

Hidden Roads: Improvisational Textuality and *On the Road*

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For nearly as long as we've been aware of Kerouac's *On the Road*, we've known that the book Viking published in September 1957 wasn't precisely what Kerouac wrote, and the story of Kerouac batting out the novel in a three week stint of intense and "spontaneous" typing has shadowed our readings of the novel—as has the story of Malcolm Cowley and the editors at Viking forcing Kerouac to delete material for commercial and legal reasons and Viking copyeditors strewing nervous commas and periods and compromising the rhythm and momentum of Kerouac's prose. These comments of Allen Ginsberg's (from a September 3, 1973 letter written to me in response to a series of questions about the composition of *On the Road*) evoke this Tale of Two *Roads* that we all know so well:

There is only one real On the Road original mss. I know of, written on teletype roll. I think Charters' biog. is wrong about so many many revisions for publishers later—Jack was probably overly-courteously writing his editors that he was "working" on the book over & over while he made minor chronologic revisions & excisions demanded.

But previous to the W. 21'st Street teletype roll (or whatever kind of paper it was) there was no other on the road tho I guess there were many separate sketches of road type material. The point of On the Road was on the roll, i.e. the realization he could just start out and type endlessly speaking the story in his own natural speedy way, on typewriter. There was no preliminary composition in that specific method I don't

guess. Perhaps chapters early in Cody precede [sic] on the road, but they're influenced by Proust, and "sketching."

If it was May 1951 that he did the single continuous long version, that's it, as far as I know.

Which is also to say that he was always writing, notebooks etc.

But I don't remember as a single Conception any Conception as on the Road till he got inspired (by Cassidy letter) to breakthrough to his own naked & endless head Consciousness and set down & type it out—on W 21st st. in room off 9th Ave with his second wife Joan Haverty—

(Ginsberg's final comment in the letter, following his signature and scribbled up the right margin, seems a kind of confessional afterthought, "*—of course my memory may be romantically fuzzy & I haven't looked at the letters for 20 years.*")

Until recently our primary knowledge of the scroll *Road* has been second hand through comments such as Ginsberg's, and the Tale of Two Roads this has encouraged has in turn encouraged a bifurcated way of reading *On the Road*. In our critical imaginings, the scroll has figured as a pure, authentic reflection of Kerouac's genius, made all the more powerful by its absence. We have constructed the scroll, the April 1951 *Road*, as authentic and untainted by the crass, intrusive manipulation of editors concerned with the marketplace and its conventions, and in doing so, we have in turn cast the Viking edition as a corruption of Kerouac's actual vision—a commercial translation of the true *Road* testament. This bifurcation has encouraged us to read the Viking *On the Road* as if it is a fogged windshield, through which we peer for glimpses of the true *Road*. And in the dialectic of the larger critical narrative of Kerouac's reputation that this story of the three weeks of spontaneous typing has encouraged—the yin of Capote's

dismissive “that’s not writing that’s typing” to the yang of Ginsberg’s myth of solitary spontaneous genius—the presumed relationship of the absent but true *Road* (the scroll) to the compromised Viking *Road* has been used both to sanctify *On the Road* as great art and to damn it as mere pop commodity.

This Tale of Two Roads suggests that the welcome publication this past year of *On the Road: The Original Scroll* should have wiped the fogged windshield clear. Our belated access to what Ginsberg terms the “one real *On the Road*” should, it would seem, have revealed everything and resolved all critical doubts. It hasn’t. Although the publication of the scroll *Road* has generated a great deal of journalism, most of these pieces simply rehash the Tale of the Two Roads, even though reading the scroll with even minimal care shows that it leaves unanswered most of the questions we thought we had. The unveiling of this previously hidden road has lengthened, not shortened, the list of scholarly and interpretive questions that we face. Reading the scroll does confirm that Kerouac deleted scenes and passages as he rethought the novel and negotiated with friends (such as Ginsberg), literary sponsors (such as Malcolm Cowley), and editors (including those at Viking), but comparing the scroll and Viking *Roads* also shows that Kerouac added scenes and passages—and that often these additions are crucial to what we have seen as most distinctive and significant in the novel. Moreover, reading the scroll shows that the scroll *Road* and Viking *Road* reflect different senses of the relationship between the narrator (Jack/Sal) and his buddy (Neal/Dean), and it shows that this difference is interwoven with a different sense of the voice of the novel; Jack as narrator in the scroll and Sal as narrator in the Viking *Road* function differently, and this alters in subtle, but significant ways, both the experience of the novel and its implications. The Viking *Road* is not simply the compromised, lesser product of Kerouac’s betrayal by the publishing industry. Rather, it is a significantly

different version of the novel, enhanced and altered in focus and tone by Kerouac's successive efforts to rework and reconceptualize the scroll text. While *On the Road* was clearly, to some extent, compromised in production (especially in such matters as its punctuation), the book that Viking compromised was not the scroll but a later, different version of the novel.

Moreover, access to the scroll *Road* is only one factor that has, in recent years, complicated the Tale of Two Roads. The publication in recent years of selections from Kerouac's journals and letters, the exhibit "Beatific Soul: Jack Kerouac and *On the Road*" that Dr. Isaac Gewirtz curated at the New York Public Library and his book based on the exhibit, further document the critical and scholarly dangers of trying to cast the scroll *Road* as the true or authentic version, emphasize the dangers of trying to read the Viking *Road* as a problematic presentation of the scroll, and point toward the need to read it as distinct and separate version of the *Road*. Moreover, this newly available material (journals, scroll, intervening typescripts) has revealed how much Kerouac, in his three-week's of typing in April 1951, was working from and adapting material from earlier letters and journals. And the typescripts and manuscripts in the Berg Library's Kerouac Archive further complicate our understanding of what happened as Kerouac worked his way from the scroll to the final version that Viking processed into the 1957 *On the Road*, by documenting intervening versions of the novel. In the Tale of Two Roads that has for so long governed our readings of *Road*, the "point of On the Road was on the roll," as Ginsberg put it, even though the "roll" was largely a hypothetical cipher, but if we want to make sense of *Road*, either as a novel or as a crucial process in Kerouac's career, we need to replace the Tale of Two Roads with a comprehensive survey of the many roads. Or, to adapt a figure that occurs in both the scroll and Viking versions of *Road*, we need to give up our fantasy of traversing the country of the novel on "Route Six."

It will take us some time, collectively and individually, to map all this newly available *Road* material into a viable critical atlas of the multiple versions of *Road*. But several things are clear. For one, as we build up this “atlas,” we will need to move beyond the Tale of Two Roads and focus instead on transformation of the scroll into the Viking *Road* as a complex process that was shaped—at least in part and plausibly in large part—by Kerouac’s changing ideas about his material and the book (we need, as Professor Joh Bryant has put it, to reconceptualize *Road* as a “fluid text”). For another, we will need to rethink our assumptions about how Kerouac wrote and put aside, to borrow Ginsberg’s phrase, our “romantically fuzzy” view of it. The pivotal “moment” in the writing of the novel published as *On the Road* may well have been three weeks in April 1951, but those three weeks need to be carefully placed in the larger process of what came before and after. In the time remaining, I would like to focus on one of the seemingly hidden *Road* workings that underscores the limitation of the Tale of Two Roads and, perhaps as well, can add to our understanding how Kerouac approached writing.

The Paris Review, in the winter 1955 issue, published an excerpt from Part I of *On the Road*, titled “The Mexican Girl,” as the issue’s lead selection. To this point, this publication (and the publication of two other excerpts around this time) have been considered primarily for what they tell us about Malcolm Cowley’s efforts to help Kerouac place *Road*. There has been (so far as I know) no interest in the texts of these excerpts as potentially distinct versions that might bear on our understanding of how Kerouac wrote and how he transformed the scroll into the Viking *Road*. Given the Tale of the Two Roads, that’s understandable. The Tale tells us that an excerpt such as “The Mexican Girl” would either approximate the scroll or the Viking text. As it happens, “The Mexican Girl” in *The Paris Review* differs significantly from both the scroll

and Viking versions of *Road*, and the nature and extent of the differences give it a quite different character from either. Here's an excerpt from "The Mexican Girl" episode—as it appears in *On the Road: The Original Scroll* (with the four differences between the text of the scroll and the 1957 Viking *Road* in blue in brackets):

We went to Hollywood to try to work in the drugstore at Sunset and Vine. Now **there was** [there's] a corner! Great families off jalopies from the hinterlands stood around the sidewalk gaping for sight of some movie star and the movie star never showed up. When a limousine passed they rushed eagerly to the curb and ducked to look: some character in dark glasses sat inside with a bejeweled blonde. "Don Ameche! Don Ameche!" "No George Murphy! George Murphy!" They milled around looking at one another. Handsome queer boys who had come to Hollywood to be cowboys walked **around** [around,] wetting their eyebrows with hincy **fingertips** [fingertip]. The most beautiful little gone gals in the world cut by in slacks; they came to be starlets; they ended up in **Drive Ins.** [Drive-ins]. (87)

Whether Kerouac, the copy-editor, or the typesetter introduced the four variants found in the Viking *Road* is largely beside the point for this discussion. What is noteworthy is that at least for this passage the scroll and Viking *Roads* are nearly identical (indeed the scroll and Viking versions are generally quite similar throughout "The Mexican Girl" episode).

But here's the equivalent passage in *The Paris Review* version of this material:

We went to Hollywood to try to work in the drugstore at Sunset and Vine. The questions that were asked of us in upstairs offices to determine our fitness for the slime of the sodafountain greaseracks were so sinister that I had to laugh. It turned my gut. Sunset and Vine!—what a corner! Now there’s a corner! Great families off jalopies from the hinterlands stood around the sidewalk gaping for sight of some movie star and the movie star never showed up. When a limousine passed they rushed eagerly to the curb and ducked to look: some character in dark glasses sat inside with a bejeweled blonde. “Don Ameche! Don Ameche!” “No George Murphy! George Murphy!” They milled around looking at one another. Luscious little girls by the thousands rushed around with Drive-in trays; they’d come to Hollywood to be movie stars and instead got all involved in everybody’s garbage including Darryl Zanuck’s. Handsome queer boys who had come to Hollywood to be cowboys walked around wetting their eyebrows with hincty fingertip. Those beautiful little gone gals cut by in slacks in a continuous unbelievable stream; you thought you were in heaven but it was only Purgatory and everybody was about to be pardoned, paroled, powdered and put down; the girls came to be starlets; they up-ended in Drive-ins with pouts and goosepimples on their bare legs.

In typing up the episode for *The Paris Review*, plausibly sometime in 1954, Kerouac inserted four blocks of material and made one interesting change in wording (the substitution of “up-ended” for “ended up”):

We went to Hollywood to try to work in the drugstore at Sunset and Vine. **The questions that were asked of us in upstairs offices to determine our fitness for the slime of the sodafountain greaseracks were so sinister that I had to laugh. It turned my gut. Sunset and Vine!—what a corner!** Now there’s a corner! Great families off jalopies from the hinterlands stood around the sidewalk gaping for sight of some movie star and the movie star never showed up. When a limousine passed they rushed eagerly to the curb and ducked to look: some character in dark glasses sat inside with a bejeweled blonde. “Don Ameche! Don Ameche!” “No George Murphy! George Murphy!” They milled around looking at one another. **Luscious little girls by the thousands rushed around with Drive-in trays; they’d come to Hollywood to be movie stars and instead got with pouts and goosepimples on their bare legs. all involved in everybody’s garbage including Darryl Zanuck’s.** Handsome queer boys who had come to Hollywood to be cowboys walked around wetting[,] their eyebrows with hincty fingertip. Those beautiful little gone gals cut by in slacks **in a continuous unbelievable stream; you thought you were in heaven but it was only Purgatory and everybody was about to be pardoned, paroled, powdered and put down; the girls [they]** came to be starlets; they **up-ended [ended up]** in Drive-ins

This passage is typical of the differences between *The Paris Review* version and the equivalent passages in the scroll/Viking *Road*. While the difference in length is perhaps what’s most

immediately noticeable, what's more significant is the way the added material changes the character of the presentation and alters the passage's tone and momentum. In the scroll/Viking version of this passage, observation and reaction are largely distinct and separate, with more emphasis placed on observation than emotional reaction. (It might be said that the observations are to imply the speaker's subjectivity, as they do, for example, in Hemingway.). The added units in *The Paris Review* version not only bring out the narrator's emotional responses to the scene they also tend to integrate, even fuse, observation and response into a single imaginative act that generates various associational extensions. This not only gives the scene greater depth, it also alters the character of the narrator and narration. In this passage, Sal is not the passive, naive observer he at times seems in the *Viking Road*. That Sal might well comment on "those beautiful little gone gals cut[ting] by in slacks," but he wouldn't add, "in a continuous unbelievable stream; you thought you were in heaven but it was only Purgatory and everybody was about to be pardoned, paroled, powdered and put down; the girls came to be starlets; they up-ended in Drive-ins with pouts and goosepimples on their bare legs."

The nature and degree of the differences between the scroll/Viking "The Mexican Girl" and *The Paris Review* version of it raise several issues. Perhaps most simply this previously hidden (or more accurately overlooked) stretch of *Road* illustrates the inadequacy of *The Tale of Two Roads* and underscores how little we know about the textual crisscrossings between the scroll, the Viking version, and the intermediate versions. "The Mexican Girl" as published in *The Paris Review* is not, clearly, taken directly from either the scroll or *Viking Road*. Neither does it come from either of the two other typescripts of *Road* in the Berg's Kerouac Archive. Does this mean there's another typescript out there—yet another conception and realization of the novel that Kerouac didn't keep with his papers? Does this mean that Kerouac, given the

opportunity to publish in *The Paris Review*, thanks to Cowley, decided to rework the episode, and in doing so, re-elaborated it to reflect the style and narration that he'd come to after *Road*? My readerly heart wants to believe the former; my scholarly head is coming gradually to accept that the latter is more likely, but either way, *The Paris Review* "The Mexican Girl" illustrates that Kerouac's reworkings of the scroll *On the Road* involved much more than cleaning it up for publication and, it seems, that Kerouac explored different tonalities and logics of narration as he tried to settle on what he wanted the book to be and what the book could be if it were to be published. This scroll *Road* is, it seems, one authentic road among many rather than, as Ginsberg wanted to believe and wanted us to believe, the one and only true road.

In closing this polemic, I'd like to suggest that the Tale of Two Roads will not fade away simply because the now available documentary evidence shows it is wrong. We have, like Ginsberg, wanted to believe that what he termed Kerouac's "own natural speedy way" as he typed the scroll enacted a "breakthrough to his own naked & endless head Consciousness" and that this breakthrough manifested itself as what was and is the "only...real *On the Road*." We have, that is, wanted to maintain our faith in the myth of "spontaneity" that is, at root, the critical desire that generated the Tale of Two Roads and enforces our allegiance to it. Here, also, Kerouac's reworkings of "The Mexican Girl" episode reflected in *The Paris Review* version suggest why this is a problem and perhaps, as well, a way we might reframe the issue.

In the excerpt we've been considering, it is ironic that the units that are seemingly the most "spontaneous" (i.e., associational) turn out to be not from the scroll text but the additions to it. To put the matter more baldly, the revisions and rewrites seem more the "breakthrough," as Ginsberg put it, to Kerouac's "own naked & endless head Consciousness" than the parallel from the scroll. There are several ways we might explain this. The most obvious, the most

conventional, and the one that does the greatest violence to the Tale of Two Roads and the myth of Spontaneity is that Kerouac could, and at times did, construct passages that had the associational dynamic and seeming immediacy to the moment of perception and imagination specified in “The Essentials of Spontaneous Prose” after the fact—i.e., that Kerouac’s artistry and craft came at times from generating passages in a largely spontaneous manner but at other times from his skill at recrafting, refining, and extending the spontaneous material through good old fashioned boring revision and rewriting.

But there’s another way to explain the revisions in this excerpt from “The Mexican Girl,” and it, I think, gets us closer to a workable critical perspective—and perhaps one that could over time help us move beyond the Tale of the Two Roads, while yet allowing us to hold on to a revisionary version of the myth of spontaneity. Clearly, the reworking of *The Paris Review* excerpt we’ve been considering is not “spontaneous” in the sense that Ginsberg imagined. From Ginsberg’s perspective there can be only one spontaneous moment—the original generation of the text is the realization of the text. But it is worth remembering here that Kerouac’s sense of the “spontaneous” was related to his sense of jazz. In jazz the same tune can be an occasion not only for multiple choruses but over time for a series of distinct performances, each with its own performative coherence and authenticity. Moreover, the spontaneity of a jazz improvisation is always (leaving aside the possible exception of “free jazz”) based on and generated out of preexisting material (the song’s structure, its melodic elements, its harmonic possibilities, and the histories of how the song has been played). The spontaneity of jazz improvisation is not the spontaneity that Ginsberg was evoking in his 1973 letter. But if we set aside that notion of spontaneity, we can, I think, see that Kerouac’s recasting of “The Mexican Girl” for its *Paris Review* appearance was not a matter of creating a revision of the piece but was, instead, a new

performance of it. And in this new performance, this new improvisation, he drew on, but was not bound by, his prior performances of the material, including the scroll and the typescripts that followed it. As such *The Paris Review* version of “The Mexican Girl” is later in time than the scroll, different in its tone and implication, but equally authentic. Its improvisational basis means that it is, finally, not a “revision” of the scroll version; it is a “re-visioning” of it.

It may also be worth noting here that Kerouac’s friendship with Jerry Newman meant that he was not only quite aware of the dynamics of jazz performance in clubs but also the dynamics of recording jazz in the studio. In recording, the ensemble and soloist would often generate a number of takes of a tune and arrangement—each with slightly different tempi and solos—then chose from among them. The Tale of Two Roads doesn’t allow for there to be a set of authentic versions of *Road* and (as with “The Mexican Girl”) pieces of *Road*, and neither does the Myth of Spontaneity al a Ginsberg’s letter. But if we set these aside—if we consider, that is, the multiple *Roads* as something akin to a series of improvisationally re-performed takes of a basic set of material and an arrangement for them—we may come closer to understanding how Kerouac worked and what is distinctive and significant about his writing and *On the Road*.

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