

VISIONS OF TOM: JACK KEROUAC'S Monastic Elder Brother *A preliminary exploration*

THE PHRASE 'Visions of Tom' deliberately echoes the titles of some of Jack Kerouac's books, in turn reflecting something of his own way of thinking and his view of the world – his own visions. *Visions of Gerard* is based on the experience of losing his older brother in 1926, when Jack was four and Gerard was nine, and *Visions of Cody* (originally *Visions of Neal*) is a collection of writings concerning his relationship with Neal Cassady who referred to Jack as his 'blood brother' – and this was Jack's own understanding of their relationship.

The term 'visions' is typical of the outlook of Kerouac and other 'beat writers' which was essentially 'apocalyptic' – other common words in their vocabulary include 'angels,' 'holy,' 'ghost,' and 'dream' – a sense of standing on the brink and mediating revelations of the Golden Eternity beyond the veil of reality. Kerouac once wrote a friend, 'I want to work in revelations, not just spin silly tales for money... I want to fish as deep as possible into my own subconscious in the belief that once that far down, everyone will understand because they are the same that far down.'

The 'Beats' were heavily influenced by Romantic literature notably that of William Blake, who was also the subject of Merton's Masters thesis at Columbia.

The meaning of the term 'vision' is ambiguous: it refers both to the visions we have of a particular person and

the visions that person experiences himself or herself. So in seeking 'Visions of Tom' we are seeking to see Merton in a new light – as a monastic elder brother to Kerouac and the 'Beats' – and at the same time seeking insights into Merton's own vision and experience of the world. There is a third way also to understand the phrase 'Visions of Tom' and that is in terms of how specifically Kerouac and Merton viewed each other; their relationship with one another. There is tantalizingly little material on this, but there is some evidence of their awareness of one another and of communication between them, possibly even of a meeting.

The phrase 'Jack Kerouac's monastic elder brother' comes from Robert Inchausti's book, *Thomas Merton's American Prophecy*, in which he explores Merton's relationship with American contemporary culture and in particular characterizes him as,

the quintessential American outsider who defined himself in opposition to the world around him and then discovered in the alternative values with which he opposed the world a way back into dialogue with it and compassion for it.

This encapsulates the tension Merton experienced in his relationship to the world and the society around him – whether secular or ecclesiastical. He was 'the marginal person, the monk, the displaced person, the prisoner,' the 'quintessential American outsider' living in the presence of death, calling into question the meaning of life. As

such he has immediate affinities with the 'beat writers' including Kerouac who also saw themselves as outsiders, questioning the conventional values and morality of society and living in the presence, and experience, of suffering and death. Steve Turner comments on Kerouac's work: 'His novels all resound with the question, "How can you make sense of life in the face of suffering and death?" It is the brutal honesty of the recurring question which makes his work so vital.'

Links and Parallels Between Merton and Kerouac

Even at first glance the links and parallels between Merton and Kerouac are striking. We should perhaps begin at Columbia University where Merton entered the sophomore year in January 1935 graduating three years later and then continuing in graduate studies. In February 1939 he received his M.A. in English and remained associated with Columbia until September 1940, when he began teaching English at St Bonaventure University in upstate New York. At about this time, the fall of 1940, Kerouac arrived at Columbia on a football scholarship. It is intriguing to speculate on whether the two ever encountered each other at this time – there is certainly no evidence to suggest such a meeting and there is no reason to suppose that there would have been any reason for them to meet, but who knows perhaps they brushed shoulders in the corridor outside Mark Van Doren's office. Kerouac would have been the young good-looking one hobbling about on crutches with his leg in a cast having broken it early on in the football season. They both read English and unsurprisingly many of the names of authors they were reading at the time were common to both – Blake

and Joyce in particular were key influences. Both attended Mark Van Doren's famous Shakespeare class, Kerouac being awarded an 'A' grade of which he was lastingly proud. Van Doren was later to become a key player in getting both Merton and Kerouac published through another Columbia alumnus, Robert Giroux.

The connections go further back and deeper than simply a near-miss encounter in time and space at Columbia University – ships passing in the night. Both had a major French influence in their early life – we are familiar with Merton's entry into the world 'down in the shadow of some French mountains on the borders of Spain' and his early schooling in St Antonin and Montauban. Kerouac was born Jean Louis Lebris de Kirouac in Lowell, MA in 1922 to a French-Canadian family who conversed almost exclusively in French at home. At school he was taught mostly in French until the age of 11 when he moved to the English speaking Bartlett Junior High School and he still experienced difficulty with English when he was 18, pinning lists of new words to his bedroom walls.

Both experienced early encounters with death: Merton's mother died in 1921 when he was six, and, perhaps significantly, Kerouac lived with his mother on and off (mostly on) until the day he died; Kerouac's older brother died when he was four (in 1926); Merton's younger brother, John Paul, died in April 1943 – flying with the RAF, reported missing in action. Both these deaths found their way into print and subsequent publication. Both lost their fathers at relatively young ages: Owen Merton died when Tom was only 16 in 1931 and Leo Kerouac died when Jack

was 24 in 1946 – and was fictionalised in his first published book, *The Town And The City*, published by Harcourt, Brace in 1950. Even the timing of their own deaths is remarkably close: Merton on December 10, 1968 and Kerouac less than a year later on October 21, 1969. There is the whole area concerning their religious outlook: Kerouac was brought up in a traditionally Catholic French-Canadian family, his mother was devout and his father disillusioned; Merton became a Catholic and yet, even as a cloistered monk, experienced tensions and ambiguities in his own standing within the Catholic Church. Kerouac's Catholicism too was fraught with tension and ambiguity. Having been baptized, brought up and educated a Catholic, by the time he was 19 he had serious misgivings though he continued to have conversations with a local priest, Fr 'Spike' Morissette who also had his own struggles with his faith. On a visit in the summer of 1941 Kerouac told him how he trembled with a sense of the mysterious and how he understood such feelings as an experience of God. Mystery, for Jack, was not confined to Church but was everywhere. Whilst he felt that Catholicism enslaved people he told the priest "Christ is joy, not damnation. That's why he cursed the fucking Pharisees." Jack's faith was a yearning to fly out into endless space though he feared the loss of identity – despite the strong sense of identity he already displayed to the priest. While Jack left as troubled as before, he had a profound effect on Spike Morissette who later declared 'that Jack Kerouac had been the chief influence in his own life, giving him the courage to unfetter his own identity.'

Then there is the fascination with the East – both Kerouac and Merton were drawn to Buddhism. Merton's interest perhaps began at Columbia with his friendship with the Hindu monk, Bramachari, who told him to immerse himself in his own traditions of the West such as Augustine's, *Confessions*, and *The Imitation of Christ*. Or perhaps earlier still when he was still at Oakham and writing articles in support of Gandhi. I have yet to investigate more closely the time and circumstances under which Merton's interest returned to the East. In 1945 Allen Ginsberg took a copy of Kerouac's (unpublished) early novel, *The Sea Is My Brother*, to Raymond Weaver, the literature professor who rediscovered Herman Melville. After reading the novel he gave Jack a reading list which included Melville's *Pierre*, Plotinus, and the Egyptian Gnostics. Ginsberg and Kerouac found affinities in these writings with the Buddhism they had begun to read about in Spengler. Through this they became aware of the concept of "emptiness," a theme that later became central to both Kerouac and Ginsberg. And, it should be added, Merton.

The Columbia connection, Francophone culture, encounters with death, Catholicism and Buddhism all offer striking parallels between Merton and Kerouac. To this could be added their struggles with solitude, the development of their writing and in particular their poetry, not to mention the overlap of their publishers – both at various times being published by Harcourt, Brace, New Directions and City Lights. Plus of course the autobiographical nature of much of their writing – autobiography, or autobiographical novels, letters and journals.

Kerouac has been described as the 'Great Rememberer,' as a teenager his contemporaries called him 'Memory Babe.' Merton too was known for his almost obsessive need to record everything!

All of these offer intriguing lines of further research. In the remainder of this paper I develop three of these a little further: the Columbia connection, the East and Buddhism, and their struggles with solitude.

The Columbia Connection

Besides Mark Van Doren and Robert Giroux, an even more important figure in the Columbia connection between Kerouac and Merton is Robert Lax. Lax was an editor of *New Story* magazine in Paris where Kerouac submitted a number of pieces for publication. Despite the rejection of his stories by *New Story*, Kerouac was drawn to Bob Lax and they began to correspond, eventually meeting up in New York in the spring of 1954. They talked almost exclusively of religion and Kerouac expressed his admiration for Merton's life as a monk – having read *Seven Storey Mountain* at the end of 1949. Lax offered to arrange a visit for Kerouac to L'Eau Vive monastery at Soissy sur Seine in France.

In late summer 1954 Kerouac wrote to Robert Giroux:

I've become extremely religious and may go to a monastery before even you do. Surely it would be a happy monastery, where you and I could meet.

I've recently made friends in a way with Bob Lax and I find him sweet – tho I think his metaphysics are pure faith. Okay, that's what it's supposed to be. We exchanged a few notes. If I get money I'll go to France and see him and dig Soissy sur Seine if I can (a retreat). By October 26, 1954 he was writing

to Lax about the Buddhist concept *Karuna* ('the pathos of compassion redressing human sorrows') and Christian *Agape* but in the same letter he decides against going to France with Lax,

O no, Bob, I don't want to go to France too badly (Europe's precisely what I'm trying to get away from) – my interest is turning to the desert, next Spring I'll be there, in a hut, prove at last by example not only by words – Bless Jesus.

In 1958 Kerouac spent Christmas at home in Northport with Robert Lax, who was by now the editor of *Jubilee: A Magazine of the Church and Her People*, and had published some of Kerouac's poems. On Christmas Eve they drank wine and read selections from *Finnegan's Wake* and from Jack's unpublished manuscripts. The following year, Kerouac's Catholic poems were published by *Jubilee* in a volume entitled *Hymn – God Pray For Me*. Kerouac also gave *Jubilee* his 1955 story "Statue of Christ" but worried that it might be too Buddhist for them. At this time he fostered friendships with a number of liberal Catholic academics and writers who found his approach to religious experience refreshing. With poet Howard Hart he could discuss the virtues of European Catholicism and the finer points of Jacques Maritain's art criticism.

Later we learn in Merton's correspondence with James Laughlin that there were plans to get together with Kerouac and others to discuss 'basic things.' In March 1960 Merton wrote, why not you, Lax, Kerouac, and a few other assorted people picked by the two of you, make an expedition down here and we could solve the problems of the world for two or three days, perhaps on the edge of some quiet lake....

The following month he writes to

Laughlin:

What would be ideal would be ten or twelve groups a year, small ones: writers, beats, protestants, Buddhists, intellectuals, who knows, even politicians. But the less professional and formal I get about it, the better. I think Lax would bring Kerouac and has already spoken of it. Do let's think more of this....

The meeting never took place – in *Song For Nobody*, Ron Seitz recalls a 1963 conversation in the hermitage when Merton mentions "... ol' Jacko Kerouac, eh [laughs] - you know he was supposed to stop by and spend a few days out here ... what Lax told me anyway." One of history's great missed opportunities and it is tempting to speculate what they might have talked about – almost certainly Buddhism and the East.

The East and Buddhism

Seitz recalls another conversation in *Song For Nobody* where Merton expresses his frustration with the Beats' handling of Buddhism:

You don't go around mouthing the Tzu brothers Lao and Chuang without paying your dues with the discipline of Confucius – all that Alan Watts casual Tao and Kerouac's drinking dharma. Good guys, no doubt, but Damn! It wouldn't do them any harm to take a look at D.T. Suzuki or Huang Po from time to time.

Kerouac's study of Buddhism was much deeper than Merton may have realised but his more substantial writings on Buddhism had not yet been published – *Some of the Dharma* was only published in 1997. Kerouac was interested in Buddhism from the early 1950s when little literature was available in the West thus placing him on the edge of cultural developments. The Zen authority in America at that time was D.T. Suzuki. In a letter to Neal Cassady

dated May 14, 1953, Ginsberg discoursed at length on *satori*, an aspect of Zen Buddhism that Kerouac found especially absorbing. *Satori* is a flash of life-changing insight – the sort of visionary experience Kerouac had been exploring such for years. Kerouac was familiar with both Suzuki and Huang Po and visited Suzuki on October 15, 1958 in Manhattan and the meeting is movingly described by Amburn in his book *Subterranean Kerouac*.

Struggles With Solitude

In the introduction to *Lonesome Traveler*, Kerouac makes the striking claim that he was 'actually not "beat" but a strange solitary crazy Catholic mystic,' whose final plans were, 'hermitage in the woods, quiet writing of old-age, mellow hopes of paradise (which comes to everybody anyway)....' As early as 1952 he wrote to his close friend John Clellon Holmes, 'Someday I am going to be a hermit in the woods ... very soon now I'll visit my site.' Sounds familiar. In *Some of the Dharma*, he again articulated his decision to become a hermit, patterning himself after Thoreau in his hut at Walden Pond. But Ellis Amburn maintains Kerouac had more in common with Merton, who was described by Carol Zaleski, author of *The Life of the World to Come*, as a "champion of eremitism ... torn by desires of solitude and sociability, silence and self-expression, monastic obedience and beatnik spontaneity."

This raises the fundamental conflict in the lives of both these men in their desire for solitude and their need for companionship and social interaction. In 1946 'Jack seemed uneasy in any social interaction, at least when sober. And even with the loosening effect of drink,

he could only take being with people for a few days; then he had to withdraw, to be alone to think.' In an almost a mirror image of this, Catholic psychoanalyst, Gregory Zilbourg famously accused Merton of wanting to be a hermit just so long as his was in *Times Square* with a neon sign above announcing "Hermit lives here!"

Yet in the mid-1940s Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg drew great inspiration from this same place – Times Square. Resolved to attain "Supreme Reality," their "New Vision," they went looking not in churches or monasteries but places like Times Square. There was an overwhelming sense of the holiness of the street – 'the holiness of every spot of ground trod by man.' Gerald Nicosia continues:

Holy is the only way to describe their feeling that Times Square was a single giant room. Studying the intricate copper and stonework on the cornices and tops of buildings, Jack and Allen had been drawn to look at the open sky above. For both of them the sight of the city (and earth) "hanging in space" triggered a sudden mystic awareness of time's passage in eternity, of the perishable world within a permanent void. At night the sky over Times Square had an apocalyptic glow, due to the reflection of red neons from the smog. The 'Paradox of Solitude' in the lives of both Merton and Kerouac has been discussed by Robert Ginn. This is an important area of study but I found Ginn's account and interpretation disappointingly oversimplified. He sets up Kerouac, particularly in his experiences of solitude on Desolation Peak for 63 days in summer 1956 and three weeks in Ferlinghetti's cabin at Big Sur, as a kind of 'straw man' with which to contrast Merton. The picture is considerably more complex – Kerouac's experiences at Desolation and Big Sur

(as recounted in the books *Desolation Angels* and *Big Sur* respectively) were not the overwhelmingly negative experiences that Ginn makes them out to be. A single quote from *Desolation Angels* (I could cite more) is offered to illustrate my contention: 'Everything is so keen when you come down from solitude, I notice all Seattle with every step I take....' Though Ginn does concede that Kerouac's 'A Poem Dedicated to Thomas Merton,' which appeared in the second issue of *Monk's Pond*, suggests his encounters with solitude were not a complete failure after all.

In *The Literary Essays of Thomas Merton*, Merton says that language must be used to awaken in man the lucid anguish in which alone he is truly conscious of his condition and therefore able to revolt against the absurd. Then he will affirm, over against its 'unreasonable silence,' the human love and solidarity and devotion to life which give meaning to his own existence.

Inchausti comments, 'put simply in a fallen world, language responsibly employed can awaken us to an awareness of our own condition, to a lucid anguish that leads us to assert our humanity over against the forces that oppose it.' I would argue that Kerouac's writing in books such as *Big Sur* and *Tristessa* constitute 'language responsibly employed' and that they certainly awaken 'lucid anguish' and awareness therefore of our human condition against which to revolt.

Concluding Comments

What I have presented here is very selective and superficial – it is certainly deficient and incomplete. These are no more than tasters, tantalizing samples to whet the appetite. I am hoping to explore these avenues and others more

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fully as time goes on. Nevertheless these strands begin to demonstrate the affinities between these two writers and, in time, may offer a deeper understanding of who Thomas Merton was, and we may come to appreciate more the complexity of his personality in the light of a fellow visionary, poet, madman, marginal person - the little brother he never had.