



Kerouac, the Word and the Way: Prose Artist as Spiritual Quester

Benedict F. Giamo

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Jack Kerouac, a "ragged priest of the word" according to Ben Giamo, embarked on a spiritual quest "for the ultimate meaning of existence and suffering, and the celebration of joy in the meantime." For Kerouac, the quest was a sustained and creative experiment in literary form. Intuitive and innovative, Kerouac created prose styles that reflected his search for personal meaning and spiritual intensity. These styles varied from an exuberant brand of conventional narrative (*On the Road*, *The Dharma Bums*, and *Desolation Angels*) to spontaneous bop prosody (*Visions of Cody*, *Doctor Sax*, and *The Subterraneans*). Giamo's primary purpose is to chronicle and clarify Kerouac's various spiritual quests through close examinations of the novels. Kerouac began his quest with *On the Road*, which also is Giamo's real starting point. To establish early themes, spiritual struggles, and stylistic shifts, however, Giamo begins with the first novel, *Town and Country*, and ends with *Big Sur*, the final turning point in Kerouac's quest.

Kerouac was primarily a religious writer bent on testing and celebrating the profane depths and transcendent heights of experience and reporting both truly. Baptized and buried a Catholic, he was also heavily influenced by Buddhism, especially from 1954 until 1957 when he integrated traditional Eastern belief into several novels. Catholicism remained an essential force in his writing, but his study of Buddhism was serious and not solely in the service of his literary art. As he wrote to Malcolm Cowley in 1954, "Since I saw you I took up the study of Buddhism and for me it's the word and the way I was looking for."

Giamo also seeks IT—"a vital force in the experience of living that takes one by surprise, suspending for the moment belief in the 'real' concrete grey everyday of facts of self and selfhood . . . its various meanings, paths, and oscillations: from romantic lyricism to 'the ragged and ecstatic joy of pure being and from the void-pit of the Great World Snake to the joyous pain of amorous love, and, finally, from Catholic/Buddhist serenity to the onset of penitential martyrhood."

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