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TO THE WILDERNESS AND BACK: A TRANSFORMATIVE JOURNEY IN JACK KEROUAC'S NOVELS

Abstract: As with virtually all writers of the Beat Generation, the attitude of the literary-critical establishment towards Jack Kerouac's works has been turbulent. Dubbed "a Neanderthal with a typewriter," and having his oeuvre panned (most notably by Harold Bloom) as having "no literary value whatsoever" or dismissed for moral reasons, Kerouac seems to have little to offer contemporary audiences and scholars being categorized as quasi-picaresque epigone of the romantic tradition, celebrating immature dropout attitude and a life of excess mingled with a shallow understanding of Eastern religions. Whereas I concur with the claim that Kerouac's works do display some deficiencies of style, my essay argues for a more constructive reading of the motive of journey explored in his central novels (particularly in On the Road, Dharma Bums and Visions of Cody), as I would like to overview some striking similarities between the experiences of Kerouac's characters and the primal, ritualistic traverses of shaman-like figures in early cultures. On such a reading (inspired chiefly by Mircea Eliade and Joseph Campbell's Hero's Journey), Kerouac's hero's journeys appear to be taking place both at the physical, spiritual and psychic level and are attempts at self-healing, pacifying, maturation and reconciliation with society. They are not then, straightforward rejection and escape, but a temporary, painful strategy, whose final aim is to return to society as a transformed individual, though as the development of the journey motif across his oeuvre demonstrates, this attempt at transformation and reconciliation need not be entirely successful.

Key words: Jack Kerouac, shamanism, Mircea Eliade, Joseph Campbell, Beat Generation

Introduction

In his introduction to the collection of essays on Kerouac's *On the Road*, Harold Bloom, the editor of the volume, wrote

> *I had not reread* On the Road *during the near half-century since its first publication, and I am not happy at encountering it again. The book has many admirers including Thomas Pynchon, but I hardly understand what he, and others, discover in this rather drab narrative. Like the* Harry Potter *volumes,* On the Road *will be rubbed down and out. I can locate no literary value whatsoever in Kerouac's novel. It strikes me as an Oedipal lament, weeping in the wilderness for a mother's consolation.* (Bloom 2004: 1)

Later on, he locates Kerouac's oeuvre in the American Romantic tradition but even then he is unwilling to give it any credit, stating that *On the Road lacks the nuanced artistry of our father, Walt Whitman* (Bloom 2004: 2). It is perhaps unusual that an introduction to a collection of essays devoted to a specific literary work blatantly states that the book's artistic value is less than poor, but it is not unusual that a respectable literary critic humiliates one of the Beatniks.

I take Bloom's opinion to be symptomatic of an attitude towards the Beat Generation which is not exactly critical, bur rather hostile. Kerouac's relation to the literary establishment has been problematic, to say the least, and Bloom inscribes himself, along with the critics that famously dubbed Kerouac *a neanderthal with a typewriter* (Lerner 1986), an author who *lacks discipline, intelligence, honesty and a sense of the novel* (Mailer:428) or called his friend Neal Cassady a *psychological psychopath* (Stephenson 1990:159), in the critical tradition that sees Kerouac's writing as an infantile apotheosis of playful or decadent ideas, on the one hand, or, as a repository of childish, New Age-like fantasies about society, religion, and the individual. The literary Beatnik hero is thus perceived as an incompetent epigone of the romantic tradition, a mad, pseudo-byronic caricature, an abnegator whose ideal is to live on the road, reject social life, and have fun. On the other hand, it would be a rather cavalier generalization to say Kerouac along with the entirety of the Beat Generation are dismissed on the grounds of being naïve romantic epigones that wrote unromantic fiction. The collection of essays edited by Bloom flies in the face of such a claim, as it offers no strong evaluative comments in favour of nuanced analyses of the disintegrating dynamics of friendship between the main characters (Dardess 2004), the tensions between the belief in the American myth and constantly voiced scepticism against it throughout the novel (Richardson 2004), barely hidden Oedipal themes dominating Kerouac's works (Jones 2004) or his failed attempt to break out of his white middle-class ideological framework and get in touch with African-American culture (Holton 2004). It does appear that the notion of failure or paradox permeates most of the essays, though they are far from Bloom's outright dismissive attitude. What they definitely manage to show is that Beatnik legacy is a problematic one, in the sense of sparking genuine interest in generations to come or resonating with contemporary cultural trends and perspectives. Other studies of Kerouac often highlight these issues, too. They include accusing Kerouac of mere imitation of African-American jazz musicians, being voyeuristic and romanticising ethnic

minorities, oversimplifying both their culture and personalities of each individuals (Quinn 2004), impressionism in nature writing and superficial attitude to Buddhism (Lott 2004), self-defeating auto-eroticism (Carden 2009), paradoxes and destructiveness of his lumpen-bohemian attitude, or finally accusations of carefully-designed self-promotion and striving for celebrity status by toning down the scandalous homoerotic, criminal and drug-related content of *On the Road* (Ellis 2009). After all, it might be said, dismissively but with some truth to it, that thematically most of the Beat prose does represent self-indulgent bohemianism with escapist spirituality and substance abuse. They are almost exclusively white males insensitive to racial or feminist issues. Formally, perhaps Burroughs's psychedelic cut-up novels acquired some cult following within counterculture and are a testimony of the period's literary experiments, but I suspect most literary critics would agree with Bloom, who claimed that what Beatniks' works lack *is the delicately nuanced artistry of our father, Walt Whitman, whose greatest poems may look easy, but actually are superbly difficult.* On the Road *and* Howl *look easy, and are easy, self-indulgent evasions of the American quest for identity* (Bloom 2004:2).

On the other hand, occasionally one finds critics who offer Beat literature strong praise, though sometimes their judgment is based on locating its merits outside of the scope of literary artistic value. Such is the case with Thomas Bierowski who overviews Kerouac's oeuvre (though with little attention to *On the Road*) celebrating traces of ecstatic, shamanist expression that pervades most of his works. Bierowski sees Kerouac as a deeply spiritual modern shaman who responds to the ailments that torment his land by going through ordeals and self-destructive rituals. At times his analysis is, however, problematically biographical weighing equally real-life events and literary material, perhaps slightly losing its focus. Bierowski is entirely apologetic in his assessment of Kerouac's writing as a shamanistic expression: he sees him as an equivalent to a successful and potent shaman character. Kerouac's real-life demise and his lack of social recognition as a shaman is, according to Bierowski, entirely our culture's fault, for it lacks a cultural definition for a modern shaman and consequently gives him "no place in the cultural landscape" (2011:8). In other words, Bierowski does not consider the possibility of failure on Kerouac's side, which is inherent in the shaman's journey. This is further illustrated in near-apotheotic comments on Kerouac's spontaneous prose method, even though Kerouac rewrote and edited *On the Road* numerous times (Ellis 2004), or his connection to Balzac, Proust, Rousseau, Whitman and Transcendentalism (Bierowski 2011:13). Similarly, Gregory Stephenson writes of Kerouac's oeuvre in his *Daybreak Boys* as forming a coherent rendition of a circular spatial and psychical journey, all too lightly stating that it *represents an affirmation of liberating, creative, redemptive forces within humankind, a prophecy of the universal heart and of the victory of the human spirit* (49). In what follows, I

wish to take a middle way. I agree with the claim that Kerouac's works do display some deficiencies of style and their purely artistic literary value is somewhat lacking. After all, apart from his experimentation with the spontaneous writing method (whose originality and actual spontaneity is, as I mentioned, disputable), Kerouac is not remembered for using sophisticated poetic language, striking metaphors or allusions, enticing imagery, balanced tone, touching observations, originality of storytelling, rich and in-depth psychology of characters, complexity of his novels, dialogue with canonical texts, etc. The value of his works lies elsewhere. At the same time, I agree that Kerouac's writing is through and through Oedipal, but at the same time, extending Bierowski's shamanic investigations, I aim for a more constructive reading of the motive of journey explored in his central novels, (particularly in *On the Road, Dharma Bums* and *Visions of Cody*), which were not cross-examined in Bierowski's analysis. There are some striking similarities between the experiences of Kerouac's characters and the primal, ritualistic traverses of shaman-like figures in early cultures. On such a reading (inspired chiefly by Mircea Eliade and Joseph Campbell's *Hero's Journey*), Kerouac's heroes' journeys appear to be taking place both at the physical, spiritual and psychic level and are attempts at self-healing, pacifying, maturation and reconciliation with society. They are not then, straightforward rejection and escape, but a temporary, painful strategy, whose final aim is to return to society as a transformed individual, since the shaman is a fundamentally social institution. Importantly, and the development of the journey motif across his oeuvre demonstrates, this attempt at transformation and reconciliation need not be successful, and both the transformation and the social recognition of a shaman might fail.

Byronic heroes and shamans

When it comes to the Byronic vision of a Beatnik hero, it is clearly far from being an exaggeration. Kerouac himself frequently portrayed characters who indeed match such caricature description. For example, one of the characters of *On the Road*, Old Bull is described in this way:

> *Bull himself only got fifty dollars a week from his own family, which wasn't too bad except that he spent almost that much per week on his drug habit - and his wife was also expensive, gobbling up about ten dollars' worth of benny tubes a week. Their food bill was the lowest in the country; they hardly ever ate; nor did the children - they didn't seem to care.(..) Bull had a sentimental streak about the old days in America, especially 1910, when you could get morphine in a drugstore without prescription and Chinese smoked opium in their evening windows and the country was wild and brawling and free, with abundance and any kind of freedom for everyone. His chief hate was Washington bureaucracy; second to that, liberals; then cops* (1957: 84).

The other character whom we can easily match to the caricature vision is the protagonist of Kerouac's *Dharma Bums*, who proclaims the following vision of life:

> *Dharma Bums refuse to subscribe to the general demand that they consume production and therefore have to work for the privilege of consuming all that crap they didn't really want anyway such as refrigerators, TV sets, cars, at least new fancy cars, certain hair oils and deodorants and general junk you finally always see a week later in the garbage anyway. All of them imprisoned in a system of work, produce, consume, work, produce, consume. I see a vision of a great rucksack revolution - thousands or even millions of young Americans wandering around with rucksacks, going up to mountains to pray, making children laugh and old men glad, making young girls happy and old girls happier, all of 'em go about writing poems that happen to appear in their heads for no reason and also by being kind and also by strange unexpected acts keep giving visions of eternal freedom to everybody and to all living creatures.* (1958: 97)

A superficial reading of Kerouac might in fact only confirm that this is indeed the essence of the Beatnik character: the egotist who babbles without any substance and romanticises poems, mountains and rucksacks, whose value is supposed to be obviously higher than that of refrigerators, TVs and new fancy cars (apparently contrary to old cars). And, while, the existence or even, omnipresence of such characters in beat literature is unquestionable, what this paper argues is that at least some of the main characters of Kerouac's fiction (most notably *On the Road*, *Dharma Bums* and *Visions of Cody)* possibly represent something more than simple abnegation, vulgar individualism and putting down on society.

However, if we accept the notion that *On the Road*, as well as *Dharma Bums* and *Visions of Cody* were written by the counter-culturalist Jack Kerouac and not by an anonymous 18th century picaresque author, then certain commitments are to be made as to the recognition of the context of their creation and of the intellectual background that shaped Beatnik's style of thinking and produced its literary works. What I urge is to read some of Kerouac's works not as Romantic expressions of an individual author but as cultural artefacts deeply embedded in the intellectual Zeitgeist of the time which reflect how counterculture appropriated a variety of intellectual traditions to make its own claims or programme. What is especially interesting when trying to challenge the myth of the Beatnik hero is to compare his journey, the leitmotif of Kerouac's novels, to Joseph Campbell's work on the journey-myth and to Eliade's work on religion in early societies, as both sources had a substantial influence on the 1950s and 1960s counterculture. There is, of course, a sense in which this, in the end, might not get to grips with the overall opinion that Kerouac's novels have some artistic deficiencies, but what I am after here is to question the popular perception of a Beatnik character as a Byronic, self-indulgent abnegator and explore the theme of painful self-healing which is supposed to lead to reintegration and reshaping of the society as a whole, an activity far from being a variety of decadent bohemianism.

In order to illustrate my point, I will first review Gregory Stephenson's perception of the Beatnik journey, then compare it to Eliade's and Campbell's models and, finally, look for specific examples in Kerouac's novels. Stephenson sees *the quest for identity and vision* (1990:173) as the central myth of the whole Beat movement. This quest is triggered by the experience of the twentieth century as a time of *permanent emergency (173)* and *constant crisis* (173*)* operating at many levels, chief of them being the physical danger of nuclear annihilation. At the psychological level, the crisis means *dehumanization and depersonalization of life* (175) owing to the development of urbanism, industrialization, mass production, consumerism and other effects of advanced capitalism which strengthened a sense of conformity, obedience and control. The crisis was also spiritual, manifesting itself in the *alienation of humankind from the sacred energies of the spirit* (177) that stems from the rise to prominence of secularism, rationalism and materialism. Stephenson concludes, thus, that Beat writing includes both a critique of urban-industrial civilization *and a search to recover authentic human identity, to rediscover the nexus that joins individual human beings, the human community, nature, and divinity* (177). To achieve this goal, both Beat writers and their characters attempt to undergo the process of spiritual transformation that *consists of initiatory ordeals resulting ultimately in communion with vital and cosmic forces* (177). For Stephenson, the first step in the road of trials is the overwhelming sense of disturbance, imbalance in the relation of the protagonist with the society. It would be obvious to state that the typical Beatnik hero of Kerouac's novels feels estranged, isolated or disgusted with it. Stephenson summarizes his ideas of general Beatnik outlook on the American society of the 1950s as follows:

> *the Beats regarded society as suffering from a collective psychosis, a madness whose symptoms manifested themselves in the form of the cold war; the threat of atomic annihilation; the consumerism, conformity, and passivity of the mass of people (with their unacknowledged secret anxieties and desires); the blandness, the aridity, and the insipidity of contemporary life; the lack of spiritual values; the erosion of human ideals and goals by self-satisfaction, indifference, compliance, and complacency; the unchallenged excess of the bureaucracy, the military, the police and the intelligence communities; the technology mania; and the insidious hypnotic powers of television and other mass media* (6-7).

Kerouac has managed to draw most of the attention of his readers to his lively and entertaining descriptions of his characters' journeys and the variety of their experiences and adventures as if the very fact of living on the move was the ultimate goal of the Beatnik's life. However, the structure of Beatnik's journey seems more complicated - three of Kerouac's novels that explore the topic of flight from society, that is *On the Road, Dharma Bums,* and to some extent *Visions of Cody* share quite similar structure of the hero's journey. First, the protagonist feels some yearning, or anxiety, estrangement from his community,

he bears a secret psychic wound. As a result, he decides to abandon society and *embarks upon a quest, only half-aware of his motives for so doing, or of the goal or object of the search* (Stephenson 1990:178). During the journey, the hero *transgresses taboos, suffers torments, encounters helpmates, pursues fleeing ecstasies and visions, experiences both adversity and minor epiphanies.* (Stephenson:178) The quest reaches its climax when the hero, disillusioned, tired, or struck by illness, is ultimately separated from all of his companions, and endures an experience of dissolution, an *ekstasis,* during which he comes close to death, descending into *the infernal depths of the hero's own psyche where in confrontation with the individual's own demons and own darkness, disintegration of the self begins* (Stephenson:178). This is followed by an experience of powerful vision redeeming and renewing the hero who then returns to a community transformed, *being of insight and of power.* (Stephenson 178) This summary is, I believe, very much akin to shaman's rite of initiation and to quest upon which ventures the hero in Joseph Campbell's theory of the monomyth.

Though I agree with Stephenson's notion that Beat literature is infused with motifs of spiritual quest, I need to voice some of my reservations. First, the claim that Beat writers attempted to go through a quasi-shamanic transformation does not need imply that they were successful. Stephenson is rather enthusiastic in applauding the Beat generation's transformative journey, but he is all too hasty in acknowledging that it made either Beat writers or Beat protagonists beings of power and insight. Second, taking into consideration the varied, heterogeneous nature of Beat writing, Stephenson's smooth generalization regarding the shamanic quest as being central to their art runs risk of being a sweeping one, or at least, it will be a more adequate description of Kerouac's journey-obsessed prose than, say, Snyder's *Turtle Island* poems. In this sense, if Beat generation represented crisis-driven search for identity and reunification of humanity, community and nature, then Kerouac's writing is a particularly suitable representative. Finally, Stephenson does not properly recognize that the figure of a shaman is a social institution. Whatever dark inner worlds shamans traversed, their social role was to renew and heal the community and this is, I believe, what Beatniks ultimately aspired to.

What both Campbell and Eliade explored in their respective studies were the proto-religious narratives and rites that reflected some deeper psychic structures and processes universal to humans. Campbell's interpretation of myths was particularly inspired by Jungian theories of individuation and spiritual maturation where the basic formula represented in the of separation-initiation-return mythical patterns of initiation stories and rituals mirrors the human drive to psychical maturation with the help of symbols and stories. In his words, the *prime function of mythology and rite [is] to supply the symbols that carry the human spirit forward* (Campbell 2004:10). Its magnified form involves

> *a hero [who] ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered, and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man* (28).

The journey is at the same time, a spiritual and a physical one where extraordinary, distant lands full of peculiar characters are at the same time the contents of one's unconscious. Clear border marks the world of the ordinary everyday life of the hero with the one he visits on his journey, much like in Kerouac's novels exploring the quest theme.

Interestingly, the structure of such a journey is not only typical of many mythical stories, but, more importantly, it appears to run even deeper, touching upon religious experience, being parallel to the rite of the initiation of a shaman, the traditional medicine man and mediator between the earthly world and the realm of the spirits in the early, tribal societies. Of course, Kerouac never wrote about shamanism per se, or never directly referred to it, but it is no surprise that the presence of shamanistic elements in all mythical and literary traditions was noted by Mircea Eliade, the author of a well-known study of shamanism, *Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*, who wrote:

> *The shaman adventures in the other world, the ordeals that he undergoes in his ecstatic descents below and ascents to the sky, suggest the adventures of the figures in popular literature. Probably a large number of epic "subjects" or motifs, as well as many characters, images and cliches of epic literature are, finally, of ecstatic origin, in the sense that they were borrowed from the narratives of shamans describing their journeys and adventures in superhuman worlds* (1964: 510).

Both shaman's and Campbell's hero's journey are reflections of universal psychic processes which are then fossilized and reinforced in forms of literary motifs, images and clichés. There might be a partially conscious design operating here, but clearly along with commonly shared contents of the unconscious. I should also add that Kerouac's novels do not follow exactly the pattern of shaman's rite or hero's journey, but Eliade's and Campbell's models themselves are just abstractions of particular versions of their respective journey which vary significantly. Moreover, the three novels which I see to be of particular importance *(Dharma Bums, On the Road, Visions of Cody*), might be seen as three variants of shaman's/hero's journey: peaceful, "bumpy" and dark.

The structure of the journey

A brief analysis of the similarities between the shaman and the Beatnik hero shows that the latter, in order to achieve its final shape, to fully recover and

return to socjety, has to undergo some ordeal. Similarly, to become a shaman, the candidate has to take part in a rite of initiation which is a series of ordeals. The word "recover" fits both characters, as the candidates who feel the calling to become a shaman, often display signs of mental illness which has its equivalent in the *secret psychic wound* (Stephenson 1990:178) of the Beatnik. Sal Paradise starts *On the Road*, by referring directly to his mental illness and personal problems that led to his travelling:

> *I first met Dean not long after my wife, and I split up. I had just gotten over a serious illness that I won't bother to talk about, except that it had something to do with the miserably weary split-up and my feeling that everything was dead* (7).

Ray Smith in *Dharma Bums,* apart from subscribing to the declaration quoted before, leads a rather undisturbed life with his family, but his hunger for spirituality builds up tension and minor conflicts, such as when Smith overhears the family "get mad and say "*What's the matter with him anyway?" and I'd hear them argue about the futility of my "Buddhism"* (Kerouac 1958:71) or when he has an argument with his brother-in-law over whether the latter's dog should be chained. Smith threatens him, saying *How would you like to be tied to a chain and cry all day like the dog?*(71) and later gets so mad over his indifferent response that he stomps off to the woods and stays *there without food until midnight*. (71) Finally, he decides to set out to Desolation Peak. As a matter of fact, literary critics might have been quite close to the truth when they called Kerouac or Cassady a psychopath, as, in Eliade's words *what separates a shaman from a psychopath is that he succeeds in curing himself and ends by possessing a stronger and more creative personality than the rest of the community* (1978:366).

In Campbell's model, the journey begins with a character departing from his ordinary life; this may happen peacefully or forcefully or as a result of some complex chain of events. Often the hero is called to adventure by the archetype of some wise old man, by some supernatural forces, crossing the threshold of the familiar world and venturing into the unknown. The figure of the guide, which in Kerouac's works is always present invariably resembles either an older brother or a father figure, and in terms of other archetypes, involves a certain trickster flavour, as with the picaresque Dean Moriarty from *On the Road* and Cody Pomeray from *Visions of Cody* or the mystic poet-monk and at the same time unrepentant aficionado of unconstrained sexuality, Japhy Ryder from *Dharma Bums*. All three play a crucial role in setting out on the journey and mentoring Kerouac's alter ego through it.

The process of healing is supposed to begin during the shaman's journey where the shaman undergoes a series of ordeals and unusual encounters before reaching the final death-like climax and resurrection. The shaman travels through the heavens, the earthly world and the subterranean world which constitute *three*

great cosmic regions which can be successively traversed because they are linked together by a central axis (Eliade 1964:8). This seems to be reflected in some of Kerouac's novels. In *Dharma Bums*, the protagonist Ray Smith drops out to become a fire lookout on Desolation Peak in Washington mountains. His journey and stay in the mountains is a peaceful and blissful ascension to heaven, which may be contrasted with a more disturbing and gritty underworld trip of Jack Duluoz in *Visions of Cody* (Kerouac's aptly titled *Subterraneans* attempts almost entirely to describe the bohemian life pulsating under the layer of common social day life), while Sal Paradise's quest in *On the Road* consists of a series of ups and downs that gradually become grimmer. In *Dharma Bums*, apart from the trickster-mentor Ryder, Smith meets another wise old man, Alvah Goldbook, whose ruminations on poetry, religion and philosophy play a minor role in sending Smith on his final ordeal. The trickster character of Cody Pomeray surfaces here along with his wife-temptress who appears to suffer from some mental disorder, has visions and has attempted suicide. Cody asks Smith to look after her, triggering a minor trial, while he goes to work at night. Though no clear sexual seduction can be sensed, Rosie tempts Smith in different ways as she has apocalyptic visions warning about his future and as he falls asleep, she continues her self-injury and eventually kills herself, proving to be a serious, failed ordeal for the protagonist (112-113). The female characters often possess features of temptresses, as with the elusive and seductive Mardou Fox in *Subterraneans* or the complicated rivalry-like relationship between Sal, Dean and the latter's female partners. At one point in *On the Road* Sal recalls the plans of Camille (Moriarty's wife) and the behaviour of Marylou, Moriarty's partner (the trickster-shapeshifter Dean elsewhere encouraged Sal to sleep with her and later beat her for being intimate with other men):

> *Then Marylou began making love to me; she said Dean was going to stay with Camille and she wanted me to go with her. […]But I knew […] Marylou was doing this to make Lucille [Sal's girlfriend] jealous, and I wanted nothing of it. Still and all, I licked my lips for the luscious blonde* (116).

Other archetypal characters associated with Campbell's or Eliade's model can be found in Kerouac. The Campbellian figure of the goddess, the mother, is as Bloom noted, barely repressed in Kerouac's prose. It is the mother-figure aunt who takes care of Sal Paradise and with whom he lives when not on the road. In *Dharma Bums* Ray Smith lives with his family and it is his caring mother that appears in his meditation induced visions (143) immediately before deciding to go to Desolation Peak. The hero's/shaman's journeys abound in adventure and encounters with minor, often unusual characters. In Kerouac's stories, these are chiefly formed on the basis of Burroughs (as with Old Bull), Ginsberg (as with Alvah Goldbook) and other characters based on real-life friends from the Beat milieu. I suppose there is no need to explore it further here, as they all fall

somewhere between the image of a wise old man (Goldbook) and the trickster (Old Bull).

The ultimate goal of the journey is to overcome the sickness afflicting the shaman and to return to the community to rejuvenate it, or to confront whatever holds power over the hero and what also constitutes his unconscious and also return to society with the boon obtained, as in Campbell's model. This is attempted in a rite that recreates the shaman's death and resurrection. In order to fulfil the rite, the shaman has to enter the state of ekstasis, which means the transcendence of the static self, the ego. The rejection of his previous, socially inscribed identity. The road to this metaphoric death runs parallel for the shaman and the Beatnik. They both use similar means to achieve the ekstasis - on the one hand, peace, seclusion, and introspection, on the other hand, the hypnotic music and dancing, sexuality and the use of various intoxicants and hallucinogenic substances. They both struggle with their inner demons and contact the world of the spirits. Eliade quotes the shaman's description of an encounter with a female spirit

> *with one half of her face black, and the other one red. She said: I am the 'ayami' of your ancestors, the Shamans. I taught them shamaning. Now I am going to teach you. The old shamans have died off and there is no one to heal people. You are to become a shaman* (1964:74).

In Kerouac's *Dharma Bums* there is a scene when the protagonist is visited by the bodhisattva of compassion:

> *One night in a meditation vision Avalokitesvara the Hearer and Answerer of Prayer said to me 'You are empowered to remind people that they are utterly free' so I laid my hand on myself to remind myself first and then felt gay, yelled 'Ta,' opened my eyes, and a shooting star shot. The innumerable worlds in the Milky Way, words* (239).

In *On the Road*, the ecstatic climax takes place in Mexico, where Sal and Dean visit a brothel where they enjoy a grand party full of intoxicants and prostitutes and soon after that Sal becomes seriously ill musing about his existence:

> *Then I got a fever and became delirious and unconscious. Dysentery. I looked up out of the dark swirl of my mind and I knew I was on a bed eight thousand feet above sea level, on a roof of the world, and I knew that I had lived a whole life and many others in the poor atomistic husk of my flesh, and I had all the dreams* (287).

The final experience of ekstasis, marks at the same time the "appointment with the divine," death and the process of healing both for the shaman and the Beatnik. After the ritual of initiation is done, and the healing process is finished, the shaman returns to his tribe. The ritual might, however, not be successful or the community might reject the shaman candidate upon his return. It is, thus, the endings of Kerouac's novels that give a valuable clue as to the effects of the

ekstasis. The ending of *On the Road* is melancholy, as a brief encounter between Sal and Dean some time after their journeys in what proves to be a farewell that leaves Sal alone on a broken-down pier in New Jersey crying and missing Dean. In the final words of the novel: *I think of Dean Moriarty, I even think of Old Dean Moriarty the father we never found, I think of Dean Moriarty* (293).

In *Dharma Bums*, quite significantly we have absolutely no narrative of what the effects of Smith's return to society are, but perhaps there is something ominous in the scene immediately preceding his return when he calls the names of Buddhist figures in the mountains and hears no response, not even an echo: *I called Han Shan in the mountains: there was no answer. I called Han Shan in the morning fog: silence, it said. I called: Dipankara instructed me by saying nothing* (242). Interestingly, this can be seen as a harbinger of the failure-triggering disparity in perception: the silence is what Smith/shaman initiate finds instructive but it might signal the lack of understanding on the side of others which a failed shaman experiences upon his return. The only thing Smith, in fact, expects is *the sadness of coming back to cities* (244).

Because of its unusual and difficult to access experimental structure, *Visions of Cody* require a separate treatment. Overall, it is narrated from the perspective of Jack Duluoz, resembling an older Sal Paradise, who recounts his past journeys with Cody Pomeray (another version of Dean Moriarty), interspersed among experimental conversation tapescripts, the stream of consciousness, long impressions of American landscapes, etc. It is an utterly sad, gritty and disillusioned story with little naivety and joy typical of *Dharma Bums* or *On the Road* which is now replaced with crudeness and obscenity. Jack's journey into the past begins simply because out of yearning he began *thinking of Cody Pomeray* (18) with whom he once *had been great buddies on the road* (18). Again, there are signs of rebelling against post-war American culture:

> *America, the word, the sound is the sound of my unhappiness, the pronunciation of my beat and stupid grief – my happiness has no such name as America […] America made bones of a young boy's face and took dark paints and made hollows around his eyes, and made his cheeks sink in pallid paste and grew furrows on a marble front* (118).

Jack's affliction and misery are what still holds sway over him and what leads him to recollections of Cody:

> *I was so much on weed, three bombs a day, thinking about unhappiness all the time."(42) Finally, he decides to write a letter to Cody saying he would "go to the Coast without money anyway […] to stay with you and talk with you* (58)

There are again recollections of dodgy adventures and strange encounters, as with a gang, where one member

is a crazy snap-knife Doug with blond hair-other- Ben says he was knifed in Amarillo, an X in his back, got a buddy to hold the gang at bay with shotgun and stomped all four one by one, stomped one's tongue out accidentally- They call their cocks 'hammers,' cunt's a 'gash' (141).

Encounters with women are more openly sexualized and rough: *poor doll, I know your juicy hole, don't die so; baby doll, your lips are cold, you don't stay high with me[…[I'd lay you, like my first wife used to say, with 'violent love'* (338). The most extreme climactic vision of Cody Jack recollects is, unsurprisingly, their visit to Mexico (342-348). Repeatedly, Cody is being called the brother that Jack lost and who no longer speaks to him. The final pages of the novel are a long, depressing farewell to Cody.

The crucial part of the hero's/shaman's transformation might be conceived of psychoanalytically as a therapeutic reconstruction of the ego where some unconscious content is exposed and confronted leading to a healing change. I will not try to give a comprehensive view of what constituted the unconscious content for Kerouac's protagonists, but the Oedipal pattern of over-attachment to parental figures is clearly there. It is, paradoxically, the fixation on mother image and the male authority such as Dean/Cody and Ryder (whose name Smith screams out repeatedly when descending Desolation Peak) that constituted a crucial force that held sway over Kerouac's protagonist and it is precisely what they should have been able to rid themselves off in the process of maturation as a precondition of the process of healing and reintegration with society. In the end, the ritual was unsuccessful leaving Kerouac's protagonists as stuck in a position of young boys, failed shamans living in constant misery, far from becoming beings of insight and power that are able to constructively participate in changing and guiding society.

To recapitulate, the goal of the shaman's journey is not finding a cure for a mentally unstable member of the tribe, or to regain contact with nature, but it constitutes an important social institution. During the shaman's initiation,

disintegration of the self begins. At the most extreme point of this distress and despair, the individual suddenly discovers an image, experiences a vision that embodies the hero's particular power. This power redeems and renews the person who then returns to the human community and to the world with a consciousness transformed by vision, as a human being of insight and power (Stephenson 178).

And according to Eliade: *through the repetition, the reactualization of the traditional rites, the entire community is regenerated* (1964: 40). The role of the shaman is thus to guard *the psychic integrity of the community. (...) Shamans defend life, health, fertility, the world of 'light', against death, diseases, sterility, disaster and the world of 'darkness'* (1964: 510). That is to say, the Beatnik cannot be simply a romantic, solitary warrior, or a rebel fighting alone with the corrupt society. He cannot be conceived of as an individual separate from the

society, but he is unavoidably a social institution whose role is to redeem and to regenerate his tribe. He is, in a way, the product of the society by means of which, the community purges itself. There is no need to repeat the list of things the Beatniks were critical of in the 1950s America, but they were definitely those things that Kerouac's characters wanted to rid his community of. Paradoxically as it may sound, the true solitary and individualist Beatnik hero aspired to be, in fact, a social institution.

An interesting expression of the ideas Beat characters apparently aspired to can be found in the work of Alan Watts, one of the early popularizers of Asian religions in America, who influenced the ideas expressed by the Beat Generation, and who has been one of the intellectuals associated with the counterculture of the 1950s and the 1960s. Watts, who was portrayed by Kerouac in several of his novels, reformulates the idea of a shamanistic experience, giving it a more modern (or postmodern) outfit. In his book called *Zen and the Beat Way*, he distinguishes between shamanistic and agrarian societies. The former are related to the primitive, *hunting culture, in which every individual man contains the whole culture* (Watts 1997:91) and it entails *the very individualistic form of religiousness. That is to say, the religious experience of a shaman is not something that he gets from an authoritative priesthood. (...) The shaman is a solitary medicine man, a man of power, who invariably has to find his experience for himself* (90). The hunting culture is then contrasted with the agrarian one, where *the style of life is more complex, [and] a division of labour is required* (91). The agrarian, settled culture requires *far more complex language and institutions to provide communication between people. And this always involves a very powerful socialisation of the individual* (91) who *has to learn to think in accordance with common patterns, whether these patterns be based on language, on the type of work, or on the geographical features of the area that he inhabits* (91). Drawing from the work of Carl Jung and Joseph Campbell, Watts goes on to describe the process that he calls the *dissolution of cosmologies* (90), where this communal, finite, stable picture of the world, associated with agrarian societies, disintegrates. According to Watts, in the Western world, the process started somewhere around the 15th century, where this stable structure of the world provided by the medieval cosmology began to break up due to the exploration of the globe, the development of science, the failure of the Ptolemaic universe, and so forth. For Watts, the process culminates in the 20th century when the Western world enters *into the confused, relativistic world of modern thought* (94). The Beatniks are thus a response to the dissolution of the Western cosmology, trying to go beyond the communal view of the world, and somehow managing to get along without [it] (94). They are then, the institution which is equivalent to many ways of liberation that are inherent in the cultures of Asia, and their works might also reflect the general anxieties of post-modern, dissolved culture. It might be concluded, thus, that the

Beatnik symbolizes the response to the disintegration of the communal, stable picture of the world, but what is unique to his attitude is to respond by putting into practice the counter-culturalist idea of individual experience. Watts summarizes his, and accordingly, the counter-culturalist view on the relativistic modern culture saying:

> *it is in a way fortunate that we in the Western world do not have too many authoritative masters and teachers to whom we feel we can now go for enlightenment. More and more of us, I think, tend to feel that we are all alone together, whistling in the dark, that we haven't a saviour. There is no statesman clever enough to understand the frightful tangle of international affairs or to really do anything much about them. There is no psychologist or physician or philosopher who really impresses us as having the last word on everything. More and more, each one of us is thrown on our own resources. And this seems to me to be a perfectly excellent state of affairs. We have, in a symbolic sense, come back to the forest, like the hunter of old, who had nobody around him to tell him how he ought to feel and how he ought to use his senses, who was required, therefore, to make his own exploration of the world and to discover it for himself* (99).

Conclusion

The counter-culturalist idea of the Beatnik hero (as distinguished from, say, the romantic idea) would thus be that of an institution that, by temporarily suspending the relation to society, is able to gain an external insight into its workings and communicate it with the aim of healing or restoring its internal balance and harmony. There is of course a sense in which this might still be called a Romantic vision. After all, the above discussion still indicates that there is a special social role for the writer, for the artist. I assume, however, that although the concept of the author as a final authority on his creation is definitely dead (as perhaps my argument also suggests), the concept of the artist as a specific social institution has not been eliminated, and I take it for granted that even Harold Bloom would agree with the latter. When comparing the social recognition of the various Beatnik authors, it is not difficult to notice a stark contrast: if, among them, there really were those artists that managed to transform their transgressive experiences into a genuine action of a recognized social activist that strives to fight with what he sees as corrupt in his culture, Kerouac is not one of them. One can easily envisage, say, Allen Ginsberg in this role, or even William Burroughs who was an inspiration to many subsequent transgressive artists, but Kerouac, the author does not fit the image. As I indicated, Eliade observes that for the process of healing and reintegration into society to be complete, the "shaman" has to be recognized as having successfully gone through the ordeal and emerged a being of power and insight. If the story of

the Beatnik is also the story of a maturation of an individual that feels special and superior but who finally realizes his inevitable attachment to society, then Kerouac, the author, did not manage to reach this level. Metaphorically, he did not successfully pass the ordeal, just like his protagonists who eventually finish their journeys always returning to society as miserable, neurotic individuals. There is a sense, then, in which, Harold Bloom's original statement is entirely right: Kerouac's own troubled relationship with his mother and his overall social and personal failure parallel his artistic demise. But it is well-worth remembering that, just like with the more successful Beatniks, his failure was perhaps a price to pay for being on the road to something of genuine cultural importance.

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