

Why Kerouac Matters: The Lessons of On the Road (They're Not What You Think)

John Leland

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In September 2007, Viking published both the original typescript of Jack Kerouac's most famous novel, *On the Road: The Original Scroll*, and John Leland's *Why Kerouac Matters* as a companion volume. Leland's study, the publicity blurb tells us, is "a wry, insightful, and playful discussion" of *On the Road* that demonstrates that the novel "still matters because at its core it is a book about how to grow up." Moreover, the blurb declares, Leland has discovered that the "core themes" of *Road* are "the search for atonement, redemption, and divine revelation."

This makes some sense if we see Leland as writing to correct *On the Road's* original reception in the popular press. It makes less sense in the context of the critical work on Kerouac published over the last several decades. Perhaps what Viking meant is that *Why Kerouac Matters* is for casual readers who haven't discovered that there is a difference between the media construction of the Beats as "Beatniks" with dopey scowls and bongos and the Beats as serious writers. That Leland knows much of the relevant critical work on Kerouac is clear from his "Notes on Sources," but apparently either Viking's aims for marketing *On the Road: The Original Scroll* or Leland's sense of his intended audience ruled out engaging other studies of Kerouac's seriousness directly or openly. From an academic perspective (which Viking perhaps saw as irrelevant and Leland perhaps as insufficiently hip), this is unfortunate, since it makes it very difficult to distinguish Leland's insights from the insights and analyses from prior studies that he has rolled into his discussion.

Perhaps a more serious limitation—for those wanting to factor Leland's work into the scholarly discussion of *On the Road*—is the way he blurs the differences between the newly available April 1951 version (i.e. *The Original Scroll*) and the long available version that Viking published it in 1957. These two versions of *On the Road* differ in a number of ways. Each has material the other lacks, and Kerouac's narration shifted subtly, but significantly, as he reworked the scroll into the 1957 version, both, it seems, in response to his own evolving sense of the book and in response to the demands of the editors and lawyers who mediated its belated publication. Leland could have sharpened his analysis by considering how the differences in the two versions develop "grow[ing] up" and "the search for atonement, redemption, and divine revelation." Instead, he mostly treats the two versions as if they are a single book.

Leland's comments on how Kerouac drew on Melville (in his chapter, "The Parable of the Wet Hitchhiker") illustrate this conflating of the two versions. "In these opening scenes," Leland notes, "Sal echoes the restlessness of another vagabond narrator, Ishmael, from *Moby-Dick*" (13). This implies that Kerouac invokes Ishmael as a parallel to Sal in the 1957 version as Sal prepares to leave on his first trip (see Chapter 2, Part one). Kerouac did not, however, liken Sal to Ishmael in the 1957 *Road*. Rather, he links "Jack" to Ishmael at the equivalent point in the

scroll version. Leland's awareness of this is clear, since he adds (a few sentences below his comment about Sal and Ishmael), "In the scroll draft, the narrator [i.e. Jack, not Sal] calls himself a 'veritable Ishmael' heading out on his first journey." Leland, then, is in one sense justified in proposing the parallel between Sal and Ishmael, because Sal is a later version of Jack in the scroll draft. But the way the two versions are blurred here implicitly erases a question: if Kerouac, in the scroll draft, explicitly connects Jack to Ishmael, why does he delete this allusion in the 1957 version? That Kerouac introduces other allusions to Melville as he revised the scroll into the 1957 version shows that he continued to think about parallels between Melville's novel and his own. What is, I'd suggest, significant about Jack in the scroll being explicitly a "veritable Ishmael," while Sal in the equivalent unit of the 1957 *Road* is not, is that this difference points to how, for Kerouac, Jack as narrator and Sal as narrator in these two versions are somewhat different figures and that this difference is significant for understanding the differences between the two versions of the novel. Such differences have implications for Leland's position but aren't addressed. Instead, Leland primarily discusses the 1957 *Road*, dropping in bits from the scroll for seasoning. There is, perhaps, a certain irony in this emphasis on the 1957 *Road* in a study published and promoted in tandem with *On the Road: The Original Scroll*.

Perhaps what makes *Why Kerouac Matters* so disappointing, though, is neither Leland's impressionistic borrowings from earlier criticism nor his blurring of the differences between the scroll and 1957 versions of the novel. Rather it is the way his study shows that he is, finally, a sympathetic reader of *On the Road* who has some potentially useful insights, yet, it seems, lacked the time or will to develop them into a sustained critical discussion. The following passage illustrates Leland's method:

The ability to see things in two states at the same time—to see Dean as both myth and rat, or Hollywood as resonant and hollow—is a model for Sal's lessons in storytelling and time. It underlies Kerouac's quest to find Whitman's America in the post-Whitman landscape. Like the book's structure, it employs a jazz way of knowledge, completing a chorus by improvising on it from every angle, with each version contributing to the whole. (23-24)

Sal does see Dean "as both myth and rat," but how this ability (which echoes Nick's perspective on Gatsby in *The Great Gatsby*) relates to the "quest" to find "Whitman's America in the post-Whitman landscape" isn't clear. Perhaps two distinct claims are being blurred together here. Or perhaps the way these things relate is more complex than Leland's explanation. And how either of these thematic points link to the "book's structure" and jazz is similarly either vague or undeveloped. The problematic suggestiveness of Leland's exposition is compounded on the next page. Speaking of Sal's encounter late in Part One with the Ghost of the Susquehanna, which Sal finds terrifying, Leland writes, "The Ghost is a ghost because he inhabits the past and present simultaneously. This is the presence of Whitman's America in Sal's own. . ." (25) The first of these sentences offers a way to make sense of Sal's other comments in this passage about the

American past and wilderness, but offering the Ghost as a figure for Whitman (if that's what Leland is doing here) seems at odds with the claim two pages earlier that "Kerouac's quest [is] to find Whitman's America in the post-Whitman landscape." If Whitman's presence in the present is the Ghost of the Susquehanna, the tone of this episode suggests that neither Sal nor Kerouac see this as the goal.

Leland may not be wrong in his analysis or conclusions, but his impressionistic exposition makes it difficult to distinguish claims that are possibly insightful and potentially productively (though elliptical) from claims that are facile, confused or dead ends. Perhaps Leland's flip/hip celebration of *Road* as a primer for "grow[ing] up" will, as Viking apparently hoped, strike general readers as evocative and dynamic and encourage them to revere *Road* as a classic American novel. Unfortunately, for those working seriously with Kerouac, the book's method can seem akin to tossing random paint balloons for the spatter. This would seem sufficient reason simply to skip *Why Kerouac Matters*. However, Leland is empathetic enough as a reader and sufficiently aware of cultural dynamics and patterns for some of the spatter to be potentially productive.