

**Confessional Strategies in Jack Kerouac's
*Desolation Angels***

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In recent years, Jack Kerouac has begun to receive the attention as he deserves as one of the great 20th century American writers. However, Kerouac scholars have not yet fully explored the influence that his conflicting religious beliefs had on his work. Kerouac's internal struggle to reconcile his Buddhist and Catholic thinking and his ultimate attempt to embrace Catholicism, had a profound effect on his writing, giving it the religiously tumultuous charge that is essential to Kerouac's distinctive writing style.

Kerouac's confession marked his acknowledgment of 'wrong' in terms of the failure of his rational plot. As such, his belief in the universal application of rational thinking dies, revealing that confession was not a matter of submitting one's self to systems of human rehabilitation but rather as a marker of his burgeoning faith in the universal ethics of cosmological nature. Kerouac's autobiographical storytelling displays confession as well. By interpreting the nature and function of this confessional strategy, one is able to let Kerouac off the hook for his inability to regard the natural through responsibility. He states, "I'm talking about human helplessness and unbelievable loneliness in the darkness of birth and death" (379). These words betray his vision of birth and death as a natural and thus appropriate cycle while in Mexico City. As such, one can see that while Mexico helped Jack Dulouze (Jack Kerouac), the protagonist of *Desolation Angels*, overcome his alienation, his eventual return to the United States manifests re-kindles his sense of alienation. Since Dulouze continues to find void in his conception of the cosmos, we might pull back and treat the author's confessional strategy as a clandestine apology to cosmological nature for his subjectivity as if to say "As I have judged, now may you judge me in turn." Kerouac writes, "I raise my fist to high Heaven promising that I shall bull whip the first bastard who makes fun of human hopelessness anyway" (378). Taken in conjunction with the previous quote, one may conclude that Kerouac equates the human condition as one of solitude: a bastard existence.

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Kerouac's raised fist suggests that his text itself functions to probe both humanity and creation for a rebuke, to either justify his words or refute them. Hence, his writing is confessional as by provoking the reader or creator Kerouac hopes to receive a *response*. Thus, his confessional writing functions as a transceiver across the abyss. Also, through the act of cataloguing his misadventures, Kerouac creates a text that may teach as a parable. His confessional strategy therefore mimics Levinasian teaching, and thereby reveals a degree of environmental agency, which we may interpret as movement toward infinity and the resolution of alienation. Consider John Lardas' words concerning confession, *The Bop Apocalypse*,

For Kerouac and Ginsberg, the confessional strategy was a way to realign the self with the cosmos through the drama of introversion—"submissive to everything"—in order to become less aware of oneself as a separate entity. It was a disciplined spontaneity that sought dissolution into the "cosmic beat," thereby replicating and adhering to the divine logos. Confessional honesty would diffuse any obstacles or internal conflicts and allow the writer to attune himself to, and participate in, the rhythms of the universe. (153)

If the structure of confessional writing is, as Lardas in *The Bop Apocalypse* notes, submissive to everything which Dulouz subjectivity wins out over any possible discourse with the other. Confessional writing involves a purging similar to giving one's self up to the other.

Kerouac's disciplined spontaneity functions as a sort of meta-apology in which the author's text attempts to reconcile—as a decentred calling of the protagonist/self into question—with creation. Kerouac's confessional prose thus functions as both contempt for and submission to a larger force, which demands justice. In employing a confessional strategy Kerouac faces the shame necessary for the ethical conduct or responsibility required by the other. As such, to a degree, he overcomes his existence as a separate entity by acknowledging alterity not through romantic rendering, but through its ability to call him into question.

To illustrate, in *Desolation Angels* Kerouac quotes a conversation with Bull Hubbard (William Burroughs) who states, "I'm shitting out my educated Middlewest background for once and for all. It's a matter of catharsis where I say the most horrible thing I can think

of....By the time I finish this book I'll be as pure as an angel..." (347). Here Burroughs laments the socio-educational background in the uniform, rationally ordered Midwest. Similar to Porfiry, Burroughs appears throughout Kerouac's work as a teacher: imparting his wisdom on the youth. In this instance Burroughs imparts a sense of mistrust in the totalizing systems that forge American identity like cookie—a sort of mechanized uniform assemblage. Realizing that this stale formula only leads to incorporation within the totality that refuses discourse with the other, Burroughs stresses the need to shed one's preconceived notions—romantic primitivism in the case of Dulouz—in order to more correctly or more objectively view the cosmological other. This too is a demasking in which our nakedness before the other reconciles the shame of domination with humanity's original purity before and among creation. Kerouac's confession is thus a means of resolving alienation by stressing an original relationship— or home—among creation. Whereas Dulouz does not display any overt resolution of alienation, by focusing on Kerouac's prose strategy it reveals at least an implicit attempt at reconciliation, which leads to believe that Kerouac the author and Dulouz the character cannot be treated as one and the same as perhaps Dulouz displays inconsistencies, contradictions, and subjectivity out of Kerouac's conscious or unconscious desire to face the shame of domination and fess up to creation.

The disciplined spontaneity of Kerouac thus refers to the rigorous acquiescence before the other that would keep domination and exploitation from creeping back to the responsible consciousness in the form of ego. In other words, just as one must guard against the faith in technology and science as that can be undermined the relationship with the natural muse, so too must responsibility take the form of guarding against the subjective force of the ego, which continually threatens to circle back on the individual weakly resolved to cosmological nature. As Emmanuel Levinas in *Totality and Infinity* states:

This is not a play of mirrors but my responsibility, that is, an existence already obligated. It places the center of gravitation of a being outside of that being. The surpassing of phenomenal or inward existence does not consist in receiving the recognition of the Other, but in offering him one's being. To be in oneself is to express oneself, that is, already to serve the Other. The ground of expression is goodness. (183)

Here Levinas notes that recognizing the other is not enough, one must acquiesce to the other as taking responsibility for prior separation. The existence already obligated refers to the omnipresent responsibility toward the other. Thus, one's ego must not radiate outward as subjectivity, but rather a human must consider his/her wellness to be in tandem with the diverse others that surround them; or, "It places the center of gravitation of a being outside of that being." Hence, one may only flourish if all the others that penetrate their being flourish. This involves action: "the ground of expression is goodness." Levinas thus connects infinity with goodness, which is achieved through action that curbs egocentric exploitation with ecocentric cultivation. Kerouac writes, "At the time I sincerely believed that the only decent activity in the world was to pray for everyone, in solitude" (355). The comma preceding "in solitude" is unnecessary, but functions to link solitude with separation. Hence, this silent prayer is not really "activity" in the Levinasian sense, which reveals that Dulouz cannot receive reconciliation due to a lack of penance. As we see in the following analysis, Dulouz remains a separate being at the close of *Desolation Angels*. His knowledge of infinity therefore does not resolve his alienation, which reveals that action takes precedence over knowledge in the trajectory of infinity.

Despite his confession and awareness of infinity Dulouz falls short of a continued relationship with alterity. Following his trip to Mexico, Dulouz visits Tangiers with Burroughs. While there he writes of a drug-influenced experience, "Experiencing as I say that 'Turning-about' which said 'Jack, this is the end of your world travel...Make a home in America...The holy little old roof cats of silly old home town are *crying* for you...' (352). Once again it appears as if the allure of America as a temptress overrides the conception of the natural as a muse. America's pristine nature exemplified by National parks and Western grandeur are not what call Dulouz home, but, rather, it is romanticized Americana in terms of "home town" and cats on roofs that appeal to his sense of place in the world. By employing terms like *Desolation Angels* Kerouac presents a sense of noble suffering akin to that of Raskolnikov before his resolution of alienation. However, whereas Raskolnikov, through the admission of guilt and suffering for reconciliation ultimately finds the possibility of existence beyond the void, Dulouz simply romanticizes the void and those who suffer under its pressure in totalities.

Perhaps this notion of noble suffering marks an extension of his romantic primitivism.

That is, Dulouz understands minority cultures as noble sufferers through their history as subjugated people who hope for release in the form of the gift of death or eternal reward. This romantic vision occurs in the following lines, which are included to link romanticism to prejudice for Dulouz: "I'd come to Europe in rags expecting to sleep in haystacks with bread and wine, no such haystacks anywhere" (366). Here Dulouz is disappointed to find that the old world does not necessarily mean an agrarian society. Dulouz is unable to mitigate earthly suffering and thus resolves to embrace what he perceives is noble about minority culture in stating: "I'm just waiting for Godot, man"—a passivity that reveals inaction as reinforcing totality (362).

Dulouz begins to revert back to his youth in returning from the experiential world (travel, carnival) to live with his mother at the expense of a fecund relationship with his lover. He states, "A few beers, a few lovings, a few whispered words in ear, and off I was to my "new life" promising I'd see her soon" (372). Dulouz does not keep this promise, but moves to California (his lover lives in New York) with his mother, which affirms, as a symbolic return to the womb, the inaction that reinforces alienation. This inaction through separation is also revealed in his sway back from Buddhism to the Catholicism of his youth. He states, "But *it has* been ever since then that I've lost my yen for any further outside searching. Like Archbishop of Canterbury says "A constant detachment, a will to go apart and wait upon God in quiet and silence" (354-355). Following two novels of outside searching characterized by Taoist and Buddhist pursuits; it is very odd to find *Desolation Angels* concluding with Christian quotations and orientation. This quote differentiates between a life of inactive separation from the natural in order to ascend toward God as opposed to seeking communion with the natural in order to render the 'Great Chain' hierarchy cyclic and thereby erasing domination as a viable excuse for aligning ourselves with God. Thus, at the end of *Desolation Angels* one can find Dulouz returning to modes of separation and ascension, which tend to condone domination over communion.

This sway toward separation releases Dulouz from ecocentric consciousness as a move away from a co-substantial relationship with the natural other. As Dulouz recounts, "One morning in the fog the waters were calm and glassy and there was the Nantucket Lightship followed a few hours later by floating garbage from New York including one empty carton reading CAMPBELL'S PORK AND BEANS making

me almost cry with joy remembering America..." (372). Sadly, here Dulouz' romanticized Americana takes precedence over the growing post-war concern for environmental stewardship. Lardas concludes his analysis of Kerouac stating: "As he traveled down the road of uncertainty, he seemed to always be looking up, toward heaven perhaps yet always falling further and further away" (249). This quote reveals the underlying premise for this thesis. The act of separation as ascension—"looking up toward heaven"—only serves to reinforce feelings of human alienation—"always falling further and further away"—and manifests the perverse ethic of domination and the resultant self-mutilation characterized by the poisoning of the very environment that we depend on for survival. Therefore, the attempt to separate marks an attempt to disavow any dependence on the natural.

Dulouz' ultimate failure to regard the natural in brotherhood reveals his sense of helplessness before the ego reinforced in post-war society those forces cultural values of competition, accumulation of personal wealth and property, and an economic system that is at its heart exploitative. This helplessness resonates with the alienation and anomie that has come to be associated with the United States today.

In the closing chapters of *Desolation Angels* Dulouz both tours the country and lives with his mother. He does so at the expense of losing a relationship with a lover in New York. This reveals that Dulouz's fear of the void causes him to selfishly revert back toward the womb rather than to donate part of himself to the greater whole of humanity. Fathers are mysteriously absent role models in his work, which suggests that Kerouac's journeying is an attempt to stave off the eventual and natural condition of human survival through multiplication and the dividing and merging of selves.

Kerouac's confessional prose amounts to a cathartic erasure of preordained American identity. This demasking is evocative in itself for readers who might see Kerouac's confessional self-confrontation as a cue to do their own demasking. Infinity then is reflected in the natural's propensity to propagate and multiply itself.

References

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