

*Beatific Soul: Jack Kerouac on the Road*

Isaac Gewirtz

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Reviewed by Ann Charters

Isaac Gewirtz is Curator of the Henry W. and Albert A. Berg Collection of English and American literature at the New York Public Library, one of the world's major literary archives consisting of "some 35,000 printed items and 2,000 linear feet of manuscripts and archives, containing the writings and correspondence of more than four hundred authors," including most recently Jack Kerouac, William S. Burroughs, and Paul Auster. [[www.nypl.org/research/.](http://www.nypl.org/research/)] He is also is the curator of the exhibit "Beatific Soul: Jack Kerouac on the Road," which runs through March 16 of this year, and his book is the companion volume.

In 2001, the Berg Collection acquired the Jack Kerouac Archive, purchasing it instead of the Norman Mailer archive (which subsequently found a home at the Harry Ransom Center at the University of Texas at Austin). In the Foreword to *Beatific Kerouac*, Paul LeClerc, the President of the New York Public Library, asserts that the Berg is "*the* center for Beat research in the world," since in addition to the Kerouac Archive it has Burroughs' papers from 1952-72, as well as papers by Ginsberg and Corso and collections of printed materials relating to Snyder, Ferlinghetti, Whalen, and McClure.

Gewirtz holds a doctorate in Renaissance History from Columbia University. In *Beatific Soul*, he has made excellent choices in his selections from the unpublished literary materials in the Kerouac Archive that illustrate the book. The exquisite full-color reproductions of Kerouac's manuscripts and artwork are well worth the hefty price, beginning with the two-color frontispiece, Kerouac's proposed front cover design for a paperback edition of *On the Road* in 1952 showing the author ("John Kerouac") trudging down a highway carrying a mysterious bundle clearly labeled "Doctor Sax" under his right arm.

The illustrations are scattered liberally throughout the six chapters of the book: (1) The Beat Generation; (2) Early Life, Influences, and Writings; (3) *On the Road* Proto-Versions: Drafts, Fragments, and Journals; (4) *On the Road*: The Scroll and Its Successors; (5) The Buddhist Christian; and (6) On Writing and the Creative Act. In addition to generous pages from the scroll version of *On the Road*, the illustrations include such rarities as a manuscript from 1944 in which Kerouac wrote in his own blood, his map and itinerary of his 1947 road trip, his typescript opening page about “The Hip Generation” dated September 1949, his narrative “ON THE ROAD – The Night of September 27” on the first page of his hand-lettered newspaper “American Times” from October 1950, and the typescript of an *On the Road* “Prospectus” from early 1951 stating that “On the Road is going to be the first of a series of novels I’m planning to write about different types of men and women in our generation.”

To those interested in biographical issues about Kerouac, Gewirtz’s second chapter is the most definitive biographical narrative in print about the early years before *On the Road*. For example, I’d been more confused than enlightened about Edie Parker’s role in Kerouac’s life after reading the recently published City Lights volume *You’ll be Okay: My Life with Jack Kerouac* by Edie Kerouac Parker. Using Kerouac’s journals, Gewirtz solved the mystery of when Edie and Jack actually met: it was in October 1942, and they began living together in November 1943.

I would, however, have appreciated a footnote for the source when Gewirtz writes that Kerouac found his second wife Joan “in bed with a waiter from the restaurant at which she was working” in early May 1951 (109). Since this event in question was so pivotal in the later tragedy of his daughter Jan’s life, we need to know if this story was anecdotal or if Gewirtz unearthed some factual basis for his statement in the Kerouac Archive.

Researchers involved in the study of Kerouac’s writing will find Gewirtz’s summary of the contents of the thousands of manuscript pages Kerouac wrote between 1943 and 1946, and his documentation of the revisions of *On the Road*. Gewirtz believes that Kerouac took so long to find his voice in his road novel because he got the idea for it when he set forth on his first cross-country trip, which unfortunately was while he was still struggling to complete *The Town and the City*:

From the beginning of the first road trip, in July 1947, through the early spring of 1951, virtually all of the drafts, fragments, and notes for *On the Road* were written in the often sentimental and leaden manner of *The Town and the City*, expressing Kerouac's adolescent desire to create a Galsworthian family saga in the grand and moody, lyrical style of Thomas Wolfe. . . . he mercilessly lashes himself forward to complete *The Town and the City*, obsessively recording daily word totals and "batting averages" in order to motivate himself to continue with a novel in which he can no longer fully believe, and which he prays will soon be finished so that he can commence his road novel. (73)

A passionate defender of Kerouac's writing, Gewirtz is honest enough to admit that "after reading carefully through Kerouac's diaries, journals, and fugitive autobiographical pieces, it is impossible to escape the oppressive reality of a psyche at war with itself." He proposes that "despite his conflict-riven psyche," Kerouac opened the American novel "to form-breaking possibilities. . . [that] only now appear in a distinctly American cultural and linguistic context." The curator leaves the evaluation of the literary significance of Kerouac's "overall achievement" to future critics, scholars, and writers.

Gewirtz, however, concludes with a startling statement dismissing the entire Beat literary movement: "What we owe Kerouac, however, as we do any serious artist, is to judge him fairly, that is, without preconceptions. In his case, this means free from the bias against (or, for that matter, attachment to) the Beat movement and all that it supposedly represented and engendered."

In the text of this beautiful volume Gewirtz is a committed champion of Kerouac's writing, but he sometimes presents his interpretations and conclusions as if he believes he is the first man to walk upon the moon. Only in his final chapter does he credit any previous Kerouac scholarship when he refers to Kerouac's *Selected Letters* and Ed Adler's *Departed Angels: The Last Paintings*, about Kerouac's paintings and drawings. Otherwise the curator dismisses Beat scholars as summarily as he dismisses the Beat movement, disregarding the steady stream of academic articles and books about Kerouac and other Beat authors published during the past three decades, including, among many others, Tim Hunt, Regina Weinreich, and James T. Jones, studies of Kerouac's writing.

*Beatific Souls* lacks a bibliography, including only a short list of “Suggested Reading” containing books by Ed Adler, Carolyn and Neal Cassady, Ann Charters, Tom Clark, Clark Coolidge, Joyce Johnson, Kostos Myrsiades, Gerald Nicosia, and Matt Theado. With a major archive at his disposal, Gewirtz could strengthen his presentation of Kerouac as an important American writer and continue to do a great service to future readers and to the ever-growing community of Beat scholars and students throughout the world by editing a second volume from the Berg Collection illustrating manuscript notebooks, journals, drafts and other source materials related to Kerouac’s writing after *On The Road*.