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## Jack Kerouac's Pursuit of The American West

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Jack Kerouac's Pursuit of  
The American West

Dan Fliegel  
1991

**Jack Kerouac's Pursuit of The American West**

by

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Departmental Honors in English

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A paper submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for

Departmental Honors in English

UTAH STATE UNIVERSITY

Logan, Utah

1991

Called alternately "the father of hip," "King of the Beats," "the daddy of the swinging psychedelic generation," Jack Kerouac was less a thrill-seeking hipster than a serious author whose life and novels speak of our shared need to explore alternatives and renew ourselves, and of our frustration and regret for our movement away from tradition. Kerouac's life and literature can be viewed as an extended quest, an episodic series of explorations for meaning and for a way of life. He continually addressed the modernist question "How shall we live?," seeking answers in what one biographer calls an ongoing "pattern of finding, losing, and struggling to find again"(Stephenson 22). Recurrently restless, he spent most of his life looking for understanding and peace, a "serious, searching soul" in John Clellon Holmes' words, who from an early age felt the need to live correctly and joyfully in what he saw to be a world of suffering. He considered his fiction "archetypal autobiography," and the novels *On The Road*, *The Dharma Bums*, and *Desolation Angels* present phases of his ongoing quest, as recorded in the body of his life's work, which makes up *The Duluoz Legend*. *The Dharma Bums* reflects a possible conclusion to the quest, the model for a way of life linked with the American West, expressing a prevailing theme in western American literature and a mythos surrounding the American West.

Kerouac was born in 1922, into a Catholic French-Canadian family in Lowell, Massachusetts, the last of three children. His brother Gerard, five years older than Jack, died at age nine after a short life that Jack's mother and the community nuns considered to be one of "martyred sainthood" (Niscosia 25). Gerard had been Jack's childhood companion and spiritual teacher, espousing the importance of Christlike kindness and gentleness to young Jack. His final painful months with rheumatic fever must have shown Jack

that no one is safe from suffering, even the young and saintly. Gerard became for a time a role model, an ideal that Jack could never live up to; and his death--instead of Jack's own--caused Jack guilt into his final years. The Kerouac household's Catholicism afterwards wavered between his mother's devotion and his father's refusal to attend mass (Niscosia 24), so that Kerouac grew up with conflicting forces of spiritual orientation.

Jack inherited a difficulty in managing money from his father, who struggled economically throughout his life. Before Jack's birth, Leo Kerouac worked as a reporter, writer, translator, and typesetter for a French newspaper in Lowell. He later opened his own successful printing business with a wide variety of customers, but somehow he rarely had money left after paying the bills (Niscosia 28). His father's difficulty in living the American dream of financial independence was passed on to Jack, who spent many of his later years leading what he considered a bum's existence. Kerouac was forever torn between living the secure life of a respected and wealthy writer, and deploring the seemingly senseless consumerism of his age.

True to his later picture of an all-American boyhood, Kerouac excelled in high school football, and several big name universities recruited him. He chose Columbia so that he could get a first-rate, Ivy League education. Though he lasted only a year there, he had a lifelong devotion to scholarship and a respect for knowledge; he continued to read classic literature, art history, and his favorite source of diverse information--the *Encyclopedia Britannica*--passionately throughout his years. His time spent at Columbia represents one of his characteristic searches into traditional American institutions. He sought there both the potential guidance offered by the canonized body of academic knowledge, and the security offered by the lifestyle of America's elite. Kerouac attended school with the country's

brightest and most privileged, and for a while life at Columbia must have seemed like a yellow brick road towards guaranteed prosperity and happiness.

But he soon abandoned school for the excitement of New York. Times Square fascinated Kerouac, where he observed all kinds of characters and lifestyles--criminals and executives, bums and prostitutes, all mingling. He also ventured into the jazz clubs of Harlem, intrigued by the spontaneous music and lifestyles of American blacks, who were forced to live outside the mainstream, excluded de facto from the American dream. Jazz relies upon improvisation, where the instrumental soloist is required to construct his solo within the limited harmonic structure of the particular composition--a perfect parallel for the seeker who wishes to construct a lifestyle within his society's offered choices. Throughout his life, Kerouac sought to discover the parameters of societal options so as to make his solo effort fit. During these early years, he found meaning in the very act of questing for new experiences, modeling his life (and his early writing) after the adventurousness of Jack London and Thomas Wolfe, two of his favorites. Following their lead in New York, Kerouac wandered the city on foot, experimenting with benzedrine, pot, prostitutes, and bisexuality out of desire to experience the variety of life that he felt was necessary to becoming a writer. He repeatedly felt guilt over these departures from the norm, and lamented fifteen years later in *Desolation Angels* that he had forsaken his opportunity to follow the established good life of American academics by setting "a new record at Columbia for cutting classes," a decision for which he was still "haunted by dreams" (46).

In wartime, Kerouac enlisted in the Navy, but failed the physical for officer training. He grew bored of the training for regular enlisted men, and feigned insanity to receive a discharge. Again, he felt guilt at having

abandoned the way of a "real American Man" (Niscosia 106), and joined the Merchant Marines in search of self-respect and Melville-like experiences for his writing.

In some respects no more free from the pull of custom than his contemporaries, Kerouac frequently looked to the security of a traditional family life for solace, but his family experiences throughout his life proved less than traditional. Convenience alone precipitated his first marriage: he needed money for bail, cash his wife-to-be, Edith Parker, could obtain only after a legal wedding. Each one resented the other's claim on their freedom, as well as their various lovers, and the marriage dissipated over several years. Kerouac shared with his friend Neal Cassady the latter's vision of one day raising large families next door to one another, and "tossing the little wiggles over the backyard fence"(Niscosia 335). Yet he refused to acknowledge his one daughter (from his second marriage) until she was a teenager. Until the end of his life, Kerouac repeated attempts to withdraw and live a substitute family life with his mother and sister--on Long Island, in North Carolina, in Berkeley--each time seeming to want to give his life at least the external look of a middle-of-the-road normalcy.

Kerouac is often considered the founder of, and spokesman for, the Beat Generation, a post-war social and literary movement. In *Vanity of Duluo*, he claims that he first identified the nature of "beat" in war-ravaged Liverpool, on leave from the Merchant Marines in the summer of 1943. The destruction, desperation, and poverty faced by the British there forced upon them what Kerouac saw to be the extreme spiritual and psychological state of "beat." John Clellon Holmes, who helped Kerouac define the term in 1948, notes that Kerouac considered beatness to be "a weariness with all the forms,



all the conventions of the world...it means being pushed up against the wall of oneself. A man is beat whenever he goes for broke and wagers the sum of his resources on a single number" (Holmes 110).

As a literary movement, the Beat Generation emphasized the quest for personal renewal and for "a true mode of perception"(Stephenson 8). Like the Lost Generation before them, they sought to reevaluate the conventions of American life, questioning the emerging conspicuous consumption of the age, along with its suburban sterility and lack of spirituality. Kerouac's Ray Smith in *The Dharma Bums* scorns the lives of the millions of Americans and their televisions, "with everybody watching the same thing and thinking the same thing at the same time while the Japhies of the world go prowling in the wilderness" and try to discover some truths to live by (33). The Beats experimented with sex, drugs, travel, and "experience" of all kinds in hopes of finding these truths. Like the British Romantics, the Beats sought to unify the psyche by releasing the subconscious and following the spontaneous drives of the self. The hero of *On The Road*, Dean Moriarty, based upon Neal Cassady, represents a near perfection of this release, a man who views sex as "the one and only holy and important thing in life" (Road 6), who chases after experience across the country, and who embodies the beatific striving for meaning. Moriarty represents an American hero in that he was born down and out, with a bum for a father, and spent years in reform school--yet he struggles against the odds to find happiness and meaning. Moriarty's movement in itself reflects Kerouac's renewal ethic, in which new experiences are sought for themselves, but always with the hope that they might offer insight to what life has to offer. The Beat ideology suggests that there is always something around the corner (like Wordsworth's "something evermore about to be")--a new chance, some hope--and Kerouac, through

some of his gloomiest periods, remained to some friends the quintessential optimist.

The Beats also experimented with literary conventions in an attempt to break free from tradition and create forms of their own. Allen Ginsberg developed his breath unit poetic line--a new way of structuring meter and line length--and William Burroughs practiced his cut-up technique, which explores the relationships between sentences and new ways of rhetorical organization. Kerouac's interest lay in applying the jazz soloist's improvisational technique to his writing, and he thus developed his spontaneous prose. The jazz musician continuously quests to find a new phrase, a new harmony within a formed composition, thereby renewing himself and his listeners. Kerouac's method attempted to imitate this process, to get at the instant, subconscious response to a situation and render a new truth. His technique was not careless, but practiced, and he often rewrote entire passages spontaneously in order to get the feeling--or even the sound--that he wanted. Contemporaries called him the first "jazz poet," and he recorded with musicians such as Steve Allen and Zoot Sims, performed at the famous jazz club The Village Vanguard, and had a composition named for him by Dizzy Gillespie. He was an avid jazz listener and critic, with hopes of learning to play himself. His technique itself reflects his belief that something new is possible in every instant, and that one must explore oneself and the world to discover the limits of both, and how to operate within these limits.

Kerouac often directed his life toward larger literary purposes, and his famous traveling years recorded in *On The Road* were likewise spent in search of material, as well as for alternatives to the established American Way of Life he saw around him in mid-century America (especially New York),

where everyone was "hustling forever for a buck among themselves" (*Road* 89). That novel's hero, Dean Moriarty, represents a western vitality not found on the East Coast. Dean is spontaneous, vigorous, operating from the normally repressed libido, "one of the world's greatest lovers" (Niscosia 146), and a "sideburned hero of the snowy West" (*Road* 6). In Dean, Kerouac sought to find (and to create) a role model. The novel ends with the separation of Dean and the narrator, Sal Paradise, their questing temporarily finished yet unfulfilled. Sal contemplates Dean and Dean's father, a symbol of spirituality whom he calls "the father we never found," thereby admitting his need to continue searching for guidance.

The tragedy of Kerouac's life stemmed from his growing sense that he could not (or would not) live the standard American life, and that he was increasingly incapable of finding an acceptable alternative. In late 1953, he wrote Neal's wife Carolyn and discussed his dream of living in the woods by himself, like Thoreau. Like many of us, he was probably impressed by Thoreau's independence from the growing materialism and spiritlessness of *his* America, as well as his ability to make it on his own with apparent cheerfulness. In Thoreau he discovered a possible role model, as well as a system of spiritual belief: Buddhism. And Kerouac's need became more desperate. In late April, 1954, he returned to live with his mother in Richmond Hill, Long Island, certain that Buddhism and isolation were his only hopes of avoiding suicide--an out that his still extant Catholic beliefs forbade. By December of that year, he reached what he hoped to be the bottom of his despair, the low point of his life. Kerouac's desperation at this time fit with his notions of "beat" and "beatific": that one has to be truly down and out, at some kind of end, before discovering enlightenment or ecstasy. Truly backing closer and closer to the wall, Kerouac increasingly put his money on

Buddhism and the dream of making it in the wilderness, a hope that would eventually find its expression in the character Japhy Ryder in *The Dharma Bums*. The following spring, he moved west to San Francisco, where he met Gary Snyder (who became Japhy) and discovered, for a time, the means for the beatific renewal that he needed. This quest, as recorded in *The Dharma Bums*, seemed to end with a new knowledge of how to live in America, how to make music in the post-World War Two world.

In *The Dharma Bums*, Kerouac presents and investigates different sides of the renewal theme. The novel is at once Buddhist, as well as western American. The protagonist, Ray Smith, quests for meaning and for a new start where Americans have traditionally gone to seek it: the West. Although the frontier is gone, the West still has its vast wild country, and most of the important scenes in *The Dharma Bums* take place in the wilderness or near wilderness, or in reference to the difference between it and modern American civilization. The book in this sense can be placed within the tradition of western American literature. Further, in a larger dimension of renewal, Kerouac's novel comments politically on late 1950's America--parallel to Ray Smith's personal search for a new way of life, *The Dharma Bums* in part calls for a new nation.

The novel starts with Ray Smith hopping a northbound train from Los Angeles to San Francisco. From the beginning, Smith is shown to be an outsider in American society, sharing food and wine with another "little bum," both of them riding the fringe, a kind of internal frontier that exists within American society but remains separate. Kerouac later wrote "The Vanishing American Hobo," an essay which praises "the peaceable nonconformist," and laments his decline in America as a sign of increased

material efficiency and the consequent "loss of trust in one's fellow men" (Niscosia 585). As a near hobo, Ray is able to separate himself from civilization, and gain an outsider's perspective; the hobo's life in this way somewhat resembles that of the free-wheeling frontier roamer of earlier times. An America which eliminated this perspective would (for Kerouac) clearly bankrupt itself.

The novel shows how the wild side of America has a powerful effect on its individuals. It provides freedom, and, as in tradition, the secluded space necessary for personal contemplation and reevaluation. In the beginning, when Ray camps in the semi-wilderness of a secluded beach in Santa Barbara, he feels the charge of standing "all alone and free" under the starlight. Here, after sleeping, he wakes and asks the questions "Wa? Where am I, what is the basketbally game of eternity the girls are playing here by me in the old house of my life, the house isn't on fire, is it?"(9). His search after this point in the novel is to understand "the basketbally game," to find a meaningful way of life--the task central to quest literature. Three pages later, Ray reveals the flip side to his search for meaning, which lies in his interest in two of the Buddhist Sakyamuni's four noble truths: "All life is suffering," and "The suppression of suffering can be achieved"(12). His search for meaning, for an end to suffering, and for a new life, focuses on the American West.

The convention of moving west for renewal is traditionally American, with the frontier having been continuously pushed farther westward until its official closure in 1890. The West for us, even today, has a certain psychological pull to it: the great space and the wildness remind us of what we can still become or return to, and that we can scrap what has happened so far, that it's never too late to start over again. The West might just reflect a

side of our minds which always seeks new beginnings. The literature of the American West, then, has often focused on this aspect of the western mythos, in which an individual can find personal renewal. About the novelist Zane Grey, a characteristic western writer, critic Gary Topping writes "The basic Zane Grey plot is a drama in which a jaded, disillusioned, and perhaps physically frail or ill member of eastern society comes west to find a complete reorientation of values"(Topping). Kerouac's Ray Smith fits this description of the disillusioned easterner in search of reorientation; and in fact he tells us early on that his western experience, and especially his time spent with the hero Japhy Ryder, made Ray "change [his] plans in life"(13), which affirms his acquisition of a new set of values. However, it is at times difficult to determine through *The Dharma Bums* and *Desolation Angels* just exactly what these values are.

With Japhy Ryder as the hero, *The Dharma Bums* follows a western standard of presenting an ideal character as a model of behavior. Tom Lyon notes that in the "dime novel" western of the late nineteenth century, the western hero represents "a synthesis of civilization and wildness," and that "Great emphasis was laid upon the utter self-reliance and individuality of the hero"(7). Kerouac portrays Japhy as this type of synthesis character: he is both a poet and a woodsman, a scholar who is yet "wiry, sun-tanned, vigorous"(11) and sexually uninhibited. He is able to survive for weeks in the woods on his own, an ability that most Americans have lost, and one that Ray Smith hopes to acquire. Ryder is a character who joins wilderness with civilization, and thus manages to steer clear of the traps of the modern, civilized world. Ray sees Ryder's lifestyle as a model for life in America: he is free of the quest for possessions, living simply with books and camping gear; he speaks his mind freely, unafraid to oppose popular opinion; he maintains his

spirituality, and meditates humbly, which Ray finds "amazing to see in America with its steel mills and airfields"(57). Japhy is a nonconformist in an ideal American sense, who reconfirms what is noble in civilization (knowledge, spirituality) while rejecting its material-progress orientation. Against the grain of materialism, Japhy's vision of life is to "grit [his] teeth and discipline [himself] all the while getting nowhere and thereby learn"(80). Knowledge, discipline, and vigor--the best of civilization and the "wild side" of human nature--are thus presented as the real values, and Japhy Ryder, who embodies them, is seen as "a great new hero of American culture"(27). The new America envisioned in the novel, the result of a "rucksack revolution," will require a widespread synthesis of the type that Ryder has achieved.

Though the necessary synthesis is presented in the Ryder characterization, much of *The Dharma Bums* emphasizes the difference between wilderness and civilization, with Ray Smith discovering the inherent virtue of the natural world and the corresponding corruption of its urban counterpart. The novel is dedicated to Han Shan, the seventh-century Chinese poet who "got sick of the big city and the world and took off to hide in the mountains"(18). Ray Smith's underlying belief is that he too can escape, and he wants to learn from Japhy the backcountry skills necessary for pulling it off. During his first wilderness jaunt with Japhy, up Matterhorn, he realizes early on that the mountain air itself feels fantastic, comparing it with the atmosphere of The Place and other bars, which are "all bleary and sick"(45). Later on, Ray feels that he must leave "the city of ignorance, which is the modern city" for good, and seek a higher wisdom and peace in nature(88). Still later, after having purchased a backpack and some other camping gear, he states with confidence that he can now "cast off the evils of the world and the city" and wander into the wilderness(123). Clearly, Ray fails

to find what he needs in the cities of developed America, and the strength of his language emphasizes his distrust of civilization. His hope is that he will find some answers in the wilderness, living like Han Shan, and will thus learn to "appreciate perhaps a whole new way of living"(45).

Most of the best passages in *The Dharma Bums* are descriptions of the natural world, perhaps an unconscious confirmation on Kerouac's part of the transcendent value of experiencing the wilderness. In these passages, Ray Smith seems to forget his earthly worries--his suffering--and the meaning necessary for his life comes merely from his own engagement with his surroundings. For example, he describes an early part of the hike up Matterhorn:

We went on, and I was immensely pleased  
with the way the trail had a kind of immortal look  
to it in the early afternoon now, the way the side  
of the grassy hill seemed to be clouded with  
ancient gold dust and the bugs flipped over rocks  
and the wind sighed in shimmering dances  
over the hot rocks, and the way the trail  
would suddenly come into a cool shady part with  
big trees overhead, and here the light deeper. (49)

He goes from "immensely pleased" to having what he believes to be memories of the place and of a simpler type of existence--perhaps the remembrance of the ways of his species before civilization. Ray experiences "ecstasy," "joy," as well as the knowledge of "other purposes more ancient, more serious, more simple"(64). Japhy's concept of haiku is that it has to make you see the "real thing" and encounter the world face to face without intellectualization; Ray has a similar realization, quoting the Bible and calling for an outward look at his world: "Who knoweth the spirit of man who looketh upward?"(62). Ray here sees the potential of looking outward and



experiencing, and curses himself for forgetting the simple joys of life by drinking and wallowing in city underlife. His experience is obviously one of awakening, of Buddhistic enlightenment, in the wilderness, and Japhy confirms that Ray's only problem is that he had let the world--or civilization--"vex" him, because he "never learned to get out to spots like this"(56). Ray interprets the real, wild world as the answer early on in the novel, and vows to "begin a new life":

"All over the West, and the mountains in the  
East, and the desert, I'll tramp with a rucksack and  
make it the pure way." (62)

Here, Ray has decided that nature alone can lead him to the true life that he has sought. It provides direct, simple, joyful experiences, and he feels that it cannot lead him to despair. In fact, as he walks down the mountain, separated from Japhy and their companion Morley, in danger of getting lost, he is literally guided down by an old deer track: he need only trust "the instinct of [his] sweet little millennial deer" (70). The symbolic message here is clear: follow nature.

The middle of the novel reaffirms Ray's findings that civilization can cause disillusionment, that nature provides "the way," and that renewal is possible by embracing wilderness. The suicide of Rosie, in the city, emphasizes the confusion of the modern world, a confusion that nearly has its grip on Ray. Her death warns him of what could happen to himself if he doesn't find a way out. But Ray has just purchased a new backpack and some other camping gear, a move that makes him feel "like a new man" (86). He knows that he must leave the city, for its pull on his psyche is deathly strong and ready to force disillusionment and depression at any time. Back in L.A.,

in the "mad sniffing smog," he struggles with the hassles of avoiding police and hopping trains, and realizes that life there is too "far away from the easy purity of being with Japhy Ryder" in the high Sierras (95). But Ray feels that the path to renewal and meaning has already been visualized. Ray has understood that there are "whole Buddha-fields in every direction for each one of us" (90), that a new beginning is possible with each new moment. The novel here testifies that the pain and suffering of life on earth--that which killed Rosie--can be transcended. Chaos and uncertainty are tied to the civilization of police, crime, and consumerism, "that horrible fog wire-fence country in industrial L.A." (97). Ray needs only to see beyond this side of the world, by entering his quiet grove of meditation back in Rocky Mount, North Carolina.

The grove is marked by two evenly spaced pines for an entrance--like John Muir's trees, through which one may find the door to a new way of life at any time. The new life for Ray is one of drifting through wilderness, an American dream of pure freedom and blissful communion with nature. The autonomy that he can achieve with his backpack recalls the freedom of the nineteenth-century mountain men, who relied on nothing but a few supplies obtained on occasional returns to outposts. Ray seeks this life, and a quiet grove to "live in forever," away from civilization. He finds a beautiful spring in Rocky Mount that recalls the "happy life of childhood," and comes to the realization that his life is his own to make, to restart--"a vast glowing empty page" on which he can write whatever he chooses (117).

The world then continues to open up, and the descriptions of it reveal a renewed sense of vitality and appreciation. Alone, in the Texas desert on his way back to the West, the silence reminds him of the wisdom he had forgotten since birth, the wisdom that allows all creatures to live with

themselves and the world. Back in California, he is awed by the beauty of the coast, and awakens to a love of life:

It was like the first morning in the world in fine  
yard, with the sun streaming in through the dense  
sea of leaves, and birds and butterflies  
around, warm, sweet, the smell of higher-hill  
heathers and flowers beyond the barbed-wire fence which  
led to the very top of the mountain and  
showed you a vista of all the Marin County area.  
(129)

The absence of humanity recalls Eden on the coast, where Ray views "nothing but trees, trees, a roaring sea of trees. It was Paradise" (131). His plan to work as a fire lookout for the summer extends his leave from civilization, and Ray envisions a continued good life. And he finds it. After the initial fears of isolation, and of surviving a snowstorm on the pack in to the lookout, he begins to adjust to life on the mountain on his own. The peaks around him are fearful, but beautiful, and when the late day sun shines on them, Ray "sees the hope" (185), a Hope which opposes Despair. He is visited by birds and deer, the "symphonic hum of a million insects" which he calls his friends, and a general feeling that life can work for him, that "though the flesh be bugged, the circumstances of existence are pretty glorious" (187). His epistemological discovery here, like Keats upon Ben Nevis, is that he can never understand the complexity of life, that "there is no answer," a realization that sets him free to live in a "golden eternity." Thus, Ray completes his search for spiritual wisdom, the search of those named by the book's title, attained finally on the mountain top, a Buddhist symbol for knowledge.

Additionally, in the end Ray seems to have fully understood Japhy's ability. His wilderness experiences have allowed him to open a part of

himself that was previously closed. He can now return to civilization with the knowledge of how to live there, and with the ability, like Japhy, to teach others to get outside of the cities and experience the wilderness. Ray has progressed through stages towards his enlightenment. At first, he felt the need to abandon civilization altogether to wander on his own. But by the end, he appears whole—a modern synthesis character who will live a balanced life between the cities and the wilderness, helping to lead the “rucksack revolution” he believes necessary for America. The conclusion suggests many more wilderness experiences for Ray, as part of a new lifestyle that requires the balancing power of nature in the dialectic with civilization.

In late August of 1956, Kerouac came down from the lookout job on Desolation Peak. Happy to be back in the world of convenience, like many backpackers returning, he indulged in the offerings of Seattle and San Francisco: cafe hamburgers, conversation, beer, and parties. Gerald Niscosia notes that Kerouac “was dead certain he would never return to a hermit's life, anywhere”(528). On the road again, he hitchhiked and jumped trains all the way to Mexico City, where he moved in above Bill Garver, an old friend who was a sixty year old morphine addict, and he began writing--mostly finishing up earlier manuscripts. He spent his days writing on the roof, and walking through the “dreary” city streets. He and Garver likened the lives and thoughts of the junky to those of the artist: both outsiders, content to sit quietly with their own thoughts. He reflected on his life as a thirty-four-year-old penniless artist who could not support his mother and whose scruffy appearance frightened middle-Americans and Mexicans alike. He grew anxious again, though he lived fairly peacefully, until poets Allen Ginsberg, Peter Orlovsky, and Gregory Corso arrived from the States, restarting weeks of

frenzied partying, sight-seeing, and discussions on poetry. He told Orlovsky that he needed to find the cause of suffering, so that he could help "save" people (Niscosia 529). He returned with the poets to New York, where in November he wrote the first half of *Desolation Angels*, recounting his experiences on Desolation Peak, and his travels to Mexico. He finally finished the second half five years later, after numerous attempts, and revised that part until 1964.

In *Desolation Angels*, Kerouac wrestles with his own "ego-worries" through the narrator Jack Duluoz. The novel begins chronologically at the end of *The Dharma Bums*, on Desolation Peak, but Kerouac wrote the first half of it a full year before the other novel. The differences in tone and theme result from the different attitudes that Kerouac held at the times of composition, and confusing contradictions between the two books are heightened by the fact that he wrote *The Dharma Bums* after writing the first half of *Desolation Angels*. Stylistically, he hoped for the latter to be as "intensely wild and personal" as his journals (Niscosia 532), and he experiments with punctuation and language--at times free associating, at others merely focusing on the sounds of words--to create a wide open effect. The style here, even less inhibited than his other work, thus reflects concretely Kerouac's questing: he searches on the page for the answers to his questions, including how he might suppress suffering, and discover meaning. The beginning gives more of what Kerouac went through on the mountain: great soul-searching. It returns to the ongoing attempt to escape the suffering of the self and of humanity, without the implication that wilderness offers part of the answer. Ray shows a need to accept the "void" which is life, to realize that only the self has "changed and done all this and come and gone

and complained and hurt and joyed and yelled, not the void" (3). The idea somehow creates an anesthetic quality, as if the final end is to feel nothing at all; the book has a certain bleakness to it at times that results from the view of life and the world as "void." Unlike *The Dharma Bums*, which builds to the conclusion that suffering is in fact transcendable through synthesis, *Desolation Angels* works its way back down--literally, off the mountain and back to the quest--with only the half-hearted insistence that nothing is real. It is difficult to feel much of the joy from *The Dharma Bums* in the latter novel, and what life there is comes mostly from the tension between the "suffering is illusion" mantra and the very real pain and suffering that Duluoz perceives in himself and in the world around him.

Missing from *Desolation Angels* is the heroic synthesis figure of Japhy Ryder, who provides in *The Dharma Bums* a model for combining the sides of wilderness and civilization that allows for a vigorous life--the Western hero. Though he comments early on that both sides are part of the same "void," Japhy's approach to life is active, as opposed to Ray's "do nothing" method. Japhy does not seek to escape feeling, but to encounter it, noting that "Pain or love or danger makes you real again." And he does not conceive of the world as illusion, but emphasizes that "dammitall the world is real...and everybody carries on like it was a dream" (*The Dharma Bums* 77). It is in the wilderness that Japhy reminds himself of the world's realness, and he carries that vision with him into civilization and into his whole lifestyle. His concept of life thus transcends his own problems, and the notion of suffering, allowing him to live creatively and actively. The difference with Duluoz is that he wants to see the world as unreal because its realness is overwhelming, and he believes that the knowledge he obtained on the mountain, "and which all wilderness hermitage saints have seen, is of little use in cities and

warring societies such as we have" (*Desolation Angels* 66). In this view, the world is again divided into "wild" and "civilized," and the two are seen as irreconcilable. The wilderness provides a decent escape, perhaps, but not an ongoing source of understanding and meaning for life, nor a means for coping with the difficulties of living in civilization. Duluoze essentially turns away from wilderness as providing any answers here (though Ray Smith felt it could), and returns to the city to again take the punches of urban living, and the pain that he feels there.

*Desolation Angels* thus in part dismantles the hope for renewal and synthesis found in *The Dharma Bums*. The wilderness section at the beginning has very few of the passages in which Kerouac (or Duluoze) engages completely with his wild surroundings (the better descriptions are of people and his own feelings in the later sections). In the Matterhorn portion of *The Dharma Bums*, as well as in the descriptions of the Skagit valley and the trip up Desolation Peak, Kerouac's writing is vivid and gripping--as engaging as any natural description. It is in these sections that he seems to lose himself by turning outward. But early on in *Desolation Angels* he focuses mainly on the fearsome aspect of his surroundings: the ever looming presence of Mount Hozomeen to his north. And he states outright that "every time I'd think of the void I'd see Hozomeen and understand" (4), so that the mountain and the void never allow for the vision of anything else, except for some excursions into his memory. The realization here is the same as at the end of *The Dharma Bums*--that he cannot truly know anything, and must simply "be"--but the tone itself sounds desolate. Whereas in *The Dharma Bums* Ray Smith emphasizes feeling "deliberate and glad and solitary" (185), here Duluoze comments on the melancholy purposelessness: "We all stand on the sad earth throwing long shadows, breath cut with flesh" (30). Like many who

spend time away from civilization, he longs for the comforts of home--wine, good food, the action of cities--and waits for an end to the "boredom" of his solitary life, for "the descent to the world again" (7). But unlike a Japhy Ryder, there is no indication that Jack Duluoze will balance the seemingly opposite forces of wilderness and civilization. He represents no Western hero himself, and by returning to the ocean--the literal end of the West--before once again heading east without consolation or resolution, Duluoze might illustrate symbolically a true end to the frontier as a source of renewal. He does not resemble Ray Smith who discovered his "new life" to be one that includes roving around in the wilds. Instead, he has spent his time in wilderness only to realize that he must return to the cities, not with the new knowledge of synthesis as described at the end of *The Dharma Bums*, but with a renewed desperation that plays itself out through the rest of the book, which reprises the high speed thrill-seeking of *On The Road*. Duluoze returns to "teach" in the world only that life is illusory, to be experienced as a flow and without feeling. *Desolation Angels*, if it can be called a Western novel, stands as a kind of post-script to the optimism of the genre: a work of closure.

After spending the several months in New York, Kerouac set sail for Tangiers, Morocco, in February, 1957. He lived there with William Burroughs, as the latter worked on his novel, *Naked Lunch*, a title suggested by Kerouac. Again, Kerouac spent a great deal of time walking, writing, and smoking marijuana. He observed Ramadan, the month-long, daily fast of Moslems, and admired the Arabs' discipline and hospitality. While he had planned to stay in Morocco indefinitely, he left after a couple of months to travel through Europe. In both places, he was put off by the American Hipster characters, the beatniks, whom he felt had nothing whatsoever to say.



He planned to write *The Dharma Bums*, in part out of a longing for America again, for the smell of pine trees (as recorded in the second half of *Desolation Angels* 317). Back in the States, he moved with his mother from the east coast to Berkeley, hoping to finally establish a *permanent* home there, in the West, and to quit getting drunk. He also planned to finish his autobiographical writing, and start on pure fiction (Niscosia 550). In California, he was frustrated by several minor run-ins with the police (for jaywalking, partying), and he was depressed by his failure to make a living there, by his mother's unhappiness, and by his inability to reconcile Buddhism with Christianity. He swayed towards Catholicism. *On The Road* was finally published, and Jack returned with his mother to Orlando, Florida, never to take up residence in the West again.

*On The Road* was published in the summer of 1957, and at first received positive reviews, before falling prey to vicious criticism, which Dennis McNally has called "some of the most scurrilous reporting and criticism in American intellectual history" (487). Herb Gold wrote in *The Nation* that the book was "an apologia for criminals and a naive paean to madness." The press saw Kerouac as the spokesman for the beatniks, called "the fevered young who twitch around the nation's jukeboxes and brawl pointlessly in the midnight streets" (Niscosia 514). These descriptions fall far from Kerouac's vision of "beat," which he later tried to define in "The Origins of the Beat Generation" as nearly everything positive about America through history, later reducing the definition on the Steve Allen Show in 1959 to a single word: "sympathetic."

Kerouac at this time felt extreme depression. He wrote to Gary Snyder that his Buddhism was "completely dead," and that his enthusiasms for mountains, camping, sex, and everything else, had vanished "like a finger

snap" (Niscosia 534-5). He spent a month or two as the toast of the town in New York--attending many publishing parties and being interviewed--as well as an object of its critical wrath. He acted the arrogant author, got drunk at parties, and embarrassed his friends with his bragging. Throughout, he was considered the bumbling spokesman for the beatniks. Kerouac was never comfortable with the double duty of defending both his novel and his generation to the world, and this responsibility weighed upon his already heavy spirit. The artificial "coolness" and thoughtlessness of the so called "beatniks" confused and offended him, and he felt no membership to this hyped and stereo-typed movement given so much attention by the media. He wrote *The Dharma Bums*, in part, to try to dispel some of the negative press about the true beats, and he originally conceived the novel to contrast "the constructive selflessness as practiced by Gary [Snyder], with the destructive ego worries of most of the hipsters" (Niscosia 547). He grew more and more desperate, again against a wall of depression and purposelessness. At this time, under these conditions, from late November to December ninth, 1957, through a drinking binge, he wrote *The Dharma Bums*.

While *The Dharma Bums* ends rather enthusiastically, with Ray's acceptance of life and his resolution to return to civilization to teach his new found wisdom, the tone at times seems to reveal Kerouac's own desperation. It is as if we can hear him think, and the novel sounds like an attempt to persuade himself that life can be glorious, and thus livable--if one follows Japhy's example. The contradiction appears at the very beginning of the novel, where Ray tells us that he has since its time grown "a little tired and cynical" (6). This statement necessarily frames the entire novel: we know from the start that the narrator lost the wisdom of what we are about to read

in the time that passed between the experience and the writing. Ray's cynicism may reflect his doubts about the possibility of synthesizing. Thus, the quester must continue his search--as he does in *Desolation Angels*. And, the novel questions its own western theme: it raises the idea that it may no longer be possible to achieve the balance that Japhy appears to have achieved, or at least that Ray may not be able to.

Stephenson notes that in Kerouac

The act of writing represents for the Duluoz figure a process of refinement--a mode of confronting, learning from, and correcting his failings and mistakes. The Duluoz character is always writing retrospectively, so that all the scrupulous self-criticism and relentless self-exposure of his confessions has been assimilated, comprehended, and surpassed at the time of writing or becomes so during the act of writing. (33)

Writing the novel may have been Kerouac's attempt to rediscover the lessons learned from his wilderness experience at a time when he desperately needed consolation. Thus, during the writing, he is trying to remember his joy and understanding, and forget the cynicism that he begins with. The book attempts to re-climb the mountain to enlightenment.

Kerouac felt that *The Dharma Bums* realigned with the American frontier tradition, and he wrote in a letter to Malcom Cowley that the book had an authentic "ring of the woods" (Niscosia 563). He was pleased with it (only later was it called a "machine-age parody on the great migrations in the nineteenth-century" by Charles Poore in the *New York Times* [Niscosia 576]); and he possibly felt some relief at having written it. Perhaps Kerouac again felt that the West offered hope, or a way of life--a possible end to the quest. But, although he was encouraged to return to California by Gary Snyder for

more hikes, he did not. The joy and potential resolution in *The Dharma Bums*--a manifestation of the Western American mythos--remains for the book's readers. But Jack Kerouac--who died in the east, in Florida in 1969, at age 47, as a result of his alcoholism and, perhaps, the depression and disillusionment that fueled his quests--never found a balance, and never found a way to stay, if only part way, in the woods.

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