

Meat, Buddhism and Salvation

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In his 242 improvised choruses making up one long sequence of *Mexico City Blues* (1959), Beat poet and novelist Jack Kerouac tried to create a hybrid between a Buddhist longing for the cessation of existence and a Catholic desire for the cessation of guilt. Key in both religious systems is the role of the flesh. The Bible tells us that the spirit may be willing but the flesh is weak – a truth Kerouac experienced again and again, especially in his recurrent but constantly failing attempts to shake off alcoholism. In Buddhism the notion of *Samsara* depicts the endless cycle of suffering caused by birth, death and rebirth

(i.e. *reincarnation*) which the world is forced to repeat. The only way out of this “wheel of the quivering meat conception,” as Kerouac termed it in one of the *Mexico City Blues* choruses (no. 211), is the attainment of *Nirvana*, where all existence ceases. Kerouac’s desire to shuffle off his mortal coil of existence and suffering, and end up “safe in Heaven dead,” was doomed to fail, as he was unable to rigorously sustain either of the two systems of religious practices he was attracted to. Nonetheless, we as readers can learn from his experiments of unifying them – textually as well as in the flesh, frail as it might be...

Poetics of Spontaneity and the Body

Jack Kerouac was famous for espousing a poetics of spontaneity and for insisting on the corporeality of the work of composition. His poetic practice always included a consideration of materiality, in the sense that he would select paper formats that facilitated speed, flow and amount of writing/typing for his spontaneous autobiographical prose (the best known example is the 120 foot scroll of tele-type paper he used for one draft of *On the Road*). He would also go to extreme lengths in terms of enabling his body to accommodate a long, uninterrupted process of composition, which would involve ingesting a number of stimulants to keep up with the pace of his mind's invention of words. What is less known is his apparently contradictory practice of imposing length/size restrictions on his poems or 'sketches' as he called them, using a metaphor from pictorial art. In his collections *Mexico City Blues* and *San Francisco Blues* one finds such poems, where the writing on each sheet of paper in a notepad forms a chorus of these 'blues'. The tendency in Kerouac's writing to both seek constraints and to relinquish control over length and size is illustrated also by another volume of poetry entitled *Pomes All Sizes*, encompassing extremely short poems, which Kerouac elsewhere dubbed "Western haikus", as well as rambling "songs" or "poem songs" filling several pages:

In my system, the form of blues choruses is limited by the small page of the breast-pocket notebook in which they are written, like the form of a set number of bars in a jazz blues chorus, and so sometimes

the word-meaning can carry from one chorus into another, or not, just like the phrase-meaning can carry harmonically from one chorus to the other, or not, in jazz, so that, in these blues as in jazz, the form is determined by time, and by the musician's spontaneous phrasing & harmonizing with the beat of the time as it waves & waves on by in measured choruses.

It's all gotta be non stop ad libbing within each chorus, or the gig is shot. (Kerouac, 1995:1)

The constraints of the body in terms of what it might be able to endure is also a constant theme in Kerouac's writings, whether letters, journals, poems or fiction. His physical ailments would always be mentioned and the struggle between his body and mind over whether he could write or not is a recurrent theme. For the writing of *Mexico City Blues*, at least two concerns were pertinent in motivating the choice of setting for the writing as well as most of the poems: access to cheap medication in an attempt to cure his phlebitis, and access to cheap drugs designed to set his mind free to ensure the spontaneity he set out as a precondition for attaining both the aesthetic freedom to create new words and the ethical equilibrium he attempted to achieve in his new hybrid religion between Catholicism and Buddhism.

In the version of his poetic manifesto (a text which, like all declared poetics, may have been intended as *prescriptive*, but in equal measure can be read as a post-hoc *descriptive* justification for writing in a specific way), entitled "Essentials of Spontaneous Prose", Kerouac's

two first entries describe his poetic practice as much as his prose writing:

SET-UP The object is set before the mind, either in reality, as in sketching (before a landscape or teacup or old face) or is set in the memory wherein it becomes the sketching from memory of a definite image-object.

PROCEDURE Time being of the essence in the purity of speech, sketching language is undisturbed flow from the mind of personal secret idea-words, *blowing* (as per jazz musician) on subject of image. (Kerouac, 1993:n.p.)

Thus, the SET-UP constrains the subject matter, whereas the PROCEDURE is designed to liberate the words from that very constraint. Taken together it is clear that Kerouac's poetics as well as his precepts for living consist of this polarity between constraints and freedom, as well as between spontaneous expression and careful planning, and this tension is mirrored exactly in his writings and their thematic concerns with transgression, trespass, guilt and forgiveness.

Kerouac's Hybrid Buddhism

In the course of 1954 Kerouac had begun to read more deeply in Buddhist scriptures, partly spurred on by two of his friends, Allen Ginsberg and Gary Snyder who shared an interest in alternatives to Western systems of thought and writing, partly because Kerouac was undergoing a personal struggle with his childhood Catholic belief which trapped him in an unpleasant feeling of guilt at not being de-

vout and holy enough, while at the same time feeling that for him to grow as an artist it was necessary for him to rebel against moral precepts regarding vices and sinful practices of the body (sex, drug taking etc.). Kerouac was seeking a system where forgiveness was granted, or even better, irrelevant. He found this in Buddhist scriptures where he believed it was stated that suffering was a given in all animal existence, a belief that he could live with exactly because the Buddhist version of suffering was a shared condition, and in a crucial distinction from Catholicism, not a particular problem for Man to come to terms with and work through via confession and the doling out of absolution by an ecclesial authority. The form of salvation Kerouac read into Buddhism was a cessation of suffering, and his concept of Heaven is a mixture of a Christian Paradise and a Buddhist non-place of non-existence, Nirvana – a condition Kerouac sometimes seems to have envisioned he could inhabit while still living here on Earth. A quote from a poem entitled "My Views on Religion," collected in *Pomes All Sizes*, illustrates these tensions:

Heaven has everything to do with healing
and healing has nothing to do with heaven

If Jesus Christ is the Son of God so am I

If suffering has anything to do
-- if cake wont do or cookies –
Heaven has everything to do with the way I feel
and I say *Heaven!* what you doin

down there, making like youse out
to beat hell [...]

Buddha was not a medicine man,
he was a beyond-partition man, --
nor did he "limp for duty
and crawl
for charity"
--- *Chuangtse*

Buddha is God, the father of Jesus Christ
AND GOD IS GOD (Kerouac, 1992:101-2)

While the hierarchies between Christianity and Buddhism may be slightly unclear in the above lines, and while the role of Kerouac himself as a man and a son of God on a par with Christ is not one that is redolent of humility, it is clear that for Kerouac the key role of being a "beyond-partition man" is the one he admires in Buddha and desires for himself – in other words, his Buddhist practice IS the creation of the hybrid system of heaven and healing.

In another poem from *Pomes All Sizes*, Kerouac describes his practice, which became increasingly rigorous though 1954:

I used to sit under trees and meditate
on the diamond bright silence of darkness [...]

And many a time the Buddha played a leaf
on me at midnight thinking-time, to
remind me 'This Thinking Has Stopped,'
which it had because no thinking was there
but wasn't liquidly mysteriously brainly
there
(Kerouac, 1992: 97-99)

This snippet reminds not only of the discipline of the practice of Buddhist meditation which consists in emptying one's mind of old thought patterns and repetitions, but also of the dangers of rational thinking which runs counter to the mystical practice of opening the brain "liquidly mysteriously". This anti-intellectual strand¹ in both faiths fits Kerouac's spontaneity principle very well, but rather defeats the purpose of his other point of pride that he was an extremely well-read man in literary terms and knew where he was coming from in terms of literary history. Another tension that it turned out would remain impossible to resolve within the hybrid faith and its practice.

Carne Tremolo

Turning now to the specific ideas of *Samsara* and *Nirvana* and their incorporation in the poem sequence *Mexico City Blues*, we find at the outset of Chorus 211 a striking, almost Bosch-like description of the Wheel of *Samsara*, the teeming cycle of procreation as a result of the frailty of the flesh:

The wheel of the quivering meat conception
Turns in the void expelling human beings,
Pigs, turtles, frogs, insects, nits,
Mice, lice, lizards, rats, roan
Racinghorses, poxy bucolic pigtics,
Horrible unnameable lice of vultures,
Murderous attacking dog-armies
Of Africa, Rhinos roaming in the jungle,
Vast boars and huge gigantic bull
Elephants, rams, eagles, condors,
Pones and Porcupines and Pills-

The teeming masses of species (humans at the top of the list, which is otherwise filled with pests, unclean animals and predators, almost all characterised by their inedibility, or by having taboos against their consumption as meat attached to them) spill from the wheel of creation, not in a Divine spark-infusing act of Creation, but as a stupidly carnal, largely phallic-driven (especially the “Vast boars and huge gigantic bull Elephants, rams” are all obvious phallus substitutes²) engine of indifferent mass-production of life – and fill the void in a claustrophobic manner:

All the endless conception of living beings
Gnashing everywhere in Consciousness
Throughout the ten directions of space
Occupying all the quarters in and out,
From supermicroscopic no-bug
To huge Galaxy Lightyear
Bowell

No sooner is the galaxy full of life, before it ejects it again as a mighty “Lightyear Bowell” having an uncontrollable movement. It is noteworthy that none of all these life forms are happy or filled with any other purpose than their own self-perpetuation, usually described as acts of aggression (“murderous armies”) and suffering (“gnashing”). “All the quarters” are occupied and there is no room for grace in this universe, and Kerouac ends the poem with a cry for quarter of another kind:

I wish I was free
of that slaving meat wheel
and safe in heaven dead
(all Kerouac, 1959: 211)

Freedom is exactly freedom from being of meat and enslaved by meat. The mortal coil is oppressive and an impediment for entering heaven – a place where one is paradoxically both ‘safe’ and ‘dead.’ Such a heaven is not a Christian Paradise but the Buddhist Nirvana which has previously been thematized throughout the poem sequence, and which in other choruses has taken on the form a hospital with respite from grief and suffering:

A hospital for the sick,
Lying high in crystal,
In heaven of pure adamantine
Consanguine
Partiality devoid
Of conditions, free –
Here I go rowin
Thru Lake Innifree
Looking for Nirvana
Inside me (Kerouac, 1959:196)

Or a unified essence that again merges the names and qualities of both Christian and Buddhist figures of salvation through unity:

Nirvana? Heaven?
X? Whatyoucallit? [...]
White light of black eternity?
Golden Secret Figures
Of Unimaginable
Inexpressible Flowers
Blooming in the One Own
Mind
Essence (Kerouac, 1959:199)

Or finally, amusingly, a brand of lipstick that, while adorning the pretty girls, also makes them disappear and remove the possibility of

carnally lusting for them, saying a big “Nirvana No” to sex:

When the girls start putting
Nirvana No on their lips
Nobody’ll see them
(Kerouac, 1959: 201)

While these images are predominantly Buddhist in their vocabulary of flowers, diamonds and mind essence, Chorus 212 then continues as an explication of the Meat wheel described in 211, and concludes that “to wish for flesh was sin alone itself” (212). This is of course Catholicism with a vengeance and reminds us of the notion of the original sin – that the body is inherently sinful and frailer than the spirit it hosts for a little while.

In Conclusion

Mexico City Blues thus concludes uncertainly within its own hybrid attempt, and while Kerouac did continue to try to formulate himself within the Buddhist idiom in his own attempt at a *Sutra* (*The Scripture of the Golden Eternity*) in 1956; his life of the Buddha, *Wake Up*; and *Some of the Dharma*, a commentary volume, his own practice never again reached the heights it attained prior to his writing of *Mexico City Blues*. Tomlinson concludes in her intro to a selection of Jack Kerouac’s Buddhist texts in *Big Sky Mind: Buddhism and the Beat Generation*:

His taste for Buddhism in a formal setting was limited, and he envisioned instead a new American Buddhism – a meditation center without rules, where wandering bhikkus could rest and med-

itate during their journeys on the road. [...] After his stint on Desolation Peak, however, it became clear that such heavy doses of solitude did not agree with him. He was only too happy to return to the frenetic activity of the city. (Tomlinson, 1995:26)

One of the most thorough Kerouac biographers, Gerald Nicosia, is even blunter in his assessment of Kerouac’s disillusionment with his failed hybrid spirituality:

Despite the fact that Allen Ginsberg sees *Mexico City Blues* as evidence of Kerouac’s intelligent understanding of Buddhism, it seems likely that the book marked the start of his emergence from Buddhist influence. [...] one should consider that after it was published in 1959 Kerouac consistently autographed copies of the book by placing a cross under his signature, a practice he didn’t normally use for his other books (Nicosia, 1983: 490)

Kerouac thus never managed to reconcile the two belief systems that fascinated him. It is tempting to suggest that the psychologically reinforced guilt of his early years was too strong for his particular version of Buddhism to overcome, partly because his version of Nirvana became tainted with a European Nietzsche-inspired nihilism that was alien to simple Buddhist faith. Paradoxically it was thus Kerouac’s intellect that co-conspired with his unconscious to sour his childish glee at enlightenment in his early days of practicing the Way:

Enlightenment is: do what
you want
eat what there is
(Kerouac, 1992: 67)

From flesh to meat, and back again, through consumption and digestion of “what there is” – the changing valorizations of the carnal and corporeal undid Kerouac’s faith and his body through alcoholism. Kerouac died of hemorrhaging esophageal varices, (“the classic drunkard’s death” – Nicosia: 1983:697) at age 47, and his last words were reportedly: *Cauterize my wounds!* It must of course remain speculation what motivated him to cry out for this antiquated purification ritual to be applied to him in his utmost distress. Perhaps he simply dreamed that a burning of his flesh would stop the bleeding that was killing him. Perhaps – and this reading is stumblingly close for the psychoanalytically inclined reader – he envisioned the cauterizing flames of Purgatory waiting for him, and he embraced them in a Christ-like gesture. If so, the dying words indicate that the fear of going to Hell remained with him to the end – what remains a solid biographical fact is that he was buried in hallowed ground in Lowell cemetery, with his rosary laid on his chest.

Notes

- 1 In another paper (Beat Dreams? Jack Kerouac’s *Book of Dreams*, Belgrade 2009) I have discussed at length whether this tendency in Kerouac to critique the grand narratives or 19th-century ideologies can best be described as anti-intellectual or non-intellectual. I believe Kerouac

desperately desired to be seen as an intellectual, but simultaneously could not abide thought systems such as psychoanalysis or Marxism, because of what he perceived as their effacement of individuality.

- 2 The phallic nature of the results of this carnal creation is a reminder of the origin of the quivering meat: sex leading to unwanted procreation – a process that in the poem sparks the desire for a cessation of creation, a stoppage of the wheel.

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