more adequate vision of the self in America could be formed, and also as a place in which he could create physically and spiritually his new form of writing. His view of the Mexican people as Spengler's "fellaheen," a people close to the earth and removed from crumbling Western civilization, coincides with his hopeful view of the human possibility that manifested itself in his conception of life as a spiritual journey. And, the idea of such a journey toward a renewed human potential parallels the experiment by liberal writers and thinkers to create a new narrative of liberalism. All of these attempts are subsumed under the metaphor of the road which acts as a controlling and ordering figure in the novel¹. In this chapter, I will consider *On the Road* as the literary expression of a spiritual journey that could potentially lead toward a new vision for the individual, and I will also show how Kerouac uses the proximity and presence of Mexico as another instrument for developing that vision.

The Spiritual Journey of *On the Road*: "The heroic message of the American future"

The sense of emptiness is deeply embedded in the narrator of the novel *Sal Paradise*, but because few readers take note of the despondency that hangs over him, many

fail to see the journey of spiritual recovery and discovery on which the novel is predicated. Not surprisingly, *On the Road* seems to have polarized its readers from the day of its publication; in the fallout from Gilbert Millstein's favorable review², critics fell swiftly towards one side or the other in their opinions of the book and of its author, and those disparate perspectives have proliferated ever since. One of the reasons for such a widespread reaction is that critics and readers seem to form impressions of the book according to the way that they would like it to be, rather than by basing their opinions on actual reading. Some readers, mistaking for endless fantasy fulfilment what narrator Sal Paradise comes to see is an the "endless nightmare road" (*On the Road* 254), glorify the novel as an appeal to "wild young hedonists" (Holmes 116) like themselves to pursue a kind of nomadic life free from responsibility and from accountability to any authority. Those readers often see the book as a tribute to living at the extremes of human experience, or, perhaps, as a much-needed corrective to the conformity and stagnation of post-war American values. Ironically, other, more moderate readers condemn the book for similar reasons; to those readers, the novel seems to criticize the cultural values of middle America and to promote the irresponsible pursuit of pleasure and excitement as a preoccupation for impressionable young people in an age, like the 1950s, that seems to demand a high degree of conformity.

Complicating the issue further is that both groups of readers tend to attach to Jack Kerouac the author their sentiment for or against the novel, either dismissing Kerouac as a only a typist, as did Truman Capote³ and blaming him for encouraging the youth of the world to abandon the path of convention, or, on the other hand, elevating the author to

the status of “angel-headed hipster” (Ginsberg, *Collected Works*, 126) and cultural deity. Both groups celebrate an image of “Jack Kerouac” that does not match the actuality of either the book or its author, a matter on which I will elaborate in the final chapter. As Steven Watson says in *The Birth of the Beat Generation*, “[t]he media was less drawn to Kerouac the person than to the Beat avatar he conveniently represented. He was new fodder for the rebel-without-a-cause trend in the tradition of *The Wild One* and mythic martyr James Dean” (254). John Clellon Holmes says in his chapter on Kerouac in *Nothing More to Declare* that because of these common mis-readings of Kerouac and of *On the Road*, Kerouac’s subsequent novels

were either dismissed or ignored, because they did not easily jibe with the image of the adolescent, kicks-hungry yawper that has dogged Kerouac’s career as relentlessly as the image of the South Sea Island tale-teller dogged Melville’s. . . . And the man who wrote me fifteen years ago, ‘Life is drenched in spirit; it rains spirit; we would *suffer* were it not so’ (and believes it still), lived to see the books which embodied this credo on page after page used as bibles of hipness by the Beatniks, derided as incoherent mouthings by the critics, and treated as some kind of literary equivalent of rock ‘n’ roll by the mass media. (84)

Holmes connects Kerouac to the treatment afforded Whitman and Melville by the public when he says that Kerouac is “the kind of writer that only America could produce, and that only America could so willfully misunderstand” (68). Again, it is much easier to see public figures as we wish they were rather than as they are.

The apparent misunderstanding of Kerouac and of his novel seems to emanate from the failure, willful or otherwise, of many readers to see in Kerouac and his writing what Holmes mentions in his reference to Kerouac's letters: Kerouac and the group of people with whom he associated believe firmly that "[l]ife is drenched in spirit." In "This is the Beat Generation," Holmes wrote "unlike the Lost Generation, which was occupied with the loss of faith, the Beat Generation is becoming more and more occupied with the need of it. . . . The difference is this almost exaggerated will to believe in something, if only in themselves. It is a *will* to believe, even in the face of an inability to do so in conventional terms" (112, italics in original). Holmes is even more direct in his correlation of spirit and journey when he writes later in "The Philosophy of the Beat Generation,": "It was Kerouac's insistence that actually they were on a quest, and the specific object of their quest was spiritual. Though they rushed back and forth across the country on the slightest pretext, gathering kicks along the way, their real journey was inward; and if they seemed to trespass most boundaries, legal and moral, it was only in the hope of finding a belief on the other side" (117). The spirituality that Holmes locates in the Beat project contains a hint of the ideological in its search for a meaningful system of belief in a world that provides little in which to believe; but the Beat journey was spiritual and not overtly political, although, according to Gregory Stephenson, it had its roots in the political. Stephenson says in *The Daybreak Boys*, that pre-war political radicalism was the source from which "the Beats derived their general libertarian-egalitarian-populist-anarchist orientation and their strategy of forming the new society within the shell of the old. In contrast to the political radicals, though, the Beats proposed a revolt of the soul, a

revolution of the spirit" (6). As Stephenson maintains, the focus of the Beat movement was not directly on political change, but on a change in the individual which could then lead to a change in the culture at large, including its politics. Stephenson adds, "[t]o redeem and revitalize the life of our culture and our individual lives, the Beats propose the cultivation of the energies of the body and the instincts, of the unconscious and the spirit" (8). That notion of spiritual revolution and the search for the elusive spiritual sense of life appears throughout *On the Road*. But, because the main characters, Sal Paradise and Dean Moriarty, seem to be propelled on a headlong quest for "kicks" and an evasion of responsibility, readers often "willfully misunderstand" that *On the Road* is a story of a journey in search of an accessible spiritual paradise in a post-war America that seems to deny the possibility of such a discovery for the likes of Sal and Dean. Dean's vision of the world is usually in direct contrast to that of Sal and as the constant presence of that difference suggests, the quest for spiritual understanding is a matter best left to the individual.

D. H. Lawrence notes that, for Walt Whitman, the soul belonged "down among the potsherds" (172), in the real world, not on high in metaphysical abstraction. For the soul to discover itself, that is, for individuals to come to a new and proper understanding of who they are and where they fit into the world, the soul must, as Whitman says, "enter upon" the "Open Road." And, as Lawrence defines it, such is "the American heroic message. . . . Whitman's essential message. The heroic message of the American future" (173). At the beginning of *On the Road*, Sal describes his intention to "enter upon" the road in no less heroic terms, at least no less heroic given the context of the troubling times

in which he lives. Sal presents somewhat cryptically his disturbed feeling of spiritual disconnection and attaches it indirectly to his current vision of post-war America. As he says, his "life on the road" began after "a serious illness" which he blames on "the miserably weary split-up" of his marriage and his "feeling that everything was dead" (3). The ambiguous "everything" seems to reach beyond the scope of his own subjectivity and out into America at large; in terms of causation, the "serious illness" comes from the stress of his marital estrangement but also from his feeling of estrangement from society. Dean Moriarty arrives just in time to resuscitate Sal by bringing a version of the "heroic message" in that it is "the coming of Dean Moriarty" that enables Sal to seek a solution to his anomie by "going West to see the country." The physical "coming" and "going" of the characters seems to be the pattern through which Sal will attempt to cure his apparent spiritual dysfunction, and he recognizes that, as a native Westerner, "Dean is the perfect guy for the road" (3). To Sal, Dean and the road represent a movement away from his older outmoded and ineffectual way of making sense of the world, for Dean is "a sideburned hero of the snowy West" (5), a "new kind of American saint" (39); he is the embodiment of a new, more accurate vision of America. In the scope of my argument here, Dean, manifests literarily the possibility of a new narrative of liberalism in his constant movement and his individualistic method of viewing the world, but also in his acceptance of complexity and ambiguity. His view of the world is not the only possible view, but it is a movement toward a more accurate and useable vision.

If Dean represents the potential for a new liberal narrative, then Sal must be considered a literary manifestation of the old narrative in need of rejuvenation in that he

struggles to come to terms with the world that he inhabits, because recent events, personal and communal, have left him in a state of cultural dislocation and bewilderment. Like the older, outmoded form of liberalism, Sal is profoundly naive in his approach to life; the recent experiences to which he alludes have left him unsure and hesitant, apparently unable even to describe precisely what troubles him. Like Reinhold Niebuhr's chastened America, Sal Paradise's late history has left him feeling domestically insecure partly because of the cultural insecurity he sees around him, and, in a way, his own disaffection reflects and embodies life in post-war America.

Sal's expressed need "to see the country" (3) is also an attempt to form a new vision of himself in the process, on the open road. He has never been West, so such a journey is one of discovery, of America as well as of himself. As the journey moves on, he learns more about the world by following Dean, but he never comes to see and accept "the impossible complexity" (303) of Dean's life or of the world as does Dean. Where Dean sees the road as presenting a separate and distinct meaning for each traveler and that each traveler must maintain a respectful distance from every other, Sal has a more negative view, as though disappointed by the lack of inclusiveness and mutual commitment that he was hoping to find in America. Late in the novel Dean reveals his difference from Sal when he describes what Sal calls his "Tao decisions" (251) about life: "You spend a whole life of non-interference with the wishes of others, including politicians and the rich, and nobody bothers you and you cut along and make it your own way. . . . What's your road, man? – holyboy road, madman road, rainbow road, guppy road, any road. It's an anywhere road for anybody anyhow. Where body how?" (251). Dean's road is personal

and decidedly individual in a modern world in which individualistic “non-interference” rather than communal inclusiveness is the “Tao.” To Sal, life on the road is incomplete and unsatisfying as seen through Dean’s vision; Sal sees only “the senseless nightmare road. All of it endless and beginningless emptiness. Pitiful forms of ignorance” (254). Following the revelation of Dean’s “Tao” to Sal, the two part and Dean waves joyously, giving Sal the “boomer’s highball,” the railroaders’ universal signifier of moving on and of joyous involvement in the task at hand, and Sal notices how he “bent to his life and walked quickly out of sight.” But, although Sal waves a return, his is much less enthusiastic; he says, “I gaped into the bleakness of my own days. I had an awful long way to go too” (254). Since Sal will still seek his spiritual rejuvenation on the road, that “awful long way” is not merely literal, but also metaphorical in that Sal stares into an abyss of “bleakness” into which he must struggle to avoid stumbling.

From the novel’s beginning, Dean represents for Sal the possibility of positive change, but he also exudes the optimism and energy that is missing in Sal’s own “dead” life. Although Sal at first recognizes that “in those days, [Dean] didn’t really know what he was talking about” (6), the two connect in a substantive way, at least according to Sal. As he says, “we understood each other on other levels of madness” (6), “other” that is, than on the level of the “real intellectual” (6) to which Dean professes to aspire. He has come to New York to learn to be a writer, but, like most of his projects, he loses interest and abandons the idea quickly, probably because of the enormity of the task given the extent of his impatient enthusiasm; he says, ““there’s so many things to do, so many things to write! How to even *begin* to get it all down . . .” (7, italics in original). But Sal finds in

Dean “a youth tremendously excited with life” and says he is attracted by “a kind of holy lightning I saw flashing from his excitement and his visions” (7); while Sal feels emptied out, Dean overflows with “a great amorous soul” (8). He could not be more unlike Sal, but Dean finds a match for his energy in Carlo Marx. Sal notes that once Dean and Carlo met, “[f]rom that moment on I saw very little of Dean, and I was a little sorry too. Their energies met head-on, I was a lout compared, I couldn’t keep up with them” (7). Sal’s desire for inclusion is frustrated by fickle Dean and his desire for new experience, but Sal’s comments reveal that he has been on the outside before; while Carlo and Dean “danced down the streets like dingedodies,” Sal says, “I shambled after as I’ve been doing all my life after people who interest me.” He adds,

the only people for me are the mad ones, the ones who are mad to live, mad to talk, mad to be saved, desirous of everything at the same time, the ones who never yawn or say a commonplace thing, but burn, burn, burn like fabulous roman candles exploding like spiders across the stars and in the middle you see the blue centerlight pop and everybody goes “Awww!”

(8)

Sal is an observer rather than a participator; he may be attracted to the “mad ones,” but he is not one of them. He does not “burn,” but stands back with “everybody” to say “Awww!” at the appropriate time. If Sal feels “dead” at present, perhaps he has placed himself in such a state by failing to accept the “dead” condition of post-war America without searching for a new method to view the changed world as do Dean and Carlo. While they work at a new level of interaction with the world, Sal “shamble[s] after.”

But, while Sal cannot participate fully in Dean's wildly adventurous life, he can be mobilized by his proximity to Dean, because Dean has the potential to act as a restorative agent to Sal, a literary relationship that parallels that of pre- and post-war versions of liberalism. Oliver Harris notes that Dean helps to fill part of Sal's emptiness by functioning as a companion which helps Sal to learn about himself; Harris says, "here the narrator's process of self-discovery goes by way of his investment in understanding a male partner" (n.p.). However, Sal is never fully invested in Dean because he fails to understand him, and therefore his "process of self-discovery" is derailed without reaching its destination. To Sal, Dean is like "some long-lost brother" (10) who reminds Sal of the ideals of his youth⁴; and, where Sal's "New York friends were in the negative, nightmare position of putting down society and giving their tired bookish or political or psychoanalytical reasons," Dean "just raced in society" (10), accepting the world as he finds it and negotiating his way through what he encounters as he encounters it. In Dean, Sal can "hear a new call and see a new horizon, and believe it at my young age" (10); Sal reveals a hope of positive interaction with the world but also an indication that the movement toward spiritual recovery for him will not be entirely successful by the end of the novel. While Sal claims to see a new vision of the world because of Dean, the final words of his optimistic statement seem to excuse his expectation for a better individual understanding on his own youthful exuberance rather than expressing a realistic possibility of achievement; as if, at the earlier age at which he went on the road with Dean, he felt differently about the possibility of a new vision of the world than he does later in life in the historical present of the narrative⁵.

But Dean's "new call" to Sal is also significant because it locates Dean within the concept of America itself, and that assimilation allows Dean to function in the novel as a manifestation of a new narrative of liberalism that replaces or modifies the old. As Sal says, Dean's boundless energy is "a wild yea-saying outburst of American joy; it was Western, the west wind, an ode from the Plains, something new, long prophesied, long a-coming. . . . A western kinsman of the sun, Dean" (10). Sal has "often dreamed of going West to see the country" (3), and to him, the mythic West is America. Also, Sal sees the West with its traditional sense of openness and adventure as a plausible site for his spiritual recovery, but that tradition is long past, as he soon discovers. Helen Huntley notes that "the old romantic dream of pursuing freedom in the West, the last frontier of infinite possibilities, still persists in the American imagination" (167), and Sal is proof of the longevity and prevalence of that dream. Before he leaves home, Sal studies the mythology of the West to ready himself for what he hopes to find; he examines maps to plot his route, "one long red line" straight across the country, and prepares for Western culture by "reading books about the pioneers and savoring names like Cimarron and so on" (12). As Huntley says, Sal sees the West as "a mythical land of his own imagination fed by powerful stereotypes from literature, films, and popular culture" (165). But he finds that even before he leaves New York State that few travelers use the road that seems so direct on the map, and Sal is forced to return to New York City to start again. Sal reluctantly admits that, "[i]t was my dream that screwed up, the stupid hearthside idea that it would be wonderful to follow one great red line across America instead of trying various roads and routes" (13). What Sal had planned at "hearthside" was not practical

when applied on the open road, and the false start to Sal's journey seems to confirm Whitman's proposal that ideas that seem strong in theory need pragmatic verification in the "flowing currents" of life (Whitman, cited in epigraph above). Also, Sal's idealistic hope of "one great red line across America," that is, one universal way of configuring the country, is not workable in a world that now needs to experiment with new modes of thought, and that needs to travel "various roads and routes."

Sal should have learned quickly by his inaugural misadventure that the way in which he has previously thought is no longer valid, and that it truly was his "dream that screwed up." Then, he could have modified the dream itself rather than his method of attaining it. But, although he admits that his "dream" was in error in leading him toward some false assumptions, Sal still does not act on that knowledge; he continues to see the West as the embodiment of the illusive America that he is seeking and the place in which he will find a better way of comprehending the world, partly because he has not yet seen the "real" West. As he crosses his "beloved Mississippi . . . with its big rank smell that smells like the raw body of America itself" (15) and looks West toward "the Promised Land," he thinks of Denver and San Francisco as "jewels in the night" (16). In the middle of the country, he has the sensation that he is "at the dividing line between the East of my youth and the West of my future" (17)⁶. He articulates his feeling of infinite possibility for his "haunted life" (17) in terms of the symbology of America—the Promised Land of the Puritans and the Mississippi of Huck Finn—without noticing the "big rank smell" of the "dream" itself. Sal seems to be trying to form his new vision by retreating toward a past that no longer has much to offer the present, and he cannot understand the artificiality or

deterioration of what he sees and says.

When he meets fellow travelers nicknamed Montana Slim and Mississippi Gene on “[t]he greatest ride” (24) he ever had with “two young farmer boys from North Dakota” (23) or perhaps “Minnesota” (he is never certain which [26]), he believes he has found the West of myth, especially since that myth seems to be embodied in the names of the people that he meets. But unlike Huck Finn who eventually sees through the monarchially-named Duke and King, Sal, in his naivety, cannot see that the hoboes are really con-men. When Mississippi Gene’s mannerisms remind Sal of his old shipmate in the Merchant Marine, Big Slim Hazard, Sal asks Gene if he has met Hazard. Sal is naively surprised to find that Gene has heard of his friend, but Sal fails to see that he is being duped, for he has already given Gene the information he needs to venture a guess about Slim: Sal has stated Hazard’s name as “Big Slim,” said that hazard was from Louisiana and had worked in the oilfields of East Texas. All Mississippi Gene need do is fill in the blanks; Gene says, ““You mean that tall fellow with the big laugh? . . . Louisiana Slim he’s sometimes called. . . . East Texas is right. And now he’s punching cows.”” Sal thinks incredulously, “And that was exactly right” (29), although he has not heard of Hazard for years. Sal has only just crossed the Mississippi River and not yet had a chance to “light out for the Territory,” but he has already become the victim of his own inexperience. Unlike Huck Finn, Sal has not “been there before” (Twain 265). Like the liberal idealism that Sal represents, his vision of the world is hopelessly naive and out of place in the cultural environment in which he finds himself.

But Sal soon begins to experience the artificiality of the dream of the West that

brought him on the road. In Cheyenne, Wyoming, he finds himself in the middle of "Wild West Week," but instead of the authentic Wild West that he hopes for, Sal finds only "[b]ig crowds of businessmen, fat businessmen in boots and ten-gallon hats, with their hefty wives in cowgirl attire Blank guns went off" (33). He is naturally disappointed to see that the West he has been hoping to find to validate himself and to reinvigorate his "dead" life has been replaced by its own myth; he says, "in my first shot at the West I was seeing to what absurd devices it had fallen to keep its proud tradition" (33). Like the "blank guns" of the tourists, Sal's "first shot" is also a dud, and the Wild West he finds, if it existed at all, has been domesticated by its embrace of crass commercialism. Deborah L. Madsen in *American Exceptionalism* takes note of "the central irony of all Western fictions: the West was 'tamed' by men who were drawn to the West in the first place because it was untamed, wild beyond the strictures of civilised life. By taming the wilderness they brought civilisation and the destruction of what they had themselves valued" (146)⁷. The West that Sal experiences is far more tame than he had anticipated, because the influx of "civilisation" has contaminated the myth. Tim Hunt would agree; he says, "In America, the future is always in the West and a source of hope. In its attainment, the future, in becoming present, ceases to be West, ceases to be a matter of place, and necessarily involves admitting failure" (21). All that remains of that West is what Sal finds in Cheyenne, "fat burpers . . . getting drunker and whooping up louder" (34). Later, when the romantic Sal offers to accompany a local girl on "a nice walk in the prairie flowers," the girl replies, "There ain't no flowers there . . . I want to go to New York. I'm sick and tired of this" (35). Sal has finally reached the West and the beginning of his "future," but

he finds that the future for someone who is already there is back in the East. If Sal had sought a new relationship with America by heading West, he is abruptly faced with the possibility that he is mistaken, because he set out with a preconceived notion of what he might find, unlike Dean who travels without such expectations. After many miles of travel, Sal finds that being in the bus depot in Cheyenne "was no different from being in Newark" (35), except of course for its location in Wyoming, and the mental image he has of himself meeting "the gang" in Denver as "the Prophet who has walked across the land to bring the dark Word" is undermined by the fact that he has no "dark Word" to bestow except "Wow!" (37).

Sal finds in Denver with Dean and Carlo Marx a repetition of the exclusion he felt in New York; his new life in the West has not changed his position in the trio; he is still a "lout." When he tries to interject a philosophical abstraction into the conversation, Carlo accuses him of talking "Wolfean romantic posh," to which Sal can only reply, "I just don't know what you're both driving at or trying to get at" (49). As a representation of an outmoded liberal idealism, he has suddenly found that his ideas are no longer relevant, that he is speaking in the antiquated "posh" of a Thomas Wolfe-type of writer, and that he is even further estranged from his group. However, he still imagines feeling a sense of inclusion and sees himself with Dean and Carlo "rising from the underground, the sordid hipsters of America, a new beat generation that I was slowly joining" (54). But he is on the outside, an observer, not a practitioner of the new sensibility he sees forming around him. Later, in San Francisco, he again feels a sense of belonging with his friend Remi Boncœur, but their affiliation is predicated on the correspondence of their negative view of

the world; like Sal, Remi “had fallen on the beat and evil days that come to young guys in their middle twenties” (61). If Sal cannot fit into a “new beat generation” with Dean and Carlo, he can fit into the world of Remi, for Remi’s world is as “dead” as the one Sal left behind in New York, a world that Sal has never completely relinquished. When he begins to realize that in California, “[e]verything was falling apart” (77) for him, he longs to be back in New York again, “across the great bulge and bulk of my American continent.” Where once the West was his future, now he feels that “[t]here is something brown and holy about the East; and California is white like washlines and emptyheaded” (79). His trip thus far has been largely unsuccessful; he has seen the West for the first time, but he feels just as excluded as he did in the East, and he still has the sense that his life and everything in it is “dead.” He cannot see the world differently than he did before.

However, Sal thinks that he has finally found the sense of inclusion and connectivity that he both desires for himself and wants to extend to others when he meets Terry, the “Mexican Girl.” The sense of connection that has been missing and that has haunted Sal by its absence up to now in the book suddenly materializes, but, ironically, only if Sal removes himself from the society of his peers. Ann Douglas refers to Kerouac’s “poetics of intimacy” in *On the Road*, that is, the feeling of extreme personal affinity of the readers with the experiences of the characters, and with those of Sal in particular. That feeling of “intimacy” manifests itself in the sense of connection within a larger cultural entity that includes a new vision of America itself. She notes that in the novel, “the continent had been strangely emptied out of the people usually caught on camera, yet it was filled with other people, people in motion, of various races and ethnicities, speaking

many tongues, migrating from one place to another as seasonal laborers, wandering around as hobos and hitchhikers, meeting each other in brief but somehow lasting encounters" (23). The intimacy that Sal feels with Terry and with the "beatest characters in the country" (*On the Road* 85) that he meets in Los Angeles appears when Sal describes the scene on the streets in terms similar to those that the young Kerouac used in "Concentration" from *Atop an Underwood*; in that story, he describes the "[y]oung men very young with life and being men and living and walking and breathing and most of all thinking and talking" (31, cited in Ch. 2). In *On the Road*, Sal says, "You could smell tea, weed, I mean marijuana, floating in the air, together with the chili beans and beer. That grand wild sound of bop floated from beer parlors; it mixed medleys with every kind of cowboy and boogie-woogie in the American night. . . . I wanted to meet them all, talk to everybody" (86). The smells and sounds are as intermingled as is the populace, and the sense of community, as Sal feels it, is palpable. But while that community is a model of multi-cultural inclusion, Sal and Terry can find no work and must leave; in this version of America, the financial rewards are not available to "everybody," and not all are included economically. Frustrated, Sal becomes angry at some young people in cars returning noisily from a sporting event, and his feeling of inclusion reaches its limits. He says, "I hated everyone of them. Who did they think they were, yaahing at somebody on the road just because they were little high-school punks and their parents carved the roast beef on Sunday afternoons? Who did they think they were, making fun of a girl reduced to poor circumstances with a man who wanted to belove?" (88). Sal forgets easily that his aunt in New Jersey does for him what the parents of the "little high-school punks" do for them,

but Sal has discovered a new sense of belonging with Terry and a new locus for his feeling of inclusion: he is connected through poverty, class, and a too-easy identification with the disenfranchised. He subscribes to the homiletic consolation that Jack Duluoz follows in *Visions of Cody*: "Everything belongs to me because I am poor" (33).

Robert Holton notes that Sal is not trying to adjust or modify society, but merely trying to find a place in which he fits:

His attempt was not to change the system, a hopeless prospect at the time, but to escape from it, and Kerouac looked both to the historical past and to the contemporary social margins for images of freedom from modern conformism and the pressure of orderly obedience. His alternatives often seem less than politically progressive, but to him progress signified modernity's continuing move toward the further alienation of the human spirit. . . . Kerouac's interest in skid row, then, was predicated not on a belief that a social solution might lie in this hopeless direction but on a refusal of the bright and shallow comforts of his culture – a refusal that would in a few years become known as "dropping out." (56)

While Holton seems to equate Sal and Kerouac, his point finds its proof in the scenes with Terry, when Sal finds that he fits comfortably with Terry's Mexican family; they are accepting of him and easygoing; her brother's response to any contingency is "'*Mañana*, man, we make it; have another beer'" (92), which suits Sal perfectly. As he says, "*mañana*, a lovely word and one that probably means heaven" (94); he belongs and no one asks much of him.

However, Sal does find a job picking cotton which also serves to make him feel an integral part of the Mexican community, and Sal believes that he has found his "life's work" (96), toiling among the migrant working poor of America. He seems to be firmly rooted in a form of liberal idealism reminiscent of the New Deal era or echoing the rhapsodizing of William Saroyan in *The Human Comedy*; he says, "I looked up at the dark sky and prayed to God for a better break in life and a better chance to do something for the little people I loved" (96). While Sal does ask for assistance for himself, he is also willing to expand his celestial request so that he can help those to whom he is presently connected. But Sal has taken his sense of inclusion further than simply his willingness to help only Terry and her family; Sal has come to think of himself as one of the ethnic poor⁸. He tells that he was so tired that he sighed "like an old Negro cotton-picker" and that certain local whites had the idea that "we Mexicans were fouling up their trailer camp. They thought I was a Mexican, of course; and in a way I am" (97). But Sal's honorary membership in Terry's family and ethnicity ends abruptly with the arrival of the colder October weather when Sal decides to return to New York; and, although they have arranged to meet later in New York, Sal says, "we both knew she wouldn't make it," and the two separate "[e]motionlessly" (101). His attachment is not as deep as he had believed, and he exhibits either a movement toward a less inclusive attitude similar to Dean's or a rejection of human connection because he cannot appreciate that Dean's notion of "non-interference" does not mean complete "non-involvement." Either way, Sal can confidently return to his old life in the East and abandon his plan to establish a future in the West, which suggests that he has seen the possibility that universal inclusion is, at

best, ineffectual; it seems that he is beginning to form a new vision in which the individual can decide what works best for him or her. After all, he is able to say nonchalantly as he leaves Terry, "Well, lackadaddy I was on the road again." But Sal's return to New York is made possible by money sent to him by his aunt; as he says, "my aunt had saved my lazy butt again" (101). He has not entirely shed his dependence on others nor his feeling of inclusion in a beneficent society unavailable to "the little people" that he loves.

On his return trip, Sal does receive a lesson that could potentially lead him toward a more accurate self-understanding, when he meets an old hobo whom he calls "the Ghost of the Susquehanna" (103). Like Sal who had hoped to be the "Prophet" bringing the "dark Word" to Denver but could only muster a meaningless syllable, the Ghost is also somewhat of a false prophet; he is "headed for 'Canady'" (103) but cannot find the bridge across the river, the existence of which he feels so certain, and he heads in the wrong direction, "west, not east" (104). Sal calls him "poor forlorn man, poor lost sometimeboy, now broken ghost of the penniless wilds" (104), not recognizing the specter of himself in the description. Sal's meeting with the "Ghost" recalls "The River" section of Hart crane's *The Bridge*. Richard P. Sugg notes the way in which Crane links the hoboes that the poet meets with "the early pioneers" (49) as they move into what Crane calls "interior after interior" of America and also into the questing self following the path of the explorers. In a way, Sal has followed that path, and like the "Ghost" he too is unsure of his direction. But, although he formulates his experience in negative terms, Sal has learned something about the road and about America, and therefore about himself; he says, "I thought all the wilderness of America was in the West till the Ghost of the

Susquehanna showed me different. No, there was a wilderness in the east" (105). He realizes he did not have to travel to the other end of the country to search for America and a way out of his "dead" feeling; he discovers a few hours from home that everyone eventually comes to realize that they are "wretched and miserable and poor and blind and naked, and with the visage of a gruesome grieving ghost you go shuddering through nightmare life" (105).

Although the bridge across the river is not discoverable, the "Ghost of the Susquehanna" acts as a medium through which Sal can discover something about the spiritual nature of his journey. Norma Walrath Goldstein calls the old man "a wraithlike prophet on the archetypal road of life" and that he, like Sal, Dean, and all travelers, manifests the same "kinetic energy, dreams, and yearnings." She adds, "[t]he bridge image is not necessarily linked to a place, but to an essence, an idea, or spiritual state. The directionlessness of the old man supports this theme, and the old wanderer teaches Sal that the wilderness of America cannot be defined by place like east or west, reinforcing the notion that their quest is a spiritual one befitting a ghost" (n.p.). Sal realizes that his feeling of dislocation and estrangement is a state of being common to all people, including or especially those living in post-war America; he is not the only one who suffers. Like Hemingway's narrator in "A Clean, Well-Lighted Place," he realizes, "[m]any must have it" (209)⁹; that is, many must feel the common sense of loneliness that paradoxically connects the people of Sal's generation. As Tim Hunt suggests, Sal finds out that, "[t]here is also wilderness in the self, society and history, and the discovery drives Sal to despair" (17). While Sal has not exactly begun to form a new way of seeing the world, he has

reached a point where he can see that finding a world in which all are or will be included is really neither a possibility nor entirely desirable, nor is a world in which a single truth prevails, but at least now he can return home and, as he says, “figure the losses and figure the gain that I knew was in there somewhere too” (106-7). His use of the plural “losses” and singular “gain” is telling as is his skepticism of the existence of the “gain.” But, before he can get home, he describes matter of factly how he had to depend one final time on the kindness of strangers, when he says, “I had to panhandle two bits for the bus” (107). Sal must hit bottom before he can begin to see a new version of America.

When Sal and Dean meet again a year later, Dean again befuddles Sal with his new vision of America and of life; while Dean can find his way in America and understand its complexity, Sal is less confident. Dean says, “Furthermore we know America, we’re at home; I can go anywhere in America and get what I want because it’s the same in every corner, I know the people, I know what they do. We give and take and go in the incredibly complicated sweetness zigzagging every side” (120-1). Where Dean is comfortable “zigzagging,” Sal looks for the straight line, the direct route to America; but Dean knows he has already found America, and he accepts it as he finds it. To Sal, “[t]here was nothing clear about the things he said, but what he meant was somehow made pure and clear” (121). As Lewis Carroll’s Alice says upon reading “Jabberwocky,” “[s]omehow it seems to fill my head with ideas—only I don’t exactly know what they are!” (Carroll 138); Sal, like Alice, has encountered a new form of reality that confuses him, and he is reluctant to admit that he does not understand.

Just what Sal thinks Dean means is left unsaid because ultimately, Sal’s view of

America does not correspond with Dean's. When they drive through Washington, D.C., they find that the city is celebrating President Truman's second inauguration with "[g]reat displays of war might," planes, boats, and armament that Sal says "looked murderous in the snowy grass" (135). Sal seems oblivious to the irony embedded in the descriptive juxtaposition he has created, for the equipment is indeed "murderous," but Sal does see the way in which Dean "kept shaking his head in awe" (135). However, Sal may have mistaken Dean's amazement for admiration because it is Sal who seems "in awe" of the spectacle. Dean sees the humor in the "regular small ordinary lifeboat that looked pitiful and foolish" in the midst of all the military muscle in what should be a time of peace; he says sardonically, "What are these people up to?" (135), realizing that the presence of the lifeboat seems like a desperate and pathetic attempt to impress by sheer numbers. Dean extends the joke and says mockingly, "Good old Harry. . . . Man from Missouri, as I am. . . . That must be his own boat" (135, ellipses in original). Sal knows that Dean was raised in Denver, not Missouri, but he does not mention that fact in the passage nor does he comment on Dean's witty humor in taking a significant aspect of American culture—its prodigious military might and its gleeful willingness to display that power to its own citizens as well as to the rest of the world—and reducing it to a gibe at militarism, politicians, and the motto of Truman's home state: "Show Me." Here, also, Kerouac uses the interplay of Sal and Dean to differentiate between what John Lardas calls "the private and the public America, between the volkisch core of America and its compromised form" (203). The "compromised form" of America is represented in the scene by the militaristic display of power, the display that captivates Sal; the "volkisch core" is represented by the

“regular small ordinary lifeboat” that Dean finds so amusing. Not all of America is as corrupt and “dead” as Sal would suggest; the simplicity of the “volk” remains to ground those, like Dean, who are astute enough to notice the irony.

Kerouac seems to use Sal to express attitudes that are informed by a naive idealism that is no longer relevant in post-war America. Conversely, Kerouac employs Dean to exemplify an attempt to see the world in a new and more astute way; Dean’s conception takes into account the reality of human fallibility, including his own, and seems to gain little benefit from a sense of inclusion as a contributing member of American culture or even of his own membership in the emerging generation of “beat” young people that Sal feels he is gradually joining. Dean’s is an attitude of individualism that considers himself and his own priorities first, while Sal is unable to distance himself from the need to be included, and he cannot understand Dean’s actions which seem to exclude even him at times. After a trip to San Francisco with Dean and Dean’s girlfriend Mary Lou, Sal is disappointed when Dean leaves them both to return to his wife, vanishing for several days. Dean may have a connotation of marital fidelity that baffles Sal, but Dean’s obligation is not to Sal or even presently to Mary Lou. Sal asks himself, “Where is Dean and why isn’t he concerned about our welfare? I lost faith in him that year” (171). Rather, than consider Dean as a fallible human being or one who follows a different set of priorities, Sal loses faith in his friend because he cannot accept that Dean has other plans that do not include him; and rather than look after himself as does Mary Lou, Sal expects Dean to look after him. When Mary Lou “disappeared with a nightclub owner,” Sal is further disillusioned and he applies his outmoded morality, saying, “I saw what a whore she was. . . . Now I

had nobody, nothing" (172). Later, after re-connecting with Dean and Mary Lou, Sal realizes, "It was the end; I wanted to get out"; and, as he leaves for New York, he refuses to share with them the sandwiches he made for the bus trip (172). His action is petty and seems to go against his own sense of inclusion and communal concern; but he fails to recognize in himself the selfish element that he saw in Dean and that Niebuhr says is exacerbated by membership in a collective. Unlike Dean, Sal has come no closer to forming a new more workable approach to the world.

The sandwiches that Sal refuses to share with Dean and Mary Lou are part of a recurrent image in the novel of food and eating. Sal seems to be eating constantly but is somehow never satiated; he consumes but is not gratified. It seems that the more he devours, the hungrier he gets. His inability to fill himself serves as a representation of his perpetual sense of emptiness in an America that seems to offer so much. Similarly, in his travels, he wants to take in everything he sees, but it, too, is never enough; he is always left wanting more and must return to the road. Several interesting occurrences of the image appear in the novel. When Sal stops to eat on his first trip West, he notes that the homey restaurant served "the sweetest cherry pie in Nebraska, and I had some with a mountainous scoop of ice cream on top" (21); on the trip with the "farmboys," although he has little money with which to buy food, he "sat around over hamburgers and coffee while they wrapped away enormous meals" (26); and, when Sal works with Remi Boncœur as a security guard, he and Remi sneak into the cafeteria where Sal says that he was "realizing a dream of mine from infancy" and he sticks his hand "wrist-deep" into the ice cream before he and Remi "filled a huge box full of groceries" and took it home (70).

Perhaps the most significant example occurs when Sal returns home from the West, and he says that the first thing he does on his arrival home is to eat "everything in the ice box" (107). Sal seems unable to digest what he has seen, as if his expectations never match the reality of what he encounters. As a manifestation of the older sentimentality, Sal keeps straining beyond his grasp for an unnameable something that is only a product of his imagination; to repeat my opening citation of Reinhold Niebuhr, the human subject "is gifted and cursed with an imagination which extends his appetites beyond the requirements of subsistence," and Sal's unquenchable appetite shows the degree to which he is both "gifted and cursed."

The following year, Sal returns to Denver alone with the intention of living there permanently; he now envisions himself becoming a part of "Middle America, a patriarch," of belonging to a larger segment of American culture, but when he arrives, he finds that most of the friends he knew there have gone, and he is "lonesome" (179). In one of the key scenes of the novel, Sal wanders alone in the "Denver colored section," and begins to wish he was African-American, because, as he says, "the best the white world had offered was not enough ecstasy for me, not enough life, joy, kicks, darkness, music, not enough night" (180). He wants to be any person other than what he is, "a 'white man' disillusioned" hampered by his "white ambitions" that compel him to keep seeking beyond himself; as Niebuhr would suggest, he is cursed by his desire for more than is absolutely essential for his own survival. Sal wishes that he "could exchange worlds with the happy, true-hearted, ecstatic Negroes of America," and he envies Dean and Mary Lou "who knew these streets so well" (180), as if Sal finally realizes that Dean's method of moving

through the world is more utilitarian than his own. In his recognition of the cause of his estrangement, Sal seems to have come to a new understanding of his relationship with the world, that the way he has been living has been inadequate and misinformed. But, his perception of the "Negroes of America" shows just how mistaken he is, for, in his misreading of the African-American life around him, Sal has begun to exhibit some of the cultural traits of the "patriarch" that he hoped to become. What he sees as ecstasy and joy is one culture's particular response to the "raggedy neighborhoods" (180) in which they are confined by the dictates of the "white world," of which Sal is a product and a representative; he seems less desirous of seeking inclusion for the underclass into his own dominant "white" culture than he does in gaining inclusion for himself into theirs.

Also, Sal does not seem to notice that he can leave the "colored section" whenever he likes and return to the world of "Middle America," but the people that he so claims to admire cannot. When he becomes over-powered by the emotion he feels from watching the vibrant life of the neighborhood evening, he describes how he simply "walked away from there" (181); but rather than leaving to commit himself to more a fulfilling life, Sal cures his disillusionment by more conventional and patriarchal means. He says, "I went to see a rich girl I knew. In the morning she pulled a hundred-dollar bill out of her silk stocking and said, 'You've been talking of a trip to Frisco; that being the case, take this and go and have your fun.' So all my problems were solved . . ." (181). Sal's solution could not be further from the "Denver colored section," and Kerouac juxtaposes Sal's artificial enlightenment in the ghetto with the gift from the "rich girl" to show just how far Sal is from forming a new vision of his life in America. While Sal's attitudes toward

African-Americans is progressive for his time, Sal is still fundamentally unable to see the world outside of the boundaries of his own limited understanding, no matter how ardently he claims to desire such an awareness or expresses a sense of empathy and even identity with African-Americans. While Sal sees himself in the same light as he sees African-Americans, both expressing the joy of life in the face of intense suffering, he cannot suffer in any comparable way to the ghetto-ized people he observes from a comfortable distance.

Two particular scenes serve to demarcate the different visions of the world of Sal and Dean. While they drive across the flat land near Salt Lake City, Sal espouses his philosophy of inclusion and human togetherness; he tells Dean that “the thing that bound us all together in this world was invisible, and to prove it pointed to long lines of telephone poles that curved off out of sight over the bend of a hundred miles of salt” (210). The vision of an infinity of poles extending to the horizon, like a hall of mirrors, fills him with a sense of connection and possibility. But although he realizes that he is seeing a “mirage” in which the distant lights of the city are “twice showing, above and below the curve of the earth, one clear, one dim”(210), he does not seem to see the illusionary nature of what he says; the poles do form an apparently endless line, but they are not connected as a totality but only one to the other, and therefore are paradoxically separate in their connectivity. Sal’s desire to see the line of poles as a metaphor is greater than the ability of the metaphor to bear his intended meaning. In contrast, Dean responds enthusiastically at first, saying, ““Oh yes, man, dear God, yes, yes!”” (210), but then he pulls the car over and immediately falls asleep; he has been up all night and driven all day. Dean’s ostensible agreement may be caused by nothing more than sleep deprivation and his response to the

lights of Salt Lake City, "the place in this spectral world where he was born, unnamed and bedraggled, years before" (211). Sal's philosophical revelation is not enough to keep Dean awake.

Later, Sal and Dean receive "a tremendous offer" (224) to drive a Cadillac limousine from Denver to Chicago, and their different responses to the car itself correspond to the differences between their visions. The Cadillac represents the quintessential American automobile as a symbol of status and economic achievement; Sal says, "It was a beautiful big car, the last of the old-style limousines, black, with a big elongated body and whitewall tires and probably bulletproof windows" (225). But before they are "two miles out of Denver the speedometer broke because Dean was pushing well over 110 miles an hour" (225). Dean also takes a detour to see a friend, crashes the car in a muddy ditch, and damages the fender (226). Sal notes how the car "could hold the road like a boat holds on water" (229); it is "an imperial boat" (232), but Dean drives it like a "mad Ahab" (234). While the Cadillac's eminence is not lost on Sal, to Dean, it is more and yet less than a luxury car; it is a means to an end, and he loves the car not because of its bourgeois appeal, but because of what it can do to further his goal of perpetual movement. But, by the time they reach Chicago, the car is "an utter wreck," and frightens the girls that they try to attract using the car's prestige (241); they dock "the muddy heap into its berth" (242) and leave town as quickly as they arrived. While Kerouac has Sal comment on the condition of the car throughout the section, Dean is concerned only with its operation as a method of gaining Chicago and enjoying himself; he has no respect for the vehicle as a symbol of post-war success. To him, there are no universals or absolute

truths, especially when the object of attention is a car; Dean sees only possibility and the car is the means to turning possibility into actuality. As he tells Sal, they could “dig the whole world with a car like this” (230), and he describes “a road that goes down Mexico and all the way to Panama . . . and maybe all the way to the bottom of South America where the Indians are seven feet tall and eat cocaine on the mountainside” (230). Dean needs to act on his fanciful sense of adventure, and Mexico, to Dean, has the potential to satisfy his need. Mexico also serves Kerouac in presenting a site from which he can re-evaluate the way in which he sees the world.

On the Road to Mexico

“To Mexico! To Mexico! Down the dovegray highway, past Atomic City
police, past the fiery border to dream cantinas!”

Allen Ginsberg. “Ready to Roll”

In “Mexico Fellaheen” from his collection of essays, *Lonesome Traveler*, Jack Kerouac describes crossing the border between America and Mexico: “It’s a great feeling of entering the Pure Land¹⁰, especially because it’s so close to dry faced Arizona and Texas and all over the Southwest – but you can find it, this feeling, this fellaheen feeling about life, that timeless gayety of people not involved in great cultural and civilization issues” (22). Mexico is at once “close to” America and yet distinct from it, a “Pure Land” removed from the fallout of Oswald Spengler’s crumbling Western civilization, and populated by the “fellaheen,” those who live closest to the earth and therefore will inherit

what is left of it after the final crush. By acknowledging Mexico's primitive innocence, Kerouac calls attention to the difference between the pastoral ideal of Mexico and the atomic reality of contemporary America. But, Mexico in its simplicity, is also a land of complexity, and Kerouac describes later in the article the inherent contradictions of the country. Along with the readily-accessible supply of drugs, the open eyes and open hands of corrupt police, and the botched novice bull-fighting, he also finds a profoundly religious and spiritual people. As he says, "I saw how everybody dies and nobody's going to care, I felt how awful it is to live just so you can die like a bull trapped in a screaming human ring" (33); but after he sees young children praying in a church, he also understands that "the world is permeated with roses of happiness all the time, but none of us know it. The happiness consists in realizing that it is all a great strange dream" (36).

This vision of Mexico as a "Pure Land" appears in *On the Road*, however, readers of the novel can easily miss the contradiction and complexity of Mexico that Kerouac notes in "Mexico Fellaheen," and consequently misunderstand Part Four of the book in which Sal and Dean travel to Mexico City. While Dean goes for kicks and to obtain a quick divorce, Sal goes for a different reason. From the beginning of the novel, Sal has felt spiritually emptied out, and he goes to Mexico partly in search of spiritual regeneration. In Mexico, the hot climate, the ingestion of copious amounts of drugs, and the debilitating fever Sal contracts cause him to believe that he has discovered a land far more spiritual than his own America. He believes that he is able to see with a new clarity of perception and that new vision, he believes, helps him to understand himself, Dean, and America, but Sal's ability to see transparently is only an illusion because he has assumed as universal the

particular hermeneutic of his own culture toward Mexico and misapplied it to that country; he interprets what he sees in Mexico in terms of what he has seen in America, and having done so, he easily misinterprets what he thinks he has learned about himself. Mexico, like America, is a complex mixture of spirituality and corruption, but Sal fails to see that. Sal has assumed that what holds for American culture also holds for Mexican culture when, in fact, Mexico, as a distinct political and cultural entity, has been shaped by forces other than those which have acted upon America. One of those forces is America itself, but, like the criticism that he unwittingly practices, Sal imposes a vision of Otherness onto Mexico and the people he meets. He cannot recognize their Otherness as significant outside the parameters of what he knows about his own world. Since he cannot step outside of those assumptions, he can never view Mexico as clearly as he thinks he has, and that inability causes any re-evaluation of liberalism based on that vision to be flawed innately.

Despite Sal's inability to form an accurate understanding of Mexico or of himself, the novel seems to suggest that, if individuals could be made aware of their own spirituality and accept complexity as a condition of modern culture, contemporary America could recover some of the "timeless gayety" that Kerouac refers to in "Mexico Fellaheen"; as if people could better understand and accept the world as it is if they could better understand themselves. Indeed, as Sal describes the steps that lead to his own imagined spiritual purification, he presents the possibility that a path to spiritual regeneration may exist for others, and he offers Americans a glimpse of a future potential by offering a glimpse of the fellaheen world. When considered as a description of Sal's

attempt at self-discovery, *On the Road* might be seen as a type of Beat jeremiad, directing readers back to the promise of America by first reminding them of the difference between America and "pure" Mexico, then directing them to the possibility of self-understanding. However, Sal also shows a profound misunderstanding of Mexico and an incredible naivety, as he does of life in America. The Mexican people do indeed possess the "timeless gayety of people not involved in great cultural and civilization issues," but embedded in those words is a Mexico that cannot be allowed to become involved in those "great" issues because that would disqualify the country from acting as a model against which to measure American ideals. Sal has misunderstood Mexico and unwittingly become the colonial tourist he resents; his plan to re-generate himself ultimately fails and any jeremiadic function must be understood in negative or, perhaps, in ironic terms¹¹.

Sacvan Bercovitch says that the purpose of the Puritan jeremiad "was to direct an imperiled people of God toward the fulfillment of their destiny, to guide them individually toward salvation, and collectively toward the American city of God" (*American* 9). While I do not think that Kerouac makes any claim for directing Americans to anything like John Winthrop's "city upon a hill," he does seem to be directing "an imperiled people" toward a new destiny by presenting the possibility of self-discovery. Bercovitch explains that the structure of the American jeremiad of the seventeenth century followed a prescribed structure: "first, a precedent from Scripture . . . sets out the communal norms; then, a series of condemnations . . . details the actual state of the community (at the same time insinuating the covenantal promises that insure success); and finally a prophetic vision . . . unveils the promises, announces the good things to come, and explains away the gap

between fact and ideal" (16). The jeremiad thus served as a means "to provide a source of social cohesion and continuity" (17). Although the last two sections of *On the Road*, omit the first of those steps, the entire novel "details the actual state" of the country, and seems to make use of the idea of the jeremiad in an attempt to establish a sense of "social cohesion and continuity," not unlike that of liberalism itself; Sal describes indirectly "the actual state" of America as he sees it, and in the process, suggests that it could be made better; then, he reveals the "prophetic vision" he finds in Mexico. Sal, who has had little success as a prophet thus far in the novel, envisions himself again as a type of Jeremiah, announcing the good things to come.

Sal's jeremiadic and prophetic journey begins early in the novel when he expresses negatively the actual state of the American community in his phrase, "everything was dead" (3). His words express a point of view that is not just a condemnation of his own life, but of life in America as a whole. The novel presents the road as a possible way out of the "dead" condition from which Sal suffers, but, by Part Four and the trip to Mexico, Sal has come to realize that the actual state of life on the road is less than satisfying; it is now "the senseless nightmare road" (254). Life on the road with Dean has offered no spiritual enlightenment, and Sal realizes he must go on his own. Obviously, the complex relationship of Sal and Dean is central to the novel; John Tytell refers to their association as the "conflict between the demands of Self as expressed by Dean and the need to extinguish Self as expressed by Sal" (65). However, Sal needs to "extinguish" the self that believes "everything was dead," and he cannot do that with Dean; but, as Tytell indicates, Sal and Dean seem to comprise two parts of one whole. The concept of reducing the self

was not unusual in writing by the Beats; as John Lardas says in *The Bop Apocalypse*, "By confronting the crisis of America within themselves, . . . [the Beats] could initiate Cultural growth through exorcism . . . of that part of the self which had become civilized" (149). Sal also echoes Beat associate Paul Bowles who has said, "The destruction of the ego has always seemed an important thing. . . . It's the stripping away of all the things that differentiate one person from another person. By stripping them away one arrives at a sort of basic working truth which will help one to go on" (Pounds 426). Sal attempts to establish such a "working truth" by going to Mexico alone. In terms of my argument, Sal's search for such a practical "truth" by "stripping away" the differences he sees between America and Mexico and between people is a representation of the attempt to form a new narrative of liberalism. However, the intended reduction is also an example of considering all people as if they are the same regardless of class or ethnicity, which itself is an example of the form of idealism that Sal must ultimately abandon.

Part Four of *On the Road* begins with Sal's decision to leave New York for Mexico using money he has earned from the publication of his novel. About to travel without Dean for the first time since their trips together began, Sal begins to show his dissatisfaction with Dean and a recognition that their previous adventures on the road were not as satisfying for him as they had at first seemed. Sal describes how the two try unsuccessfully to reignite their youthful vigor by playing basketball with some younger boys, but their opponents, as Sal says, "beat us with ease" because the two played so chaotically and frantically that "the younger boys just reached up and grabbed the ball from our sweating hands and dribbled away" (253). An even more intense sense of loss

emerges later as Sal looks at some photos taken during their travels and sees only “the senseless nightmare road” (254; cited above). He leaves Dean in New York, but, when he arrives in Denver, he learns with some disappointment that Dean is on his way to Denver with the intention of driving him to Mexico, which means that Dean has abandoned his attempt at a settled, married life and returned to his former destructive ways. Sal says, “Suddenly I had a vision of Dean, a burning shuddering frightful Angel, palpitating toward me across the road, approaching like a cloud, with enormous speed, pursuing me like the Shrouded Traveler on the plain, bearing down on me. . . . I saw his old jalopy chariot with thousands of sparkling flames shooting out from it; I saw the path it burned over the road; . . . Behind him charred ruins smoked” (259). Dean, the “flaming tyro” (267) with his destructive, burning life leaves only smouldering destruction in his wake. In Sal’s opinion, Dean’s destructive behavior is in direct contrast to his own desire for positive renewal.¹² But, he accepts Dean’s offered companionship, and as they enter Mexico and drive across the desert, Sal realizes that he “had finally found the magic land at the end of the road and we never dreamed the extent of the magic” (276). He has the impression that he has ventured back to the “pure and ancient activities of human life” (278). But Sal is imposing on the country and its people a hermeneutic that does not apply; the “activities” Sal marvels at are merely the everyday workings of life in Mexico.

On the trip south, Sal, in his desire to configure the country in his own terms, experiences what he thinks are a series of revelations that foreshadow the approach of his purified vision and his renewed spirituality. In a small Mexican town, the travelers spend the afternoon at a brothel, where Sal notices a young girl seemingly out of place; he says,

“her unimpeachable dignity was the thing that made her poor in a wild old whorehouse” (290). Her presence there seems incongruous to Sal, and he is fascinated by her Madonna-like purity. He says, “she was the queen” (290), and the brothel seems a spiritual refuge, a “strange Arabian paradise . . . at the end of the hard, hard road” (290). But, just as he fails to see Mexico as Other than America, he also fails to consider the effect on his perception of the drugs he has taken; finally, he remembers that he “was in Mexico after all and not in a pornographic hasheesh daydream” (291). In his drunken and drug-addled state, he notices the contradiction of the child-Madonna in a brothel, but is unable to understand fully what he has seen. Later, Sal sees a second revelation, “an apparition: a wild horse, white as a ghost” (295) being chased by dogs in the night, but Dean sleeps on, oblivious to the event. While Sal recognizes that what he has seen is significant, he is puzzled and asks himself, “What was this horse? What myth and ghost, what spirit?” (296). Tim Hunt, in *Kerouac’s Crooked Road*, sees in the white horse a connection to “The Whiteness of the Whale” in Melville’s *Moby Dick*, where Ishmael compares the whale to the legend of

the White Steed of the Prairies [who led] . . . vast herds of wild horses. . . .
At their flaming head he westward trooped it like that chosen star which
every evening leads on the hosts of light. . . . A most imperial and
archangelical apparition of that unfallen, western world, which to the eyes
of the old trappers and hunters revived the glories of those primeval times
when Adam walked majestic as a god . . . always to the bravest Indians he
was the object of trembling reverence and awe. (Melville 165)

Hunt remarks on this section, “To the extent that the Mexican pilgrimage has religious

dimensions, Sal has had a perception of absolute life and absolute death. He has died out of his old social identity and been reduced through a kind of death to a primal substance and process" (67). Hunt is right about the reduction of Sal's identity, but Sal has misunderstood because he has no knowledge of primitive mythology and cannot make sense of what he has seen. As Mircea Eliade says, in *The Myth of the Eternal Return*, the horse in what he calls "archaic societies," is "pre-eminently the funerary animal" and appears as an apparition to represent the return of the dead and spiritual re-birth at the beginning of the New Year (67). But, Sal is unaware of such a mythology; he comes from a completely different culture and can never understand the myths of another; all he can say is, "Let's start the car and blow some air! . . . I'm dying of heat" (296). His own rebirth is not yet apparent.

Sal's third revelation appears when he and Dean encounter young Indian girls selling pieces of pure "rock crystal" (298). He notices that one girl had "the eyes of the Virgin Mother when she was a child. We saw in them the tender and forgiving gaze of Jesus. And they stared unflinchingly into ours. We rubbed our nervous blue eyes and looked again. Still they penetrated us with sorrowful and hypnotic gleam" (298). But, Sal merely observes, unable to communicate with the children, while Dean digs through his traveling trunk and exchanges for "the sweetest and purest and smallest crystal" (298) an old wristwatch. Neither item has any intrinsic value in the context, but at least Dean has attempted some cross-cultural communication, and he is successful in a way, because "[t]he lucky little girl squeezed [the watch] to her breast" and thanked Dean (299). Eric Mortenstern says in "Beating Time: Configurations of Temporality in Jack Kerouac's

On the Road," that the trunk

situates the wristwatch, itself laden with images of time, in a distinctly U.S. context. Its exchange for the native crystal thus signals a swap of constraining, constructed, American temporality for the natural, formless production of the Indian earth itself. The presentation of an alternative temporal universe undermines the idea that time constructed in the U.S. is somehow 'natural' and singular. (69)

Mortenstern also notes that, in the novel, "there exists a tension between Dean and Sal's conceptions of timelessness. Dean's is a life-affirming philosophy, a belief that life should be lived to the fullest in every moment. Though Sal seems to desire this idea, his notions remain firmly entrenched in Christian ideals that display temporal transcendence in terms of annihilation. Where Dean sees an infinity in the moment, Sal sees infinity in the beyond" (68). Dean's attitude represents a more efficient and workable way of seeing the world as opposed to Sal's outmoded form because Dean's is more "life-affirming" and takes account of an infinite number of possibilities rather than seeking one universal point of view.

Finally, in Mexico City, Sal contracts dysentery. In his feverish condition, he remembers how he "became delirious and unconscious" (302), and he experiences what he thinks is a clarity of vision. He says, "I knew that I had lived a whole life and many others in the poor atomistic husk of my flesh, and I had all the dreams" (302). But as Sal suffers, Dean deserts him to return to America, having obtained the quick divorce he wanted. Sal admits, "I didn't know who he was anymore" (302), but as he recovers from his illness, he

forgives Dean and says, "I realized what a rat he was, but then I had to understand the impossible complexity of his life, how he had to leave me there, sick, to get on with his wives and woes" (303). But his understanding of Dean's "complexity" is limited by his trust in a faulty mode of vision. In each of these instances, Sal believes that he has encountered the "Pure Land" that he is seeking, that he has recovered a measure of lost spirituality, but each instance is merely an everyday occurrence in Mexico: brothels in operation, animals running loose in the night, small children trying to earn a living selling anything at hand, and tourists taking sick. Sal has simply transposed the cultural values of his own society onto another; he has assumed that what he takes to be universals are really elements intrinsic to a particular culture. Sal sees what he wants to see rather than what is actually there. Fredric Jameson refers to the "radical break" between primitive and Western societies that has been created by capitalist culture and that makes us incapable of understanding what he calls "the older forms of collective relations, leaving their cultural expressions and their myths as incomprehensible to us as so many dead languages or undecipherable codices" (69). Unwittingly, Sal has, in effect, become a form of colonizer because the myths and customs of Mexico are as incomprehensible to him as a "dead language."

In the final section of the novel, when Sal is back in New York, he meets ". . . the girl with the pure and innocent dear eyes that I had always searched for and for so long" (306). He thinks that he has found in America the purity and innocence he sought in Mexico. But he has learned nothing from his experience in the "Pure Land," because later, when Dean visits him again, Sal has no time for him or for the complexities of his life that

Sal claimed to have understood so clearly. This time Sal is on his way to a Duke Ellington concert in a Cadillac limousine, similar to the vehicle he and Dean abused so vehemently on the road to Chicago; no more hitch-hiking and bebop jazz for the patriarchal Sal. He has returned to a life that is no more alive than the "dead" life he wanted so much to discard, and he has failed to re-fashion the way in which he views the world. In broader terms, he has been unable to forge a new narrative that takes account of human failing, complexity, and the role of the individual in a post-war world in which older systems of valuation no longer apply.

Sal has tried to attach meaning to his experience in Mexico by applying a system of "wisdom" and interpretation from his own culture, and he has misunderstood. His revelations are revelations only to him; they mean little to Dean, and in Mexico, they are elements of the ordinary. While he claims to understand the complexity of Dean's life, he fails to see the complexity of Mexico and, therefore, he has little chance of comprehending the complexity of America. The culture of commodity that has made Sal feel that "everything was dead," and of which he is unavoidably a part, has denied him the possibility of understanding the mythical significance of what he has seen, although he is unaware of his culture's power to put that perceptual restriction in place. Therefore, when he returns to New York and to the culture that has informed his understanding, his own critique of America is reabsorbed by that culture. So, he rejects Dean, whom he claims to have understood so well, without recognizing the anomaly in what he does. *On the Road* explains away this gap between ideal and reality by showing that, if Sal the perpetual outsider, can so easily be reabsorbed into the culture he claims to criticize, to what extent

are all implicated in the ideology of consumerism.

Home on the Road

He who travels to be amused, or to get somewhat which he does not carry,
travels away from himself, and grows old even in youth among old things.

Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Self-Reliance."

After completing the "scroll" version of *On the Road* in three weeks of amphetamine fueled writing, Kerouac wrote to Neal Cassady May 22, 1951: "Book marks complete departure from *Town & City* and in fact from previous American Lit. . . . blow and tell all. I've telled all the road now. Went fast because road is fast . . . [ellipses in original] wrote whole thing on strip of paper 120 foot long . . . rolled it out on floor and it looks like a road" (Charters, *Selected Letters, 1940-1956*, 315-6). To Kerouac, the road seems a fitting analogy for his manuscript. As I claimed at the beginning of this chapter, all of the attempts to create a new and more meaningful liberal outlook are encircled in Kerouac's novel by the metaphor of the road, which acts as a principle of order for the narrative as well as for the ideas that it contains. However, rather than just a symbol of freedom and movement, as it is so easily and often considered, I maintain that the road also represents a desire for home and safety, for the certainty that only a sense of place and permanence can provide; in other words, the road as a metaphoric construct in Kerouac's novel, acts in opposing ways within the same text.

The search for a guarantee of surety and certainty in an uncertain universe is a tenet central to modern liberalism, and can be located in Kerouac's writing as well as in other so-called works of "road fiction."¹³ For example, in *The Sheltering Sky*, American ex-patriot Paul Bowles distinguishes between the tourist and the traveler when Port Moresby says:

Whereas the tourist generally hurries back home at the end of a few weeks or months, the traveler, belonging no more to one place or the next, moves slowly, over periods of years, from one part of the earth to another.

Indeed, he would have found it difficult to tell, among the many places he had lived, precisely where it was he had felt most at home. (13-4)

Bowles' description of a traveler as one perpetually in motion without the need of a return ticket seems to ground itself on a separation of road and home; however, the apparent distinction is not as clear as it might seem initially, because embedded in Port's language is the necessity of the home that the traveler denies. Travelers, in "belonging no more to one place or the next" do indeed belong somewhere, whether "to one place or the next"; and, although they cannot call one place more "home" than another, they do feel at home somewhere, if not everywhere. For the traveler, the road becomes home. Although a home on the road seems to be an oxymoron, in acknowledging a place called "home," Bowles' traveler invokes the necessary presence of that place even while on the road.

Reiterating an irony similar to that of Bowles, Robert Kroetsch says in *The Lovely Treachery of Words*, "Canadians are supremely at home when they travel" (67), and travel to Kroetsch can be both a quest for origin, "originality" (68) and as "an evasion" (82) of

the origin. Perhaps both modes express a similar function: the search for an origin must always be an evasive process in that the seeker is abandoning a visible present on the road in favor of a re-imagined and absent past, attempting to shed what separates the present from its origins, avoiding "face-to-face confrontation" (82) as Kroetsch says, so that one might come face to face with one's origin. Discovering where one comes from allows for an understanding of where one is. Being on the road, then, becomes a search for self and that sense of self is enabled and guaranteed by the potential attachment to home. John Clellon Holmes refutes the public tendency to consider Kerouac as a Beat wanderer and madman, and in the process, reveals his view of Kerouac's fondness for a home: "They saw the seeker after continuity who, no matter how rootless his life may seem, has always known that our anguish is uprootedness" (83). For Kerouac, being on the road is only a temporary condition, as *On the Road* makes clear in Sal's attachment to the home to which he always returns after each journey.

Home for Kerouac always seems to guarantee the road's freedom, and describing his road days later in *Desolation Angels*, Kerouac reveals his need for the certainty of home and place. After a particularly trying time in Tangiers with William S. Burroughs, he cannot wait to return to America; he says, "I actually got up and packed to go back to America and find a *home*" (339), where his mother reminds him: "Home is with your family. . . . make yourself a *haven* in this world and Heaven comes after" (402). He accepts a life of tranquility, saying, "A peaceful sorrow at home is the best I'll ever be able to offer the world, in the end, and so I told my Desolation Angels goodbye. A new life for me" (409). Also, in *Visions of Cody*, the narrator describes the title character at the end of

his traveling days: “nudge Canadian groping lands that end in arctic bays, purl your Mexican ribneck, America. Cody’s going home, going home” (391). Their wild time on the road has ended with Cody’s call toward home. Sal’s experiences in *On the Road* might seem to reflect Emerson’s adage, “Travelling is a fool’s paradise” (1140), in that the traveler cannot escape anything by traveling, because no matter where he goes, Emerson says, “there beside me is the stern fact, the sad self, unrelenting, identical, that I fled from”(1140). As Edward Halsey Foster says, “*On the Road* is exactly what a generation of readers took it to be: a guide to ways out of a conformist civilization—but in the end it admits that all these roads lead back to where they began. There is no final way out” (43-4).

The road functions as a controlling metaphor in Kerouac’s novel, but it also serves a broader function in terms of my contention that Kerouac is trying to forge a new literary representation of liberalism in his writing. Steven Cohan articulates the function of the road in terms of post-war film when he notes that “the road readily served the movies as a symbolic route for tracing a unified national identity in the face of regional, racial, ethnic, and class differences that the war made apparent” and it also “served to project a utopian representation of national unity that effaced the various divisions of US society” (114). As the lines from Whitman’s “Song of the Open Road” with which I began this chapter establish, the road serves Kerouac in a similar way; while it has the potential to create an image of “a unified national identity,” that identity is merely an illusion in *On the Road*. However, the road does serve to allow Kerouac’s characters a means to “reëxamine philosophies and religions” in the world. But, Sal, as a literary representation of pre-war

liberalism, cannot understand the "impossible complexity" of Dean's world, which represents the possibility of a form of liberalism attuned to modern realities. Although Sal tries to re-fashion his view of the world along the lines of Dean's less inclusive, less universal, and more individualistic version, he cannot accomplish the task; he remains contained within the older view. In the end, neither characters' view seems to be offered as the "Tao"; by valorizing home at the same time that he seems to long for home, Kerouac seems to undermine his presentation of Dean as "the perfect guy for the road" (3). Dean might be "perfect" for the road, but his view of the world may be, in the end, as flawed as Sal's. But Sal's failure is not, as I read it, a failure of the spiritual journey as a means to a more accurate understanding; it is Sal's misreading of his experiences and his inability to see outside of the limitations of his older way of thinking that inhibits his movement toward a new vision.

Notes to Chapter Three

1. In *Blue Highways: A Journey into America*, William Least Heat-Moon expresses this view of the road as a means of attaining some self-understanding by re-discovering the world. He says, in terms that echo those of both Kerouac and Whitman, "With a nearly desperate sense of isolation and a growing suspicion that I lived in an alien land, I took to the open road in search of places where change did not mean ruin and where time and men and deeds connected" (4).

2. Dennis McNally notes that Millstein was a vacation replacement for the esteemed Orville Prescott, "nicknamed 'Prissy,'" (239) and that Millstein, unlike Prescott, looked favorably on the Beat writers, and it was Millstein who had requested John Clellon Holmes' article, "This is the Beat Generation" in 1952. Holmes says of his article, "While reviewing my novel *Go*, he [Millstein] became intrigued by the phrase [Beat Generation] (which was casually mentioned in the book several times) and wondered if I would do an article on the subject for *The New York Times Magazine*. The piece appeared on November 16, 1952, thereby earning itself the dubious distinction of being the first attempt to name the generation. It caused a ripple of curiosity, prompted a few hundred letters, and then it was forgotten" (107). Millstein proclaimed *On the Road* "an authentic work of art," and its publication a "historic occasion"; the book was "the most beautifully executed, the clearest and most important utterance yet made" by any Beat writer, and as important to the Beat Generation as was Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises* to the Lost Generation (cited in Johnson, *Minor Characters* 184-5). McNally repeats some of the many less than complimentary reviewers' comments in Chapter XIII of *Desolate Angel*. Kerouac's novel reached the eleventh position on the best-seller list and stayed on for five weeks before disappearing. It was not able to unseat the Number One contender, Grace Metalious' *Peyton Place* (McNally 242), which speaks to the ease with which Kerouac was placed within the discourse of mass culture.

3. According to a Ronna C. Johnson, Truman Capote, spoke his "deathless jibe" on the David Susskind television program *Open End* in 1959; Capote is reported to have said that what Kerouac did "isn't writing at all— it's typing" (39 and 54, note 2). In a letter to Philip Whalen June 10, 1959, Kerouac, apparently never one to turn the other cheek, recalls the comment and refers to Capote as "the little faggot" (237).

4. An argument can be made, and no doubt has been, for considering Dean (or even Neal Cassady outside the frame of the novel) a replacement or surrogate for Kerouac's dead brother Gerard. In which case, that argument could be extended to see Dean as a completion or fulfillment of a part of Sal that is missing or that he feels is "dead." In *Visions of Gerard*, Jack Duluoaz says that, "[f]or the first four years of my life, while he lived, I was not Ti Jean Duluoaz, I was Gerard, the world was his face, the flower of his face, the pale stooped disposition, the heartbreakingness and the holiness and his teachings and tenderness to me" (2). It seems possible that Kerouac's despair at what he sees is the suffering inherent in all life and his later embrace of Buddhism with its tenet that all life is

suffering was effectuated by his idolization of his brother and his sorrow over Gerard's death.

5. The novel is narrated in hindsight, and such a narrative strategy represents, according to Hayden White, a representation of "time in which endings can be seen as linked to beginnings to form a continuity within a difference" (*Content* 52). Here, the beginning of Sal's journey toward a spiritual recovery that he describes in the passage is connected to the ending of that journey, an ending that his words suggest will end in the failure to attain the level of spirituality he may have hoped for originally. In the short phrase, "and believe it at my young age," Sal expresses White's "continuity within a difference" in that the hope he claims to have felt at the beginning of the narrative as capable of attainment is, by the end of the narrative, not realized; the ending is linked to the beginning by the differences between expectation and resolution, and recorded after the fact. In terms of the creation of a new form of liberal sensibility, Sal's words suggest that, in the end, he has not been able to create a new form that works for him, but rather fallen back to an older, outmoded position of relative security from the past.

6. Kerouac's sense of the prairies seems to follow that of Walt Whitman. As Steven Olsen says in *The Prairie in Nineteenth-Century American Poetry*, "The prairies represent, for Whitman, the many themes of America – its vastness, ambiguity, freedom, equality, democracy, and diversity become unified. That is, the prairies symbolize the future, ideal potential of America. . . . They become a metaphor for unlimited human potential – that is, human perfection" (135-6). Olsen's liberal notion of progress is probably taking Whitman too far, but his point is correct that Whitman, as does Kerouac, looks to the West and the prairie as a site of human possibility, as the center of America. The significance of the prairie that comes to Kerouac's characters on the road enables them to value the idea of America itself as home and also to regard home as a necessary presence behind the road, which I will discuss at the end of this chapter.

7. In his play *True West*, Sam Shepard presents a version of Madsen's "central irony" of the Wild West, and one that also reflects Sal's experience of the American West of myth. Brothers Austin and Lee are attracted to a vision of the West that no longer exists; Lee is a petty thief who seeks freedom in the desert while Austin is on the trail of success as a screen-writer. However, neither finds the West of their dreams, and their roles reverse; Lee becomes the writer trying to create a "real Western A true-to-life Western" (699) based on his twisted experience, while Austin becomes a modern rustler, except that rather than cattle, he steals toasters from his neighbors. Although both men sought the West of myth updated to the present, they find that the frontier West, if it exists anywhere, has moved North to Alaska, where their mother has gone to vacation; however, in Alaska, mother, like those cowboys and *desperados* of legend who would wander West to escape domesticity, feels only "desperate" (712), and returns to civilization sooner than expected because she has learned that the late Pablo Picasso is visiting the city. Her view of culture is as skewed as that of her sons. In the play, as in Kerouac's novel, civilization has brought the destruction of the West of myth until, now, only the myth itself remains, as Sal finds

out in Wyoming.

8. Kerouac often associates himself through his narrators with ethnic minorities because of his French-Canadian heritage which serves to connect him with the “fellaheen” of the world, in his view. In *Maggie Cassidy*, for example, Jack Duluoz compares himself to the African-American track star against whom he must run; they are both outsiders, Duluoz because he is French-Canadian; the other because he is African American. He refers to the pair as, “[t]he Canuck Fellaheen Indian and the Fallaheen [sic] Negro face to face in a battle of spears before they hit the long grass, contesting territories that howl around” (101).

9. Hemingway’s story presents a view of the world from an existentialist perspective, and Kerouac seems to be leaning toward existentialism in this section of the novel in his depiction of Sal’s recognition that a universal despair haunts all humans in the face of the essential meaninglessness of existence.

10. “Pure Land” is a term that certain forms of Buddhism use for Heaven. When Kerouac wrote the article printed in *Lonesome Traveler* in 1960, he would have been aware of that connection following his study of the discipline; however, when he wrote *On the Road*, he may not have known it. I do not wish to imply that he did or to impose a Buddhist sensibility onto Sal Paradise.

11. John Lardas points out the influence on the Beats of both Spengler and the jeremiadic tradition: “Although the Beats had drunk deeply from the well of American mythos, particularly the ideas of a New Jerusalem and an errand into the wilderness, they interpreted these cultural myths according to a Spenglerian blueprint. Spengler’s philosophy of cultural cycles enabled the Beats to see themselves at both the end and the beginning of an era” (11). Locating the end of the present era for the Beats may have seemed relatively easy in post-war America thanks to their reading of Spengler, but seeing themselves at the beginning of a new era was more difficult and came with pronounced responsibilities to spread the word about the promise of the new dispensation. The Beats, as members of a liminal subculture both within and without of dominant American culture, found themselves in a uniquely advantageous position both to critique and to valorize that culture. As Lardas says, “In working within the jeremiadic tradition, [the Beats’] relationship with the majority culture was highly antagonistic yet strangely intimate. The tone of Beat literature oscillated between reproach and celebration, self-imposed alienation and the desire to assume representative status” (28). In the attempt to assume that status, *On the Road* offers a jeremiad adapted for postwar America, although one that is accessible only if understood ironically. Sal’s description of his Mexican trip offers a possibility for other Americans to recover their lost spirituality which had been attenuated by the postwar condition of the country and several hundred years of “progress.” But since Sal’s mission to purify himself seems to fail, the novel must offer that jeremiad in reverse; Sal becomes the example of what not to do.

12. Although not directly pertinent to my argument here, one useful way of understanding the final sections of *On the Road* as a spiritual journey lies in correctly reading the significance of “burning” and “heat,” idea-words that Kerouac uses in a memorable passage early in the novel, and more pervasively in the final two sections. Sal expresses his attachment to those who “burn, burn, burn like a fabulous roman candle” (8). Sal’s statement associates burning and fire with clarity of perception, self-discovery, and spirituality. His words allude to Walter Pater’s well-known tenet: “To burn always with this hard, gemlike flame, to maintain this ecstasy, is success in life” (Bloom 60). Kerouac paraphrases Pater in his 1959 article “The Origins of the Beat Generation” when he makes a distinction between two types of “hipsterism”: the cool “bearded, laconic sage” and the “hot . . . crazy talkative shining eyed (often innocent and openhearted) nut.” He concludes that “[m]ost Beat Generation artists belong to the hot school, naturally since that hard gemlike flame needs a little heat” (*Good Blonde* 61). For Pater, artists see, not just an Arnoldian glimpse of the object as it really is, but a knowledge of their impression of the object as it really is. They know the object because they know themselves.

Pater’s ideas sound like a type of Beat manifesto; he insists on the “sharp and eager observation” of a world in which “[n]ot the fruit of the experience, but experience itself is the end”; to observe all that can be observed by “the finest senses” and to “be present always at the focus where the greatest number of vital forces unite in their purest energy” (60). He also seeks a recognition of “the splendour of our experience and of its awful brevity, gathering all we are into one desperate effort to see and touch” (60). Pater seeks a possibility of stasis in the “awful brevity” of art and in life, or, as David Williams says in *Confessional Fictions*, “to arrest the stream of sensations in the aesthetic image” (22), and thereby extend the moment of aesthetic pleasure, because “our one chance lies in expanding that interval, in getting as many pulsations as possible into the given time” (Bloom 61).

Pater’s words in his “Postscript (Romanticism)” to *Appreciations* also seem applicable to the Beat project: “there are the born romantics, who start with an original, untried *matter*, still in fusion; who conceive this vividly, and hold by it as the essence of their work; who, by the very vividness and heat of their conception, purge away, sooner or later, all that is not organically appropriate to it, till the whole effect adjusts itself in clear, orderly, proportionate form” (218). In the act of observation, all perception is reduced, and, as Pater says, “loosed into a group of impressions” which are individual and personal, “unstable, flickering, inconsistent, which burn and are extinguished with our consciousness of them” (59). As perceptive individuals form impressions, they experience what Pater called “that strange, perpetual weaving and unweaving of ourselves” (60). The aesthete undergoes what Pater would call *ascēsis*; in Greek, “an exercise in spiritualizing purgation” but in Paterian terms, “an aesthetic self-curtailment, a giving-up of certain powers so as to help achieve more originality in one’s self-mastery” (Bloom xvii-xviii). Critic Denis Donahue says that Pater’s “supreme value is not form but force, energy, the flow of mind among phenomena. He settles for mobility as the condition under which he has access to either subject or object, and makes the best of every moment by making the most of it. ‘Paterian’ is the adjective for this way of being alive. That the experience continues to be interesting is the only blessing at hand, but it is enough” (53).

13. "Road fiction" is often considered an element of picaresque writing (from Spanish meaning "rogue" or "rascal"), a genre that seems to have its roots in such works as Cervantes' *Don Quixote*, Nashe's *The Unfortunate Traveller*, Defoe's *Moll Flanders*, and Fielding's *Tom Jones*, among others, and could perhaps be extended to include Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. Traditionally, its purpose is satiric and it is distinguished by its use of a main character or narrator who is often of low cultural status and who travels through a variety of seemingly unconnected experiences and places. In the process, the innocent or naive character exposes cultural folly by crossing between different levels of society while being essentially unchanged by the experience. Certainly, Huckleberry Finn is a picaresque character and Sal Paradise serves such a function in *On the Road*, but as Rowland A. Sherrill points out in *Road-Book America*, the picaresque is also very prevalent in much modern American writing; he includes such texts as Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49*, Mona Simpson's *Anywhere But Here*, and Saul Bellow's *The Adventures of Augie March* in his study. Sherrill notes a difference between the satirical function of traditional picaresque and its function in contemporary writing: "Owing to the prevailing open and essentially innocent temperament of the picaro and picara, even in the midst of his or her accidents and blunders, the new American picaresque narrative, in general, seems to accredit a hopeful outlook or at least to posit a way to survive the contingencies met and to move forward" (4). Kerouac's narrator would fall under that designation.

Chapter Four

Kerouac, Bop, and Buddhism

Holy the groaning saxophone! Holy the bop apocalypse!

-Allen Ginsberg, "Footnote to Howl"

As Kerouac gradually realized that the financial rewards of the successful writer would not materialize from *The Town and the City*, he began to reconsider the artistic compromises he had made to construct his novel in a way supposedly acceptable to publishers and to the reading public. Shortly after the novel was published, Kerouac was made even more aware of those compromises when he received Neal Cassady's lengthy "Joan Anderson" letter in which Cassady wrote of his experiences in a flowing, stream-of-consciousness monologue, disregarding the restrictions of conventional novelistic writing¹; and, in a series of letters to Cassady in late-1950 and early-1951, Kerouac expressed his regret that, as he says, "in the fiction of 'The Town & City' I gathered those informations which had truly and sincerely to do with my life, but I muddled them for the sake of 'art'" (Charters, *Selected Letters, 1940-1956* 305). Inspired by his friend's ability to use the events of his life as the source for his writing and to articulate those experiences in a flowing, almost conversational way, Kerouac vowed to Cassady, ". . . I hereby renounce all fiction . . . and proceed into the actual truth of my life I will travel again the experiences already written by me for the fiction-work (T&C) and tear them down systematically" (246-7). He concludes, "I have renounced fiction and fear. There is nothing to do but write the truth. There is no other reason to write. . . [M]y second book

will still be the first book of truth I shall have written" (248).

On the Road was that "second book," and, in the novel, Kerouac clearly uses "informations" that come from his own experience in an attempt to approach a "truth" through which he can view the world and his own experience of that world, although whether Kerouac was successful in locating that "truth" in the novel is arguable. But he was able to describe the search of his main characters for a workable "truth," and, as I claimed in the previous chapter, that search parallels his attempt to create a more accurate narrative of liberalism. In *On the Road*, Sal represents the older version of liberal ideal in his disposition to see everyone he meets as potentially good and in his desire to include both himself and virtually everyone else he encounters within his immediate cultural moment; he also reflects that outmoded form in his search for an all-inclusive and universal meaning for the sense of alienation he feels. Dean embodies a less naive view of experience, although he too is not entirely successful in locating himself in the world; he has seen more of life's vagaries than has Sal, and he understands that any attempt to conflate the "complexity" of the world and its people into a seamless and homogeneous unity is doomed from the inception. He realizes that all people cannot be lumped under a single rubric and neither can all experience be explained in rational and inclusive terms. Dean's ability to accept the world as he finds it and to adjust himself to its contingencies seems, to Sal, a lack of concern for his peers and a rejection of the sense of group cohesiveness that Sal looks for in his interactions with people. In the end, the novel presents neither Sal nor Dean as models for a new liberal narrative; both characters fail to negotiate their way through the world in a completely meaningful way. Sal has returned to

the world he had once sought to escape bearing a sense of resignation and a reluctance to admit the existence of darkness or human evil, and Dean still seems to be plunging headlong through his life without much consideration for the outcome of his actions or without apparently realizing where he is going. The novel seems to posit a “truth” somewhere between the two points of view. Because *On the Road* was written in the early-1950s but not published until 1957, Kerouac’s literary output in the intervening and subsequent years shows that he continued to struggle to uncover a “truth” through which he could formulate his world most accurately, in spite of his avowed mission to “renounce all fiction” and “write the truth.”

In the previous chapter, I discussed several ways in which Kerouac attempted to form a new method of re-visioning the world in *On the Road*, and I connected those attempts to the formation of a new narrative of liberalism expressed literarily. In this chapter, I will examine several texts that Kerouac wrote after *On the Road* and I will locate in those texts two competing discourses² that Kerouac employs to make sense of his experience, and these choices have the potential both to parallel and to facilitate the creation of a new liberal narrative. In *On the Road*, as in much of Kerouac’s writing, jazz plays a significant role, and a type of reworked narrative of liberalism appears in Kerouac’s adoption of bebop jazz as a form of expression that reflects the hectic and changing times. His “spontaneous bop prosody” (Ginsberg, Dedication to *Howl*, 3) is an attempt to replicate the spontaneity, creative energy and process of the performing jazz musician; this performance itself is a representation of individualistic liberalism in which the individuals act in their own creative best interests within the context of the larger

group; as such, the performance embodies a neo-Emersonian self-reliance which benefits the goals of the group as well as of the individual. Key to my argument is that the musician operates *within* a defined and structured context both as a member of a performance group and as a creative artist; rather than choosing spontaneously from an infinite number of musical options, the musician is limited in those options by the strictures of music itself and yet is able to create in an almost endless number of ways. In the first section of this chapter, I will establish a paradigm through which to view what I believe is Kerouac's approach to jazz; then, I will discuss several of the many instances in Kerouac's writing in which jazz plays a role and consider those occurrences using that model.

Kerouac seems to ascribe spiritual if not outright religious sensibilities to jazz; therefore, he is not acting inconsistently when he embraces Buddhism as a means of configuring the world as he sees it, and in the second section of this chapter, I consider Buddhism as another competing discourse that Kerouac employs. In the middle-1950s after reading Thoreau, Kerouac began his study of Buddhism, and in the first of Buddhism's Four Noble Truths, "All Life is Sorrowful," he found a confirmation and an explanation for his sense of alienation and cultural discomfort; in the third of those Truths, he found the hope for renewal: "The Suppression of Suffering can be Achieved" (Kerouac, *Some of the Dharma* 3). Buddhism offered a way of explaining and reducing his feeling of uneasiness in the world, and within the scope of my discussion here, Kerouac's absorption of Buddhist philosophy acts in a similar although not exact manner to the attempt to form a new relationship to certain elements of liberalism. Kerouac reveals this parallel in the third of his "Last Words" columns for *Escapade* magazine in October 1959 when he

describes his attraction to Buddhism in terms of a new way of viewing the world; he says that once he accepted the Buddhist axiom “REPOSE BEYOND FATE,” which he takes to mean “rest beyond what happens to you,” “give it up, sit, forget it, stop thinking,” he found that “all things vanished, what was left was the United Stuff out of which all things appeared to be made of without being made into anything really, all things I then saw as unsubstantial trickery of the mind” (*Good Blonde* 152). However, Buddhism could not provide the permanent relief that Kerouac sought because he could never fully divorce himself spiritually from his Catholic roots nor physically from his recurrent desire for the temporary comfort of alcohol and material pleasure; “all things” were not “unsubstantial trickery,” but all too real. In the second section of this chapter, I will examine several texts in which Buddhism factors, including *The Dharma Bums* and Kerouac’s extensive treatise on Buddhism, *Some of the Dharma*. I will show that, although Kerouac approaches Buddhism with good intentions and high hopes, he is ultimately unable to internalize the philosophy in a way that benefits him in any long lasting fashion. Kerouac’s writing during the period reveals that both discourses are only partially effective in reaching any permanent solution to his search for a practical way to view the world.

Jazz and the Narrative of Liberalism

Charley Parker, pray for me –
Pray for me and everybody

-Jack Kerouac, *Mexico City Blues*, 241st Chorus

One discourse not so easily absorbed into the post-war ideology of consumerism and commercialism was that of bebop jazz, and this resistance to mass cultural absorption may help to explain why Kerouac and the other Beats were so fond of that particular mode of creative expression and why it appears so prevalently in Kerouac's writing. Besides serving as a rejection of the conformity and homogenization of mass culture, bop represents a new mode of creating music by building on and then transcending the musical forms that came before; in that regard, it becomes an artistic manifestation of the struggle to redefine liberalism by revamping the older form of liberal thought. The importance of bop to Kerouac becomes clear early in *On the Road*. On Sal's first trip West, he stays over in Chicago and describes the jazz he hears there: "At this time, 1947, bop was going like mad all over America. . . . And as I sat there listening to that sound of the night which bop has come to represent for all of us, I thought of all my friends from one end of the country to the other and how they were really all in the same vast backyard doing something so frantic and rushing about" (14). In his description of the post-war American jazz scene, Sal also expresses his vision of America: the incessant "going" and "rushing," the "frantic" madness he finds so enticing, the "night" as a symbol of excitement and of the illicit, the vastness of "the country," but also of "all of us" united by a common experience provided by the music. For Sal, jazz does what few other events in his life can; it provides a sense of inclusion and belonging, if not to the dominant culture of the country, at least to a part of it, to the marginalized group he considers his "friends." In a way, jazz provides the sense of inclusion that is so endemic to the older liberalism while at the same time it supplies a modified form of inclusion for the newer, liberal sensibility in that not all can nor should be

included under one homogenous cultural umbrella. Bebop jazz becomes for Sal, and for Kerouac outside the narrative frame of the novel, a means of providing a sense of unity and affiliation in a world in which few potential principles of connection are available.

Bebop or simply “bop”³ is a form of musical expression that appeared in the mid-1940s and is usually associated with certain influential jazz musicians such as Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespie, Thelonius Monk, and Miles Davis, among others. Bop was a reaction to “swing,” the more melodically- and rhythmically-conventional form of jazz that preceded bop, and which is usually associated with orchestral music like that of Glenn Miller; but unlike swing, which featured large bands of twenty or more members, bop was usually performed by smaller combos of three to six musicians consisting of one or more solo instruments, such as saxophone or trumpet, accompanied by a rhythm section of piano, bass, and drums. Frank Tirro describes the bop performance method in *Jazz: A History*,

The standard procedure when performing without written music—and this was the norm for bebop musicians rebelling against the written arrangements of swing—was to play the melody in its entirety once (twice if a twelve-measure blues), follow it with several choruses of improvised solos . . . and repeat the melody of the first chorus to end the piece. (299)

With its frenetic technical gymnastics and its endorsement of an almost free-form improvisation, bop demanded greater skill from musicians than did previous forms of jazz, which was part of its allure to hip musicians who wanted to create a more elite form of music which could be performed by only the most proficient, a requirement that would

eliminate musicians of more modest skill from the bandstands. As Tirro says, "bebop musicians were trying to raise the quality of jazz from the level of utilitarian dance music to that of a chamber art form. At the same time, they were trying to raise the status of the jazz performer from entertainer to artist. . . . Technical proficiency was part of the movement, and bebop musicians did their best to belittle anyone who could not maintain the demanding pace" (290-1). Quite understandably, that elitism in performance also challenged the listening skills and patience of much of the audience who did not possess the musical sophistication of the musicians, and, as Tirro's comment suggests, it also exasperated those club-goers who wanted to dance; therefore, the difficulty of listening or dancing to bop translated into its rejection by "straight" society. The lack of immediate (or any) acceptance from much of the listening public caused bop musicians to reject their audiences as unlearned and undeserving, and occasionally "to play with their back turned toward the audience or to walk off the bandstand as soon as the solo was ended, even though the rest of the group was still playing" (290). These actions no doubt served to alienate further the musicians from the audience. As Tirro notes, the apparent attitude of bop musicians in their rejection of less talented musicians and of the listeners "gave rise to a breed of person who became known as a 'hipster'" (290).

Given that description of the music and of those who performed it, the appeal to the Beats of bop and of the "hipster" musicians who performed it is not hard to comprehend. John Clellon Holmes says that Bop "was not merely expressive of the discords and complexities we were feeling, but specifically separated us from the times just passed. . . . No one who was not involved in the Bop revolt can know all that it meant to

us" (105)⁴. His double negative explains why an outsider cannot understand: "jazz is primarily the music of inner freedom, of improvisation, of the creative individual rather than the interpretive group. It is the music of a submerged people, who *feel* free, and this is precisely how young people feel today" (124). Because of its improvisatory nature and its emphasis on the creative powers of the individual within the context of the group, bop represents "freedom," and Holmes sees bop as the property of all who are culturally "submerged" but who possess that sense of personal inner freedom. His statement can easily be read as an equation of the Beats with the African-American musicians who were the main exponents of bop and of jazz in general, and his words demonstrate how easily his ideas gloss over race as an issue for the Beats, as the thoughts of Sal Paradise in the Denver slums indicate.⁵ But Holmes' point is accurate in terms of its emotive intent; his generation feels an affinity with African-Americans, at least on the basis of music, and specifically in the acceptance of bop as a creative form of personal expression. Dennis McNally in *Desolate Angel* says that

[b]op reflected the technical changes of World War II—greater speed and magnified complication—with perfect precision, but the music's social aspects were equally important. For the first time, black musicians saw themselves as artists to be respected, as artists in revolt. As a protection from American racism in general and the crudities of audiences in particular, the Boppers developed a whole culture of restrained coolness that enraged bourgeois critics and older musicians but entranced Jack and many of his peers. (82)

The affinity that both Holmes and McNally detect is based on the sense of “inner freedom” that comes from the improvisatory nature of the bop style at a time when the surety or feeling of external cultural freedom was not guaranteed; but it is also grounded on the premise that the form represented by the song and its arrangement both sets the limits and allows those limits to be tested and exceeded or improvised upon. Paradoxically, freedom comes from a knowledge and acceptance of limitation. Robert Creeley says in an interview for *The Paris Review* of his connection to jazz and jazz musicians, “Charlie Parker and Miles Davis and Thelonius Monk and those people were extraordinarily interesting to me. Simply that they seemed to have only the nature of the activity as limit” (Plimpton 81). Such a non-limitation allows the artist the opportunity for unlimited expression. The “nature of the activity” to which Creeley refers is the form of the music itself which both limits and allows for the performance; in this case, there is no difference between dancer and dance⁶.

Creeley’s statement may well describe the desire of all writers to locate a form of writing that is limited only by “the nature of the activity” itself, and this obsession with form appears throughout *On the Road*, where jazz appears frequently as a soundtrack to the travels of Sal and Dean. “Blow, man, blow!” Dean yells to “a wild tenorman” in a mostly-black jazz club in San Francisco in which a band is playing bop jazz (*On the Road* 196). As Dean Moriarty’s excited and encouraging comment indicates, part of the attraction of bebop to him, as it was to the Beats and to Kerouac, is the apparent freedom that it offers the performer, the possibility of playing almost anything without restriction, of transcending limitations and exceeding the margins of conventional jazz. Sal says that

“Dean was in a trance” (198), deeply moved by the music in the club. As a transcendence of convention, bebop would certainly seem to represent the life that Sal and Dean are trying to lead. But neither seems to realize that the form of bebop, like the culture in which Sal and Dean operate, is highly-structured, governed by strict rules of performance, and involving disciplined adherence to formulas, as Tirro’s description above indicates. To operate outside of those margins would be a violation of the rules of bop, which are themselves violations of the rules of the jazz that came before it. Certainly, the performer has the freedom to play anything, as long as it fits into the defined structure, but a performer is not completely free to play whatever comes to mind, as some critics suggest. Further, the apparent inability of Sal to recognize the underlying and unstated defining structure of the performance which allows for its freedom calls attention to his inability to recognize that the defining structure of the culture to which he is subject also allows him a means toward a form of freedom. His failure to recognize the parallel also calls attention to his failed construction of a new narrative of liberalism; he seeks release from the confinement of older liberal ideals and believes he has found that escape on the road, but, just as the music that generates Dean’s “trance” operates within certain restrictions, life on the road has limitations for both Sal and Dean.

Sal seems unaware of those restrictions and, apparently without understanding what is really happening, he describes the response of a musician to a sit-in drummer who plays without understanding the rules of bop. The regular bop drummer who is observing is quick to show his resistance to his substitute’s performance, and in so doing, he acknowledges and reaffirms the restrictions under which the music should and must be

played; these limitations are not recognized or appreciated by those who admire the music for what they see as its completely improvisatory and spontaneous nature. Sal describes the shock and dismay of the drummer, but he also reveals the inherent structural requirements of bop and its elitist nature, when the musician says, “‘What that man doing? . . . Play the music! . . . What in hell! . . . Shh-ee-eet!’ and looked away, disgusted” (200). Later, Dean exaggerates the details of his story about a musician who “blew a hundred choruses before he was ready to jump for fair” (201), seeming not to realize that a musical chorus is a defined structure itself without which there would be no song. It is not possible to play music too far outside of the inherent limitations of its form no matter what the genre of music is, because, as this section of the novel makes clear, the performance would then be no longer recognizable as music. However, true creativity arises from pressing against or resisting the demands of those limitations. While Dean and Sal choose to follow parameters that they consider to be outside of post-war American culture, they also enjoy the freedom offered by the parameters of bop, a system that is as carefully structured and determined as the one that they reject.

While Sal and Dean do not understand the inherent structure and restriction in the music with which they are so infatuated, Kerouac, behind the narrative, does seem to understand, and that understanding appears in all of his writing that involves jazz. Kerouac seems to appreciate that creativity is made possible by recognizing restrictions and resisting those limitations so that a more effective and meaningful form of creativity can emerge. In *Mexico City Blues* and in all of his “blues” poems, Kerouac follows a tight and inviolable strategy of form: the page of the notebook in which he records or “performs”

his poems. On the unnumbered introductory page to his *Book of Blues*, Kerouac notes, “[i]n my system, the form of blues choruses is limited by the small page of the breastpocket notebook in which they are written, like the form of a set number of bars in a jazz blues chorus, and so sometimes the word-meaning can carry from one chorus into another, or not” (*Book of Blues*). He uses the small page as a material and permanent representation of the musical chorus, in effect, substituting the shape of the page for the musical chorus and the materiality of the page for the ephemerality of the musical performance⁷; as he says, “the form is determined by time.” In other words, the musical chorus itself, performed in actual “time,” is its own form, but Kerouac uses the page of the writing pad in place of “time” to structure his chorus. Also, as in the musical performance, the written line or “phrase-meaning” can extend from one chorus to the next, spanning choruses using the idea as the connection between choruses within the larger structure of the poem. Kerouac recognizes that, without the so-called restriction or limitation of the form, there could be no music or poem⁸. In introducing his *Mexico City Blues*, he declares his desire “to be considered a jazz poet / blowing a long blues in an afternoon jam session” (n.p.), and he restates his concept that his “ideas vary and sometimes roll from / chorus to chorus or from halfway through / a chorus to halfway into the next” (*Mexico City Blues*).

Also, as Kerouac says in *Book of Blues*, the writing must “be non stop ad libbing within each chorus, or the gig is shot” (n.p.), which seems to follow his own direction in “Essentials of Spontaneous Prose”: “Not ‘selectivity’ of expression but following free deviation (association) of mind into limitless blow-on-subject seas of thought, swimming in sea of English with no discipline other than rhythms of rhetorical exhalation and

expostulated statement" (*Good Blonde* 69). But, Kerouac's statement in favor of spontaneity in composition is too easily and too frequently misunderstood; he is not suggesting that the writer can use any word or phrase that comes to mind anymore than he suggests that a musician can play any note at any time. Whatever the writer chooses must be "limitless" like the ocean (an image of containment, itself), but it must also be "blow-on-subject seas of thought"; in other words, the writing must follow the form dictated by a particular idea or "subject." What Kerouac refers to as "no discipline" is in fact, highly disciplined by the rhythm of the language and by a "statement" which is "expostulated" in the course of the writing. Improvisation and spontaneity function by allowing the mind to associate as it will, but always on a particular "subject," and that association comes from intense focus on the subject, not on the absence of focus or by delving into the far reaches of the subconscious as some critics would suggest.

Ray Carney, in "Escape Velocity: Notes on Beat Film," characterizes the idealized critical misunderstanding of improvisation and spontaneity as modes of expression that are completely free of limitation, physical or intellectual. Describing post-war jazz and its appeal to the Beats, Carney says,

As a master of second-by-second responsiveness, the jazz performer gave himself over to the flowing energies of the moment. He lived in an eternal now, making himself and his performance up as he went along. Blueprints were out; improvisation was in. Planning and premeditation were the enemies of openness and spontaneity. Art (and life) for the jazz performer became open-ended acts of attention expressed in continuously revised and

adjusted acts of mastery. (Philips 194)

Carney is correct in part, but his desire to configure the jazz musician as operating outside of temporality and at a level of the subconscious unavailable to most artists reflects the idealize desire for a thought process in which the consciousness does not enter into the performance at all. Certainly, the soloist responds to the “second-by-second” demands of the song and of the group’s other musicians, and certainly that soloist will also feed off of the energy generated by the band’s interpretation and enaction of the song’s rhythm, tempo, and intricacies of arrangement; but to suggest that the musician ‘makes up’ the performance on the fly, without a ‘blueprint,’ is to remove agency from that soloist for the creation of the performance itself. The musician, like the writer, also has a form of “vocabulary” that is determined by training, knowledge of music theory, technical proficiency, ability of quick recall, willingness to extend beyond what he or she had played in previous performances or practice sessions, the ability of the other musicians to respond to that soloist’s performance, and probably dozens of other factors that enter into the makeup of the individual musician. Those elements comprise what we think of as a musician’s particular “sound” or style. Even a new listener to the music can quickly learn to detect distinctive performance characteristics in one player that do not occur in another. Charlie Parker’s “sound” is not the same as John Coltrane’s which is not the same as Branford Marsalis’, and those differences go beyond simple chronology or genre⁹.

Also, as Carney suggests, the musician in performance also makes up “himself,” and to suggest that the musician forgets all of those factors and performs subconsciously in creating that “self” is romantically fanciful but hardly likely, because musicians in

performance cannot usually forget what they have learned, nor would they want to; such a mental process would mean the dislocation of their musical vocabulary from the actuality of their performance. Where Carney is absolutely accurate is in his assessment of jazz performances as “open-ended acts of attention expressed in continuously revised and adjusted acts of mastery”; the “acts” may be “open-ended,” but they are “acts of *attention*,” and therefore conscious acts consisting of a series of artistic decisions made almost instantaneously and determined by the player’s level of “mastery,” but always coming from the musicians’ stored vocabulary and their willingness to reach for new “words.” Frank Tirro calls this vocabulary, “instant ideas”:

With rare exceptions, the jazz performances of the 1940s and ‘50s were all based on this ‘melodic improvisation to the [chord] changes’ technique. Jazz musicians, because of their frequent employment at dances, nightclubs, and parties, worked from a repertoire of popular songs, musical-comedy melodies, blues tunes, and a few jazz originals. Also, this style of employment, where musicians were called upon to produce three or four hours of improvised music five to seven days a week, led to their developing a repertoire of melodic patterns—actually a collection of instrumental finger patterns related to the keys and chords—that were generally unique to the individual and were called upon as “instant ideas” for developing long-line, extemporaneous solos. The better musicians did not merely repeat patterns mechanically: melodic units were modified, dropped, and added to over time so that the state of improvisation for

developing jazz artists was one of flux and growth, not impoverished redundancy. (299)

This development of style and technique that leads to creative and imaginative art is also a form of self-creation; the musician's *musical self* or individual sound which is created by great personal effort is not unlike the creation of a cultural self in that individuals learn the techniques needed to engage effectively with their culture and then modify those techniques by testing them against the limitations set by the culture. As Daniel Belgrad says in *The Culture of Spontaneity*, "The idea of a present without past had no meaning for these [Beat] writers, as it had no meaning for the jazz musicians whose flights of improvisation could be achieved only after the painstaking accumulation of musical technique known as 'woodshedding [a musician's euphemism for practicing]'" (238). Ralph Ellison would agree; he says in his essay "The Golden Age, Time Past" from *Shadow and Act*: "after the jazzman has learned the fundamentals of his instrument and the traditional techniques of jazz . . . , he must then 'find himself,' must be reborn, must find, as it were, his soul. All this through achieving that subtle identification between his instrument and his deepest drives which will allow him to express his own unique ideas and his own unique voice. He must achieve, in short, his self-determined identity" (208-9). While the best musicians do not simply run through a series of prefabricated "licks" or phrases, they do of necessity rely on what Tirro refers to as their "instant ideas" to begin or to extend the improvisation. That reliance does not operate on the level of the subconscious although the musician does, as Carney suggests, make up the performance on the fly; the musician must still refer back to his cache of "instant ideas" just as Kerouac

would refer to his “personal idea-words, *blowing* (as per jazz musician) on subject of image” (“Essentials of Spontaneous Prose,” *Good Blonde* 69)¹⁰. No such creation can be completely spontaneous and tap into areas of the subconscious hitherto unknown, but musicians, like writers, can use their “instant ideas” or their “idea-words” to create more freely by focusing on the “image,” on the performance as a creative act, rather than on the product of the act.

Crucial to my argument here and what connects it to the modification of liberal ideals is that, in the jazz performance, when creative individual musicians operate freely within the limits set both by the form itself and by their abilities, including the talent to access spontaneously their “instant ideas,” they possess an authority that transcends that of the group and yet contributes to the success of that group by the exercise of their very individuality. They do not relinquish their individuality for the sake of the group, but their individuality, pooled with that of the other musicians in a synergistic conjunction, creates something greater than would be possible otherwise. In “Living with Music,” Ralph Ellison notes “the give and take, the subtle rhythmical shaping and blending of idea, tone and imagination demanded of group improvisation. The delicate balance struck between strong individual personality and the group during those early jam sessions was a marvel of social organization”(189). Daniel Belgrad, too, says of bop, “[t]he fixed authority of the conductor was replaced by a format in which musicians passed authority among themselves according to flexible but reliable patterns. Ultimately, bebop embodied a more radical cultural stance than European modernist music, because it provided for a more democratic and participatory form of musical expression” (185). As a “participatory

form,” bop becomes a representation of a new form of culture in which the individual is granted a far greater degree of autonomy than in previous forms and yet the level of intersubjective communication is increased while the overall performance of the culture is improved. This idea is an example of Emersonian self-reliance reduced and honed to the small combo level. Sacvan Bercovitch in *The American Jeremiad* explains how Emerson’s “vision of the good society invited the individual to deny every secular distinction between himself and others and so to make individuation an endless process of incorporation” (184). This simultaneous “process of incorporation” and elevation of the individual around the “symbol of America” (184) is comparable to the individual jazz musician encouraged to be as individualistic as possible so that he or she might be incorporated successfully into the larger group through the “symbol” of the musical performance itself. The jazz group, made up of strong individuals operating freely within defined and limited parameters, becomes a model of liberal culture in a post-war world in which universal inclusion and complete freedom are practical impossibilities. But, in the contemporary world of Kerouac’s post-war America, partial inclusion and limited freedom are infinitely possible, when that culture is modeled on the paradigm of bop.

Many scenes in Kerouac’s *Visions of Cody* reveal the importance of jazz to the cultural context in which Kerouac wrote. In one scene, the narrator Jack Duluoz recounts the difficult beginnings of his attempt to learn to play the saxophone, a desire which is motivated by his fondness for jazz. He describes blowing “the perfect harmonic note in this moment of the tune, the pop tune, the song, the living American melodic symphony that rings in my brain continually and is the great chord of the key” (328-9). Music reaches

out beyond the immediate into America at large and becomes a unifying force is it did in the early sections of *On the Road*. But in *Visions of Cody*, the joy and exuberance is accompanied by a sense of sorrow and sadness, for although jazz is a connection that seems to offer a sense of inclusion and universality as “the conglomerating music of the world” (329), on the level of the individual, another darker emotion is evident, and jazz is not enough to eradicate that feeling. Duluoz tells how he has seen “the great Abstraction that is coming” which would swallow all other discourses, art, music, consumerism, baseball, drama, and writing; but first on the list of abstractions is “Abstract war (as now)”; further, he has “seen the tenorman’s sad pale face too, and in my own face” (329). Behind the joy and exuberance that Jack and Cody find in the music is the realization that the world is changing negatively into a form which may not be fulfilling for the iconoclast, and therefore, that change needs to be resisted.

Later, Duluoz will note the sense of loss brought on by the impending change when he describes a club in San Francisco in which he and Cody watch the musicians and the audience. Jack says that, at that time, “the age of the wild tenorman was piercing up through the regular-course developments of bop,” a time in which “the wild tenormen blew with an honest frenzy”; however, Duluoz writes the passage at a later time in which “now it’s a fad,” and therefore somehow diluted of honesty (350). Still, through the musicians’ performance, the audience members are unified; as Cody says, “It’s the big moment of rapport all around that’s making him rock; that’s jazz; dig him, dig her, dig this place, dig these cats, this is all that’s left, where else can you and go Jack? [sic]” (351). Cody notices the sense of connection that exists among the people and among the

musicians, and which has been generated by the performance; but his words point beyond the club to a world that is also reduced in its level of honesty, because, the club "is all that's left" of the old honesty and there is no where else to go. While jazz provides a temporary feeling of belonging and supplies a sense of meaning inside the club, there is a strong sense in the passages of a deteriorating world outside, and jazz can do little to rejuvenate that world on a permanent level. However, Duluoz fails to notice that the performance is actually a model of a new culture in which the individual "tenorman," operating at the creative peak of his individuality within the confines of the jazz combo and within the limitations of the song and genre, has attained what Cody and Jack refer to as "It" (351), a level of artistic involvement that transcends both time and place¹¹. As Tim Hunt says in describing the same scene as it appears in *On the Road*, by reaching the emotional levels that the musician attains in performance, that musician

releases his audience from their oppression by celebrating it. He escapes time by being preternaturally aware of it. He crosses the bridge of the tune . . . by willing himself to recognize the temporary and doomed quality of his gesture. The alto man wills himself to create in the face of his despair at recognizing his own inevitable decline and inability to create. He escapes by accepting momentarily that there is no escape. . . . The alto suffers not only to attain his own fleeting moments of ecstasy but in order to renew his audience by creating a momentary experience of community among them based, paradoxically, on each one's recognition of his own isolation. (40-1).

Similarly, the narrator of James Baldwin's short story "Sonny's Blues" witnesses his brother's stirring performance on the piano and realizes, "he could help us to be free if we would listen, that he would never be free until we did. Yet, there was no battle in his face now. I heard what he had gone through, and would continue to go through until he came to rest in earth" (2636); like Baldwin's narrator, Cody and Jack and the rest of the audience are given a chance at renewal in what Hunt calls "a momentary experience of community among them based, paradoxically, on each one's recognition of his own isolation." The narrative of liberalism that emerges is one that allows for and accepts a certain "isolation" but, an isolation that is recognized by the group as an inevitable product of the coming "abstraction" to which Duluoz refers. The sense of "community" comes from an acceptance of isolation as a present and irrefutable fact.

Jazz offers the possibility of release from the suffering generated by life in a modern world, but only if the listeners recognize that the feeling of connection comes from the exercise of individuality within the context of the larger group. In *The Subterraneans*, the narrator Leo Percepied describes watching Charlie Parker play at a club called the "Red Drum" while Parker himself gazes out at Leo and at the people in the audience "as if he knew my thoughts and ambitions." Parker seems to be watching Leo and Mardou, as Leo says, "in the infancy of our love," and he imagines Parker "probably wondering why, or knowing it wouldn't last, or seeing who it was would be hurt," as though Parker possesses some extraordinary power of divination because he is "the kindest jazz musician there could be while being and therefore naturally the greatest" (14). The musician, like the "tenorman" or like Baldwin's Sonny or like Kerouac's Parker, who

can find “it” and initiate that connection can lead the way to a new vision of the world and should indeed be the object of adoration and prayer for Kerouac. However, such a feeling of connection requires the human subject to recognize and accept the involvement of their own individuality within the larger group, and their own inevitable feeling of isolation, even within the compass of that group.

Kerouac’s Buddhism

Charley Parker Looked like Buddha

...

And his expression on his face
Was as calm, beautiful, and profound
As the image of Buddha
Represented in the East, the lidded eyes,
The expression that says “All is Well”

-Jack Kerouac, *Mexico City Blues*, 239th Chorus

As did Leo Percepied in *The Subterraneans*, Jack Kerouac in the 239th Chorus of *Mexico City Blues* assigns to jazz musician Charlie Parker a power beyond merely the ability to play his instrument extremely well and to captivate his audience; where Leo felt Parker’s prescience to foresee the end of his relationship with Mardou, Kerouac sees in Parker’s facial “expression” an image of Buddha, “calm, beautiful, and profound,” and also reassuring. *The Subterraneans* presents Parker and jazz as possessing a perception and an understanding that has the capability to transform the world, or at least, the world that Leo and his subterranean friends inhabit. In *Mexico City Blues*, Kerouac presents

Parker and Buddhism as manifesting a similar power; in the visage of the master, Kerouac finds assurance that "All is Well," because Parker's face emits a sense of peace that Kerouac also has found in his study of Buddhism. One text offers jazz as the medium through which a new vision of the world may be available; the other extends the hope of finding such a vision by joining jazz and Buddhism, that is, by finding in Charlie Parker the sense of surety that Kerouac finds in Buddhism. Both texts represent Kerouac's ongoing search for a new, conciliatory, and more accurate way of viewing the world. Kerouac wrote *The Subterraneans* in October of 1953, "in three all-night marathon typing sessions fueled by Benzedrine," according to Ann Charters (*Selected Letters, 1940-1956*, 401); he began *Mexico City Blues* in August of 1955 (507) after he had begun his investigation into Buddhism, and in that book of poetry, he combines his desire "to be considered a jazz poet" (Introduction to *Mexico City Blues*, n.p.) with his new found vision of the world which has been enabled by his new grasp of the dharma, or truth, made available by his study of Buddhism. Where jazz serves in the former book as the means through which the world might be understood, in the latter, Kerouac attempts to find that stimulus in Buddhism.

Prompted by Henry David Thoreau's exposition of Eastern philosophies in *Walden*, Kerouac had begun a study of Buddhism (Tonkinson 24). He wrote to Allen Ginsberg in May 1954 to tell Ginsberg that he had finally discovered an explanation for his feelings of sorrow and alienation in the world, and also that he had found a way to break his cycle of suffering and alcoholic excess; he says, somewhat contradictorily, in the letter, "I've been getting sillydrunk lately in Remo and disgusting myself a la *Subterraneans*. I

want to live a quiet life but I am so weak for booxe [sic] booze. I am very unhappy and have nightmares; when drinking; after a week of abstinence, I am happier than ever before in life, but slowly become bored and wonderin what to do now. . . . I have crossed the ocean of suffering and the path at last" (Charters, *Selected Letters, 1940-1956*, 410). Kerouac reiterates his new-found path several months later in a letter to publisher Malcolm Cowley: "Since I saw you I took up the study of Buddhism and for me it's the word and the way I was looking for" (430). The juxtaposition of alcoholic excess and Buddhism in Kerouac's letter to Ginsberg is telling, for the latter must necessarily preclude the former in any serious form of spiritualism that rejects attachment to earthly pursuits; but Kerouac seems to be embracing Buddhism partly as a means of swearing off the destructive drinking whose effects make him so "very unhappy" and partly to provide new meaning for his aimless life. However, he will eventually abandon his study of Buddhism amid the pressures that follow the onset of his "fame" and return to the Catholicism in which he was raised; unfortunately, he will also fully embrace a life of alcoholic indulgence which will eventually lead to his death¹².

As the following discussion will show, Kerouac fluctuates frequently between Buddhist sobriety and the temptations of alcohol, and the frustrations of those lapses are documented in much of his writing at the time. Buddhism appears as a competing discourse to his Saroyan-inspired liberal idealism and seems to offer much to the suffering writer, especially as a means of re-fashioning his vision of the world in which he suffers. However, to suggest that Kerouac's study of Buddhism parallels the struggle to form a new narrative of liberalism would be assigning to Buddhism a political or ideological

subtext which it clearly does not possess. But, what is significant about Kerouac's attraction to Buddhism is that he felt that he had finally found a means of more accurately envisioning the world using a form of spirituality other than that of his Catholic roots and other than the contemporary American notion of spirituality, a choice which shows that he was still moving toward a more personally authentic view of the world. Therefore, while Buddhism cannot be considered a parallel discourse to liberalism, Kerouac's employment of Buddhism as a lens through which to interpret experience connects Buddhism to the attempt to create a new liberal narrative. Therefore, in this section, I will focus on two of Kerouac's texts in which Buddhism appears predominantly, *The Dharma Bums* and *Some of the Dharma*, to locate there the clash of the asceticism of Buddhism with its opposite, the world of sensual gratification. That collision occurs both within the frame of the narrative of *The Dharma Bums* and also in the life of its author, as an examination of Kerouac's personal guidebook to Buddhism, *Some of the Dharma*, will show. I will conclude that, in the end, neither the acetic world nor the sensual world is satisfactory in forming an effective vision of the world for Kerouac at this time. While my intention here is not to present a thorough study of Buddhism itself, I will consider briefly the way that Kerouac understood Buddhism, and I will refer to several scholars of that philosophy to draw the connection to Kerouac and his work.

Stephen Prothero says in the introduction to *Big Sky Mind*, that "Buddhism recommended itself to Kerouac because rather than denying suffering and death, it faced squarely up to both. Moreover, by tracing the origin of suffering and death to craving, desire, and ignorance, Buddhism also offered a way to transcendence" (16). In the first of

its Four Noble Truths, Buddhism acknowledges that life is a process of suffering and that suffering is inevitable from the moment of birth; however, the Second of these Truths explains that suffering comes from desire, and that desire “gives rise to fresh rebirths” (Goddard 29) rather than leading to Nirvana, the escape from rebirth. Further, desire itself arises “[w]henever in the world there is the delightful and pleasurable” (29), and therefore desire is associated with the senses and sensory experience. Kerouac would certainly have found in those two Truths an explanation for his discomfort, as his letter to Ginsberg about his “sillydrunk” escapades at the San Remo bar and subsequent “nightmares” would attest. Kerouac would also have welcomed the Third and Fourth Noble Truths which provide the solution: suffering can be eliminated by “the complete fading away and extinction of this craving” (Goddard 31) once seekers can realize that pleasure, like life, is illusionary and “impermanent,” and they proceed down “the Noble Eightfold Path,” “the *Middle Path*” (31) of living according to the teachings of the Buddha. As Ben Giamo says in *Kerouac, the Word and the Way*, Kerouac became aware that “hedonistic coddling of the senses ensnared one in opposite emotive forces. By scaling the heights of Buddhist meditation, Kerouac realized he could transcend the rigid dualisms that ailed him throughout his life, thereby attaining equanimity of mind” (89). However, it is the elimination of “craving” that seems to be more problematic for Kerouac and which makes his transcendence and reconciliation of those “rigid dualisms” all but impossible.

The opposing forces that Giamo notes appear frequently in *Some of the Dharma*, Kerouac’s eclectic collection of notes, poems, and literary meditations on Buddhism, and those dualisms often associate Kerouac’s drinking with his recognition that alcohol and

Buddhism do not mix. In a short poetic entry, he expresses the essence of that dualism:

I dont want to be a drunken hero of the generation suffering everywhere
with everyone ---

I want to be a quiet saint living in a shack in solitary meditation of universal
mind --- . (63)

A few pages later, he names and accuses his demons: "alcohol which stimulates gayety, and narcotics that create self-romance, are the great enemies to the seeker after Truth and Highest Samadhi ---- They are not only intoxicants but deceivers of Sorrow-Knowledge" (73). Kerouac is aware of the barrier that blocks his ascension to Buddhahood, and he is aware of what he needs to do to remove that obstacle: he must remain apart from the people with whom he associates drinking and sensory enjoyment; but he is often powerless to distance himself from material pleasure, because, as he says in the letter to Ginsberg, after a period of sobriety, "[I] slowly become bored and wonderin what to do now." He notes directly in the book his own awareness of the dualism that haunts him, "TWO SELF-CONTRADICTIONS in my notebook: 'Death?--how many glasses of wine have I put between me and death? Eat, drink, and be merry.' Then:- 'Stay sober? Dont be silly --- it's too dreary'" (103). In another entry, he seems to contradict himself within the space of several lines; he notes the toll that drinking takes on his life when he includes

NOTE ON HEAVY DRINKING

Drinking heavily, you abandon people --- and
they abandon you --- and you abandon yourself --- It's a form of self-
murder but too sad to go all the way.

A few lines below he seems to negate that statement when he writes,

DON'T DRINK TO GET DRUNK

DRINK TO ENJOY LIFE

Then, he reverses his direction again when he confesses just below, "I've been drinking like a fiend; twice in August [1954] I passed out like a man hit over the head; several times in July. I drink to destroy myself --- 'twere better to recognize the fickleness of life by constant recollection" (112). After studying Buddhism for much of 1954, Kerouac evaluates his progress and comes to a discouraging summation:

As it's now Dec.19, 1954, the end of this pivotal year is near--- and I am at the lowest beatest ebb of my life . . . mutilating myself (burning hands, benzedrine, smoking, goofballs), also full of alcoholic sorrow and dragged down by the obligations to others, considered a criminal and insane and a sinner and an imbecile, myself self-disappointed & endlessly sad because I'm not doing what I knew should be done a whole year ago when the Buddha's printed words showed me the path . . . (185)

It is not difficult to see by his self-deprecation that Kerouac is torn between the horns of his own dualism; he cannot resist the pull of his chosen intoxicating substances, but he knows that he must if he is to remove himself from the suffering of life. His desire to see everything as "holy" seems to be in a constant battle with the realization that everything is not as "holy" as he would like it to be.

Against such impossible odds, Kerouac's affinity with Buddhism seems exceptionally tenuous. In "Beat Zen, Square Zen, and Zen," Buddhist scholar Alan Watts

dismisses Kerouac's and the other Beat's connection to Buddhism, and says that anyone who would become a serious practitioner of Buddhism

must understand his own culture so thoroughly that he is no longer swayed by its premises unconsciously. He must really have come to terms with the Lord God Jehovah and with his Hebrew-Christian conscience so that he can take it or leave it without fear or rebellion. He must be free of the itch to justify himself. Lacking this, his Zen will be either "beat" or "square," either a revolt from the culture and social order or a new form of stuffiness and respectability. (np)

Watts sees Kerouac as observing a "Beat Zen," one that is merely "a revolt from the culture" rather than any serious engagement with the philosophy of Buddhism because it is not informed by a thorough knowledge and ensuing rejection of the discursive formations of his culture, nor is Kerouac "free of the itch to justify himself." Watts is correct, because Kerouac fills many pages of *Some of the Dharma* with self-justifying rhetoric, and the dualisms I have noted seem to suggest that Kerouac has not come to terms with his Judeo-Christian "conscience," as I will argue below in my discussion of *The Dharma Bums*. Watts continues: "Beat Zen is a complex phenomenon. It ranges from a use of Zen for justifying sheer caprice in art, literature, and life to a very forceful social criticism and 'digging of the universe' such as one may find in the poetry of Ginsberg and Snyder, and, rather unevenly, in Kerouac" (np). Watts is clearly dismissive of the form of 'pop' Buddhism that Kerouac practices, apparently with some justification, in light of what we now know since the publication of *Some of the Dharma*.

The difficulty that Kerouac finds in maintaining the Noble Path to Buddhahood arises from his desire to 'dig the universe' and also from his desire for sensual experience, but he also suggests another reason why his goal may not be attainable on the road he follows. Writing in 1955 in *Some of the Dharma*, he notes that the pursuit of enlightenment by emptying the mind does not coincide with his need to write about his experience. He says,

After all these years and all this art and all this Buddhist Learning I still dont know what to do, what course to follow, or whether to follow no course. The constant flow of "creative" imagination in my brain prevents me from appreciating the crystal emptiness . . . [ellipses mine] of the Eightfold Path . . . a path so arid to behold, so juicy to experience, yet so arid to behold, constantly thinking about it with the thinking mind
 . . . the constantly, constantly thinking mind ---- The millions of ideas I have. . . all of one essence --- all empty -- (282)

It is Kerouac's fertile imagination, "constantly thinking," that prevents his further spiritual growth because he cannot stop thinking and empty his mind in order to embrace the pure essence of the path to enlightenment. At the end of the notebook, he writes in 1956, "*I'm not a Buddha this trip . . . face it . . . because I have too many decisive ideas about life, how to live, health, food and drink, a veritable crone of ideas . . . because of sensuality, drink, involvement in the ideas and antagonisms of men*" (417, italics and ellipses in original). While his study of Buddhism has provided much material for his work and arguably helped him to see the world more clearly than he did before, Kerouac has

recognized a dualism which cannot be resolved. His final entry in the book is "All this BOOK OF DHARMAS since December 1953, hasnt it been mighty preparations for the Epic Novel THE TATHAGATA?" Kerouac answers his own question; he has handwritten and underlined twice one word: "NO" (420). If his Buddhist study was intended to help him see the world more clearly, it appears that his effort was not completely successful. But considered from different perspective, perhaps his study can be seen as a movement toward a better understanding of the world in that it forced Kerouac to confront the reality of attachment to earthly desire.

Carol Tonkinson notes that after the publication of *On the Road* in the fall of 1957, Kerouac became the object of so much media interest both prurient and genuine that he was unable to find the reclusive existence that he needed to practice his Buddhism: "The life of a solitary Buddhist wanderer now an impossibility, Kerouac became increasingly overwhelmed by the pressures of celebrity, and began to take refuge in alcohol. . . . Amid hostility from the scions of the literary establishment, outrageous demands from a reading public that gave him no privacy, and a rising tide of 'beatniks' who had less and less to do with Kerouac's beatific vision, he sank into alcoholic despair" (26-7). Tonkinson is of course correct in noting Kerouac's decline into alcoholism and his subsequent abandonment of Buddhism as a spiritual endeavor, but, as his entries in *Some of the Dharma* indicate, Kerouac was always at the mercy of his fondness for drink, and Buddhism may have been a way of trying to escape that attachment; therefore, his sinking into "alcoholic despair" was really a *further* sinking into a quagmire from which he could never escape, and his eventual renunciation of Buddhism was a philosophical move

backward in time toward an acceptance of suffering as the only possible state for the human subject. Also, that resigned acceptance seems to be informed by Reinhold Niebuhr's assessment of the human condition in post-war America: the human subject is always at the mercy of "an imagination which extends his appetites beyond the requirements of subsistence" (Niebuhr, *Moral Man*, 1, cited above).

While Kerouac was struggling with his commitment to Buddhism under "the pressures of celebrity," as Tonkinson notes, he wrote *The Dharma Bums* in two weeks near the end of 1957 while his literary stock was still on the rise (Giamo 131). In spite of his flagging Buddhism, Kerouac writes to fellow Buddhist *bhikku* Philip Whalen to convey his high hopes for the book: "now with Dharma Bums I will crash open whole scene to sudden Buddhism boom and look what'll happen closely soon . . . [ellipses in original] everybody going the way of the dharma It will be a funny year of enlightenment in America. I dunno about 1959 but 58 is going to be a dharma year in America" (Charters, *Selected Letters, 1957-1969*, 111)¹³. However, by 1959, the year after America's prophesied "dharma year," Kerouac writes to Philip Whalen again (June 10, 1959) to tell him that his relationship with Buddhism has succumbed to a different dualism than that of the sensual against the ascetic; Kerouac is now looking back to his Christian roots and to an afterlife in heaven rather than to the blissful nothingness of nirvana. He writes,

Myself, the dharma is slipping away from my consciousness and I cant think of anything to say about it any more. I still read the Diamond Sutra but as in a dream now. Don't know what to do. Cant see the purpose of human or terrestrial or any kinda life without heaven to reward the poor

suffering fucks. The Buddhist notion that Ignorance caused the world leaves me cold now, because I feel the presence of angels. Maybe rebirth is simply HAVING KIDS. (Charters, *Selected Letters, 1957-1969*, 236-7)

In *The Dharma Bums*, Kerouac uses Ray Smith and Japhy Ryder to represent the struggle between these dualisms, and he reveals that the outcome of Smith's confrontation with the consuming fire of passion is somewhat less successful than it at first seems. Smith's pursuit of the *dharma* can be considered as a parallel to the attempt to re-write the narrative of liberalism in that, when Smith wavers between spirituality and sensuality, he is also moving between states of naivety and realism similar to the idealism of an older liberalism and the more reasoned awareness of a new version. As Kerouac's letter to Whalen indicates, the concept of world-as-illusion that is central to Buddhist thought seems, to Kerouac following his 'success,' without purpose and leaves him "cold" and empty.

From the very beginning of the novel, Smith makes it clear that he is writing about the narrative events from a distance in time and also from a distance in perspective; he says, "I was very devout in those days and was practicing my religious devotions almost to perfection. Since then I've become a little hypocritical about my lip-service and a little tired and cynical" (5). Not only is Smith currently jaded about his insincere pursuit of the *dharma*, but he indicates that his devotion never was perfect, but in practice, only "almost" perfect. Also, Smith reveals his spiritual hypocrisy in his description of an old hobo whom he meets while hopping a freight train; the old man carries with him a written prayer by Saint Teresa, and, as Smith says, he "solidified all my beliefs" about the spiritual nature of

the itinerant wanderer (5), following what Ben Giamo calls “the wanderlust of the holy” (133). But Smith’s Buddhism is not so firmly entrenched as is the Christian faith of the hobo. Smith looks for physical warmth from Buddha as the temperature in the rail car drops; he says, “I’d huddle and meditate on the warmth, the actual warmth of God, to obviate the cold; then I’d jump up and flap my arms and legs and sing. But the little bum had more patience than I had and just lay there most of the time chewing his cud in forlorn bitterlipped thought” (*Dharma Bums* 6). The Buddhist immateriality of human existence becomes painfully material in the cold weather, and Smith’s “religious devotions” are of little use compared to the St. Teresa bum’s Christian virtues of patience and faith. From the beginning, the Buddhist-Christian dualism figures in the novel.

In Japhy Ryder, Smith finds his opposite, for Ryder is apparently closer to true Buddhahood than is Smith, and Smith positions Ryder within the text as an American hero, “real grave like Buck Jones, eyes to the distant horizons, like Natty Bumppo” (58). Of course, one character lives in the imaginative future and the other in the imaginative past; both are anachronisms and hardly relevant to the everyday reality in which Smith, the aptly named Everyman, operates. Still, Smith sees Ryder as a model for his own spiritual future; he says that Japhy in his devotion to his Zen study, “is making me look like a fool forgetting all the ideals and joys I knew before, in my recent years of drinking and disappointment I promised myself that I would begin a new life” (77). In fact, when he and Japhy climb a mountain, Smith loses his taste for alcohol and rich food because of the purity of the air and the water, and because of the overwhelming spiritual sensation he feels when he is away from civilization. He says, “I had absolutely not a jot of appetite for

alcohol, I'd forgotten all about it" (73); however, by stating that he had forgotten alcohol, he acknowledges that he has not stopped thinking about it at all. But the apparent resolve that motivates Smith to change his old destructive ways is not long lived, because as soon as they return to the bottom of the trail, Smith suggests that they eat hamburger and potatoes at a restaurant where he drinks port, and then buys "a bottle of muscatel" and a cigar (92-3) to celebrate his "new life."

The dualism of the existent world versus Smith's Buddhist vision of the world-as-a-dream becomes dramatically obvious when Cody's girlfriend Rosie commits suicide. Rosie is paranoid and delusional, but in spite of the fact that she has tried to cut her wrists, Cody dismisses her illness; he says, "'She's just nuts, that's all'" (109). Ray does not want the responsibility of tending to the woman while Cody is at work; as he tells Cody, "'I was planning on having fun tonight'" (109), but he acquiesces to his friend's request after Cody cites a biblical passage about human compassion. To Rosie's irrational warnings of a potential police state, Smith can only offer the advice that "'don't you realize life is just a dream?'" (111), not realizing that his Buddhist platitude bears no validity in the face of her very real human suffering. Ray spends the evening drinking with some neighboring musicians, and after he passes out, Rosie jumps from the roof fleeing the police who have tried to prevent her from killing herself. As Smith says nonchalantly, once the police arrived, "that was it" (112). The musicians who live downstairs in an apartment that fronts the sidewalk on which Rosie lands are as without compassion as is Ray; as he notes, "[t]hey drew the shades and trembled," so disturbed that they "'couldn't make the gig that night'" (112). The lack of concern for other people and the inability to recognize his

failings is made more obvious by Smith's callous response to Rosie's personal suffering, and that disregard reflects poorly on the sincerity of his Buddhist life. But, Smith reveals his attachment to his Christian past when he tells Japhy that he resisted saying to Rosie what he really believed because he "felt suppressed by this schism we have about separating Buddhism from Christianity, East from West, what the hell difference does it make?" (114).

Smith also reveals the conflict between Buddhism and Christianity when he returns home for Christmas and attempts to continue his study and practice of Buddhism in his Christian family home. He reads "a little Saint Paul" and applies it to his experience with the dharma bums on the West Coast; he reads, "Let him become a fool, that he may become wise" (135), noting the closeness of Paul's teaching to Buddhist doctrine, but accepting the idea as valid whether Christian or Buddhist. He is unable to explain his Buddhist faith to his family any more than he was able to make Rosie understand; his mother and sister see his hypocrisy and suggest, "You and your Buddha, why don't you stick to the religion you were born with?" (144); but Smith is on a quest for enlightenment and refuses to abandon his mission because of the ignorance of the uninitiated, even if he cannot explain himself or the most basic tenet of his new-found religion to them. But the conflict between the two spiritual modes remains for Smith; later, Japhy argues religion with Smith and says, "You really like Christ, don't you," to which Ray replies, "Of course I do" (202), because Smith does not discriminate between the two religions as possible ways of envisioning the world as does Japhy. The text seems to suggest that any method that helps a person configure the world in an understandable way

is a correct path to follow.

Back on the West Coast, Ray is again faced with the dualism of alcohol and Buddhist asceticism when the dharma bums put on large-scale parties; but, he has convinced himself that he is “a kind of crazy saint. And it was based on telling myself ‘Ray, don’t run after liquor and excitement of women and talk, stay in your shack and enjoy natural relationship of things as they are’ but it was hard to live up to this with all kinds of pretty broads coming up the hill every weekend and even on weeknights” (186-7). Although his friends are concerned about his boundless consumption of alcohol, Smith says, “but I just went on drinking” (191). He is consumed by his desire for earthly pleasure and therefore cannot hope to attain any higher level of the dharma than the stage that he has reached, a stage which is, as he noted at the beginning, mere “lip-service.” Smith ignores one of the fundamental documents of his chosen religious philosophy. In Buddha’s “Fire Sermon,” Buddha tells a group of monks that “All is aflame” (Thanissaro n.p.):

The intellect is aflame. Ideas are aflame. Consciousness at the intellect is aflame. Contact at the intellect is aflame. And whatever there is that arises in dependence on contact at the intellect -- experienced as pleasure, pain or neither-pleasure-nor-pain -- that too is aflame. Aflame with what? Aflame with the fire of passion, the fire of aversion, the fire of delusion. Aflame, I say, with birth, aging & death, with sorrows, lamentations, pains, distresses, & despairs. (n.p.)

The wise disciple, knowing that all sensory perception and all that is generated by that perception is “aflame,” becomes “disenchanted” with conscious perception and desire, and

that enlightened disenchantment causes the disciple to become “dispassionate.” As the Buddha continues, “Through dispassion, he [the disciple] is fully released” from the suffering caused by desire. Smith is certainly “afame” but he has not become “disenchanted” nor “dispassionate”; he has no hope of being “fully released.”¹⁴

Even after Smith’s isolated summer as a fire watcher in the mountains of Washington State, during which he can finally aver, “I was feeling happier than in years and years, since childhood, I felt deliberate and glad and solitary” (236), he will still return “down the trail back to this world” (244). Here, the novel returns my discussion of Buddhism to where it began, to the statement that reading Thoreau prompted Kerouac to look into Eastern philosophies; for in Smith’s declaration of peace and contentment in his new “deliberate” life is an allusion to Thoreau’s reason for his own isolation at Walden Pond: “I went to the woods because I wished to live *deliberately*, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived” (61, italics mine). But the connection to the passage from Thoreau extends beyond Smith’s feeling of purpose and deliberation; it is his return to the world and to life in all its suffering and pleasure that is key to the novel and perhaps also integral to the development of my argument here. Thoreau continues

I did not wish to live what was not life, living is so dear; nor did I wish to practise resignation, unless it was quite necessary. I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life, to live so sturdily and Spartan-like as to put to rout all that was not life, to cut a broad swath and shave close, to drive life into a corner, and reduce it to its lowest terms, and, if it proved to

be mean, why then to get the whole and genuine meanness of it, and publish its meanness to the world; or if it were sublime, to know it by experience, and be able to give a true account of it in my next excursion.

(61)

In the connection of Smith to Thoreau may lie the creation of Kerouac's revised narrative of liberalism through which he can understand the world. Thoreau's greatest fear is to reach the end of his life and realize that he "had not lived." To avoid such a tragic outcome, he will "live deep and suck out all the marrow of life"; whether life proves to be "mean" or "sublime," Thoreau will "publish" and "give a true account" of what he finds. Further, he will "know it by experience," by living each of those experiences to the fullest. Perhaps, Ray Smith has also come to such a realization. In his solitude, he has learned that life exists in many complex forms, and not all of those forms adhere to the ascetic life of a Buddhist dharma bum, a searcher of truth; life is indeed both "mean" and "sublime," and Smith will return "back to *this* world" rather than to a world that does not exist except as a construction of the mind according to Buddhist doctrine. He has learned to accept the world as he finds it and also to accept himself as a human being who is prone to the failings of all human beings; he is not capable of that ideal that both Buddhism and liberalism claim is possible for the imperfect human species. And, in the final days of his stay on the mountain, he sees "the hope" (236). By standing on his head as an exercise, Smith gains a new perspective on the world, literally and metaphorically; he sees that "the earth was truly upsidedown and man a weird vain beetle full of strange ideas walking around upsidedown and boasting" (238). Having come to that understanding, Smith can

return to the world with its “humanity of bars and burlesque shows and gritty love, all upsidedown in the void God bless them” (244). He can accept the innate “holiness” in everything as a part of life in a troubling time, and in his acceptance, he seems to be endorsing a form of pre-war liberal idealism. However, Smith’s perception of holiness allows for the presence of human failing and evil, including his own; whether or not everything is “upsidedown” does not impinge on its holiness.

Kerouac may be challenging the reader to accept the realization that Smith has accepted by the end of the novel, that life is complex and not easily explained by facile expressions of universality, inclusion, and the possibility of human perfection; that every person experiences life in an individual way and that everyone, like the generically-named Smith, is “wishing there were a Personal God in all this impersonal matter” (237). By narrativizing Smith’s struggle with his faith and perseverance, Kerouac may be presenting a version of seeing the world that is also personal and not subject to the expectations of an ideology that demands correct action in terms of the group, but allows for human failing and ill-conceived intentions executed poorly, for individual action that benefits the group as a whole, as does the apparently introverted work of the jazz musician, and for a personal faith that may or may not follow the dominant discursive formations of society. Ray Smith comes down from the mountain with a sense of trust in a greater being and also in life itself; as he leaves, he says to his God, ““Take care of us all, one way or the other”” (244), finally able to accept uncertainty and human imperfection with equanimity. In the final chapter of this thesis, I will argue that the ideas with which Kerouac closes *The Dharma Bums* inform most of his writing for the remainder of his career and also

represent his reworked liberal literary narrative.

Notes to Chapter Four

1. The letter prompted Kerouac to write back to Cassady, "I thought it ranked among the best things written in America and ran to [John Clellon] Holmes & [Alan] Harrington & told them so; I said it was almost as good as the unbelievably good 'Notes From Underground' of Dostoevsky" (Charters, *Selected Letters 1940-1956*, 242). As Charters notes, the original letter has disappeared but portions appear in Cassady's *The First Third* (approx. 144-60). Allen Ginsberg mentions the famous letter in a 1958 review of *The Dharma Bums* when he refers to the "sustained imagic rhythms" that Kerouac used in *On the Road*: "The conception for such prose came from the hero [of *On the Road*] himself, Moriarty's prototype, who sent Kerouac a long wild introspective 40-singlespace-page letter. It's been lost, by me, I think" (*Deliberate Prose* 342-3). In a 1968 interview with Ted Berrigan, Kerouac says of the letter, "Allen Ginsberg asked me to lend him this vast letter so he could read it. He read it, then loaned it to a guy called Gerd Stern who lived on a houseboat in Sausalito, California, in 1955, and this fellow lost the letter: overboard I presume. Neal and I called it, for convenience, the Joan Anderson Letter" (Plimpton 102).

2. My sense of a "competing discourse" follows the work of Michel Foucault who defines a "discourse" or "discursive practice" as "a body of anonymous, historical rules, always determined in the time and space that have defined a given period, and for a given social, economic, geographical, or linguistic area, the condition of the operation of the enunciative function" (*Archaeology* 117), that is, of the sum of what can and what cannot be said and understood within a given historical or cultural period or epist \grave{e} me. These discursive formations are systems of dispersion or division (rather than inference and coherence) between statements, types of statements, objects, concepts, or themes within a field (38-9). In *The Discourse on Language*, Foucault states that "in every society the production of discourse is at once controlled, selected, organised and redistributed according to a certain number of procedures, whose role is to avert its powers and its dangers, to cope with chance events, to evade its ponderous, awesome materiality" (216). The dominant culture controls the discourse and has the power to determine what is considered true and false, and this opposition of true and false acts as a method of exclusion which, expressed as the will to knowledge, is historically configured and therefore also subject to the power of society. This exclusion acts as "a power of constraint upon other forms of discourse" (219), while at the same time, it is unable to recognize its own existence and operation because in any exclusionary system only one truth can prevail. Therefore, a competing discourse is one that sets itself in opposition to dominant cultural discursive formations by resisting the system of "constraint" placed upon it and proffering an alternative or competing form through which to view the world.

3. The term "bebop," according to Frank Tirro, seems to have come from the jazz technique known as *scat singing*, "the practice of vocalizing or singing instrumental melodic lines with nonsense syllables" (287) that ended in tight labial consonants for rhythmic punctuation, a skill made popular and mastered by singers such as Ella Fitzgerald. Ralph Ellison says that the name is "[a] most inadequate word which does

little, really, to help us remember. A word which throws up its hands in clownish self-deprecation before all the complexity of sound and rhythm and self-assertive passion which it pretends to name; a mask-word for the charged ambiguities of the new sound, hiding the serious face of art" (204). As Tirro notes, the name first appeared in the title of a 1945 recording by Dizzy Gillespie called "Salt Peanuts / Be-Bop" (287). In his article, "The Beginning of Bop," originally published in April 1959 in *Escapade* magazine, Jack Kerouac presents his own quirky theory; he says, "The name derives from an accident, America was named after an Italian explorer and not after an Indian king. Lionel Hampton had made a record called 'Hey Baba Ree Bop' [Hey! Ba-Ba Re-Bop, 1945-46] and everybody yelled it and it was when Lionel would jump in the audience and whale his saxophone at everybody with sweat, claps, jumping fools in the aisles, the drummer booming and belaboring on his stage as the whole theater rocked" (*Good Blonde* 113).

Kerouac is correct that "Hey! Ba-Ba Re-Bop" is a call-and-answer dialogue between the vocalist and the members of the band and audience, and probably had much to do with spreading the name "bebop," but he misleads the reader somewhat in the passage. Although the late Lionel Hampton also played the drums in his stage show, his main instrument was not the saxophone, but the considerably less-portable vibraphone or vibes. Also, while Hampton might "wail" on the vibes, it is inconceivable that he would "whale" on the instrument. Kerouac's motivation or carelessness is difficult to explain as is the lack of attention of *Escapade's* editors. But, considering the accuracy in Kerouac's article of every other detail including his technical description of the voicing of jazz harmony (he describes how the musicians "... changed the placing of the note in the middle of the harmony to an outer more precarious position where also its sense of not belonging was enhanced by the general atonality produced with everyone exteriorizing the tune's harmony . . .", 115-6), it seems unlikely that he would be unaware of the most basic information about a jazz great like Hampton. Perhaps, like the bop musicians who wanted to keep the less-talented pretenders off the stage, Kerouac had in mind a more ulterior motive that involved duping the uninitiated or casual "expert" reader.

Douglas Malcolm critiques the use of jazz in *On the Road* and finds that, "[w]hile jazz does play a significant role in the novel, its impact lies in the music's ideological, behavioral, and semiotic implications – in particular their roots in African American culture rather than in the direct application of its formal rules" (85). He concludes that Kerouac's view of jazz is limited and therefore flawed because "[t]he Romantic ideology of primitivism through which Kerouac views jazz prevents him from recognizing the irony and self-reflection that is at the music's core" (109). I agree with Malcolm's assessment of Kerouac's 'primitivist' attachment to the music, but if my evaluation of Kerouac's reasons for mistaking Hampton's instrument is correct, then Malcolm's assessment of Kerouac's ability to recognize the irony in the music is clearly mistaken.

4. Holmes describes with great exactness the power of the "conversion experiences" that jazz fans underwent, and the passage from which the sentence has been taken is worth citing in its entirety because it situates the relationship of the listener to the music on the cultural and intellectual plane rather than on the aesthetic: "When you 'went over' to Bird [saxophonist Charley Parker], when you 'heard' him all of a sudden, you were

acknowledging that you had become a different sort of person than the Swing or Dixie fan you had been, because, with Bird, you had to *dig* to know; your consciousness had to be at a certain level of evolution; you had to be able to intuit on the bias, to hear music *being* music, to comprehend the difference between the confining intelligence and the soul directly recording its own drift. No one who was not involved in the Bop revolt can know all that it meant to us. If a person dug Bop, we knew something about his sex life, his kick in literature and the arts, his attitudes toward joy, violence, Negroes and the very processes of awareness" (105).

5. In "Libraries Full of Tears: The Beats and the Law," Maurice Berger notes that "[t]he scarcity of prominent African-Americans in the Beat movement suggests an appropriative, hierarchical, and sometimes disingenuous relationship to black culture. Often, too, the African-American presence in Beat literature and art signified negative or generalized values that rarely considered the complexity of black culture. . . [But] in a period galvanized by fears of the mingling of races . . . , the Beats were advocating an open, interracial culture. Indeed, the Beat milieu was relatively integrated in contrast to virtually all other white-identified avant-gardist movements in the twentieth century" (132). Still, the relationship of the Beat Movement and African-Americans remains a subject insufficiently explored.

6. William Butler Yeats ends the poem "Among School Children" with the speaker's question, "O body swayed to music, O brightening glance / How can we know the dancer from the dance?" (Geddes 15). Graham Hough in *The Last Romantics* says that Yeats considered perfection to be a state in which "body becomes only the complete expression of soul" (243); he saw dance as a manifestation of this completeness. According to Stan Smith in *W. B. Yeats: A Critical Introduction*, Yeats equates philosophers and dancers in that the paradigms of the dance as well as of philosophy remain while dancers and philosophers pass on. He valorizes the power of the imagination because ideas outlive the thinker. However, unlike philosophers and their philosophy, the dancer cannot be separated from the dance, because the form of the dance is only evident when it is being performed, and therefore it approaches a truth that philosophers can only theorize (Smith 84-6). The imaginative power to live in the ideal is to transcend time, which brings us back to the equation of form and performance in bop that Holmes and Creeley admire.

7. Clark Coolidge comments on the transitory nature of the musical performance in "Kerouac: A Talk" from *Now It's Jazz*. He notes that "sound is movement. . . . Every statement exists in time and vanishes in time [T]here's an intensity to a moment that can never be gone back to that is somehow more memorable" (37). Such a distinctive property of music would seem to be in contradiction to what Kerouac is trying to do in his writing because, by definition, writing must be written, and therefore it situates itself in a condition of permanence. But, in a way, Kerouac's method of spontaneous composition is an attempt to replicate the momentariness of the musical performance by recording the written "performance" as it occurs to the writer and allowing the reader to experience the spontaneity of the creative act with each reading. As Kerouac says in "Essentials of

Spontaneous Prose," if the writer gets on paper precisely what he or she is thinking without the interference of "selectivity" of expression," "then reader cannot fail to receive telepathic shock and meaning-excitement by same laws operating in his own human mind" (*Good Blonde* 70).

8. Kerouac told Ted Berrigan, "as for my regular English verse, I knocked it off fast like the prose, using, get this, the size of the notebook page for the form and the length of the poem, just as a musician has to get out, a jazz musician, his statement within a certain number of bars, within one chorus, which spills over into the next, but he has to stop where the chorus page *stops*" (Plimpton 104, italics in original).

9. Gregory Corso recognizes the existence of a distinctive "sound" in his poem "For Miles" when he says of the trumpeter, "Your sound is your sound / true & from within / a confession / soulful & lovely" (44).

10. Tim Hunt in *Kerouac's Crooked Road* connects the concept of the "idea-word" with art and music: "In Action Painting and Spontaneous Prose, the artist does not start out in possession of a reality to communicate. He must discover the world and record the process of his discovery" (144), as does the jazz artist, exploring a phrase, expanding, rephrasing, developing a sound, style, an identity or signature. Hunt continues: "The role of melody or theme in jazz of the thirties and forties is roughly equivalent to the role of the 'image-object' in Spontaneous Prose" (146).

11. Ben Giampo makes the quest for "IT" a major concern of his *Kerouac, the Word and the Way*, and his exacting discussion of the term certainly makes redundant anything I might add here. Giampo says, "Kerouac's use of IT ultimately exceeds our ability to fully explain the reality it embodies. Perhaps this is why Kerouac chose to represent the ineffable and fluid combination of mystical, spiritual, and creative/decreative experience by such a simple utterance. IT is nothing less than a protean-god term for the transcendental impulse in human affairs" (214, n11). My use of the term in describing the performance of the musician obviously hinges on the what Giampo refers to as the "transcendental impulse."

12. Kerouac tells Ted Berrigan and Aram Saroyan that his study of Buddhism "has influenced that part in my writing that you might call religious, or fervent, or pious, almost as much as Catholicism has" (Plimpton 117). When Saroyan asks him, "What's the difference between Jesus and Buddha?", Kerouac responds, "That's a very good question. There is no difference" (118).

13. Kerouac's profession of his fondness for Buddhism seems to have had at least some influence on the reading public. Nancy Wilson Ross in "Beat – and Buddhist," a review of *The Dharma Bums* in the *New York Times* October 5, 1958, says that "[i]n general, the new activities of Ray Smith-Kerouac and his fellow bums are rather more on the positive side than heretofore. Digging 'cool' Zen is clearly more adult than digging hot jazz,

drinking tea is certainly healthier than smoking it" (np). Stephen Prospero notes that "many young people disenchanted with Cold War America and the atomic age ushered in by World War II sought solace in Kerouac's *The Dharma Bums* (1958). In turn, *The Dharma Bums* soon proved itself capable of marking new eras in individual lives, thus sparking something of the 'rucksack revolution' of wandering 'Zen lunatics' that it had prophesied" (Tomlinson 2). Also testifying to the influence on Buddhism of *The Dharma Bums* is Robert Aitken, editor of the most recent edition of Dwight Goddard's *A Buddhist Bible*, who mentions in his introduction to the book the "creative process of Americanizing Buddhism" that began with Kerouac's *San Francisco Blues* and *The Dharma Bums* (viii).

14. In "The Fire Sermon," Part III of *The Wasteland*, T. S. Eliot refers to the Buddhist parable to demonstrate the alienating emptiness of earthly desire. The "typist" (l.222) yields with "indifference" (l.242) to "the young man carbuncular" (l.231), after which, "She turns and looks a moment in the glass, / Hardly aware of her departed lover; / Her brain allows one half-formed thought to pass: / 'Well now that's done: and I'm glad it's over'" (ll.249-52). Eliot's speaker concludes, "To Carthage then I came / Burning burning burning burning / O Lord Thou pluckest me out / O Lord Thou pluckest / burning" (ll. 307-11), combining Buddha's "Fire Sermon" with St. Augustine's *Confessions* in which Augustine relates the story of his youthful experience as a seeker after pleasure, an experience that has value in that it led him to his current understanding of God.

Chapter Five

After the Deluge: *Big Sur*, Celebrity, and Liberalism

I've come home from Trout Fishing in America, the highway bent its long smooth anchor about my neck and then stopped. Now I live in this place. It took my whole life to get here.

Richard Brautigan. *Trout Fishing in America* (92).

The titles that Jack Kerouac chooses for his writing receive little critical attention, perhaps because, given the autobiographical nature of many of the texts, the title often seems to be a reflection of the only-slightly-disguised personal life of "Jack Kerouac" behind the narrative; therefore, critics usually need not look too rigorously at the title for literary allusion or cultural connotation. Granted, Kerouac's titles do tend to follow certain patterns: names of people – *Sax*, *Maggie*, *Tristessa*, *Pic*, and even an unnamed *Traveler*, or perhaps just their *Visions* or *Vanity*; at other times, groups of people – *Angels*, *Bums*, and *Subterraneans*; occasionally unspecific locations – a *Town* and a *City*, the *Road*, an *Underwood* typewriter; sometimes the titles reflect the location in which the work was created – *Mexico City*, "San Francisco," the "Bowery," or "MacDougal Street" – or the city that inspired an uncertain *Satori*. But the title of one text is a place name alone, without a modifying word or phrase: *Big Sur*. Unlike the locations represented by the titles of his *Blues*, *Big Sur* is not the site of Kerouac's writing act, but rather the place in which the events depicted in the novel transpire, in and around Bixby Canyon in *Big Sur*, California, and it is the narrator's response to those events that provides the impulse

for the book's creation. In *Big Sur*, place is crucial, and not just as a physical site at the end of a long road, which it also is, but as the impetus that returns the narrator to a different place: home. However, within the narrative frame of the novel, the narrator does not return home; he only thinks of home as part of an uncertain future somewhere "across autumn America" (*Big Sur* 216).

In a journal entry from 1963, Kerouac describes his prolific output during the "spring" and "summer" of his life; he lists the novels for which he has become well known written up to about 1960. Then he writes, "Then came Autumn, to which BIG SUR belongs & all my present unhappy exhaustion of harvest time" (Charters, *Selected Letters, 1957-1969*, 405). The novel itself is at the literary juncture of youth and maturity in Kerouac's opinion and represents a change in his vision of the world, a change that he associates with the "unhappy exhaustion" of the bitter "harvest" that he reaped from his literary fame. Through the experiences of Jack Duluoz, *Big Sur* describes the gathering of the writer's "harvest" at the end of a long season; and, the pervasive sense of ending in the novel serves to explain why Kerouac chose the single place name as a title. Big Sur and California are geographically at the western extremity of the country, "the end of the continent" as Sal Paradise notes (*On the Road* 177, 201); it is the end of the road on the literal level, and it is also the end of Duluoz's road days and of his drunken attachment to his San Francisco cronies, including Cody Pomeray. Duluoz recognizes the emptiness of his past experience on the road when he drives with Cody having not done so for several years, and he expresses the meaninglessness of the act of moving when he says cryptically, "[s]o of old we're alone in a car at night bashing down the line to a specific somewhere,

nothing nowhere about it whatever, especially this time” (139). Secondly, Monsanto’s cabin in the canyon situates Jack Duluoz physically between the roaring sea and the soaring coastal cliffs, just as he is caught between his desire for solitude and the irresistible pull of his need for social interaction, and also between his desire to be a well-known writer of literature and to return to the private life he knew before the demands of his celebrity took their toll on his seclusion and his health. Jack’s feeling of cultural entrapment is only exacerbated by the closed-in canyon. Thirdly, the location of the cabin, with its treacherous winding road from the highway above, functions as a metaphor for Duluoz’s writing career and his personal life; the descent to the floor of the canyon represents the spiritual bottom that Jack must hit before he can climb out, and he reaches that bottom physically and geographically in *Big Sur*. His harsh landing is represented by the wrecked car that years ago went through the bridge railing and now lies overturned beneath the bridge, an event from the past whose presence continues to haunt the narrative just as the publication of Duluoz’s well known novel haunts his present. Ultimately, the canyon at *Big Sur* itself is a force in the novel that seems to dominate and control the narrative events; in effect, the canyon functions as a character that speaks to Duluoz and with whom he seems to engage in a relationship at once frightening and necessary for his eventual return to external world. While hardly offering a reiteration of a romanticized view of nature, Kerouac presents *Big Sur* as the catalyst in Duluoz’s movement toward home.

For the purposes of this study, I consider *Big Sur* a signal work in the Kerouac canon partly because of its chronological position; although the novel was written in 1961,

the events narrativized take place in the summer of 1960, nearly three years after the publication of *On the Road*, and at a particularly low point in Kerouac's life after he had been virtually bombarded with adoration and overzealous fan worship, often to which he seemed to succumb willingly. In a letter to Lawrence Ferlinghetti in which Kerouac accepts Ferlinghetti's offer of his cabin at Big Sur for the summer, Kerouac writes, "I'm at the end of my nerves now the other night I knew I was headed for a genuine, my first real mental breakdown if I didn't get away from everybody for at least 2 months this can save my life, at least my sanity, as well as maybe I might write a book during those 2 months in Bixby Canyon." Later in the letter he will ask, "Is the water in creek to drink?" (Charters, *Selected Letters, 1957-1960*, 297-8), a question that will attain added significance below in the discussion of the text in which I will show how water functions as an enabling and purifying image. During his stay at the cabin, Kerouac experiences what he calls a "nervous breakdown" brought on by excessive alcohol consumption and little sleep because of the constant presence of his friends from whom he cannot separate himself for more than a brief time. He writes later to Philip Whalen who helped him during his collapse and says, "It appears like I had my first serious nervous or mental breakdown this time but now that it's over I wonder if it wasnt some kind of satori, because I've changed to the better" (302).

Kerouac creates a narrative of his experience at the canyon, and he presents his narrator Jack Duluoz at a nexus, caught between the recognition he sought as a writer of literature and the unsought fallout of that fame at the caprices of mass culture; between the life of a wandering, overly-social "beatnik" and the solitary life that Kerouac himself

also seems to desire; and between an older, outmoded vision of the world and a new understanding of that world which would take account of the changing conditions that have so deeply affected him in recent times. The satori that Kerouac imagines and appropriates for himself, and then reveals in Duluo's experience, is a realization that his old ways of functioning and of perceiving the world are no longer useful to him; his days on the road are officially over and he writes of his new intention in a letter to Neal Cassady: "i am now making my home my monastery" (309). Like Duluo and Kerouac, the novel *Big Sur* also sits at a nexus between the last vestiges of Kerouac's attachment to an older version of liberal ideal and the acceptance of the more accurate version that he finally comes to accept, however painfully after his "breakdown" in the canyon. He seems finally to shake his connection to that Saroyan-style idealism that had dominated his writing since the days of *Atop an Underwood* and to accept a more flexible and accurate version that takes into account human frailty and evil, the illusion that a universal truth exists and is available to all, and the folly of trying to include everything and everyone into his world; like his character Ray Smith at the end of *The Dharma Bums*, he also comes to understand that "holiness" is a spiritual quality that is more felt than perceived and that not everything is "holy."

In the first section of this concluding chapter, I will consider *Big Sur* as a literary representation of the attempts of Jack Kerouac, through his narrator Jack Duluo, to come to terms with his responsibility as a writer, with the celebrity that robbed him of the solitude he needed as a balance to his social life, with his destructive lifestyle which was so heavily influenced by his friends and fans, and with his role as an icon of mass culture.

Duluoz finally accepts life as a complex, confusing, and ultimately ineffable movement toward a knowable finality, a process in which there are few certain universal ideals to guide the traveler; he accepts the actuality of human fallibility, including his own, and he realizes that the disadvantages of the form of inclusion that is available to him far outweigh its merits. In short, through the tribulations of Duluoz, Kerouac forms a new conception of liberal ideals with which he can make sense of the world, but Duluoz must first reach bottom before he can ascend back to a condition of consolation and return home; like the speaker in Richard Brautigan's statement above, it took his whole life to get there. In the following section of this chapter, I will discuss the commodification and neutralization of "Jack Kerouac" as a cultural entity that exists externally to Jack Kerouac the author and human being. This process transformed him from a figure of the counterculture to a mass cultural icon, and it began even before his 'overnight' success; it continues long after his death. I argue that the dominant discursive formations that control mass culture need to turn figures like Kerouac into cultural icons and thereby neutralize or render them harmless because of their potentially disruptive influence on the comfortable conformity of the masses. Therefore, the control exerted by mass culture upon the populace represents a form of political and ideological control, and in America where the dominant ideology is that of liberalism, mass culture becomes a tool of liberal ideologies. I end this chapter by returning to the discussion of liberalism in its contemporary form that I began in the first chapter in an attempt to situate Kerouac, toward the end of his life, within the spectrum of liberal ideology, although more to the center than toward either extreme.

Big Sur : The Coming of Autumn

At the beginning of the novel, Jack Duluoz says of his triumphal return to San Francisco in the wake of his successful writing career and the whirlwind of popularity that has sent him on a dizzying drunken binge for several years: "the bloody 'King of the Beatniks' is back in town buying drinks for everyone" (4); he has come to California from New York to escape from the pressures of his success by which he has "been driven mad for three years" (4). By his self-deprecatory self-reference "King of the Beatniks," Duluoz shows his awareness of his cultural image using the terminology of his critics who seem to consider him a "Beatnik" first and a writer second, if at all¹. Further, by his statement, Duluoz shows that he is also aware of his role within his small countercultural group: as the prodigal returner, he is "buying drinks for everyone" having made good in the literary world. But his words also reveal his resentment at allowing himself to succumb both to the expectations of his supposed friends that he will supply the entertainment and to the expectations of the mass culture which has replaced the writer Jack Duluoz with an image of "Jack Duluoz, King of the Beatniks."² But, before Lorenz Monsanto can drive Duluoz to Big Sur, Jack passes out after a welcome-back binge with his friends, although he has vowed to keep his arrival a secret, and he misses his ride to the cabin. He berates himself for succumbing to the very thing he has been trying to resist; he says, "I've hit the end of the trail and cant even drag my body any more even to a refuge in the woods let alone stay upright in the city a minute" (4). The sense of the end of the road prevails in the novel, and the speeding cars that played such a pivotal role in *On the Road* now are replaced by the

transcontinental train that Duluoz takes to California, the bus he takes to Monterey, and the taxi that he hires to take him to Big Sur. But once he arrives at the top of the road that winds down to the cabin, he finds himself in a more precarious position than the one that he was in with his friends in San Francisco or among the adoring masses in New York. In the dark and the fog, he must negotiate his way down a narrow road between the rock cliffs and a steep thousand-foot drop to the ocean; the "larkish, bucolic, all homely woods" that he has imagined before his arrival is now an "aerial roaring mystery in the dark" (10). Duluoz is caught between the rock and the abyss, a situation in which he is completely disoriented, but one through which he is forced to find his way alone; Monsanto's map that Jack memorized is of no use to him once he has arrived above his destination. Like Duluoz's writing career in which he has unintentionally and inadvertently set in motion the media frenzy over which he has little control and then must negotiate his way between the undesirable options that remain for him, Duluoz must find his way without help to reach a goal that he has never even seen; a single mistake could be fatal. The descent to reach bottom is both literal and metaphoric.

In the morning, Duluoz awakens on the sand beside a creek, the creek that Kerouac had asked casually about in his letter to Ferlinghetti, and he is provided proof that he has not been found wanting on the first stage of his journey; as his fear subsides, he is able to notice "the rapturous ring of silence or Heaven even within and throughout the gurgle of the creek" (20). One recurrent image in the novel is of water as both a restorative agent and as a representation of the deluge of experience that threatens to swamp Duluoz in his pursuit of a more accurate understanding of his role as a writer in the

new American decade. One key scene appears early in the novel and speaks to his struggle to make sense of the recent past and to protect himself from being washed away by his mass cultural status. On the third day of his stay, he creates a "mill race" in a shallow stream so that clear water will be made available from the accelerated flow; but his creation causes unexpected problems that need to be rectified before he can enjoy what he has constructed. By redirecting and improving the flow, the rushing water begins to erode the edge of the stream, so he must construct a wall of rocks to contain the torrent and protect the shore. He describes the process:

Doing that, fortifying the outside of the seawall with smaller rocks and finally at sundown with bent head over my sniffing endeavors (the way a child snuffles when he's been playing all day) I start inserting tiny pebbles in the spaces between the stones so that no water can sneak over to wash away the shore, even down to the tiniest sand, a perfect sea wall, which I top with a wood plank for everybody to kneel on when they come there to fetch their holy water. (29)

By first creating something intentionally to solve a problem and improve his living condition, Duluoz unintentionally creates another problem that must be corrected before it makes his life worse; but he is able to devise a solution by building a protective wall against the vulnerability of the soft shore. Kerouac uses Duluoz's project as a metaphor for the writer's career and in the process, directs the reader to the main point of the novel. In writing and creating a novel that meets with a success that Duluoz could never have imagined, he has inadvertently created a situation in which he is engulfed by the attention

of the public, and that deluge is now overwhelming him, essentially eroding parts of himself; Duluoz needs to put something between the public and himself to protect his vulnerability, and he has come to Big Sur in an attempt to fortify himself against the world by regaining his sense of balance and equilibrium. Up to this point in his burgeoning career, Duluoz has hidden behind the media creation of "Jack Duluoz" and acted as they would expect "the King of Beatniks" to act, drunken and irresponsible.³

In this important scene, Kerouac has Duluoz allude to three classical American writers seemingly to show his desire to be regarded as more than a "Beatnik King" and also to show his awareness of how distanced he has become from the literary ideals of those writers that certainly impelled his career as a writer. At the end of his engrossing physical labor, Duluoz says, "[I was] amazed to see where I was, who I was, what I'd done — The absolute innocence like of an Indian fashioning a canoe all alone in the woods" (29). His industriousness self-reliance in the canyon, his initial rejuvenation in nature, and his reference to the "absolute innocence" of the Indian recall Henry David Thoreau in *Walden*, when Thoreau tells the story of the "strolling Indian" who, seeing the success of "his industrious white neighbors," decides to go into business for himself and weave baskets to sell, because, as he says, "it is a thing which I can do" (Thoreau 12). But, as Thoreau points out, the Indian is unsuccessful because he has not "discovered that it was necessary for him to make it worth the other's while to buy" his baskets (12). Like Thoreau, Duluoz (and Kerouac outside the frame of the novel) has "woven a kind of basket of a delicate texture" (12), a basket of words, because writing "is a thing which [he] can do." Also like Thoreau, Kerouac, through Jack Duluoz, could say that "instead of

studying how to make it worth men's while to buy my baskets, I studied rather how to avoid the necessity of selling them" (12). However, Duluoz has reached a point where it is now too late to stop the stream; people have bought his "baskets." Instead, like Thoreau, Duluoz questions his definition of success and soon regrets that he was not more careful in his wish. Duluoz might well use the words of Thoreau from the passage in *Walden*: "The life which men praise and regard as successful is but one kind. Why should we exaggerate any one kind at the expense of the others?" (12). Thoreau's passage concludes with self-deprecation and could easily be transposed into the voice of Duluoz; Thoreau says that he went to Walden Pond "to transact some private business with the fewest obstacles; to be hindered from accomplishing which for want of a little common sense, a little enterprise and business talent, appeared not so sad as foolish" (13). The recent events in Duluoz's life has left him feeling the same way. Unlike the Indian in Thoreau's example who tries to enter the world of business with an unsaleable product and, not understanding that world, is therefore out of his element, Duluoz's Indian creates his useful product "all alone in the woods," where he can maintain his "absolute innocence." Conversely, Duluoz has created his product in a world of literary business that he does not comprehend, and he has come to correct the past where the Indian in his vision made his canoe, away from the world. In a sense, Duluoz seems to subscribe to a romanticized version of liberalism in his return to a more natural habitat, but because of Big Sur's cliffs, roaring ocean, and fog, his romantic idyll is undermined.

Kerouac continues his allusion to the classic American writers when Duluoz refers to Ralph Waldo Emerson's words from "Self-Reliance": Duluoz says parenthetically, "(. . .

. a man 'is relieved and gay when he has put his heart into his work and done his best') (applicable both to building simple little millraces and writing big stupid stories like this)" (Kerouac, *Big Sur*, 30). But, Kerouac has led his readers to one sentence from "Self-Reliance" without mentioning the surrounding text which informs that sentence and provides further insight into Duluo's meaning. In his essay, Emerson says, "A man is relieved and gay when he has put his heart into his work and done his best; but what he has said or done otherwise, shall give him no peace. It is a deliverance which does not deliver. In the attempt his genius deserts him; no muse befriends; no invention, no hope. Trust thyself: every heart vibrates to that iron string" (Emerson 1127). While Duluo has "put his heart" into constructing the mill race and seawall, he suggests that he has also put his heart into his writing, and that investment alone should validate the effort of writing and engineering. But, "what he has said or done otherwise," that is, without putting his heart into it, has given him "no peace" and he has not been delivered; his "genius" has deserted him, and he feels a sense of hopelessness. The connection of Emerson's admonition with Duluo's writing career (as opposed to his writing) reveals that Duluo has failed himself in capitulating to the destructive demands of mass culture because he has been less than honest⁴. Learning to trust himself and resist conforming has been all but impossible under the onslaught of success, but with the rejuvenating influence of the creek at Big Sur, he has a chance to begin again to form a way of making sense of the world. That idea of a new beginning appears immediately after Duluo's first reference to Emerson and is contained in his mention of Emerson as the "trumpet of the morning in America . . . who announced Whitman" (30) and in that announcement, congratulated

Whitman at the beginning of his writing career. Duluoz is not at the beginning of his career, but could rejuvenate himself if he can overcome his conformity to the desires of others. Unfortunately for him, he will not achieve that level of self-reliance until the end of the novel, and even then, whether he can sustain it is questionable.

Kerouac's allusions and direct reference to Thoreau, Emerson, and Whitman⁵ seem to be attempts to address his own sense of his failed responsibility as a writer; by connecting the classic writers with his own feeling, as he says, "that I have been fooling myself all my life . . . and actually I'm just a sick clown and so is everybody else" (41), perhaps he is allowing himself some ironic latitude to accept himself as he is rather than comparing himself to an unrealizable ideal, and also he is permitting himself to face the distinct possibility that not all life is holy all of the time. He is in effect creating a new sense of self-acceptance that rejects naivety and more accurately reflects experience as he sees it. Later in the novel, Duluoz will recognize "how multiple it [life] is" (56), as he acknowledges the complexity inherent in the modern world that the older liberalism tried to homogenize or explain away as aberrations of human behavior. He will also address the issue of inclusion when he mentions the greed with which his friends devour the food and drink he buys for them; he notes sardonically that "[i]t's not everyday they're with a drunken novelist with hundreds of dollars to splurge on them" (74). While his friends seem to consider the group a solidified and inclusive unit, Duluoz resents their incursions into his wallet, but continues with his largesse partly because he is drinking and partly because he knows he can leave for home at any time. As he says, he is "[a]lways an ephemeral 'visitor' to the Coast never really involved with anyone's lives there because I'm always

ready to fly back across the country" (178). Once he can grasp that he can leave at any time, he escapes from the need for an artificial and destructive inclusiveness. Therefore, when Monsanto suggests that the crowd of people that has followed Duluoz back to the canyon "somehow desecrates it," Duluoz who has previously installed his shrine at the creek, agrees; he says to himself, "Which is just the way I feel too" (94). He can also admit and declare openly, "what's all this giving of ourselves, what's there to give that'll help anybody" (189). He is moving away from an old view of liberalism and toward one more in accord with his experience. The people he encounters do not want his "help"; they want him to 'give of himself,' but Jack has come to see that such a gift will do no long lasting good for them and will only diminish himself.

Just as Duluoz has finally subscribed to a version of social welfare in which he is unwilling to give more of himself than is absolutely necessary, he also comes to see that his so-called friends consider him in terms not unlike those of the mass media, and that the relationship is not a model of equality. Duluoz realizes that he must distance himself from his Beat past, partly because that past has been coopted by mass culture and partly because he knows that too many people want to associate with him only because of his iconic status rather than because they care for him. When he is forced to spend several hours with a young man who idolizes him as a cultural hero and who "believes that there's something noble and idealistic and kind about all this beat stuff, and I'm supposed to be the King of the Beatniks according to the newspapers" (109), Duluoz refuses to submit and to play the role for the young man. He is "sick and tired of all the endless enthusiasms of new young kids trying to know me and pour out all their lives into me so that I'll jump

up and down and say yes yes that's right, which I can't do any more—My reason for coming to Big Sur for the summer being precisely to get away from that sort of thing” (109). Later, he says to Cody's mistress Billie, ““Well I don't know all those big theories about how everything should be goddamit all I know is that I'm a helpless hunk of helpful horse manure looking in your eye saying Help me”” (175). But Billie does not want to help Jack; all she wants is that Jack marry her so that she can remain close to Cody who will not leave his wife for her. Jack refuses her also. He can finally admit that, “I simply want to go home now, I'm just plumb sick and tired like Cody I guess of the whole nervewracking scene” (181). However, it has taken his absence from New York and his interaction by himself with Big Sur during the first three weeks of his stay for him to see more clearly that his old way of envisioning the world has been more faulty than he had previously thought.

However, before he leaves, Duluoz must experience his dark night of the soul when he goes through a form of alcohol psychosis. In a feverish vision brought on by his inability to sleep, his exorbitant drinking, and the relationship pressures of Billie and her “cretin” young son (214), Duluoz sees a cross appear before him and he believes he is dying; but his “heart goes out to it” (205) and he feels a sense of salvation flood over him. Duluoz is surprised that in his time of need, he has been presented with the Christian symbol of salvation and redemption, rather than a Buddhist image of the Void; he thinks, “for years my Buddhist studies and pipesmoking assured meditations on emptiness and all of a sudden the Cross is manifested to me—My eyes filled with tears—‘We'll all be saved’” (205-6). Speaking of this scene, Ben Giamo notes that “Duluoz truly comes home to settle

down in mind, body, and spirit after roaming so far and wide. Tapping the spiritual innocence of Ti Jean [Kerouac's childhood name, a Joul diminutive meaning Little John], Duluo returns to an old familiar dwelling" (192). His journey home is now a possibility because he has been able to reject the no longer workable past and form a new vision of the world out of the remnants of what has gone before, and he is able to accept that not everything is holy. After a brief nap, Duluo suddenly can say that "[e]verthing has washed away—I'm perfectly normal again" (215), and he will return home where "it'll all be like it was in the beginning . . . Something good will come out of all things yet . . . There's no need to say another word" (216). He seems to suggest that perhaps he has not abandoned the possibility that everything can still be holy, but this time, he is less self-assured, and the experience of holiness and wonder will only be available at home where he will "stand in the yard under the stars" (216). His act of recovery is one of self-determination and overpowering desire to survive his current situation, but it is also one of hope and faith. Such an existential refusal to submit speaks to his need to configure his world in terms that match his own experience. Having done so, he can go on and ultimately return home⁶.

In *The American Novel and Its Tradition*, Richard Chase says that

The characteristic American form of the mythic archetype is thought to be the fall from innocence and the initiation into life – an action of the soul that entails a symbolic dying and rebirth. . . . [But] American literature does not often mirror forth this dramatic action. Instead it pictures human life in a context of unresolved contradictions – contradictions which, for better or

for worse, are not absorbed, reconciled, or transcended. (244)

In a way, Duluoz experiences an "initiation into life" through the "satori" induced by his personal struggle in the canyon; but in his case, it is not a transcendence of the world, but an initiation back into a world that he has gradually come to understand in a different way than he had previously. However, according to Chase's statement, Duluoz's revelation is generated within "a context of unresolved contradictions," and therefore is only provisional. Duluoz has come to the brink of his sanity under the pressures of his writing career and of his negative involvement with attachments from his past at Big Sur. But he pulls himself back from that abyss by an act of will, in spite of the demands to include everyone in his world and of the expectation of a universal right way to do things. His resistance to the external demands of his associates is his movement toward a rejection of the unusable past and of an acceptance of a hope for a usable future. Duluoz moves closer to that future or has the potential to do so, but for now, all he can say is that "[t]here's no need to say another word." In the process of his Buddhist satori and his return to the Christianity of his youth, Duluoz has formed a new vision of himself and come to terms with his role as a cultural icon, a role that he did not expect or ask for, and one that he attempts to reject having seen its deleterious effects. He can now accept himself as he is without feeling the need to act as the mass culture image of himself. He can return home to reclaim some degree of isolation, certain that "[s]omething good will come out of all things yet," but also certain that "[n]othing ever happened—Not even this" (216). The last phrase seems to harken back to the Buddhist philosophy that he claims to have left behind, that life is an illusion created by the mind. If that implication is accurate, Duluoz may not

have come very far from where he began his journey to Big Sur. But, it seems that the illusion whose existence he wants to suppress is of the terrifying events that happened to him during his long night in the canyon. However, he will repeat his need for home later in *Desolation Angels*, when he accepts a life of tranquility, saying, "A peaceful sorrow at home is the best I'll ever be able to offer the world, in the end, and so I told my *Desolation Angels* goodbye. A new life for me" (409)⁷.

"The King of the Beatniks": Jack Kerouac as Mass Cultural Icon

In "Disengagement: The Art of the Beat Generation," San Francisco Renaissance poet and local legend Kenneth Rexroth describes the state of American fiction as he sees it in 1957, just before *On the Road* was finally published:

Much of the best popular fiction deals with the world of the utterly disaffiliated. Burlesque and carnival people, hipsters, handicappers and hop heads, wanted men on the lam, an expendable squad of soldiers being expended, anyone who by definition is divorced from society and cannot afford even an iota of the social lie—these are the favorite characters of modern post-war fiction. (186)

In his article, Rexroth includes Jack Kerouac as a writer of such "popular fiction" and he devotes almost fifty words to him, all in one paragraph, but says that Kerouac, "in his small way the peer of Céline, Destouches, or Beckett, is the most famous 'unpublished' author in America. Every publisher's reader and advisor of any moment has read him and

is enthusiastic about him" (188). Rexroth notes the magnitude of Kerouac's fame seemingly without connecting it to his writing, for Kerouac is, as yet, essentially "unpublished"; further, every significant member of the literary community is "enthusiastic about *him*," rather than about his work. Before his books were widely available, Kerouac was already the "most famous" writer of his time, but apparently less for his writing than for his reputation as a noteworthy writer. He arrived on the literary scene already transformed into a mass cultural icon, already "famous for being famous," in Ronna C. Johnson's words (39)⁸.

Kerouac and Rexroth knew each other from Kerouac's time in San Francisco when Rexroth acted as master of ceremonies for the historic "Six Gallery Reading" in October 1955 at which Ginsberg performed *Howl* for the first time and where Kerouac was a notable presence⁹. But *On the Road* would not be published until September 5, 1957, and by the time of its public release, Kerouac had written, among other shorter pieces, *The Subterraneans*, *Maggie Cassidy*, *Visions of Gerard*, *Tristessa*, parts of *Desolation Angels*, and some of what would become *Visions of Cody*, most of which focus on characters who seem to exist on the margins of society, in the counter-culture. Rexroth's evaluation of the types of characters that find favor in American popular fiction *circa* 1957 is arguably accurate, and there is the possibility that, had he read Kerouac's *On the Road* before he wrote the article, he would see no reason to change his opinion of American writing. Kerouac's *On the Road* would comfortably fit the paradigm of "the best popular fiction" in 1957 as Rexroth saw it, which may explain why Kerouac was able to get the novel published at that time; perhaps the popular taste for fiction caught up to him, thanks in

part to the notoriety and success of Ginsberg's *Howl* with its dedication to William S. Burroughs, Neal Cassady, and especially to "Jack Kerouac, new Buddha of American prose, who spit forth intelligence into eleven books written in half the number of years (1951-1956) . . . [Ginsberg lists the titles of which he is aware]. . . creating a spontaneous bop prosody and original classic literature. . . . All these books are published in Heaven" (Ginsberg, Dedication to *Howl*, np). With such pre-publicity from such notable people, it is small wonder that, when *On the Road* was released and reviewed favorably by Gilbert Millstein in the *New York Times*, success was immediate for Kerouac; immediate, that is, after twenty years of struggle atop his Underwood. Then began the years of attacks and rejections, and a multitude of misreadings of his work. Arriving as they did, Kerouac's most famous novel and its more famous author appear at the nexus of literary achievement and mass cultural acceptance, at the intersection of "original classic literature," as Ginsberg remarks, and "the best popular fiction," according to Rexroth.

In their essay, "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception," Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno address the connection of liberalism and the culture industry. They note the complicity in the dialectic between the two: "Not only do its [the culture industry's] categories and contents derive from liberalism . . . but the modern culture monopolies form the economic area in which, together with the corresponding entrepreneurial types, for the time being some part of its [liberalism's] sphere of operation survives, despite the process of disintegration elsewhere" (132). According to Horkheimer and Adorno, liberalism as a dominant ideology is complicit in the functions of its mass cultural institutions. Further, "[t]he culture industry tends to make itself the embodiment

of authoritative pronouncements, and thus the irrefutable prophet of the prevailing order” (147), and that “prevailing order” in postwar America as it is today is liberalism. Through mass culture, the dissemination of political ideology is effectuated and society is controlled and conditioned, although as Horkheimer and Adorno’s essay maintains, the process of indoctrination and control is far more subtle than it may seem. Therefore, any cultural radicalism or countercultural movement, such as the common perception would consider Kerouac and the Beats, to be effectively controlled, must simply be absorbed into the culture industry and it is neutralized by that very acceptance¹⁰.

Barbara Ehrenreich, in *The Hearts of Men*, notes one possible source of the contemporary cultural concern about the Beat movement; she says that because no segment of the population called the “poor” could exist officially in the consumer-driven 1950s, “the class that inspired the Beats was officially nonexistent. . . . Nowhere in this flat demographic landscape was there room for Kerouac’s ‘fellaheen’” (58). Therefore, the Beats “were an unwanted reminder of the invisible class outside and the repressed masculine self within. . . . [T]he Beats spoke from an underclass of unassimilated people to an unassimilated corner of the middle-class psyche; and this, as much as the wanton beat of rock and roll, was dangerous” (58). Critics’ attacks attempted to keep the Beats marginalized; Ehrenreich locates this marginalizing attempt in Norman Podhoretz, who in essays such as “The Know-Nothing Bohemians,” “established to his own satisfaction that the Beats were class enemies of the worst sort, foes of everything civilized, accomplices in every crime” (Ehrenreich 60)¹¹. Also, Ehrenreich claims that the creation and representation of beatniks by the media was an attempt to counter the allure of Kerouac

and the “passionate energy the Beats derived from a world outside the middle-class” (60). To be removed from the counterculture and absorbed into the dominant culture, the critical power of the Beats and Kerouac had to be neutralized; therefore, the creation and promotion of beatniks by the media was part of a process of recontainment that was very effective. William S. Burroughs exemplifies this painless absorption into a culture of consumerism in *Naked Lunch* when the narrator notes that in Interzone, “Freeland was a welfare state. If a citizen wanted anything from a load of bone meal to a sexual partner some department was ready to offer effective aid. The threat implicit in this enveloping benevolence stifled the concept of rebellion” (168-9). The urge to dissent is eliminated when all apparent needs are taken care of by the state; but since the state cannot cover everything, the “needs” of the populace must also be conditioned and controlled to want only what can be made available by the state so that it can continue to exert control over the individual. As Burroughs’ novel demonstrates, without the need for “junk,” i.e., consumer products, the control of the masses by the dominant culture is limited.

However, the Beats do attempt to find methods of resistance to that form of state control, and these methods do not need to address directly the power of the dominant culture. David Sterritt, in “Kerouac, Artaud, and the Baroque Period of the Three Stooges,” notes that the Beat response to authority is not an overt operation perpetrated by “guerrillas recruiting partisans,” but “[t]heir rebellion took place on the dispersed terrain of scattered individual consciousness, not so much confronting the centers of organized power as ignoring or evading them” (84). However, although Sterritt argues for the existence of an effective Beat resistance to the dominant culture, the Beats could not

help but be coopted into the liberal-consumerist ideology because they launched their critique of the culture from within "the basic form of American mythos" (Lardas 190). Sacvan Bercovitch has indicated that such a site of dissent is really the only possibility in America, and he locates that form of dissent in the American Renaissance; he says:

None of our classic writers conceived of imaginative perspectives radically other than those implicit in the vision of America. Their works are characterized by an *unmediated* relation between the facts of American life and the ideals of liberal free enterprise. Confronted with the inadequacies of their society, they turned for solace and inspiration to its social ideals. It was not that they lacked radical energies, but that they had invested these in a vision which reinforced (because it emanated from) the values of their culture. . . . The works of our classic writers show more clearly than any others I know how American radicalism could be turned into a force against any form of change that would decisively alter the norms, ideals, and structures of American culture. (*Rites* 59)

In terms of my project and in consideration of Bercovitch's proposition, it seems apparent that any attempt to create a narrative of liberalism that is radically different from that which went before, can only be effected by using ideas and perspectives that are already "implicit in the vision of America," that is, by embracing "the ideals of liberal free enterprise" that were already in place. Kerouac and the Beats could not avoid being absorbed into the mass culture as a way of being appropriated into the dominant; they could never completely escape from it, nor would they want to, according to Bercovitch's

exposition of dissent in America¹².

A prominent early instance of the media capitalization on Kerouac's success is the unpaid and unacknowledged use of his narrative idea from *On the Road* for the hit CBS television program *Route 66*, which first aired in 1960. Kerouac voices his anger to Sterling Lord, his agent, in a letter immediately after completing *Big Sur* in 1961; he says that he is aware that his "ideas are being lifted left and right," and he suggests that he is the victim of a Jewish conspiracy, since "Route 66 has jazz and hip talk and the white line feeding into the car (a tip I gave [Hollywood producer] Jerry Wald in 1957 and maybe he knows Herbert Leonard and Sterling Silliphant the 'creators' of Route 66)" (*Charters, Selected Letters, 1957-1969*, 344). Dennis McNally, in *Desolate Angel*, notes that "Sterling Silliphant took the archetypal freedom image from Jack's book and added George Maharis, an actor who eerily resembled Kerouac, to produce *Route 66*. Appalled by the show's violence, Jack asked two different lawyers to sue Silliphant for plagiarism, but both concluded that there was insufficient evidence" (272). The basic idea of the show seems indeed to have been Kerouac's, but as Mark Alvey says, in "Wanderlust and Wire Wheels: The Existential Search of *Route 66*," "the resemblances between the two texts are superficial"; Alvey cites producer Herbert Leonard saying in 1962 that he had only just learned of the existence of Kerouac's bestseller (151), a possibility, but an unlikely scenario in a relatively small television industry. In a 1968 letter to his former editor at Viking, Keith Jennison, Kerouac referred to the situation as "the 'Route 66' idea-grab" and seems to have connected the success of the show with his inability to sell *On the Road* to the film industry. He saw the "grab" as part of a larger conspiracy in which he was

“being black balled by the new ‘cultural’ underground”(Charters, *Selected Letters, 1957-1969*, 523).

That process of cultural containment and neutralization of Kerouac and the Beats continues to the present. Rock musician Graham Parker says, “[t]hat explosion of talent that formed the Beat movement was arguably as influential on Twentieth-Century culture as any key rock & roll wellspring Time has proven that the work of Kerouac and Burroughs, et al., although forever categorized in what often seems a stifling, sycophant-encircled genre, will just not go away” (406). The sycophantism that Parker notes is also part of the process of neutralizing a countercultural figure and turning that figure into a functional icon for the use of capitalist enterprise, as a recent advertisement suggests. The ad is comprised of a photo of Jack Kerouac taken at night in front of what appears to be a bar, although, of the large, vertical neon sign, only the “A” and the top part of the “R” are visible; the “B” is cropped from the picture by the upper margin and the bottom half of the “R” is partly blocked by the man’s body. Kerouac wears a rather bemused, no doubt drunken grin, and his clothes are ruffled, casual, and, like his hair, slightly messy. He is alone in the frame of the photo. Embossed on the left side just off the right shoulder of Kerouac are the words, “Kerouac wore khakis,” and in the bottom right is the recognizable logo of a brand of clothing from one of the most successful contemporary American retail outlets: “GAP KHAKIS.” Since the viewer can readily see by his clothes that “Kerouac wore khakis,” the next logical response is to assume that he bought them at the Gap; indeed, the visible portion of the “BAR” sign might easily be seen as a part of “GAP” since the first letter is not visible at all, and from what is visible of the “R,” it might

also be a "P." The poster seems a blatant example of Madison Avenue sleight-of-hand and therefore a falsified representation, but, in fact, as I have been suggesting here, it is simply a physical manifestation of the creation and exploitation of a mass culture icon in which the "real" Jack Kerouac has been replaced and therefore neutralized by the image "Jack Kerouac." Obviously, the Gap sees in the figure of Kerouac a commercial potential; if "Kerouac wore khakis," as it appears he certainly did by the photo, then perhaps the impressionable consumer, having properly accepted the countercultural status of Kerouac, may be inclined to wear them also.¹³ For the advertisement to be effective, the viewer must be impressionable enough not to consider the distinct possibility that The Gap as a commercial entity on the scale that it is today was not in existence when the photo was taken, and therefore Kerouac is probably not standing in front of a Gap store, at all; nor is he likely wearing khakis retailed by that store. Certainly, that the sign in the photo could be either "BAR" or "GAP" does not harm the cachet of Kerouac's image as a countercultural icon. But logic does not enter into the power of the message, for the point of the advertisement is not necessarily that 'Kerouac wore *Gap* khakis' but that "Kerouac wore khakis" sometime during his life, and therefore, so should the modern-day consumers who consider themselves members of some countercultural group¹⁴. And the informed modern-day consumer knows that the only proper place to purchase the khakis that Kerouac wore is at the Gap, since the icon "Jack Kerouac" got his there. The ad, in few words, tells them so.

According to Kerouac's former companion Joyce Johnson in *Door Wide Open*, a collection of letters between herself and Kerouac, the bar in the photograph is the "Kettle

of Fish” on MacDougal Street in New York City, and the picture was taken “in front of its red neon sign” in the fall of 1957 by New York photographer Jerry Yulsman, shortly after the publication of *On the Road*, when Kerouac was at his peak of celebrity (137). A portion of one of the photos that Yulsman took at the time makes up part of the cover of the 1999 edition of Johnson’s *Minor Characters*, and it is clear from the cover shot that The Gap ad photo has been altered to remove Johnson from the right arm of Kerouac. Evidently the modern visage of such a staunchly male representation of American individualism and iconoclasm requires no female sidekick when he wears his khakis, because the figure “Jack Kerouac” does not have to represent any “reality” behind itself; it need only stand for itself, a signifier without a signified. Regina Weinreich says of The Gap’s commodification of Kerouac and the Beats: “The early beatnik misfits, as they were thought to be, had become cultural icons. They had name recognition; they could sell products, a payoff for early beat bravado, and it had little to do with what they wrote” (np). Weinreich’s accurate assessment returns us to the beginning of this discussion on the separation by mass culture of Kerouac the author from his writing, and it recalls the difficulty Kerouac experienced following his sudden fame in 1957 when he was absorbed by the mass culture and essentially devoured. The beginning of his awareness and resistance to that cultural cannibalism is described in *Big Sur*.

Kerouac will show his disdain for the treatment afforded him by mass culture in his later writing, and a brief mention of several occurrences will reveal his awareness of his cultural position. In *Vanity of Duluoz*, Jack Duluoz sets out to explain to his “wifey,” the difficulty he has experienced in his life up to the present in 1967 so that she will better

understand who he is, since his identity as a person behind the writer has been taken over by the mass culture that has made him famous. He tells the story of a woman who wrote to him claiming “[t]here is no Jack Kerouac” (13), and therefore, he is now “inexistent” (14). His “success” as a writer, “far from being a happy triumph as of old, was the sign of doom Himself” (9). Duluoz describes why he feels that his career has seemed a failed enterprise when he describes the writing of his first novel, “a huge novel explaining everything to everybody”:

and I settled down to write, in solitude, in pain, writing hymns and prayers even at dawn, thinking, ‘When this book is finished, which is going to be the sum and substance and crap of everything I’ve been thru throughout this whole goddam life, I shall be redeemed.’ . . . I did it all, I wrote the book, I stalked the streets of life, of Manhattan, of Long Island, stalked thru 1,183 pages of my first novel, sold the book, got an advance, whooped, hallelujah’d, went on, did everything you’re supposed to do in life. But nothing ever came of it. No generation is ‘new’. There’s ‘nothing new under the sun’. ‘All is vanity’” (268).

In spite of his intentions, the effort he expended in writing, and the amount of himself that he put into the book, his hoped for success in hindsight turns out to be only “vanity”; but more bleak is his conclusion that “nothing ever came of it.” Kerouac ends *Desolation Angels* with a similar sentiment; he describes being in New York with his friends who are all now “famous writers more or less, but they wonder why I’m so sunk now, so unexcited as we sit among our published books and poems” (409). Success and fame as it has

materialized for him is not what he had hoped it would be. Paul Goodman in *Growing Up Absurd* describes Kerouac's dilemma indirectly: "As a Beat spokesman he [the poet] receives notoriety and the chance of the wide public that every poet wants and needs; but he cannot help feeling that he is getting it as a pawn of the organized system" (178). And, as "a pawn" of that cultural system, Kerouac's creation of a liberal narrative has to be effected within the limits of that system. Therefore, if Kerouac appears to be embracing a form of liberality that closely resembles that of the culture he supposedly resists, that is because he cannot help but be reabsorbed into that culture, as the following discussion will illustrate.

Strange Bedfellows: Contemporary Liberalism, *West Wing*, George McGovern, and Jack Kerouac

Any attempt to generate a new form of liberal narrative must always deal with its supposed opposite, conservatism. Further, the rewriting of the liberal narrative must also deal with the perpetual presence of previous liberal narratives and must operate within the model of liberalism "implicit in the vision of America," as Bercovitch claims. The example of the attempt to rewrite the narrative of liberalism shows the difficulty in moving away from the past toward a more functional and rationally-considered future, but it also shows the necessity of operating within that "vision of America." Here, I will discuss two contemporary texts that reveal the difficulty of this revision made harder by the perpetual presence of the past; these texts also demonstrate the pervasiveness of attempts to refine

and refashion liberalism.

In the episode “Gone Quiet” from the popular NBC television drama *West Wing*, Bruno Gianelli, the head of the Committee to Re-elect the President, expresses the frustration of the contemporary American liberal politician in America and the centrality of liberalism to all things American. Gianelli says,

“We all need some therapy. Because somebody came along and said ‘liberal’ means soft on crime, soft on drugs, soft on communism, soft on defense, and we’re gonna tax you back to the stone age, because people shouldn’t have to go to work if they don’t want to; and instead of saying, ‘Well, excuse me, you right-wing, reactionary, xenophobic, homophobic, anti-education, anti-choice, pro-gun, leave-it-to-Beaver-trip back to the fifties,’ we cowered in the corner and said, ‘please . . . don’t . . . hurt . . . me.’ No more. I really don’t care who’s right, who’s wrong. We’re both right; we’re both wrong. Let’s have two parties. Huh? What d’ya say?”

Gianelli reveals the challenge of trying to be a “liberal” in an era in which “conservative” ideologies seem to reflect more accurately the state of the world. In the scene, he defends his idea of what “liberalism” means against the charges of its political opponents and, at the same time, he seeks to redefine what “liberal” means, not only along the spectrum of American politics, but also for the benefit of the television audience. Accused of being “soft” on issues that need to be treated with a hard-nosed aggressiveness, the liberal is typified generically as “cowered in the corner,” in effect “gone quiet,” refusing to come out fighting or even to mount a feasible defense against the accusations. For to refute the

accusation of being “soft” would necessitate adopting a more “hard” position, a more aggressive defensive strategy, perhaps more like the offensive tactics of the conservative accusers. Also, the liberal defender would run the risk of protesting too much and thus appear overly anxious to refute charges that in light of the urgent response would quickly become irrefutable. Gianelli finds himself in the position of defending himself against the stereotypical mudslinging that has made such populist accusations against liberalism very difficult to rebut.

Nonetheless, Gianelli has drawn his line in the sand and adopted the offensive strategy if not a facsimile of the language of his adversary; he attacks the conservative critics with a set of generalities and stereotypes not unlike those that have been lobbed at his own camp. To the liberal, conservatives are “right-wing, reactionary, xenophobic, homophobic, anti-education, anti-choice, pro-gun, leave-it-to-Beaver-trip” types who yearn for the more secure world of the 1950s, a world which itself is a utopic construction of the contemporary imagination apprehensive about life in the new century; this desire for security is expressed by liberal thinkers, as well. Significantly, Gianelli does not, or cannot, define “liberal” directly; he can only describe it by reversing the slings of its critics. He can say what a conservative is in his opinion, reactionary, xenophobic, homophobic, etc., but he cannot define himself as “liberal” except in terms of his opposition to “conservative” and in opposition to what conservative sentiment says about the liberal. If the reactionary perception of traditional liberalism once meant “soft on crime, soft on drugs, soft on communism, soft on defense, and we’re gonna tax you back to the stone age, because people shouldn’t have to go to work if they don’t want to,” then by denying those

generalities, Gianelli is, in effect, creating a revised narrative of contemporary liberalism and also of himself as a contemporary liberal as he deflects the stereotype, for he means to make known that neither liberalism nor he is "soft" on the issues that he names; he is creating a version of "liberal" that more closely resembles his own experience. In short, his liberalism is closer to the conservatism that he professes to oppose. In the speaker's rhetorical maneuvering, liberalism has been revised, at least theoretically, into an entity that meets the present demands of American political necessity, regardless of which end of the political continuum it inhabits.

Once the name-calling has been dispensed with, they remain two parties, both right and both wrong. As Gianelli says, "I really don't care who's right, who's wrong. We're both right; we're both wrong. Let's have two parties. Huh? What d'ya say?" *West Wing*, as itself a Hollywood representation of contemporary liberal ideology, presents a utopic and perhaps fictive vision of Americans working together for the common good, a reading of contemporary American politics that should ease the worst fears of the show's target audience that the crumbling figure of Western civilization is slouching roughly toward them. If the two parties are really not that different, then perhaps stability, at least in the prime-time world of American television, is a possibility. But, in this particular scene, Gianelli, we should note, is not talking to a Republican adversary, but to one of the faithful, another member of the Committee to Elect the President. There is no dialogue between opposing camps here, at least not within the narrative frame of the television program, the lack of which itself reveals a rift in the seamless political cloth Gianelli and *West Wing's* writers are trying to weave for a nervous America. But, more importantly,

his view of the liberal/conservative dichotomy reveals something else about the (f)utility of trying to expose what the two terms actually mean. In modern parlance, the terms "liberal" and "conservative" have been so conflated in part because of their common ends; as Leonard Williams says, "despite the fact that the umbrella labels of Left and Right are given to various and sundry groups, these contrasting ideological positions have nevertheless produced a common critique of the bureaucratization, alienation, and stratification that mark modern society" (67). Theodore J. Lowi calls the attempt to define a distinct difference between the terms an "empty debate" that has become "almost purely ritualistic." And, according to Lowi, the conflation of the two has led to a watered-down version of political conflict: "The decline of a meaningful dialogue between a liberalism and a conservatism has meant the decline of a meaningful adversary political proceedings in a favor of administrative, technical, and logrolling politics" (43).

Despite his intention, Gianelli has virtually conflated the two terms "liberal" and "conservative" into one political type; but embedded in his monologue in favor of a more agreeable political climate is the single visible idea from his speech that differentiates himself as a liberal from the conservative politicians he should be addressing. While Gianelli calls the "conservative" faction "right-wing" in his imagined defense, nowhere, in his description of the imagined conservative attack does he use the term "left-wing" to describe his own side of the bipartisan coin; nowhere does he counter his detractors' assertions with what would be the exact opposite of "right-wing." Perhaps the term "left-wing" still exudes a pejorative connotation with its obvious connection to an all-too-familiar communist antagonist. But, the missing term is telling: the modern day liberal is

not left-wing at all, but occupies the vital terrain nearer the center, an area once reserved for undecided liberals and conservatives¹⁵. To the separate terms "liberal" and "conservative," Seymour Lipset assigns a single term, "Americanism," a mixed ideological perspective that he describes "in five words: liberty, egalitarianism, individualism, populism, and laissez-faire. The revolutionary ideology which became the American Creed is liberalism in its eighteenth- and nineteenth-century meanings What Europeans have called 'liberalism,' Americans refer to as 'conservatism': a deeply anti-statist doctrine emphasizing the virtues of laissez-faire" (31, 36). Lipset's "Americanism" is a combination of elements from classical European liberalism that Americans today untangle and classify as "liberalism" and "conservatism." Further, this mix of political ideologies under the rubric "Americanism," Lipset contends, "has led to a utopian orientation among American liberals and conservatives. Both seek to extend the 'good society'" of Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal (63). If Gianelli's definition seems uncertain and ambiguous, perhaps that is because he is trying to separate two sides of the same coin. Liberalism and conservatism are so contained within the larger term "Americanism" that they appear to be very much the same thing, and that melange becomes the main reason for Gianelli's need for "therapy," because, as Lipset says, Americans "quarrel sharply about how to apply the basic principles of Americanism they purport to agree about" (26). So the difference between "liberal" and "conservative" becomes one of how to disagree and still stay within the consensus of "Americanism," which, in turn, becomes a definition of "liberalism" itself. What is American is liberal, and vice versa. As a corollary, the answer to the question of how does one re-fashion their version of "liberalism" and still remain "liberal" becomes

one of how to re-fashion it within the boundaries or guidelines of "Americanism."

The problem of defining both liberalism and the character of the liberal individual in modern times is one that concerns not only politicians and their aides, nor is it one of recent birth, although it is a debate that remains current¹⁶. Its presence in the script of *West Wing* attests to its contemporary prestige, because the program is immensely popular and would hardly waste a second of expensive air-time on issues that were not demographically, and therefore not commercially, expedient. How to envision oneself as a liberal in times that seem to demand and reward a conservative attitude, or at least a more conservative form of liberalism, is evidently an issue that still concerns a great many Americans. But, Gianelli's attempted revision of liberalism is not a product solely of contemporary American politics, although it is obviously central to it; visible behind the character's words is the outline of the ongoing project that began after the Second World War to form a new narrative of liberalism that more closely addressed the actualities of lived experience and that would more effectively confront the difficulties facing an America in recovery from the psychic destruction of recent historical circumstance. Ultimately, the scenario of a liberal politician struggling with the ideology of liberalism in a contemporary popular television program can only indicate that the writing and rewriting of a "liberal narrative" in America is a project that has no realizable completion; although certain elements of liberalism remain constant (such as the enfranchisement of economic and constitutional rights), liberalism, like most other forms of narrative, seems to need a transformation for every cultural moment.

The revision of liberalism is more than simply a creation of Hollywood for the

entertainment of the American viewing audience. A recent essay by George McGovern reveals that the attempt to create a new narrative of liberalism is still at issue and is still problematic. In "The Case for Liberalism: A Defense of the Future Against the Past," the former presidential candidate, congressman, and self-confessed "American patriot and a liberal in the tradition of Jefferson, Lincoln, and Franklin Roosevelt" (McGovern 38) places himself in heady company and presents an argument for a return to the fundamentals of a battered liberalism at a time when a conservative recapitulation of the past seems to be the only solution offered by George W. Bush's Washington to stabilize an uncertain future. McGovern insists that, since liberalism is the dominant ideology of America in the Twentieth-Century and that "nearly all Americans have some identification with liberalism, whether they know it or not (38), only a return to a universal trust in liberalism's promise of progress, inclusion, innate human goodness, and respect for the individual can restore America and its people to a sense of security in an unsettled world that has truly become, thanks to the terrors of instant communication, "a global village" (McLuhan & Fiore 17). In presenting its case, McGovern's essay helps to bring my discussion full circle in that it shows Kerouac's hope for a renewed America as essentially contiguous with McGovern's own vision, and therefore, Kerouac's struggle to form a new, more meaningful relationship between himself and the world, configured as an attempt to form a new narrative of liberalism, appears for him as a process without end and as a means of trying to come to terms with a world that remains, and that remained for Kerouac, confusing and ultimately undecipherable.

McGovern begins his essay with a qualified statement that both establishes his

credentials as a liberal ideologist and echoes Reinhold Niebuhr and Arthur Schlesinger, Jr.; McGovern declares, "I believe in the essential decency and fairness of the American people. This does not mean, however, that I believe our leaders and our voters always to be of sound judgement. Democracy does not guarantee wisdom or virtue" (37), but it is for McGovern the most efficient and culturally satisfactory system of government. Here, McGovern speaks to Schlesinger's "imperfect alternatives" (Schlesinger 7) with which humans must function in the democratic world; as Schlesinger notes, although those alternatives are flawed, they are in fact real choices and, given the flawed nature of human beings themselves, they represent the only available way for humans to function in the real and imperfect world. Niebuhr's ideas reappear again in McGovern's essay when McGovern acknowledges the inevitability of human evil, a clear example of liberalism tempered by the cataclysmic events of the post-war period. Because of his acceptance of the eternal presence of evil, McGovern says, "I look to the future with far less fear and therefore far less cynicism" (38). But, having noted his reduced level of fear and cynicism because of his recognition of human failing, McGovern seems to embrace a liberal attitude toward progress that harkens back to the New Deal era; he proudly lists some of the liberal accomplishments of the past several decades ("advances in the sciences, in education and health care, in protecting the environment, and in securing a more peaceful economic order," 38), and says, "I believe, in fact, that we are on the verge of the best period in human history . . . and I have reason to believe we will do even better over the next twenty-five years" (38), although what precisely has given him that "reason" is not clear in light of his assessment of the Bush administration's conservatism.

McGovern continues by extolling the palpable virtues of liberalism in a positive metaphor of surety and guidance: "I believe that the most practical and hopeful compass by which to guide the American ship of state is the philosophy of liberalism. Virtually every step forward in our history has been a liberal initiative taken over conservative opposition" (39). While McGovern considers conservatism "a stale and musty doctrine" (39) that is counterproductive in an age that desires a way to guarantee a successful and safe future, conversely, his liberal vision is "grounded in common sense, patriotism, and veneration of life" (41). Here the tension between the two ideologies appears as it did in the transcribed passage from *West Wing*. Recall how Bruno Gianelli rejected conservative criticism of the liberal as "soft on crime, soft on drugs, soft on communism, soft on defense, and we're gonna tax you back to the stone age, because people shouldn't have to go to work if they don't want to"; echoing his view, McGovern notes how "conservative political candidates in the postwar years depicted their liberal opponents as weak on national defense, indifferent to family values, soft on communism, and captives of the welfare lobby, the gun controllers, and the abortionists" (McGovern 40). The parallels are not coincidental, but McGovern's confinement of the conservative attack only to "the postwar years" is clearly inaccurate, because, as the words of the actor make evident, the conservative strategy is still operative today, as is the attempt to delineate a more accurate narrative of liberalism.

McGovern works toward his conclusion by re-invoking the names of the great American liberal politicians, Jefferson, Lincoln, and Franklin Roosevelt, and asserting that, although it has taken a political beating of late, "[l]iberalism is not dead Indeed, I

fully expect liberalism to be stronger and more successful over the next twenty-five years than has been in the past twenty-five—provided that liberals learn to shed a little of their timidity” (42); here, again his provisional qualifier “provided that” reflects the sentiment behind Gianelli’s refusal to cower to the aggressive political rhetoric of the right wing, unlike the liberal response in other eras: “‘Well, excuse me, you right-wing, reactionary, xenophobic, homophobic, anti-education, anti-choice, pro-gun, leave-it-to-Beaver-trip back to the fifties.’ . . . No more. I really don’t care who’s right, who’s wrong. We’re both right; we’re both wrong.” Evidently, the creation of a new liberal narrative that I have attempted to track from the post-war era is still under construction, as both the television program and McGovern’s article ably demonstrate. Interestingly, McGovern’s concluding slogan, a response to the “America, Love It or Leave It” bumper sticker, is “‘America, let us improve it so that we may love it the more,’” (42). Not coincidentally, his paraphrase echoes Kerouac’s hope for his own America.

In McGovern’s essay, the voice of Jack Kerouac is also detectable. As I have claimed, it is Kerouac’s faith in human “decency and fairness” (McGovern 37), in the potential “holiness” and wonder of everything and everyone, which seems to dominate his writing in its earlier stages; that faith never really leaves him even in his recognition of human fallibility and his acceptance of the suffering inherent in life that is central to his understanding of Buddhism. Even if that “decency” seems to have been willfully suppressed in the critical reception of his work by the reading public, by the intellectual community, and by several of his peers, Kerouac seems still, later in his career, to maintain a favorable conception of the human subject and of America itself¹⁷. In his article “The

Origins of the Beat Generation” originally published in *Playboy* in June 1959, he admonishes, “woe unto those who don’t realise that America must, will, is, changing now for the better I say. Woe unto those who believe in the atom bomb, who believe in hating mothers and fathers, who deny the most important of the Ten Commandments” (*Good Blonde* 65). Here he echoes McGovern’s certainty that the country will do even better in the next decades than it has in the past; his liberal sensibilities are strong in spite of the nuclear threat, the decline of the importance of the family unit, and the increase in immoral behavior that he notes. Although he has experienced much that would refute such a notion, as the discussion in these pages has indicated, he still clings to hope for progress, at least, progress of a moral nature, but that hope is always tempered by the recognition that evil and moral decay are facts of life in a modern world, as they were for Niebuhr. He ends the essay with a statement that reveals his belief in the necessity of some form of inclusion: “Woe unto those who spit on the Beat Generation, the wind’ll blow it back” (65). He finds unity and a sense of community in a like-minded, yet marginalized, group of individuals, and that connection serves as the only feasible possibility of security and belonging in a world of competing interests and self-concerns.

Toward the end of his life, Kerouac reveals his still present sense of the political in an interview with Ted Berrigan for *The Paris Review*; although he says that he is “bored with the new avant-garde and the skyrocketing sensationalism” (Plimpton 131), he expresses his attachment to America when he says, “I’m pro-American and the radical political involvements seem to tend elsewhere. . . . The country gave my Canadian family a good break, more or less, and we see no reason to demean said country” (132). Behind his

words is not boredom with the New Left, nor is it a non-political attitude; Kerouac is expressing his defensiveness about what he considers to be assaults against America. Similarly, in "What Am I Thinking About?" also published as "After Me, the Deluge," Kerouac writes in response to a request by the editor of the *Chicago Tribune Magazine* to state his opinion of the hippie movement and to assess his own role as a possible progenitor of new left radicalism. He begins by positioning himself sardonically as ostensibly uninvolved, as neither right nor left, but as "a Bippie-in-the-Middle" (*Good Blonde* 181); but, as the essay develops, it becomes clear that Kerouac is, at the very least, "disgusted" (183) with both the New Left and with the "alienated radicals" (183) from his own generation who have abandoned their principles and embraced either an anti-capitalist ideology or a bourgeois decadence¹⁸. He acknowledges those lost ideals of cultural change when he says, cryptically, "[t]he principles that built our very rocking chair 'Rest Your Head,' that renaissance straight-line, that linear, rational, yet sentimental care that keeps the heart set on conserving rather than destroying, are what anarchists . . . want" (186). If he seems to have been hoping for a movement toward a post-political individuality, one that would transcend the necessity of politics or, at least, redefine the political in terms of the individual after the failure of the old liberalism following the Second World War, it seems he has recognized the unlikelihood of its arrival. But although he jokes that he will "drop out – Great American tradition" (187), and accepts that "the liberality of poets . . . is conservative to the bone," it is also clear that he still has the hope for cultural renewal with which he began his writing career. He ends the essay with a positive phrase that he credits to Juvenal: "'No cede malis' (cede not to misfortune) (don't give into bad times)"

(188). The article in the *Chicago Tribune Magazine* was published September 28, 1969.

Kerouac died on October 21.

Kerouac's revision of the liberal narrative seems to have been a lifelong process; to paraphrase Richard Brautigan's speaker whose words began this chapter, it took Kerouac his whole life to get there, apparently not far from where he began.¹⁹ But that statement may be doing Kerouac a disservice. His reflection of a hopeful Saroyanesque liberalism in his early writing is always tempered by his recognition that another more realistic view is always present somewhere in the background; that the world may not be as "holy" and full of wonder as Saroyan presents it, especially when seen through the eyes of the young Jack Kerouac. Throughout *On the Road*, Sal is constantly faced with the possibility that life is just as "dead" as he feels it is; he can never fully satisfy his hunger for the America that he seeks and yet fails to find anywhere on the menu. In Kerouac's embrace of jazz and Buddhism, he finds possibilities for more accurate liberal visions, but both visions must be tempered by the realization of the darker side of both the world and of human subjectivity. Jazz can be effective in providing a model of a new liberal culture; the example of the jazz performance reveals that it must operate from within the culture and abide by the restrictions inherent in the form, but within those limitations lies the possibility for creative expression, and therefore a more accurate way of envisioning the world. Buddhism appears too utopic and unrealistic in its belief in the illusory nature of life, especially once Kerouac begins to "feel the presence of angels"; that is, once he returns to his Catholic roots and reaffirms his need for a hereafter to justify the life of suffering that is presumed in the first of the Noble Truths. Ultimately, it is Kerouac's troublesome literary success

that causes him to come to positive terms with liberal ideology and with the liberal culture in which he finds himself, for that "notoriety" forces him to recognize human failing as an ever-present reality, in others as well as in himself; and, it is through that recognition that he can finally see that all is not "holy," but that there is enough that is "holy" about the world to justify going home to "stand in the yard under the stars." As could be expected, Kerouac's liberalism by the end of his life is not far from what it was when he first began to write; however, by the end, he seems better able to acknowledge that the world is a deeply flawed place and yet he can still "preserve a sense of wonder" for himself (Tanner 349). Like George McGovern, Kerouac still seems to hope for the best while fully expecting something less than that, a form of realism which in itself may represent a new narrative of liberalism in a difficult world.

Notes to Chapter Five

1. According to Dennis McNally, the term "beatnik" was coined by *San Francisco Chronicle* columnist Herb Caen who meant the word as a derogative (McNally 252). Ellis Amburn says that "Kerouac scolded Caen when he encountered him in a North Beach bar in the late fifties, but Caen insisted he hadn't intended the word to be a put-down" (282). Caen had parodied *Sputnik*, the name of the satellite launched by the U.S.S.R. in 1957, an event that threatened not only the American military complex, but also its educational system. As Tom Engelhardt says in *The End of Victory Culture: Cold War America and the Disillusioning of a Generation*, "The grapefruit-sized satellite exposed America as technologically backward and aroused fears that its undisciplined next generation, evidently deficient in science, reading, and computational skills, would be no match for Russian youth" (107). When Caen attached the derisive term to his targets, his aim was not only on what he considered the Beat movement's lack of motivation and literary talent, but more intently on the wider potential that the Beats and youth like them presented for the decline of America scientifically and intellectually. In a letter to Stella Sampas, Kerouac refers to *Sputnik* as "the beep satellite" and calls it "a toy, and even if it ever becomes a manned satellite with war-controlling instruments, well war is just a toy too, big men play with toys" (Charters, *Selected Letters, 1957-1969*, 87-8). When the Beats refer to themselves as "Beatniks," the term takes on a self-deprecating irony and also acts as a reverse jab at critics like Caen.

In "The Game of the Name" from *Nothing More to Declare*, John Clellon Holmes says of the term: "That sneering diminutive, which is about all that is left of the Beat Generation today . . . , was originally coined by Herb Caen, a facetious columnist in San Francisco, to describe the bearded, sandaled coffee-house loungers of the North Beach Bohemia, but it was immediately adopted by the Mass Media as a handy caricature for everyone associated with Beatness, and thereby quickly entered the smear-vocabularies of all those perceptive people who like to call intellectuals 'eggheads.' . . . The notion (which became universal) that when you talked about the Beat attitude you were speaking of Caen's idea rather than Kerouac's, had the paradoxical effect of at once making the Beat Generation briefly notorious in the popular mind as a species of hip Amish, and more or less permanently obscuring the wider, and deeper, implications of the term" (127). He continues, "Mostly, the Beatniks stuck me as sad. It always seemed to me that they never realized how truly bad things were. They had reached no joy, no certainty, and small reconciliation with themselves by their secession. There was a wistful glance-backwards quality about all their studied withdrawals, like the lonely child's contention that 'they'll be sorry when I'm gone'" (128).

2. Linda Hutcheon notes that Jean Baudrillard refers to mass media's tendency to replace the "reality" of the object with its image as the process of *simulation*, and the image that replaces the "real" object as the *simulacrum*. She describes the process: first they [the mass media] *reflected* it [reality]; then they *masked* and perverted it; next they had to *mask its absence*; and finally they produced instead the *simulacrum* of the real, the destruction of meaning and of all relation to reality" (33). In other words, the *simulacrum* is a sign

without a corresponding referent in reality. Baudrillard's vision is a bleak one, but the idea serves to explain the iconization of Jack Duluoz or of Kerouac behind the text. Ronna C. Johnson uses the concept in her essay, "'You're Putting Me On': Jack Kerouac and the Postmodern Emergence." She says, "The 'image of Kerouac' is a fluctuating, indeterminate second order signifier, a copy for which no original has ever existed" (40).

3. Kerouac uses water as an image in many instances in *Big Sur* other than the particularly significant use to which I draw attention above, and a few examples may be enlightening here. As Duluoz leaves after visiting his Japanese Buddhist friend George Baso who is suffering from tuberculosis in a sanitarium, they play a game, "the magic game of glad freedom" (82), waving goodbye to each other in increasingly imaginative ways. Finally, Duluoz notes how Baso "throws a glass of water out the window in a big froosh of water and I don't see him any more" (83). George seems to disappear or dissolve into the water he throws, as if he has been freed at least momentarily from his suffering by Jack's honest act of playful interaction and human kindness.

Later, as Duluoz suffers from his hangovers, he drinks copiously from the creek as if to slake a deeper thirst than the physical; he says that he "slurped up tons of water kneeling at the creek race" (115), an image that takes on the connection of "holy water" (29) and he feels better "just like that suddenly" (115). The creek provides a form of refuge from his pain, and Duluoz says, "I go out at once again madly to the creek, always thinking the creek itself will give me water that will clear away everything and reassure me forever" (195). Interestingly, given the effects of the moon on bodies of water, Duluoz's worst night occurs on the night of "an enormous full moon at full fat standing there" (196), and Duluoz finds himself "mooning by the creek" (199); later, he imagines that "a million moony arms are thrashing around" him (200). As he struggles to sleep, he questions his decision to invite people he barely knows to his canyon: "What on earth have I brought these people for and why just on this particular night of that moon that moon that moon?" (210).

4. Later in the novel Duluoz paraphrases Emerson's words in his realization that he has followed the classic writer's advice in regard to his writing; even when he knows that his words "will bring annoyance," Duluoz says, "here I am a perfectly obvious fool American writer doing just that not only for a living . . . but because if I don't write what I actually see happening in this unhappy globe . . . I think I'll have been sent on earth by poor God for nothing" (166-7).

5. Sacvan Bercovitch says in *Rites of Assent* that the classic writers opposed the dominant culture, but that they felt "compelled . . . to speak their opposition as keepers of the dream. . . . The many disparities they register between social and 'ultimate' values were not to them intrinsic defects of the American Way. They were aberrations . . . their denunciations were part of a ritual attempt to wake their countrymen up to the potential of their common culture. And, if anything, the ritual becomes more insistent in proportion to the writer's sense of despair. For of course the faith that magnified the culture into a cosmos carried with it an ominous prospect. If America failed, then the cosmos itself – the

laws of history, nature, and the mind – had failed as well” (60-1). Bercovitch speaks of Emerson, but the sentence holds well for Kerouac, also: “This is not to reduce Emerson to a liberal apologist. It is to say that his radicalism cannot be understood outside of his conservatism” (61fn).

6. In *Irrational Man: A Study in Existential Philosophy*, William Barrett expresses ideas that help to explain Duluoz’s struggle with rationality and with the perception of holiness in his experience at Big Sur when Barrett notes that modern humans too easily confuse rationality with reasonableness. We think that the current age, in all its apparent danger, must somehow be transformed; but, what is needed is to assess accurately our own age as it is, uniquely our own, which is what Duluoz does: he assesses his situation as unique to himself and through an act of will, forces his recovery in his own way.

Barrett also says, “If, as the Existentialists hold, an authentic life is not handed to us on a platter but involves our own act of self-determination (self-finitization) within our time and place, then we have got to know and face up to that time, both in its threats and its promises” (271). The recognition of the finite nature of human existence means the end of the Enlightenment belief in the perfection of the human species and of the notion of infinite progress, ideas that are innate to older forms of liberalism; and, according to Barrett, such an end may not be a bad thing. Placing the meaning of the individual life and of human life broadly considered somewhere in the future robs life of any present meaning; but the Existentialists have made clear that any meaning for human life must be located in the *now*.

As Barrett says, “The realization that all human truth must not only shine against an enveloping darkness, but that such truth is even shot through with its own darkness may be depressing, and not only to utopians. But it has the virtue of restoring to man his sense of the primal mystery surrounding all things, a sense of mystery from which the glittering world of his technology estranges him, but without which he is not truly human” (275). By accepting that not all things are holy, Duluoz allows himself to accept the “primal mystery,” which is what he does in reaching out to the cross and in his desire to stand in his back yard “under the stars” (*Big Sur* 216).

7. In an interview at his home in Florida in 1968, Kerouac tells Ted Berrigan, “[t]he Beat group dispersed as you say in the early sixties, all went their own way, and this is my way: home life, as in the beginning, with a little toot once in a while in local bars” (Plimpton 131).

8. In his interview with Ted Berrigan, Kerouac refers to himself as “a writer of ‘notoriety,’” and adds parenthetically, “(notice I don’t say ‘fame’)” (Plimpton 124). Kerouac seems to be self-deprecating in his assessment of his literary reputation, but I believe his words to Berrigan suggest a very realistic point of view in regard to the cultural role into which he has been cast and serve to support my contention that Kerouac found his “fame” at least, troubling, at worst, destructive. As he says later in the interview, “Notoriety and public confession in the literary form is a frazzler of the heart you were born with, believe me” (128).

9. According to “cosmicbaseball.com,” a website dedicated to Beat writers and their affiliations, Rexroth did not long hold his high opinion of Kerouac and the other Beats who had considered him an elder statesman of avant garde San Francisco poetry. A review of *On the Road* by Rexroth refers to Kerouac’s writing as “terrifying gibberish that sounds like a tape recording of a gang bang...”, and he wrote later to his wife that the Beats were “rotten and dishonest and disloyal.” His review of Kerouac’s *Mexico City Blues* was critical of the poet’s embrace of Buddhism, saying that Buddha to Kerouac “is a dime-store incense burner, glowing and glowering sinisterly [*sic*] in the dark corner of a Beatnik pad and just thrilling the wits out of bad little girls,” and he compared Kerouac to “those wax work figures in the old rubberneck dives in Chinatown” (McNally 274).

The website does not offer explanations for Rexroth’s vitriolic attacks, but there are possibilities other than simply his sense of aesthetic revulsion. Dennis McNally describes how Rexroth was insulted when, at a strategy meeting just before the “Six Gallery Reading,” Kerouac “had pulled his moustache and kissed him” which put him on Rexroth’s “constantly shifting ‘shit list’” (205). Also, Ellis Amburn in *Subterranean Kerouac* describes an altercation between Rexroth and Kerouac at a dinner party that Rexroth held for Ginsberg, Cassady, Philip Whalen, and Peter Orlovsky in late-1955; Rexroth refused the drunken Kerouac’s summons for more wine which led to angry words and the subsequent expulsion of the guests from Rexroth’s home (232). But, perhaps the most probable reason for Rexroth’s dislike of Kerouac is that Robert Creeley, a close friend of Kerouac in San Francisco, started an affair with, and subsequently ran off with, Rexroth’s wife, Marthe, and Kerouac allowed Creeley to use his house for the illicit liaisons (which may explain Rexroth’s adjectives, “rotten and dishonest and disloyal”). As Amburn says, “After Kerouac’s complicity in his cuckolding, Rexroth’s hatred for Jack turned into a blazing obsession” (245).

Kerouac’s feelings for Rexroth were reciprocal; as he says in a letter to Gary Snyder, “I am mad at Rexroth not because he lost his temper because I wanted more wine in his house, & made unruly demands I suppose, but because of what he said about *Doctor Sax* the book I wrote in 1952 [which Rexroth had seen in manuscript]; it smacked of jealousy and spite and it smacked of that musty parasitism of the critic, who cosily makes his living or reputation off the out-on-a-limb creations of others.” He calls Rexroth a “rude, piddling, envious fish-wife” (Charters, *Selected Letters 1940-1956* 540-1). Also, in *The Dharma Bums*, narrator Ray Smith groups Rheinhold Cacoethes, the Rexroth character, among the “bow-tied wild-haired old anarchist fuds” (11), and describes him at the Six Gallery reading making “a little funny speech in his snide funny voice” and later “wiping his eyes with a handkerchief” (16) apparently out of “gladness” (14) at “the birth of the San Francisco Poetry Renaissance” (13), for which Smith seems to be taking much credit.

Certainly, the objectivity of Rexroth’s opinions of Kerouac’s writing is called into question by his personal animosity, as is Kerouac’s sentiment toward Rexroth, and Kerouac’s quest for a liberal sense of community among the writers of the post-War American counter-culture seems to have been partly derailed by the individualistic natures of their personalities.

10. E.L. Doctorow's *The Book of Daniel*, a novel based on the Rosenbergs, reflects the control of the masses that Horkheimer and Adorno postulate. The narrator Daniel Isaacson shows his disdain for a mass culture that substitutes mindlessness for experience, history, and education: "What Disneyland proposes is a technique of abbreviated shorthand culture for the masses, a mindless thrill, like an electric shock, that insists at the same time on the recipient's rich psychic relation to his country's history and language and literature. In a forthcoming time of highly governed masses in an overpopulated world, this technique may be extremely useful both as a substitute for education and, eventually, as a substitute for experience. One cannot tour Disneyland today without noticing its real achievement, which is the handling of crowds. . . . The problems of mass ingress and egress seem to have been solved here to a degree that would light admiration in the eyes of an SS transport officer" (289-90).

11. In the essay, Podhoretz attacks the Beat aesthetic as he sees it for its "worship of primitivism and spontaneity [which] is nothing more than a cover for hostility to intelligence; it arises from a pathetic poverty of feeling as well. The hipsters and hipster-lovers of the Beat Generation are rebels, all right, but not against anything so sociological and historical as the middle class or capitalism or even respectability. This is a revolt of the spiritually underprivileged and the crippled of soul . . ." (211). He extends his assault to find in the Beats "the same spirit which animates the young savages in leather jackets who have been running amuck in the last few years with their switch-blades and zip guns" (211). Such criticism, although still detectable, is now largely discredited as shallow and reactionary.

12. The desire for a sense of inclusion that is generated from the possibility to dissent only within the limits of what Bercovitch calls the "vision of America" also appears in texts that seem to present a competing discourse to that of middle America. In Chester Himes' *If He Hollers Let Him Go* (1945), the African-American narrator Bob alternates between a deep love for America and a deep hatred, depending on how he has been treated in any given situation; he says, "I felt the size of it, the immensity of the production [the war effort]. I felt the importance of it, the importance of the whole war. . . . I felt included in it all; I had never felt included before. It was a wonderful feeling" (38). Success and its trappings mean nothing to Bob if he cannot enjoy the same rights as he thinks white people enjoy, and that difference is reflected in his masculinity; as he says, the only way he "could be a man" (153) is to be equal to the white culture that needs his labor in a time of war. He says, "I knew that that was at the bottom of it all. If I couldn't live in America as an equal in the minds, hearts, and souls of all white people, if I couldn't know that I had a chance to do anything any other American could, to go as high as an American citizenship would carry anybody, there'd never be anything in this country for me anyway" (154).

Tom Engelhardt considers such racial integration during the War as a product of liberalism in league with other American discursive systems: "Inclusion, the response of the 'vital center,' the liberal elite (now shorn of a more radical past and rearmed as anti-Communists), the globalizing corporation, and the CIA, was an attempt to expand the boundaries of the story to allow in a tamed version of the alien Other. The former racial

enemy abroad and the problematic racial Other at home were both to be invited to join the struggle for global freedom" (100).

13. The Gap also used the late jazz trumpeter and vocalist Chet Baker in a "Chet Baker wore khakis" advertisement. According to James Gavin's liner notes to the CD *Deep in a Dream: The Ultimate Chet Baker Collection*, (Pacific Jazz/EMI 7243-5-35937-2-8, released 2002), Baker's appeal as a counter-culture icon stems from his "beautiful, winsome face; and a stare as enigmatic as the Mona Lisa's," "his cool pose, so often compared to James Dean," and his "sound like candy." But, for the Gap ad to work most effectively in valorizing a member of the counter-culture, probably also useful were his addiction to heroin and his "mysterious, drug-related death in Amsterdam" in 1988 where he lived "among his adoring fans." In the 1950s, "Baker was *marketed* as the ultimate heartthrob in jazz" (my emphasis). Then, as now, his skill and expression as a musician were not necessary to his value as a marketable commodity. Today, Baker, as a musician, like Kerouac, as a writer, "is selling more records than he ever did in life." His final months are the subject of the film *Let's Get Lost* (1989) directed by Bruce Weber, which Gavin credits with helping to create a Chet Baker "revival"; the film and the resurgence of Baker's popularity probably also had much to do with his appearance in an ad for the Gap.

Ronna C. Johnson refers to the Gap advertisements as part of "a campaign that nostalgically and ironically appropriates and pastiches, recycles and refits, images of the 1950s and 1960s to sell khaki trousers in the 1990s" and notes that besides Kerouac and Baker, the ads used the images of Allen Ginsberg, Miles Davis, Andy Warhol, James Dean, Ernest Hemingway, Arthur Miller, Pablo Picasso, and Truman Capote (54, note 3).

14. As Robert Bennett says in his essay, "Teaching the Beat Generation to Generation X," the acceptance in recent times by young people of the ideas of the Beat counterculture is often based on their erroneous equation of what is considered normal youthful resistance to authority with that of the Beats in the 1950s. Bennett points out that "it is much easier to *celebrate* them today than it was to *be* them in the 1950s. To begin with, there is a qualitative difference between actively producing a contemporary cultural revolution and belatedly consuming that revolution fifty years after the fact" (5, italics in original).

15. Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. posited the necessity of *The Vital Center* in 1949 to replace the terms right and left in American politics, and to establish what he called a more politically-involved generation that he called "new radicalism" modeled after ideas already expressed by Niebuhr. As he says, "[t]he new radicalism derives its power from an acceptance of conflict – an acceptance combined with a determination to create a social framework where conflict issues, not in excessive anxiety, but in creativity. The center is vital; the center must hold. The object of the new radicalism is to restore the center, to reunite individual and community in fruitful union" (255-6).

16. The difficulty in differentiating between right and left is hardly confined to American politics and culture. According to an article titled "Canadians Confused by Left & Right" published in the on-line *National Post* April 29, 2002 and written by Chris Cobb of the

Ottawa Citizen, "A large number of Canadians do not know the difference between the political right and the left, according to a new poll. When Compas pollsters recently asked Canadians whether the Canadian Alliance party was to the right or left of the NDP, fewer than half answered correctly. Only 47% knew the Alliance was to the right of the New Democrats, while 18% said it was to the political left of the social-democratic NDP. Three per cent thought they were on the same political wing and 32% said they did not know. Conrad Winn, the president of Compas, which conducted the poll for Southam News and Global Television, said the ignorance of such a fundamental aspect of politics may be even worse than the numbers first suggest. Almost three quarters of Canadians, he said, either do not know, or are fuzzy on, the concept of a political right and left. 'Given that 18% say wrongly that the Alliance is to the left, and are probably guessing, it is fair to assume that a corresponding 18% among those who correctly said the Alliance was right wing were guessing too,' Mr. Winn said."

17. John Clellon Holmes speaks to his generation's political outlook in "The Name of the Game" from *Nothing More to Declare*, when he recalls the sense of being a young person in America after the Second World War: "There was a feeling in the first years after World War II that is difficult to evoke now. It was a feeling of expectation without reasonable hope, of recklessness without motivation, of uniqueness seeking an image. Probably mine was the last generation to feel that its shared experience had produced an attitude so widespread and so peculiar to us that it could be expressed in a single descriptive term – in other words, the last *postwar* generation. . . . [O]ur political and social attitudes were almost wholly in the emotional style of the thirties, and the only philosophical insight that seemed to smack exclusively of our time was existentialism – though its bleakness and absurdities seemed more suited to a ruined and embittered Europe than to the America we knew, so powerfully flexing itself in its forenoon on the world stage" (104-5). Certainly, Kerouac was subject to this same "feeling."

18. Kerouac displays his doubt about the sincerity of the political conscience of his former associates in a 1964 letter to Italian literary anthologist Fernanda Pivano; Kerouac flatly refused to allow his material to be placed in her compilation of Beat writing which also contained the work of Ginsberg and Corso. He says of his colleagues, "They've both become political fanatics, both have begun to revile me because I don't join them in their political opinions What these bozos and their friends are up to now is simply the last act in their original adoption and betrayal of any truly 'beat' credo. . . . Now that we're all getting to be middleaged I can see that they're just frustrated hysterical provocateurs and attention-seekers with nothing on their mind but rancor towards 'America' and the life of ordinary people" (Charters, *Selected Letters 1957-1969* 429). According to Charters, Pivano included several of Kerouac's poems in the anthology regardless of his objections.

The radicalism, violence, and resistance of the New Left, "the political and cultural excesses" (Leonard Williams 75), that irritated Kerouac in the 1960s were a result of the perceived connection of movements like Students for a Democratic Society with the Democratic Party and with the university intellectualism that he found so offensive. But Kerouac's disdain seems to have sprouted from another source; the New Left movement

“appeared to betray its early, fundamental principles” (75) of liberalism. Where the movement once heralded ideals of equality and community, ideals with which Kerouac would have agreed, it soon adopted a more violent and cynical outlook, which was “no doubt accelerated by governmental intransigence” (75) from the FBI and other policing institutions.

19. Not all critics would agree that Kerouac approaches some form of spiritual comfort toward the end of his life. In ““Blessed are the Beatniks,” Peter Gilmour notes the innate spirituality of the Beat Movement and of Jack Kerouac himself, and Gilmour asks, not rhetorically, “Might Jack Kerouac someday emerge as one of the preeminent Catholic novelists of the 20th century? Might his books become classic spiritual texts someday? Probably not, because, unlike other spiritual giants, this creative and conflicted artist never attained spiritual peace before his death at the age of 47” (7).

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