

On the Road: The Original Scroll

Edited by Howard Cunnell, with essays by Cunnell, Penny Vlagopoulos, George Mouratidis, and Joshua Kupetz. New York: Viking, 2007.

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To paraphrase Gilbert Millstein, the publication of Jack Kerouac's *On the Road: The Original Scroll* is a historic occasion as it exposes an authentic work of art. At long last, readers can explore the text in very nearly the original wording as Kerouac set it down.

Four scholarly essays, including Howard Cunnell's fine composition history, preface the scroll text. Cunnell, a writer from East Sussex who has written a forthcoming novel, is an interesting choice for handling one of the most challenging editing jobs in American literature. Some Beat scholars have expressed surprise that a British person with apparently no experience in editing literary texts was selected to prepare this one-of-a-kind, very American text. The only pertinent question should be whether the selected person can accomplish the project, but one would think that other scholars with both an extensive background in Beat Studies and a track record of editing experience would have been considered. Cunnell brings a potentially fresh approach, but maybe freshness is not the quality one anticipates in a job of this sort.

In his introductory essay, Cunnell outlines the confusing, convoluted, and often misunderstood path of *On the Road*'s publication, making short work of the notion that Kerouac's most famous book was written in twenty days in the spring of 1951: "*On the Road* does not appear out of the clear blue air" (3). Drawing from Kerouac's notebooks, journals, letters, and various typescripts, Cunnell takes advantage of his unlimited access to Kerouac's archive to detail the development of Kerouac's road story. He provides helpful summaries from three proto-versions of the story that Kerouac wrote in 1948 ("Ray Smith" version), 1949 ("Red Moultrie / Vern Pomery" version), and 1950 ("Gone on the Road"). Blending biography and composition history, he provides sound reasons for Kerouac's inability to make progress on the story. Other scholars have covered much of this material in one way or another, most notably Tim Hunt in his groundbreaking *Kerouac's Crooked Road: Development of a Fiction* (Archon 1981). But Cunnell has had the greatest access to the Kerouac archive, even adding background to the anecdote of Kerouac's submission of the scroll to Robert Giroux, editor at Harcourt, Brace: Kerouac, according to Cunnell, had submitted a proto-version of the book, "Gone on the Road," to Giroux in 1950, so Giroux knew about the developing road story before a jubilant Kerouac unfurled the scroll typescript across his desk in 1951.

The other essay contributors, as young scholars and newcomers to Beat Studies, do not possess the imprimatur one might expect to attend a text of this literary weight, although their backgrounds indicate strong potential. Penny Vlagopoulos is completing her doctorate in English and comparative literature at Columbia University. George

Mouratidis is working on a doctorate on the literature of the Beats at the University of Melbourne, in Australia. Joshua Kupetz teaches at the University of Colorado at Boulder, where he teaches poetry writing and contemporary American literature courses. In short, none of these scholars is a seasoned PhD with a history of Kerouac scholarship. Their inclusion as the figures of authority in the editing and packaging of the *On the Road* typescript scroll is fraught with risk, yet also loaded with youthful enthusiasm for a book that ultimately appeals to the young.

Penny Vlagopoulos follows Cunnell's introductory essay with "Rewriting America: Kerouac's Nation of 'Underground Monsters,'" a thoughtful and meditative exploration of the relationship between the individual and the nation. Vlagopoulos places *On the Road*'s genesis in its historical cultural setting, drawing on such documents as a previously classified US National Security report, George Kennan's 1947 article "Sources of Soviet Conduct," and William H. Whyte's 1956 bestseller, *The Organization Man*. George Mouratidis's "'Into the Heart of Things': Neal Cassady and the Search for the Authentic" traces Kerouac's depictions of Cassady through the scroll and its revised versions, *Visions of Cody*, and the Viking publication of *On the Road*. By tracking the Cassady character's metamorphosis through these stages, Mouratidis demonstrates that Kerouac "underscores the *process* of authentication itself" (70). Since the process of authentication is *becoming* not arriving, he claims there can be no authentic *On the Road* text. This is a wonderfully "shifty" idea, further supported by Mouratidis's postmodern interpretations of biography, specifically the meeting of Kerouac and Cassady.

In "'The Straight Line Will Take You Only to Death': The Scroll Manuscript and Contemporary Literary Theory," Joshua Kupetz recommends that readers privilege the literary value of the novel over of its cultural value, and he charts the novel's location in terms of literary criticism. Kupetz places Carl Solomon, an editor who courted then rejected *On the Road*, as having a viewpoint consistent with New Critical discourse: "New Criticism was the forge within which Kerouac fashioned *The Town and the City* and the crucible from which he had to escape in order to write *On the Road*" (85). Along with Cunnell, these scholars have researched their topics well, yet surprisingly none of them has cited or even referred to previously published Kerouac study or *On the Road* criticism. By ignoring work done by George Dardess, Robert Holton, Regina Weinreich, John Tytell, Tim Hunt, and numerous others, they miss the opportunity to provide important scholarly context.

Each essay presents provocative ideas and offers fresh insights, but my guess is that most readers will skip the essays and head straight to the original scroll content: "I first met met Neal not long after my father died..." I find that reading the original scroll text is a fascinating experience: potent, surprising, intoxicating. Many reviews have already centered on the differences between the scroll and the Viking publication (including my own review in *American Book Review*) and, while acknowledging the brilliance of the text, I'd like to offer a different approach more directly aimed at the Beat studies scholars and other savvy readers.

When I first held the book I did not have my own scroll notes for comparison, but at least I could flip from the text to the front cover and compare the text with the facsimile. On the second page of text, we have this: “. . . Neal got up nervously, paced around thinking, and decided the thing to do was have Louanne making breakfast and sweeping the floor. Then I went away. That was all I knew of Neal at the outset.” The facsimile of the scroll on the cover of the book has this: “. . . Neal got up nervously, paced around thinking [words cut off at the book’s edge] thing to do was Louanne making breakfast and sweeping the flo[words cut off at book’s edge] This was all I knew of Neal at the outset.” The editor inserted “have” and changed “This” to “That.” Three short sentences, two substantive emendations. And I had only just started reading.

Later, I compared my scroll notes and the photos of the scroll (from the Christie’s auction catalog and Rolling Stone magazine). I found numerous emendations of substantives and accidentals. First page of text: “At one point Allen Ginsberg and I talked about these letters . . .” The scroll does not have “Ginsberg” and the Viking 1957 publication does not have the corresponding “Marx”: why would the editor insert “Ginsberg” here? Maybe he wanted to alert new readers to the character’s identity. That may be permissible in a footnote. It should not be a textual insertion.

Another instance: On page 206: “There was no end to the American sadness and the American madness.” The scroll has this: “There is no end to the American sadness and the American madness.”

The scroll typescript for too long has been represented by rumor and hearsay, and it is renowned for being the great, unread prose masterpiece of the 20th century. Its publication should clear up issues, not cloud them. If the publisher commemorated the book with 108 pages of scholarly essays, at least ten pages could have been dedicated to a list of substantive emendations. Cunnell states in his “Note on the Text,” “The scroll manuscript has been edited with the intention of presenting a text that is as close as possible to the one Kerouac produced between April 2 and April 22, 1951” (101). This rationale for copyediting would be fine, if it were entirely maintained. Sometimes misspellings are corrected; sometimes they are not. Sometimes lower case letters are changed to capital (where a capital letter is required), sometimes they are not. The lack of a list of substantive emendations means that the book, which is marvelous to read, is of limited usefulness to textual scholars. One cannot know what Kerouac typed.

Several recommendations are in order. First, the next edition of this book should include an appendix that lists the emendations of substantives and accidentals. The book has great value that can be enhanced by clarification of the copyediting rationale. Finally, a new edition of the scroll should be published, either as an accurately typeset facsimile (as is purportedly the case with *Some of the Dharma*) or, ideally, as a facsimile scroll. A facsimile publication of the first or second sort would not negate the importance of nor diminish the audience for the current *Original Scroll*. Instead, it would offer a scholarly text for reference by a different audience, particularly one with the interests and needs of the Beat Studies Association.

