

THE FACE OF GOD AT THE END OF THE ROAD: THE SACRAMENTALITY OF
JACK KEROUAC IN LOWELL, AMERICA, AND MEXICO

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ABSTRACT

THE FACE OF GOD AT THE END OF THE ROAD: THE SACRAMENTALITY OF JACK KEROUAC IN LOWELL, AMERICA, AND MEXICO

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This dissertation examines Catholic devotionism's positive impact on the novelist Jack Kerouac's work. It examines how Kerouac's engagement with devotionism fostered his sacramentality and his sensibility of the imminent presence of the sacred, and the dissertation examines how Kerouac's sacramentality/sensibility moved him to attempt to convey the same sensibility to his readers. After the introduction, the dissertation examines how the Catholic subculture of Lowell, Massachusetts cultivated and fostered Kerouac's sacramentality. Then, it explores the interaction between Kerouac's devotionism and sacramentality with mid-twentieth century/postwar America while it explores how his sacramentality offered him a way to critique the increased commodification of American life. Finally, it explores Kerouac's travels in Mexico and seeks to understand why that was the place where he achieved his greatest vision – a vision of God's face.

Dedicated to my wife Amanda, my daughters Amelia and Felicity, my parents Thomas
and Maria de Jesus, and my great friend Damian Costello

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When I am reading theology (and that is nearly all the time), listening to music (and that is nearly all the time), talking with friends and loved ones, driving, traveling, relaxing, or just enjoying life, it never fails to surprise me how often my thoughts turn to prayers of thanksgiving. My prayers of thanksgiving go out especially for all the years I had the privilege to converse with, listen to music with, drive with, attend Mass with, and study under my theological hero and advisor Dr. Sandra A. Yocum. She is a brilliant theologian and a deeply spiritual person who taught me more about Jesus and the church than most other people have (excluding my own mother and father and my wife and my daughters). Thank you for everything Dr. Yocum.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.....	iv
DEDICATION.....	v
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS.....	vi
INTRODUCTION. DEVOTIONALISM, SACRAMENTALITY, AND KEROUAC'S VISION	1
CHAPTER 1. WHERE THE ROAD BEGINS: DEVOTIONALISM IN LOWELL, MASSACHUSETTS	21
CHAPTER 2. THE DEVOTIONAL WRITER AT HIS DESK.....	42
CHAPTER 3. THE DEVOTIONAL WRITER ON THE ROAD.....	65
CHAPTER 4. THE FACE OF GOD AT THE END OF THE ROAD: MEXICO, DEVOTIONALISM, AND THE SACRAMENTALITY OF JACK KEROUAC	95
CONCLUSION. THE ROAD ENDURES: SEEING (AND SHOWING OTHERS) THE FACE OF GOD.....	123
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	126

INTRODUCTION

DEVOTIONALISM, SACRAMENTALITY, AND KEROUAC'S VISION

“The Catholic Church is a weird church; much mysticism is sown broad-spread from its ritual mysteries till it extends into the very lives of its constituents and parishioners.”¹

All Roads Lead to Kerouac

All roads lead to Kerouac. They do not, however, equally take the reader to the integrity of Kerouac's life, work, and vision. This is a point that many of Kerouac's readers and many Kerouac scholars miss. By that I mean there are various roads of interpretation one could take toward understanding the writer Jack Kerouac, and they probably all offer some insight into Kerouac's life and work, but for some reason Catholicism remains one of the least accepted and traveled roads while it is one of the most important roads – as the author himself often attested. This dissertation will emphasize the Catholic road but not to the exclusion of other roads.

Jack Kerouac – born Jean-Louis Lebris de Kerouac – was born into a French Canadian Catholic family on March 12, 1922, and he was raised in the devotional ethos of the Catholic subculture of the textile town of Lowell, Massachusetts. His childhood and adolescence was permeated with devotional imagery like crucifixes on the walls of

¹ Jack Kerouac, *Jack Kerouac: Selected Letters, 1940-1956*, ed. Ann Charters (New York: Penguin Books, 1996), 270.

his home and schools, and in public spaces, portraits of Mary and the infant Jesus, and statues of the saints. He continued to interact with these images and symbols long after he left Lowell until the day he died. As this dissertation argues, this Catholic devotional ethos – especially as expressed in Lowell, Massachusetts – was one of the most important characteristics of and contributors to Kerouac's vision as a writer.

Some of the most commonly travelled alternative roads taken by Kerouac's readers, however, are the Beat road, the Buddha road, and even the American road. These alternative roads, however, do not account for Kerouac and his vision the way the Catholic road does. In other words, these alternatives roads do not cover the same ground the way a Catholic sacramental theological interpretation does, and it is the happy burden of this dissertation to demonstrate that point.

Furthermore, of the few who have taken the Catholic road toward interpreting Kerouac, no one has taken the Catholic road from Lowell, Massachusetts (the land of his birth) all the way down to Mexico in a sustained theological manner.

In this dissertation I take the Catholic road toward understanding Kerouac's work as a whole. I take this road in a way that – if read charitably out of a love for Jack Kerouac – challenges readers who would reject or criticize a Catholic approach. I understand why some Kerouac scholars take the Beat road or the Buddha road or the American road, and I also understand why other Kerouac scholars take other roads. I only ask that those who are sincerely interested in Kerouac take time to openly consider what insights wait in store for readers *if* we follow Kerouac down the Catholic road.

I take this road because as I read Jack Kerouac I notice his life's work moves toward being able to see the presence of God – the saints, the holy, the sacred – amidst

the supposedly mundane, and I see him trying to articulate that vision in his journals, letters, and novels in the hopes of helping others share that vision. What is most striking about his work is that located his vision in underground America and the underground of Mexico, in stark contrast to locating it in the commodified existence of postwar America with its suburbs and consumerism. Most importantly, it was Catholic devotionism that fostered Kerouac's sacramentality and helped him capture and articulate this vision in his writing. In short, my thesis is: in order to understand Kerouac's vision as a writer one must speak of his devotionism and subsequent sacramentality.

While I take the Catholic road to interpreting Kerouac, I neither assume nor propose the road I take is a monolithic, airtight, all encompassing, exclusive interpretation of Kerouac's work. This presupposition is as it should be, just as other roads to Kerouac are not airtight, exclusive interpretations of him and his work.² For instance, as compelling as the Beat road is – especially as narrated by religious studies scholar John Lardas in *The Bop Apocalypse*, it is not an exhaustive analysis of Kerouac.

² I am sincere when I suggest that exploring other traditions behind and interpretations of Kerouac are worthwhile endeavors. This is especially important in light of the methodological points raised by ethnographer Michael M. J. Fischer. He argues a point that – I think – could be applied to Kerouac. He writes, “for many the search in another tradition ... can serve as a way of exploring one's own past,” and he adds, “ethnicity is a process of inter-reference between two or more cultural traditions.” In other words, when applied to Kerouac, Fischer's insight could mean that as Kerouac sought to understand his own identity as a French Canadian Catholic or as an American he needed to play the two off of each other – he may have even needed to play something like Buddhism off of his Catholicism in order to understand himself. By extension, if Kerouac scholars seek to understand Kerouac, then they may also need to consider two or more traditions and play them off each other if they truly hope to better understand the man and his work. In this dissertation I focus on the Catholicism of Jack Kerouac not to neglect Fischer's observations but to provide a basis for future Kerouac scholarship. It is my hope that scholars will use this dissertation (along with the work of other Kerouac scholars) as a basis from which to explore Kerouac yet again by taking his Catholicism as seriously as one takes his Buddhism, or his Americanism, or Spenglerianism. See Michael M. J. Fischer, “Ethnicity and the Post-Modern Arts of Memory,” from http://www.hausite.net/haus.o/SCRIPT/txt2000/08/memo_X.HTML, accessed 5/21/2012, page 4 of 22.

Furthermore, as compelling as the Buddha road is, it is also not the only permissible interpretation or analysis of Kerouac.

Alternative Roads to Kerouac

i. The Beat Road

John Lardas especially offers a creative, rich and captivating analysis of Kerouac as part of the nascent Beat Generation writers. The most impressive aspect of Lardas' work is his analysis of German intellectual Oswald Spengler's book *The Decline of the West* and the influence it had on, arguable, the three most important Beat Generation writers: Williams S. Burroughs, Allen Ginsberg, and Jack Kerouac. The problem is that while Lardas does a praiseworthy job of interpreting German intellectual Spengler's influence on Burroughs and subsequently Ginsberg, the success of his analysis of Spengler's influence on Kerouac depends, at least partially, on Lardas taking a reductionist approach to Kerouac's Catholicism.

For instance, in the narrative Lardas advances, the Beats entered Mexico on fundamentally Spenglerian terms. However in the Beat road approach to understanding Kerouac, Kerouac's Catholicism becomes nostalgia or a residual hangover from his childhood, so as to foreground the Spenglerian influence. Such an assumption is especially problematic because it interferes with a proper analysis of Kerouac's thought and work, especially, as the reader will see, in Mexico. It makes Mexico appear as merely having to do with "an idyllic past" or as "an imaginary space on which [Kerouac]

projected his cultural fantasies,” rather than part of his greater vision of the world as a Catholic writer.³

As my dissertation will argue, if one hopes to understand what Kerouac was really striving for in his vision as a writer, then one absolutely cannot take a reductionist approach to Kerouac’s Catholicism, especially with regards to his work and thought in Mexico.

ii. The Buddha Road

The Buddha road is another popular road to take among Kerouac scholars and general readers. One of the most enjoyable and impressive interpreters of this road is the scholar of English James T. Jones’ *A Map of Mexico City Blues*.

While ostensibly arguing for an objective read of Kerouac’s work, Jones, like many Kerouac readers, essentially argues for a Spenglerian read as a starting point, culminating in a Buddhist interpretation.

Following the Beat road down to Mexico, Jones observes that it is there that Kerouac’s Buddhism begins to bloom. Thus, apparently, Mexico is important because it was the landscape upon which Kerouac powerfully engaged Buddhism. Of course, from a methodological and historical point of view, Jones’ approach is appropriate. It is appropriate – to an extent – because Jones is focused on Kerouac’s extended poem *Mexico City Blues* in conversation with Kerouac’s prose, and Kerouac wrote *Mexico City Blues* in Mexico in 1955 shortly after he began earnestly studying Buddhism (1954).⁴

³ John Lardas, *The Bop Apocalypse: The Religious Visions of Kerouac, Ginsberg, and Burroughs* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2001), 185, 184.

⁴ Tom Clark, *Jack Kerouac: A Biography* (New York: Paragon House, 1990), xvii.

The problem is that in Jones' hands Catholicism was a constraint on Kerouac and Kerouac's vision as a writer. Buddhism, as illuminated in the poem *Mexico City Blues*, becomes the basis for a necessary "counter world" to Kerouac's prose. Based on Jones' work, it appears that if there is a religious vision in Kerouac's work, and if that religious vision persists, it is due to the presence of Buddhism in Kerouac's thought and work correcting his Catholicism.⁵ Worst of all Jones fails to recognize the fundamental importance and influence the Catholic context of Lowell, Massachusetts had on Kerouac. Jones dismisses this background as "mundane," referring to Buddhism as an important "counter balance to mundane Catholic rituals [Kerouac] learned at home and in school as a child," adding that the Buddhism enlivened – what Jones actually calls – the "stale" Catholicism in Kerouac's work.⁶

Through problematizing Jones, I am not necessarily arguing again a Buddhist interpretation of Kerouac's work, but I am arguing against an exclusively Buddhist interpretation which denies room for a Catholic interpretation, or which characterizes Kerouac's Catholicism in primarily negative terms or as a pale, stale influence. In other words, I am arguing for an interpretation of Kerouac's work that demonstrates the essential, positive, and prolific role Catholicism played in Kerouac's vision as a writer.

Finally, I worry that many who take the Buddha road do so without thinking about it critically and without recognizing an inherent negative bias toward Catholicism. Another Kerouac scholar, the jack-of-all-trades Jim Christy, strongly criticizes such a

⁵ James T. Jones, *A Map of Mexico City Blues: Jack Kerouac as Poet* (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1992), 4, 11, 12, 20-21, 24, 102, 104, 109, 112-113, 114

⁶ Jones, *A Map of Mexico City Blues*, 109, 112-113.

move. Christy's criticism is more rhetorically charged, or more one-sided, than I would prefer, but he has a point. In *The Long Slow Death of Jack Kerouac*, he writes:

What unites Kerouac's early detractors and later biographers is their almost total aversion to his Catholicism. But Kerouac's Catholicism, with its imagery, hagiography, mysticism, and promise of the big payoff at the end, is the most important aspect of his work and life. Many Kerouac readers that I know – some of whom have written about him – either shake their heads at the iconographic references or are repulsed by them. Some devotees won't even open a copy of *Visions of Gerard*. Others, when they come across "the Catholic stuff," skip ahead a few pages, as if turning a deaf ear to a loved one's quirk. But there are thousands of such passages in Kerouac's work. They might as well skip his entire output.⁷

Christy adds,

I've noticed that many people have a weird, almost reverse-Pavlovian, reaction to Catholic references and iconography ... these people's prejudice blinds them to the greatness of much of Kerouac's work, particularly the Christian mystic masterpiece, *Visions of Gerard*.⁸

Refusing to let up on his passionate counter-critique, he further adds:

When Kerouac meets that old hobo at the beginning of *The Dharma Bums*, many of his readers wished the fellow would have been some wandering Berkeley *bhikkhu* or *Tathagata* tramp rather than an adherent of St. Theresa, who happened to be Kerouac's favorite saint. They might have been open-minded, or open-hearted, enough to learn of St. Theresa's "little way" of trust and love.⁹

Whether or not Christy's suspicion is correct that Kerouac's interpreters almost intentionally neglect or underplay Kerouac's Catholicism does not totally concern me.

What I am concerned with, however, is advancing the argument that Kerouac's Catholicism was a key component to his vision and a positive influence. Furthermore, upon reaching the conclusion, I will argue that Kerouac's Catholic vision holds tremendous implications for his readers' understanding of the relationship between this

⁷ Jim Christy, *The Long Slow Death of Jack Kerouac* (Toronto: ECW Press, 1998), 87.

⁸ Christy, *The Long Slow Death*, 87.

⁹ Christy, *The Long Slow Death*, 88.

world and heaven, for the relationship between the sacred and the, supposedly, profane. For instance, as Christy indicated, through reading Kerouac's work, one could learn something "of St. Theresa's 'little way.'"¹⁰

iii. The American Road

Aside from interpreting Kerouac on the beat road or the Buddha road, one could also interpret him against the backdrop of the American road. Literary critic Regina Weinreich, literary scholar Paul Maher Jr., and historian Douglas Brinkley are all great particular examples of Kerouac scholars who help illuminate Kerouac as an American writer or depict him as an author clearly obsessed with the idea of America as a subject.

In *Kerouac's Spontaneous Poetics*, Weinreich boldly argues that "a national character is projected in Kerouac's singular voice."¹¹ She argues that as the smart, witty, and brilliant Mark Twain captured America in his writing, so too does Kerouac. In fact she argues that Kerouac continues the American tradition embodied in Twain, but he updated it. As she writes, "in the broader context of American literary history Kerouac conjures the Huck Finn image, the raft supplanted by the automobile, the Mississippi River replaced by the open highway."¹²

Maher continues the analysis of Kerouac on the American road. In *Jack Kerouac's American Journey*, he references Twain but also observes the influence of other American authors like Thomas Wolfe, Walt Whitman, and William Saroyan. Kerouac absorbed all these influences and then called forth their voices applying their influence to different angles as he wrote his descriptions and articulated his vision of

¹⁰ Christy, *The Long Slow Death*, 88.

¹¹ Regina Weinreich, *Kerouac's Spontaneous Poetics: A Study of the Fiction* (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 1987), 148.

¹² Weinreich, *Kerouac's Spontaneous Poetics*, 148-149.

America. Of Wolfe's American sensibility, Kerouac once wrote, "put your ear to the ground at night in America and listen to thunderous hooves of the Blackfoot, the Indian. Here the great railroad train. Ooh, he could hear everything when he put his ear to the ground."¹³ "Ultimately Wolfe's road, exemplified by Eugene Gant's train ride along the American landscape, morphed into Kerouac's own open road," as the influence of other great American writers morphed or were absorbed into Kerouac's writing and vision.¹⁴ According to Maher, the influence of other American writers and Kerouac's own articulation of America is best embodied in Kerouac's most famous novel, *On the Road*. Maher's concluding comments in his own preface provide a great summary:

The novel [*On the Road*], in all its deceptive simplicity, needed to absorb the most profound of Kerouac's cultural influences and apply it to modern America: Twain's Mississippi, Remington's West, Faulkner's South, Steinbeck's California, Thoreau's New England, and Saroyan's sociological reflections of ethnic heritage are some of the examples. Kerouac merged social classes on a broad palette to depict the human condition. He drew upon everything he accomplished in the past and, simultaneously, forgot it all in order to begin anew.¹⁵

His effort to learn everything about America extended beyond these literary masters. He also read classic works like Francis Parkman's *The Oregon Trail: Sketches of Prairie and Rocky Mountain Life*, he read about "American history, the Revolutionary war specifically, and a biography of George Washington. Intent on becoming knowledgeable

¹³ Paul Maher Jr., *Jack Kerouac's American Journey: The Real-Life Odyssey of "On the Road"* (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 2007), xvii.

¹⁴ Maher, *Jack Kerouac's American Journey*, xix.

¹⁵ Maher, *Jack Kerouac's American Journey*, xxiii. Maher also asserts that Kerouac learned to identify with the underclass through Whitman's influence, see pages 5-7. While I acknowledge this influence, I will argue that the most unique aspect of Kerouac's work is how he applied devotionism to the situation of the underclass – a point which will become apparent throughout the dissertation.

about ‘every state in the USA,’ he read page after page, noting geographical landmarks like lakes, bays, mountains and cities.”¹⁶

Perhaps the historian Douglas Brinkley best captures Kerouac as an American writer in his introductory comments to *Windblown World: The Journals of Jack Kerouac, 1947-1954*. According to Brinkley, “what is also quite evident when reading Kerouac’s journals is his tremendous love of ‘the essential and everlasting America . . . No serious writer has ever celebrated American city names with the childlike exuberance of Kerouac . . . He tried to find the midnight essence of all American community both big and small.”¹⁷

If Kerouac was striving after the “essence of community” in America in his writing – as Brinkley observed, then this move in Kerouac’s work may actually be a point of departure from the Transcendentalist narrative. Whitman, Thoreau, and company charted a narrative wherein the autonomous individual reigned supreme – think *Song of Myself* and *Walden*.

Other scholars have observed that community and the dissolution of community in postwar America was a dominant theme in Kerouac’s writing.¹⁸ However, they neglect a full consideration of how for Kerouac’s vision the most essential part is the relationship between the communion of Saints in heaven and our communities on earth.

It is correct to say that Kerouac was writing about community in America, but I hope to demonstrate that his concern with community - as with many of his other concerns – has more to do with a Catholic sensibility.

¹⁶ Maher, *Jack Kerouac’s American Journey*, 39.

¹⁷ Douglas Brinkley, *Windblown World: The Journals of Jack Kerouac, 1947-1954* (New York: Viking Press, 2004), xvi.

¹⁸ For example, not only Brinkley but also historians like Richard Sorrell and James T. Fisher.

America, as subject, however, did not exist as an unmediated reality for Kerouac. He could only arrive at the meaning of America via vantage points, and authors like Wolfe, Whitman, Saroyan, and Twain supplied Kerouac with various lenses. However, Kerouac used non-literary resources too. He drew on characters and archetypes to try to capture parts of America – characters like the cowboy ranchers and rodeo hands he met during his trips west. He thought these characters gave him a more truthful insight into America. Characters like the cowhand who “got on the bus at Hugo” when Kerouac was heading west for the first time – this cowhand who “smiled at all of us” and who Kerouac “knew ... was more interested in mankind than 10,000,000 New School and Columbia professors and academicians.”¹⁹

There is a way one could interpret Kerouac’s American road from a negative point of view too. One could argue that he was merely perpetuating the same aspects of America that he thought he intended to criticize. Arguably, Kerouac was the typical American consumer of the postwar years. Perhaps he was even a hyper-consumer, carelessly consuming resources while practically promoting a desire for Cadillacs, and other cars, like a car salesmen and even devouring experiences as commodities. One observant Kerouac interpreter went so far as to suggest that Kerouac occasionally acted as an imperialist – overtaking not only experiences but also people.

To think of Kerouac as an American author who perpetuated the consumerism he tried to combat may seem counterintuitive. Nevertheless, literary scholar James T. Jones ponders whether the very method Kerouac promoted (his spontaneous-writing method) was actually a form of embodying postwar America’s consumerism. One could interpret

¹⁹ Kerouac, *Jack Kerouac: Selected Letters, 1940-1956*, 190. See also page 197.

Kerouac's spontaneous-prose method as a style that resisted the conformity and sterility of postwar America by drawing out the author's most immediate (and supposedly innermost) thoughts and feelings – which were supposedly his truest thoughts and feelings. Jones wonders whether such an approach perpetuated postwar consumerism because it produced an excess of material and was thus wasteful.²⁰ After all, while Kerouac fans celebrate the scroll versions of his novels (especially *On the Road*), he was inevitably forced to transform his scrolls into manuscript formats and edit them.

Kerouac also sounds like an excited consumer in some of his writing. Consider his description of the Cadillac he rode in with the famous character Dean Moriarty from the scroll version of *On the Road*.

It was a magnificent car, it could hold the road like a boat holds water. Gradual curves were its singing ease ... That magnificent car made the wind roar; it made the plains unfold like a roll of paper; it cast hot tar from itself with deference --- an imperial boat. Long after we'd left the great sage spaces of the Sandhills it bruited its immense snout bearing the dust of same through dews of Nile-like valleys and early morn. I opened my eyes to a fanning dawn; we were hurling up to it.²¹

This is the stuff popular advertisements are made of – indeed, more than an excited consumer, he sounds like a salesman moving people in the audience to desire their own Cadillac.

²⁰ Jones, *A Map of Mexico City Blues*, 146-147. It seems Jones is more entertaining the idea that Kerouac could be accused of perpetuating postwar American consumerism, rather than giving much credence to the idea, because Jones goes on to contextualize Kerouac's method within a religious cast. Drawing on Kerouac's own words and secondary sources like Dennis McNally's *Desolate Angel: Jack Kerouac, the Beat Generation, and America* (New York: Delta, 1990) and Gerald Nicosia's *Memory Babe: A Critical Biography of Jack Kerouac* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), Jones emphasizes the connection between Kerouac's spontaneous method and Kerouac's belief that he was participating in the inspiration and guidance of the Holy Spirit through this method. From this perspective, Kerouac's only duty was to write whatever the Holy Spirit told him to write or helped him write. In fact, according to Kerouac, within this method, to trim down his work or to revise it would be a sin. See Jones, *A Map of Mexico City Blues*, 150-151; McNally, *Desolate Angel*, 292; Nicosia, *Memory Babe*, 595, 638.

²¹ Jack Kerouac, *On the Road: The Original Scroll* (New York: Viking, 2007), 328, 330.

The way Kerouac consumed experiences also mirrored and foreshadowed consumer culture's understanding of experience. Consumer culture teaches people to freely enter into or purchase experiences regardless of concern for the proper context for these experiences and regardless of any possible moral implications. Kerouac acted as if he had a right to enter any experience he wanted to, whether it was borrowing from African American or Mexican culture, other religions like Buddhism, abusing drugs, promiscuous sex, or taking on the hobo and transient culture in America.

All the above modes for interpreting Kerouac's work have at least some validity to them. Nevertheless, there are other equally important ways to think about Kerouac's work. The following dissertation material recognizes the various approaches to Kerouac, but I focus my argument on Kerouac's sacramentality, informed not only by his French Canadian background – especially its devotionism, but also his encounter with Mexican culture and its devotionism. In other words, I focus on Kerouac's Catholic sensibility, because it needs to be accounted for (according to Kerouac himself) if one hopes to gain a fuller appreciation of his work.

The Catholic Road

There are other scholars who write about Kerouac and Catholicism – scholars like James T. Fisher, Richard Sorrell, Paul Giles, and Douglas Brinkley. However, their concerns, presuppositions, and conclusions are different than mine. The historian Fisher situates Kerouac within the Catholic subculture and observes how it indeed shaped Kerouac's identity, but – in Fisher's hands – Kerouac is always ready to rebel against the

subculture or he at least longs to transcend it.²² Literary scholar Paul Giles examines the presence of theological themes like the beatific vision in Kerouac's work, yet Giles still does not observe the theological moves that I observe Kerouac making – especially with regards to devotionism. Taking a sociological and historical approach to Kerouac, Sorrell examines the influence of the Franco-American Catholic experience – especially *la survivance* – on Kerouac and his writing. He observes how Kerouac's attraction to a theme like *suffering* may be reasonably attributed to the legacy of *la survivance*.²³ Finally, historian Douglas Brinkley has had the keen eye and insight to focus on Kerouac's near obsession with Jesus in his journals and Brinkley has collected many of these records in the book *Windblown World*. As Brinkley observes, plenty is known about Kerouac's interest in Buddha but his constant interest in Jesus is not yet as obvious. Indeed, Brinkley has made a great contribution to the pool of easily obtainable resources for more engaged Kerouac readers especially with regards to his view of Jesus. However, I aim to be more bold in my assertions about Kerouac and his concerns with Jesus and Christianity, especially Catholic Christianity. While I greatly respect and benefit from the work of all the aforementioned scholars, the difference between their work and mine is the difference between not only asking “how has Catholicism influenced Kerouac” but also asking “what did Kerouac do with his Catholicism?”

²² James Terence Fisher, *The Catholic Counterculture in America, 1933-1962* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1989).

²³ Richard S. Sorrell, “The Catholicism of Jack Kerouac,” *Studies in Religion* 11 (Spring 1982): 190-200.

Traveling the Catholic Road: Methodology

While the influences on this dissertation are wide and varied they are all connected in terms of a threefold approach. The three theological categories that ground my argument are the doctrine of the incarnation, sacramentality, and devotionism. Indeed these unified theological categories are key to unlocking the beauty of Kerouac's work – even if his work is dark and disturbing at times.

In this dissertation I not only retrieve the importance of Christianity for understanding Kerouac's work, but I also uncover what Kerouac did with his Catholicism. Influenced and inspired by the work of theologians, sociologists, and historians like David Tracy, Andrew Greeley, Roberto Goizueta, Vincent Miller, Robert Orsi, and William Portier I focus on how Kerouac used signs and symbols – especially as found in Catholic devotionism – to reconfigure space, time, and reality as we know it. In other words, I focus on how Kerouac sacralized the supposedly secular.²⁴

I take the incarnation to mean simply what the doctrine states: God takes on human flesh in Jesus, but the doctrine takes on more depth when one considers the implications of it. God did not need to take on flesh to be with us; God could have made us all angels and in that way drawn nearer to us. As theologian William Portier asserts in

²⁴ The following outstanding books and articles helped me identify and think about Kerouac's Catholicism and his moves within devotionism from a theological perspective: David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1981); Andrew Greeley, *The Catholic Imagination* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000); *Horizons of the Sacred*, edited by: Timothy Matovina and Gary Riebe-Estrella, S.V.D. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002); Roberto Goizueta, "The Symbolic Realism of U.S. Latino/A Popular Catholicism," *Theological Studies* 65 (2004), 255-274; Vincent J. Miller, *Consuming Religion: Christian Faith and Practice in a Consumer Culture* (New York: Continuum, 2004), see especially his chapter on "Popular Religion in Consumer Culture"; Robert A. Orsi, *Thank You, St. Jude: Women's Devotion to the Patron Saint of Hopeless Causes* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), *The Madonna of 115th Street: Faith and Community in Italian Harlem, 1880-1950* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), and *Between Heaven and Earth: The Religious Worlds People Make and the Scholars who Study Them* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2005); and William Portier, "The Eminent Evangelist from Boston": Fr. Thomas A. Judge as an Evangelical Catholic" *Communio* vol. 30.2 (Summer 2003).

his foundational book *Tradition & Incarnation*, since the incarnation – wherein God took on human flesh – we can expect to find and see God in our world, even in our seemingly mundane lives, including amidst the darkness and confusion of the world. In short, we can confidently expect to see God in the world.²⁵

Influenced mostly by sociologist Andrew Greeley's work on the Catholic imagination and the sacramental imagination, I take sacramentality to mean the ability to recognize and see the presence of God (or the sacred in general) in the world. This includes being able to recognize and see God amidst not only celestial or church settings, but also in the ordinary, dark, or suffering contexts of this world and in our lives.

My understanding of devotionism comes mainly from the works of Robert Orsi and Roberto Goizueta. Drawing from their work, I take devotionism to mean an embodied understanding of God's presence in this world, or the presence of the sacred in this world. This embodiment manifests itself when people engage in practices like lighting holy candles not only in church but also in more ordinary settings like their homes. Other examples include people using holy water in their homes (as well as at church), using prayer cards of saints and asking for their intercession, or actions like kneeling in prayer at church and at public shrines like grottos, praying the rosary, praying before a crucifix at home, or carrying a saint's medal or crucifix on you.

²⁵ William L. Portier, *Tradition and Incarnation: Foundations of Christian Theology* (New York: Paulist Press, 1994), 71-73.

Road Map to the Dissertation

Chapter 1 primarily covers Jack Kerouac's early years, specifically spanning from the time of his birth through his grade school and adolescent years and ending with his high school years. As Kerouac covers his early years, especially in *Visions of Gerard* and *Dr. Sax*, he addresses encounters with the sacraments, Catechism lessons, praying the rosary and other devotional practices. He ends his coverage of this time with *Maggie Cassidy*, writing about himself as a high school boy who, among many other experiences, meditated before crucifixes and reflected on the presence of the sacred.

The most important aspect of the first chapter is the emphasis on a consistent presence of a formative devotional ethos and Kerouac's awareness of it. This pervasive devotional ethos shaped Kerouac's sensibilities and his overall imagination resulting in what can be called a Catholic imagination or sacramentality. In short, this was the time that Kerouac learned to sense and see the presence of God, angels, and saints in the ostensibly ordinary flow of daily life.

The devotional ethos was richly textured, vast and complex, but there are a few standout elements. One of the strongest focal points – around which other related elements revolved – was devotion to the infant Jesus. This devotion was extended through attention to Mother Mary with the infant Jesus (an image which appears with great effect in chapter 1) or through devotion to the French Saint Thérèse de Lisieux (more attention is given to Thérèse in chapter 3). Attention to the category of “suffering” was also a dominant concern in the ethos of Kerouac's time. This manifested itself in the

presence of bloody, tortured crucifixes inside homes and churches, as well as the special attention given to suffering people like Kerouac's sickly brother Gerard.²⁶

The remarkable effect of the pervasive presence of and intersection with sacred images in church, at home, and at school was that the overall experience blurred the distinction between the sacred and the supposedly profane. In this ethos, Kerouac learned to experience and recognize the sacred everywhere.

Chapter 2 focuses on Kerouac's early years as a writer – or at least his years as someone who was intentionally committing himself to learning and practicing his craft. These were the years when he dropped out of Columbia to become a writer.

This was supposedly the same time period when – according to some perspectives – Kerouac left behind Catholicism. Contrary to that assumption, as my second chapter argues, this was actually the time period when Kerouac began to intentionally invoke his Catholicism and his faith in Jesus. He specifically invoked his Catholicism through the intentional use of devotional practices. As I further argue, this was the time period when Kerouac intentionally linked his Catholic faith to his writing. It was a connection, as I will demonstrate, that he never lost, and when it appeared he was losing the connection, he wrote to regain it.

The third chapter is similar to the second except for one main aspect. Whereas in the second chapter I present a Kerouac immersed in devotionalism and writing at his desk; he is mostly writing from a stationary point. The third chapter focuses on how

²⁶ Robert Orsi uncovers the negative aspects of this element of devotionalism in his chapter "Mildred, Is It Fun to Be a Cripple?" in *Between Heaven and Earth*. For instance, he notes how this element of devotionalism could be used to dictate to people how to interpret their experience of suffering – demanding that they understand their experience as being especially joined to Jesus' suffering (regardless of whether or not they sought to interpret their experiences that way). In other words, Orsi uncovers how the devotional ethos of suffering could be used to rob people with disabilities of their own agency and their ability to articulate their experiences in their own words.

Kerouac mobilizes his devotionism. In other words, he recognizes that his devotionism is portable and takes it on the road with him. This moves the reader closer to the Kerouac that history remembers, but the reader begins to learn that this Kerouac is a Kerouac with a Catholic underpinning.

Additionally, in the third chapter, I narrate Kerouac's story as one that almost becomes the classic American dream narrative, but instead, due to religious experiences he had on the road, ends with Kerouac aligned (or realigned) with and devoted to those whose existence was lived amidst great suffering. Here is where St. Thérèse made some of her most important appearances in the Kerouac canon.

In the fourth and final chapter, I argue that Kerouac having become disenchanted with America and the commodification of life there (due to consumer culture's narration of the American dream) came to see Mexico as a land where the prevailing consciousness was one that sensed and saw the sacred – God, Jesus, angels, and saints – as present amidst everyday life and circumstances. This reminded him of the way he learned to configure the world in his youth (as is demonstrated in chapter 1) and the Catholic ethos of Mexico with the pervasive presence of devotionism resonated with the way Kerouac intentionally embodied his sacramentality (as is demonstrated in chapter 2). Most importantly, the Mexican Catholic devotional ethos and practices that Kerouac witnessed demonstrated that God was present even amidst the suffering and the darkest underground corners of Mexico. It was in this context with devotional practices like lighting candles before an image of Our Lady of Guadalupe, and meditating before a bloody crucifix, that Kerouac finally received the vision he had been waiting for – like the psalmist, Kerouac was waiting to see God's face.

Conclusion: A Glimpse of the Vision at End of the Road

The French Canadian American Catholic devotional ethos that formed Kerouac sharpened his sensibilities, bolstered his imagination, and formed his sacramentality so that he could recognize and see the world as a place where the sacred - God, Jesus, the angels, and the saints – was always present, even amidst the darkest corners of the world. Kerouac framed his work in this manner, and he captured that reality in the scenes of his books. Taken as a whole, with due attention to Kerouac's own concerns, his work now trains his readers to see the world similarly. In a way then, this dissertation is about more than recontextualizing Kerouac within his Catholic devotional ethos and practices, and it is about more than describing his religious visions and their effect on him. As stated previously and throughout this dissertation, Kerouac wanted to share his vision with his readers and, as will become apparent in chapter 2, he wanted to train his readers in a way of seeing. Given that devotionism was the primary operative mode behind his writing, Kerouac's work followed suit and he thus became (I think intentionally) a devotional writer.

CHAPTER 1
WHERE THE ROAD BEGINS: DEVOTIONALISM IN LOWELL,
MASSACHUSETTS

“Supported there at the earth’s gray edge of immateriality, is a great White Virgin Mary with a flowing robe ballooning partly in the wind and partly tucked in at the edges and held aloft by swarms, countless swarms of grave bluebirds with white downy bellies and necks – On her breast, a crucifix of gold, in her hand a rosary of gold, on her head a star of gold.”¹

“He saw Heaven.”²

The material that follows presents Kerouac’s early memories, paying special attention to his focus on religious imagery and how he interacted with it. By paying attention to how Kerouac interacted with the devotional imagery, the reader will begin to understand how these images communicated the reality of God, heaven, or the “other world” – as Kerouac would later call it – as it related to “this world,” a relationship that was so intimate and involved that at times the two worlds blended.

This chapter draws from four main resources for the basis of its analysis of Kerouac’s Catholic subculture and the sacramentality it fostered. Three of the resources are novels by Kerouac that illustrate his sacramentality: *Visions of Gerard*, *Dr. Sax*, and *Maggie Cassidy*. Together these three novels cover Kerouac’s time in Lowell from his

¹ Jack Kerouac, *Visions of Gerard* (New York: Penguin Books, 1991), 52.

² Kerouac, *Visions of Gerard*, 55.

birth, through his parochial grade school years, and through high school until he left Lowell to attend Horace Mann preparatory school. Lastly, my analysis in this chapter is assisted through ethnographic research especially in the figure of the French Canadian Catholic Kerouac scholar, Lowell native, and founding member of Lowell Celebrates Kerouac committee, Roger Brunelle. Brunelle's insights were especially valuable for understanding French Canadian Catholic devotionism and how formative and important Kerouac's parochial grade school experience was for the formation of his sacramentality.

Formation at Home

Watching his mother pray at home was one of the first ways Kerouac learned about the other world's relationship to this world. He had a brother, Gerard, who died at age nine when Kerouac was four years old. During the time leading up to Gerard's death, Kerouac watched his mother pray novenas for the health of her sick son. She not only prayed at church but also at home. Kerouac recalled her praying in the kitchen with the aid of a candle and a special prayer on a piece of paper she kept folded up in her apron pocket. The long detailed scene is significant because it offers a window into how devotionism was practiced at home, and it includes the special prayer his mother used.

In the kitchen ... Ma takes out her missal and unfolds a paper from it on which are written the words of the prayer of St. Martha: –

“St. Martha, I resort to thy protection and aid and as proof of my affection and faith I offer this light which I shall burn every Tuesday.”

She lights her devotional candle.

“Comfort me in difficulties and thru the great favor which you enjoyed thru lodging in the house of Our Saviour, intercede for my family that we may always hold God in our hearts and be provided for in our necessities. I beseech thee to have infinite pity in regard to the favor I ask thee.” (State favor).

“If you please, my Lord, bless my poor little Gerard and make him well again, so he can live his little life in peace – without pain – he has suffered so much – he’s suffered enough for twenty four old sick men and he hasn’t said a word – My Lord, have pity on this little courageous child, amen.”

“I ask thee, St. Martha,” she finishes reading the prayer, “to overcome all difficulties as thou didst overcome the dragon which thou hadst at your feet. Our Father – Hail Mary – Glory Be”³

Seeing his mother pray at home taught Jack an important lesson about how the other world relates to this world and, by extension, how God relates to this world. Such a scene taught him that God was not exclusively accessed within the walls of a church but was also accessed in one’s own kitchen. Additionally, while access to God at home was not dependent on something like a prayer card, the use of such an item embodied the reality that one could access God wherever they went and in a very visible and cognitive way it created a space for the interaction to occur. The assistance of a candle at home, which may normally be associated with use in a church, also reinforced the idea that God – the other world – was present in one’s own home and not only at church.

There were many other examples of devotionism within their home. In fact, the presence of devotionism was so pervasive that Kerouac regarded the rich variety of Catholic aesthetics as indicative of the “scenes of my childhood,” his “early Catholic childhood of Centralville.”⁴ Among the various devotional items he saw around the house were religious calendars, religious paintings, statues of saints, and crucifixes.

Like many French Canadian Catholics, the Kerouacs had a portrait of Mary with the Infant Jesus hanging on their wall. Theirs was a “brown painting ... depicting angels playing around a brown Virgin Mary and Child in a Brown Eternity of the Brown

³ Kerouac, *Visions of Gerard*, 60.

⁴ Jack Kerouac, *Dr. Sax* (New York: Grove Press, 1987), 6, 4.

Saints.”⁵ It hung in the same room with the “squareback piano and dark easy chairs and maw sofa.”⁶

In addition to the portrait of Mary and the Infant Jesus, they also had religious calendars everywhere in the house. He recalled how his family, and others, hung “Catholic French Canadian calendars on the wall ... in a bleak brown kitchen with a castiron stove covered with brass scrolls and a poem in a tile panel,” and sometimes, specifically, “St. Mary Calendars” were “hung in brown door behind the stove,” also on closet doors, and on the back of bathroom doors – everywhere.⁷ Also like many French Canadian Catholics, the Kerouacs “had a statue of Ste. Thérèse in [their] house,” and they had crucifixes. One was a unique crucifix that hung in his mother’s room.⁸ “A salesman had sold it to her in Centralville, it was a phosphorescent Christ on a black-lacquered Cross – it glowed the Jesus in the Dark,”⁹

Having these religious items in the context of his everyday life reinforced the idea that God was part of his everyday concerns and experiences. For a young Jack Kerouac the presence of devotional items throughout the house meant that playing the piano, eating in the kitchen, watching his mother cook, playing in his room, and sleeping were all activities conducted in the company of God and the saints. He indicated his awareness of this relationship in a variety of way. For instance, he prayed about friendship and romances before household crucifixes. “Before the crucifix of Jesus in the house I stood

⁵ Kerouac, *Dr. Sax*, 81.

⁶ Kerouac, *Dr. Sax*, 81.

⁷ Kerouac, *Dr. Sax*, 37, 172. Jack Kerouac, *Maggie Cassidy* (New York: Penguin Books, 1993), 15. Kerouac, *Dr. Sax*, 6.

⁸ Kerouac, *Dr. Sax*, 4.

⁹ Kerouac, *Dr. Sax*, 44.

attentively ... I'd pray at the crucifix for the love of my Ernie Malo."¹⁰ Little Ernie Malo was a classmate Kerouac desperately wanted to befriend, perhaps because he reminded him of his deceased brother Gerard. About ten years later he prayed before the crucifix at home again "for the grace of [Maggie Cassidy's] love."¹¹ Maggie Cassidy in life was Mary Carney – Kerouac's high school sweetheart. "Before the crucifix of Jesus in the house I stood attentively," and "listened in the silence of my mother's house to divine how God was going to arrange the success of my love with Maggie."¹²

Whether praying or not, at times the presence of devotional items would make the relationship between heaven and this world so intimate that it was difficult to distinguish between the two realities. For instance, one memorable rainy day, when his mother let him stay home from school, he saw a reflection of his mother and himself in the rainy window as a reflection of the Madonna and Child portrait that hung in their living room.

I'm at the window in the parlor facing Sarah Avenue ... the brown painting on wall [depicts] angels playing around a brown Virgin Mary and Child in a Brown Eternity of the Brown Saints ... My little boy blue eyes shine in the window ... behind me suddenly you see my mother smiling ... Both our faces peer fondly out the window at the rain ... you can tell how the rain pelts the side of the house and the window – we don't budge an inch, just fondly look on – like a Madonna and son.¹³

In other instances the boundaries between the reality of heaven and the reality of this world were so intimately joined that one could pass from one reality to the other without necessarily being aware of it. He described one such instance in *Dr. Sax*, when he and this mother were walking through Lowell heading to the grotto replica of Our

¹⁰ Kerouac, *Maggie Cassidy*, 41, 42.

¹¹ Kerouac, *Maggie Cassidy*, 38, 41.

¹² Kerouac, *Dr. Sax*, 41, 43.

¹³ Kerouac, *Dr. Sax*, 81, 83.

Lady of Lourdes. This grotto had a row of the Stations of the Cross leading up to it, and it stood amidst trees on the perimeter of the St. Joseph's orphanage property.

The Grotto – it Hugely Mooked ahead of us ... It belonged to the orphanage on the corner of Pawtucket Street and School Street at the head of the White Bridge – a big Grotto is their backyard, mad, vast, religious, the Twelve [sic] Stations of the Cross, little individual twelve altars set in, you go in front, kneel, everything but incense in the air (the roar of the river, mysteries of nature, fireflies in the night flickering to the waxy stare of statues ...) – culminating, was the gigantic pyramid of steps upon which the Cross itself poked phallically up with it Poor Burden the Son of Man all skewered across it in his Agony and Fright – undoubtedly this statue moved in the night.¹⁴

Kerouac admitted to being afraid of going there at night sometimes when he was a child, as it was filled with shadows. Of one particular night, he wrote, “turning from the sidewalk into the darkness of the Grotto ... so engrossed have we been in our conversation, we’re in the Grotto! – deep, too, - halfway to the first Station.”¹⁵ Such was the power of devotionism for Kerouac, that, as easy as turning a corner, one could easily pass from an everyday reality to another reality.

Furthermore, one can deduce from Kerouac's description, that the Grotto was a place, perhaps due in part to the bodily actions associated with it, that reminded him of the reality he experienced at church – “everything but incense in the air,” a reality so intense, as described in the quote above and in another quote later in chapter 2, that it allowed him to see a statue's head turn.

Readers ought to also closely read Kerouac's description of the bodily practices associated with the Grotto. He described how “we made the stations to the ultimate foot of the Cross, where my mother kneeled, prayed, and worked a step up the cross-mount, to

¹⁴ Kerouac, *Dr. Sax*, 122-123.

¹⁵ Kerouac, *Dr. Sax*, 124-125.

show me how some people did it all the way up – to the foot of the Cross itself.”¹⁶

French Canadian Catholic Lowell native Roger Brunelle elaborated on these bodily actions associated with the Grotto. He described how when people have a petition they go to the Grotto, kneel at each station of the cross and say a prayer, then, after completing the stations, they go up each step – “the gigantic pyramid of steps” – leading to the crucifix at the top of the Grotto (on their knees the entire way), saying a Hail Mary on each step. Upon reaching the top, the people kneel again at the foot of the massive baroque crucifix and state their petition. Finally, the people walk down the other side to light a candle on the small altar beneath the Grotto.

Granted, a skeptic might be tempted to conclude that it is the bodily actions that produce the effect and perception of another reality, and he may reduce it to that.

However, based on conversations with Brunelle and other Lowell Catholics, it is more appropriate to conclude that one engages such bodily actions because the space itself calls forth such actions. French Canadian Lowell Catholics like Brunelle assume the reality of the “other world” already exists there, and they therefore step into it.

Formation at School

The formation of Kerouac’s sacramentality – the ability to see the relationship between the “other world” and “this world” – also occurred at St. Louis de France parochial school. He attended this school from April 3, 1929 of his first grade year through the fourth grade, and his formation there was conducted under the tutelage of the Sisters of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary, “based at Nicolet in Quebec

¹⁶ Kerouac, *Dr. Sax*, 126.

Country.”¹⁷ They especially formed his sacramentality as they taught him how to interact with saints and through *Catechism* lessons. As Brunelle likes to say on his tours of Kerouac’s Lowell, “let’s go into the school and take a look at what the kids do inside.”¹⁸

The material presented here draws on Roger Brunelle once again to break open Kerouac’s French Canadian Catholic experiences in Lowell. Brunelle proves to be a valuable resource at this point for several reasons. He was born only a few years after Kerouac, grew up in the same area as Kerouac, and attended the same St. Louis de France parochial school. According to local historians, the school remained unchanged during this time. Furthermore, Brunelle has conducted and contributed extensive historical and ethnographic research into this area of Kerouac scholarship himself.¹⁹

According to Brunelle, here is how the typical school day started. In the morning the kids line up, the directrice comes out, rings the big brass bell, they walk in, in silence, go to their rooms and start with the Pledge of Allegiance to the American flag. Then the work begins. English, mathematics, American History, Geography and Science. At 10 o’clock, there’s recess for half an hour during which the Pastor may come out to check if the kids speak French. The children run up to him: “Bonjour, mon Pere!” Back into school. More work with spelling and writing exercises in English.²⁰

Kerouac, on the other hand, recalled the start of a school day with more descriptive detail and imagery, but he lacks the content – the purpose of this part of the dissertation – that Brunelle delivers. According to Kerouac,

At the end of the yard are gathered the teacher nuns getting ready for the morning bell and lineup, the morning breeze moving their black robes and pendant black rosaries slightly, their faces pale around rheumy eyes,

¹⁷ Roger Brunelle, “The Birthplace” (lecture, University of Maine, Orono, ME, April 2, 1987).

¹⁸ Brunelle, “The Birthplace.”

¹⁹ Although Brunelle has published on Kerouac, and has a modest archive of rare Kerouac material, his contribution to Kerouac scholarship has been largely through symposium presentations and the tours he performs for Lowell Celebrates Kerouac, as well as for random visitors, including foreign guests, with extensive commentary, throughout Kerouac’s “Catholic Lowell.”

²⁰ Brunelle, “The Birthplace.”

delicate as lacework their features, distant as chalices, rare as snow,
untouchable as holy bread of the host, the mothers of thought.²¹

Then “the bell rings and all the scufflers go to shuffle in the dreary lines of class by class
with the head nun overlooking all, the parade ground formation of the new day.”²²

At lunchtime, however, things changed and, one could say, the curriculum
attended to Kerouac’s innermost character. Brunelle explains,

At lunchtime the kids run out, not to the cafeteria, but to their homes
where all the mothers are working hard at their task, waiting to feed the
hungry ones for the afternoon session, which is going to be quite different
from the morning one.²³

Then, “after lunch at home, Ti Jean runs across West Sixth Street into the school yard
with hundreds of others, the nun rings them inside the building where everything is now
in French.”²⁴ This second half of the school day begins with a Pledge of Allegiance to a
French Canadian flag, and “before sitting down, everyone turns to a picture of Pope Pius
XI and says: ‘Vive le Pape Pie XI!’”²⁵

Clearly this half of young Jack Kerouac’s school day formation had distinctly
French Canadian Catholic principles to it, and the formation intensified on a physical,
intellectual, and emotional level.

After the Pledge of Allegiance and cheers for the pope, the students turned to an
intense recitation of the rosary. This was no mere recitation, especially during the Lenten
season. As Brunelle explains, “every child takes out his first communion rosary beads
and all say 3 decades of “Je vous salue, Marie”, the first two standing and the last one

²¹ Kerouac, *Visions of Gerard*, 26.

²² Kerouac, *Visions of Gerard*, 27.

²³ Brunelle, “The Birthplace.”

²⁴ Brunelle, “The Birthplace.”

²⁵ Brunelle, “The Birthplace.”

kneeling on the little chairs, arms outstretched during the Lenten Season. Everyone prays in French.²⁶

Next they studied the *Catechism* lessons and the “history of religion.” “This is when the nuns tell us all those wonderful stories about angels and saints who were more real than Cinderella or Snow White,” “and many saints we get to know are French, of course.”²⁷ The impression the *Catechism* lessons, in particular, left on Kerouac will be discussed further below. For now I want to elaborate on the impression these stories about the saints, as well as the other parts of the curriculum, left on the minds of the young students, especially as it fostered their sacramentality.

“Oh, they would tell us all stories about the bravery and heroic deeds of the North American Saints and martyrs,” exclaimed Brunelle as he tried to express the impression the nuns had on their young minds. “When the nuns would tell us these stories, they would cry, and we would cry. It was wonderful!” “Did you ever have this experience in school?” he asked. “No,” I said. “Awww, that’s too bad,” he responded. Then he told me of the plays and pageants the nuns performed in the playground with the students depicting the lives of the American and Canadian Saints. “Kerouac participated in these plays,” Brunelle informed me. “You think this wasn’t influential on our young minds?” he asked rhetorically. “Just think of the themes that emerged in Jack Kerouac’s art and paintings,” he said as he jabbed his finger into the palm of his hand to emphasize each

²⁶ Brunelle, “The Birthplace.”

²⁷ Brunelle, “The Birthplace.”

point, “RELIGION! THE CROSS! LAMBS! ANGELS!” “The nuns ... they excited you!” he concluded.²⁸

Roger also described the interior décor of the school, some of which remains today. “Every classroom had a crucifix too – bloody devotional ones, just like the one at the Grotto!” The hallways were adorned with statues of the Saints as well.

The Saints’ feast days were also celebrated in a special manner. They celebrated with special Masses, and the students would decorate the given Saint’s picture on that day, especially St. Thérèse de Lisieux – The Little Flower of the Infant Jesus, and St. Joseph.²⁹

The remainder of the curriculum also fostered sacramentality. The instruction manuals, readers, and primers, and so on, mainly came from religious orders in Quebec, like the Christian Brothers and Sisters of the Assumption (the same Sisters who taught Jack Kerouac, Kerouac’s brother Gerard, and Roger Brunelle). Devotional images adorned the covers and pages of these texts. They were filled with such images as Jesus with a group of children (Mark 10: 13-16), St. Anne instructing her daughter Mary, and an image of a dad holding his daughter up to a portrait of Mary amidst letters printed and in cursive.³⁰ Thus these lessons themselves were explicitly religious and fostered piety.³¹

Preparing for the *Catechism* lessons, the nuns first sought to inspire the students. “For inspiration and guidance, the nuns go straight to Corinthians I, Chapter 6, Verse 19

²⁸ Roger Brunelle, interview by Louis Albarran, Lowell, MA, June 25, 2009. This interview was conducted in St. Louis de France Parochial School as we walked through the classrooms and the hallways – the same grade school which both Jack Kerouac and Roger Brunelle attended (much of the same devotionalism still remains in this school).

²⁹ Gerard J. Brault, *The French Canadian Heritage in New England* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1986), 95.

³⁰ Brault, *French-Canadian Heritage*, 95-96.

³¹ Brault, *French-Canadian Heritage*, 96.

... what an awesome and disturbing idea to be told that ‘Your body is the Temple of the Holy Ghost.’”³² Most impressively, for considering how the nuns fostered sacramentality, in this component of the curriculum, is the way “St. Paul is developed further.”³³ The nuns took the opportunity to elaborate on St. Paul and instruct the students on how to properly *see* the world around them.

St. Paul is developed further: your eyes are windows through which the grace of God shines and your soul can be seen by everyone through those windows. When you look out at the world look for God and crosses. When you speak you are opening the door of your temple, therefore, your language must be as pure as that of the angels.³⁴

The *Catechism* lessons also left a grand impression on Kerouac. Years later, in addition to the doctrinal content, he also recalled the images that accompanied the lessons. Furthermore, he repeatedly referenced the imagery from the *Catechism* lessons to articulate his identity as a Catholic and his beliefs. For instance, in *Visions of Gerard*, he remarked he could vividly recall the illustrations “done by old French engravers like Boucher and others always done with the same *lamby* gray strangeness,” he could even recall “the reeds of Moses’ bed-basket,” “I remember the careful way they were drawn and divided and the astonished faces of women by the riverbank.”³⁵ According to Brunelle, their old *Catechism* was filled with this type of devotional imagery, images like that of lambs, especially depicting Jesus as the Lamb of God, and illustrating scenes from the Bible. Bringing it back to the formation of Kerouac’s sacramentality, after *Catechism* lessons from this approach, never again would a lamb be just a lamb to Kerouac; it would

³² Brunelle, “The Birthplace.”

³³ Brunelle, “The Birthplace.”

³⁴ Brunelle, “The Birthplace.”

³⁵ Kerouac, *Visions of Gerard*, 51. Italic emphasis in *lamby* is mine; Kerouac seemed to favor such a description when articulating his brand of Catholicism and the formative elements that shaped him.

always represent something more. In other words, there was a meaning behind a lamb in “this world” and there was a meaning behind a lamb in the “other world,” and the two worlds met in his *Catechism* lessons. St. Louis de France School was the type of place that encouraged its students to consider as fact that the images in the *Catechism* could link up with the “other world.”

For instance, sometimes the religious images from the *Catechism* lessons would seep into people dreams and could be considered visions. When such visions occurred, the nuns considered the implications with great sincerity. His sick brother Gerard was reported to have had numerous visions, including one famous vision when he fell asleep during a *Catechism* lesson. Kerouac retold the story in *Visions of Gerard*, complete with devotional imagery like lambs, birds, and Mary with a crown.

Gerard dreams that he is sitting in a yard ... and suddenly the ground ends and there's just air and supported there at the earth's gray edge of immateriality, is a great White Virgin Mary with a flowing robe ballooning partly in the wind and partly tucked in at the edges and held aloft by swarms, countless swarms of grave bluebirds with white downy bellies and necks – On her breast, a crucifix of gold, in her hand a rosary of gold, on her head a star of gold ... she speaks to Gerard: “Well my goodness Ti Gerard, we've been looking for you all morning – where were you?” ... “Well your wagon is there” ... he snaps his finger and looks to remember and there it is, the snow-white cart drawn by two lambs, and as he sits in it two white pigeons settle on each of his shoulders ... the little wagon of snow ascends to Heaven ... his arm is rudely jolted by Sister Marie ... “Well what are you doing Gerard! you're sleeping!” “Well I was in Heaven.” “What?” “Yes Sister Marie, I've arrived in Heaven!” ... “It's your turn to read the catechism!” ... “My sister, I saw the Virgin Mary.” The nun is stunned: “Where?” “There – in a dream, when I slept.” She does the sign of the cross. “Aw Gerard, you gave me a start!” “She told me come on – and there was a pretty little white wagon with two little lambs to pull it and we started out and we were going to Heaven.” ... “A little white wagon!” echo several children with excitement.³⁶

³⁶ Kerouac, *Visions of Gerard*, 51-54.

The teacher then summoned an elder nun, and they both “[stared] at him with tenderest respect.” “Will you repeat what you told me to Sister Caroline?” asked the teacher. “Yes – but I don’t feel good,” said Gerard. “He saw Heaven,” she announced, and the others believed it.³⁷

Formation at Church

Home and school were not the only places to form Kerouac’s sacramentality. Born at the apex of the golden age of the Catholic subculture in America, his experiences inside his local parish church were also saturated with robust aesthetic devotional details.³⁸ This too helped form his sacramentality and understanding of the relationship between “this world” and the “other world.” In *Visions of Gerard*, he described the interior of one of his childhood churches, St. Louis de France, with its memorable dynamics. His description is noteworthy not only because he offers a detailed view of the type of aesthetics commonly found in his childhood churches, but also, with regards to understanding Kerouac’s vision, he indicates his awareness that people interacted with these aesthetics within this space. This interaction was an essential step toward recognizing how the two worlds were engaged and related to each other.

St. Louis de France, ... with concrete cross, and inside the ancient smooth pews and stained windows and stations of the cross and altar and special altars for Mary and Joseph and antique mahogany confessionals with winey drapes and ornate peep doors – And vast solemn marble basins in which the old holy water lies, dipped by a thousand hands – And secret alcoves, and upper organs, and sacrosanct backrooms where altar boys

³⁷ Kerouac, *Visions of Gerard*, 55.

³⁸ American Catholic Historian Jay Dolan has noted that some people refer to the 1920s as “the golden age of the Catholic parish.” See Jay P. Dolan, *The American Catholic Experience: A History from Colonial Times to the Present* (New York: Doubleday, 1985), 206.

emerge in lace and blacks and the priests march forth bearing kingly ornaments.³⁹

There will be other, more explicit examples to follow, but for now one can already sense from Kerouac's description that there is something more to this aesthetic space than serving as a mere backdrop or setting. His description of the holy water font and the various rooms already attest to this insight. The "vast solemn marble basins" that served as holy water fonts did not simply sit there, rather, they were points of interaction as they were "dipped by a thousand hands," and those who dipped their fingers thereby affirmed their investment in interacting with this space. Furthermore, his description of the space – the "secret alcoves" and the "sacrosanct backrooms" – indicates his awareness of the dynamics of this space. He saw it as a mysterious space – a sacred space. The point is, at least in Kerouac's mind, there is movement within this space; it is not static.

I think too many of Kerouac's readers and biographers often view and assume the world manifested by the Catholic subculture of Kerouac's time was too flat and static to provide anything artistic or insightful for Kerouac's vision in this world as we know it. Understanding the concept of the world manifested inside the church as an interactive space prepares readers of Kerouac's work to understand and appreciate how that world was dynamic enough to engage and impact Kerouac's concerns for "this world." In this last section I will continue to develop the idea that Kerouac saw the world manifested by devotionism and Catholic aesthetics as so real that it caused concrete effects in the world. Within these aesthetics there was a dynamic that allowed for an interaction between the two worlds. I will emphasize that this was how Kerouac understood the matter. In short, the point is the "other world" had very real effects on "this world."

³⁹ Kerouac, *Visions of Gerard*, 25-26.

For instance, there was a crucifix in St. Louis de France church capable of causing intense human reactions. As Kerouac described it, it hung “right on the wall,” with “arms extended and hands nailed, Jesus sags to his footrest ... The massive silence enveloping the graceful gentle form of hip and loin cloth, limbs and knees, and the tortured thin breast – And the unforgettable downcast face.”⁴⁰ He further described how someone, like his brother Gerard, could pass before an image like this crucifix, or a similar image found in the Stations of the Cross, and be moved to tears. Speaking of Gerard, he described how such images “always wrenched at [Gerard’s] heart when he saw them,” and Gerard would say ‘*Pauvre Jésus*, Poor Jesus’ ... as thou Jesus had been [Gerard’s] close friend and brother done wrong indeed.”⁴¹ He then described Gerard’s intimate reaction, as Gerard turned his “eyes up and around to the cross, where, with arms extended and hands nailed, Jesus sags to his footrest and bemoans the scene forever, and always it strikes in Gerard’s naturally pitiful heart the thought ‘But *why* did they do that?’ ... ‘He’s crying!’ moaned Gerard, seeing it all.”⁴²

The sacrament of Confession was also an intense experience of the “other world” within this world. In something like Confession, the aesthetics of the entire experience caused participants to become mentally and emotionally involved in a positive way. As Kerouac described the sacrament, practitioners were engaged from the moments leading up to it, through the event of the sacrament itself, and aspects that served as resolution afterward. In *Visions of Gerard*, he described the positive effects. He told how the aesthetics of candles and silence of the church worked on Gerard’s mind and helped him

⁴⁰ Kerouac, *Visions of Gerard*, 34.

⁴¹ Kerouac, *Visions of Gerard*, 31-32.

⁴² Kerouac, *Visions of Gerard*, 34.

experience the sacrament of Confession. “Now Gerard ponders his sins, the candles flicker and testify to it ... in and throughout all a giant silence reigns, shhhhhing, throughout the church like loud remindful ever-continuing abjuration to stay be straight and honest with your thought.”⁴³ In this instance the candles and the silence worked together to help Gerard center himself within the “other world” as he prepared to make a good confession. Then there was the very real release from sin for the practitioner. According to Kerouac’s description, this release happened on a psychological level, but Kerouac gave no indication that he meant for his description to be understood in a reductionistic sense. “Gerard, now knelt in his secure pew, prepares to visit the priest in his ambushade and palace hut with the drapes that keep swishing aside as repentant in-and-out sinners come-and-go burdened and disemburdened as the case may be and is, amen.”⁴⁴ After his confession,

The gracious slide door slides, Gerard is facing the good happy wood, he runs out and hurries lightfoot to the altar, fit to sing – It’s all over! It was nothing! He’s pure again! He prays and bathes in prayers of gratitude at the white rail near the blood red carpet that runs to the stainless altar of white-and-gold, he clasps little hands over leaned elbows with hallelujahs in his eyes.⁴⁵

Indeed, Kerouac described how Gerard received the very real effects of the sacrament of Confession, even the psychological effects, and like countless other Catholics was “leaving the church with that lightfooted way indicative of the weight taken off their minds and left in the confessional.”⁴⁶

⁴³ Kerouac, *Visions of Gerard*, 33.

⁴⁴ Kerouac, *Visions of Gerard*, 33.

⁴⁵ Kerouac, *Visions of Gerard*, 38.

⁴⁶ Kerouac, *Visions of Gerard*, 31.

Catholic liturgy was another access point between “this world” and the “other world.” Kerouac told two stories in *Visions of Gerard* that help illustrate this idea. The first has to do with the way the Catholic church’s liturgical calendar can cause very real effects in this world, especially – as in Kerouac’s example – the season of Lent. The second has to do with the way liturgy conveys meaning through signs and symbols articulating something about the “other world” to “this world.” Illustrating the latter examples, Kerouac focused on the funeral Mass celebrated for his brother.

For the first instance, Kerouac described how the liturgical calendar physically impacts a practitioner’s body. In perhaps the only reference in American Catholic literature to Lent’s effects on bowel movements, Kerouac made a keen, if crude, observation describing Gerard’s confession of pushing a little first grader in the schoolyard. As Kerouac put Gerard’s confession with the priest, “when I pushed him he turned pale, he didn’t know anybody was gonna push him at that moment and that was the moment that hurt him ... He got pale as a Lenten fart ... his heart sank, and it’s *me* that done it.”⁴⁷ In crude fashion, Kerouac described how one could be so in tune with the “other world” through adherence to things like the Catholic church’s liturgical calendar that there could be a physical effect on one’s body. The crude folk saying – “pale as a Lenten fart” – was born from a culture that adhered so strictly to Lenten fasting practices that it produced a very real and noticeable difference in one’s body. Since Lent, after all, was a time when people abstained from heavier meat based dishes, Kerouac perceived that one’s stomach would react favorably to the lighter fare. The two worlds then, the “other world” and “this world,” met in a very real way in a person’s body.

⁴⁷ Kerouac, *Visions of Gerard*, 33.

In the second instance, Kerouac's description of Gerard's funeral Mass demonstrates his understanding of liturgical signs and symbols, and the reality they convey to participants. He was aware that the "opening peals of the organ [sounded] the beginning of the Mass."⁴⁸ He was also aware what the other liturgical elements meant, and he explained all this to the reader. He explained his understanding of how the bells and incense communicated to all of Lowell not only that his brother had died but that he was being commended to God and would rise again just as the incense was rising.

The priest flicking the ciborium incense pot and at each flick, in three directions, by some magic bell rope signal, the outside roofbell flicks like smoke itself and kicks off a soft "ker plang" for the edification of the people of Centreville, Gerard has died ... From the incense pot, 'ker-tling,' so gentle and quiet, to the sound of the connecting signal rope, 'kak,' and 'ker plang,' such beautiful music and I saw three fumes of smoke float up and away – let there be rejoicing.⁴⁹

In another piece by Kerouac he recalled a very personal example of how the aesthetics of a childhood church at Christmas time completely absorbed him and made the "other world" present as he walked in the snow of "this world." The article was called "Not Long Ago Joy Abounded at Christmas," and he published it in New York's *World Telegram and Sun*. In it he focused on how the aesthetics and devotionism during the Christmas season were particularly memorable. He wrote,

At first I was too young to go to midnight mass, but that was the real big event we hoped to grow up to ... When we were old enough it was thrilling to be allowed to stay up late on Christmas Eve and put on best suits and dresses and overshoes and earmuffs and walk with the adults through crunching dried snow to the bell-ringing church ... Near the church you could hear the opening choruses of Bach being sung by child choirs mingled with the grownup choirs usually led by a tenor who inspired laughter more than anything else. But from the wide-open door

⁴⁸ Kerouac, *Visions of Gerard*, 124.

⁴⁹ Kerouac, *Visions of Gerard*, 128.

of the church poured golden light and inside the little girls were lined up for their trumpet choruses caroling Handel.⁵⁰

Upon stepping inside the church he marveled at the various statues arranged for a nativity scene. He loved the sight of the St. Joseph statue at the midnight mass because he was now “proudly in his new honorable position at the front of the church, standing over his family in the manger where all eyes were turned.”⁵¹ As with all devotional fixtures in Kerouac’s life, the sight of this statue sent Kerouac’s mind into a state of heightened spiritual illuminations and he was able to perceive St. Joseph in various circumstances that Kerouac knew himself or wanted to know. He described St. Joseph as, “he who knew the desert stars, and spat with the Wise Men in back of the barn – arranger of the manger, old hobo saint of haylofts and camel trails – my secret Friend.”⁵² After mass they would return home. The devotionism he interacted with at church saturated his mind and continued to inspire him to sense and see the sacred in all creation even after he left the church building. He wrote,

In the general uproar of gifts and unwinding of wrappers it was always a delight to me to step out on the porch or even go up the street a ways at 1:00 in the morning and listen to the silent hum of heaven diamond stars ... consider the trees that seemed frozen in sudden devotion, and ... Before my mind’s eye was the St. Joseph of my imagination clasping the darling little Child.⁵³

The nativity scene from church influenced the way he saw creation; the created representation of a sacred moment such as the nativity caused him to see all of creation as sharing in that same sacred moment on Christmas Eve.

⁵⁰ Jack Kerouac, “Not Long Ago Joy Abounded at Christmas” in *Good Blonde & Others*, ed. Donald Allen (San Francisco: Grey Fox Press, 2001), 101.

⁵¹ Kerouac, “Not Long Ago,” 102.

⁵² Kerouac, “Not Long Ago,” 102.

⁵³ Kerouac, “Not Long Ago,” 103.

Conclusion

This chapter introduced the various ways Kerouac's sacramentality was formed in the French Canadian Catholic subculture of Lowell, Massachusetts. Borrowing from Kerouac's terminology, the chapter focused more specifically on how Kerouac's sacramentality was formed through the various aesthetic components and practices of Lowell's Catholic subculture that embodied and instantiated the reality of the "other world" – heaven – within "this world."

While I broke the chapter into three main sections, presenting the formation of Kerouac's sacramentality at home, school, and at church, this was only done for the sake of clarity and analysis. In reality, Kerouac's formation generally happened in and through all three places at once. For instance, while he learned about the Saints and engaged religious images at school, most of what he learned would have been reinforcing what he already learned at home about how to interact with devotionism and Catholic aesthetics. He would engage these aspects again when he entered a church.

Seeing instances of the "other world" – heaven – all over "this world" – Lowell – fostered in Kerouac the corollary sense that heaven was everywhere or at least there was an access point to it. As he remarked in *Maggie Cassidy*, thinking about his formative days in Lowell: "I believed in the planks of the little corner; I knew that the earth, the streets, the floors and shadows of life were holy," meaning nearly everything contained or could contain an access point to heaven.⁵⁴ As this chapter further demonstrated, and as the remainder of the dissertation will maintain, Catholic devotionism was Kerouac's preferred mode for making this connection.

⁵⁴ Kerouac, , *Maggie Cassidy*, 105.

CHAPTER 2

THE DEVOTIONAL WRITER AT HIS DESK

“[I wish] someday we could all ... spend all our time ... scanning the words of God over and over again till they become our only concern, our only language, our only imagery....”¹

The commonly accepted image of Jack Kerouac – which has become almost a parody – is the image of the man as a mad experimenter of spontaneous prose who wrote stream of consciousness. To an extent this popular and prevailing image of Kerouac was a mythology cultivated by Kerouac himself and then promoted and sold by poet and friend Allen Ginsberg.

In one of the first celebrity interviews of a writer on television, for example, T.V. host and pianist Steve Allen asked a brooding Kerouac, seated on the other end of the piano, how he came to write *On the Road*. While improvising on the piano, among other questions, Allen asked Kerouac how long he was on the road and how long it took him to write the book. Kerouac indicated that he was on the road for seven years, and it only took him three weeks to write about it. In the face of and acknowledging such a remarkable feat, Allen jokingly responded that he was once on the road for a mere three weeks but it took him seven years to write about it. Kerouac further described his

¹ Kerouac, *Jack Kerouac: Selected Letters, 1940-1956*, 292.

process of writing on scrolls – long sheets of teletype paper taped together – which enabled him to write without stopping to reload sheets, further suggesting that he could write a novel in no time at all so long as nothing got in his way.

Allen Ginsberg added to and promoted this image of Kerouac in his own way. Ginsberg started out, perhaps surprisingly, as a more traditional academic poet within the channels and formalities of the establishment, with marketing credentials and experience as well. So Ginsberg knew what he was doing when he began snapping pictures of Kerouac in flannel and checkered shirts, walking through the bohemian quarters and city streets, as opposed to the pictures of Kerouac wearing a tweed suit and necktie at book signings. Ginsberg was developing a Kerouac who visually bucked against the system, and he joined this image to a written description of Kerouac. In a review of one of Kerouac's book, which has now been reduced to a standard blurb, Ginsberg "coined a catchy nickname for his friend's style of writing – 'spontaneous bop prosody.'"² Ginsberg's catchy phrase likened Kerouac and his work to the new music of the bop avant-garde jazz scene, essentially implying Kerouac not only wrote spontaneously but also, as in bop jazz, at an anxious, rushed, and sometimes frantic pace that "spit forth intelligence," as Ginsberg added.

This mythology resulted in the image of Kerouac as a mad writer. It is an image that fails to capture the fact that he was a more intentional author and it certainly fails to account for the influence of Catholicism on his work. The image of Kerouac as a mad writer at his desk, only portrays him as an author pumping out novels, fueled by Benzedrine, or some other synthetic chemical, as well as coffee and cigarettes, wearing a

² Tom Clark, *Jack Kerouac: A Biography* (New York: Paragon House, 1990), 173.

flannel work shirt, with his furrowed brow, bowed over a shining black Underwood typewriter, sweating, with his thick hands and fingers arched over the typewriter's keys, still reeling from the Benzedrine, tapping and striking the keys like a jazz drummer immersed in a long improvised solo, typing his words to the rhythm of the land that he heard in his head, instantly recalling events, faces, towns, taverns, bars, roads, and cities, ringing the bell at the margin at the end of every line so fast and frequently it sounded like an alarm clock, producing a novel as fast as a car could drive, as the words poured out on long biblical scrolls of paper. This image is not completely without a basis, and at times appears more than appropriate; Kerouac once wrote a novel in seventy-two hours and over the three long days and nights of intense writing lost fifteen pounds doing it.³ While this suggests a serious commitment to writing, even at the expense of one's physical and mental wellbeing, it fails to convey the amount of thought and intentionality that went into his writing and suggested something akin to madness instead. It certainly fails to account for the influence of Catholic devotionism in his writing.

Toward Understanding Kerouac as a Catholic Writer

There is a darker image of Kerouac as a writer that comes from a period he called "Self Ultimacy" which illustrates his occasionally extreme dedication to his craft – a dedication that took on religious overtones especially as he began methods or practices commonly associated with the occult. It involved cutting himself and dripping his own blood on paper.

³ Clark, *Jack Kerouac*, 127.

The year was 1944, and Kerouac had recently been bailed out of jail by a man who was about to become his father-in-law. He was arrested on a vague charge of being a material witness for a murder. When his own father refused to put forward the bail money, his girlfriend Edie Parker's father paid it. Mr. Parker paid it on the condition that Kerouac marry Edie, which he did. Once he paid back his debt to his father-in-law, he decided to ship out to sea that fall to earn more money for his new bride and himself. He already had experience at sea with the merchant marines.

Unlike his extensive trips with the merchant marines in 1942 and 1943, this trip was short lived. Supposedly, the problem was Kerouac could not trust the ship's bosun. The bosun was a 230 pound man who began calling Kerouac "handsome," "pretty boy," and "baby face." Kerouac sensed the man was about to manipulate and abuse him physically and sexually. As Kerouac recalled the tension with the bosun, "'you know what, Pretty Boy, Baby Face, you aint no able-bodied seaman. By the time I'm done with you ...' I sensed he wanted a fight'"⁴ So Kerouac jumped ship in Norfolk, "put all my clothes on, put my chinos and black jacket over that, folded the empty duffel bag into my belt under, and walked off the ship that night the fattest able-bodied seaman you ever saw."⁵ He "walked across the endless piers, got to the highway ... and got into the toilet of a Texaco filling station. There I undid all my clothes, packed in [sic] back in the duffel bag, and emerged light as a feather in the cool southern autumnal evening."⁶

⁴ Jack Kerouac, *Vanity of Duluo: The Adventurous Education of a Young Man* (London: Quartet Books Limited, 1973), 200.

⁵ Kerouac, *Vanity*, 201.

⁶ Kerouac, *Vanity*, 201.

Later, when the time was right and he could go by unnoticed, he was on a “bus and riding back up across the southern dark toward New York. A ship jumper, to add to the rest.”⁷

Upon arriving back in New York, he isolated himself in a room, secured by Allen Ginsberg, on Columbia’s campus, and thus began his period of “Self Ultimacy.” He was almost totally alone, since his friends were elsewhere, and his family and wife thought he was still at sea. Basically in solitude, he committed himself to an intense reading list and writing program.

In *Vanity of Duluoz*, he offered a sample of his esoteric reading list during this time and a description of the intriguing practices that typified his “Self Ultimacy” period. “I only mention these few quotes to show the reader what I was reading and How (and How!) I was absorbing it and how serious I was.”⁸ He covered everything from The Huxleyan “idea of ceaseless growth (also Goethean),” “Sexual neo-Platonism and the sexual understanding of a *grande dame* of the eighteenth century as a modern trend,” “the conflict between modern bourgeois culture and artistic culture in Thomas Mann, in Rolland, in Wolfe, in Yeats, Joyce,” Rimbaud, Nietzsche, “Anglo-Catholicism and classicism of Eliot,” and “the prophecy in end of third movement of Beethoven’s Ninth.”⁹ As if his reading list was not eccentric enough, when a particular quote struck him he wrote it out on a separate piece of paper, piercing his hand and using his blood to spell out key words from the quote, such as *The Blood of the Poet*, the title to the avant-garde artist Jean Cocteau’s film. He described the process,

I lighted a candle, cut a little into my finger, dripped blood, and wrote
‘The Blood of the Poet’ on a little calling card, with ink, then the big word

⁷ Kerouac, *Vanity*, 202.

⁸ Kerouac, *Vanity*, 203.

⁹ Kerouac, *Vanity*, 203.

‘BLOOD’ over it, and hung that up on the wall as reminder of my new calling. ‘Blood’ writ in blood.’¹⁰

When another quote from his reading list of Rimbaud, Yeats, Huxley, and Nietzsche struck him, he “reopened the wound and tourniqueted more blood out of it” to continue writing.¹¹ He tacked these scraps of paper on the walls around him in the room, as if to contextualize his new writing ethic, and when he finished each day’s work he gathered the pages he had written and burned them in a type of purifying or purging ceremony.

Artistic morality, that was the point, because then I devised the idea of burning most of what I wrote so that my art would not appear (to myself as well as to others) to be done for ulterior, or practical motives, but just as a function, a daily duty, a daily scatological ‘heap’ for the sake of purgation. So I’d burn what I wrote, with the candle flame, and watch the paper curl up and squirm, and smile madly. The way writers are born, I guess.¹²

Finally, “after much candle-writing and bleeding on my part,” his friend William S. Burroughs stepped into the room, took a condescending look around and led Kerouac out the door and back to his ordinary life saying, “my God, Jack, stop this nonsense and let’s go out and have a drink ... let’s go have dinner, then go see Jean Cocteau’s movie *The Blood of the Poet* if that’s your line these days.”¹³

Arguably, Kerouac would have been better off staying with his “Self Ultimacy” project. For during the time that followed he sank even further into a scene he described as “a year of low, evil decadence.”¹⁴ He was frequently in the company of a wealthy heir from St. Louis, William S. Burroughs. Associating with Burroughs had a price to pay, however, as Burroughs “was allowing his underworld friends to hide stolen goods in his

¹⁰ Kerouac, *Vanity*, 202.

¹¹ Kerouac, *Vanity*, 202.

¹² Kerouac, *Vanity*, 204.

¹³ Kerouac, *Vanity*, 204.

¹⁴ Kerouac, *Vanity*, 206.

room, and was experimenting wildly with drugs.”¹⁵ From another acquaintance within the new group, Vickie Russell, he learned to “extract the Benzedrine-soaked blotter strips out of ninety-eight cent inhalers, roll them into balls and swallow them with a cup of coffee to produce amphetamine highs that would last as long as eight hours.”¹⁶ After a year of living like this the wear and tear began to show. While the group’s dynamics eventually produced the key people who seemed to embody and articulate what would become known as the Beat Generation, Kerouac “had changed from a well-muscled athlete into a paunched and puffy drug-user.”¹⁷ Even worse, “the excessive Benzedrine use had caused blood clotting in his legs, and he was hospitalized with thrombophlebitis – a problem that would stay with him [throughout] his life.”¹⁸ His life in danger, facing his own mortality, he received treatment in Queens General Hospital and there began to reflect on his life. “In fact I began to bethink myself in that hospital,” he wrote, “I began to get a new vision of my own.”¹⁹ The vision will be attended to below, but for now, shortly after his release from the hospital, Kerouac faced another dark reality far worse than the fate of his own death, the prospect of his father’s death.

Kerouac returned to his parent’s home in Ozone Park and there tended to his father, Leo Kerouac. Leo had cancer of the spleen, and much to Kerouac’s anguish, as well as Leo’s, of course, had to watch his father writhe in pain, get bloated, and have his stomach pumped. “Although Leo had disapproved of the way he’d been leading his life

¹⁵ Steve Turner, *Angelheaded Hipster: A Life of Jack Kerouac* (New York: Viking, 1996), 75.

¹⁶ Turner, *Angelheaded Hipster*, 75.

¹⁷ Turner, *Angelheaded Hipster*, 81.

¹⁸ Turner, *Angelheaded Hipster*, 81.

¹⁹ Kerouac, *Vanity*, 208.

and of the way he seemed to be squandering opportunities, Leo had remained fiercely proud, and had wanted to see Jack lifted out of the gutter he'd been forced to live in.”²⁰

Almost immediately after his father's death, Kerouac changed his ways, for a while. As one might expect, after Leo's death Kerouac was in a deep depression for weeks. “His trips to the city grew less frequent,” and slowly, slowly he “settled down to write, in solitude, in pain,” as he put it in *Vanity of Duluoz*, “writing hymns and prayers even at dawn.”²¹ He was working on what would eventually become his first published novel. He added, “when this book is finished ... I shall be redeemed.”²²

Kerouac's thought that writing a book could bring redemption is a key point for understanding the man as a writer. To properly unpack the meaning behind such a statement one must understand how Kerouac understood his vocation, or duty, as a writer.

As I walked through the streets of Lowell with Roger Brunelle again, approaching the Kerouac commemorative, he once again provided further insights into Kerouac scholarship. This time, Brunelle emphasized Kerouac's sense of *duty*. In particular, he helped me understand Kerouac's notion of writing as a *duty*. For Brunelle, after all, is a linguist – specializing in French and Latin – so he pays special attention to the way words are used and the meaning they carry, especially how they are used by people from Lowell. Staring at the tall red pillars of the Kerouac commemorative, made of Cornelian granite, with Kerouac's engraved words spread over them, Brunelle began to read aloud.

²⁰ Turner, *Angelheaded Hipster*, 81.

²¹ Kerouac, *Vanity*, 213. Turner, *Angelheaded Hipster*, 72.

²² Kerouac, *Vanity*, 213.

“Always considered writing my duty on earth,” he proclaimed.²³ Those were Kerouac’s words. Then Brunelle stepped forward, jabbed his finger into the pillar at “duty” and expertly elaborated on my own hypothesis that one ought to attend more closely to the various ways Kerouac described his writing as *duty*. “The word ‘duty’ carried a lot of weight in our old parochial schooling system,” he added, “and the nuns of St. Louis de France made sure we appreciated that.” “We first learned this in our *Catechism* lessons,” he added, “when we learned that the purpose of life is to ‘know, love, and serve God in this world so we can be with Him in the next.’” “Now how can we actually serve God in this world when we are but children?” he asked. “That’s easy,” I replied, “like every pastor or nun in America tells kids, ‘by being a good son or daughter.’” “Well, what about when you’re in school, sitting behind your little wooden desk?” After several failed guesses, I finally said, “look, just tell me!” “Well, I’ll give you an example,” he said. “Whatever your task or the lesson of the day is, you must do it to the best of your ability. If the students are practicing a lesson in penmanship, then that is the way you serve God: by practicing perfect penmanship. Now, if you decide to slack off in your lesson, then the nuns would stand over you and shout ‘it is your *duty* to practice perfect penmanship,’ and we understood that accomplishing the task at hand was our way of glorifying God.” He jabbed his finger into my chest when he quoted the nuns saying “duty,” just like he jabbed at the word “duty” engraved in the Cornelian granite pillar.

For a while it appeared that being an all American boy, a football hero, and then a successful business person was Kerouac’s duty. There is reason to believe that his parents pounded this idea into his head, that his duty was to earn his scholarship through

²³ Jack Kerouac, *Lonesome Traveler* (New York: Grove Press, 1988), vi.

Lowell high school football, play for Horace Mann preparatory school, then go off to bigger and better things on his scholarship at Columbia, and finally return to Lowell to move his parents out of there. If this was Jack Kerouac's duty and way to serve God then he clearly sinned grievously when he rejected it by quitting Columbia not once but twice.

The sight of his dying father looking at his "quitter" of a son, and his mother working hard in a shoe factory to support her son, the same son in whom both Leo and Gabrielle had placed all their hopes when they sent him off to the big city, dramatically reinforced the fact that Kerouac was in desperate need of redemption.

My poor father had to see me, while dying of cancer, come down to all of this from that beginning on the sandlot football field of Dracut Tigers Lowell when the ambition was to make good in football and school, go to college, and become a 'success.'²⁴

Columbia, football, and having a successful business career were all inconsequential for Kerouac's salvation. His main duty, vocation, and way of serving God was as a writer. A famous priest from Lowell, Fr. Armand "Spike" Morissette, had a story he liked to tell and it sheds light on understanding Kerouac as a person who understood writing as his religious vocation, his duty.

Fr. Spike once saw a little boy crying at school. He asked the little boy what the matter was. "The other children are laughing at me," was the response. "Why are they laughing at you?" he asked. "Because I want to be a writer." "Well then," said Fr. Spike, "you'll need to go to a good school, so you'll need to earn a scholarship." That boy was Jack Kerouac. Young Kerouac and Fr. Spike decided it would be best if Kerouac earned an athletic scholarship as a means to securing his education as a writer. While he

²⁴ Kerouac, *Vanity*, 207.

occasionally looked back fondly on his football days, he declared the he “always considered writing my duty on earth.”²⁵

After the death of his father, it was time for Kerouac to tend earnestly to his vocation as a writer. In fact, this was the only way Kerouac could be redeemed – a point that becomes more coherent against the backdrop of Lowell’s Catholic subculture, especially with its emphasis on duty.

The description of Kerouac’s Self Ultimacy period, in a dissertation that is trying to advance the idea of the man as a distinctly Catholic author formed by the Catholic subculture, may appear odd to readers looking for signs of Catholicism. Nevertheless, without claiming that Self Ultimacy was some kind of common practice in the Catholic subculture, I do want to propose that there are some similarities between Kerouac’s practices during this period compared to some of the practices of devotionism as described in chapter 1. I am particularly thinking of the way Lowell Catholics tacked religious images to the walls in their homes. The sight of these religious images in their common settings like living rooms, bedrooms, and bathrooms, instead of only in church, seemed to alter that setting, making it too seem like an access point to the ‘other world.’ This at least has some similarities with the way Kerouac tacked the scraps of paper with the blood ridden quotes of Rimbaud and Cocteau to the walls around his isolated apartment near Columbia. In both cases such a practice altered the space around him. As the images on the walls in his Catholic devotional ethos transformed ordinary rooms into extraordinary space, so too the bloody pieces of paper with quotes tacked to his walls, combined with the practice of burning heaps of his writing, also altered the normal

²⁵ Kerouac, *Lonesome Traveler*, vi.

context he wrote in and helped elevate his writing to another level as he was trying to be *born* as a writer, “the way writers are born, I guess.”²⁶

The addition of the phrase “I guess,” after reflecting on Self Ultimacy, implies a level of ambivalence in Kerouac toward the whole project. There was no such ambivalence three years later when he started tacking pieces of paper with words on them to his walls again. This second time around, those pieces of paper were hymns and prayers that he himself composed, and he drew inspiration from them as he wrote.²⁷ This time, instead of burning the pages he typed, he saved them and began producing what would become his first published novel, *The Town and the City*.

Catholic Devotionalism and Kerouac’s Workspace

The type of hymns and prayers Kerouac wrote and tacked to his walls back at home while he began work on *The Town and the City* illustrate the difference he experienced between the two ethos: the Catholic devotional ethos he knew from Lowell and the “low, evil decadence” ethos of New York’s underground scene.

He described the darkness of the latter season in his life – approximately from 1944 to 1946 – in *Vanity of Duluoz*. He went to such extremes during those days and so thoroughly abused his body that he once “lost thirty pounds in three days” using Benzedrine, and would “come home to Ozone Park from these endless debauches looking like a pale skin-and-bones of my former self.”²⁸ He described the scene,

It was a year when I completely gave up trying to keep my body in condition and a photo of myself on the beach at the time shows soft and

²⁶ Kerouac, *Vanity*, 204.

²⁷ Turner, *Angelheaded Hipster*, 81. Kerouac, *Vanity*, 213.

²⁸ Kerouac, *Vanity*, 206.

flabby body. My hair had begun to recede from the sides. I wandered in Benzedrine depression hallucinations. A 6-foot redhead applied pancake makeup to my face and we went in the subway like that ... we hung out in the evil bar on 8th Avenue around the corner from 42nd Street.²⁹

Eventually, he became horrified by all this and saw it as a place of “guilt, sin, sorrow, lamentation, despair.”³⁰ He tried to articulate this feeling of horror and in doing so drew on the imagery of light and darkness.

It wasn't so much the darkness of the night that bothered me but the horrible lights men had invented to illuminate their darkness with ... I mean the very streetlamp down at the end of the street.³¹

He was looking for a light in the darkness, and he recognized the synthetic chemicals the group used to illuminate their lives was not worth the toll on his body and mind – it was worth no more than the streetlights he could see from the window in his hospital room. In other words, Kerouac thought, as he lied in the hospital bed, that the drugs were, in hindsight, basically useless; he would have illuminated his life just as well if he stood under a street light instead of ingesting the synthetic chemicals and spared himself the phlebitis. As he meditated on this darkness while he recovered from phlebitis, the thought of the darkness made him sicker. From his hospital bed he would “look out the window at the darkness of the Queens night and feel a nauseating gulp to see those poor streetlamps stretching out into the murmurous city like a string of woes.”³² He was, however, getting healthier and he was sure people “could see in my eyes what had been

²⁹ Kerouac, *Vanity*, 206.

³⁰ Kerouac, *Vanity*, 206.

³¹ Kerouac, *Vanity*, 206. The ellipsis in this quotation is part of Kerouac's original text.

³² Kerouac, *Vanity*, 208.

there in 1939, 38, may 22.”³³ He would soon return home to tend to his dying father, and then after his father’s death recommit himself to his vocation as a writer.

Back at his parents’ home in Ozone Park, religious items adorned the walls, just as they had in Lowell. A silver crucifix hung over his headboard in his room where he slept, while a string of rosary beads either hung over his bed or was laid on the night table.³⁴ Within this environment he sat down to write, and the prayers he wrote to contextualize his work ranged from psalms of lamentation to hymns of praise.

Kerouac’s journals from his post “low, evil decadence” days attest to the importance of a devotional ethos for him. Indeed, this ethos had a tremendous affect on his writing and his vision, and its significance is seen in the imagery he used in his journals, imagery that contrasted with New York’s underground scene which lacked devotionalism. One particular prayer – a psalm of lamentation – played off the imagery of the darkness that surrounded him in the city and suggested now that he was back in the proper ethos there was a light on the horizon.

God, I cannot find your face this morning: the night has been split, a morning light has come, and lo! there is the *city*, and there are the city men with their wheels coming to swallow darkness under towers. Ah! Ah! there’s rage here, God, there’s a bridge too upon which the wheels collide, beneath which they bring more wheels and tunnels, there’s a fire raging here over dull multitudes. God I have known this city and stayed here trapped and full of rage, I have been a city man, with wheels, and

³³ Kerouac, *Vanity*, 208.

³⁴ Al Aronowitz, “St. Jack (Annotated by Jack Kerouac,” in *Conversations with Jack Kerouac*, ed. Kevin J. Hayes (Jackson, Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi, 2005), 18. Turner, *Angelheaded Hipster*, 142. According to one interviewer who witnessed part of Kerouac’s nightly routines years later, he watched as Kerouac reverently “tiptoes over to the [rosary] beads, gently picks up the crucifix and presses it to his lips,” giving it “the silent kiss,” as Kerouac called it, impressing upon the interviewer that he did this “every night.” See Val Duncan, “Kerouac Revisited,” in *Conversations with Jack Kerouac*, 49. Kerouac also told a reporter about his “ritual” of “kneeling and praying before starting [his books],” something he picked up from a French movie about George Frederick Handel. See Ted Berrigan, “The Art of Fiction: Jack Kerouac,” in *Conversations with Jack Kerouac*, 70.

walkings all about inside, I have seen their faces all around me here. I must see your face this morning, God, Your Face through dusty windowpanes, through steam and furor, I must listen to your voice over these clankings of the city: I am tired, God, I cannot see your face in this *history*.³⁵

The darkness would fade and he would eventually see a vision of God on the road several years later, and another vision several more years later. Back in his element once again, he was able to see better, and his writing began to reflect the light. He had enough of the darkness – for the time being – and stated so:

And when I saw the light of the morning sun streaming in the city, my Saviour, I wept that there was such richness, I wept that Your light was shed upon the sorrowful weary city men, the melancholy women, within their black towers and byways all the light, my Lord: and oh my God now I pray to you – do not remove Your light from us all, and from me – I could not rejoice in more darkness, nor could I pray in the ignorance of the dark: Your light wide over the city and the bridge at morning – and I am saved, my Saviour, saved! By the sun which is a miracle, by the light which is everywhere bright – but Lord: give me power for my psalms, that I may rejoice powerfully, with equal light, give me tears for strength, give me again these mornings of light and purpose and humbleness.³⁶

As this psalm revealed, Kerouac was beginning to sense his “purpose” as a writer and his vision was coming into focus. He had gone through his own season in hell, and he came out the other side more determined than ever now to be a writer – and not only a writer but one who wrote stories for God. As he wrote in another psalm,

Oh God how I rejoice in sorrows now, as though I had asked you for them, and You had handed them to me, how I rejoice in these sorrows. Like steel I will be, God, growing harder in the forge-fires, grimmer, harder, better: as you direct, Oh lost Lord, as you direct: let me find You now, like new joy on the earth at morning, like a horse in his meadows in the morning seeing the master a-coming across the grass – Like steel, I am now, God, like steel, you have made me strong and hopeful. Strike me and I will ring like a bell!³⁷

³⁵ Kerouac, *Windblown World*, 157.

³⁶ Kerouac, *Windblown World*, 157-158.

³⁷ Kerouac, *Windblown World*, 158.

It would take Kerouac about three more years to ring like a bell, three more years of “praying in my room and sighing at the moon from the fullness of my hopes.”³⁸ In the meantime, he struggled with his own methodological questions as he tried to articulate his vision and searched for some mode to capture the visions to come, so he could record them on scrolls for others to read.

Catholic Devotionalism and Kerouac’s Methodological Concerns

My aim at this point in the chapter is to demonstrate how Catholic devotionalism shaped Kerouac’s methodological concerns as a writer. Just as Catholic devotionalism was concerned with the relationship between “this world” and the “other world,” Kerouac became concerned with the relationship between the two worlds in his writing too. I will then attend, in the next section, to a description of how Kerouac decided to furnish his writing with the aesthetics of Catholic devotionalism.

When Kerouac sat down to work on his first published novel, *The Town and the City*, he was already considering the ways he could transcend the genre of a “novel.” He began to search for a way to translate his vision of the world to his readers through his books, as most authors do, but more importantly, for Kerouac, his vision had a religious quality to it, and, more, a distinctly Catholic aesthetic to it. This observation comes to the forefront when one reads Kerouac’s journals and letters, and it helps contextualize much of the religious imagery in Kerouac’s novels. Granted, in some cases his vision may appear to contain only general or vague religious imagery, like his sense of the light in

³⁸ Kerouac, *Windblown World*, 56.

the darkness. However, I maintain that the images only appear general or vague when they are taken out of their Catholic context.

So, in 1948, as he was working on completing *The Town and the City*, he began to transcend the genre of a “novel.” Instead he speculated about something he would call a “‘soulwork’ instead of a ‘novel.’”³⁹ He had no illusions about the difficulty in succeeding in such a project, and his self-awareness is apparent in his other journal entries from this time. Addressing his idea of a “soulwork,” he wrote, “such a name is too fancy, and laughable, but it does indicate someone’s writing *all-out* for the sake of earnestness and salvation.”⁴⁰ Furthermore, he confidently stated “the idea is that such a work must infold [sic] the man like his one undeniable cloak and dream of things ... his ‘vision of the world and of the proposition of things.’”⁴¹ He meant that he would impart his vision of the world – a religious vision, a Catholic vision – through his work to his readers, and readers would be able to know something about the author himself and the world he came from through such naked and honest writing.

Two years later, in 1950, he remarked on the same theme, but he elaborated on it. In a letter to a friend, he confessed he wanted,

A pen that spurts golden fire and winds shrouds around the man. I guess I want to be an angel of some kind. That is a fact. Not for immunity, but for the right to be near God ... Something is bound to happen ... Some revelation is bound to appear to me soon, like light ... so that in my work I will be able to reflect those mysteries in a glass ... a fiery glass.⁴²

He may not have been as specific or intentional about furnishing his work with Catholic aesthetics early on, but in the span of a few short years he would quickly build

³⁹ Kerouac, *Windblown World*, 95.

⁴⁰ Kerouac, *Windblown World*, 95

⁴¹ Kerouac, *Windblown World*, 95.

⁴² Turner, *Angelheaded Hipster*, 216.

and shape his work in such a way that reflected his formation in the French Canadian Catholic subculture of Lowell with all its aesthetics. A year after he announced his intention to write a soulwork he began to define the contours of such a work. One distinguishing mark of Kerouac as a writer was that he was chiefly concerned with demonstrating the relationship between the reality of the world as we know it and the reality of what he referred to as the “other world,” by which he meant heaven.⁴³ As discussed above, Kerouac learned about the relationship between these two worlds in Lowell’s Catholic devotional ethos. As a reading of his journals and letters indicates, he now became fixated on investigating the relationship between the two worlds.

More than mere relationship, Kerouac wanted to describe the intimacy of the two worlds in his soulworks. He hoped to demonstrate the intimacy to such a degree that his works could become “bridges” between the two worlds. These soulworks would then allow readers to access the other world, or, if not access it, at least stay in contact with it until one arrived there. As he wrote in his journal,

Life is not enough if you lose contact with the other world . . . I want to burn and I want to feel and I want to bridge from this life to the others, [sic] that is what I meant: - to go to the other world, or that is, keep in contact with it till I get there.⁴⁴

Having tended to his self-imposed methodological questions, Kerouac sought to “exert more greatly for further and further visions of the other world, and preach (if I can) in my work.”⁴⁵ His preaching, however, was not on a moral level. Rather, his preaching in his books would be based on a level of aesthetic sensibilities. He was about to start writing books that would describe both this world and the other world, aesthetically, and

⁴³ Kerouac, *Windblown World*, 210, 208, 205.

⁴⁴ Kerouac, *Windblown World*, 210-211.

⁴⁵ Kerouac, *Windblown World*, 211.

in thick detail. While he was not making moral claims he did intend his works to influence the way people thought about life.⁴⁶ After all, his understanding of literature was “the tale that’s told ... to teach something religious, of religious reverence, about real life, in this real world which literature should (and here does) reflect.”⁴⁷ That he intended for his books to be taken seriously on a religious level is even more apparent in a line from 1952, when he wrote, “I should like to make it plain to everyone that I am speaking from a pulpit.”⁴⁸ Years later, in *Vanity of Duluoz*, his last published novel before his death, he reiterated his intentions as a writer. After claiming to be “one of the world’s worst secret Jesuits,” he wrote, “everything I do is based on some kind of proselytisation, everything I’ve written, just take a close look.”⁴⁹

Furnishing His Vision with Catholic Aesthetics

Having established his basic methodology, Kerouac needed to fill in the content of his new vision as a writer. The emphasis he would place on these new details and the way he conveyed them would mark a dramatic shift from the approach he took in *The Town and the City*. To an extent, the shift happened in response to a series of letters from Neal Cassady, from as early as 1948 but most importantly in December of 1950. Neal, who later became the hero of *On the Road* and *Visions of Cody*, sent Kerouac a long (13,000 words by Kerouac’s estimation), handwritten letter written in a brutally honest, confessional style. Apparently Kerouac was overwhelmed by this letter, “it seems to

⁴⁶ Turner, *Angelheaded Hipster*, 217.

⁴⁷ Kerouac, *Satori in Paris* (New York: Grove Press, 1985), 10.

⁴⁸ Kerouac, *Visions of Cody* (New York: Penguin Books, 1993), 274.

⁴⁹ Kerouac, *Vanity*, 32.

have helped him to trust his own voice as a writer and break free from the influence of Thomas Wolfe's fiction," whose style he had imposed on *The Town and the City*.⁵⁰

Over the next two weeks, from December 1950 to January 1951, Kerouac wrote several letters to Cassady also in a confessional style setting up and detailing exactly what he hoped to say in his work. The themes that emerged would be the guiding light of the majority of his work until the day he died. One of the dominant themes to emerge was Kerouac's recognition of the importance of the aesthetics of the Catholic church as a window to the world for him. Furthermore, if he was going to bare his soul in his work – as in his idea of a soulwork, he decided he was going to need to write more explicitly about his own life.

In a letter dated January 9, 1951, Kerouac recalled a profound insight he had while meditating in St. Patrick's Cathedral, in New York. This letter was significant because it described the type of details he was going to use to furnish his vision. He was thinking about how to proceed with his new confessional style and how to convey certain details of his life and insights to Neal when he found himself "in the middle of a novena."⁵¹ He was familiar with novenas from his youth in Lowell and described them in *Visions of Gerard*. For this particular novena he noted the approximate time was just before eventide, "so that the blue light still pressed at the stained glass windows high up."⁵² There was a "lovely silence" amidst the "heights of mysterious upreaching darkness 'fading among the naves,'" as he stared at the "splendors of stained glass window, altar, chandelier, pillar[s]." Then, contrary to the frenzied jangle of his

⁵⁰ Charters, *Jack Kerouac: Selected Letters, 1940-1956*, 242.

⁵¹ Kerouac, *Jack Kerouac: Selected Letters, 1940-1956*, 282.

⁵² Kerouac, *Jack Kerouac: Selected Letters, 1940-1956*, 282.

Benzedrine haze days, he began to ponder his “desire to sit and think, without smoking, without fidgeting, for hours in the silence of the church.”⁵³ The aesthetics began to work on him and took him to another place, another world, the “other world.” He began to think “how nice it would be to sit thinking in a church for several hours every day of one’s life!”⁵⁴ Ah, “if it was only 500 years ago,” he thought “and in Stuttgart, and I could go up to my sacristy and write my devotional hymns and ring the bells!”⁵⁵

Gradually, as he was caught up in the aesthetics and the liturgical actions emerging around him, his attention turned to two old priests who were participating in the novena. He was struck by the realization that it “was their duty ... to read of angels in a tiny book,” “the reading of words they had read a thousand times before, all about angels and the Lord and the Lamb and the Virgin Mother, over and over again till it really becomes interesting and mysterious.”⁵⁶ This impressed him because he intended to draw more heavily on this type of language, the same language he learned as a youth in Lowell. Then, as the priest who was leading the novena “sprayed incense from his ciborium,” Kerouac’s thoughts rose with the smoke, and his meditation led to insight. He found himself wishing “we could all ... spend all our time, like the old priests, scanning the words of God over and over again till they become our only concern, our only language, our only imagery, our only wish and our only life, eternal life.”⁵⁷ This was a clear indication of the vision he hoped to capture and impart in his books. He meant that

⁵³ Kerouac, *Jack Kerouac: Selected Letters, 1940-1956*, 286.

⁵⁴ Kerouac, *Jack Kerouac: Selected Letters, 1940-1956*, 287.

⁵⁵ Kerouac, *Jack Kerouac: Selected Letters, 1940-1956*, 287.

⁵⁶ Kerouac, *Jack Kerouac: Selected Letters, 1940-1956*, 288.

⁵⁷ Kerouac, *Jack Kerouac: Selected Letters, 1940-1956*, 292.

in order to fully illustrate and explicate his vision of the world he preferred and needed to draw on his Catholic devotionism, with all its signs, images, and symbols.

Conclusion

Admittedly, the image of Kerouac as a writer presented by this chapter is different from the commonly accepted image. However, I maintain the image presented here comes from Kerouac himself and an analysis of his journals, letters, and novels. It takes seriously his quest to be a religious writer, especially by acknowledging the self-made methodology that helped him write his soulworks.

Furthermore, competing images of Kerouac as a writer, such as the emphasis on his spontaneous method, need not be jettisoned. They do, however, need to be placed in their proper context. As this chapter maintains, the proper context for understanding Kerouac as a writer is within the Catholic devotional ethos, specifically the subculture of Lowell, Massachusetts. For within this context even Kerouac's own references about writing spontaneously – as on the Steve Allen show – begin to achieve a more cohesive and coherent balance. For instance, in an interview from 1968, Kerouac addressed the same question people always asked him throughout his life as a famous writer: “how do you write?” His response covered that aspect of his identity known as his spontaneous method, but it did so in the context of a Catholic devotional ethos. He responded,

As Saint Mathew says, Do not store up in your mind what you will say, for it is the Holy Ghost Who speaks through you. I don't write. The Holy Ghost writes through me ... I'm taking orders from heaven ... I was sent here to do something.⁵⁸

⁵⁸ Gregory McDonald, “Off the Road: The Celtic Twilight of Jack Kerouac,” in *Conversations with Jack Kerouac*, ed. Kevin J. Hayes (Jackson, Mississippi: The University Press of Mississippi, 2005), 87.

In the end, what mattered most was not how fast Kerouac could write a book, or the drugs he ingested while he wrote, but the world, or worlds, he evoked in his work, and the fact that he understood his role as a writer within the context of a religious vocation bolstered by the devotional ethos of his Catholic subculture.

CHAPTER 3

THE DEVOTIONAL WRITER ON THE ROAD

“I saw in the clouds huge and massed above the fiery golden desert of eveningfall the great image of God with forefinger pointed straight at me through halos and rolls and gold folds that were like the existence of the gleaming spear in His right hand, and sayeth, Go thou across the ground; go moan for man ... and of [this world] report you well and truly.”¹

The previous chapter began by presenting various images of Kerouac, all of which had an element of truth to them, and all of which help readers understand something of the man and his work. However, Kerouac as a religious writer within a Catholic ethos is the Kerouac that I tried to bring forth as the key to understanding his vision.

More than competing images, this chapter begins by presenting more than one Kerouac: there were two. One is called Jack and the other John. Ultimately, Jack Kerouac won out, but there was a moment when John Kerouac almost had his day and possibly would have stayed. The former Kerouac was the hitch-hiking hoboing writer ever in search of new experiences to live out and turn into novels; the latter was the personae behind the author's name as it appeared on the cover of his first published novel *The Town and the City*: John Kerouac. Jack Kerouac hitch-hiked and hoboed on the

¹ Jack Kerouac, *Visions of Cody*, 295.

railroad. John Kerouac gave special attention to the new cars in which he rode. Jack Kerouac apparently could care less about owning property like a house. John Kerouac desired a ranch out in Colorado. Jack Kerouac, apparently, could care less about having a wife. John Kerouac desired to turn his ranch into a homestead, with a wife and family.

Paying special attention to the John Kerouac inside Jack Kerouac, and illuminating that aspect of him, will help reflect light on the commonly accepted, incomplete version of Jack Kerouac that most readers think they know. The point is: the Jack Kerouac commonly associated with his personae Sal Paradise in his most famous book *On the Road* did not come out of nowhere in 1957. In fact, Jack Kerouac underwent a profound spiritual conversion and awakening during the time between his “on the road” years – 1947-1951 – as covered in the famous scroll draft version of *On the Road* and the version Viking Press published in 1957.

As I trace Kerouac’s trajectory from his ambitions of wealth, property, and fame to the days when he intentionally and more frequently lived on skid row – keeping in mind his “this world/other world” methodology, as presented in chapter 2 – the reader will begin to see how the farther away Kerouac moved from the stereotypical version of the American dream (which he was almost lured into) the better he focused and resonated with his own methodology. I will make this trajectory more apparent by analyzing what may be called his road visions, noting that one of the most revealing and important aspects of his road visions is to notice where Kerouac was in terms of his life and physical location when these visions occurred.

Finally, I will analyze the relationship between Kerouac’s vision and his critique of postwar America. There will be several aspects to notice in this analysis. First, I want

to emphasize that the bulk of his critique came simultaneously with and after his initial attraction to and pursuit of the American dream. Second, his critique of America has many correlations with the critique of himself as a writer and how he saw the new consumer culture as obscuring his vision. The result was a rich paradox that pulsed within his vision of America and his vision as a writer – a paradox between “the profound spiritual loss following the Second World War” and his own “ensuing quest for spiritual fulfillment.”²

“Always dreamed of going west”: Kerouac and the American Dream.³

In June 1947, “having finished a good half of [his first] novel,” Kerouac made his first trip west on the road.⁴ This trip took him from Ozone Park in the North Eastern United States, through the flatlands, and the great Illinois prairies, past the continental divide, into the rangelands, and finally to San Francisco. This grand trip, however, had humble beginnings. The sky cracked open shortly after he set out on the road, and the rain came pouring down. He was soaked from his head down to his open-weave huarache Mexican sandals – a special purchase for the trip. To make matters worse, he could not seem to hitch a ride anywhere. He finally bought a bus ticket for part of the way. After a series of lucky rides in semi-trucks, he caught a ride – now famous in Kerouac circles – with “two young blonde farmers from Minnesota.” He rode on the flatbed of their truck with other hoboes, wanderers, and possible criminals. This ride took him deep into the West – all the way to Cheyenne. Soon he would be in Denver

² Maher, *Jack Kerouac's American Journey*, xxii.

³ Kerouac, *On the Road: The Original Scroll*, 109.

⁴ Kerouac, *On the Road: The Original Scroll*, 114.

meeting up with his friends. After Denver, he pressed on to San Francisco in search of elusive jobs in California and found only unsatisfying employment.

Once his resources were depleted, and summer turned to autumn, he secured his passage home. He made his way back East by bus.

At dawn my bus was zooming across the Arizona desert ... In inky night we crossed New Mexico immersed; at gray dawn it was Dalhart Texas; in the bleak Sunday afternoon we rode through one Oklahoma flat-town after another; at nightfall it was Kansas. The bus roared on. I was going home in October. Everybody goes home in October.⁵

When he finally made it home, his “half-finished manuscript was on the desk. It was October, home, and work again.” He wrote, “the first cold winds rattled the windowpane and I had made it just in time.”⁶

For roughly the next year and a half, Kerouac stayed home working, completing his *The Town and the City* manuscript, and trying to find a publisher. Considering he began earnest work on this book in 1946, and then left it behind for a life on the road from June through October in 1947, he achieved success remarkably fast when the book was accepted by Harcourt, Brace in March of 1949 and released in March of 1950. The relatively swift success fueled an idealistic tendency already in Kerouac, and he dreamed of a particular life for himself as a writer.

Drawing on advances from Harcourt, Brace, he set out to turn one of his dreams into a reality. Since the early days of working on the *Town and the City*, he expressed in his journals his hope to make a living as a writer and if not as a writer then as a rancher in the West where writing would only “be a secondary struggle.”⁷ He hoped this would

⁵ Kerouac, *On the Road: The Original Scroll*, 207.

⁶ Kerouac, *On the Road: The Original Scroll*, 211.

⁷ Kerouac, *Windblown World*, 72.

allow him not only to make a living for himself but also to find a wife with whom he could raise a family.⁸

The further along he went in his writing the more he built up his dream. In the tapestry of this dream he wove in the specific details of a cattle ranch in the West with his entire family joining him. As he wrote in his journal, May 6, 1948,

I've been blinded on the subject of cattle raising in Colorado or Arizona ... I've got to create a home, I need a home, a *homestead*, a base, a place to marry and raise children, a place to work for myself, for a living, for the others. Writing should only be a secondary struggle.⁹

A month later he elaborated on his dream. He had returned from a visit with his sister Nin and brother-in-law Paul, for the birth of their first child. Reading his journal entry it becomes apparent that the family setting influenced the details of his dream for a ranch, a "homestead" as he called it.

Now I really *must* sell my book, make money. While down there Paul and I worked on his garage and around the place, and I got a foretaste of my ambition for a ranch with Paul, Nin, my mother ... myself and my own future family all together. A real homestead and stockade. I suddenly realized that Northern California, around Mendocino Forest, is the place for my big homestead – with San Francisco nearby a hundred miles or so. More on that later. But now I've work and responsibility and human plans ahead of me.¹⁰

In his journal entry from the next day, he continued an exploration of his dreams and ambitions but with a touch of sadness. He had returned to the Northeast alone to work on his manuscript, his mother stayed behind to help tend to her daughter Nin and the new baby. He wrote,

Arrived home alone, a little sad, but preoccupied with ambitions ... I must, I *must* be successful ... without money I cannot bring my human

⁸ Kerouac, *Windblown World*, 7.

⁹ Kerouac, *Windblown World*, 72.

¹⁰ Kerouac, *Windblown World*, 90.

beings all together around me on a homestead ... For a life of family and purpose – while still *inwardly mad* as a writer!¹¹

As the months wore on and the manuscript grew, his dreams of a ranch grew too. He “walked among the farmfields [sic] in back of the railroad track” in the afternoons, “in the warm September sun,” and dreamed about “how it would be if the land were mine and the crops my own.” “In due time,” he told himself, “at rosy dawns, I’ll be walking my own fields, in California or somewhere.”¹²

With the acceptance of his manuscript in the spring of 1949, Kerouac set out for his ranch in Westwood, Colorado only two months later. His family would join him once he established things. The work it took trying to establish his ranch filled Kerouac with anxiety amidst hope. As to the anxiety, he wrote “I still feel that way even though I know I’ll have *some* money all my life from writing, and will never starve or have to hole up in a canyon ... or wash dishes in the great-city slops.”¹³ When he was not working on establishing the ranch, in the evenings, he spurred his hopes and dreams reading dime-store Western novels and the New Testament.¹⁴ Sadly, the work it took to establish the ranch was filled with too much anxiety and too many problems amidst the hopes and dreams. As he wrote in his journal, on June 13, 1949 – the day his family arrived in Colorado, “leased small house on outskirts of W. Denver, where plains wash down from mountains. Beautiful summer is mine. Family arrived. Money troubles. And rainy mud; and dry well.”¹⁵

¹¹ Kerouac, *Windblown World*, 90.

¹² Kerouac, *Windblown World*, 128.

¹³ Kerouac, *Windblown World*, 192.

¹⁴ Kerouac, *Windblown World*, 199.

¹⁵ Kerouac, *Windblown World*, 200.

The troubles of establishing a ranch won the day. The reasons for the failure were numerous. For instance, Kerouac was running out of money as his family was arriving. The little money he had leftover he was supposed to use to plant the lawn around the house he leased. Also, there was too much rain, so the land around the house became too muddy. When his family did arrive his mother became stuck in the mud every time she tried to walk. To make matters worse, the well ran dry. Facing the financial crisis and burdens, his mother decided she had enough and returned to her job in New York. In Kerouac's estimation it "was one of the saddest days I've ever seen."¹⁶ His sister and brother-in-law, along with their child, departed shortly after their mother did. Alone in Colorado, with the failed dreams of his ranch, Kerouac knew he had to move too. As he pondered his next move and the reality of his failed dream, it caused him to suddenly think, "nothing in the world matters; not even success in America."¹⁷ In a sense, then, he became ambivalent about the dream he was pursuing, to say the least. He tried a modest, traditional approach to the American dream, and in the end it cost him his \$1,000 advance.¹⁸

Kerouac eventually made his way back to New York too, but it took him two weeks to complete the trip. He went further west first, to San Francisco, only to return to Denver before making his way back to New York. He summarized the flurry of activity in his journal.

AUGUST 1949 – 5,000 –miles on the road.

Closed up the house in Denver, went to Frisco in a '49 Ford for \$11, stayed three days, came back to Denver with Neal in a '48 Plymouth; stayed in Denver a few days; came on to Chicago in a '47 Cadillac

¹⁶ Kerouac, *Windblown World*, 202.

¹⁷ Kerouac, *Visions of Cody*, 292.

¹⁸ Kerouac, *On the Road: The Original Scroll*, 280-281.

limousine, dug Chicago one night with Neal; bus to Detroit; three days in Detroit trying to understand Edie; on to N.Y. with Neal in a '49 Chrysler at \$5 each.¹⁹

It was on the first leg of the trip, on the way to San Francisco, before the frenzied flurry of activity on the road, that Kerouac received one of the most important visions of his life. He was not hitch-hiking this time. Instead “he sat in the backseat of a travel bureau car, a 1949 Ford, with his head against the window watching the countryside.”²⁰ “All he had to do was sit and absorb the rise and fall of the arid western lands under the skies strewn with cumulus clouds.”²¹ It was at this point that Kerouac had what he later called his great “God-cloud” vision. It was to be one of his most important visions.

Kerouac’s Road Visions

He came to understand the “God-cloud” vision as some sort of divine commissioning for his vocation as a writer. However, what he saw in this vision was not immediately apparent to him. Indeed, it took him a couple years to properly write about it and to see the connection between the vision and his methodology as a writer.

Early on there were only vague references at best to the vision. In fact, he omitted any reference to the vision in the aforementioned summary of the trip. Elsewhere, in a separate journal titled “Rain and Rivers,” he merely made a passing reference to “the God-clouds at Utah border [sic].”²² In the original scroll of *On the Road*, 1951, Kerouac began to give some depth to his description of the vision but not nearly the depth he

¹⁹ Kerouac, *Windblown World*, 203.

²⁰ Maher, *Jack Kerouac’s American Journey*, 187.

²¹ Maher, *Jack Kerouac’s American Journey*, 188.

²² Kerouac, *Windblown World*, 349.

reached a year later in *Visions of Cody*. In any case, the last two examples are similar in that Kerouac attached biblical language to his descriptions.

He first reflected on the vision in light of Proverbs 11:4, in his *On the Road* scroll, and later, in *Visions of Cody*, he used imagery and language drawn from the book of Revelation. Proverbs 11:4 seems an appropriate interpretation of the “God-cloud” vision for Kerouac, because depending on the translation he had in mind, the vision told him “riches profit not in the day of wrath.”²³ That would have been an appropriate interpretation of the vision, because it told him to ignore the \$1,000 advance he lost, and it told him to ignore the crushed hopes and dreams of owning and running a ranch to support his writing and a family. That was never his vocation anyway. His writing still mattered, of course, but he needed to write from different perspective. His second articulation and interpretation of the God-cloud vision indicated his new perspective, a perspective he would be committed to on in a deeper, more spiritual, way. It is to that analysis that I now turn.

His second major attempt at interpreting and articulating the God-cloud vision drew from Revelation 1:7-19. Like Kerouac’s description in *Visions of Cody*, this passage begins with cloud imagery, locates the author geographically, emphasizes pronouns, and combines images of gold and flames, along with illuminated spears and sword of some sort, garments, and God’s hand. Finally, and most importantly, it has God

²³ While historically, Kerouac, like most Catholics, would have been more familiar with the Douay-Rheims translation of the Bible, Kerouac probably did not have that version in mind here, because the Douay-Rheims version uses “revenge” instead of “wrath.” Perhaps he had in mind the translation of his miniature Bible that he often took with him on the road. The same one he “stole from that Fourth Avenue bookstore in the used religious book section at the back because I thought the guy was a cheat in his bargainings with me over the exchange of new textbooks for used books.” See Kerouac, *Visions of Cody*, 95.

commissioning the subject to write what he sees. Here is an excerpt of the biblical passage,

⁷Behold, he cometh with the clouds, and every eye shall see him ... ¹⁰I was in the spirit on the Lord's day, and heard behind me a great voice, as of a trumpet, ¹¹Saying: What thou seest, write in a book, and send to the seven churches which are in Asia, to Ephesus, and to Smyrna, and to Pergamus, and to Thyatira, and to Sardis, and to Philadelphia, and to Laodicea. ¹²And I turned to see the voice that spoke with me. And being turned, I saw seven golden candlesticks: ¹³And in the midst of the seven golden candlesticks, one like to the Son of man, clothed with a garment down to the feet, and girt about the paps with a golden girdle. ¹⁴And his head and his hairs were white, as white wool, and as snow, and his eyes were as a flame of fire, ¹⁵And his feet like unto fine brass, as in a burning furnace. And his voice as the sound of many waters. ¹⁶And he had in his right hand seven stars. And from his mouth came out a sharp two edged sword: and his face was as the sun shineth in his power. ¹⁷And when I had seen him, I fell at his feet as dead. And he laid his right hand upon me, saying ... ¹⁹Write therefore the things which thou hast seen, and which are, and which must be done hereafter.²⁴

Kerouac interpreted his God-cloud vision in a similar manner, but with a variation that I will describe below. He wrote,

At the junction of the state line of Colorado, its arid western one, and the state line of poor Utah I saw in the clouds huge and massed above the fiery golden desert of eveningfall the great image of God with forefinger pointed straight at me through halos and rolls and gold folds that were like the existence of the gleaming spear in His right hand, and sayeth, Go thou across the ground; go moan for man; go moan, go groan, go groan alone go roll your bones, alone; go thou and be little beneath my sight ... go thou, die hence; and of [this world] report you well and truly.”²⁵

The insertion of “go thou across the ground” and “go moan for man,” is significant because it indicates a shift in Kerouac’s approach, another layer or depth to his “this world/other world” methodology. He understood this aspect of the vision meant

²⁴ Douay-Rheims translation of the Bible, Biblegateway.com, <http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Revelation+1&version=DRA>, (accessed November 10, 2011).

²⁵ Kerouac, *Visions of Cody*, 295.

he was to align himself with America's underground scene once again. This time would be different from his "low, evil decadence" days. This time he aligned himself with the underground because a vision of God told him that is where he was to situate himself. His ranch having failed, he was free to go to the places where men and women moaned, and groaned, alone, and from that perspective write about the relationship between "this world" and the "other world." In his mind, he had little choice, because he was divinely commissioned to report well and truly of this world, from the underground perspective, from the bottom up. In a sense, this vision led him to reinterpret his vocation as a writer.

Kerouac's interpretation of this God-cloud vision, and subsequent reinterpretation of his vocation as a writer, may have been due in part to the poor reception and sales of his first published novel, and the severe criticism by his editor of his other projects. *The Town and the City* was actually well received in some circles at first. He also had a taste of fame that "included being introduced as an 'author' at parties, accompanying his editor to social functions," and sitting in "opera balconies dressed as he would never dress again, formal, sharp, and clean."²⁶ Barely a month later, however, "sales had slowed to a trickle and the publisher had ceased advertising it as a new selection. This, he knew, would reduce the royalty check."²⁷ Nevertheless, though he was soon broke and penniless, he was all the more committed to his vocation as a writer regardless of whether or not he was financially successful.

Kerouac's failed attempt at the American dream incidentally created the circumstances wherein his writing better fulfilled his own methodology. As he was forced to abandon his attempt to write from the safety and security of his western ranch,

²⁶ Maher, *Jack Kerouac's American Journey*, 209.

²⁷ Maher, *Jack Kerouac's American Journey*, 210.

along with the failure of his first novel, and in light of his understanding of the God-cloud vision, he shifted his perspective from the status quo to skid row. He tried to write from this perspective before, but now, after his failure to “earn a steady income,” as he wrote in his journal, and failure to “really *help* anyone in the world, including really taking care of myself,” skid row looked increasingly like it could be his damned reality.²⁸ To write from this perspective, then, in a sense, was to write and report of this world as he knew it well and truly, because he had first-hand experience of it and because for a while he was forced to earn a living doing things like working hard for the railroad as a brakeman.

Kerouac thus combined two important aspects in his writing. First, he already held that devotionism provided insights for the reality of this life as it truly is, and, second, he also held that writing from the perspective from below offered him greater insights into life as it truly is too.

The divinely commissioned perspective to write from below directly influenced, and, I maintain, aided Kerouac’s vision as a writer. Let the reader know that I am only making an observation here with regards to Kerouac’s work. For while I am aware that what I am about to say may be misinterpreted as an example of romanticizing poverty, I maintain that Kerouac’s vision became purer and better revealed his methodology once he committed himself to an alignment with skid row. Before his divine commission to write from the perspective of skid row, Kerouac’s work failed to reflect his basic methodological concerns: to show the relationship between “this world” and the “other world.” After his commitment to skid row, however, his understanding of his writing, his visions, and the writing itself better revealed instances where “this world” was indeed

²⁸ Kerouac, *Windblown World*, 73.

connected to the “other world.” The material presented below will develop this point further.

It makes sense that Kerouac’s skid row vantage point allowed him to better illuminate the relationship between “this world” and the “other world.” It makes sense because the very phrasing of “this world” and the “other world” implies boundaries, but Kerouac was also trying to find places or instances where the boundaries between the two worlds were transgressed and where one could actually find contact between the two worlds. His living on skid row, then, embodied a fundamental implication in his methodology: transgressing boundaries. Most importantly, it makes sense that he would write most strikingly about the “other world” from this perspective because this is where he understood God to be most intensely present.²⁹

In this next section I will analyze important insights and visions Kerouac either wrote about in articles and novels, or spoke about in interviews. My analysis will focus mostly on where Kerouac was in terms of physical space when he had the vision or reached the insight, what his mental or emotional state was, and items that were present in those moments – things like a Bible, a statue, or a prayer card. Lastly, I will also address the implications of Kerouac’s visions and insights.

In analyzing Kerouac’s movement through skid row America, one of the most important points to observe at the outset is what he took with him on the road. One of the Boott Mill Museums in Lowell, Massachusetts, housed an exhibit featuring some of his road gear. It was an excellent exhibit, showcasing one of Kerouac’s typewriters, a backpack, goggle sunglasses, and eating utensils, among other items. Conspicuously

²⁹ For more on transgressing boundaries and theological implications, see Roberto Goizueta, *Caminemos con Jesus: Toward a Hispanic/Latino Theology of Accompaniment* (New York: Orbis Books, 2001), 203.

absent, however, at least from a theologian's point of view, were Kerouac's miniature bible and his St. Christopher medal. He usually packed a Bible in his "little tattered black bag," or rucksack, for his travels.³⁰ It is also known that he carried a St. Christopher medal with him – it was sewn into the flap of his rucksack.³¹ He also wore a set of rosary beads around his neck at times; they were blessed by Trappist monks.³² These items were not incidental.

Kerouac physically and mentally carried devotional items with him on the road, and their presence affected his vision as a writer. Recall that in chapter 1 I analyzed the use of devotional items and observed how their very presence in a setting altered the space around them. Their presence made the other world present in this world or at least blurred the boundaries for a moment.³³ Additionally, in chapter 2, I observed that Kerouac intended to make more use of the images, symbols, and language of the Catholic church in his work. Now, here in chapter 3, I aim to bring all of this to the forefront to observe how Kerouac's engagement with devotionism on the road embodied the intimate relationship between "this world" and the "other world." Moreover, his devotionism illuminated and embodied the contact between the two worlds, even as he walked through skid row – a point discussed below.

Kerouac practiced his devotionism no matter where he went or what he was doing, whether working, writing, or eating. For instance, in 1952, Jack Kerouac worked as a brakeman for the Southern Pacific Railroad in California. He lived a solitary life there, almost as he had back in 1944 during his "Self Ultimacy" period near Columbia,

³⁰ Kerouac, *Lonesome Traveler*, 69.

³¹ Jack Kerouac, *Big Sur* (New York: Bantam Books, 1963), 4.

³² Aronowitz, "St. Jack," 18.

³³ Goizueta, *Caminemos con Jesus*, 49, 69. See also chapters 3 and 4 in Orsi's *Between Heaven and Earth*.

but with significant differences. This time around he imagined himself living a sort of monastic existence, but in a different way.

He was living this monastic existence in San Francisco's skid row area on Third Street. He described the area as "the poor grime-bemarked Third Street of lost bums."³⁴ When he ate, it was usually in the company of these bums and under miserable conditions. In a piece known as *October in the Railroad Earth*, he described the scene of one skid row restaurant he frequented. The details give a sense of how Kerouac truly was trying to report the world from the bottom up.

Restaurants like the Public catering exclusively to bums of the black, winos with no money, who found 21 cents left over from wine panhandlings and so stumbled in for their third or fourth touch of food in a week, as sometimes they didnt eat at all and so you'd see them in the corner puking white liquid which was a couple quarts of rancid sauterne rotgut or sweet white sherry and they had nothing on their stomachs, most of them had one leg or were on crutches and had bandages around their feet, from nicotine and alcohol poisoning together, and one time finally on my way up Third near Market ... a bum a thin sickly littlebum [sic] like Anton Abraham lay face down on the pavement with crutch aside and some old remnant newspaper sticking out and it seemed to me he was dead ... And this was the clientele in the Public Hair restaurant where I ate many's the morn.³⁵

Even with the miserable surrounding conditions, or perhaps because of them, Kerouac perceived his living quarters as a monastic cell. He noted how placing the little Bible he always traveled with on the desk in his skid row room transformed the room into a "dim cell," as if he were living in a monastery.³⁶ He wrote, "so there I am in dawn in my dim cell ... I look at my littlebook [sic] – and I stare at the words of the Bible."³⁷ The

³⁴ Kerouac, *Lonesome Traveler*, 37.

³⁵ Kerouac, *Lonesome Traveler*, 41-42.

³⁶ Kerouac, *Lonesome Traveler*, 45.

³⁷ Kerouac, *Lonesome Traveler*, 45, 46.

sight of “the Bible on [his] desk” impressed him, and made him think of a nearby monastery.³⁸

He worked a 50 mile stretch between San Francisco, at Third and Townsend, and San Jose during this time. On this stretch, he could see a monastery from Lick, California. He wrote,

always I take my looks at favorite landmarks ... at Lick there is on a hill a kind of monastery ... there a field, cloisters, work, cloisterous prayers and every form known to man of sweet mediating going on ... The dreams of monastery men up there on the hill at Lick, and I think, “Ah creamy walls of either Rome, civilizations, or the last monasterial mediation with God
...³⁹

In other instances, he confessed again that he wanted a monastery-like existence in the world, to be in a place that mediated God. However, he had to work the railroad to make a living. In the meantime, the least he could do was focus on how the presence of his little Bible transformed his austere setting into a monastery-like “dim cell.”

While Kerouac did not report any visions from his time on San Francisco’s Third Street skid row, he nevertheless indicated the persistence of his devotionism and his dedication to the God-cloud vision. Back on the other end of the continent, however, visions would come when he stayed on skid row in Lowell, Massachusetts.

In October of 1954, Jack Kerouac revisited Lowell with hopes of being inspired for a new novel. During this time he stayed in a room on skid row near the railroad depot and began walking nearly 20 miles a day around his childhood city, the same city he so beautifully mythologized in works like *Dr. Sax*, but something was different. This time

³⁸ Kerouac, *Lonesome Traveler*, 47.

³⁹ Kerouac, *Lonesome Traveler*, 76-77.

through Lowell he felt strange and alienated, perhaps the fact that he kept emerging from skid row to study Lowell added to his estrangement.

In any case, at some point Kerouac decided to visit high school sweetheart Mary Carney – later called Maggie Cassidy in the novel by the same name. The two met again and watched television in her parent’s house while she told Jack about her new boyfriend. Later, he resolved to win her love again, and when he returned to the Carneys Mary was surrounded by family members on her porch. They were “all silently and rigidly united in their resolve to keep him out of the house.”⁴⁰ Not even invited to sit down, he retreated from the house and sank into a two day binge, “tortured by the realization that whatever was left between Mary and himself wasn’t worth a half-hour conversation.”⁴¹

It was in this context and state of mind that Kerouac went to one of his childhood churches, St. Jean d’Arc. He entered the church in a moment of despair and was about to leave Lowell with all the makings of a failed trip. However, “immersed in the light of the stained-glass windows and the odors of incense and candle flame,” “[the] holy silence in the church” overtook him, and as the candles flickered, he “knelt” and prayed before a statue of the Virgin Mary and he beheld a vision where Mary turned her head to him and blessed him.⁴²

So he had returned to Lowell and revisited two Marys he had always known. The difference was that while one Mary, along with her relatives, coldly rejected the strange Kerouac, the other Mary turned her head to look upon this Kerouac and blessed him,

⁴⁰ Nicosia, *Memory Babe*, 468.

⁴¹ Nicosia, *Memory Babe*, 468.

⁴² McNally, *Desolate Angel*, 189-190; Jack Kerouac, “The Origins of the Beat Generation,” in *Good Blonde & Others* (San Francisco: Grey Fox Press, 2001), 63; Aronowitz, “St.Jack,” 31; Brinkley, *Windblown World*, xxiv. See also Orsi’s “‘I Recognize Him When He Turns’: Women Imagining Jude,” in *Thank You, St. Jude*.

even in his beatness. Kerouac took this to mean that no matter how down and out or corrupt someone is, God, and all the angels and saints, could still bless you and recognize the human dignity and the shred of grace that remains in you.

On that fall day in Lowell, 1954, Kerouac had embodied and experienced the combined idea of being “beat” in the street sense – meaning “being poor and sleeping in subways” or on skid row – and the idea that being “beat” meant being blessed and thus living as such did not necessarily mean one was without God. He tried to clarify his understanding of *beat* in a 1959 interview,

Then I went to Lowell, Massachusetts, in 1954. Got a room in Skid Row near the depot. Walked twenty miles around Lowell every day. Went to my old church ... Knelt, all alone, all alone in the church, in the great silence of the church ... And I suddenly realized, beat means beatitude! Beatific! I was beatific in the church ... See?⁴³

A year previous he also expanded on his understanding of “beat,” in an article titled “Lamb, No Lion.” He explained his religious connotations, “Beat doesn’t meant tired, or bushed, so much as it means *beato*, the Italian for beatific: to be in a state of beatitude.”⁴⁴

About a year after he beheld the vision of Mary and obtained insight into what “beat” really meant, Kerouac found himself back in the West. He had more visions. This time the visions involved the very people who lived on skid row. One such vision occurred in “late September 1955,” while Kerouac was riding the very thing that created skid row – a railroad boxcar.⁴⁵ This boxcar was part of a freight train coming out of Los Angeles bound for Santa Barbara, and Kerouac was hoboing on it. “Somewhere near

⁴³ Aronowitz, “St. Jack,” 31.

⁴⁴ Jack Kerouac, “Lamb, No Lion,” in *Good Blonde & Others* (San Francisco: Grey Fox Press, 2001), 51.

⁴⁵ Jack Kerouac, *The Dharma Bums* (New York: Penguin Books, 1986), 3.

Camarillo,” “a thin old little bum climbed into [his] gondola.”⁴⁶ It was getting cold. So, when the train stopped again at a small railroad town, Kerouac “figured I needed a poorboy of Tokay wine to complete the cold dusk run to Santa Barbara.”⁴⁷ He hopped off the boxcar to get provisions for the rest of the journey. What he purchased was significant because of the imagery and the reality it drew forth.

I jumped over the side and ran across Highway 101 to the store, and bought, besides wine, a little bread ... I ran back to my freight train which had another fifteen minutes to wait in the now warm sunny scene. But it was late afternoon and bound to get cold soon. The little bum was sitting crosslegged [sic] at his end before a pitiful repast of one can of sardines. I took pity on him and went over and said “How about a little wine to warm you up? Maybe you’d like some bread ... with your sardines.”⁴⁸

Notice the Eucharistic imagery in Kerouac’s description of the scene. He and the bum broke bread together, and they were drinking wine together. This is almost the same as what Jesus did at the Last Supper. Kerouac, as any Catholic writer who was formerly an altar boy might do, intended to use the imagery in a Eucharistic way. This point is apparent because he used such imagery in his journals previously. He wrote, “I have broken break with thieves and sinners too, and also not for political reasons.”⁴⁹ To view Kerouac’s association, or, better yet, table fellowship, with this skid row bum, and his associations with skid row in general, as merely an instantiation of his nonconformity is to state the obvious and to miss the point. Kerouac was doing what he knew Jesus did,

⁴⁶ Kerouac, *Dharma Bums*, 3-4.

⁴⁷ Kerouac, *Dharma Bums*, 4.

⁴⁸ Kerouac, *Dharma Bums*, 4.

⁴⁹ Kerouac, *Windblown World*, 140.

based on the numerous times Kerouac read the Bible.⁵⁰ Furthermore, he was remaining faithful to the divine commission in the God-cloud vision.

Kerouac observed that the bum appeared to be “the kind of thin quiet little bum nobody pays much attention to even in Skid Row, let alone Main Street.”⁵¹ However, in breaking bread and drinking wine with the bum, Kerouac treated the man as something more than a thin little bum. Furthermore, Kerouac happily observed, the hobo was a devotee of St. Thérèse.

The little bum in the gondola solidified all my beliefs by whipping out a tiny slip of paper which contained a prayer by Saint Teresa announcing that after her death she will return to the earth by showering it with roses from heaven, forever, for all living creatures.⁵²

The little bum’s use of a St. Thérèse prayer card was important for Kerouac’s vision, because it “solidified” his beliefs about the possibility of contact with the “other world” from within “this world.” Furthermore, it supports my argument that Kerouac recognized, at least on an intuitive level, that devotional items help to facilitate that contact. For after they parted ways, Kerouac had a vision of the bum and St. Thérèse side by side in heaven, showering the world with roses together. As he described the scene in *Dharma Bums*, he made a fire in the night and cooked his can of beans and hotdogs over it. Then he drank his hobo wine, and looking at the stars saw the “umpteenth trillion ... unnumberable number of roses that sweet Saint Teresa and that fine little old man” were “showering on [his] head.”⁵³

⁵⁰ For more on Jesus transgressing boundaries through engaging in things like table-fellowship with the poor and also with sinners, see Goizueta, *Caminemos con Jesus*, 203.

⁵¹ Kerouac, *Dharma Bums*, 5-6.

⁵² Kerouac, *Dharma Bums*, 5.

⁵³ Kerouac, *Dharma Bums*, 8.

Given what Kerouac would have learned about St. Thérèse within the Catholic ethos of Lowell, Massachusetts, it is entirely fitting that he would receive a vision of the little bum and St. Thérèse showering the world with roses together. He would have learned about St. Thérèse's life from his mother, about how she suffered and died of a "consumptive affliction of the lungs," but also how she promised to spend her time in heaven showering the world with roses.⁵⁴ He would have also learned to identify St. Thérèse with the suffering plight of his own French Canadian people, and subsequently with anyone who lives in suffering circumstances. A great danger in the textile mill-towns like Lowell, after all, was to have floating particles from factory work afflict your lungs – a "condition all northern factory workers dreaded."⁵⁵ Thus, in their worst circumstances, they could identify with St. Thérèse, and more importantly, they could be certain St. Thérèse could identify with them. Kerouac, himself a devotee of St. Thérèse's "little way," also recognized that ordinary gestures of kindness were important for manifesting the reality of heaven.

No doubt the practice of table fellowship with the Eucharistic elements and imagery assisted Kerouac's vision, but there was more. The bum's use of the St. Thérèse prayer card also altered the railroad boxcar, and, later, Kerouac's campsite along the railroad tracks. It helped Kerouac see the vision – a vision that his early days in Lowell prepared him to see.

The point, for Kerouac, was that the "other world" was connected to "this world," including places like skid row, and devotionism helped him see it. He reemphasized this point drawing on St. Thérèse again in *Desolation Angels*. This time, in Kerouac's

⁵⁴ Clark, *Jack Kerouac*, 8.

⁵⁵ Clark, *Jack Kerouac*, 8.

vision, she showered social deviants with roses as well. Kerouac was resting in a transient room after running around San Francisco, during the great poetry renaissance, when the vision came to him.

In my room invisible eternal golden flowers drop on my head as I sleep, they drop everywhere, they are Ste. Terese's roses showering and pouring everywhere on the heads of the world – Even the shufflers and madcaps, even the snarling winos in alleys ... even on the least her roses shower, perpetually.⁵⁶

This vision reinforced the lesson, almost for didactic effect, that the “other world” was in contact with everything and everyone, even in the most marginalized circumstances.

This aspect of Kerouac's work was misunderstood even by his eccentric poet friends. In *Desolation Angels*, one such friend shouted, ““You! Duluo! I see you your ideas goin down Skid Row drink with the bums, agh, I've never even thought of doing such a thing, *why bring misery on yourself?*””⁵⁷ Nevertheless, Kerouac walked those streets, lived there, wrote there, and drew the attention of his readers there because that is where he was commissioned to find an intersection between “this world” and the “other world,” and that is, indeed, where he experienced contact with the “other world.”

He had other visions during these road years, but those were largely in Mexico, and I will address those in the last chapter. For now, I want to add that when Kerouac was asked what he was searching for during these road years, he simply replied, “I was waiting for God to show his face.”⁵⁸ He spent years sorting out a methodology to accomplish this – as described in chapter 2, but his vision was obscured by his own ambitions. The God-cloud vision at the border of Colorado and Utah purged him of this.

⁵⁶ Jack Kerouac, *Desolation Angels* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1995), 144.

⁵⁷ Kerouac, *Desolation Angels*, 188.

⁵⁸ Kerouac, “Lamb, No Lion,” 51.

Then, he soon realized if ambition obscured his own vision it could obscure the vision of others. So, he turned his internal critique outward to postwar America for fear that others would miss seeing the connection between “this world” and the “other world.”

Kerouac’s Disenchantment with America⁵⁹

All of this material is presented with an aim toward bringing Kerouac’s methodology and vision to the foreground. The material that follows presents an examination – according to Kerouac – of what was happening in the background in postwar America. Furthermore, it seeks to address how what was happening in the background affected Kerouac’s methodology and vision and ultimately led him to explore Mexico.

In reading Kerouac’s work, it appears that there were at least two main problems with postwar America. First, Kerouac critiqued the suburbanization of America. He sensed that the move toward suburbanization also entailed the dissolution of old communities. Second, he critiqued the new consumer culture that occurred amidst the economic boom of America’s postwar years. He sensed that the increasing hegemony of consumer culture turned life itself, and the way people lived life, into a commodity or product to be bought and sold.

⁵⁹ In *The Catholic Counterculture in America, 1933-1962*, historian James T. Fisher offers two insights relevant for thinking about Kerouac’s critique of America. The comments I want to focus on here are from Fisher’s analyses of Tom Dooley and the Marycrest group that was an offshoot from Dorothy Day’s vision, instead of his chapter on Kerouac. Nevertheless, they shed light on Kerouac’s criticisms. Fisher notes, “critiques of American materialism during the late 1950s were, of course, neither uncommon nor necessarily controversial.” Furthermore, many Catholics who were caught up in these critiques of American materialism or the “bourgeois spirit,” “had never *known* a bourgeois existence” in the first place. The latter point was partially true about Kerouac; he did have a taste of what a bourgeois existence would be like as a published author from 1949 – 1950. See Fisher, *The Catholic Counterculture in America*, 178, 122.

Reading Kerouac's primary sources together, one sees that he was creating a narrative wherein all of America was moving from a vast experience of communities toward a lifestyle that led to alienation and commodification. In Kerouac's narrative, America was disappearing into the suburbs; America was moving from communities like wagon parties and shared tenement housing to individualized prefabricated houses. As he saw in his first travels west,

we arrived at Council Bluffs at dawn; I looked out; all winter I'd been reading of the great wagon parties that held council there before hitting the Oregon and Santa Fe trails; and of course now it was only cute suburban cottages of one damn dumb kind and another, all laid out in the dismal gray dawn.⁶⁰

Kerouac experienced this sense of loss himself in the particular case of Lowell, Massachusetts. The America he had in mind was the America he learned about and knew in Lowell. In Lowell, there was as an inherent community if only because people upon people shared tenement houses. This was a part of his parents' experience and his own experience. What Kerouac actually wanted was the America about which his father preached. As he wrote in *The Town and the City*, Kerouac wanted an America where "everybody had to pitch in together to put up a cabin or build a saloon or haul a wagon across a river." He had the character of his father shout in the same book, preaching in "a political rage," about "when America was America, when people pulled together and made no bones about it."⁶¹ Such an America was the true America in Kerouac's vision.

In *Maggie Cassidy* he observed that Lowell, like the rest of America, disappeared or was disappearing and being overrun amidst suburbanization. It was 1953 when he

⁶⁰ Kerouac, *On the Road: The Original Scroll*, 122.

⁶¹ Jack Kerouac, *The Town and the City* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, Harvest Edition, 1983), 68.

wrote *Maggie Cassidy*, recalling his high school years in Lowell in the novel. In a prophetic tone he alluded to the fate that would overtake Lowell:

looking under the big trees out at Lowell over the field across Riverside Street – over its waving weeds we could see two miles away rooftops of Christian Hill shining red in the sun, the Kingdom was more beautiful than ever ... rooftops up and down little Pawtucketville were creaming into rose for me – I was the beloved youth – blade of grass in my mouth, lying in the slope after supper, seeing – letting the winds of evenin [sic] ripple hugely in the trees above, at home, *patria*, land of birth. No idea someday our Kingdom would be overrun by vaster Kingdoms invisible like superhighways through the dump.⁶²

Kerouac's word choice in this passage illuminated his understanding what he thought about the importance of communities like Lowell with regards to the postwar America. Kerouac's Lowell was not merely a place for him, it was much more. Lowell was "home" to him, and there was a sense of patrimony – a birthright to have a place, even in this new America – as this was his "land of birth." In other words, Lowell was a distinct place with an identity, and part of his identity came from that distinct place – his "kingdom." Yet the kingdom of Lowell was overrun by "vaster Kingdoms" like postwar America's economic boom and the infrastructure that sought to move people away from places like Lowell and out to the suburbs. Lowell, in a sense, then, was treated like a garbage "dump," sidestepped, and left behind in the new America.

The question of suburbanization and civic engineering was no secular matter for Kerouac. It was a matter of spiritual concern for him, as his word choice once again indicated. Thinking about suburbanization and the new America, in *Visions of Cody*, he referred to the dissolution of old communities as a "sin." He wrote,

The sins of America are precisely that the streets ... are empty where their houses are, there's no sense of neighborhood anymore, a neighborhood

⁶² Kerouac, *Maggie Cassidy*, 160.

quarter or a neighborhood freeforall fight between two streets of young husbands is no longer possible except I think in Dagwood Bumstead and he ain't for real, he couldn't – beyond this old honesty there can only be thieves.⁶³

The greater sin of the new America, Kerouac might have said, was that people were becoming increasingly alienated and marginalized, as areas with skid rows were bypassed and overrun. In this new America, Kerouac would have never even seen the little “St. Teresa bum,” let alone shared a meal with him.

When Kerouac returned to New York, after his first trip west, he suddenly found himself in Times Square. He was struck by what he considered the superficiality of its commerce. In the scroll for *On the Road*, he wrote,

I had traveled eight thousand miles around the American continent and I was back on Times Square; and right in the middle of rush hour too, making me see with my innocent road eyes the absolute madness and fantastic hoorair of New York with its millions and millions hustling forever for a buck among themselves ... grabbing, taking, sighing, dying ... the place where Paper America is born.⁶⁴

By referring to Times Square as “the place where Paper America is born,” he meant that there was something false and manufactured about it, just as he would later describe Hollywood as a place of huge flood lights that used those lights to present a false reality.

Times Square was the place where the commodities were invented and sold, and Hollywood was the place where the illusion was presented through our television sets as reality. According to Kerouac, these were the two sources at the base of our increasingly commodified existence. In a journal entry from 1948, he specifically blamed these two sources, generalized as part of the “great ‘Upper White Collar’ class,” for starting this

⁶³ Kerouac, *Visions of Cody*, 261.

⁶⁴ Kerouac, *On the Road: The Original Scroll*, 211.

process.⁶⁵ As he wrote, “it is they” – the movie makers, publishers, critics, editors, and other members of the culture industry – “who are the enemy of the people of this country. It is they who build New Yorks and Hollywoods, and flood our radios with inanity, and our papers and magazines with sterilized ideas.”⁶⁶ It was they who produced the movies and “countless cheap goods that are used up as fast as they’re produced.”⁶⁷ And it was they who reduced experiences of life in America “down to the shallow formulas of this age.”⁶⁸

He continued his critique of the commodifying forces in America in *The Dharma Bums*, *Desolation Angels*, and *Big Sur*. He particularly honed in on the commodifying and standardizing effects of the suburban lifestyle, due in no small part, he thought, to the birth of television sets. He characterized this lifestyle as “the middleclass non-identity,” and declared it found “its perfect expression ... in rows of well-to-do houses with lawns and television sets in each living room.”⁶⁹ In Kerouac’s vision, despite the fact that people freely moved to the suburbs, suburban existence here was an oppressive situation. It was oppressive in that people’s minds and visions were standardized as they sat before their “television sets in each living room with everybody looking at the same thing and thinking the same thing at the same time.”⁷⁰ The standardized prefabricated houses contributed to the narrowing of America’s vision as well, as, according to Kerouac, all those neat lawns became “prison lawns.”⁷¹

⁶⁵ Kerouac, *Windblown World*, 130.

⁶⁶ Kerouac, *Windblown World*, 130.

⁶⁷ Kerouac, *Windblown World*, 130.

⁶⁸ Kerouac, *Windblown World*, 130.

⁶⁹ Kerouac, *Dharma Bums*, 39.

⁷⁰ Kerouac, *Dharma Bums*, 39.

⁷¹ Kerouac, *Desolation Angels*, 95.

When Americans did break free, they nevertheless continued to move within commodified experiences. As Kerouac observed in *Big Sur*, suburban Americans only set forth on road trips with a “previously printed blue-lined roadmap distributed by happy executives in neckties to the vacationists of America who would also wear neckties.”⁷² Furthermore, he conjectured that Americans were further cut off from other people and creation because their experiences with automobiles reduced their world to parking lots and themselves. He wondered if people lost sight of the larger existential questions, or the more noble preoccupations such as experiencing table fellowship with a hobo or taking long walks. He pondered whether people lost sight of such pursuits or lacked such insights now “because they’re used to walking across parking-lots only?”⁷³ He concluded, ““the automobile filled them with such vanity” – “because everybody drives a car and goes with a stupid erect head guiding the idiot machine.”⁷⁴ Thus, they fail to notice others, and, equally disturbing, neglect experiences or contact with the “other world.”

One could critique Kerouac’s criticisms – like those of suburbanization, consumerization, and commodification – as too abstract or theoretical, but he thought he could support his analysis based on firsthand experiences. For instance, he encountered the direct effects of the new America during what supposedly became his last hitchhiking experience ever. He described it in *Big Sur*.

The first time I’ve hitch hiked in years and I soon begin to see that things have changed in America, you cant get a ride any more ... sleek long

⁷² Kerouac, *Big Sur*, 37.

⁷³ Kerouac, *Vanity*, 2.

⁷⁴ Kerouac, *Vanity*, 2.

stationwagon after wagon comes sleering by smoothly, all colors of the rainbow and pastel at that, pink, blue, white.⁷⁵

He added “there’s no room anymore anyway for a hitch hiker,” because “ten thousand racks of drycleaned and perfectly pressed suits and dresses of all sizes for the family” occupied the rest of the space.⁷⁶

He foresaw that this was the direction America was heading. He concluded that few people genuinely cared about the loss of community as he did, and that fewer cared about experiencing life outside their living rooms, and even if people did care the new America of consumerism would obscure it. Until his vision of contact between this world and the other world could be appreciated, and the implications of such a vision for America recognized, Kerouac could only write, as he did in *Visions of Cody*, “nobody cares but the heart in the middle of US that will reappear when the salesmen all die. America’s a lonely crockashit.”⁷⁷

Conclusion

As chapters 1 and 2 demonstrated, the Catholic subculture of Lowell, Massachusetts formed and influenced Jack Kerouac in his youth and early adulthood. It shaped his vision of the world and the way he configured the relationship between this world and the other world. In this chapter, chapter 3, I maintained that Kerouac’s Catholic formation, especially in devotionism, continued to shape his vision as a writer as he traveled on the road, and especially as he traveled through skid row. One major obstacle to Kerouac’s work, however, was that amidst America’s postwar economic

⁷⁵ Kerouac, *Big Sur*, 37.

⁷⁶ Kerouac, *Big Sur*, 37.

⁷⁷ Kerouac, *Visions of Cody*, 91.

boom, Kerouac came to see America as less and less of a source or background for his religious vision. Therefore, he found himself looking elsewhere for a land and people that resonated with his vision. He found that place in Mexico.

CHAPTER 4

THE FACE OF GOD AT THE END OF THE ROAD: MEXICO, DEVOTIONALISM,
AND THE SACRAMENTALITY OF JACK KEROUAC

“I’m glad now I took Ma on this trip to see the real church of America ...
Now she understood Mexico and why I had come there so often even tho
I’d get sick of dysentery or lose weight or get pale.”¹

“From the Golden Eternal Heaven bends God blessing us with his face ...
I’ve seen it, in a vision.”²

Toward the end of Book I of *On the Road*, Jack Kerouac described the return trip from his first journey across the continent (1947). It was on this leg of the journey that he “was destined to meet and love a wonderful woman and go through the craziest adventure of all before I got back home.”³ This woman’s name was Bea Franco, called Terry in the published version of *On the Road*, and she was a Mexican woman with, what he called, “my kind of girlsoul.”⁴ They were both on a bus bound for Los Angeles and quickly fell into a romantic relationship.

After remaining together for about two weeks, and vaguely entertaining the idea of finding work in the Hollywood scene, they resigned themselves to migrant work.

¹ Kerouac, *Desolation Angels*, 383, 384.

² Jack Kerouac, *Tristessa* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1978), 74.

³ Kerouac, *On the Road: The Original Scroll*, 182.

⁴ Kerouac, *On the Road: The Original Scroll*, 184.

During this time, Kerouac was accepted into the community of workers, especially by Bea's family members and relatives. They "were going to take a bus to Bakersfield and work picking grapes," as he wrote in *On the Road*, and they would "live in tents on the job."⁵ The plan seemed direct enough, however, finding work proved harder than they anticipated. When they failed to come across work, Kerouac asked one of her relatives, "where do we go now man?"⁶ One of the men in their group proposed "'we go find a farmer with some manure laying around – tomorrow we drive back in the truck and pick it up.'" The man added, "Man we'll make a lot of money. Don't worry about nothing.' 'We're all in this together!'" This last comment impressed Kerouac, as he wrote, "I saw that was so – everywhere I went everybody was in it together."⁷

The manure plan failed, but the group eventually found work picking grapes. During this time, Kerouac moved from simply being accepted by the group to actually identifying with the group. He went so far as to refer to himself as a Mexican. Perhaps Kerouac identified with the group simply because he was working side by side with the people, while working intimately with the earth picking grapes, as if the very ground they worked on connected them. He suggested as much in *On the Road*, when he described how, in his mind, he had become "a man of the earth precisely as I had dreamed I would be in Ozone Park."⁸

He further identified with the group after one of their own was beaten by some locals. He described these dynamics in *On the Road*,

⁵ Kerouac, *On the Road: The Original Scroll*, 190.

⁶ Kerouac, *On the Road: The Original Scroll*, 193.

⁷ Kerouac, *On the Road: The Original Scroll*, 193.

⁸ Kerouac, *On the Road: The Original Scroll*, 198.

One night the Okies went mad in the roadhouse and tied a man to a tree and beat him to a pulp with sticks. I was asleep at the time and only heard about it. From then on I carried a big stick with me in the tent in case they got the idea we Mexicans were fouling up their trailer camp. They thought I was a Mexican, of course; and I am.⁹

Criticizing Kerouac's cultural naivety here would be missing the point; it is more important, within the scope of this dissertation, to observe how Kerouac was beginning to identify with a Mexican community.

Roughly two and half years later, Jack Kerouac traveled to Mexico for the first time. A lot had happened for Kerouac between the time of his first journey across the U.S. and the night before his first venture south of the Rio Grande. For instance, shortly after his time with the migrant workers in California, he returned to New York and his half-finished manuscript of *The Town and the City*. He completed the novel by 1948, found a publisher the following year, and the book was published in 1950. It was during this time, as chapter 3 described, that Kerouac attempted a modest form of achieving the American dream. He hoped to start a homestead in Colorado and to raise a family there. He hoped earnings from his first published novel, and ideally subsequently published novels, would make this possible. He also experienced what it might be like to be a famous published author attending high society functions with his editor. As chapter 3 also described, Kerouac's dream failed, and his book did not sell well.

So Kerouac was filled with great anxiety as he prepared for a trip back to Colorado that would then take him south to Mexico. He was filled with anxiety even as "the morning of [his] new departure to the West and to Mexico City" was upon him.¹⁰ He was distraught because he felt as though "nothing happened" even though "a great

⁹ Kerouac, *On the Road: The Original Scroll*, 198.

¹⁰ Kerouac, *Windblown World*, 257.

many things happened,” like “money, and women, and travel ... and friends, events, shows, meals, dreams, about 75,000 words of miscellaneous writing, and so forth.”¹¹

Yet, it all came to nothing in the end.

The night before his departure was also angst ridden and filled with existential questioning as his mother helped him prepare for the trip. He described the setting and the feel in his journal.

Last night was sad & rainy. My mother ironed my clothes; we had a snack, talked; occasionally looked at each other with a furtive sadness. Perhaps I'm writing all this to warn all travelers – the night before the journey is like the night before death. This was how I felt. Where am I really going, and what for? Why must I always travel from here to there, as if it mattered where one is?¹²

Thus, the writer who later became famous for *On the Road* was not even sure why he was going back on the road or whether he should go at all.

However, it is not as if Kerouac went on this trip in complete existential angst, without any reference points to help him, or to give his trip purpose. Two weeks before his journey began he had a vision of his deceased brother Gerard. It was an instructive vision, and Kerouac vowed “I’m taking this brother with me on this trip to Mexico and see what happens.”¹³ The vision was meaningful in that it instructed Kerouac to maintain his French Canadian Catholic heritage by telling him “to go to church” and not “defrench” himself. Gerard also said Jack “should go to Lowell, or Canada, or France, and become a Frenchman again.”¹⁴

¹¹ Kerouac, *Windblown World*, 257.

¹² Kerouac, *Windblown World*, 257.

¹³ Kerouac, *Windblown World*, 259.

¹⁴ Kerouac, *Windblown World*, 248-259.

Perhaps in Jack Kerouac's vision Gerard had Jack's first novel in mind when he used the term "defrench." After all, there are parts of *The Town and the City* where Kerouac made it seem as if his French Canadian Catholic background was incidental. In describing the Martins – the main family in the story and a composite and reflection of the Kerouacs, he depicted the Catholic practices and commitment to the church in stereotypical American voluntaristic overtones. He wrote,

There was no official religion in the family, but the mother had always taught the legend of the Catholic religion to those of her children who seemed most interested. As a result, on church holidays such as Easter or Christmas, some of the kids went to church with her, or else did not, all according to whimsical family trends. In this manner some of the young Martins grew up under the influence of formal religion, while the less susceptible ones had practically nothing to do with it. It was a unique situation – especially since the death of little Julian Martin when the grieved and remorse-stricken mother had felt it her mourning duty to acquaint her more devout children closer to the church and its meanings. No family tension was created by this, since the children saw religion as a kind of activity, like school, instead of as a divine ordaining, and they never made comparisons.¹⁵

Yet, as the vision of Gerard pointed out, this was not the heritage of the French Canadian Catholicism they received. Rather, as chapter 1 illustrated, Catholicism was something that was much more engrained in them in almost every aspect of their lives.

Kerouac was clearly impressed by such a vision, as he wrote in his journal, "[Gerard's] words strike home and heavy."¹⁶ He hoped the lesson in the vision signaled "an eventual comedown to the roots of my true self."¹⁷ While it would be years before he returned to his roots in Lowell or traveled to France, as his brother instructed, he did head south to a Catholic land, Mexico. There he realized new insights into his vision as a

¹⁵ Kerouac, *The Town and the City*, 24.

¹⁶ Kerouac, *Windblown World*, 258.

¹⁷ Kerouac, *Windblown World*, 259.

religious writer. As the remainder of the chapter will demonstrate, they were insights that are best understood within the context of the French Canadian Catholic devotional ethos that formed him.

Once the journey was underway, and Kerouac finally moved farther south toward Mexico, he grew more excited and optimistic, as if he was on the trail of something that had evaded him for years and now he would soon glimpse it. “I looked over the map,” he wrote, “a total of nineteen hundred miles mostly Texas to Laredo, and then another 767 miles through all Mexico to the great city near the Isthmus. I couldn’t imagine this trip. It was the most fabulous of all. It was no longer east-west but magic SOUTH.”¹⁸ As he finally pulled through the massive state of Texas, and then the end of Texas, and the end of America, he described in poetic form the sense that he was about to cross a threshold. He wrote, “there was no night dew, not a breath of air, nothing, except billions of moths smashing at bulbs everywhere and the low rank smell of a hot river in the night nearby --- the Rio Grande.”¹⁹

The following material analyzes Kerouac’s insights once he crossed the threshold into Mexico. The material especially focuses on the way Mexican Catholic devotionalism embodied what Kerouac was searching for in his vision as a writer. Devotionalism, after all, best embodied the contact between “this world” and the “other world” for Kerouac, even in the most destitute of places. Also, although Kerouac was immediately struck by Mexico’s Catholic ethos, it is important to recognize that he may not have immediately grasped the depths of Mexico’s devotionalism and its implications

¹⁸ Kerouac, *On the Road: The Original Scroll*, 366.

¹⁹ Kerouac, *On the Road: The Original Scroll*, 375.

for his vision until he spent more time there. Nevertheless, it is clear that upon entering the land he was immediately struck by its Catholic aesthetics.

I will present Kerouac's reactions to and insights from Mexican and especially Mexican Catholic devotionism in three layers. First, the chapter addresses the biblical and devotional surface of Mexico, according to Kerouac. Second, the chapter addresses the complexity of Mexican Catholic devotionism in practice. Finally, third, the chapter seeks to uncover the implications of Mexican Catholic devotionism for Kerouac's vision.

The Biblical and Devotional Surface of Mexico

When Kerouac entered Mexico, the aesthetics rang out to him like church bells. It was a visually Catholic land, and his experience in the formative Catholic subculture of Lowell, Massachusetts prepared him to receive everything Mexican Catholicism had to offer.

He described Mexico as if he were entering a sacred land, or a sacred scene – almost as if he stepped into a Mexican Catholic nativity set or a crèche. For instance, in his mind's eye, Mexico was not just another country; it was the Garden of Eden.

“Mexico drove me mad,” he wrote, “we were innocent ... I had never known God's original Eden jungle could be so soft and sweet.”²⁰ He imagined himself moving “across the holy biblical plains by the first starlight the wise men made,” but it was Mexico.²¹ Nevertheless, as Kerouac also described it, Mexico was the “earth of the young Jesus.”²²

²⁰ Kerouac, *Visions of Cody*, 379.

²¹ Kerouac, *Visions of Cody*, 389.

²² Kerouac, *Visions of Cody*, 381.

Sensing the land as a sacred place made him see the Mexican men and women as if they were also stepping out of the Bible. As he wrote in *Visions of Cody*, “Hey Cody look at all the shepherds of the Bible in the sun of antiquity.”²³ Wearing ponchos and serapes, the men were “biblical patriarchs,” “Jeremiactal hobos,” or “shepherds by trade” blessing their herds – all of them prophets of some sort with something to teach him, walking across the “wild Judean earth.”²⁴

The Mexican girls and women also captured his attention in a sacramental way. He described them as “women with lowered Virgin Mary faces,” and observed how “their great brown innocent eyes looked into ours with such soulful intensity,” adding “that not one of us had the slightest sexual thought about them,” because “they were like the eyes of the Virgin Mother must have been when she was a child.”²⁵ Kerouac became convinced that they were not only looking upon biblical shepherds or Mary, but also upon “the tender and forgiving gaze of Jesus.”²⁶ The cumulative effect led him to declare that he could “see the hand of God” in this land.”²⁷ In sum, the rich Catholic aesthetics of Mexico permeated Kerouac’s mind, blended with his inherent French Canadian Catholic aesthetic sensibilities, bolstered his sense of the sacred, and positively affected his vision.

Inspired by Mexico, viewing the land and the people as a real-life biblical setting, he turned to the New Testament yet again and read it anew in Mexico. He had a “little tiny hand-sized Bible” that he packed for the trip, and “the big occasion” for reading it

²³ Kerouac, *Visions of Cody*, 381.

²⁴ Kerouac, *Visions of Cody*, 380.

²⁵ Kerouac, *Visions of Cody*, 381; Kerouac, *On the Road: The Original Scroll*, 397.

²⁶ Kerouac, *On the Road: The Original Scroll*, 397.

²⁷ Kerouac, *Visions of Cody*, 380.

“was in Mexico City.”²⁸ He described the setting and the impact reading the Bible there had on him.

In the incredibly warm glow of my lovely checker-cloth beside the soft goof lovely bed, well fed with midnight cheeseburgers from the Insurgentes lunchroom ... sitting on the edge of the bed for a moment before the sleeps that in Mexico City ... were never equaled in sheer sweetness and LOVE ... I happened to pick up this midget New Testament Bible and in my huge-hearted state of high love I saw the great words ... and was so amazed with almost every sentence or that is line I saw that I felt *attacked* by words, overtaken by great blows of consciousness I should have absorbed a long time ago, realizations of Jesus I'd never dared before, Jesus as a prophet and his political necessities and positions as a prophet, including charmed and awed interpenetrations of the mystery of the Bible²⁹

In Kerouac's mind, the Bible came alive and gave him new insights as he read it in Mexico.

He was living in California in 1952, when he wrote the aforementioned description of reading the Bible in Mexico. It had been two years since that first trip to Mexico, and his second trip would occur shortly. Looking forward to reading the Bible there again, he wrote, “I'll look at my little hand Bible ... and a newer further diving into the awfulness and beauty of the Great Bible will happen to me.”³⁰ Looking at his little Bible again, he optimistically vowed, “I'm taking that with me.”³¹

Part of Kerouac's positive reaction to Mexico was also due to the abundance of churches in the land, a presence that inspired him. He mused that one could actually read the progress of the history of the church in the sacred land, as he first passed monasteries,

²⁸ Kerouac, *Visions of Cody*, 95.

²⁹ Kerouac, *Visions of Cody*, 96.

³⁰ Kerouac, *Visions of Cody*, 96.

³¹ Kerouac, *Visions of Cody*, 96.

then chapels and then cathedrals. In a sense, for Kerouac, everything about Mexico was visually Catholic and edifying for the faith of the people. As he wrote,

We rose for the plateau [sic] whereon Mexico City sits; it was gradual, those Biblical levels in between, those sweet lands terminated, just a step up, by monasteries, like the progress of the history of the church, and the town and the city, till we reach the San Juan Letran chapels and cathedrals of the great city night.”³²

Furthermore, while the streets of America, outside of Lowell, seemed to be filled with suburban cottages, Kerouac saw Mexico as a land filled with churches, the presence of which affected his perception of Mexico. Describing the visual effect of the land south of the Rio Grande, he wrote, “you can see to the end of the streets ... it’s all pale blue churches,” and beyond that it’s all “distant church tops.”³³ He especially noted his impressions of devotional imagery in church architecture up close. The “front of the church[es]” had “images of angels in rain dimmed stone.”³⁴ Describing the aural effect, he wrote of “Orizaba plaza and the churchbells [sic] thronging in the air like flowers.”³⁵ This was a description of his time in Mexico City during the years 1952 and 1953. He lived on Orizaba Street during those years, and the church bells ringing were not an occasional sound. It seems he could always hear “church bells down Orizaba lane,” and it was a sound which signaled for Kerouac “people are going to church.”³⁶ Describing the interior of the churches in Mexico, he emphasized the edifying effect of additional devotional imagery. Inside one could find “portions of the ceiling where some Spanish

³² Kerouac, *Visions of Cody*, 381.

³³ Kerouac, *Tristessa*, 76-77.

³⁴ Kerouac, *Lonesome Traveler*, 36.

³⁵ Kerouac, *Desolation Angels*, 67.

³⁶ Kerouac, *Tristessa*, 51.

Michelangelo has run up cherubs and angelkins [sic] for the edification of upward gazers on Sunday mornings.”³⁷

Thus, the fact that Mexico was permeated with churches, instead of suburban housing, signaled to Kerouac that he was in a different place, a sacred place. The bells too, aside from signaling to Kerouac that people were going to church, or perhaps because of that, also helped him associate Mexico with being a sacred place. Its effect was similar to the way he felt towards growing up in the Catholic ethos of Lowell, Massachusetts, as described in chapter 1.³⁸

In addition to viewing the land as a biblical landscape, and the abundance of churches, he also observed the pervasive presence of religious ikons and crucifixes in Mexico. He noticed them everywhere. They were in things as mundane as a city bus, they were sold in alleys next to and along with marijuana, and they appeared in brothels. In a description of what he considered a typical street scene, busy city bus drivers rushed through town, wailing on the horn, plowing straight ahead instead of waiting for people to get out of the way, and meanwhile an ikon burned and flickered above the bus driver. “The busdrivers were barefoot and sat low and squat in T-shirts at the low enormous wheel. Ikons burned over them.”³⁹ Meanwhile, in “Downtown Mexico City thousands of hipsters in floppy strawhats and longlapeled jackets over bare chests padded along the main drag, some of them selling crucifixes and weed in the alleys, some of them kneeling

³⁷ Kerouac, *Lonesome Traveler*, 35.

³⁸ For example, consider Maher’s observations from *Jack Kerouac’s American Journey*, where he writes, “a distinct air of Catholicism hung like verdant clouds over [Mexico City],” and adds “Kerouac observed that Mexico City, bore an eerie resemblance to Lowell; it shared the same Catholic overtones [...]” Maher, *Jack Kerouac’s American Journey*, 217, 220.

³⁹ Kerouac, *On the Road: The Original Scroll*, 403.

in beat chapels next to Mexican burlesque shows in sheds.”⁴⁰ He was struck by how seamless it all seemed – selling crucifixes while selling marijuana – and one gets the impression that Kerouac seemed to think it all made sense. As he wrote of one young street hustler, “... selling crucifix and weed ... the kid says he’s going to church, we don’t disbelieve it.”⁴¹ The presence of devotionism even appeared in brothels. Here is Kerouac’s matter-of-fact description, “it was just a square room with wooden slats and no ceiling, a bulb hanging from the hall roof, and ikon in the corner, a washbasin in another.”⁴² It was as if in Mexico there was a general sense that nothing could keep the “other world” from being in contact with “this world.” As if the sacred could not be quarantined, but instead extended even to the darkest corners of the world.

The Complexity of Mexican Catholic Devotionalism in Practice

This section explores Kerouac’s observation of the way Mexican Catholics practiced their devotionism, and it also offers insights into the way Kerouac himself continued to practice Catholic devotionism in Mexico.

By the time Kerouac made his fourth trip to Mexico, in 1955, it had been five years since his first trip and three years since his second and third trips, both in 1952. This fourth time around, however, he would finally produce a book with extensive details of Mexican Catholic devotional practices. He began writing the first half of this book in 1955 while he was in Mexico, and completed it when he returned for his fifth trip in 1956.

⁴⁰ Kerouac, *On the Road: The Original Scroll*, 403.

⁴¹ Kerouac, *Visions of Cody*, 386.

⁴² Kerouac, *On the Road: The Original Scroll*, 388.

The book was called *Tristessa*, written about a woman he met there whose real name was Esperanza, who happened to be a morphine junkie. He met her through a friend who had been living in Mexico, who was also addicted to morphine. *Tristessa* was the wife of this friend's local drug connection. When the drug dealer died, Kerouac began spending more time with *Tristessa*. As one might suspect, this book was no simple account of Mexican Catholic devotionism, but, rather, offered a window into how devotionism was practiced by inhabitants of Mexico's underground drug scene.

While the romantic implications in *Tristessa* and the influence of Kerouac's Buddhist studies (from 1954) on this novel have intrigued other Kerouac scholars, the following material focuses on the observations Kerouac made on Mexican Catholic devotionism. The material further below will engage in a deeper analysis addressing Kerouac's observations and their implications for his overall vision.

In *Tristessa*, he described the deplorable living conditions of the underground scene, and how *Tristessa* negotiated with this space. Most impressively, he described the home altar she constructed within such conditions, including an ikon of Guadalupe. She had a "huge ikon in a corner of her bedroom. It faces the room, back to the kitchen wall, in right [sic] hand corner as you face the woesome kitchen with its drizzle showering ineffably from the roof tree twigs and hammberboards (bombed out shelter roof)."⁴³ It was an ikon of "the Holy Mother," – "the Virgin Mary" – "staring out of her blue charaderees, her robes." This ikon had a candle before it along with "a bunch of glass-fulla-wax [sic] economical burners that go for weeks on end."⁴⁴

⁴³ Kerouac, *Tristessa*, 11.

⁴⁴ Kerouac, *Tristessa*, 11.

Elsewhere in the book, he described Tristessa's matter-of-fact interactions with her devotional space. He wrote, "she goes to the ikon and adjusts flowers and prays, - She bends over a sandwich and prays, looking sideways at the ikon, sitting Burmese fashion in the bed (knee in front of knee) (down) (sitting), she makes a long prayer to Mary to ask blessing or thanks for the food...."⁴⁵ Tristessa, as Kerouac described her, acted as if she were breaking bread with Guadalupe and took time to make sure her guest was comfortable.

Kerouac was not only an observer in this setting of Mexican Catholic devotionalism. He had his own personal experiences with this type of devotionalism years earlier when he was staying in Mexico City working on *Dr. Sax* (1952). He recalled and collected one important experience of devotionalism from this time in *Lonesome Traveler* – a book that told the story of what he was doing while he was writing the books that would someday make him famous. In an important chapter titled, "Mexico Fellaheen," Kerouac recounted an experience he had as he stood and then knelt before a baroque crucifix in a church in Mexico City.

He described the crucifix, the scene, and his reaction to it. It was his last day in Mexico during this trip, and he was in a "little church near Redondas in Mexico City, 4 o'clock in the gray afternoon."⁴⁶ He wrote,

Right above me is a great tormented statue of Christ on the cross, when I first saw it I instantly sat under it, after brief standing hand-clasped look at it ... "*Mon Jesus*," I'm saying, and I look up and there He is, they've put on Him a handsome face like young Robert Mitchum and have closed His eyes in death tho one of them is slightly open ... looking at you ... and saying "Hombre, man, this is the end." – His knees are all scratched so hard sore they're scathed wore out through, an inch deep the hole where

⁴⁵ Kerouac, *Tristessa*, 23.

⁴⁶ Kerouac, *Lonesome Traveler*, 33.

His kneecap's been wailed away by flailing falls on them with the big Flail Cross a hundred miles long on His back, and as He leans there with the Cross on rocks they goad Him on to slide on His knees and He's worn them out by the time He's nailed to the cross – I was there. – Shows the big rip in His ribs where the sword-tips of lancers were stuck up at Him. – I was not there, had I been there I would have yelled “Stop it” and got crucified too ... It shows the blood running from His hands to His armpits and down His sides ... It shows His body falling from the Cross on His hand of nails, the perfect slump built in by the artist.⁴⁷

The devotionism summoned forth, in Kerouac's mind, some sort of conversation that must have taken place at the crucifixion. Involved in this conversation were the people responsible for Jesus' death, Jesus himself, and Jack Kerouac. While praying before the bloody, tormented figure of Jesus on the cross – which “shows the blood running from His hands to His armpits and down His sides” – he heard Jesus say,

This you would do to Man? I am the Son of Man, I am of Man, I am Man and this you would do to Me, Who Am Man and God – I am God, and you would pierce my feet bound together with long nails with big stayfast points on the end slightly blunted by the hammerer's might – this you did to me, and I preached Love?⁴⁸

Then Kerouac shouted, “He preached love, and you would have him bound to a tree and hammered into it with nails, you fools, you should be forgiven ... What a Victory, the Victory of Christ! Victory over madness, mankind's blight.”⁴⁹ While it is not clear what Kerouac meant by this particular exchange, it is apparent, from what he wrote, that the devotionism was intense enough to inspire Kerouac to think that he actually heard dialogue that happened at the crucifixion. Furthermore, it was so real that he participated in the dialogue.

⁴⁷ Kerouac, *Lonesome Traveler*, 33-34.

⁴⁸ Kerouac, *Lonesome Traveler*, 34.

⁴⁹ Kerouac, *Lonesome Traveler*, 34.

Years later, in 1957, shortly before Viking published *On the Road*, Kerouac was in Mexico again, this time he was with his mother. It was only a brief visit, but they witnessed the complexities of Mexican Catholic devotionism together, and they were both inspired by it. He wrote about these impression four years later, in 1961, when he completed Book Two of *Desolation Angels*, during what was his seventh and final trip to Mexico.

The Kerouacs, that is Jack and his mother, were moving from their residence in New York to a place he found in Berkeley. They were traveling by railroad, and “after two days of vibration on wheels,” they were ready to “lie in still beds on still ground and sleep.”⁵⁰ Somewhere near El Paso they got off the train to sleep in a hotel and made plans to cross “the little bridge to Juarez” and visit Mexico in the morning.⁵¹ His mother had never been to Mexico.

In the morning, with eight hours till bus time, we sallied forth strong with all our luggage repacked and stored in 25¢ bus station lockers ... at the bridge we paid three cents each and went over.

Immediately we were in Mexico, that is, among Indians in an Indian earth – among the smells of mud, chickens, including that Chihuahua dust, lime peels, horses, straw, Indian weariness – The strong smell of cantinas, beer, dank – The smell of the market – and the sight of beautiful old Spanish churches rising in the sun with all their woeful majestic Maria Guadalupe and Crosses and cracks in the wall.⁵²

Upon entering Mexico, his mother said, “O Ti Jean! I want to go in that church and light a candle to Papa!”⁵³

Inside the church they witnessed some of the richness of Mexican Catholic devotionism. First, they saw “an old man kneeling in the aisle with his arms

⁵⁰ Kerouac, *Desolation Angels*, 382.

⁵¹ Kerouac, *Desolation Angels*, 382.

⁵² Kerouac, *Desolation Angels*, 383.

⁵³ Kerouac, *Desolation Angels*, 383.

outstretched in penitence,” a “*penitente*” Kerouac explained to the reader, “hours like that he kneels, old serape over his shoulder, old shoes, hat on the church floor, raggedy old white beard.” “O Ti Jean, what’s he done that he’s so sad for?” his mother asked. “He’s a *penitente*,” he told her, “he’s a sinner and he doesnt [sic] want God to forget him.”⁵⁴ Then they saw “a shawled woman all dressed in black, barefooted, with a baby in her arms advancing slowly on her knees up the aisle to the altar.”⁵⁵ “What has happened *there*?” asked his mother, “where’s the priest that he dont [sic] bless her? There’s nobody here but that poor leetle mother and that poor old man!”⁵⁶ “This is the church of Mary?” she added. Indeed, it was a church dedicated to Our Lady of Guadalupe – “this is the church of Maria de Guadalupe,” Kerouac explained, “a peasant found a shawl in Guadalupe Mexico with Her Face imprinted on it like the cloth the women had at the cross of Jesus.”⁵⁷ Then they went up to the altar and lit their candles, said their prayers, and made the sign of the cross. Meanwhile, “the Chihuahua desert blew dust into the church. The little mother was still advancing on her knees with the infant quietly asleep in her arms,” and the old penitente continued to kneel, and – as Kerouac imagined – “is still there and will always be there.”⁵⁸ Seeing all this, his mother’s “eyes blurred with tears,” and Kerouac thought to himself, “now she understood Mexico and why I had come there so often even tho I’d get sick of dysentery or lose weight or get pale.”⁵⁹ He added, “I’m glad now I took Ma on this trip for her to see the real church of America if

⁵⁴ Kerouac, *Desolation Angels*, 383.

⁵⁵ Kerouac, *Desolation Angels*, 383.

⁵⁶ Kerouac, *Desolation Angels*, 383, 384.

⁵⁷ Kerouac, *Desolation Angels*, 384.

⁵⁸ Kerouac, *Desolation Angels*, 384, 385.

⁵⁹ Kerouac, *Desolation Angels*, 384.

nothing else.”⁶⁰ In the following section I will attend to why Kerouac saw the church in Mexico as the “real church of America,” and what this meant for his vision as a writer.

Mexican Catholic Devotionalism and Kerouac’s Vision

Kerouac’s comments about Mexico being “the real church of America” ought to be understood within the context of his vision as a religious writer. His description of what he saw in Mexico helps fill in this context. What he meant was that Mexican Catholic devotionalism embodied his vision of the relationship between “this world” and the “other world.” Examples of his observations help support this. The aesthetics inside the churches there embodied this relationship by showing how closely the “other world” was involved with this world, even through the depths of suffering. For instance, the bloody and tormented crucifix at the church in Redondas reminded Kerouac how deeply God is involved with this world, even to the point of death on a cross. Later, at the church in Juarez, the people he witnessed – the woman and the old penitente on their knees – embodied the reality that “this world” was connected to the “other world” by taking on practices, such as kneeling, that signaled they were transcending the ordinary aspects of this world and coming into contact with the “other world.” One could say such bodily actions or practices – such as kneeling – called forth that reality.

On a more intense level, the incident where Kerouac knelt before the complex Baroque crucifix in Redondas demonstrated that “this world” and the “other world” were not only connected, but that one could seemingly pass back and forth between the two

⁶⁰ Kerouac, *Desolation Angels*, 383.

worlds.⁶¹ What was so impressive to Kerouac was the realistic quality of the crucifix. Jesus' knees as Kerouac wrote, were "all scratched so hard sore they're scathed wore out through, an inch deep."⁶² It is interesting, with regards to Kerouac's vision as a writer, to observe how such a crucifix summoned forth a reality and allowed Kerouac to enter into another dimension. In fact, the scene became so real that Kerouac became wrapped in further details. He expanded on the reality contained in the crucifix,

His kneecap's been wailed away by flailing falls on them with the big Flail Cross a hundred miles long on His back, and as He leans there with the Cross on rocks they goad Him on to slide on His knees and He's worn them out by the time He's nailed to the cross."⁶³

The scene was so real to Kerouac, and, perhaps, one could say, the devotionism has done its job so well, that it caused him to exclaim, "I was there."⁶⁴ After meditating further before the crucifix and staring at the "big rip in His ribs where the sword-tips of lancers were stuck up at Him," Kerouac decided, "I was not there," because "had I been there I would have yelled 'Stop it' and got crucified too."⁶⁵ Such a crucifix called forth the reality of the crucifixion for Kerouac to the extent that he imagined a conversation that must have taken place at the crucifixion between the crucified Jesus, those who crucified Jesus, and Kerouac himself.

⁶¹ Theologian Thomas O'Meara's historical analysis sheds light on how people experienced Baroque Catholicism. Of the many marks of the Baroque, two general points stand out for understanding Kerouac's experience with this crucifix (and other devotional items): First, the Baroque emphasized "that God is not distant nor utterly different from creatures;" Second, during the Baroque, "Christ appeared in a more human way, filled with a personal love, redemptive and empowering. This was a time of methods and exercises, of imagination and conversation with the divine." See Thomas O'Meara, *Theology of Ministry* (Mahwah, New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1999), 116, 115.

⁶² Kerouac, *Lonesome Traveler*, 33-34.

⁶³ Kerouac, *Lonesome Traveler*, 34.

⁶⁴ Kerouac, *Lonesome Traveler*, 34.

⁶⁵ Kerouac, *Lonesome Traveler*, 34.

He also recalled what it was like to come out of the meditation but remain in that devotional space.

I pray on my knees so long, looking up sideways at my Christ, I suddenly wake up in a trance in the church with my knees aching and a sudden realization that I've been listening to a profound buzz in my ears that permeates throughout the church and throughout my ears and head and throughout the universe, the intrinsic silence of Purity (which is Divine). I sit in the pew quietly, rubbing my knees, the silence is roaring.⁶⁶

Such a description indicates that Kerouac had indeed gone somewhere else during this meditation, and coming back from that place he still retained some residual elements of the reality this devotionism called forth, such as the roaring silence.⁶⁷ Even more so, when he left the church after this, the world outside was different too. "I bow to all this, kneel at my pew entryway, and go out ... Everything is perfect on the street again," he wrote, and "the world is permeated with roses of happiness all the time."⁶⁸ Given Kerouac's devotion to St. Thérèse, the mention of roses here seems to be an indication of her presence for him again, but she is not specifically mentioned in this passage. Perhaps the vision of roses was due to the influence of devotions to Our Lady of Guadalupe so prominent in Mexico.

On an entirely different level, the examples of devotionism from *Tristessa* do more than indicate the fact that there is a relationship between "this world" and the "other world." The devotionism in this book demonstrates that the "other world" breaks into this world and comes forth in this world, even from its darkest corners. As the "other world" broke forth through the crucifixion, and in a very real way broke forth through a Baroque crucifix, so too it broke forth amidst the daily crucifixion of a morphine addict.

⁶⁶ Kerouac, *Lonesome Traveler*, 35.

⁶⁷ Kerouac, *Lonesome Traveler*, 35.

⁶⁸ Kerouac, *Lonesome Traveler*, 36.

That Kerouac recognized these dynamics is one of the greatest qualities of his vision as a religious and devotional writer.

Tristessa helped to embody this notion through the use of a Guadalupe ikon in her living quarters. The interesting aspect, in light of the claims made about devotionism in this dissertation, was that Tristessa's living quarters was often the site where she took her shots of morphine, while sitting on the edge of her bed. Yet, "Tristessa had a huge ikon" of Our Lady of Guadalupe "in a corner of her bedroom" that "faces the room."⁶⁹

Kerouac observed that the ikon was present without any indication that he thought it did not belong in such a setting. In fact, he wrote, "I smile to see this lovely ikon," along with its accompanying home altar.⁷⁰ Kerouac was delighted to see such an ikon because he knew the presence of it manifested the reality that the "other world" really was present in "this world," amidst Tristessa's suffering circumstances, even where she shot morphine. He could believe the reality of the "other world" was present at Tristessa's bedside just as he believed the "other world" was present at the crucifixion and was re-presented when he meditated before a baroque crucifix. For devotionism taught Kerouac that the "other world" was present here and now even in suffering circumstances.

The novel *Tristessa* also yields great insights into Kerouac's own understanding of devotionism and his need for it. As in all his novels, not only is he aware of devotionism when he sees it, but he also reacts to it internally. His comments and insights regarding devotionism, especially by the time he wrote *Tristessa*, appear more dynamic and impressive when one considers where he was at this point in his life.

⁶⁹ Kerouac, *Tristessa*, 11.

⁷⁰ Kerouac, *Tristessa*, 11.

Kerouac wrote the novel *Tristessa* while staying in Mexico City: he began it when he stayed there in 1955 and completed it during another stay in 1956. At that time in his life as a writer he had reached the point of despair, and the more the years of rejection piled on top of him, the more he relied on alcohol to cope. He had already failed at his attempt at the American dream with the collapse of his plans for a homestead and the poor sales of his first novel. His second attempt at a published novel, *On the Road*, was immediately rejected by his editor upon its completion in 1951. To make matters worse his third attempt at a published novel, *Visions of Cody*, in 1952, was essentially rejected by his own friend Allen Ginsberg who was serving as his agent. Ginsberg found the book nearly incomprehensible and knew that every editor along with the reading public would too. In the same year, 1952, Kerouac also wrote *Dr. Sax*, while staying in Mexico City. As with his other novels, this was rejected by potential publishers too.

By 1952, Kerouac thought he had finally hit bottom. He expressed his despair in a letter to a friend. Assessing his situation, he wrote, “what have I got? ... I’m 30 years old, broke ... my old mother after all this time and work and money and hopes is still working her ass off in a shoe shop, I have not a cent in my pocket for a decent whore.”⁷¹

He wrote three more novels over the next several years, all of which remained unpublished in the meantime. He still had several more years of rejection to go before he would publish his second novel.

To make the sting of rejection worse, his peers reached high levels of success and recognition during this time. For instance, his friend John Clellon Holmes enjoyed a satisfying income with the release of his own novel about the Beat Generation, *Go*.

⁷¹ Clark, *Jack Kerouac*, 116.

Later, poet friends like Allen Ginsberg finally became famous amidst the San Francisco poetry renaissance, and by 1956 these writers were a hot commodity for stories in magazines like *Mademoiselle*.

So when Kerouac wrote of the importance of the presence of ikons for Tristessa, he may have been writing about the importance of the presence of ikons for himself, especially as he descended further into alcoholism and his stack of rejected manuscripts grew higher. As he wrote in *Tristessa*, reflecting on the importance of seeing an ikon of Our Lady of Guadalupe in Tristessa's home,

I know everything's alright but I want proof ... and the Virgin Marys are there reminding me of the solemn pledge of faith in this harsh and stupid earth where we rage our so-called lives in a sea of worry.⁷²

In short, the ikon embodied for Kerouac the reality that the "other world" was in contact with "this world."

Finally, if Kerouac really was on the road waiting to see the face of God, as he claimed in interviews and articles, then Mexico truly was the end of the road for him. For in *Tristessa* he claimed to have finally had a vision of God's face. This vision appeared differently from what he saw farther north at the Colorado Utah border (described in chapter 3). At the Colorado Utah border he saw nearly everything but God's face. In the vision in Mexico he would describe what he actually saw of God's face and the meaning of it. Most surprisingly, given common assumptions about where God ought to be found, this vision happened as Kerouac walked through Mexico's underground scene.

⁷² Kerouac, *Tristessa*, 16.

This vision bore witness to the reality that God was and is present in all places, especially with those who suffer. This insight becomes apparent when one considers the context and the people involved in the vision. It happened while he walked the horrible streets with Tristessa and another morphine using friend. He described the type of street they walked through, as “the slippery garbage street of dull brown cokestand lights and distant dim blue and rose neons.”⁷³ What a nauseating scene it must have been, as he wrote, “O there’s been pulque and vomiting in the streets and groans under heaven.”⁷⁴ It was as if they were walking through the streets of “hell,” and Kerouac indicated as much.⁷⁵

His understanding of the scene, however, did not indicate that they were condemned to walk the streets of hell forever, nor were they to walk alone. For he saw himself and his companions with “wings huge in the dark” as if they were “Angels in hell.”⁷⁶ Yet, the “other world” was still in contact with them. Kerouac indicated as much in his description of their wings as “angel wings covered with the pale blue dirt of heaven.”⁷⁷ In other words, there was still a trace of heaven even as they walked through their hellish reality.

It was in this context and from this perspective that the vision of God’s face occurred. According to Kerouac’s description, God’s face broke forth from the “other world” into “this world,” even with the world’s suffering, or because of “this world’s” suffering. As Kerouac wrote,

⁷³ Kerouac, *Tristessa*, 74.

⁷⁴ Kerouac, *Tristessa*, 74.

⁷⁵ Kerouac, *Tristessa*, 74.

⁷⁶ Kerouac, *Tristessa*, 74.

⁷⁷ Kerouac, *Tristessa*, 74.

From the Golden Eternal Heaven bends God blessing us with his face which I can only describe as being infinitely sorry (compassionate), that is, infinite with understanding of suffering, the sight of that Face would make you cry.⁷⁸

Although one might doubt that such a vision could occur in a place like Mexico's underground drug scene, Kerouac emphatically declared that it did occur. He concluded, "I've seen it, in a vision, it will cancel all in the end – No tears, just the lips, O I can show you!"⁷⁹ The lack of tears here indicates an absence of sadness, because the vision of God's face transforms the suffering; the reference to God's lips in this passage functions as a sign of compassion as God compassionately revealed God's self to people in such deplorable circumstances.⁸⁰

Kerouac's description of where God's face came from also mattered because it evoked his constant awareness of the relationship between the two worlds. He wrote, "from the Eternal Heaven bends God blessing us with his face."⁸¹ Such a description indicates Kerouac's understanding that the "other world," heaven, breaks forth into this world to such an extent that one can actually see God's face from within this world.

Second, Kerouac's description indicates more than his understanding that the two worlds are connected. It indicates his understanding of how deeply the two worlds are connected. The "other world" is connected to "this world" even in the depths of human suffering. Furthermore, according to Kerouac's vision, it seems this is precisely where God wants to be, in the depths of human suffering, out of compassion. As Kerouac wrote

⁷⁸ Kerouac, *Tristessa*, 74.

⁷⁹ Kerouac, *Tristessa*, 74.

⁸⁰ Kerouac, *Tristessa*, 74.

⁸¹ Kerouac, *Tristessa*, 74.

of God's face, "I can only describe [it] as being infinitely sorry (compassionate), that is, infinite with understanding of suffering."⁸²

Third, there is a strong sense in Kerouac's vision as a writer that God and humanity do not remain in the realm of suffering. There exists in Kerouac's work the hope of redemption and salvation with God, a confidence that people will make it to the "other world." As he wrote in his journal long ago, "I want to burn and I want to fell and I want to bridge from this life to the others ... to go to the other world, or that is, keep in contact with it till I get there."⁸³ Furthermore, he wrote, "my happiness, depends on the recognition of the other world while I am in this one ... I must be in contact with the Holy Final Whirlwinds that collect the ragged forms into one Whole Form."⁸⁴ Of humanity's ragged suffering in "this world," Kerouac's vision told him God "will cancel all in the end."⁸⁵ According to his vision, as he put it in sparse terms, there would come a time when there would be "no tears, just the lips," meaning no more suffering, only God's compassion. As Kerouac might have put it, there will come a time when everything will be "beat," as in beatific. The two worlds would be completely in contact with each other.

To summarize, Kerouac's vision of God in Mexico was significant for at least three main reasons. First, in his vision God's face was breaking forth from heaven, the "other world," into "this world" – a reality that Kerouac hoped to capture in his vision as a religious writer. Second, the vision of God's face occurred in the darkest corners of "this world," amidst the suffering circumstances of people trapped in addiction in

⁸² Kerouac, *Tristessa*, 74.

⁸³ Kerouac, *Windblown World*, 211.

⁸⁴ Kerouac, *Windblown World*, 211.

⁸⁵ Kerouac, *Tristessa*, 74.

Mexico's underground drug scene. Third, it was a hopeful vision, even amidst the suffering; it was a vision that promised to "cancel all in the end" and evoked a state wherein there would be no more tears, only compassion.

Conclusion

When Kerouac first entered Mexico in 1950, he did not know then what the country had in store for him. However, he was soon struck by the Catholic aesthetics of the land. The presence of ikons, crucifixes, and churches everywhere was so pervasive that he was compelled to write about it all. On subsequent trips, he became further immersed in Mexico and Mexican Catholic practices.

Kerouac's engagement with Mexican Catholic aesthetics and practices bolstered his vision as a writer. He observed how the presence of things like ikons and churches everywhere indicated the presence of the "other world" within "this world" – a primary concern in his methodology as a writer. Such was the case when he prayed before a Baroque crucifix, for example, causing him to transcend the ordinary aspects of "this world" and enter into contact with the "other world." This was also the case when he read the Bible in Mexico, or observed other people praying in Mexico.

Perhaps the vision of Gerard prepared Jack Kerouac to absorb the effects of Mexico's Catholic aesthetics in his writing. It was in that vision, after all, that his brother Gerard instructed him to be more attentive to their Catholic heritage.

Prior to his entry into Mexico, and prior to his vision of Gerard, Kerouac had sought a different life. He attempted to live a comfortable middle class life, perhaps even upper class life, as a writer. The failure of his first novel, and subsequent rejection of his

other novels, of course caused him to feel estranged and disenchanted with life in America, especially with regards to the so called “American dream.” This estrangement and disenchantment was exacerbated by the increasing commodification of life within postwar America’s new ethos of consumerism.

It was in the aforementioned context that Kerouac encountered the great God-cloud vision at the Colorado Utah border. This vision affirmed and transformed his estrangement, calling it to a higher purpose. It commissioned him to identify with all others who were estranged and alienated in this world.

Kerouac thus descended into Mexico’s underground world. Yet, ever aware of Catholic devotionism’s ability to embody the intimate relationship between “this world” and the “other world,” and newly resolved to articulate this reality in his prose, he moved with the assumption that at any moment he could have a vision of God. After all, he was essentially where his visions told him to position himself, with the poorest of the poor, in a land saturated with Catholic aesthetics.

So with every church bell that rang, with every bloody crucifix he saw down every alley, with every Guadalupe ikon he saw in every dark corner of Mexico, Kerouac was called back to the point where the “other world” makes contact with “this world.” In other words, just as in Lowell, every embodied instance of devotionism in Mexico told Kerouac that God was in contact with this world even in the darkest or most troublesome corners of the world.

CONCLUSION

THE ROAD ENDURES: SEEING (AND SHOWING OTHERS) THE FACE OF GOD

“I hope it is true that a man can die and yet not only live in others but give them life, and not only life but that great consciousness of life...”⁸⁶

”For life is holy and every moment is precious.”⁸⁷

It matters that Jack Kerouac was born into the Catholic devotional ethos of Lowell, Massachusetts in the first half of the twentieth century. It also matters that America began moving toward a hyper-commodification of life during this time. These two components matter because they set the stage on which Kerouac’s work reached its highest importance. As American life became increasingly commodified, and secularized, Kerouac – lead by his sacramentality – drew on his devotionism in his work to demonstrate to his readers how the world could be resacralized, and, indeed, that the world was/is holy because God is with it. Furthermore, the fact that Kerouac’s travels took him through the streets of Mexico’s underground drug scene where he also beheld a vision of God’s face demonstrates Kerouac’s intuition that God is with this world even in its darkest corners.

⁸⁶ Turner, 217.

⁸⁷ Kerouac, *On the Road: The Original Scroll*, 159.

Indeed, it appears it truly was Kerouac's vocation to impart such a vision to his readers. That is what he spent most of his energy doing as a writer, and he labored to remind his readers of this. From the time of his birth, surrounded by angels, Kerouac's sacramentality was fostered through his sustained encounters with devotionism. Then, as he continued to learn and practice devotionism, he became fluent in it. Later, after he worked out his methodology as a writer, he was able to skillfully interweave devotionism into his work to help his readers see that God is present in this world.

Yet, Kerouac was a conflicted man, and, indeed, he was a sinner. This is, perhaps, a point that I have not yet adequately addressed. Nevertheless, even if Kerouac was a sinner, consider the apparent possibility that – as trapped as he was in sin – the sacred was still able to break into the suffering and sinful context of his life, and – at least for a moment – illuminate the world for him and help him describe it as it truly was for him and is for us: sacred.

So, after reading Kerouac's journals, letters, poems, prayers, and novels I find myself praying and hoping that one day we too can say that we offered people a vision of the sacred, and not a shallow vision but a richly textured and compelling vision that is so beautiful people will have a hard time looking away from such visions, and that the world will remember us for imparting such a vision and maybe not dismiss our sins but certainly celebrate our vision over of our sins.

Kerouac concluded his last book, *Vanity of Duluoz*, with a lamentation. In his lamentation he went back and recalled his first published novel, *The Town and the City*, the book that started it all for him. "I settled down to write, in solitude, in pain, writing hymns and prayers even at dawn ... I did it all, I wrote the book, I stalked the streets of

life ...sold the book, got an advance, whooped, hallelujah'd, went on, did everything you're supposed to do in life. But nothing ever came of it. No 'generation' is 'new.' There's 'nothing new under the sun.' 'All is vanity.'"⁸⁸ Kerouac wrote this book shortly before he died. His life was in shambles. More than an alcoholic, he was a "drunken ghost," as Allen Ginsberg called him, and he doubted that his work mattered anymore and he suspected perhaps it never mattered.

Let us then answer Kerouac's psalm of lamentation with an affirmative response by recognizing the role devotionism and sacramentality played in his work, because his work really did reveal the myriad of ways the holy is inherent in our ordinary world and our lives. As Kerouac wrote, "I hope it is true that a man can die and yet not only live in others but give them life, and not only life but that great consciousness of life...."⁸⁹

Well, something will come of his work yet, especially for people who long to engage prose that will help them reach a greater consciousness of life and meditate on the presence of the holy in this world that seems so dark at times. Yes, upon arriving at this end of the dissertation, and this end of my formation in the doctoral program at the University of Dayton, it becomes clear that in reading Kerouac's work one learns that God, Jesus, Mary, Joseph, St. Thérèse, and our deceased loved ones are all present with us in this world – transforming everything around us into a mystical reality. One can embody this reality – that "life is holy and every moment is precious" – for others to see by using devotionism as Kerouac demonstrated in his novels. We can begin like this: "Jack Kerouac, pray for us."

⁸⁸ Kerouac, *Vanity of Duluoz*, 213.

⁸⁹ Turner, 217.

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