

Jack Kerouac and the Literary Imagination

by Nancy M. Grace

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Nancy Grace has written a richly philosophical text with a deceptively straightforward thesis: Kerouac was “a man with a holy mission to be achieved through life, language, and art” (1). As Grace acknowledges, viewing Kerouac’s work and wanderings in terms of a spiritual quest has become something of critical commonplace, but she presents her scholarship as distinctive in its emphasis on “American folk culture and wisdom literature” (25). Unlike many other book-length studies of Kerouac’s work, Grace does not feel obliged to deal with his entire oeuvre. Instead she devotes substantial chapters to *On the Road*, *Doctor Sax*, *Some of the Dharma*, *Mexico City Blues*, and *Desolation Angels*. These chapters include some wonderful instances of close reading in which Grace really engages the multiple layers of Kerouac’s prose—her analysis of the Detroit movie house incident in *On the Road* finally illuminates this intriguing and oft-quoted passage. She also gives considerable attention to Kerouac’s early spiritual and literary development through detailed study of his journals and letters. The result is a densely layered consideration of Kerouac as a specifically American embodiment of the traditional prophet figure, in which equal attention is given to both expansive metaphysical ideas and Kerouac’s unique particulars of style. The readers who will get the most out of this book are those who already have a reasonable familiarity with Kerouac’s work. Grace’s deeply probing approach requires the reader to hold various complex concepts in mind from chapter to chapter (such as phanopoeia, the aerial sublime, and Spengler’s pseudomorphosis). Hence *Jack Kerouac and the Literary Imagination* is not an introductory book, but one that will take more seasoned readers further into the subtleties of Kerouac’s own thinking. And, indeed, after decades of general overviews and autobiographical studies, this approach is exactly what Kerouac scholarship needs.

Overall, the book combines close analysis of Kerouac’s Duluo persona with a penetrating critique of his lifelong struggle to reconcile Catholicism and Buddhism. Grace views Jack Duluo as quintessentially American, a “vibrant representation of the nation’s mythic heritage as a New World grown out of and superseding the Old” (9). The value of this perspective is that it captures the distinctive quality of Kerouac’s prose, its fusion of the intensely personal with the broadly mythic, so that the Duluo persona becomes an Everyman who is also endearingly ordinary. The Everyman is, more particularly, every *American*, and Grace positions him within the American “master narrative” as a folk hero who “as a self-appointed savior of the world straddles plains and mountains as well as popular and elite cultures” (14). Having presented Duluo as a folk hero with teachings to impart, Grace then connects Kerouac’s work to the tradition of “wisdom literature.” While this broad category seems a little too amorphous, it does facilitate Grace’s key, overarching argument—that Kerouac’s idiosyncratic and seemingly

casual techniques are actually performing important rhetorical functions in the transmission of his spiritual insights. (For example, she links his tendency to create character “types” to the oral folk tradition, rather than seeing this trait as a technical weakness).

Grace’s treatment of Kerouac’s spiritual quest is the most challenging aspect of the book. She looks carefully at his religious development as revealed through early fiction, letters, and journals, and while she does a marvelous job of taking the reader on a far-reaching journey into the eclectic reaches of Kerouac’s own reflections, at times this journey becomes disorientating in its complexity. Gnosticism dominates the early discussion; Grace notes Kerouac’s knowledge of the Gnostic teacher Mani but also refrains from making “an intentional causal link” between Gnosticism and Kerouac’s metaphysics (18). However, she then develops highly specific connections between the motif of the pearl in *On the Road* and the ancient Gnostic text “The Song of the Pearl,” despite the fact that Kerouac himself seems not to have known this work. Certainly, Grace does demonstrate the Gnostic dimensions to Kerouac’s thought, but I find it strange that she gives William Blake so little attention in this matter, for Blake provided Kerouac with a powerful distillation of Gnostic theosophy that moved him greatly, as is clear from his letters and journals. This omission seems to me the one weakness in Grace’s formidable assemblage of Kerouac’s religious sources, which include such obscure figures as Dionysius the Pseudo-Areopagite and Anicius Boethius.

In fact, the strongest chapter, to my mind, is “Songs and Prayers, *Mexico City Blues* and Other Poems,” the chapter with the least gnostic freight on board. Here, Grace provides a gratifyingly specific analysis of the jazz and blues elements in Kerouac’s poetry, offering new insights despite the bulk of existing criticism on the subject. Furthermore, Grace has closely studied the original *Mexico City Blues* notebooks, and she elegantly summarizes the transformation of the original handwritten verses into their published form, clarifying the vexed question of how spontaneous Kerouac’s composition process actually was. Grace handles this issue productively, revealing Kerouac’s self-mythologizing while acknowledging that a significant number of the poems were, in fact, printed as originally written. The revisions he initiated, mainly in terms of overall arrangement, “transformed an inchoate collection of prayers, dreams, stories, and tics into an autobiographical poem of spiritual awakening and atonement” (173). Grace also performs a close aesthetic reading of Kerouac’s poetry, the best to date in my opinion, which includes an illuminating consideration of his debt to James Joyce that ranges from stylistic specificity to philosophical vision. Both were postmodernly aware of the multiple ways in which identity and language intersect, and much of Kerouac’s poetry explores this interdependence from a Buddhist perspective. Yet while Kerouac’s metaphysical musings led him through a preoccupation with voice and sound to moments of actual silence in his poetry, his fascination with recording the mind in motion ultimately resulted in a visually dominant and, Grace argues, aesthetically successful poetic style. Overall, this long chapter is highly persuasive in its ultimate claim that Kerouac’s deep, prolonged experiments with voice and image place his songs and prayers at the center of his quest for wisdom.

In Grace's reading, that this quest ended not with calm spiritual illumination but in a rather anguished return to Catholicism does not devalue Kerouac's journey. She ends her study with *Desolation Angels* and *Big Sur*, two later works that record Kerouac's unsuccessful struggle to let go of his desire for a personal god. But Grace connects Kerouac's fusion of religious systems to his blending of genres, and it is this unconstrained openness that constitutes Kerouac's value as a "contemporary prophet and sage" (233). Ultimately, Duloz puts his faith in language itself, in the power of poetry to reveal and channel wisdom. As Grace points out, for Kerouac, American culture "has already fallen in part because it strayed too far from its natural voice, language, and expressive mediums" (227). Kerouac's desire to recapture ancient bardic potency through Duloz affirms the "imaginative act of literary self-transformation" as a means to discover and transmit knowledge (232). The portrait Grace gives us of Kerouac is, truly, that of "a man with a holy mission to be achieved through life, language, and art" (1), but also that of a man who was both cursed and blessed by his sensual, passionate love for language.