



DOCTORAL THESIS

Irrational Doorways: Religion and Spirituality in the Work of the Beat Generation

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Award date:
2011

Awarding institution:
University of Roehampton

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**Irrational Doorways:
Religion and Spirituality
in the Work of the Beat Generation**

by

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*A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements
for the degree of PhD*

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2011

ABSTRACT

My thesis explores the role of religion and spirituality in the work of the Beat Generation, a mid-twentieth century American literary movement. I focus on four major Beat authors: William S. Burroughs, Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac, and Gregory Corso. Through a close reading of their work, I identify the major religious and spiritual attitudes that shape their texts. All four authors' religious and spiritual beliefs form a challenge to the Modern Western worldview of rationality, embracing systems of belief which allow for experiences that cannot be empirically explained. They also assert the primacy of the individual—a major American value—in a society which the authors believed to encroach upon individual agency. Ginsberg, Kerouac, and Corso are also strongly influenced by established religious traditions: an aspect of their work that is currently overlooked in Beat criticism. Burroughs' belief in a magical universe shapes his work. Ginsberg is heavily influenced by the Jewish exegetical tradition. Kerouac and Corso's work contains Catholic themes. My study rectifies some tendencies in current criticism which I find problematic: a dismissal of the Beats as a countercultural phenomenon rather than a literary movement, a tendency to frame Beat religion and spirituality in vague language, and a tendency to focus solely on Buddhism within the movement. My study illustrates that the Beat authors' work contains serious religious and spiritual content, that they take part in American religious and literary traditions, and that the authors engage with major social issues of the post-war period.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank all those who have been helpful in various ways as I have undertaken this thesis. My supervisor, Kevin McCarron, and my co-supervisor, Mark Knight, have guided me through the entire process, and I thank them for all their help and approachability. I would also like to thank Tina Beattie for help with the material on Catholicism. My parents, Rita and Jasper Reynolds, have provided invaluable support and encouragement along the way, without which this thesis would not be possible. I would also like to express my gratitude to Tom Robinson for proofreading and lively discussions.

“Most of us can remember the strangely moving power of passages in certain poems we read when we were young, irrational doorways as they were through which the mystery of fact, the wildness and the pang of life, stole into our hearts and thrilled them” (James 302).

“Something even more evil than atomic destruction is . . . an anti-dream drug which destroys the symbolizing, myth-making, intuitive, empathizing, telepathic faculty in man, so that his behavior can be controlled and predicted by the scientific methods that have proved so useful in the physical sciences” (Burroughs, Letters 268).

“The typewriter is holy the poem is holy the voice is holy the hearers are / holy the ecstasy is holy!” (Ginsberg, “Footnote to Howl” 9-10)

“it was as a Catholic...that I went one afternoon to the church of my childhood (one of them), Ste. Jeanne d’Arc in Lowell, Mass., and suddenly with tears in my eyes and had a vision of what I must have really meant with ‘Beat’ anyhow when I heard the holy silence in the church (I was the only one in there, it was five p. m., dogs were barking outside, children yelling, the fall leaves, the candles were flickering alone just for me), the vision of the word Beat as being to mean beatific” (Kerouac, “Origins” 63).

“We will not force ourselves into any hand-me-down inherited straight-jacket [sic] of all cast-off moral concepts mixed with beastly superstition derived from the primitive mythology which is found in the bible- not that I have any objection to mythology in its proper place. We are human” (Corso, “Variations” 184).

Chapter One

The Beat Generation and its Place in the (Religious) World

The Beat Generation is a mid-twentieth century American literary movement, beginning in the early 1940s in New York City and continuing throughout the late forties and fifties, when most of the movement's major work was produced. By the early sixties, the movement can be considered to "wane" (Stephenson, *Daybreak* 3), though some work was still produced after this point. Major Beat authors like Jack Kerouac, William S. Burroughs, and Allen Ginsberg championed open literary forms based on spontaneity and the full expression of personal emotions and urges. Their work was often considered vulgar in its time—two major works, Ginsberg's *Howl* (1956) and Burroughs' *Naked Lunch* (1959), were the subject of obscenity trials. However, despite this incendiary content, much Beat writing is seen to have a spiritual aspect by commentators, critics, and the Beat authors alike. This spiritual characteristic is often linked to the new religious movements of the 1960s, particularly to the burgeoning interest in Eastern-tradition religions among the American counterculture.

In her introduction to *The Portable Beat Reader* (1992), Ann Charters discusses her conception of the Beat Generation. She writes:

Its members share . . . their "own sense of life, something that might be defined as an intricate web of perceptions, judgments, feelings, and aspirations." This shared experience for the Beat writers was historical and political, based on the tumultuous changes of their times: the historic events that began with America's dropping the atomic bomb on Japan to bring World War II to an end, and the political ramifications of the ensuing Cold War and wave of anti-

Communist hysteria that followed in the United States in the late 1940s and the 1950s. (xvi-xvii)¹

Beat writers themselves often comment, in interviews, essays, and journals, on their own understandings of the movement. Jack Kerouac, who named the movement, remarked in 1958:

The Beat Generation, that was a vision that we had . . . in the late Forties, of a generation of crazy illuminated hipsters suddenly rising and roaming America, serious, curious, bumming and hitchhiking everywhere, ragged, beatific, beautiful in an ugly graceful new way—a vision gleaned from the way we had heard the word *beat* spoken on street corners on Times Square and in the Village, in other cities in the downtown-city-night of postwar America—*beat*, meaning down and out but full of intense conviction. (“Aftermath” 47)²

This statement points to some of the movement’s central aspects, such as madness (“crazy illuminated hipsters”) and a preoccupation with the “down and out” society of underground New York. Beat authors often view these marginal segments of society as having a spiritual aspect, evidenced here by Kerouac’s use of the terms “illumination” and “beatitude.”

It is the spiritual aspect of the Beat Generation which I argue is the movement’s most important feature, and which is the focus of my thesis. I investigate the role of religion and spirituality in the work of the Beat movement, with a particular emphasis on the links between the Beats and traditional religious forms. My investigation responds to what I view as a gap within current Beat scholarship: although Beat texts are full of rich and varied religious and spiritual themes, the current critical understanding of this aspect of the movement is

incomplete. Particularly, the link between the Beats and traditional religious belief is largely unexplored. It is surprising that this aspect of the Beats is so widely neglected in current criticism, as the Beats' texts are packed with imagery and language that is clearly religious and spiritual. For example, Allen Ginsberg's best-known poem, *Howl*, is followed by a "Footnote to Howl" which, in its first two lines, repeats "Holy!" fifteen times. In the rest of the poem, Ginsberg continues to sanctify nearly everything he sees: "Holy the sea holy the desert holy the railroad holy the locomotive holy the / visions holy the hallucinations holy the miracles holy the eyeball holy / the abyss!" (28-30). Kerouac claims to see God himself in *On the Road*: "As we crossed the Colorado-Utah border I saw God in the sky in the form of huge gold sunburning clouds above the desert that seemed to point a finger at me and say, 'Pass here and go on, you're on the road to heaven'" (181). Gregory Corso's poem "Ecce Homo" describes a painting of the crucified Christ:

the nails went through the man to God.
 The crown of thorns (a superb idea!)
 and the sidewound (an atrocity!)
 only penetrate the man. (5-8)

And William S. Burroughs' short story, "The 'Priest' They Called Him," though ostensibly about drug addiction, has a striking Christian content. In the story, a drug addict gives his last bit of morphine to a suffering "Mexican kid" on Christmas night (117). After doing so, "He sat there and received the *immaculate fix* and since he was himself a priest there was no need to call one" (118).³

My thesis explores the abundant religious and spiritual material in Beat texts. I begin with the disciplines of religion and history and delineate what can be meant, and what I mean, by difficult, often confusing terms like religion and spirituality.⁴

Also, the context in which the Beats lived and worked is delineated by identifying major religious and spiritual trends in post-war America. Having clarified these preliminaries, I move into the literary discussion which is the major focus of this thesis. My major argument is that, amid the several religious influences on each writer, there is a particular tradition that informs and shapes each major Beat author's work. I identify this belief in the work of each author, and through a close reading of each major author's main works, I illustrate how this system of belief is one of the strongest influences on his writing. Beat literature and Beat religion are, I argue, inseparable: the Beat authors' beliefs are expressed through their literary forms and their view of writing itself. I also analyse how the Beats' work fits into the literary, religious and spiritual landscape of America. The Beats protested against the social conditions of their time with their often radical religious and spiritual beliefs, and, although they were often misunderstood during their time as anti-American because of this tendency, they were in fact taking part in a fundamental American tradition of spiritual protest which has shaped the nation since its founding. In this respect they follow in the footsteps of American writers, like the Transcendentalists Henry David Thoreau and Ralph Waldo Emerson, whose literature is concerned with spiritual protest.

In order to explore the religious and spiritual attitudes central to the Beat Generation, I analyse the texts of four Beat authors: William S. Burroughs, Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, and Gregory Corso. By limiting my research to these men, I am not arguing that these authors are the only authors within the Beat tradition. I simply view these authors' texts as the best subjects for the purposes of this study, encapsulating the core of Beat religion and spirituality. The question of who should and should not be included in the Beat Generation has been addressed by

many existing commentators, with some basic agreement reached but also much disagreement as to how widely the term can be applied. Many critics agree that Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, and William S. Burroughs are the major Beat authors.⁵ Others agree that while these authors are the major Beats, the canon can be widened around them. Carole Tonkinson writes that while the movement “was clearly centered on Kerouac, Ginsberg, and Burroughs,” it “incorporated East Coast writers such as John Clellon Holmes, Lucien Carr, and Gregory Corso” and “embrac[ed] the poets of the San Francisco Literary Renaissance, among them Gary Snyder, Philip Whalen, Lew Welch, Michael McClure, Joanne Kyger, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Philip Lamantia, Bob Kaufman” and even more like “Diane di Prima, Amiri Baraka (then LeRoi Jones), and still others” (11). Stephen Watson similarly expands the canon:

By the strictest definition, the Beat Generation consists of only William Burroughs, Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac, Neal Cassady, and Herbert Huncke, with the slightly later addition of Gregory Corso and Peter Orlovsky. By the most sweeping usage, the term includes most of the innovative poets associated with San Francisco, Black Mountain College, and New York’s Downtown scene. (5)⁶

While it is important to be aware of the influence of all those associated with the Beat Generation, it can be perilous to widen the definition too much. By amalgamating movements as diverse as the Black Mountain poets and the San Francisco Renaissance, the nuance and detail of these literary movements is lost. I agree with Edward Halsey Foster, who writes:

The word *beat* can too easily be appropriated to describe a range of experimental or innovative poets and novelists with little else in

common except a general resistance to academic poetry and to conservative values and politics in America during the 1950s. (3)

To avoid this misunderstanding, Foster limits the Beat canon to “four major Beat writers”: “William S. Burroughs, Gregory Corso, Allen Ginsberg, and Jack Kerouac. Others with whom they were associated and who strongly affected their work—Neal Cassady, Herbert Huncke, and Carl Solomon, for example—were not as committed to writing as were the original four” (1).⁷ Although Foster’s canon can be debated, a narrow focus is the best way to investigate Beat religion and spirituality, as it allows for the necessary precision to explore such a complex phenomenon as religion and allows space for a close reading of the major texts of each author. I also support Foster’s inclusion of Corso with the more accepted three major authors. Corso was an original member of the Beat coterie, associating with Burroughs, Ginsberg, and Kerouac in 1940s New York as they formed the movement. His unconventional background as a foster child and petty criminal, existing on the margins of society, was a great inspiration to these authors, particularly when the Beat Generation was in its infancy.

In the rest of this introductory chapter, I provide some background for my investigation, delineating the literary, religious, and historical context of the Beat Generation. The first section addresses the critical reception of Beat Generation literature, both in their time and in more contemporary studies. Problems with these critical studies are addressed, as well as where my own work fits in with these analyses. It is also necessary, before analysing difficult concepts like religion and spirituality in the Beats’ work, to explore what these terms can mean, and address some general religious and spiritual trends occurring in the post-war world. This is the subject of the second section of this chapter. I narrow my focus in the third

section of the chapter to explore American religious history and the turn toward religious forms that celebrate the individual and his subjectivities that has operated there for centuries. The Beats' work, which celebrates the individual, can be seen to take part in this American religious tradition. Finally, an outline of my thesis as a whole is provided, as I set out the chapters that follow.

Critical Reception

“After publishing my book about the Beat Generation I was asked to explain beatness on TV, on radio, by people everywhere. They were all under the impression that being beat was just a lot of frantic nowhere hysteria. What are you searching for? they asked me. I answered that I was waiting for God to show his face.” (Kerouac, “Lamb” 31)

Although the Beats' work abounds with religious and spiritual language and themes, the Beats are not appreciated as serious religious and spiritual authors. Their involvement in the 1960s counterculture and the negative media image that was propagated of the movement influenced a misunderstanding of the group, particularly during its time, as an anarchic, intellectually bankrupt cultural phenomenon with little literary value. Early reviewers and critics could not see past the taboo language, frank sexual content, and avant-garde form of works like Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*, Allen Ginsberg's *Howl*, and William S. Burroughs' *Naked Lunch*.

During the Beats' time, criticism of their work appeared mostly in magazines, and much of this early comment was negative and sensationalistic. Some of the earlier—and most vitriolic—examples of criticism are collected in Thomas Parkinson's *A Casebook on the Beat* (1961). Among the most notorious and scathing reviews of the Beats, reprinted there, is Norman Podhoretz' “The Know Nothing Bohemians,” which originally appeared in the Spring 1958 edition of

Partisan Review. Podhoretz sees the Beats as not only irrational, but also dangerous: “The bohemianism of the 1950s . . . is hostile to civilization; it worships primitivism, instinct, energy, ‘blood’” (204). He views works like *On the Road* as nonsensical, seeing only “contempt for coherent, rational discourse” in such writing (204).

Podhoretz concludes his article with a paranoid condemnation of the Beats’ “poverty of feeling” and irrationality: “whenever I hear anyone talking about instinct and being and the secrets of human energy . . . next thing you know he’ll be saying that violence is just fine . . . that kicking someone in the teeth or sticking a knife between their ribs are deeds to be admired” (211). Paul O’Neil expresses a similar sentiment in his “The Only Rebellion Around,” stating that the Beats revel in dissolution:

“They are talkers, loafers, passive little con men, lonely eccentrics, mom-haters, cop-haters, exhibitionists with abused smiles and second mortgages on a bongo drum” (235). Herbert Gold’s “The Beat Mystique” argues that the Beat Generation cannot be seen in a positive light, embracing “religion and rebellion; instead, it is a mob phenomenon” (255). And John Ciardi, like Podhoretz, sees the Beats as linked to juvenile delinquency, as “sensation seekers” (260). He agrees with Gold’s condemnation of the religious aspect of the movement, stating that the Beats are not “fool[s] for God,” but “playing the fool for the fun of it” (261).⁸

When the Beats are seen in a more positive light—either in reviews from their time period or in more contemporary criticism—there is a tendency to view them as a social, rather than literary, phenomenon.⁹ The Beats are often viewed—and valued—as pop-culture heroes rather than serious authors. Thus, while in recent years many Beat-related books have been published, much of this material is biographical or autobiographical, focusing on the Beats as personalities: collections of personal interviews, memoirs, journals, and even photographs.¹⁰ Critical, literary

studies of an academic nature are rarer. But even in more academic work, typically, if the Beats' religion and spirituality is addressed, it is only briefly and superficially discussed. It is not given the space and analysis that it needs, or it is framed in vague language that does not provide the necessary nuance for a discussion of such complicated concepts.

When the religious and spiritual quality of the Beats' work is acknowledged, there is a strong tendency to simply identify religious themes without elaborating or supporting this statement with close textual analysis. Critics often use vague, quasi-religious terminology like "mystical," "visionary," or "magic" to describe the Beats' spiritual attitudes and work.¹¹ For example, in a rebuttal of those critics like Podhoretz and Ciardi who could "see no sign of a search for spiritual values" in the Beat Generation ("Philosophy" 16), John Clellon Holmes writes:

The suggestion, at least in Kerouac's book [*On the Road*], is that beyond the violence, the drugs, the jazz, and all the other "kicks" in which it frantically seeks its identity, this generation will find a faith and become consciously—he believes that it is unconsciously already—a religious generation. ("Philosophy" 25)

Here, and in the rest of the essay, Holmes does not detail anything specific about the Beats' "spiritual values" or religious beliefs. He simply states that this aspect is present, and ultimately, his discussion does little to convince the reader that the Beats are, in fact, religious. Another early commentator, Elias Wilentz, in the introduction to his 1960 anthology *The Beat Scene*, states that there is "apparent in some of the [Beat] writings . . . a mystical withdrawal to the inner life" (10). But like Holmes, he does not expand on what he means by this, and the description is too vague to convey a meaningful religious aspect of the movement.

Later criticism is not much more detailed than Holmes and Wilentz's comments. In the introduction to *The Beats: Essays in Criticism* (1981), Lee Bartlett writes, "Again, the Beats were certainly concerned with spiritual matters, but aside from the fact of the spiritual quest itself, can we find a common thread running through their work?" (3). Although Bartlett goes on to name Catholicism and Hinduism as influences on Kerouac and Ginsberg respectively (3), he does not go into depth about either. The essays contained in his collection, while they contain strong literary analyses, do not comprehensively explore the role of religion in the Beats' work. Similarly, in A. Robert Lee's introduction to *The Beat Generation Writers* (1996), Lee quotes Holmes, who states that the Beats' interests "if they have included the criminality of narcotics, have also included the sanctity of monasteries" (1). However, Lee does not elaborate on what he thinks Holmes might have meant by this, and religion and spirituality is not central to the essays contained in Lee's collection.

Existing Beat criticism sometimes identifies a spiritual quest as a driving force of the Beat Generation and their literature, particularly in Kerouac's *On the Road*. But the nature of this spiritual quest is rarely elaborated upon, and without supporting this claim with close textual analysis, much discussion of such a theme remains unsatisfactory. For example, in "Philosophy of the Beat Generation," Holmes states that "What made them [the Beats] *beat* . . . was Kerouac's insistence that actually they were on a quest, and that the specific object of their quest was spiritual" (15). However, Holmes does not provide further details. Two essays in Kostas Myrsiades' anthology *The Beat Generation: Critical Essays* (2002) also mention the theme of spiritual quest. Steve Wilson contributes an article called "The Author as Spiritual Pilgrim: The Search for Authenticity in Jack Kerouac's *On the*

Road and *The Subterraneans*,” discussing how Kerouac is “[o]n a . . . quest for spiritual enlightenment” (78), but provides little specific information about what sort of spiritual enlightenment Kerouac seeks. Fiona Paton states in her essay that “Kerouac is better understood as a spiritual seeker with a deep attachment to place and community” (124), and identifies Kerouac’s novel *Doctor Sax* as having “serious religious content” (144). However, Paton only devotes a few pages to a discussion of this religious content; while her discussion can be illuminating, further explication is needed.

Furthermore, vague terminology is often used to frame the spiritual quest. For example, Steven Watson states, referring to *On the Road*, “Neal’s trip across the continent had the aura of a religious pilgrimage—the drive through the American landscape became a magic dream” (108). Here, Watson problematically uses the vocabulary of traditional religion — “pilgrimage”—alongside the phrase “magic dream.” Not only does Watson not elaborate on this densely packed statement, but he also fails to draw a distinction between what I see as the two very separate realms of magic and dream, which themselves are both very distinct from religion. By using imprecise terms like these without qualifying what he means by them, Watson’s comment is too vague to tell the reader anything about the wealth of religious and spiritual themes inherent in the text of *On the Road*. The lack of specificity about the nature of religious belief and textual evidence for this belief within existing Beat criticism means that, unfortunately, Beat religion and spirituality is left largely unexplored.

Defining Religion, Spirituality, and the Subjective Turn

The aim of this thesis is to provide a sharper account of the religious beliefs that shape the work of the Beat writers I consider. To make my discussion of religion and spirituality more precise, and to clear up existing confusion about these themes in Beat work, it is helpful to address what religion and spirituality can mean. Many scholars, from early commentators like Holmes and Wilentz to more contemporary critics like Lee and Watson, agree that the Beat Generation has a spiritual, or religious, dimension. But it is likely that all these scholars understand these terms in different ways, as do the Beat authors. Religion and spirituality refer to complex ideas that are difficult to express, let alone clearly delineate, and which may mean different things within different disciplines, such as literary criticism, religious studies, philosophy, and sociology. The terms have a long history, and their definitions have changed with the times. The following discussion does not purport to be a full historical study of religion, spirituality, or theology. Such analyses are far beyond the scope of this thesis; my main concern is the literature of the Beat Generation. Thus, my explorations of these wider themes are confined to those aspects which relate to the Beat Generation, and which illuminate the most important links between the Beats and these various realms of thought.¹²

Before investigating the meaning of spirituality, it is important to understand religion, as spirituality was once exclusively viewed as an aspect of religion. But the task of defining religion is not a simple one, though the difficulties in doing so are not insurmountable. One difficulty in defining religion is that definitions of religion are necessarily concerned with ideas of the transcendent and the supernatural. Religious experience typically cannot be described through the five senses and it cannot be empirically measured. Indeed, the existence of a deity cannot be “proven”

in any scientific way. Therefore, descriptions of this sort of experience necessarily must contain language that reflects this, which unfortunately is often very difficult to understand.

Further complicating the issue, some scholars believe that the very act of attempting to define religion is problematic, bringing with it certain biased assumptions. In the introduction to his collection *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*, Mark C. Taylor writes, “To ask, for example, ‘What is religion?’ assumes that religion has something like a general or even universal essence that can be discovered through disciplined investigation” (6). Taylor continues to state that some scholars believe that there is no such thing as “religion” as such at all:

Recent investigators working in a variety of fields have argued that religion is a historical phenomenon that emerges only in particular intellectual and cultural circumstances. . . . Investigators create—sometimes unknowingly—the objects and truths they profess to discover. Some critics claim that appearances to the contrary notwithstanding, religion is a *modern Western invention*. (5-6)¹³

Even if one decides that religion is something that can be defined, there are other difficulties in coming to a definition. For example, many scholars, especially contemporary ones, argue that religion does not necessarily entail the worship of gods or superhuman beings, but simply refers to a perception of something greater than the human—a higher, ultimate truth which transcends the temporary physical world—or a purpose to existence that is more than earthly life. Zygmunt Bauman quotes Jeffrey Alexander’s definition of religion, which relates to the Latin word which is its source, “religio”: “the name we give to the activity that allows us to feel we are in contact with this noumenal world ‘beyond our own,’ which to be sure is a

world of the imagination, of projected fantasy and the sensibility of the unconscious mind” (qtd. in Bauman 56). While Alexander's definition highlights an important aspect of religion—the belief in the existence of a higher, transcendent realm—it does not make clear how religion is set apart from simple imagination.

In *Popular Religion in America*, Peter W. Williams provides a more comprehensive definition of religion:

a system of symbolic beliefs and actions—myths, rituals, and creeds and their supporting social structures—which provides its adherents with a coherent interpretation of their universe. Religion is a process of cosmos-construction: it creates order out of chaos, and informs its constituency with a sense of meaning, purpose, and significance that would otherwise be lacking. (9)

This definition indicates that the essential function of religion is to explain the universe, and carries with it the implication that religion, then, fulfills an innate human need for order. Williams' stating that religion serves human needs does open his definition to challenge, but the definition does not isolate this order-creating function as the only important, defining one. It also addresses other important aspects of religion, such as belief, action, and social structure, giving a more comprehensive idea of the concept. Peter Clarke and Peter Byrne also discuss a useful definition of religion in *Religion Defined and Explained*:

In summary religions are human institutions which typically have theoretical, practical, experiential, and social dimensions. They are distinguished by characteristic kinds of objects (gods or transcendent things), goals (salvation or liberation), and functions (the provision of meaning and unity to group or individual life). (13)¹⁴

This definition, like Williams', identifies the varied facets of religious belief, giving the reader a comprehensive idea of what religion entails. The authors then provide more detail, naming specific elements of these major dimensions of religion: the theoretical dimension contains “myths and doctrines,” the practical dimension deals with “rites and moral codes,” while the social dimension contains “churches, priests, monks” and the experiential “emotions, visions, attitudes” (12). This definition highlights what the authors view as the most important qualities of religion—the four major dimensions—and provides specific information about each dimension, providing a useful overall view of the concept.

For the most part, I use the term religion to refer to a social phenomenon in which individuals search for and interact with a higher source of meaning—often, though not necessarily, a supernatural being—typically through some form of engagement with an organised institution and its doctrines. This understanding is not meant to be definitive, or to put to rest debate on what religion means within religious studies. I choose this definition of religion in order to sharpen my literary discussion of religion in Beat works, making my treatment of such a complex phenomenon as clear and illuminating as possible.

The term spirituality is just as troublesome as the term religion, if not more so. Spirituality is often used in a much vaguer, more popular sense than is religion, particularly within the literature of and about the 1960s countercultural movement. Also, the term is sometimes used as a synonym for religion, or as a catch-all term for behaviours and ideas that would not fall within the category of religion, or that might have a slight religious element. For example, phenomena like yoga and meditation, self-improvement and positive thinking, or even a sense of well-being or a

contemplative experience of nature are often considered to be spiritual in a popular sense of the word.

Before exploring what spirituality can mean on its own, it is important to consider it within the context in which it began, as an aspect of religion. This history of the term serves as a starting point for contemporary definitions thereof. The Christian theologian Alastair McGrath discusses the role of spirituality within Christianity. Within Christian discourse spirituality refers to a believer's personal, private relationship with God, as opposed to his social, church-orientated relationship with the deity. McGrath defines spirituality as “the outworking in real life of a person's religious faith—what a person does with what they believe” (2). Although this may seem to characterize spirituality as something outward, “what a person does with what they believe” is based upon that individual's subjective, personal interpretation of his religious beliefs. McGrath continues, stating that spirituality is “the preferred way of referring to aspects of the devotional practices of a religion, and especially the interior individual experiences of believers. It is often contrasted with a purely academic, objective, or detached approach to a religion” (2). From McGrath’s definition, one can infer that this aspect of Christian spirituality deals with the personal, involved, and even emotional or passionate side of religious experience.¹⁵

Paul Fiddes, in *The Novel, Spirituality, and Modern Culture*, explains how the concept of spirituality has widened over time, to exist not only within but also outside its religious context. He traces the history of the word: in the seventeenth century, it meant “ascetic,” but its meaning has shifted over time. Fiddes states:

[Spirituality] has often been used to express the “reaching out” of the whole person towards realities which transcend the world of the senses.

This usage has the advantage of being applicable to various religions, and indeed to non-religious experience as well; it might denote *any* awareness of the “mystery at the heart of life” that cannot be contained within empirical-scientific experiences of the world.

(11)

This understanding of spirituality as pertaining to non-empirical knowledge and experience is helpful, particularly since the four major Beat authors are all highly concerned with moving away from empirical knowledge as the only “true” knowledge toward embracing the irrational. However, Fiddes himself admits that this definition is virtually indistinguishable from that of religion. Therefore, he elaborates, stating that spirituality can be found both inside and outside traditional faith: “For Christian believers, this spirituality will centre upon a journey into the fellowship of the triune God . . . but a spiritual journey can be recognized in those of other faiths and none” (12). Fiddes’ observation supports my claim that religion is not best understood by Alexander’s definition, as “the mystery at the heart of life,” since this aspect of life that transcends the empirical is also perceived within non-religious experience and by those without religious faith.

David Black, a psychoanalyst, investigates the meaning of spirituality, and finds that his patients use the term in several different ways. In one usage, patients mean “connected to the universe”: this is the sense of something higher that Alexander uses as the basis of his definition of religion. But a distinction between the two terms is illuminated in another way Black’s clients use the term: to refer to

the existence of a “pure, uncorrupted core of being” within oneself (135). Within religious discourse, things pure and holy typically exist outside the self, perhaps within a separate, divine realm, or embodied in a superhuman deity. Though these things may at times be manifested in the created world, they originate in a being outside it. While a human being can become pure and holy, this is typically achieved through devotion to the pure entity or realm that exists outside and above the self. This idea of the sacred as within the self, rather than above and outside it, separates spirituality from religion in Black’s definition.¹⁶

My investigation of the meanings of the term spirituality, and how it may differ from religion, is meant to clarify the terms and facilitate an understanding of the subtle distinctions between them. However, there is a danger in attempting to distinguish too sharply between the two. In *The Spiritual Revolution: Why Religion is Giving Way to Spirituality*, Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead discuss what is called a “subjective turn” in contemporary life: “a turn away from ‘life-as’ (life lived as a dutiful wife, father, husband, strong leader, self-made man etc.) to ‘subjective life’ (life lived in deep connection with the unique experiences of my self-in-relation)” (3). Heelas and Woodhead go on to make a link between these states of life and religion and spirituality: “One of the great virtues of the language of ‘life-as’ and ‘subjective-life’ is that it enables us to sharpen up the distinction between ‘religion’ and ‘spirituality’ by distinguishing between life-as religion and subjective-life spirituality” (5). In their study, Heelas and Woodhead imply that spirituality and religion have become different concepts entirely, reflecting the needs of contemporary men and women. This distinction reflects Heelas and Woodhead's focus upon the idea of religion as institutional and conformist, which neglects the possibility for religion to be something personal, radical, and anti-institutional.

Furthermore, while Heelas and Woodhead view both religion and spirituality as concerned with “the mystery at the heart of life,” they believe that spirituality attempts to commune with this mystery primarily through worldly things, while religion includes an aspect which reaches out past this world to another, and a relation to certain specific symbolic behaviours. Such a generalization is problematic, not taking into account all forms of religious expression; for example, in the Catholic faith the created world is a major locus for experience of the divine. While Heelas and Woodhead’s polarized view of religion and spirituality attempts to clear up two problematic terms, such an interpretation of the terms can lead to a biased view of religion as purely authoritarian and repressive.

From a brief survey of what spirituality has meant historically and can mean now, it is clear that this term is just as complex, if not more so, than religion. It is impossible to come to a definitive definition of the term, but for the purposes of this thesis, I understand spirituality as the personal, individual interpretation of religious belief. Thus, it is strongly connected to subjectivity, as stated by McGrath. It is also important to acknowledge that the term can also refer to a search for something transcendent or greater than the human outside the realm of the traditional faiths. It is essential to my argument that spirituality cannot be totally separated from, or opposed to, religion, as Heelas and Woodhead attempt to do. Spirituality grew out of religious belief, and while it does exist at times on its own, it is also a key aspect of traditional religious belief, inherent within its structure. It is this spiritual, subjective aspect of religion which three of the major Beats in my thesis, Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac, and Gregory Corso focus on in their work. They bring this subjective quality of their respective faiths to the surface, and see within such

subjectivity a strong potential for redemption: not only for themselves, but for America as a whole.

Any discussion of religion and spirituality must take into account that these phenomena do not exist in a vacuum—they shape and are shaped by the social conditions in which they exist. Inextricably linked to the Beats' religious and spiritual attitudes is their dissatisfaction with some trends prevalent in post-war American society. For example, the Beats believed that Western society relied too heavily upon technology and reason, which they believed to encroach upon the individual and his freedom of expression and ultimately create a spiritually stultified America. This attitude is not the sole preserve of the movement but part of a massive shift that occurred in the post-war Western world. At this time, there was a paradigm shift away from a modern worldview, based in the thought of the Enlightenment. This modern worldview is characterised by reliance upon empirical science, reason, sensory perception, and a search for truth and unity.¹⁷ Such a worldview, some scholars believe, is hostile to religious belief.¹⁸ David Ray Griffin states, “God, transcendent values, and the human soul (with freedom), which are at the heart of any significant religious vision based upon the biblical tradition, are not allowed to play a role in the universe by the ‘modern scientific worldview’” (2). He continues, arguing that theology “has been considered irrelevant. . . . In modern liberal society, salvation is to be achieved through material progress” (2). The Beats take part in this wider discussion about the role of religion in the modern world: like Griffin, the authors believe that a worldview too reliant on technology, science, and reason leaves no room for religious and spiritual forms in post-war America.

Several events occurred in the mid-twentieth century which caused the tenets of the modern worldview to be widely questioned. During the Second World War,

humans used technology to create such horrors as the atomic bomb and the gas chambers of the Holocaust. These events served as undeniable evidence that science—previously trusted as beneficial and aiding the advancement of humankind during the modern age—could be used as readily against the human race as in its aid. Indeed, these events forced humanity to question all their previous ways of ordering the world: not only their faith in empirical science, but also their faith in other major traditions. Gordon Kaufman states that, due to the bomb and its impact, humanity “can no longer take for granted the ultimate authority and truth of tradition” (19). Brent Waters describes the worldview that results when these previous traditions are discarded:

The world really was a chaotic place, even more erratic than the champions of providence had dared to imagine. There are no ironclad laws governing either nature or history. Humans are the result of evolutionary accidents, and history is merely a subjective interpretation of past events and future aspirations. (114)

Some thinkers believe that religion itself is not viable for the post-war world. Linked to their problematic discussion of the definition of religion and spirituality, Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead see in the post-war era an abandonment of the former for the latter. Instead of choosing a side in the secularization debate, Heelas and Woodhead present an alternative viewpoint with what they term “the subjectivisation thesis” (10): the idea that people are abandoning traditional, institutional religious forms and moving toward spiritual forms that cultivate individual subjectivities. While I agree with Heelas and Woodhead that there is a turn toward subjectivity operating within post-war religion and spirituality, I argue that such a subjective turn, rather than necessitating a turn away from all forms of

organised religion, can operate within it.¹⁹ I support the idea that, after the events of the Second World War, humanity was forced to re-evaluate the structures through which it understood the world and their role within the universe. And it is true that during this time of restructuring, subjectivisation can be evidenced in a complete turn away from traditional religious forms toward new, alternative religions or solitary spiritual quests. These new religious and spiritual explorations, which flourished in 1960s America, and their link to the counterculture, are extremely well documented.²⁰ But to view these New Age spiritualities as the only “subjective-life” forms and to overlook the revival of subjective elements within the traditional religions is a mistake. I see, rather than a complete dismissal of traditional religious forms, a tendency to mine these extant religious traditions for those aspects individuals view as most relevant to their world, and to combine those sometimes disparate traditions.²¹

The Beat writers take part in several larger-scale post-war religious and spiritual trends. The work of all four major Beats reflects the backlash against a modern, rational worldview. Podhoretz’ accusation that the Beats have a “contempt for rational discourse” is certainly true (204), though I would argue that this is a positive, regenerative quality, rather than a dangerous one. Evidenced in their major works is a turn toward religious and spiritual forms which celebrate the irrational. They also combine disparate traditions and beliefs to create distinctive, individual worldviews, taking part in the hybridity characteristic of post-war religious behaviour. For example, William S. Burroughs rejects the scientific, objective view of the material world characteristic of modernity. He also largely rejects organised religious belief, viewing it, similarly to Heelas and Woodhead, as authoritarian and repressive, encroaching upon the freedoms of the individual. This rejection of

religion does not mean, however, that Burroughs cannot be considered a spiritual author. Burroughs' work can be seen to have some spiritual themes, if one understands spiritual—like Fiddes—as finding transcendence outside a religious context. Burroughs believes that the universe is more than material: he believes in a magical universe in which individuals directly control the world around them. The other three main Beat authors' work is shaped by traditional religious beliefs. Allen Ginsberg abandons the logocentric modern Western tradition, embracing the fragmented, often chaotic Jewish exegetical tradition called midrash. He also believes himself to undergo a mystical experience—an auditory hallucination—which cannot be explained in terms of modern, empirical science. Jack Kerouac and Gregory Corso are both Catholics, and view the created world not as scientific, rational, and objective, but as sacramental, infused with the divine. Corso takes this view a step further, focusing on the Eucharist and transubstantiation, during which bread and wine is believed to become the literal flesh and blood of Christ: a transformation which, like Ginsberg's mystical experience, cannot be explained in terms of modern science and views of material reality.

American Religious History and the Beats' Subjective Turn

“Beat comes out, actually, of old American whoopee” (Kerouac, “Origins” 65).

The Beat Generation not only takes part in the large-scale shift from a rational, scientific worldview to a more irrational, chaotic one, but also takes part in a broader Western trend toward subjectivity within organised religious forms. This tendency toward subjective forms within traditional religion is visible throughout the Western world after the two world wars, but has always been a part of American

religious history. A brief survey of American religion makes it clear that the Beats are hardly the dissolute anti-Americans their detractors accused them of being. Instead, they take part in spiritual trends that have been present since the foundation of America, and which continue to influence its history.

This tradition of subjectivity within organised religion, always extant in America, began to be visible on a broader scale during the tumultuous, unsettled period after the two world wars. The social changes that had occurred facilitated a larger-scale turn toward individual, subjective forms within traditional religious thought. For example, Christian theology began to explore the role of the body, a locus of subjectivity and sensual experience. This new discipline was called body theology.²² This discipline was not founded upon new ideas, but focuses on existing aspects of the tradition, such as the incarnation, life and crucifixion of Christ. These aspects of Christianity are understood through a focus on Christ's bodily experience on earth and links to the bodily experience of humanity. This interest in the body within Christianity takes place at the same time as the 1960s sexual revolution, revealing a perhaps surprising parallel between countercultural and traditional religious thought. The counterculture's celebration of the body and sexuality was more dramatic than the subtle shift to exploring bodily elements of Christianity and moving away from a view of the flesh as sinful, but the concern with the body within both realms illustrates that traditional religion is not necessarily opposed to the counterculture, as many scholars of the 1960s seem to believe.

Evidence for a subjective turn also exists within post-war Catholicism, which was often viewed—particularly by Protestants—as a very authoritarian and rigid faith, characterised by a hierarchical structure and doctrine of papal infallibility. John Dolan writes, “The existentialism of the post-war era has especially placed

Catholicism in an entirely new spiritual climate which directs man toward a more personal encounter with the world, a commitment to humanity, and a deeper comprehension of the human condition” (214). The authoritarian nature of Catholicism was transformed by the Second Vatican Council of 1962, which relaxed some of the church’s rules, placing more power with the individual rather than with the clergy, and adopting a more ecumenical stance.²³ The Catholic Charismatic Renewal, which began around 1967, also reflected a subjective turn within the faith. The charismatic movement focused on experience of the Holy Spirit exhibited in ecstatic religious experience and had formerly only existed in Protestant and non-denominational churches. While Catholics had previously been interested in more dynamic worship, they had been suppressed, but the freeing influence of Vatican II allowed them to explore these forms. The Catholic Charismatic Renewal also reflects the hybridity characteristic of the post-war era with its blending of Protestant and Catholic traditions.

Another major faith heavily affected by the Second World War was Judaism. Six million Jews were slaughtered during the Holocaust, and, understandably, Jewish theology was heavily impacted. While some Jews questioned their faith, others turned to their religion to attempt to make sense of these events.²⁴ This return to classical faith can be seen as stemming from distrust for the technology, so trusted during the modern period, which had made the Holocaust possible. As in Christianity, post-war Judaism focused upon the human: the individual human body, the human race as a whole, what it meant to be a Jewish person. The field of existential theology within Judaism explored these striking questions about the role of humanity. Byron Sherwin elaborates:

Earlier modern Jewish thought tended to subordinate classical Jewish literature, especially Talmudic and Kabbalistic literature, to modern European philosophy and to science. The Jewish existentialists, by contrast, sought to articulate an “authentic” Judaism, rooted in classical Jewish religious sources and ideas. (125)

The decline of the rational, modern worldview allowed Jews to explore aspects of their faith that had been dismissed during this time of reason and science, such as the mystical Kabbalism mentioned above, which attracted the attention of major post-war Jewish scholars such as Gershom Scholem and Martin Buber.

In the Beats’ America, the subjective turn within organised religion is not only evident in the post-war era; it has a long history, reaching back to the country’s founding principles. Although it is true that the Beats protested against many major American wartime and post-war ideas and institutions, they can be seen to take part in other, longer-standing religious and spiritual traditions. Historically, America has encouraged religious fragmentation and plurality, celebrating the power of the individual to make his own way, particularly in the sphere of religious belief.

Protestantism—the most mainstream religion in America—began as a Christian sect which broke away from the highly institutional medieval church. The Puritans who founded one of America’s first colonies were also religious dissenters seeking freedom of expression for their beliefs. Throughout America’s history, multiple groups of religious dissenters broke away from more traditional Puritan and Protestant establishments to form their own unique sects and denominations to accommodate their individual religious convictions. By taking part in the protest culture of the 1960s, for example, breaking away from a society they viewed as spiritually sterile, the Beats take part in an American tradition of religious dissent.²⁵

Beginnings of a subjective turn are evident in the first half of the eighteenth century, in the religious revivals of the First Great Awakening. George Marsden writes that the scattered revivals of the time “were revolutionary in that most of them challenged established authority by appealing directly to the people. In most of British North America preaching had been reserved for a highly educated elite” (25). This shift from classical to vernacular language asserted that the individual parishioner, not just the educated pastor, was important within the church; it illustrated the desire for a move away from a hierarchical church structure to a more egalitarian one. Marsden continues, “[Popular Awakening preacher George] Whitefield and his imitators frankly appealed to the emotions of their listeners, a practice shocking in an ‘enlightened’ age when rationality was so highly valued both within and outside the churches” (26). This style of preaching asserted the importance of the listening congregation, and the focus on emotional response illustrates a turn away from the rational language and mode of thought of the time to more subjective forms—a turn that presages the Romantic movement of the nineteenth century as well as the work of the Beats.²⁶

More evidence of the subjective turn in American religious history exists in the fertile religious climate of the early and mid-nineteenth century, an unsettled time—similar to the post-war period—when much social change was underway. Of this time, Winthrop Hudson writes:

there was an absence of tradition and a sense of pregnant possibility which encouraged a spirit of experimentation. Nor was this experimentation inhibited by law. Unlimited freedom had been granted religious expression, no matter how eccentric it might be. And an abundance of cheap land and open space provided an

unequalled opportunity to implement and institutionalize religious ideas. (182)

For example, adherents of the Romantic, Unitarian, and Transcendental movements continued to turn away from the rational, scientific Enlightenment mode of thought that characterised the modern worldview to forms valuing intuition, individual perception, and the spiritual, rather than the material, realm.²⁷

Also during the mid-nineteenth century, many new Christian groups broke away from traditional forms of the religion to forge their own paths, such as the Mormons (a polygamous sect), and the Oneida and Shaker communities (Marsden 79-82). Less radical groups that emerged during this time were the Holiness movement, which was popular among Methodists, stressed piety, and criticized the extravagances of wealthy, prestigious churches; the Pentecostal movement, which focused upon charismatic gifts such as speaking in tongues; and the millennial Seventh-Day Adventists and Jehovah's Witnesses (Hudson 342-50). All these new strains of Christianity provide evidence that American Christians interpreted their religion in ways that were particular to their own individual beliefs, ideals, and needs. Even within religious forms that are often viewed as authoritarian, such as the Puritanism and Calvinism of early America, there can still be a space for the exploration of subjectivity, and the fragmentation of a single tradition to accommodate many personal needs.

In twentieth-century America, cultural shifts brought about by the First and Second World Wars inspired a widespread religious and spiritual revival. Many scholars of American religion and spirituality choose to focus on the new movements occurring within the American youth counterculture, such as the burgeoning interest in Eastern religions, but it is important not to neglect the changes occurring within

traditional American faiths. As mentioned above, large-scale paradigm shifts within Christianity—the focus on body theology, for example, and the changes of the Second Vatican Council—affected American mainstream religion. Additionally, some exceptional Protestant churches served as compelling evidence for a pronounced subjective turn within American mainline religion in the post-war period. While liberal Protestantism has a tradition of being more orientated toward subjectivity than its conservative counterparts, during the 1960s, a few exceptional Protestant churches became far more liberal than the norm. Examples of these include the Glide Memorial Methodist Church, St. John's, and Grace Cathedral, which were all located in the Bay Area, a countercultural centre in the sixties. These churches stressed interpersonal relationships and individual emotions, and did not condemn the pursuit of earthly pleasure. Their worship style was more emotive and joyful, like many “celebratory” black churches, focusing on ecstatic personal experience of the divine (Wolfe 227-44). In Glide Church, no Christian symbols were displayed, and people of all faiths were welcome to worship there. These ultra-liberal congregations were very rare, but they illustrate some important points. While to the outsider it may be questionable whether the activities occurring there constitute religion or “worship,” participants viewed themselves to be a part of Protestant Christianity. Additionally, it illustrates that—although this example is rare—that even traditional mainstays of American Christianity were not utterly incompatible with the countercultural movement.

A brief survey of traditional religion—both throughout Western culture during the post-war period, and in America throughout its history—provides strong evidence for the existence of a subjective turn within traditional religion. An awareness of this tradition of individual expression, impulse, emotion, and

subjectivity sets the context for the Beats' own subjective turn, and serves as evidence against the conception of the Beats as anti-American and dissolute. All four major Beats participate in a large-scale turn away from the rational modern worldview to elements of religion and spirituality which celebrate the mystery inherent in the universe, and the possibility of finding a form of enchantment and *jouissance* in a shell-shocked, fractured post-war world. By doing so—particularly through returning to and restructuring traditional religious belief, bringing out those aspects latent within them that celebrate the individual, subjectivity, bodily experience, chaos, and fragmentation—they take part in an established tradition of American religious protest.

Outline of the Research

Delineating the terms religion and spirituality and setting the context for understanding the Beats as taking part in both broader Western and American historical and religious trends provides a strong foundation for my own research. While I argue that Beat religion and spirituality is largely misunderstood within existing criticism, there are a few critics whose approaches are similar to my own. However, when Beat religion and spirituality is given the analysis that it warrants, critics tend to focus on the Buddhist aspect of the Beat Generation. Carole Tonkinson's *Big Sky Mind: Buddhism and the Beat Generation* (1996) is devoted to exploring the role of the Buddhist faith within the work of major and peripheral Beats, and is probably the most thorough and incisive study of the role of Buddhism within the Beat Generation as a whole. As for criticism on single Beat authors, Tony Trigilio has devoted his book, *Allen Ginsberg's Buddhist Poetics* (2007), to the study of Buddhism in Allen Ginsberg's work, and Matt Theado's *Understanding Jack*

Kerouac (2000) devotes a chapter to the significance of Buddhism in Kerouac's *Tristessa* and *Visions of Gerard* (123-40).²⁸ Buddhism is important to the Beats, but it is just one aspect of their spirituality. The authors' beliefs are multifaceted and hybrid, bringing in many varied influences. I agree that Buddhist themes are certainly present, and that Buddhism is an important aspect of Beat literature and spirituality, but extensive critical attention has already been given to this topic. By contrast, the Beats' celebration of religious and spiritual forms which embrace irrationality, and particularly the influence of organized Western religious traditions on the Beats' work are just as important as Buddhism, and currently largely unexplored.

A few critics have commented on important Beat religious and spiritual themes apart from Buddhism. However, they all ultimately fail to link these themes to the traditional Western religious and spiritual forms which influence the Beat authors, and thus miss what I argue is an essential aspect of Beat spirituality. However, it is important to acknowledge the work of these critics, which helps form a base for my research. One important aspect of Beat writing that a few contemporary critics recognize is its critique of the mid-century world, in which the Beat authors saw technology and rationality as eroding the rich American traditions of individuality and spirituality. John Tytell, in his seminal study *Naked Angels: The Lives and Literature of the Beat Generation* (1976), describes this period:

The postwar era was a time of . . . profound powerlessness as far as individual effort was concerned. . . . The nuclear blasts in Japan had created new sources of terror, and the ideology of technology became paramount; science was seen as capable of totally dominating man and his environment. (5)

John Lardas agrees, arguing in *The Bop Apocalypse: The Religious Visions of Kerouac, Ginsberg, and Burroughs* (first published in 2000) that the Beats saw the post-war world as “increasingly hostile to nonlinear, nonrational, and mystical thought processes” (93). Gregory Stephenson also sees a decline in individuality, due mainly to an overreliance on technology. He writes in *Daybreak Boys* (1990), “At the psychological level the crisis manifested itself as an insidious dehumanization and depersonalization of life” (175). Stephenson also argues that the Beats saw, with the increasing reliance on technology and reason in their culture: “the alienation of humankind from the sacred energies of the spirit within and the corresponding desacralization of life and the natural world” (*Daybreak* 177).

All four major Beat authors reject the prevailing glorification of the scientific, the rational, and the objective, replacing it with alternative religious and spiritual worldviews—all slightly different, but all positioned against such rationality—that they believe to have salvific potential. These worldviews stress sensation and instinct, and go beyond embracing simple individuality to celebrate irrationality. Tytell states that this tendency toward irrationality could be so strong that “in the terms of their time, the Beats were regarded as madmen” (*Naked Angels* 10). Such “madness” was “induced . . . with drugs, with criminal excess, and the pursuits of ecstasy” (*Naked Angels* 11). The Beats’ very rejection of safe, conventional, materially secure American society to embrace the marginalised would be viewed by most Americans as irrational. The Beats rejected this mainstream to embrace the dangerous world of drug users and petty criminals like Herbert Huncke, of outsiders like Gregory Corso and Neal Cassady who came from impoverished backgrounds outside the strictures of the American middle class. But although these behaviours might seem “mad” to the average American citizen, the Beats saw in the

irrational, in the “mad” segments of society, a chance for redemption. Tytell views Beat madness as truly purposeful madness, combating the sterility of mainstream America. The authors “dramatized the irrational, the oral, and the improvisatory to provoke the end of an omnipresent stupor”; they aimed to do so through “transform[ing] consciousness” (*Naked Angels* 259).

The very concept of “beat,” for which the movement is named, can be seen as a key expression and celebration of irrationality through its embrace of suffering and degradation as a route to exaltation and salvation.²⁹ Stephenson sees beatness as a part of the lives of the Beat authors, as well as a characteristic of their work. The Beats first underwent “the Beat condition: weary, defeated, resigned, despondent, burdened with guilt and crime and sin, or caught in a blind search for understanding” (*Daybreak* 3).³⁰ Through this struggle, the Beat writers found “attainment of vision and . . . the communication of vision to the human community” through their work (*Daybreak* 3). This template of redemption through suffering is the template for Beat writing, Stephenson argues: “the literature of the Beats characteristically records a descent into the darkness and the depths of the psyche . . . and then ultimately, a renewal of the self and an ascending impulse toward equilibrium or transcendence” (*Daybreak* 8). He then states that this process of finding redemption through suffering is at the root of the Beat embrace of madness and outsiders which Tytell discusses above. Stephenson states that beatness understood in this way “may be seen to represent the foundation for certain common traits of the literature of the Beat Generation” (8). These “common traits” include:

the treatment of the themes of criminality, obscenity, and madness in Beat writing. These qualities are . . . expressions of the dark underside of the psyche—the realm of appetite and chaos . . . the

refuge of forbidden desires and repressed impulses; the abode of powers at once destructive and creative. (*Daybreak* 9)³¹

In addition to madness, the Beats also view writing as a means of sacred escape from the spiritual barrenness of America. The writers find palliative holiness within the textual: they believe that the problems they see in society can be “cured” through writing that celebrates the irrational and the individual. In *Understanding the Beats* (1992), Foster writes of the Beat authors, “Their object was to find a way out of that [post-war] world, and their means were fiction and poetry. Literature allowed the writer to see things as they were while at the same time providing an entry into transcendent realities” (xii-xiii). Foster sees the influence of the Transcendentalists in this tendency: “the Beats constitute an essential link in that specifically American literary tradition, traceable to Emerson and Thoreau, which insists that the individual is superior to any consensus and that poetry and fiction, in so far as they testify to this, constitute a sacred task” (197). Lardas also explores the Beat idea that writing—and existing texts from which the Beats draw inspiration—can be considered sacred. The thesis of Lardas’ *The Bop Apocalypse* is that the spiritual aspect of the Beats was largely predicated on the Beats’ understanding of German philosopher Oswald Spengler’s *The Decline of the West*. Not only did the Beats use Oswald Spengler’s *The Decline of the West* as an “esoteric text centering their spiritual quest” (81), argues Lardas, they saw writing as a spiritual act: “As each Beat made a sustained effort to make his work an organic extension of his life, the act of writing took on religious significance” (171).

Lardas, Stephenson, and Laurence Coupe all attempt to identify the roots of the Beats’ attempts to sacralise sterile post-war culture through an embrace of the irrational, characterised by their idea of beatness, and the idea of writing as sacred.

However, none of these critics acknowledge the compelling links between these Beat attitudes and traditional religious forms, which I argue have a major influence on the movement. Lardas ignores such influences completely, viewing the Beats as creating their own alternative tradition: “the Beats’ social vision was an appeal to a new form of religiosity, free from the infringement of the dominant institutions and standards” (99). Stephenson sees in the Beats’ work an attempt “[t]o redeem and revitalize the life of our culture and our individual lives” which have been damaged by “the appalling slaughter and devastation of the world wars” and the “misguided faith in rationality and materialism, in the analytical faculties of the mind, in the narrow dogmatism of logical positivism and scientism” (*Daybreak* 8). He also argues that the Beats attempt to re-sacralise this world, stating that the movement’s goal was to “rediscover the nexus that joins individual human beings, the human community, nature, and divinity” (*Daybreak* 177). The Beats find this “nexus,” Stephenson argues, in “primitive processes of spiritual transmutation that consist of initiatory ordeals resulting ultimately in communion with vital and cosmic forces” (*Daybreak* 177). This revival of themes of quest and initiation ties the Beats to myth: Stephenson argues that the Beats attempt the “creation or reactivation of myth as a primary mode of expression,” which he terms “the mythopoetic sensibility” (*Daybreak* 183). Stephenson also sees in the Beats’ writing an “aspiration to sacramental vision” (*Daybreak* 183). The term sacramental is complex, with a very particular meaning within Christian, particularly Catholic, theology, but Stephenson seems to use the term more widely, as a term applicable to any sort of religious or quasi-religious experience. Using the term in this way without delineating what the term means in its original, Catholic context, or what he means by the term, makes Stephenson’s argument somewhat imprecise.³² He views various Beat phenomena—

such as the “transcendent visions” and “direct mystical awareness of ‘the secret meaning of things’” in Lawrence Ferlinghetti’s poetry; the “transcendent infinite” in Gregory Corso’s; and the “deep joy and metaphysical insight” in Kerouac’s writing—as examples of this “sacramental vision” (*Daybreak* 184). But by relying on vague terms such as “primitive,” “vision,” “cosmic,” and “transcendence”—which can be used in a religious or a non-religious sense—without qualifying them or identifying the context in which he is using them, Stephenson’s argument lacks nuance.

Although its major focus is the relationship between Beat writing and the popular music of the mid-twentieth century, Laurence Coupe’s *Beat Sound, Beat Vision: The Beat Spirit and Popular Song* (2007) contains a few insights into the links between Beat spirituality and Christianity. Coupe argues that the Beats are influenced by “Emerson’s understanding that the essence of Christianity is mystical wisdom rather than theological doctrine” (29). Coupe also sees the “beat-down” aspect of beatness as a part of the radical Christian tradition: “Christianity . . . is reaffirmed and validated within the context of the Beat commitment to genuinely alternative values. The voluntary embrace of poverty and simplicity . . . is sanctioned by the example of Jesus Christ and his imitators” (64). Coupe links the Beats’—particularly Kerouac’s—interest in exploring what Stephenson terms the “darkness and the depths of the psyche” to the *via negativa* tradition of Christianity. This strand of the religion is opposite and complementary to the *via positiva*, which affirms creation; the *via negativa* advocates an embrace of the darker aspects of life, such as suffering, emptiness, and pain, and follows a “theology of the cross” (Coupe 74).³³ However, Coupe only devotes a paragraph of his discussion to the link

between the *via negativa* and the Beats. I argue that there is enough of a connection between them to warrant much more research.

Coupe also comments briefly on the links to a radical Christian tradition evident in Allen Ginsberg's interest in the author William Blake, who can be viewed as a radical Christian mystic.³⁴ While Blake was Christian, he took much poetic licence in the interpretation of Christian texts and dogma. He "felt able to rewrite it [the Bible] totally according to the dictates of his imagination, which he took to be a spiritual force" (101). Blake conflated traditional ideas of God with the Enlightenment,³⁵ viewing both as repressive, and was instead drawn to the figure of Christ, whom he viewed as a "liberating myth, not a literal truth" (Coupe 101). Although Coupe does not acknowledge this point, it is clear here that the text—and the creative rewriting of text—is viewed by Blake as a sacred act. So, considering the Beat view of text and writing as a religious act, it makes sense for Ginsberg to be interested in the work of Blake, which was a great inspiration to the author's own poetry.

Although critics like Tytell, Stephenson, Lardas, and Coupe have identified some useful religious and spiritual themes in Beat work, there are still many problems within their analyses. None of these critics connects these themes to existing religious traditions except Coupe, whose discussion is very brief. Lardas holds a view of the Beats as averse to existing religious traditions: he writes, "the Beats neither wrote nor acted within an institutionalised religious tradition. They invented their own" (17). Such a view, I argue, is mistaken, and based upon a flawed understanding of religion, similar to that of Heelas and Woodhead, as exclusively authoritarian and oppressive. Lardas dismisses the influence of existing religious traditions on the Beats, instead devoting his entire spiritual biography of the

Beats to tracing the influence of Spengler. I argue that this approach is somewhat myopic: while Spengler's work is one of many influences on Beat spirituality, I do not believe that it is the strongest, most striking, or most culturally relevant one.³⁶

While Stephenson acknowledges the meaning of beatness as a journey from suffering to enlightenment, his discussion of the concept is hindered by his reliance on vague terminology, which is too imprecise for a discussion of complex religious and spiritual concepts.

To accomplish my main aim of identifying and analysing the most influential religious or spiritual attitude in each major Beat author's texts—focusing on the influence of traditional religious forms—I have divided my discussion into four chapters, one for each major author. In Chapter Two, I focus on William S. Burroughs' early novels, *Junky*, *Queer*, and *The Yage Letters*. Burroughs differs from the other three major Beats in that he draws his inspiration not from earlier traditions of organised, institutional religion, but from a tradition which pre-dates organised religion: magic. While I believe that a major aspect of Beat spirituality is its grounding in existing, organised religious traditions, I do not believe Burroughs should be excluded from this study because he does not participate in these traditions. Because he is at times outspoken against organised religion in his work, critics tend to assume that this means that he cannot be considered a spiritual author in any way. However, I argue that Burroughs is a spiritual author. His worldview and much of his work is shaped by a belief in magic, which can be considered a spiritual belief. Furthermore, although he differs from the other Beats in his decision not to embrace organised religious traditions, he shares with them a concern with fighting reason and science and embracing the unconscious, the irrational, and those things which cannot be explained through the laws of science, such as fate and

coincidence, as well as magic. Moreover, Burroughs provides a helpful point of comparison with the other authors I consider, whose writing is more clearly indebted to particular religious traditions.

Chapter Three investigates the links between Allen Ginsberg's work and the Jewish tradition, which highly values the interpretation of sacred text. Although Ginsberg was raised Jewish, most critics dismiss this early religious connection and focus instead on his interest in Eastern religious forms, such as Hinduism and Buddhism. This oversight has led to an incomplete understanding of an experience which shapes his work: an auditory hallucination of William Blake's poetry, read in the voice of Blake himself. By understanding this event, and Ginsberg's textual focus, as a part of his Judaism, it is clear that the author's religious influences are more varied than just the Eastern religion he is known for exploring.

Chapter Four explores the role of Catholicism in the work of Jack Kerouac, specifically in his best-known, bestselling novel *On the Road*. *On the Road* is one of the Beat works most attacked by journalists of the fifties, who argued that the book had no literary merit and celebrated crime, violence, and dissolution. But I argue that the novel contains strong Catholic themes. Inherent in the work is Kerouac's Catholic belief in a universe in which created matter is sacramental, a form of connection between the human and God. In the novel, Kerouac also sets up an "irrational" alternative to the American capitalist economy based upon the concept of sacred loss, or, the concept of beatness as degradation leading to exaltation. He also presents the main character, Dean Moriarty—who steals cars, takes in copious amounts of intoxicants, and squanders huge sums of money—not as a criminal, but as a fool for Christ. This figure of the holy fool has a long tradition within Christianity.

My final chapter also focuses on Catholicism, this time in the work of Gregory Corso. My investigation links Corso's work, which often incorporates images of food, eating, and even cannibalism, to the sacrament of Eucharist. I argue that the Eucharist is central to both his early poetry and his only novel, *The American Express*. An understanding of the influence of Catholicism in Corso's work, as well as *On the Road*, illustrates just how far-reaching the influence of a highly institutional form of Christianity is on the work of the Beats: something that is missing from the present critical understanding of the movement.

Understanding the influence of traditional religious and spiritual forms on Beat religion and spirituality facilitates a new understanding of the Beat authors, who are often seen as iconoclasts. While they did seek to change the way America thought about religion and spirituality, they did not completely cast aside existing systems of belief, but explored, revised, and combined them. They focused particularly upon two aspects of these systems: first, those which embraced irrationality, positing that empirical, scientific facts are not the only type of knowledge. Second, they focused on the subjective aspects of these traditions, aspects which celebrated individuality and individual agency. Restoring the possibility of non-empirical knowledge and individual agency, the Beats believed, was crucial in a post-war world in which technology and conformity were rapidly encroaching on the freedom and consciousness of the individual. Through an embrace of traditional spiritual forms—such as magic—and aspects of traditional religion—such as Judaism and Catholicism—the Beat authors sought to re-enchant and re-sanctify America, to restore the mystery and excitement at the heart of life which they felt had been suppressed by reason, technology, the suffering of two world wars and the stultifying conformity of the post-war era.

Chapter Two

“Heaven consists of freeing oneself”: The Magical and the Spiritual in the Work of William S. Burroughs¹

“I would say that free men don't exist on this planet at this time, because they don't exist in human bodies. By the mere fact of being in a human body you're controlled by all sorts of biologic and environmental necessities” (Burroughs, Job 22).

Although his work contains abundant spiritual themes, William S. Burroughs is the least likely of the four main Beat authors to be considered a religious or spiritual writer. His writing lacks the overt religious concerns of the work of Allen Ginsberg, who is influenced by the Jewish tradition, and Jack Kerouac and Gregory Corso, whose writing is shaped by Catholicism. In works like *Naked Lunch* and the three works collectively referred to as the Nova Trilogy—*The Soft Machine*, *The Ticket That Exploded*, and *Nova Express*—he satirises and criticises organised religion as a control system. As a result, Burroughs' critics tend to focus on other themes in his work, particularly his struggle against any and all systems of control, and the components and interactions—such as word and image and parasitic power relations—that perpetuate these systems.² Eric Mottram writes of Burroughs' belief “that in human society there should not even be the desire for a god, let alone the setting up of such an idea and its images and words” (74).

However, a closer look suggests that Burroughs holds several spiritual beliefs, some traditional and some non-traditional, and an understanding of these beliefs can facilitate a reading of his work that illuminates themes previously ignored or downplayed in the critical canon. Burroughs' major spiritual belief is one in magic: he rejects religious and scientific worldviews to embrace magic as the ordering principle of his universe. Magic can be understood as an attempt, through imagined contact with and manipulation of some supernatural force, to gain control

over events, one's environment, or other people. Burroughs believes not only in the existence of magic, but also in a “magical universe,” in which events are controlled through magical means, rather than random or governed by scientific law.

Burroughs sees magic as a way to regain individual agency in a world dominated by institutional control systems. This interest in magic is reflected in both his early and later work. The author's first three works, *Junky*, *Queer*, and *The Yage Letters*, form a narrative of a quest; this quest, like those narrated in medieval romance, contains magical elements. In later works, such as *The Soft Machine* (1961), *The Ticket that Exploded* (1962), and *Nova Express* (1964), Burroughs uses what he calls the cut-up technique (a kind of literary collage). This technique takes on a magical function, as Burroughs believes these cut-ups can, like other traditional methods of divination, predict the future.

Another aspect of Burroughs' work that can be seen as spiritual is his concern with achieving transcendent experience: an experience in which one feels in touch with something universal that is greater than the human and the physical. Such experience is at the root of spirituality. In Burroughs' work, the desire for transcendent experience is manifested in a longing to overcome limitations and achieve freedom from control. He believes this can be achieved with an enlargement of consciousness that cuts through the modern Western conception of reality. The protagonist of *Junky*, *Queer*, and *The Yage Letters*, William Lee, embarks upon a quest to overcome bodily limitations and widen his consciousness, mainly through drug use. The cut-up works, through destroying traditional syntax and literary form, break through what Burroughs views as a repressive system inherent in written language. Destroying this system, which limits the capabilities of the human mind

by forcing it into prefabricated patterns of thought, enables an expansion of consciousness.

Burroughs' belief in magic as an ordering principle of the universe forms a challenge to prevalent modern attitudes of a world that operates according to rational, scientific laws. His attempts to widen consciousness through transcendent, spiritual experience also oppose traditional conceptions of what can be considered "reality." In addition, both beliefs posit the primacy of the individual and the self: the enlargement of consciousness William Lee seeks in his quest is personal and highly subjective, and magic is driven by individual desire and agency. These connections link Burroughs' belief to the larger-scale subjective turn occurring in mid-twentieth century religious belief, and suggest that far from being anti-spirituality, Burroughs in fact takes part in larger-scale spiritual trends.

Burroughs' quest for transcendent experience and his belief in a magical universe are the two main focal points of the following chapter. In the first section of the chapter, I analyse the quest theme that shapes *Junky*, *Queer*, and *The Yage Letters*. My focus here is the magical elements of these works and their role in William Lee's search to overcome the limitations of the physical body. Burroughs' larger-scale belief in a magical universe—a world controlled not by the impersonal laws of science, but by the individual agency of the magician—is the subject of this chapter's second section. In it, I focus on Burroughs' cut-up technique, which he believes to have a magical function, serving as a form of divination.

The *Merveilleux*, the Magical, and the Spiritual in William Lee's Quest

Burroughs' first three works, *Junky*, *Queer*, and *The Yage Letters* form a narrative of a quest to surpass human—particularly physical and bodily—limitations

and thus achieve transcendent experience. In these texts, the protagonist William Lee journeys from the criminal underground of New York and New Orleans to Mexico City and finally into the jungles of South America. This quest, like traditional quest narratives of medieval romance such as Chrétien de Troyes' *Perceval*, contains magical elements, ranging from the subtly eerie to the overt.³ In *Junky*, Lee's drug of choice, opiates, or "junk," and obtaining junk, takes on a magical quality. In *Queer*, William Lee attempts to seduce a reticent acquaintance via magical means. But by the final text in the trio, "In Search of Yage," these magical elements have diminished, and Burroughs' focus is upon the attempt to surpass physical limitations to find spiritual experience. In *Junky*, Lee searches for transcendent experience in the form of junk; in *Queer*, it is intimate human companionship to which he turns; in "In Search of Yage," it is the elusive drug *yagé*, reported to have consciousness-expanding qualities, that is his focus. This search for transcendent experience, whichever form it takes, is the essence of Lee's quest.

In *Junky*, there are two main magical elements: the *merveilleux* and the magical question. The *merveilleux*, a quality of medieval romance, "is characterized by elements that are rationally inexplicable according to the laws of nature" (Carasso-Bulow 11). J. E. Stevens states that the term refers to three types of phenomena: "the purely mysterious: unmotivated, unexplained and inexplicable," "the strictly magical," and "the miraculous" (qtd. in Sweeney 78). By magical question, I mean a question that shapes a quest by allowing a desired item, effect, or goal to be obtained, often via supernatural means. A prime example of a magical question is found in Chrétien de Troyes' *Perceval*. After Perceval witnesses the grail procession, he learns that had he asked about the function of the grail and who is served from it, he could have restored the Fisher King's waste land kingdom to

health. Because this question is key to achieving the quest's goal, and because there is no logical or natural connection between asking it and the restoration of the kingdom, I consider it to be a magical question.

Carasso-Bulow states that “characters are *merveilleux* when they are distorted in their physical appearance such as giants, dwarves, monsters” (16). Some of the underworld characters Lee meets in New York have characteristics of the *merveilleux*. While there are no actual monsters in *Junky*, some characters take on monstrous appearance through Lee's descriptions. Speaking about an acquaintance, Mary, Lee states: “There was something boneless about her, like a deep-sea creature. Her eyes were cold fish eyes that looked at you through a viscous medium she carried about with her. I could see those eyes in a shapeless, protoplasmic mass undulating over the dark sea floor” (13-14).

Throughout *Junky*, junk and its acquisition is surrounded by characteristics of the *merveilleux*. Upon arriving in New Orleans and beginning to search for the drug, Lee receives advice about where it might be found from a strange character. Lee describes the scene at the bar where he meets this character: “Standing next to me was a middle-aged man with a long, thin face and gray hair” (70). At first, Lee finds the man “a terrific bore,” but then, seemingly out of nowhere, the man says to Lee, “I know that you are interested in narcotics” (70). Since there is no rational way that the man could have known this, his statement gives the episode a strange, dreamlike effect and the gray-haired man an air of mystery and significance. This significance is sharpened when Lee begins to question the man: he asks how he knew Lee was “interested in narcotics,” and the man replies only “I know” (70). Lee, apparently suspicious, then asks: “Isn't it dangerous for you to talk this way? You don't know who I am. Suppose I was on the other side” (71). The man replies:

“I know who I'm talking to,” he said. “If I didn't, I wouldn't be here. I'd be dead. Out of all the people in this bar I picked you, didn't I?”

“Yes, but why?”

“There is something that tells me what to do.” He showed me a religious medal he wore around his neck. “If I didn't carry this I would have stopped a knife or a bullet long ago.” (71)

Here, it is possible that the man has recognized Lee as a cohort in the drug subculture, based upon his appearance. But the way Burroughs writes this section, deliberately leaving out such an explanation, charges the incident—which may be quite ordinary—with mysterious, vague connections that are not made explicit to the reader. The man's comment about the religious medal suggests his belief that his choice to approach Lee was brought about by the influence of a supernatural force, which lends this occurrence, coming as it does in a dry, factual narrative, an eerie quality.

Lee's actual “score”—when he obtains the junk—is also surrounded by elements of the *merveilleux*. A few nights later, when Lee is wandering the streets of New Orleans, he finds, with the same ease as he found the gray-haired man, a new connection who allows him to acquire the drug. This man, Pat, approaches Lee and starts a conversation. “I hope you won't take offence at what I say,” Pat says, “but you look like you use stuff yourself” (74). Lee confirms Pat's suspicion, and Pat asks him a very important question: “Do you want to score?” (74). Lee assents, and the cycle of drug use, addiction, arrest, cure, and flight begins once more. Lee's meeting and questioning of the gray-haired man serves as a preliminary test, after which he is able to meet and be questioned by Pat, and then obtain junk. Lee's

success in these ordeals of questioning point to his increasing experience: he is becoming a seasoned quest(ion)er, and by asking the right questions at the right time, he is able to gain what he seeks.

Junk is also surrounded by elements of the *merveilleux* when Lee meets a new connection in Mexico City. He encounters a man whom he immediately recognizes as a junky outside his lawyer's office, and observes: "The junky was there to sell some religious medals. The lawyer had told him to bring a dozen up to his office" (115). The religious medals link the junky to the gray-haired man Lee encountered in New Orleans. This strange coincidence, and the lack of textual commentary on the coincidence, adds an unsettling, dreamlike sense of *déjà-vu* to the scene. The magical question plays a role in Lee's interaction with this junky, Old Ike, who questions Lee over dinner, asking him "what [his] story was" and "Do you want to score?" (115). Upon being asked the same question that Pat asked in New Orleans, Lee's cycle of drug use and addiction begins once again. By the end of the text, Lee realises that junk is not going to provide him with the transcendent experience he seeks.

Lee continues his quest for transcendent experience in *Queer*. Although it was written in 1952, directly after *Junky*, *Queer* was not published until 1985. This delay is due to the novel's frank homosexual content, which would have been considered unpublishable during the period in which it was written. Burroughs initially envisioned the two, along with *The Yage Letters*, as part of one book about his experiences with junk (*Letters* 244). The action in the first half of *Queer*, which takes place in Mexico City, overlaps chronologically with the Mexico City section of *Junky*. In *Queer*, after his unsatisfying experiences with junk in *Junky*, Lee's new objective is to seduce a man he meets in Mexico City, Eugene Allerton. However,

the seduction proves unsuccessful, and, like many traditional quest heroes such as Yvain, Lee turns to magic when having problems fulfilling his quest.⁴ When he fails to achieve intimacy with Allerton, he begins to narrate “routines” to him, believing that they will have a magical efficacy in achieving this intimacy. The routine is a literary form particular to Burroughs: a darkly humorous, often bizarre and satirical anecdote. Burroughs uses the routine form in this text, and also in later works such as *Naked Lunch* and the Nova Trilogy. The author himself defines the routine as “a usually humorous, sustained tour de force, never more than three or four pages” (“Last European Interview” 83), while Jennie Skerl calls it “a satirical fantasy improvised from a factual base” which “has its source in the irrational world of dreams and is, therefore, a kind of 'vision'” (*Burroughs* 32). The routine provides the fragmented, nonlinear structure of his later works, and conveys main themes of some of his major texts. For example, the “talking asshole” routine in *Naked Lunch* is “[t]he most important episode” (Skerl, *Burroughs* 39) that develops one of the novel's main themes, that of a “virus” (Skerl, *Burroughs* 38) that “lives upon the human host, satisfying its own needs for drugs, sex, or power . . . which dehumanizes the human being by making him subservient to a physical or psychological need” (Skerl, *Burroughs* 38-39). In this text, in which the form first takes shape, the routine can be viewed as operating in the same way as magic, the goal of which is to gain control over Allerton and make him return the affection that Lee feels for him.⁵

In his anthropological work *Magic, Science, and Religion* (1954), Bronislaw Malinowski discusses the conditions that can inspire a person to turn to magic for aid, such as when he is frustrated, his actions thwarted or his limit of knowledge tested. Malinowski writes, “his anxiety, his fears and hope, induce a tension in his

organism which drives him to some sort of activity” (79). In *Queer*, Lee finds himself in such a frustrated condition, experiencing the same impotence and desire in his situation with Allerton. Malinowski describes the magical action produced by frustration: “The man under the sway of impotent fury or dominated by thwarted hate spontaneously clenches his fist and carries out imaginary thrusts at his enemy. . . . The anxious fisherman or hunter sees in his imagination the quarry enmeshed in the nets, the animal attained by the spear” (79-80). Here, each magical act symbolizes the fulfilment of the failed desire, and serves as its substitute. This is what James Frazer terms “sympathetic magic”: a form of magic in which “the magician infers that he can produce any effect he desires merely by imitating it” (14).

The routine can function as such a symbolic action, though its illustration of the fulfilled desire is indirect. Lee's routines often take the form of fantasies of absolute power. As evident in the passages of *Queer* just discussed, Lee's frustration stems from a lack of control—particularly control over potential lovers—and the routines compensate by symbolizing power. Malinowski continues his description of symbolic magical actions:

And what is the purely intellectual process, the conviction formed during such a free outburst of emotion in words and deeds? First there surges a clear image of the desired end. . . . When passion reaches the breaking point at which man loses control over himself, the words which he utters, his blind behavior, allow the pent-up physiological tension to flow over. (80)

One can view the routine as this kind of “outburst of emotion,” in its verbal form. The “breaking point” is the point at which Lee launches into his routine; the “image

of the desired end,” then, is the substance of the routine, the story being told. Such an action, in addition to its main function as symbolic wish-fulfilment, also serves as a release for built-up tension. Malinowski continues: “As the tension spends itself in these words and gestures the obsessing visions fade away, the desired end seems nearer satisfaction, we regain our balance” (81). The routine has the same effect on Lee, helping to (temporarily) relieve the anguish he feels at being rejected by Allerton.

The text of *Queer* contains routines that serve as a symbolic fulfilment of Lee's unrealised desire for Allerton. One such routine is narrated after Lee goes to the Ship Ahoy bar to find Allerton, who is playing chess with his friend Mary (69). Lee begins a routine about chess, but when Allerton and Mary leave, Lee begins to narrate a new routine (69-70). In this routine, Lee envisions himself as an officer who leaves a military camp to embark on a journey across Africa, and he describes his search for a suitable travelling companion, who will also serve as a sexual partner. This search brings him to “Corn Hole Gus's Used-Slave Lot,” where he demands the highest-quality boy:

Gus rushes out and goes into the spiel: “. . . I have something right up your ass, I mean, alley. It's young and it's tender. In fact, it talks baby talk . . . behold!”

“You call those senile slobberings baby talk? My grandfather got a clap off that one. Come again, Gussie.”

“You do not like it? . . . Now here I have a one-hundred percent desert-bred Bedouin with a pedigree . . . ”

“A good appearance job, Gus, but not good enough. . . .Reach down into your grease pit and dredge out the best-looking punk you got . . . ” (71; 2nd ellipsis in orig.)

Lee's control over the selection of partners in the routine serves as the “clear image of the desired end” Malinowski describes (80); it is this control over the objects of his desire that Lee has lacked throughout the narrative. Lee's pent-up desire and frustration reaches “breaking point” (Malinowski 80) when Allerton leaves, rejecting Lee once more. These emotions flow over into the routine, which shifts from the material about chess to the fantasy of control that comes to Lee “like dictation” (*Queer* 70).

The final routine in *Queer* also takes on a magical function. Lee has returned to Mexico City from his South American expedition. In Mexico City, he enquires about the whereabouts of Allerton, whom he learns has returned to South America (119). The tension created by the failure to connect with Allerton—and thus, the failure of *Queer's* quest—inspires a routine for its relief, which comes in the form of a dream:

That night I dreamed I finally found Allerton. . . . In the dream I was a finder of missing persons.

“Mr. Allerton, I represent the Friendly Finance Company. Haven't you forgotten something, Gene? You're supposed to come and see us every third Tuesday. . . . We don't like to say ‘Pay up or else.’ It's not a friendly thing to say. I wonder if you have ever read the contract *all the way through*? I have particular reference to Clause 6(x) which can only be deciphered with an electron microscope and a virus filter. I wonder if you know just what ‘**or else**’ means, Gene?” (120)

This routine has a magical function in that it is another symbolic fulfilment of Lee's desire, in the form of a fantasy of control: here, Lee is the inescapable Skip Tracer, to whom missing persons are bound by a sinister contract. The presence of this contract, and its effectiveness in securing the Skip Tracer and Allerton's relationship, is particularly important. When Allerton and Lee go to South America together, they agree that they will sleep together twice a week, in return for Lee paying Allerton's way (75-76). When Lee makes advances more often than this, Allerton complains that it is "breach of contract" (86). Lee uses the phrase later regarding the same matter: "That night Lee wanted to go to bed with Allerton, but he refused and the next morning Lee said he was sorry he asked so soon after the last time, which was a breach of contract" (98). In the context of Lee and Allerton's relationship, the contract is something Allerton, not Lee, controls; it is a limit on Lee's desire. But in the routine, the Skip Tracer's contract becomes the thing that gives Lee the upper hand. The contract undergoes a transformation in the space of the routine, becoming an instrument of control in Lee's hands rather than something that controls Lee.

This routine has a function in addition to its role as symbolic fulfilment of Lee's unconsummated desire for Allerton: it is also the symbolic fulfilment of the goal of this section of the quest. Without this routine, the text would end on a note of failure, with Lee not having succeeded in his objective of seducing Allerton, and without any new objective to carry him into the next section of his quest. Burroughs lessens this sense of loss by allowing Lee—in the guise of the Skip Tracer—to achieve his goal in the imagined, magical space of the routine. Rather than end on a note of failure, it ends on a note of unfulfilled prophecy: the text ends with the routine—the magic spell, driven by Lee's initiative and agency—and all Lee can do is wait for its intended result, the eventual return of Allerton.

While *Junky* and *Queer*, with their magical themes, contain more specific examples of Burroughs' spiritual beliefs, these two texts, along with *The Yage Letters*, can also be read as the narrative of a continuing quest of a spiritual nature.⁶ These three books are written in fairly traditional style—a sharp contrast to later experimental works such as *Naked Lunch* (1959)—with a dry, factual tone and linear plot that parallels the forward-moving progression of the quest. Lee's spiritual quest begins when he sets out from the “comfortable” upper-class setting of his youth (xi), which he considers to be spiritually barren. He becomes frustrated by the limitations of physical existence—particularly his bodily needs and desires—and seeks to overcome the physical through an expansion of consciousness that puts him in touch with a larger, universal reality. Such an experience can be considered transcendent: Louis Roy defines transcendent experience as “an event in which individuals . . . have the impression that they are in contact with something boundless and limitless, which they cannot grasp, and which utterly surpasses human capacities” (xi). Robert Torrance points to the relation between the quest and transcendent experience, defining the quest as “the deliberate effort to transcend, through self-transcendence, the limits of the given and to realize some portion of this unbounded potentiality through pursuit of a future goal that can neither be fully foreknown nor finally attained” (xii). This desire for transcendent experience can be considered spiritual, as such experience—focused as it is upon overcoming the physical and the everyday and moving toward something greater—is an important aspect of both traditional religion and alternative forms of spirituality.

Before beginning discussion of Lee's quest in *Junky*, it is important to establish the reasons he undertakes this journey and its major objective, which is the same throughout all three novels. The Prologue to *Junky* describes an experience

that could serve as what Joseph Campbell terms the “Call to Adventure,” that is, “the signs of the vocation of the hero,” the point at which the hero realises that it is necessary to embark on a quest (Campbell 36). But unlike the external calls—such as challenges or summons—seen in traditional myth, Lee's call is self-determined and internal. He experiences an internal dissatisfaction with the alienation and spiritual sterility he experiences in the setting of his youth. Lee feels as though “all contact with life was shut out” in the affluent Midwestern suburb where he grew up (xii). It is this dissatisfaction and yearning for a more exciting, somehow more genuine life that inspires Lee to set off on his journey. This goal parallels that of many quest narratives of medieval romance and myth. Jessie Weston describes the Holy Grail of Chretien's *Perceval* as the “source of life” (124), while Campbell states that the goal of many traditional quests is often not just life, but *everlasting* life, expressed in an “Indestructible Body” (176) or “physical immortality” (188), like that present in traditional religions, such as Christianity. The fact that Lee's goal is life itself positions his quest in a long-standing tradition of spiritual quests, which some critics might find surprising, considering Burroughs' reputation as an avant-garde writer and iconoclast. Although the spiritual quest theme in Burroughs work is less specific and striking than his interest in magic, it is important to be aware of such a theme in his work. Burroughs is often, and unfairly, seen as purely anti-religion, not concerned with any spiritual themes whatsoever, and his concern with a spiritual quest aligns him with Beat contemporaries such as Kerouac.

Lee refers to his goal of life at several points in the text of the Prologue. After referring to his hometown as being “shut out” from what Lee views as genuine life, he also refers to being “cut off from life” by the cushion of his trust fund (xiv). Lee contrasts junk to this stagnancy, viewing it as a genuine, regenerating form of

life. In the last lines of the Prologue, Lee states, “Junk is not a kick. It is a way of life” (xvi). This attitude toward junk persists into the early sections of the main text of *Junky*: initially, Lee sees junk as a vehicle for experience—a literal way of (experiencing) life—that would not have been available to him in the suburbs.

As the text progresses, Lee's need for junk grows stronger and stronger, and through his experiences with addiction, he comes to realise that junk not only contains in it the promise of life, but also the danger of death. This too is typical of the quest narrative: by endangering the life of its user, junk works as an initiatory test for the inexperienced quester. Weston writes: “the test preceding, and qualifying for, initiation into the secrets of physical life, consisted in being brought into contact with the horrors of physical death, and that test was one which might well end disastrously for the aspirant” (90). These themes are also connected to traditional religious narratives. In *Junky*, it is clear that junk provides Lee with just such experience with suffering and death. While in New Orleans, Lee overdoses, and his experience of the overdose is described much as one would describe physical death. “Holy Jesus, this man is dying!” Lee's friend, Pat, who witnesses the overdose remarks (75), and Lee's own report of the overdose could easily be mistaken for a description of the process of death. He narrates: “as soon as I took the needle out of the vein, I knew it wasn't all right. I felt a soft blow in the heart. Pat's face began to get black around the edges, the blackness spreading to cover his face. I could feel my eyes roll back in their sockets” (74).

It is not just the effects of junk use that brings Lee closer to death, but the withdrawal from the drug. Lee, incarcerated in New Orleans and unable to use junk, compares the experience of withdrawal to the physical action of death. He describes the experience:

the worst thing is lowering of blood pressure with consequent loss of body liquid, and extreme weakness, as in shock. It is a feeling as if the life energy has been shut off so that all the cells in the body are suffocating. As I lay there on the bench, I felt like I was subsiding into a pile of bones. (92)

These symptoms parallel the action of decease: first weakness, then a feeling that “life energy has been shut off,” which parallels the moment of death, and then, “subsiding into a pile of bones,” which represents the body's post-mortem decay. Now junk is associated with biological, bodily existence, rather than the transcendent or eternal life that is the goal of the traditional quest narrative. While Lee believed junk might bring him the latter, he finds that it only brings him the former, trapping him within the needs of his addicted body, enslaving him to the life cycle and the pain and death that are a part of it. The circular aspect of Lee's quest, in which he repeats the same actions—addiction, arrest, cure, and flight—again and again in first New York, then New Orleans, then Mexico City, serves as a metaphor for the cycle of biological life to which junk enslaves Lee. It represents the futility and repetition that is a part of everyday life.

Lee fully identifies junk with death by the end of the text. After becoming addicted once more, while in Mexico City, Lee remarks: “Junk is an inoculation of death that keeps the body in a condition of emergency” (127). Lee's initiatory experience with junk has taught him that the drug will not bring him the life he seeks. No longer a neophyte, he invests his hope for transcendent experience that can free him from the constraints of his body in other drugs, such as peyote and *yagé*. Lee states:

I decided to go down to Colombia and score for yage . . . I am ready to move on south and look for the uncut kick that opens out instead of narrowing down like junk. . . .

Kick is momentary freedom from the claims of the aging, cautious, nagging, frightened flesh. Maybe I will find in yage what I was looking for in junk and weed and coke. Yage may be the final fix. (152)

Here, the phrase “claims of the aging, cautious, nagging, frightened flesh” describes the biological life cycle, in which Lee is subordinated to his physical needs, “narrowed down” to the consciousness of an animal. What he seeks now is an expansion, rather than a contraction of consciousness. Such an expansion is characteristic of the “ultimate boon” sought in the traditional quest narrative: “intrinsically it is an expansion of consciousness and therewith of being (illumination, transfiguration, freedom)” (Campbell 246). What Lee seeks now is not so much life as transcendence of the limitations of (physical) life, and at the end of the text, Lee is hopeful that the new object of his quest, *yagé*, will serve as his salvation, his “final fix.”

The action of Burroughs' next book, *Queer*, continues directly from the end of *Junky*. In this novel, Lee's quest continues, but his object subtly shifts. Lee begins to look for *yagé*, but his search for the drug is subordinated to his search for human contact, companionship, and extreme intimacy. This shift of interest may seem surprising, but underlying it is the same longing to overcome the limitations of the body and the self that Lee experiences in *Junky*. Lee hopes, in his mainly homosexual relationships with others, to surpass the limitations of the human body and mind in the form of a complete, literal merger of two people. He wishes not

only to enter his lovers' bodies sexually, but literally: to think as they think, to experience things as they experience them, and ultimately, to escape the prison of the self, which by its nature prevents such intense identification.

In *Queer*, it is clear that Lee is much more interested in others around him, which foreshadows his longing for the perfect merger. This work is written in the third person, which distances the reader from Lee, and reflects Lee's reaching outside the self. Lee's attitude toward *yagé* changes in this text, reflecting his new longing for human connection. He no longer describes it as a personal "final fix" but as a vehicle for the ultimate connection of minds: telepathy. Rather than wishing to expand his own consciousness and enable a different subjective experience of reality, he now longs to link his own mind to that of others and participate in a form of communication that does not necessitate verbal expression. The drug is first mentioned in the text in conjunction with telepathy: "In South America at the headwaters of the Amazon grows a plant called Yage that is supposed to increase telepathic sensitivity. Medicine men use it in their work" (57). Lee's desire for a superhuman, telepathic link stems from his feelings of failure in connecting with Allerton in a normal manner. He mentions the drug when his relationship with Allerton is not progressing ideally—just before Lee speaks of it "Allerton was somewhat sullen, and Lee felt depressed and ill at ease" (55). This failure only intensifies his desire for some form of perfect merger.

This desire is expressed even more intensely when Lee, while seeing a film with Allerton, feels a yearning to physically enter his body: "Lee could feel his body pull towards Allerton . . . straining with a blind worm hunger to enter the other's body, to breathe with his lungs, see with his eyes, learn the feel of his viscera and genitals" (48). Although Lee is attempting to overcome his bondage to his own body

by entering Allerton's, the language in this passage reveals that this very urge is underscored by a base, bodily longing that overpowers Lee, as did his desire for junk. Lee's wish to surpass the limitations of the body is always brought about by a feeling of enslavement to the body and its needs.

Lee's hunger for human connection intensifies when he and Allerton travel to South America, searching for *yagé*, and this desire for a connection overshadows Lee's desire for the drug. The point at which Lee's wish for intimacy is made most evident comes when he is walking the streets of Guayaquil:

He [Lee] walked on, looking at every face he passed, looking into doorways and up at the windows of cheap hotels. An iron bedstead painted light pink, a shirt out to dry . . . scraps of life. Lee snapped at them hungrily, like a predatory fish cut off from his prey by a glass wall. He could not stop ramming his nose against the glass in the nightmare search of his dream. (92; ellipsis in orig.)

Now, rather than searching for life (the object of his overall quest) in junk or even *yagé*, the things Lee considers to be “scraps of life” are the faces of others, and the items of everyday, domestic humanity. He feels that this life is unachievable for him, as though he is separated from it “by a glass wall,” which only intensifies his sense of desire and frustration. This feeling of alienation from life, the goal of his overall quest, indicates that he is far from achieving this goal.

As Lee's desire intensifies, so does his yearning for a physical merger: now, he actually imagines himself in the body of a boy, who “vibrated with life like a young animal” (93), whom he sees on the streets of Guayaquil. Lee “could feel himself in the body of the boy. Fragmentary memories . . . the smell of cocoa beans drying in the sun, bamboo tenements” (93; ellipsis in orig.). In this passage, again,

“life” is associated with other people, from whom Lee feels alienated. Lee then imagines a sexual experience between the boy with whom he identifies and another boy (93-94). But the fantasy is only fantasy, and when it ends, it leaves Lee feeling unfulfilled (94). Ultimately, Lee's desire for intense human connection only leaves him more frustrated, more aware of his confinement and isolation within his self. At the end of *Junky*, while the quest remained unrealised as it does here, Lee set forth a specific new course of action, the search for *yagé*, which would bring him fulfilment. But here, there is no such new course of action, and the ending is much more uncertain.

Lee's quest for transcendent experience continues, though, in the “In Search of Yage” section of *The Yage Letters*.⁷ *The Yage Letters* followed *Junky* as Burroughs' second published work, due to the delay in the publication of *Queer*, and in many ways follows directly from its conclusion. In this work, Lee gives up his search for intimacy with others, and now is fully focused on the goal set out at the conclusion of *Junky*: that of *yagé* as the “final fix” that will enable transcendent experience. In addition, the first person viewpoint used in *Junky* is restored, reflecting this text's focus on personal fulfilment and an inward quest.

Early sections of the text emphasise Lee's frustration with the limitations of the human condition. This frustration is symbolised by Lee's movement on his quest, which alternates between circularity—for example, his backtracking due to a mistake with his tourist card (16-22)—and stasis. When Lee is delayed in Peru, he writes: “This place gives me the stasis horrors. The feel of location, of being just where I am and nowhere else is unendurable. Suppose I should have to live here?” (46). While Lee's frustration with both circular motion and stasis may at first seem contradictory or simply peevish, both conditions evoke feelings in Lee of being

trapped, triggering his longing for transcendent experience. Whether confined in a cycle of junk addiction, a dreary Peruvian town, or within his own body and mind, Lee cannot bear to be “just where I am and nowhere else” (46).

In Mocoa, Lee has another, stronger experience with *yagé*, which, far from providing transcendence, only further traps him within his body and its cyclic processes. Lee describes the experience:

I vomited violently leaning against a tree and fell down on the ground in helpless misery. . . . I kept trying to break out of this numb dizziness. I was saying over and over, “All I want is out of here.” An uncontrollable mechanical silliness took possession of me.

Hebephrenic meaningless repetitions. . . . I was on all fours convulsed with spasms of nausea. (27)

In this passage, Lee's body takes over, with unpleasant reactions, such as vomiting, numbness, and “mechanical silliness.” These strong physical sensations allow no opportunity for mental or spiritual transcendence. Phrases like “trying to break out” and “All I want is out of here” reflect Lee's intense, but unfulfilled, desire to transcend these bodily sensations and limitations. His repetitions reflect his circular movements and the life cycle which they mirror, and the fact that Lee is on all fours equates him with the physical, the animal, and the biological, rather than the philosophical or the spiritual.

The text ends with a letter describing Lee's second experience with *yagé*. Although this experience seems to be more fulfilling to Lee than the previous one, it is still unclear from the description in the letter whether the drug has provided him with transcendent experience. Initially, Lee's impressions of his *yagé* episode point to some sort of transcendence being achieved: the experience is described in terms of

motion and travel fully unimpeded by any limitations imposed by the body, space, or time. Lee states, “Yage is space time travel” (50). Lee indicates that the sense of motion he feels when under the influence of *yagé* is effortless, unimpeded by any obstacles: he moves “through” not around, seeing “Migrations, incredible journeys through deserts and jungles and mountains” (50). His consciousness can be seen to expand in that he is able to experience the many various effects of extensive travel at once, having visions of various landscapes—“Minarets, palms, mountains, jungle”—and their inhabitants in an instant (50). Also, *yagé* gives Lee a sense of integration with “many races, Negro, Polynesian, Mountain Mongol, Desert Nomad, Polyglot Near East, Indian” while under the influence of the drug, feeling their “blood and substance” as they “[pass] through [his] body” (50). This integration with others is precisely what he longed for in *Queer*. These descriptions suggest that *yagé* provides Lee with all the pleasant sensations of the quest, such as a sense of motion and knowledge of the various areas and peoples of the world, with no physical effort necessitated on his part. However, such an experience might hardly be considered a quest, since effort and suffering is such an intrinsic part of the quest itself. Lee seemingly fails to take this into account, and views the *yagé* experience as a way to overcome the physical obstacles he has faced along his journey, such as becoming stuck in cycles of circular motion, the alienation he feels in his own body, and a sense of being trapped within his own body and consciousness.

The final images from Lee's *yagé* experience, though, suggest that while *yagé* may have temporarily expanded Lee's consciousness, the larger quest for life is not yet over. One of Lee's later visions is that of a “Composite City” (50), which, far from being a place where human limitations are surpassed, offers detailed imagery of the bodily processes Lee longs to overcome, such as eating, sexuality, and excretion.

There are “bars and rooms and kitchens and baths, copulating couples on rows of brass beds, criss cross of a thousand hammocks, junkies tying up, opium smokers, hashish smokers, people eating, talking, bathing, shitting back into a haze of smoke and steam” (50-51). These descriptions are overwhelming in their scope; it is as if Lee experiences the sheer proportion of human life and its plentiful daily tasks all at once.

The final image of the composite city—and of the letter and the text itself—also suggests that complete transcendence has not been achieved. In the final sentences, Lee describes the city as “A place where the unknown past and the emergent future meet in a vibrating soundless hum. Larval entities waiting for a live one” (53). These last lines make the narrative end on a note of anticipation, rather than satisfaction. The image of “larval entities” suggests a sense of dormancy preceding growth and the realisation of purpose, and the phrase “waiting for a live one” indicates the lack of such fully realised life. The “larval” image also points to the role of the biological cycle in limiting that fully realised life: the larval stage is a limiting, yet inescapable part of the life cycle of the organism that must be endured on the way to adulthood.

Such an ending for this narrative, which is the last of the three works that trace Lee's quest for life, is of particular importance, as it implies that Lee's overarching quest for transcendence, achieved via freedom from human limitations, has not been completely fulfilled. Although Lee's consciousness has been expanded via the *yagé* experience, which provides an unconstrained sense of travel and worldly experience without effort, the unclear note on which this text ends prevents a sense of ultimate achievement and final resolution. However, this vagueness

concerning resolution is characteristic of the quest itself: Torrance defines the quest's goal as one “that can neither be fully foreknown nor finally attained” (xii).

The Cut-up Technique and the “Magical Universe”

Following completion of *The Yage Letters*, Burroughs moves away from an autobiographical, linear style to the more experimental, fragmentary structure of *Naked Lunch*. After writing *Naked Lunch*, Burroughs explores a new form in which he moves even further away from conventional narrative. In 1959, when the author was living in Paris, his friend Brion Gysin introduced him to the cut-up technique, which he used for his Nova Trilogy novels: *The Soft Machine* (1961), *The Ticket that Exploded* (1962), and *Nova Express* (1964). Burroughs explains the mechanics of the cut-up technique in *The Third Mind*: “The method is simple. Here is one way to do it. Take a page. . . . Now cut down the middle and across the middle. You have four sections. . . . Now rearrange the sections placing section four with section one and section two with section three” (29-30). Burroughs also used a slight variation of this technique, called the fold-in, in which “A page of text . . . is folded down the middle and placed on another page—The composite text is then read across half one text and half the other” (*The Third Mind* 95-96). Later, Burroughs applied cut-up and fold-in techniques to audio tape, recording conversations and random sounds, then splicing them into each other.

Since the cut-up technique destroys key elements of traditional literature such as plot, sentence structure, and characterisation, it renders the text resistant to conventional interpretation. Some cut-ups, while unorthodox, can still be understood and can convey evocative images, such as this one from *The Soft Machine* which describes experiences with junk: “The guide did not see me – spinning fractured

light down all your streets and by the river junk sick in dawn mist took the ferry
 from Algiers to New Orleans – grey powder in spoons shaking junk sick hands”
 (157). Others are nearly impossible to comprehend, such as the “In Present Time”
 section of *The Third Mind*:

dont ask questions and dont pass remarks longago boy walked
 through the dust kicking in sunlight silver grey and out of focus a
 thinboy gilt edge sepia typhoid witness in switzerland muttering
 dangerous no one wants to machine guns in baghdad (120)

The untraditional quality of cut-up texts, along with the fact that their form and content is controlled by chance rather than conscious authorial decisions, has led many critics to neglect the texts. Others dismiss them as unoriginal, due to the fact that Burroughs often used not just his own work but that of other authors for his cut-ups.⁸

Burroughs insists upon the importance of the unconventional technique, which he sees as the only way to destroy the control system he believes to be inherent in language itself. Skerl explains:

Drugs, sex, and power control the body, but “word and image locks” control the mind, that is, “lock” us into conventional patterns of perceiving, thinking, and speaking that determine our interactions with environment and society. The cutup is a way of exposing word and image controls and thus freeing oneself from them . . .

(*Burroughs* 49)⁹

In creating the cut-ups, Burroughs' concern is not simply with freeing the body from its limitations, but with freeing the mind and thus the universe itself from any and all forms of control. This liberation also has spiritual implications: when the mind is

freed via the cut-up, Burroughs believes that it is possible to experience reality in a different way, accessing higher, enlightening truths that traditional conceptions of reality normally inhibit. In *The Third Mind*, Burroughs writes: “‘Reality’ is apparent because you live and believe it. What you call ‘reality’ is a complex network of necessity formulae . . . association lines of word and image presenting a prerecorded word and image track” (27; ellipsis in orig.). He continues, “The first step in recreation is to cut the old lines” (28)—meaning, to make cut-ups, and thus break down the system of word and image that he believes to obscure an alternative reality.

Central to Burroughs’ spirituality is his conception of a “magical universe.” Burroughs had an interest in magic for some time, as evidenced in the magical elements of *Junky* and *Queer*, but this interest sharpens around the time the author begins to experiment with the cut-up technique. At this point, he forms an idea of a magical, individual-centred idea of reality that rejects two traditional worldviews: the scientific and the religious. He rejects science's view of an impersonal universe that operates according to empirical law and religion's view of a personal god on whom humans must rely. Instead, he embraces a view of a magic-controlled world that retains the personal quality of religion yet places the individual at its centre, controlling events through magical will. Burroughs' growing interest in magic when he was living in Paris in late 1958 (months before beginning his cut-ups in 1959) serves as evidence for the author's growing belief that something other than science or religion is behind the workings of the world. Barry Miles writes about Burroughs' magical experiments during this period, when the author attempted scrying, a divinatory technique in which one gazes into a reflective surface in order to see visions thought to predict the future (162-65).

This new interest interacted with other magical beliefs Burroughs already held that suggested forces other than scientific law at work in the universe. For example, while Burroughs rejects religious belief, viewing it much as Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead do—based upon obedience to a larger institution at the expense of personal desires—he does believe in spirits. Burroughs believed that this spirit world was close to the everyday world of humans, and affected events in their lives. He blamed the death of his wife Joan, whom he accidentally shot in 1951, on the influence of an evil spirit. In the introduction to *Queer*, Burroughs writes about this spirit: “I live with the constant threat of possession, and a constant need to escape from possession, from Control. So the death of Joan brought me in contact with the invader, the Ugly Spirit, and maneuvered me into a lifelong struggle” (18).

Burroughs' view of traditional society as a malevolent, restrictive system of control can be seen to inform his rejection of religion for a belief in spirits. In *Spirits in Culture, History, and Mind*, Robert Levy, Jeanette Mageo, and Alan Howard suggest that, in general, religion provides a more structured experience of the Other than does a belief in spirits, which can be quite ad-hoc. Gods are intimately connected to mainstream society, “sanctioning a community's moral order,” but spirits are considered “extra-moral” or “evil” and function as “threats to order” (16). Levy, Mageo, and Howard also view spirits as more intimately connected to the world of marginalised individuals than gods, envisioning them as “exist[ing] at the margins of the human order in a dreamlike world of shifting categories, vague motivations, and amorphous relations with other beings” (16). Burroughs is particularly drawn to such vague, unconscious realms, in which reality is not what science might suggest it is. He sets works like *Naked Lunch* and *The Wild Boys* in

such chaotic settings, in which individuals explore the often bizarre possibilities of a world in which there is no institutional control.

Another main aspect of Burroughs' "magical universe," apart from the posited existence of spirits, is a stress on individual agency (whether natural or supernatural) as the cause for all events. This positing of the individual as a locus of control is present throughout Burroughs' work and serves as one of his major themes. This idea underpins his quest for individual freedom, his attempts, via the routine, at working magic of his own, and his cut-up technique. In "On Coincidence," he writes: "From my point of view there is no such thing as coincidence" (99). He elaborates, linking his magical beliefs to this idea of agency: "I will speak now for magical truth, to which I myself subscribe. Magic is the assertion of *will*, the assumption that nothing happens in this universe (that is to say the minute fraction of this universe that we are able to contact) unless some entity wills it to happen" (101). This idea is also expressed in Burroughs' belief that events—particularly disastrous ones—are linked along personal, associational lines which can be revealed by cut-ups. In *The Third Mind*, he explains the nature of these far-reaching links:

[Cut-ups] are often interconnected. When you pick up one, you may find it is a branch of word and image vine reaching from North Clark Street to California to Manila to Gibraltar. For example: Captain Clark was shot by one Frankie Gonzalez, from Manila, described as a quiet man who was always fingering his rosary. Several days later, a plane crashed at Clark Airbase in Manila, killing everyone aboard.

(135)

With such beliefs in the importance of individual agency in influencing events and the personalised, connected nature of these events, Burroughs proposes a subjective

turn in the conception of the universe and its workings. He challenges the modern Western conception of the universe as impartial and controlled by impersonal, scientific law with the belief that the individual is literally at the centre of the universe, bringing about events by means of his will and individual agency, and intimately connected to other events throughout the world.

Burroughs' cut-ups can be viewed as a form of divination, which is an attempt to predict the future, often through believed contact with supernatural beings or realms. Burroughs believed he could predict the future by interpreting the random arrangements of text created by his cut-ups. There are many different divinatory techniques that have been used from ancient to modern times, from dream analysis to induced possession, but the method which most closely resembles that of the cut-up technique involves what might be termed the creation and analysis of chance arrangements.¹⁰ While the cut-up technique is viewed as a very avant-garde, innovative method of writing, it is based on this ancient technique; it is the application of this non-literary technique (which also resembles artistic collage) to literature which makes the cut-up a revolutionary written form.

Burroughs expresses his beliefs in the divinatory power of the cut-up throughout his work. In an essay, "It Belongs to the Cucumbers," Burroughs describes some cut-ups that he believes to have foretold future events:

When you experiment with cut-ups over a period of time, some of the cut and rearranged texts seem to refer to future events. I cut up an article written by John Paul Getty and got: "It is a bad thing to sue your own father." And a year later one of his sons did sue him. In 1964 I made a cut-up and got what seemed at the time a totally inexplicable phrase: "And here is a horrid air conditioner." In 1974 I

moved into a loft with a broken air conditioner which was removed to put in a new unit . . . a horrid disposal problem, heavy and solid, emerged from a cut-up ten years ago. (52-53)

Additionally, he believes that the cut-up can not only provide knowledge about the future, but also reveal information about past events. In the introduction to *Queer*, he writes,

I remember a cut-up I made in Paris years later [after Joan's death]:
 “Raw peeled winds of hate and mischance blew the shot.” And for years I thought this referred to blowing a shot of junk, when the junk squirts out the side of the syringe or dropper owing to an obstruction. Brion Gysin pointed out the actual meaning: the shot that killed Joan.
 (16)

The use of the word “mischance” here is contradictory. On one hand, Burroughs believes that all things are brought about by some sort of individual agency, and that nothing, including the results of his cut-up experiments, is purely chance. But here, he seems perfectly willing to believe, as the cut-up states, that it was “mischance”—random, bad luck—that caused the incident. One difficulty in understanding Burroughs' beliefs about the cut-up are the contradictions inherent in them; the author's beliefs concerning them are not clear or static, but in a constant state of flux.

Burroughs offers some theories on how the cut-up works as divination; these theories are various and even contradictory. In both “It Belongs to the Cucumbers” (54) and *The Third Mind* (32), Burroughs compares the cut-up technique to a more well-known divinatory method, table-tapping, which is a spiritualist practice believed to facilitate communication between humans and spirits. The comparison of these two techniques suggests that Burroughs believes the cut-ups are somehow

influenced by the spirit world, or are communications from such a realm. In *The Third Mind*, Burroughs writes, “The cut-up perverts scriptural practice in the sense that the space-time of the text is distorted. There is an impression of *déjà-vu*, as well as an indication of what’s to come” (21). Here, he suggests that by disrupting traditional, linear narrative, the cut-up enables simultaneous access to past, present, and future for the writer and the reader, thus enabling a form of literary time travel. This theory underpins his belief that the cut-up can both explain past events and foretell future ones.

In *The Job*, however, the author provides a different explanation of how cut-ups may predict the future, which contradicts his faith in and emphasis upon individual agency: “Perhaps events are pre-written and pre-recorded and when you cut word lines the future leaks out” (13). This suggests a belief that events are predetermined, which is unexpected, as such an attitude is often associated with religion, particularly the Calvinism associated with the American Puritan theologian Jonathan Edwards. Such a belief in predestination contradicts Burroughs’ belief in individual agency: if the future is “pre-written,” surely such agency can only be futile. There is some indication that Burroughs believes that, by contacting the future via the literary time travel enabled by the cut-up, one can change one's predestined fate: “Could you, by cutting up, overlaying, scrambling, cut and nullify the prerecordings of your own future? Could the whole prerecorded future of the human race be nullified or altered? I don't know – let's see” (“Cucumbers” 59). However, the tentative, questioning tone of the passage indicates that Burroughs himself is far from resolving the contradiction. Most likely, the author does not wish to retract his faith in the importance of individual agency. It is more probable that he does not realise the contradiction inherent in these two convictions, as he often takes

a fluid approach to his spiritual beliefs, expressing and working through them as they come to him, rather than forming a philosophy based upon fully thought-out ideas. Such a relaxed approach to his spiritual beliefs is characteristic of the author, and of the Beats' approach to spirituality as a whole.

Another of Burroughs' beliefs relating to the magical universe, a belief in synchronicity, or "meaningful coincidences," aligns him with other post-war thinkers who challenge conventional ideas of reality. In 1952, C.G. Jung wrote an essay on the concept of synchronicity, analysing "meaningful coincidences" (426) as evidence that the human unconscious can have an effect on events in the outside world. The essay, "Synchronicity: An Acausal Connecting Principle," reveals similarities between Jungian theory and Burroughs' own ideas. Both authors seriously consider these "meaningful coincidences" as challenges to modern science's ideas of chance; their alternative explanations for such coincidences allow for the possibility that the individual has more power to influence external reality than science might grant him.

Jung presents synchronicity as an alternative to the "scientific view of the world" (422). He defines it as "the simultaneous occurrence of a certain psychic state with one or more external events which appear as meaningful parallels to the momentary subjective state" (441). He describes a synchronistic event as when "an unconscious image comes into consciousness either directly (i.e., literally) or indirectly (symbolized or suggested) in the form of a dream, idea, or premonition" and "an objective situation coincides with this content" (447). These definitions themselves are complex, so it is helpful to turn to the examples of synchronicity discussed in the essay for clarification. As one example, Jung describes a day in which he encounters the same numbers in a tram ticket, a theatre ticket, and a telephone number he is given (424). He also describes a time when he was

researching the meaning of the fish symbol, and encountered fish or references to fish several times in one day, such as having fish for lunch and having a patient show him paintings of fish (426). Another example provided is that of a patient telling Jung about a dream she had involving a golden scarab beetle. While she was speaking, Jung heard something tapping at the window, and when he opened it, a beetle very similar to a golden scarab flew in (438).

Jung uses these events to challenge traditional views of reality and consciousness. Such events, Jung believes, call into question the concepts of space and time, which order traditional Western concepts of external reality (446). While Western science views reality as controlled solely by natural law, Jung believes that the human psyche—particularly, the unconscious mind—can alter this objective reality in ways that do not conform to natural law's dictates. In the case of synchronistic events, Jung believes that the unconscious temporarily gains control over the conscious mind (446). He believes that the events he gives as examples of synchronicity came about because of an unconscious “a priori, causally inexplicable knowledge of a situation which at the time is unknowable” (447). The unconscious knowledge affected conscious knowledge, and thus, the reality of the situation.¹¹

Burroughs views his cut-up texts as the same type of “meaningful coincidences” that Jung discusses and, like Jung, sees them as evidence that the universe does not operate according to scientific law. He envisions the scientific idea of chance as an attempt to dismiss the magic inherent within the universe: “What is the magic word that exorcises and banishes magic? . . . Coincidence” (“On Coincidence” 99). By serving as “meaningful coincidences,” the cut-ups serve as evidence against conventional conceptions of chance. The cut-ups also subvert established ideas of the linear movement of time as it is reflected in traditional

writing with its linear plot and chronological progression: “The cut-up perverts scriptural practice in the sense that the space-time of the text is distorted. There is an impression of *déjà-vu*, as well as an indication of what's to come” (*The Third Mind* 21). By disrupting traditional narrative, and, by proxy, space-time itself, the cut-up enables the author (and the reader) to travel through time: “when I fold today's paper in with yesterday's paper and arrange the pictures to form a time section montage, I am literally moving back to the time when I read yesterday's paper, that is traveling in time back to yesterday” (*Soft Machine* 67).

Burroughs comments on experiences similar to those Jung discusses in “Synchronicity: An Acausal Connecting Principle,” viewing these occurrences as evidence for the central place of the individual within the “magical universe.” Such a belief forms another challenge to an impersonal, scientific conception of reality. He discusses the same kind of “streaks”—like the numbers of the tickets and the recurring fish theme—in an essay contained in *The Adding Machine*:

all events seem to arrange themselves in sequences, as if one accident magnetically attracts similar occurrences. . . . If you miss one train you are that much more likely to just miss another. . . . Look through a newspaper: two people on the same day drowned in bathtubs, similar fires and accidents . . . or a run of fatalities all the same age.

(“An Epitaph” 161-62)

Unlike Jung, Burroughs sees “streaks” such as these as common rather than uncommon, which reflects his belief that in the “magical universe,” things are connected along the same kind of associational lines—“word and image vine”—he discusses in *The Third Mind* (135). Burroughs also writes about times when things

he is thinking about seem to correlate with events in the outside world, as with Jung's patient's experience with the beetle. He relates these incidents to the cut-up:

cut-ups make explicit a psychosensory process that is going on all the time anyway. Somebody is reading a newspaper, and his eye follows the column in the proper Aristotelian manner, one idea and sentence at a time. But subliminally he is reading the columns on either side. . . . That's a cut-up. . . . I was thinking that one *does* feel a little boxed in in New York, like living in a series of boxes. I looked out the window and there was a great big Yale truck. That's cut-up—a juxtaposition of what's happening outside and what you're thinking of. (*The Third Mind* 4-5)

Here, Burroughs' definition of a cut-up as “a juxtaposition of what's happening outside and what you're thinking of” can be seen as a literary version of Jung's definition of synchronicity as “the simultaneous occurrence of a certain psychic state with one or more external events which appear as meaningful parallels to the momentary subjective state” (Jung 441). Burroughs' analysis of the cut-up here is also a critique of Western thought: he feels the “Aristotelian” explanation of reading fails to take into account subliminal—or unconscious—thought, which is constantly “cutting up” the things in the environment, processing them all in montage. While he does not, like Jung, directly suggest that the unconscious thought process is actually influencing what is going on in the real world, he does imply that the two are connected in acausal, associational ways.

A comparison between Burroughs' and Jung's beliefs reveals a common interest in challenging traditional conceptions of reality with a more person-centred view of the world, though there are subtle, telling differences between the authors'

beliefs. Both authors consider alternate views of reality in which humans have more power over external events than science might allow, using “meaningful coincidences” as evidence for this power. Burroughs, though, believes that the individual's power is more direct and conscious than does Jung. Jung believes in a collective unconscious, shared by humanity. He believes that it is this collective unconscious which has the power to influence outer events, and it does so without the individual subject directly willing it to. Burroughs believes that individuals, by means of their agency and will, have a direct power to influence events. At times, he expresses the belief that all events in the universe come about due to personal agency of this sort. By subjectivising and re-imagining reality, Burroughs and Jung participate in a larger trend toward subjectivity that took place during their time, challenging systems they thought of as depersonalising and limiting to embrace a new consciousness, in which the individual reclaimed power from the institutional.

Chapter Three

“The Voice Out of the Burning Bush”: Allen Ginsberg’s Poetics of Textual Interpretation¹

*“Now poetry instead of relying for effect on dreaminess of image or sharpness of visual phanopoeia—instead of conjuring a vision or telling a truth, stops . . . nobody can seriously go on passionately concerned with effects however seeming-real they be, when he knows inside all his visions and truths are empty, finally. So the next step is examination of the cause of these effects, the vehicle of the visions, the conceiver of the truth, which is: words. Language, the prime material itself” (Ginsberg, *Indian Journals* 38).*

Allen Ginsberg is a countercultural poet well known for speaking out against conventional American, Western culture and the “harrowing effects of institutions such as schools, the family, orthodox Western religion, Western legal and medical establishments, and the postwar military-industrial complex” (Trigilio, *Prophecies* 36).² Ginsberg is also widely recognized as exploring the Eastern tradition, particularly Buddhism, as an alternative to this Western society and tradition that he views as problematic and spiritually sterile.³ I argue that, while the author does reject Western society, the Eastern tradition is not the only place he turns for alternatives to this culture. Ginsberg was Jewish, and he participates in the Jewish tradition as an alternative to Western modes of thought and spirituality. However, partly due to the author’s own insistence that he identified little with his Jewish background, his connection to the Jewish tradition is often overlooked in existing criticism.⁴

The defining feature of Ginsberg’s spirituality, a mystical experience he believed he had in July of 1948,⁵ can also be linked to the Jewish tradition. While alone in his apartment in Harlem, Ginsberg had what he considered a direct experience of God. As he read a book of William Blake’s poetry, he believed he could hear a voice, the voice of Blake or “the creator,” speaking aloud the poems he

was reading (Ginsberg, “Art” 37).⁶ Upon hearing the voice speaking the poems, Ginsberg felt new insight into his relationship with this “creator” and also experienced a widening of mental awareness, a “total consciousness . . . of the complete universe” (Ginsberg, “Art” 39). The textually-based aspect of the experience, based upon the Blake text Ginsberg was reading and then heard, links it to the Jewish tradition: in Judaism, God is typically experienced through reading and interpreting a sacred text. Ginsberg’s poetics are shaped by this text-orientated mystical experience. After the experience, much of his work is concerned with describing and reframing his Blake encounter, interpreting the incident as though it is a text in itself.

In Judaism, there is a tradition of biblical exegesis called midrash, in which sages create compilations of commentary on the sacred text. Geoffrey Hartman uses midrash as a paradigm for exploring the relationship between literary texts and critical commentary, and, similarly, I view Ginsberg’s work as a literary midrash of the Blake text and the mystical experience it inspires. Ginsberg’s poetics is one of textual interpretation: similar to the midrashic creation of new texts through the interpretation of older texts, Ginsberg creates his poetry by interpreting texts like the work of William Blake and canonical Jewish texts such as the law code of Leviticus and the Kaddish prayer for the dead. By analyzing Ginsberg’s poetics as one of textual interpretation, in which the interpreter is of utmost importance—two ideas strongly linked to the Jewish tradition—one can gain new insight into the poet’s authorial process and explore a spiritual influence largely overlooked in existing criticism.

An analysis of the influence of the Jewish tradition on the work of Allen Ginsberg is the focus of this chapter. In order to make this analysis clear, the first

section of Chapter Three explores some relevant aspects of the Jewish tradition: the role of textual interpretation and experience of God through sacred text. The next section addresses Ginsberg's accounts of his mystical experience, to gain familiarity with the event that shaped much of his work. Then, I move into close readings of Ginsberg's poetry. The third section of the chapter addresses his early poems which frame and reframe the mystical experience. Finally, I analyze "Many Loves" and *Kaddish*, in which the poet revises canonical Jewish material, such as the law codes of the Old Testament and the Kaddish prayer for the dead.

The Jewish Tradition: Openness, the Individual, and Textual Experience of God

To understand how Ginsberg's mystical experience and poetics of textual interpretation draws upon Judaism, it is important to be aware of some of the major aspects of this tradition. The Jewish, or Hebraic, tradition is viewed by some scholars as an alternative to the Western. The two can be seen to have different world-views and modes of thought, including the religion most characteristic of the Western world: Christianity.⁷ Christ is a key figure separating Judaism and Christianity: although Jesus was Jewish, Christians view him as a messianic figure, while Jews do not. This diverging interpretation of Christ heavily influences each tradition's sacred texts and experience of God. Both faiths share a sacred text on which belief is predicated; this text is called the Hebrew Bible, Scripture, or Torah in the Jewish tradition, and the Old Testament in the Christian. This text is the sole sacred text in the Jewish tradition, and in Christianity, is paired with the New Testament to form the Christian Bible. With the emergence of the Christian faith came a major split in the interpretations of this source text, and Christianity was

faced with the task of re-interpreting the Jewish scripture to accommodate the figure of Christ. Many Christians support a typological reading of the Old Testament and believe Jesus fulfilled the meaning of the previously open, interpretable text:

“Christianity claimed that it had the final and validating interpretation of the now “Old” Testament text. The word literally became incarnate” (Handelman xiv). For many Christians, the Old Testament “made sense only insofar as it prefigured Christianity” (Kermode 18). The typological reading of the Old Testament illustrates a key characteristic of the Western tradition’s approach to language: a search for the one true meaning of a text, a “tendency to *gather* various meanings *into a one*” and a “movement toward the universal, the general, the univocal” (Handelman 33).⁸ In this example, the one true, unifying meaning is Christ himself.

But as Christians narrowed the interpretation of their Old Testament, Jews further expanded the interpretation of their Torah. From about 70 to 600 CE, rabbinic Judaism arose and became the traditional form of Judaism. Rabbinic Judaism revolutionised the conception of the sacred text with its doctrine of the dual Torah. Previously, the Hebrew Bible, believed to have been revealed by God to Moses at Sinai, was considered to be the only sacred text, but the doctrine of the dual Torah states that in addition to the written part of the Torah given to Moses, there is also an oral aspect. The oral Torah is comprised of several exegetical works written by sages. The first is the Mishnah: a law code based upon oral tradition, which contains rules to guide multiple aspects of daily life. Next came the Talmud (a commentary on the Mishnah), and further works of commentary on many books of the Hebrew Bible. The doctrine of the dual Torah allowed textual commentary and interpretation to flourish for centuries. While Christians often saw one unifying truth

in the person of the Saviour, Jews privileged “a plurality, even a plethora, of meanings that overflow from within the text” (Stern, *Parables* 44).

This tendency toward multiple meanings is nowhere more evident than in the method of scriptural exegesis used by the rabbis to create the oral Torah, called midrash. Hartman and Sanford Budick define midrash as:

a term in rabbinic literature for the interpretive study of the Bible. By extension the word is also used in two related senses: first, to refer to the results of that interpretive activity, namely, the specific interpretations produced through midrashic exegesis; and, second, to describe the literary compilations in which the original interpretations, many of them first delivered and transmitted orally, were eventually collected. (*Midrash and Literature* 365)

Midrash responds, mainly, to textual gaps that bring up questions in the mind of the reader, such as “[c]ontradictions in the scriptural text, discontinuities, lacunae, silences, inexplicable motives, lexical peculiarities, awkward or unusual syntactic constructions” (Stern and Mirsky 7).⁹ Midrash does not fully close off these gaps by resolving them with a single explanation. Instead, multiple explanations are usually offered, and the entire associative thought process can be seen within the explication of the scriptural verse. This expansive tendency points to a major underlying principle of midrash: the idea that the sacred text is polysemous, containing in it multiple, even contradictory meanings. The idea of textual polysemy is based upon the belief that when Moses was given the Torah, what he was given was the infinite word of God. This sacred text inherently “included every multiple interpretation of Scripture” (Stern, “Indeterminacy” 148) and even “encompasses the whole range of supernal and mundane knowledge” (Idel,

Absorbing 29). This belief that the Torah contains all knowledge provides the rationalization for the idea of the polysemic text: one text can contain many meanings, because that text contains all meaning. It also provides a way to reconcile several contradictory exegeses of one verse or story. Joseph Dan writes:

The atmosphere of freedom. . . enables the homilist to negate previous notions drastically, even while presenting those previous notions without argument. The text clearly insists that even though the two interpretations are in conflict, both are true and should be accepted equally. (137)

Since all possible scriptural meanings, including those which contradict one another, are inherent in the original Torah, they all enjoy the status of truth and divine revelation.

The rabbis' interpretive hermeneutics also keep the meaning of the Torah dynamic. Midrashic interpretation is based upon freedom, intuition, play, and association; at times, it can even be chaotic. Stern writes of "[t]he typical midrashic predilection for multiple interpretations rather than for a single truth behind the text," of midrash's "irresistible desire to tease out the nuances of Scripture rather than use interpretation to close them off" and "the way midrashic discourse mixes text and commentary, violating the boundaries between them and intentionally blurring their differences" (*Midrash and Theory* 4).

The rabbis are fully at ease with the incoherence produced by such an approach, as they are with contradiction: they have an "apparent lack of interest in making a theologically coherent whole out of their disparate beliefs" and are "not worried by the possible absence of meaning" (Stern, "Indeterminacy" 154). But midrashic exegesis is not totally free: it has bounds that keep it from slipping into

total chaos. Hartman states that the rabbis' work "remains commentary; they find their way back to the words of the Bible, and however many meanings are discovered, these never replace Scripture" ("Midrash" 351).

The interpreter is of great importance in the Jewish tradition, and some rabbinic views of the interpreter give this figure an authority that matches that of God. During the biblical period, the divine author was the main authority, speaking to his people, demanding their obedience, intervening directly in their lives. But during the rabbinic period, faced with a silent God and a text that, without intervention, would become static and irrelevant to modern life, the rabbis engaged with and expanded this text through midrash. With its focus upon exegesis and its idea of the polysemic text, midrash destabilizes textual meaning and allows for inventiveness on the part of the interpreter. For rabbis, exegesis is a creative act:

The biblical narrative . . . became for the rabbis a giant screen upon which they projected the story of their own existence. Responding to the most subtle, latent possibilities of meaning in Scripture, these exegetes allowed their narrative imaginations to blossom in the cracks of the biblical text. (Stern and Mirsky 7)

Alan Avery-Peck discusses how, in the rabbinic traditions, the rabbis not only projected their own ideas and selves into the text, but also believed that by doing so they were able "not only to comprehend God and God's will but even to shape that will, to reveal that which was unknown even to God, but which is part of the divine will" (222). This idea is taken even further in some rabbinic texts, such as passage B. B. M. 59b,¹⁰ which "asserts that the law is defined by a vote of the majority of sages, who determine proper conduct based upon their wisdom and knowledge and who give no heed to supernatural interference. . . . In the Rabbinic academy, rabbis,

not God, determine the law” (Avery-Peck 224). This belief, taken to its farthest extent, binds God to the interpretations of the sages:

God, as much as the people, is bound by the rules of Torah. God, just like the people, must accept and follow the logically decided view of the sages on earth. . . . People, and not God, are the source of revelation, their minds producing that which is understood to have been in God’s mind from the beginning of time. (225)¹¹

The Jewish tradition gives not only rabbis but also ordinary worshippers an interpretive power that can parallel that of God and text. The rabbis placed the “individual—not God—at the center of creation” by dismissing “the notion that it is appropriate for God to control people or force them into obedience. . . . Instead . . . it is up to individual Jews to find the otherwise hidden God . . . by acting responsibly in pursuing justice, promoting what is good, observing the law” (Avery-Peck 227-28). The rabbis’ interactions with ordinary Jews were structured in order to facilitate understanding of the sacred texts and thus include laypeople in the interpretive process. Moshe Idel states that the rabbis:

delivered their homilies before an open audience, without any restrictions regarding the age or the competence of the participants. The language of their discourses was generally perspicuous and aimed at explaining relatively simple items related to the biblical texts. Such explanation was usually achieved without resort to complex theological concepts. (Idel, “Infinities” 142).

Thus, in the Jewish tradition, the individual has a central role in religious life, as an interpreter of the sacred text, and thus, of God’s own word.

The Torah—with its openness and interpretability—is the focus of Judaism, because God is traditionally viewed as being present within the text of the Hebrew Bible. Idel writes: “In the postbiblical period God is conceived of much less as penetrating reality at His free will, using the apparatus of the Tabernacle or the Temple, than as constantly present within the literal signs of a portable book” (*Absorbing* 3). Handelman agrees, stating that “for the Jews, God manifested Himself through words in a divine text” (33). In Jewish mysticism, this link is particularly strong: “In the various forms of Kabbalah, there are numerous cases where performed language and texts are the main locus of the mystical encounter” (Idel, *Absorbing* 411). Some Kabbalists identify the text with God so strongly that they blur the line between text, creator, and author: “the book becomes more and more important, to the point where . . . it is conceived of as comprising God in itself” (Idel, *Absorbing* 124).

It is not enough to passively read the Hebrew Bible; language—particularly language that is spoken or “performed” as mentioned above—and interpretation is key to the Jewish experience of God. Handelman writes, contrasting rabbinic and Christian ideas of God, “For the Rabbis . . . the primary reality was linguistic; true being was a God who *speaks* and creates *texts*, and *imitatio deus* was not silent suffering, but speaking and interpreting” (4). Avery-Peck writes of the necessity for study and thought in knowing the divine:

knowledge of God results not primarily from God’s self-revelation in history. It depends rather upon humanity’s proper grasp of the Torah, requiring the Jews’ active engagement . . . by thinking about Torah, the Jew asks the deeper question of what can be known about God.

Thinking about Torah . . . reveals God's thought in God's own words.
(228)

The Jewish relation to the divine is far from passive. It is imperative instead to get involved with God's word, to use one's intellect to analyse its contents.

This tendency to locate God in the interpretation of a sacred text is present in both normative (rabbinic) and mystical strains of the religion, although each strand approaches these texts in different ways. The rabbis view the Torah as containing open, infinite meaning, which can be interpreted in many ways and still represent the word of God. The mystics view the sacred text as less open, containing "unique, unchangeable messages to be extracted by means of eccentric hermeneutics precisely from the written form of the Torah" (Idel, *Absorbing* 225). These "eccentric hermeneutics" tend toward an atomisation of the text of Torah, focusing upon techniques of re-combination and permutation of the letters of the text. But while the mystical reading of the Torah is less open, it still shares with rabbinic teaching the focus on textual interpretation. Furthermore, paranormal experience of God is linked most strongly with mysticism. While mystics believe themselves to have paranormal experiences of God, experiencing visions, voices, or other sensual phenomena, rabbinic Judaism posits that rabbis and lay Jews experience God in the minutiae of everyday life, including study of the Torah.¹² But paranormal experience, while rare, is not unheard of within rabbinic forms. Idel states that there are examples of both rabbinic and mystical texts "which point out the possibility of a paranormal experience as the result of intensive study of the Torah" (*Absorbing* 170). Max Kadushin discusses rabbis who have had visions of the prophet Ezekiel, who "instructed them in specific haggadic and even halakhic matters" (259).

With its open mode of interpretation, valuing of individual creativity and authority, tendency toward chaotic, associative form, and location of experience of God in text and its interpretation, the Jewish tradition is central to Ginsberg's poetry. Ginsberg's mystical experience, which shapes his work, is textually-focussed, and this experience influences him to create a poetics of textual interpretation which forms the foundation of his subsequent work.

Ginsberg's Blake Experience: A Textual Encounter with the Divine

In July of 1948, Allen Ginsberg had a mystical experience which he would refer to throughout his life as a "vision." However, this experience was not actually visual, but aural: while reading a book of William Blake's poetry as he lay in bed in his Harlem flat, he believed he could hear a divine voice speaking aloud the poems he was reading: "Ah! Sunflower," "A Sick Rose," and "Little Girl Lost." After this initial mystical experience, he had a few similar, though less intense, encounters. The occurrence as a whole would become the core of his spirituality and his poetics, forming the basis of the thematic material for most of his work from the time of the experience to the early sixties and influencing his later work. Tony Trigilio calls the experiences "the catalyst for Ginsberg's transformation of his poetics and epistemology" (*Prophecies* 36), and Ginsberg himself remarks of them: "because of their absolute and eternal nature I assumed [them] as the keystone and reference point of all my thought—a North Star for life" (*Martyrdom* 278).

Many critics have commented on Ginsberg's mystical experiences, relating them mainly to his rejection of rationalistic Western thought and culture in favour of alternate forms of lifestyle and consciousness and his role as a prophetic figure. Trigilio views Ginsberg as a "poet-prophet" whose work comes "in response to the

pressures of scientific, industrial, and religious orthodoxies” (*Prophecies* 14). John Tytell states that after the experience, Ginsberg “would now see his own poetic attempts as a part of a tradition of magic prophecy” and “would understand the experience . . . as an inner mental projection of his own . . . physiological voice” (*Naked Angels* 89). Barry Miles agrees with Trigilio that Ginsberg’s experience is an embrace of alternate consciousness against a society Ginsberg viewed as rationalistic and conformist. Miles states that the experience served to “strengthe[n] his [Ginsberg’s] attachment to those outside society, the insane, the criminal, the rejected” (54). One of the most confusing aspects of the critical discussion of Ginsberg’s mystical experience is the fact that, like Ginsberg, his critics typically refer to this experience as a “vision,” using the term as a catch-all for all forms of mystical experience. Trigilio refers to the occurrence as Ginsberg’s “1948 auditory vision”—a contradictory phrase (*Prophecies* 36). Paul Portugés, similarly, acknowledges the auditory aspect of the mystical experience as an “auditory hallucination” (xiv). But then, he goes on to classify it as a “vision,” which he defines as “a kind of medium through which the visionary experiences ontological perceptions that have a profound, lasting impact on the individual’s life” (xiv). Nowhere in Portugés’ definition of a “vision” is there a reference to any actual visual phenomena, and this definition is vague and problematic. By broadening the definition of “vision” to mean any sort of mystical experience, both critics overlook the auditory and textual nature of the experience, and mistakenly assimilate it into a Western, Christian, visually-based mystical tradition. Such a categorisation conflicts with their previous positioning of the author as opposed to the Western tradition.

Ginsberg himself attempts to interpret his experience by turning to the works of Western-tradition mystics, further complicating the issue. He feels as though he is

carrying on their legacy, which he believes to be stultified by post-war American conformity. He identifies with Christian mystics such as St. John of the Cross and Teresa of Avila and writers such as Blake and Walt Whitman, whom he views as a part of a mystical tradition. Before the experience occurred, Ginsberg “had been reading St. John [of the Cross] and felt he had certainly entered his own dark night of the soul, that he was not unlike the spiritual aspirant preparing himself for a visitation from God” (Portugés 10). He was also reading Plato’s *Phaedrus* and the work of Plotinus and Teresa of Avila (Portugés 105; Ginsberg, “Art” 40), and after the mystical experience, he turns to “the New Testament, Thomas Merton’s *The Seven Storey Mountain* . . . *The Cloud of Unknowing*, and some of the texts of fourteenth-century Catholic mystics” to help interpret the experience (Schumacher 164).

This reading list suggests Ginsberg’s interest in the Western mystical tradition as an aid to understanding his own mystical experience. However, both critics and Ginsberg himself fail to see that the Christian mystics describe experiences that differ from Ginsberg’s textual, aural ones. In his writings, St. John describes the divine encounter as taking place in the human soul, which seeks out and is eventually “transformed” into God (King 155). After a “dark night of the soul,” he describes a union with Christ in erotic terms, taking on a feminine role, as an “exchange of love that transpires between the soul and Christ, its bridegroom” (Egan 453), while Teresa feels a similar sensation of “spiritual marriage” and actually sees an apparition of God in an “imaginative vision” (Egan 449). These accounts are typical of Christian mystics, whose experiences are characteristically visual. There are some instances of aural experiences, but in these, the subject

usually hears God speaking to them in words meant specifically for their ears, rather than words from a pre-existing text.¹³

Ginsberg's mystical experience, unlike these, is not *visual* at all. It is an aural hallucination of a pre-existing literary text, read aloud in the voice of its author, William Blake. Ginsberg states that this hallucination "woke me further deep in my understanding of the poem" ("Art" 37). This new awareness also gives him insight into his relationship to the universe and its "creator." The term *creator* points to another essential difference between Ginsberg's experience and those of the Christian mystics, which Portugés highlights: "Most visionaries in Western culture have been Christians. However, one distinctive feature of Ginsberg's visions . . . is that they are directed toward the poetry and the poetics and *not* toward an ultimate, divine saviour" (xiv). Portugés goes on, however, to link Ginsberg's poetry to a visual tradition that is characteristic of Western culture. He states that Ginsberg's poetry is shaped by a "poetics of vision" which Portugés describes as "a theory and practice of poetry that would allow him to communicate his visions and his heightened awareness of reality to an audience bent on denying the mundane as well as the sublime" (23). In the first quotation, Portugés acknowledges that Ginsberg's mystical experience is related to poetry. But he does not acknowledge the textual and aural nature of the experience itself, evident in his use of the words "visionaries" and "visions." Ginsberg's poetics is not one of vision, but one of *textual interpretation*, in which the poet uses the same intellectual process that shaped his mystical experience—the interpretation of a source text—to create new poetry. I argue that Ginsberg's focus upon the text as a locus of divine encounter and an inspiration for further texts links the poet to his Jewish heritage, which he often downplays. For Ginsberg, as for rabbinic and mystical Jews alike, God is

experienced through the polysemous text and its interpretation, not through the visual apparitions and novel utterances typical of Christian mystics.

Ginsberg's mystical experience exhibits the main characteristics of the Jewish experience of God: his encounter with the divine is mediated by the text, and by interpreting this text, he believes he experiences revelation and salvation. The poet gives his most detailed account of his mystical experience in a 1965 interview for *Paris Review*, which is reprinted in *Spontaneous Mind*.¹⁴ In this account, he describes lying in bed and reading Blake ("Art" 35). He then describes what happened as he interpreted the poem:

I realized that the poem was talking about me. . . . Now, I began understanding it . . . and suddenly, simultaneously with understanding it, heard a very deep earthen grave voice in the room, which I immediately assumed, I didn't think twice, was Blake's voice. (36)

Ginsberg's reading of Blake initially brings about an intellectual understanding of the poem; he has interpreted the poem as any literary scholar might. But the interpretive experience intensifies as, in his moment of realisation and understanding, he experiences an aural hallucination of the authorial voice. He continues, "the auditory hallucination . . . the apparitional voice . . . woke me further deep in my understanding of the poem" (37). Ginsberg believes that his reading of the poem, which brought about the mystical experience, was incomplete—it took the voice of the author to improve his initial, unaided understanding.

Ginsberg then conflates this voice of the author of the text with the divine, without clarifying why or how he makes this association. He describes the voice which he just attributed to Blake as "like the voice of the Ancient of Days," "like God had a human voice," and "a living creator speaking to his son" (37). Here,

Ginsberg associates the author of the text with the author or “creator” of the world. Ginsberg then begins to feel that he has gained a new understanding of not just the poem, but the “universe” itself. He continues:

suddenly it seemed that I saw into the depths of the universe, by
 looking simply into the ancient sky. . . . And this was the very ancient
 place he was talking about, the sweet golden clime . . . this was the
 moment I was born for . . . this vision or this consciousness, of being
 alive onto myself, alive myself onto the creator. As the son of the
 Creator—who loved me, I realized, or who responded to my desire.

(37)

The language Ginsberg uses to describe the next part of his mystical experience reveals the importance the author places upon its auditory aspect. When he goes on to read “The Sick Rose,” he has the same sensation “with the same voice” speaking the poem aloud (38). Again, the voice facilitates in Ginsberg an understanding of the poem, and he arrives at a new interpretation of the text. This time, he also believes that the poem and voice have made a revelation to him. He feels “as if Blake had penetrated the very secret core of the entire universe and had come forth with some little magic formula statement in rhyme and rhythm that, if properly heard in the inner inner ear, would deliver you beyond the universe” (39). Although Ginsberg believes that Blake has discovered the “secret core of the entire universe,” his description of what Blake has found there—a “little magic formula statement” is anticlimactic and vague. But this quotation, albeit nebulous, reveals the key importance of the textual to Ginsberg. For him, the secret of the universe is not to be revealed visually, but through a “magic formula statement in rhyme and rhythm”—that is, Blake’s poem (a text)—and Ginsberg’s hearing thereof.

Furthermore, this “secret” is not made explicit, but must be interpreted, just as the Torah must be. The way it must be interpreted is aurally, when it is “heard” in the “inner inner ear.” This hearing can be understood literally, as aural experience of performed text. Or, it can be understood metaphorically, representing the intellectual, interpretive process: it is not enough to simply “hear”—that is, passively experience—text; one must “*properly*” *hear* in the “*inner inner ear*.” This type of enhanced hearing can be viewed as a metaphor for thinking about and interpreting the text, as Ginsberg is doing in his mystical experience.

With his final auditory experience, of “Little Girl Lost,” Ginsberg expands the significance of his experience, realizing its impact on his consciousness. He interprets the word “wake” in the poem as referring to the revelation he has just experienced: “The total consciousness, then, of the complete universe . . . is what Blake was talking about. In other words a breakthrough from ordinary habitual quotidian consciousness into consciousness that was really seeing all of heaven in a flower” (39). Ginsberg feels his encounter with the divine has imparted him with an understanding not just the poem but the universe itself. This conflation of text, infinity, and universe is characteristic of the Jewish understanding of the divine: for Jews, the Torah “encompasses the whole range of supernal and mundane knowledge” (Idel, *Absorbing* 29) and is viewed as infinite, believed to “contain the universe” (Idel, *Absorbing* 32). This sense of textual infinity persists after the main experience for Ginsberg: he describes being “able to read almost any text and see all sorts of divine significance in it” in the period directly following his experience (“Art” 41).

The incident just described is the main mystical experience of Ginsberg’s life, but he also has a few more minor experiences related to the original event in

1948. After the aural hallucination ends, Ginsberg wants to come into contact with the same consciousness again, and “began experimenting with it, without Blake. . . . I started moving around . . . and saying ‘Dance! dance! dance! dance! spirit! spirit! spirit! dance!’” He continues, “it started coming over me, this big . . . creepy feeling . . . so I got all scared and quit” (“Art” 41; ellipsis in orig.). Without the medium of the text to serve as a bridge to the divine, Ginsberg feels helpless and afraid: for him, there is no encountering God outside the text. But later, while reading Blake in the Columbia bookshop, he has another experience. This one is less terrifying, allowing him to feel the same expansion of consciousness associated with his first experience. While browsing and reading “The Human Abstract,” he finds that he is “in the eternal place *once more*” (41). He experiences another shift of consciousness, and feels he can see the weight of human life on the faces of those around him (42). He associates this feeling with another Blake text, “London,” and its words “marks of weakness, marks of woe” (43).

Ginsberg’s final mystical experience comes a week after the experience in the bookshop. This time, although not reading, he claims that he was walking “by the library” at Columbia. The author’s description of his location in relation to the library, rather than any other neighbouring landmark, reveals that Ginsberg views text as a locus for mystical experience. Here, he “started invoking the spirit, consciously trying to get another depth perception of cosmos. And suddenly it began occurring again . . . but it was frightening. Some like real serpent-fear entering the sky” (44). As in his second mystical experience, without the medium of the text before him, Ginsberg is frightened and upset, rather than enlightened, by his experience. He links the experience to the Blake text after the fact, stating he had

experienced “the Gates of Wrath” which Blake writes about, but at this point, he backs off from the visions, asserting that after this, “I shut it all off” (44).

The aural hallucination of Blake’s voice reading his work and the subsequent sense of direct experience of God and expanded consciousness of the universe is the most important event in Allen Ginsberg’s spiritual life. Understanding this event as what it is—a spoken hallucination of a pre-existing literary text—rather than as a “vision,” as Ginsberg and his critics view it, reveals that, for Ginsberg, God is encountered through study and interpretation of a literary text. This tendency links Ginsberg to a Jewish heritage which he and his critics downplay: in the Jewish tradition, God is typically experienced through text and interpretation. This mystical experience inspires Ginsberg’s poetics of textual interpretation, in which new texts are created through the interpretation of pre-existing texts; in these new texts, the line between the old text, the interpretation, and the new text is blurred. Over the next decade, Ginsberg would write numerous poems describing, revising, and explaining the Blake experience, in various and contradictory ways.

Poetics of Textual Interpretation: Poems of Mystical Experience, 1948-1958

Most of Ginsberg’s poetry from the time his mystical experience occurred until around 1952 relates to the Blake encounter. These poems are collected in *Empty Mirror*, *Early Poems*, and *The Gates of Wrath: Rhymed Poems*.¹⁵ The poet chose to work through this experience in the form of text, by creating his own poems which explore the encounter. These early poems reflect the importance of text in Ginsberg’s attempt to understand his mystical experience. In order to analyse them, I will be addressing the poems as a literary midrash of the Blake text and the experience itself. Such an approach draws upon the work of Geoffrey Hartman, who

has seen parallels between contemporary literary theory and midrash. In both, Hartman sees a favouring of “‘open’ modes of interpretation” and intertextuality (Hartman, Introduction xi).¹⁶

In midrash, the rabbis interpret the written Torah to create new texts of oral Torah, and Ginsberg follows the same process in his poetics of interpretation. Hartman writes, “at a certain level midrash is not satisfied with the text as it stands, and while it refuses to produce a new or transformed writing it looks for more of the original in the original, for more story, more words within the words” (“Midrash” 344-45). Ginsberg’s mystical experience and the poetry it inspires both stem from his reading of Blake’s original text and his desire to find “more story” there, to integrate this text into modern life and his own personal experience. This tendency parallels the way midrash stems from the Torah and the rabbis’ wish to do the same.¹⁷

Much of Ginsberg’s early poetry, written as Ginsberg still struggles to grasp and analyse his Blake encounter, contains vague language and erratic imagery. Also, he had not yet begun to use the freely expressive long breath line that is typical of his later poetry, instead favouring a rhymed style which, in his case, limits his range of expression. The strongest imagery in these early poems is that of impaired, ineffectual sight. This imagery suggests Ginsberg’s reliance on text as a facilitator of and way to interpret his mystical experience. The first stanza of “On Reading William Blake’s ‘The Sick Rose’” reads:

Rose of spirit, rose of light,
Flower whereof all will tell,
Is this black vision of my sight
The fashion of a prideful spell,

Mystic charm or magic bright

O Judgement of fire and of fright? (1-6)

Precisely what Ginsberg is asking here is unclear, yet the image of “black vision” is strong, suggesting blocked, ineffective sight. “Vision 1948” contains similar imagery:

I shudder with intelligence and I

Wake in the deep light

And hear a vast machinery

Descending without sound,

Intolerable to me, too bright,

And shaken in the sight

The eye goes blind before the world goes round. (22-28)

This poem contains imagery of hearing on a different, possibly extrasensory level (the narrator can “hear” the “vast machinery,” although it is “descending without sound”) as well as that of impaired sight. Something “bright” seems to have blinded the eye here, suggesting that mystical experience is too strong for vision to endure, and can only be comprehended aurally. This idea of hearing on a different register relates to Ginsberg’s description of the “inner inner ear” as a metaphor for intellect and interpretation in the “Art of Poetry” interview (39): the narrator’s mental acuity—described here as his “intelligence” and his “waking”—precede his deeper hearing.

“The Voice of Rock”—a title coming from Ginsberg’s description of the voice he hears speaking the Blake poetry¹⁸—focuses on the terrifying aspect of his experience, portraying a scenario of horror in which “dead eyes see, and dead eyes weep” (6). The poem ends with another image of blindness:

for what he knows and I have known
 is, like a crystal lost in stone,
 hidden in skin and buried down,
 blind as the vision of the dead. (21-24)

“Psalm II” describes the “Visions of the soul” (38), which seem to Ginsberg “As if the sleeping heart, agaze, in darkness, / Would dream her passions out as in the Heavens” (40-41). “Ode to the Setting Sun” contains a similar image: “Under the earth there is an eye / Open in a sightless cave” (25-26). From these early poems, it is clear that Ginsberg views the sense of sight—the typical tool of divine revelation in the Western tradition—as insufficient for comprehending his mystical experience. His early work serves as a record of his attempt to understand the divine revelation he believes he has experienced. For him, this event transcends the visual, and can only be successfully explored through the medium which inspired it: the written and oral text.

Ginsberg wrote “The Lion for Real” in March 1958, almost ten years after his mystical experience. Its language and imagery reflects Ginsberg’s years of contemplating the encounter. The poem can be understood as a *mashal*, which is a form of midrash in which a rabbi interprets a scriptural passage or idea by means of a parable, explicating or expanding its meaning. By using this midrashic technique to structure the poem, Ginsberg is able to shape his often chaotic thoughts about the experience into something much more cohesive. Stern defines a *mashal* as: “The generic name in Rabbinic literature for fables . . . and for parabolic narratives in general” (Stern, *Parables* 5). He writes: “both parables and fables operate surreptitiously as literary forms, expressing allusive messages through indirect means,” but a “parable suggests a set of parallels between an imagined fictional

event and an immediate, ‘real’ situation confronting the parable’s author and his audience . . . the literary form tends to imply the parallel rather than explicate it” (5). In “The Lion for Real,” Ginsberg explains his relationship to what he calls “Divine Presence” (liner notes, *Lion for Real* CD) through a parable. In Ginsberg’s parable, he provides a fictional narrative of finding a lion in his flat, symbolising his mystical experience.

Parables are used in contexts apart from the Jewish and rabbinic, but there are some qualities that set the rabbinic *mashal* apart from other parables. These qualities are present in “The Lion for Real.” *Meshalim* typically have a thematic concern with the relationship between God and Israel; this relationship is expressed through the symbol of a “king and his court” (Stern, *Parables* 98). In “The Lion for Real,” there is no human king, but the lion is traditionally viewed as king of the beasts. As in the *meshalim*, this kingly figure serves as a symbol for God—here, more specifically, the direct experience of God. Ginsberg’s poem personalizes the standard theme of the *mashal*: rather than exploring the relationship between God and a large group of his worshippers, he explores the relationship between God and himself alone. He presents himself as not one in a group of chosen people, but as a single chosen person, who is misunderstood by all those he approaches.

Meshalim also have some structural qualities that set them apart from other parables. First, these narratives follow a common plot structure:

The narrative invariably begins with a crisis, often marked . . . by a departure or absence. . . . The crisis . . . is followed by the characters’ growing consciousness of the void, the emptiness and irresolution, in which they have been left. If the *mashal*’s narrative can be said to reach a conclusion, the resolution comes through an interpretive event

. . . that aims to restore the absent presence. (Stern, *Midrash and Theory* 53)

Following this structure, “The Lion for Real” begins with a crisis and a departure: the crisis comes in the first line, when the narrator “found a lion in my living room” (1). Due to this, he then departs, “hurr[ying] home to Paterson,” his childhood home (4). In Paterson, the narrator feels the emptiness characteristic of the *mashal*: despite his desperation to convey his experience to others, none of the acquaintances he approaches are sympathetic. The narrator “Called up my old Reichian analyst” (5), but his analyst is unhelpful, stating “I’m afraid any discussion would have no value” before hanging up the phone (8). An “old boyfriend” (9) is similarly unsupportive; after the narrator “announced I had a lion with a mad gleam in my eye” (10), the boyfriend “kicked me out” (11). The narrator then has an unfulfilling and confused sexual experience: “I ended masturbating in his jeep parked in the street moaning ‘Lion’” (12).

The friend who is able to best understand Ginsberg is a “novelist friend” (13). This friend “looked at me interested,” but when he “read me his spontaneous ignu high poetries / I listened for lions all I heard was Elephant Tiglon Hippogriff Unicorn Ants” (14-15). Although the narrator is able to gain a listener in his “novelist friend,” this friend does not quite grasp the nature of the narrator’s mystical experience. But the fact that a “novelist” has been the best listener out of the narrator’s three friends illuminates the link between the experience and the textual: while the divine may not be understood via psychoanalytical methods, or even through sexual intimacy with fellow humans, it can be more closely grasped by those who work with text—the medium that for Ginsberg is the locus of divine experience.

Following the typical *mashal* structure, the narrator returns home and to the presence of the lion. Here, the two are able to exist in relative peace: the lion “stopped roaring and bared a fang greet- / ing” (32-33). However, this reunion is not completely positive: while the lion “didn’t eat” the narrator (36), this meant that it grew visibly starved: “a sick rug of bones wheaten hair falling out / enraged and reddening eye” (37-38). Similarly, the narrator grows sickly and stressed, and, like the lion, “stopped eating” (41). Eventually, he exclaims, ““Terrible Pres- / ence! . . . ‘Eat me or die!’” (45-46). Then, the lion leaves the flat, but this parting is not nearly as stressful: the lion promises to be “back again” (53). Although the two are estranged once more, this promise points to a reconciliation typical of the *mashal*’s structure.

A second unique structural quality of the *mashal* is its division into two main parts: the *mashal*-proper and the *nimshal*. The *mashal*-proper is the main, “fictional narrative,” while the concluding, explanatory *nimshal* is “the narrative’s application” (Stern, *Parables* 8), or “a kind of translation into transcendental or covenantal terms of the *mashal*-proper’s story” (Stern, *Parables* 69). This *nimshal* is considered exegetical, explaining the fiction of the *mashal*-proper. The *mashal*-proper, the fictional narrative, in “The Lion for Real,” then, is the story of the lion. The *nimshal* is the final four lines of the poem, which serve as an exegesis of this story, and allow the story of the lion to be understood as an allusion to Ginsberg’s mystical experience:

Lion that eats my mind now for a decade knowing only your hunger
 Not the bliss of your satisfaction O roar of the Universe how am I
 chosen

In this life I have heard your promise I am ready to die I have served

Your starved and ancient Presence O Lord I wait in my room at your
 Mercy. (54-57)

But, unlike in the *mashal*, the link between the story of the lion and the mystical experience is only alluded to here, rather than made explicit: nowhere does Ginsberg directly state that the lion represents the divine, or that the poem is a record of the mystical experience. The work is, foremost, a poem, and does not conform precisely to the characteristics of the prose parable.

The fact that Ginsberg's parable is not made completely explicit also links it to a final distinguishing characteristic of the *mashal* genre: its division into three main narrative types or functions. *Meshalim* normally fall into one of three main categories, which Stern describes in *Parables in Midrash*. One type of *mashal* is that of illustration, showing "abstract ideas or beliefs through narrative examples that are concrete, familiar, and thus more easily comprehended" (48). Another type, the *mashal* of secret speech, conveys its message in a much less explicit way, as an "implicitly esoteric mode of communication, an interpretive event that separates 'insiders' from 'outsiders' . . . and that restricts its understanding to a select, elect few" (50). This type of *mashal* is most common in a Kabbalistic context. The rhetorical narrative *mashal* combines characteristics of the *meshalim* of illustration and secret speech: "both the narrative in the *mashal*-proper and their midrashic exegesis in the *nimshal* imply, respectively, their individual meanings, and together those two meanings contribute to the *mashal*'s overall rhetorical message" (51). The rhetorical narrative *mashal* involves the reader in the interpretive act: "In both parts of the *mashal*, the act of communication is wholly accessible to the audience, even though they have to complete it themselves so as to arrive at the *mashal*'s full meaning—at what we might call its interpretation" (52). It is this type to which

“The Lion for Real” most closely conforms. The final *nimshal* suggests the mystical experience that inspired the poem, but the meaning is more easily deduced if the reader is familiar with Ginsberg’s experience, explained in the *mashal*-proper, and the terms in which he often discusses it. A reader who knows that the author’s mystical appearance occurred a decade ago, and is aware of his “preoccupation with being in the presence of the Creator and yearning to get back that feeling of the infinite” (Portugés 25), which Ginsberg expresses in the phrase “knowing only your hunger,” might be able to interpret the poem as a reference to his mystical experience. However, one unfamiliar with these biographical details would not. By keeping his parable somewhat unclear, the poet makes the reader participate in an interpretive process which parallels Ginsberg’s own, as well as setting his work apart from the parable form, asserting its identity as a poem.

In his work from mid-1948 until 1958, Ginsberg recounts his mystical experience and the importance of text to his encounter with the divine. He moves from simply attempting to make sense of what occurred in early poems such as “Psalm I” and “Vision 1948” to locating and expanding its central themes in the more sophisticated “The Lion for Real,” in which he describes his attempts to share his experience with others in the form of a parable. With this new insight Ginsberg then moves away from his preoccupation with the mystical experience. He applies the midrashic techniques of his poetics of textual interpretation to canonical Jewish works, revising these works to further stress the importance of the individual and explore new themes such as the role of homosexuality and madness as redemptive alternatives to what the author views as repressive American conformity.

Poetics of Textual Interpretation: Revising the Jewish Canon in “Many Loves” and *Kaddish*

Allen Ginsberg’s poetics of textual interpretation, which shapes his creation of new poems through the interpretation and expansion of a source text, is evident in not just the poems that deal directly with his mystical experience, such as “The Voice of Rock” and “The Lion for Real,” but also much of his other work. “Many Loves” and *Kaddish* are two such poems. In his earliest work, the source texts for Ginsberg’s poetry were Blake’s work and the mystical experience this work facilitated, but in some of his later work, the poet turns to canonical Jewish texts. The law code contained in the biblical book of Leviticus inspires “Many Loves,” while the Kaddish, the traditional Jewish prayer to honour the dead, inspires Ginsberg’s poem of the same name.

Ginsberg revises these two canonical Jewish works, both of which are concerned with the Jewish community, and modifies tradition to subject this community to the needs of the individual. The book of Leviticus is concerned with upholding a community of holiness which obeys God’s law in order to secure community prosperity, and the Kaddish links Jewish mourners to a larger religious community which comforts the bereaved by linking them to tradition and God. In Ginsberg’s interpretations, however, the individual’s personal experiences, passions, and sensations take precedence over communal holiness or tradition. Ginsberg’s subversion of tradition, his tailoring it to the needs of the individual, reflects the influence of the subjective turn functioning at large in America during this period. He also takes part in the very tradition he revises, as interpreting and reshaping sacred text is a major function of midrash.

The poem “Many Loves” serves as a midrash of Leviticus’ prohibitions against homosexuality.¹⁹ There is an existing tradition of midrash on this book and these prohibitions, both ancient and modern. The rabbinic texts *Sifre* and *Leviticus Rabbah* both take the book of Leviticus as their subject. Jacob Neusner writes, “The authors of *Leviticus Rabbah* . . . wished to provide both an exegesis and an expansion, into a larger context, of the book of Leviticus” (*Comparative Midrash* 107). The interpretations contained in both texts remain close to the sacred text, and their main theme, like that of the scriptural source, is that of the importance of community morality: “If Israel carries out its moral obligations, then God will redeem Israel. If Israel does not, then God will punish Israel” (Neusner, *Introduction* 389).

Modern interpretations of Leviticus’ prohibition against homosexuality expand the text’s original meaning; they interpret the verses in a way that accommodates certain types of homosexual behaviour. They also state that a probable reason for the prohibition is a belief that homosexual behaviour confuses typical categories of gender. Theodore Jennings explores the meaning of the phrase “You shall not lie with a male as with a woman.” He proposes that what this phrase expressly prohibits is “sexually using a male as an ersatz or imitation female” (206). He continues, “In this view, it does not prohibit male same-sex relations where these are the expression of desire or delight, which desires and delights in the maleness of the partner” (206). Jennings believes that the transgressor in the homosexual relationship is not the penetrating partner, as the wording of the original text seems to suggest, but the penetrated partner: “The one who is penetrated performs the mixing of categories. It is he who acts as a female and so confuses the social categories that Leviticus . . . is concerned to enforce” (208-9). Like Jennings, Saul

Olyan also analyses the phrasing of the prohibition, and addresses the idea of category confusion as a reason for the prohibition. He suggests that such acts are prohibited because “inappropriate penetration was frequently likened to feminization: to be penetrated was to be feminized, to surrender male status and authority” (191). He refers to Mary Douglas’ *Purity and Danger*, in which she states her belief that “Holiness means keeping distinct the categories of creation. It therefore involves correct definition, discrimination and order” (Douglas 54).

Steven Greenberg also interprets the verse in a way that allows certain types of homosexual behaviour: “If the prohibition is defined by anal penetration, then a whole array of sexual engagements between two men, ranging from kissing onward, would not be formally prohibited . . . same-sex emotional and physical desire . . . is not prohibited in Scripture” (85). Like Olyan, he addresses some of the possible reasons for the prohibition, and one of these reasons is that of “category confusion” (144). And also like Olyan, it is the receptive partner he views as the one who throws these categories into chaos: “Men who behave like women by allowing their bodies to be ‘acted on’ violate the design of creation” (175).

Ginsberg joins in this tradition of contemporary revision of the prohibitions of Leviticus. In his poem “Many Loves,” and an earlier unpublished draft thereof, Ginsberg takes on the role of boundary-crosser, providing a detailed record of his homosexual experiences, which transgress Leviticus’ laws. In these experiences, the poet is the partner being penetrated, thus crossing the boundary of gender that Olyan, Greenberg, and Jennings discuss. By crossing this boundary—which is meant to be a building-block of community order—Ginsberg embraces the chaos that Leviticus seeks to prevent, with its prohibition against gender category confusion.

Furthermore, Ginsberg’s challenge to the sacred commandments also constitutes a

boundary crossing in itself. Such boundary crossing and acceptance of chaos over strictly delineated order functions in the spirit of midrash: such transgression of boundaries is a key aspect of the exegetical tradition, which inhabits the line between text and commentary, creation and interpretation, ancient and modern text. A resistance to strict order is also characteristic of the exegetical principles of midrash (Stern, *Midrash and Theory* 4; “Indeterminacy” 154). Furthermore, while biblical interpretation is part of other religious traditions, such as Christianity, rabbinic Judaism lends the interpreter more authority, at times even placing final authority not with Scripture as it stands, but with the sages who interpret it. Ginsberg’s boldness in revising the sacred text, then, is parallel to this tradition.

Ginsberg’s poem “Many Loves,” and a previous, unpublished draft thereof, can be viewed as a midrash of Leviticus. Like Greenberg, Olyan, and Jennings, the poet interprets Leviticus to allow for homosexual behaviour. Trigilio writes of the unpublished draft:

The journal draft appeared one month after an entry in which he [Ginsberg] noted that he had finished reading the Old Testament; and it appeared during the same month that he read Blake’s “The Everlasting Gospel” and concluded that homoerotic desire does not by nature transgress biblical law: “the body’s five senses are expression of the soul, the body does not exist soul does, my love for Peter [Orlovsky] therefore doesn’t sin against my body.” (*Prophecies* 134)²⁰

The early draft of “Many Loves” opens with a bold statement of challenge to Leviticus’ prohibitions:²¹

Now I will speak out boldly, nay sing, not argue, dispute or

justify, dainty,
 But preach by example of the love known between men,
 And number my lovers among men, their names and stations,
 carnal days together,
 Proving by life what was not known in books, nor
 mortals, nor Bibles— (1-7)²²

After this assertion of the fluidity of individual experience over what Ginsberg views as static dogma, the poet goes on to name lovers he has had throughout his life: “Paul my first friend” (8), “Eric Law” (10), and “Dom” (27). Ginsberg makes it clear that he is taking up the position of receptive partner, the boundary crosser, in these sexual experiences. He states his strong desire to take up this position: “And I lusted to get my asshole fucked, these are the words of my / bowels. / To feel the goring of a cock in my belly coming from behind” (84-85). Juxtaposed against the prohibitions, with their vague language and lack of feeling or strong imagery, Ginsberg’s poem provides a record of the vivid experience to be found in throwing Leviticus’ boundaries into chaos, in confusing categories that, in mid-twentieth century America, were believed to be as integral to an orderly society as they were in ancient times.

The published version of “Many Loves” is a continuation of the draft present in Ginsberg’s journals, which also discusses Ginsberg’s homosexual experiences, focusing on the poet’s relationship with Neal Cassady. Here too, Ginsberg characterizes himself as the feminized partner who “confounds the categories of maleness and femaleness” (Greenberg 144); though here, he does so by describing Cassady in highly virile language, and himself in gender-neutral, and, in one instance, feminine language. Cassady is described as an “Irish / [boy]” (9-10), with

a “great arm like a king’s” (15). His sexual organ is referred to directly (44, 83), while Ginsberg’s is not. Cassady’s masculine sexuality is evident in his physical appearance: “his belly a thousand girls kissed in Colorado” (19); “his rock buttocks, silken in power, / rounded in animal fucking and bodily nights over nurses and school- / girls” (57-59). Ginsberg avoids such strongly gendered language toward himself, and once even uses feminine language toward himself: “And he seeing my fear stretched out his arm, and put it around my breast” (13). In the final stanza of the poem, he refers to being the penetrated partner in his and Cassady’s relationship, stating that he “made him [Cassady] then and there my master” (81). As in the earlier draft, taking up this boundary-crossing position brings Ginsberg joy and freedom: he describes feeling as though “my soul melted, secrecy departed, I became / Thenceforth open to his nature as a flower in the shining sun” (25-26). As in the previous draft, crossing the strict textual and sexual boundaries set up by Leviticus, and experiencing the chaos that transgressing these boundaries brings, gives Ginsberg individual fulfilment, ecstasy and freedom. By finding such fulfilment in transgressing textual boundaries and accepting chaotic readings of the text, both versions of “Many Loves” are indebted to the Jewish tradition.

Kaddish, like “Many Loves,” is a revision of a canonical Jewish work, the Kaddish prayer for the dead.²³ Here, Ginsberg revises a community-based tradition to assert the primacy of the individual. But while “Many Loves” is more of a breach with or revision of tradition, *Kaddish* both breaks and affirms the tradition: Ginsberg adapts this classic Jewish prayer into a personal narrative of his experiences with his mentally ill mother and their influence on his mental state and mystical experience. Trigilio, one of few critics to address Ginsberg’s revision of the Jewish tradition in *Kaddish*, also comments on Ginsberg’s focus on the individual: “Ginsberg . . .

affirms the power of the individual prophetic voice over the law of orthodoxy. As he addresses Jehovah in his revision of the burial prayer, Ginsberg affirms the authority of the individual to revise orthodox, and presumably timeless, language”

(*Prophecies* 156). But Trigilio’s view of Jewish texts and tradition is problematic: here, they are described as “orthodox” and “timeless”; elsewhere, he describes the tradition as “monovocal” (153) and states that its “authority as a lineage derives from an essential, un-revisable, Logocentric purity” (154-55). By doing this, he overlooks a key aspect of the Jewish tradition: the idea of the polysemous, interpretable sacred text that is the antithesis of the logocentric. Therefore, he cannot see that Ginsberg takes part in the tradition that he is revising, through the act of interpreting a canonical Jewish text.

When Ginsberg’s mother died, the responsibility fell to Ginsberg and his brother—as sons of the deceased—to recite or arrange a Kaddish for her. However, due to planning conflicts, this did not occur:

Allen did not make the cross-country trip to attend his mother’s funeral and burial on June 11 [1956]. Louis [Ginsberg, Allen’s father] wanted a small service and, in fact, did not inform his family of the services until after they had occurred, an unfortunate decision, because at the gravesite there were not enough men present to have a Kaddish read. (Schumacher 232)

Although not an observant Jew, Ginsberg was upset that his mother had no Kaddish.

In August, 1956:

Allen had asked Louis to send him a copy of a prayer book with the “Kaddish” included. Disappointed that the Kaddish had not been read at his mother’s funeral, Allen was determined to write his own

version—one that combined poetry with the rhythms of the Hebrew prayer. (editor's note, Ginsberg and Ginsberg 53)

He did not write the poem immediately, but a few years after his mother's death.

Ginsberg explains that in 1958, one night after visiting a friend who “showed me his old bar-mitzvah book of Hebrew ritual and read me central Kaddish passages,” he walked home and wrote most of the poem (“How Kaddish Happened” 233).

Ginsberg's *Kaddish* both breaks with and reaffirms the aspects of the Jewish tradition that are expressed in the original Kaddish. Ginsberg breaks tradition by taking the poem out of its social setting of synagogue and *minyan* to recite it alone. The words Ginsberg uses are not those of the canonical prayer but his own, and the short, succinct lines of the original prayer are replaced with long lines. Its content, which is applicable to any bereaved person, is replaced with a highly detailed, personal narrative in which Ginsberg lists what he imagines his mother remembers of her own life, such as “flowers in the summer fields of New York” (62) and “your memory of your mother, 1915 tears in silent movies weeks and / weeks—forgetting, aggrieve watching Marie Dressler address human- / ity, Chaplin dance in youth” (69-71), along with his own memories of his mother's life. But the poem affirms many of the classic prayer's functions, although these functions are modified. Ginsberg uses the Kaddish as an outlet to express the strong emotions of bereavement, as a space for reflection upon his parent's life and teachings, and as a blessing of God in the midst of tragedy and sorrow, all of which are traditional functions of the original Kaddish prayer.

A major way that Ginsberg breaks from tradition is by reciting his *Kaddish* alone. The original Kaddish is intimately linked to the Jewish community, and is

meant to provide a strong bond to this society in a time of crisis. Maurice Lamm explains:

And while it is true that the individual is accorded great value in Jewish ethics . . . this service of holiness must be recited only in public, eliciting the response of a congregation. The Jewish experience has taught that such values as peace and life, and the struggle to bring heaven down to earth, of which the Kaddish speaks, can be achieved only in concert with society, and proclaimed amidst friends and neighbours of the same faith. (164)

Ginsberg asserts the individual's primacy over tradition by breaking one of the main rules of Kaddish—the presence of the *minyan*—to recite the prayer for his mother. By making this move, he also implies that religious experience and values like those Lamm mentions can, in fact, be achieved by the individual, and not “only in concert with society.” Such a statement is to be expected of Ginsberg, whose very individualized mystical experience was the defining event of his life and poetry.

One of the traditional functions of the Kaddish is to serve as a vehicle for expressing the grief and strong emotions attendant to bereavement; Ginsberg affirms this function in his work. Joshua Liebman writes that “traditional Judaism . . . had the wisdom to devise almost all the procedures for healthy-minded grief which the contemporary psychologist counsels” (115). He continues: “The ancient Jews thus arranged for the expression of grief and stimulated that experience by ordaining wailing, the tearing of the garment, the repetition of the tearstained pages of the Bible, the creation of an unashamed atmosphere of sorrow” (116). Liebman believes that modern mourners repress their grief, rather than expressing it, due to society's “assumption that men should not give in to themselves; that indulgence in emotion is

harmful; that the bereaved must be protected against despairing thoughts; that the tragic realities of life should be glossed over and avoided” (117). He believes that the Jewish way in mourning is much healthier than this modern repression, since “emotions denied their proper expression in life do not disappear; they live on in a submerged fashion and create the dynamite of psychic conflict and misery” (117).

Ginsberg expresses the grief he feels after his mother’s death in *Kaddish*. The act of writing the poem itself allowed him to release these feelings; he speaks of having “been up all night” (3) and “wept, realizing / how we suffer” (7-8) the night he wrote the poem. When read aloud, the poem’s long breath-length lines and numerous dashes follow the heavy breathing and weeping of the mourner. Ginsberg writes: “considered as breath, it means the vocal reader has to build up the feeling-utterance three times to climax, and then, as coda, diminish the utterance to shorter and shorter sob” (“How Kaddish Happened” 233). Furthermore, Ginsberg expresses not just his grief about his mother’s death in the poem, but also his grief about the suffering she experienced in her life, due to her mental illness. He writes of his final visit to his mother in an institution: “‘The Horror’ I weeping—to see her again—‘The Horror’—as if she / were dead thru funeral rot in—‘The Horror!’ (613-14). Ginsberg’s tears express grief about not only his mother’s frail appearance—he describes her as a “small broken woman” (604)—and her impending death, but also his sorrow about the anguish she experienced throughout her life. Later in the poem, when Ginsberg hears the news of his mother’s death, rather than the “horror” he feels when visiting her in the asylum, Ginsberg experiences a sense of relief, knowing that her suffering is over: “Outside I bent my head to the ground under the / bushes near the garage—knew she was better— / at last—not left to look on Earth alone—2 years of solitude . . .” (631-33). He links this sense of peace and relief to

his Jewish heritage, making a link between his mother and the Hebrew Bible figures Naomi, Ruth, and Rebecca: “at age nearing 60—old woman of skulls—once long-tressed Naomi of / Bible— /or Ruth who wept in America—Rebecca aged in Newark— . . . ” (634-36). Including himself in this tradition, he continues: “Svul Avrum—Israel Abraham—myself—to sing in the wilderness / toward God—O Elohim!—so to the end— . . . ” (638-39). As “Svul Avrum” or “Israel Abraham,” Ginsberg is included in the community of alienated, exiled Jews “in the wilderness.” However, he is not lost in this wilderness but singing, suggesting the sense of peace Ginsberg felt at the end of his mother’s life, and ending his poem with the same tranquillity as the original Kaddish.

The second traditional quality of the Kaddish that Ginsberg affirms in his poem is that of reflecting on the parent’s life and teachings. Lamm writes:

Jewish tradition recognizes the important influence of the father upon the son during the lifetime of the parent. The “merit of the Fathers” is a bold and important theme in rabbinic literature. . . . The child’s psyche indelibly bears the imprint of the parent, whether we think it just or not. (158)

Lamm views the Kaddish as a “great spiritual triumph that reflects on the life of mother and father, and confirms the correctness of their teachings” (160). Ginsberg reflects on what he has inherited from his mother in *Kaddish*, but, in keeping with the tradition of expression, he focuses not just on the positive things he inherited from her, but the negative as well: he reflects on his mother’s mental illness, and its link to his own mental issues. Although Ginsberg’s own mental problems were not as severe as his mother’s, he was institutionalized in 1949 until early 1950, experiencing the alienation and marginalization afforded to the mentally ill in mid-

twentieth century America. But despite Ginsberg's painful experiences with madness—his mother's and his own—he and the rest of the Beats viewed madness as a redemptive alternative to the conformity they saw around them. Tytell writes: “Recognizing that madness was a kind of retreat for those who wanted to stay privately sane, the Beats . . . used “madness”—which they regarded as naturalness—as a breakthrough to clarity, as a proper perspective from which to see” (*Naked Angels* 11). This attitude toward madness is reflected in *Kaddish*, in which Ginsberg spares the reader no horrific details of his mother's madness—which traumatized him as a child and broke apart his family—but acknowledges his appreciation of her as an inspiration for his own outsider status and even his mystical experience.

In his poem, Ginsberg describes his mother's madness in horrific detail, expressing the scenes that haunted his childhood, thus taking part in the tradition of expression, not repression, of painful memories that Liebman describes. He describes his mother, just before she was institutionalized, distraught and fighting with Ginsberg's father as he attempted to take her away: “Naomi, Naomi—sweating, bulge-eyed, fat, the dress unbuttoned at / one side—hair over brow, her stocking hanging evilly on her legs—scream- / ing for a blood transfusion . . .” (284-86). Here, Ginsberg addresses some negative or taboo feelings a child may have toward a parent. His mother's dress is “unbuttoned,” connoting his mother's sexuality and his own recognition thereof. He also speaks of her stocking “hanging evilly”; the idea of the mother as evil is a problematic feeling that a child might repress out of guilt. Her monstrous appearance—his “fat,” “sweating” mother is the antithesis of the idealized image of the good mother or 1950s housewife—also suggests Ginsberg's feelings of disgust and hatred toward his mother. Most likely, he repressed these taboo feelings up to this point, but now is able to express them in the safe space of

the Kaddish. Ginsberg also portrays his mother's appearance as monstrous when he describes seeing her naked after her return from the mental institution, listing each aspect of her grotesque appearance in almost clinical detail: “. . . big slash of hair, scars of operations, pancreas, belly / wounds, abortions, appendix, stitching of incisions pulling down in the fat / like hideous thick zippers—ragged long lips between her legs— . . . ” (443-45). Here, Ginsberg finds catharsis in describing each aspect of his mother's appearance as vividly as he saw and remembered it, and thus participates in the tradition of expression discussed by Liebman.

Just as the original Kaddish provides comfort even in time of death, grief, and crisis, Ginsberg is able to come to terms with his mother's madness within the space of the poem. He does so by exploring the links between his mother's madness and one of the most important events in his life: his mystical experience. In a fragmented, associational line early in the poem which mirrors the flow of the irrational mind, Ginsberg acknowledges his link to his mother's disturbed mental state: “By my later burden—vow to illuminate mankind—this is release / of particulars—(mad as you)—(sanity a trick of agreement)” (148-49). The sense of prophetic responsibility that Ginsberg feels after his Blake experience, his need to “illuminate mankind,” he believes, is linked to mental illness. Such a comparison makes sense, as Ginsberg felt a change in consciousness during the experience, and began to associate atypical states of consciousness, such as those disturbed by drugs or mental illness, with experience of the divine. The line also reveals Ginsberg's attitude toward madness as an alternative to assimilation into the American society he distrusts when he describes sanity as “a trick of agreement,” suggesting his belief that those who dissent against the status quo—including his mother and himself—are

often classified as mad. Also in these lines, Ginsberg makes his first comparison between his own “madness” and his mother’s with the phrase “mad as you.”

Ginsberg strengthens the link between his and his mother’s altered mental states later in the poem when he writes about his mother’s description of direct experience of God. His mother tells him, “Yesterday I saw God” (423). Then, she describes how he appeared to her: “I climbed up a ladder—he has a cheap cabin in the country, like Monroe, / N. Y. the chicken farms in the wood. He was a lonely old man with a white / beard (424-26). Though the link between his mystical experience and his mother’s—the visual, non-textual nature of which differs from the auditory nature of his own—is not made explicit here, and he does not directly acknowledge his mother as inspiration for his religious experience here, he does so later in the poem. He writes, “O glorious muse that bore me from the womb, gave suck first / mystic life & taught me talk and music, from whose pained head I first / took Vision—” (590-93). Even after discussing all the “horror” of Naomi’s madness, Ginsberg is able to accept her as a “glorious muse,” as inspiration for his “Vision.” By expressing these painful emotions in his poem, by the end of the work, he is able to be at peace with his experience of his mother, and to recognize the positive link he has to her.

Ginsberg is also able to reconcile his painful experiences with his mother by blessing her and her madness, and sanctifying God’s name with the language used in the original Kaddish. In his poem, Ginsberg uses only a few of the original prayer’s words. He quotes the original Hebrew of the prayer: “Yisborach, v’yistabach, v’yispoar, v’yisroman, v’yisnaseh, v’yishador, / v’yishalleh, v’yishallol, sh’meh d’kudsho, b’rich hu” (449-50). These lines are translated as “Blessed, praised, glorified, exalted, extolled, honored, elevated, and lauded be the name of the holy

one, blessed is he.” This quotation comes just after perhaps the most disturbing image contained in the harrowing poem: the image of his mother naked, and Ginsberg’s thoughts about sexual intercourse with her. Although Ginsberg takes the idea much further with this shocking imagery, the juxtaposition of trauma and praise of God is typical of the original Kaddish. Tragedy and grief are viewed as not a reason to abandon God, but as a time to praise him more and more. Such juxtaposition occurs again later in the poem: just after the main part of the poem concludes, with Naomi’s death, the “Hymmn” section opens with the English translation of the Kaddish passage quoted earlier: “In the world which He has created according to his will Blessed Praised / Magnified Lauded Exalted the Name of the Holy One Blessed is He!” (645-46). Ginsberg then goes on with a litany of blessing, combining the sacred and the profane: “In the madhouse Blessed is He! In / the house of Death Blessed is He! / Blessed be he in homosexuality! Blessed be He in Paranoia! . . . ” (647-49). Here, Ginsberg revises the typical Kaddish tradition of blessing God’s name, by adding many other things to his litany of blessing. He sanctifies homosexuality, madness—which throughout the poem he has grappled with as something both horrible and divine—his mother, who has suffered so much, and finally Death itself.

Kaddish represents Ginsberg’s revision of canonical Jewish works to give primacy to the individual—who, typically, in organized religion is often subordinated to the community—and to explore the individual’s highly personal experiences and emotions. Rather than fully reject the Jewish religion and its traditions, Ginsberg chooses to take part in them, to subvert them from the inside and to counter them when he believes they are wrong, as in “Many Loves,” or to take part in them, with some revisions, when he feels they are beneficial, as he does in

Kaddish. Ginsberg feels a strong affinity with the Jewish mourning tradition's encouragement of open expression of emotion, and uses the traditional prayer as a platform to come to terms with his mother's life and its effect on him, exorcising the painful memories and acknowledging her as inspiration for the mystical experience which shaped his life and work.

Chapter Four

The Catholic (Sacra)mental: Religious Loss in Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*

"the real Christmas is hiding somewhere from me and it is still, it is holy, it is dark, it is insane, the crow broods there, some Nativity darker than Christianity, with Wise Men from underground, a Virgin Mary of the ice and snow" (Kerouac, "Home at Christmas" 107).

Mike Wallace: You mean that the Beat people want to lose themselves?

Jack Kerouac: Yeah. You know, Jesus said to see the Kingdom of Heaven you must lose yourself. . . something like that.

MW: Then the Beat Generation loves death?

JK: Yeah. They're not afraid of death. ("Interview with Jack Kerouac" 66; ellipsis in orig.)

Jack Kerouac is an author well-known for his role in the countercultural scene of the 1960s, which was influenced by his seminal novel, *On the Road*. Some reviewers, such as Norman Podhoretz, Paul O'Neil, Herbert Gold, and John Ciardi viewed this novel—as well as Kerouac's other work—as a celebration of mindless hedonism, anarchy, and "unwashed eccentricity" (Ciardi 257). Other critics take a more favourable view of Kerouac's work, often viewing Kerouac as a spiritual author. Critics like John Leland, Omar Swartz, and Gregory Stephenson address the "quests for identity, community, and spiritual knowledge" (Stephenson, *Daybreak* 17) that shape Kerouac's semi-autobiographical *Duluoz Legend*, but the nature of this "spiritual knowledge" remains vague throughout the discussions. Others, like John Lardas and James Jones (in *Jack Kerouac's Duluoz Legend: The Mythical Form of an Autobiographical Fiction*) stress the importance of Oswald Spengler's philosophy to Kerouac's spirituality; Stephen Prothero also briefly notes the importance of Spengler to Kerouac in his article (209). This critical vagueness and tendency to focus on other aspects of Kerouac's spirituality means that the influence of Catholicism, which I argue is the strongest shaping force on Kerouac's faith and work, is largely unexplored. Although a few critics acknowledge the importance of Catholicism on the author's work, the faith is often seen as one influence among

many—most notably, Buddhism—on the author’s hybrid spiritual attitudes. Ben Giamo, Prothero, and Jones (in *A Map of Mexico City Blues: Jack Kerouac as Poet*) all mention Kerouac’s Catholicism, but emphasise its interaction with the author’s Buddhism.¹ Even Paul Giles, who is one of the few critics to analyse the Catholic themes in Kerouac’s work, states that “Kerouac’s form of Catholicism was fairly close in spirit to Zen” (412).²

But Kerouac’s Catholicism exerts far more of an influence on his work than these critics acknowledge. Although the author sometimes doubts his faith, it remains at the core of his religious questing. Kerouac grew up in a devout Catholic home in the small French-Canadian community of Lowell, Massachusetts, attending parochial school and church on a regular basis. During the 1940s, as a young adult, Kerouac began to mix in bohemian New York circles with Allen Ginsberg, William S. Burroughs, and some of his fellow Columbia students. Exposed to these new intellectual friends, Kerouac sometimes questioned the church of his youth, but he retained faith in God. In an unpublished 1943 journal, Kerouac writes: “But to me—religion is entirely personal between yourself and the influence you call God. It is independent of the church. For the church should be secondary - for you should choose your form of worship *after* you realize the presence of unexplainable power” (*Holograph Notes*). Gerald Nicosia states of Kerouac in the late 1940s: “One of the things that genuinely bewildered Jack was his relationship with the Catholic Church. . . . he had long discussions about whether or not he should leave the Church” (205). But, Nicosia continues, he soon reconciled his exploratory tendencies with his desire for something holy, in the figure of the hipster: “Hip to Jack was the quintessence of holy, the furthest refinement in a civilized understanding of life” (206).

When Kerouac began to develop an interest in Buddhism in the 1950s, he did not abandon Catholicism completely. Jones states, “If Kerouac was passing through Buddhism in the mid-1950s, he nevertheless remained a Catholic—for what that is worth—and sometimes his Buddhism sounds a great deal like Western philosophical idealism” (*Map* 109).³ While critical sources state that Kerouac did not become immersed in Buddhism until late 1953 or early 1954, there is evidence in his journals that Kerouac was familiar with Buddhist thought by July 1950 (*Windblown World* 362-63).⁴ By 1954, Kerouac’s interest in Buddhism was at its peak, and in 1954 and early 1955 he wrote letters to friends like Allen Ginsberg and Carolyn Cassady discussing Buddhist philosophy. He was most intrigued by the Buddhist belief that the material world is illusory: “Eternity is a dream, the present moment is a dream; you know it in yr bones. Nothing is real” (*Letters 1940-1956* 422). During 1954, he compared Christianity unfavourably with Buddhism, suggesting his questioning of the religion of his youth: “I’m sure Christ never trekked to the Orient, only wish he had, one dab of Buddhism would have wiped clean from his mind that egomaniacal Messiah complex that got him crucified and made Christianity the dualistic greed-and-sorrow Monster that it is” (*Letters 1940-1956* 427).

But Kerouac’s distancing himself from Catholicism was short-lived; he soon integrated Buddhism with Catholicism, insisting that the two faiths contained the same basic truths. In October 1954, Kerouac writes another friend, Robert Lax, highlighting similarities between the Christian doctrine of agape and the Buddhist principle of karuna (*Letters 1940-1956* 446). The author continues to discuss Buddhism alongside Christianity in his correspondence throughout the 1950s.⁵ The beginning of the next decade marked Kerouac’s return to Catholicism. As early as 1959, Kerouac wrote to a friend, Philip Whalen, rejecting Buddhism completely:

“I’m not a Buddhist any more, I’m not anything, I don’t care” (*Letters 1957-1969* 203). The final part of *Desolation Angels*, written in 1961, full of Catholic imagery and bereft of Buddhist influence, illustrates this shift. In *Big Sur*, written in 1961, Kerouac’s return to Catholicism is completed as he tells the story of experiencing a life-changing vision of Christ. This religious shift is reflected in the author’s correspondence from 1961 and after.⁶

Although it is clear that Catholicism is Kerouac’s major spiritual influence, characterising an author as Catholic can be contentious in itself. The idea of “the Catholic novel” has been debated by critics. Thomas Woodman states that some view it as “any novel on a Catholic theme or subject, whether by a Catholic or not” (xi), while others view it more narrowly as “a violently pessimistic work written in reaction against the humanist values of the modern world” (xi). Acknowledging these different perspectives, Woodman views the Catholic novel as:

one that deals with specifically Catholic themes or subject matter or indeed with any themes or subject matter from a distinctively Catholic perspective and with a sufficient degree of inwardness. . . . Writers who have ceased to be practising Catholics may well retain a distinctively Catholic perspective. (xi)

This is the type of Catholic author that Kerouac is. His works are not overtly Catholic, like those of fellow authors Graham Greene and Evelyn Waugh, whose books deal directly with Catholic theological issues. But Kerouac’s Catholicism defines the way he sees the world and shapes the universe of his novels.

This Catholicism is evident in much of Kerouac’s work, which contains many compelling Catholic symbols and themes. The semi-autobiographical nature of Kerouac’s novels, which together form what he called “The Duluoz Legend,” can

be understood to chart the author's spiritual and religious growth; the main character in these novels, Jack Duluoz, corresponds to Kerouac. One such work is *Big Sur*, a fictionalised account of a difficult period for the author, when he is worn down by alcoholism and the demands of the fame he experienced in later life. Jack Duluoz, the main character and Kerouac's fictional alter ego, goes for what is meant to be a restful trip in a friend's countryside cabin, but only descends deeper into alcoholism and paranoia. When Duluoz is at his lowest point in the work, spending a sleepless night when "I'm afraid to close my eyes for all the turmoiled universes I see tilting and expanding suddenly exploding suddenly clawing in to my center, faces, yelling mouths, long haired yellors, sudden evil confidences" (156), he sees a vision of the Cross. This vision is perhaps the most explicitly Catholic one in all Kerouac's work, containing classic Catholic imagery such as Mary and the crucifix: he sees "blue Heaven and the Virgin's white veil" (156). He then sees the cross itself:

Suddenly as clear as anything I ever saw in my life, I see the Cross. I see the Cross, it's silent, it stays a long time, my heart goes out to it, my whole body fades away to it, by God I am being taken away my body starts dying and swooning out to the Cross standing in a luminous area of the darkness, I start to scream because I know I'm dying. . . . I swallow the scream and just let myself go into death and the Cross: as soon as that happens I slowly sink back to life. . . . I see the Cross again, this time smaller and far away but just as clear and I say through all the noises of the voices "I'm with you, Jesus, for always, thank you." (157)

The impact the vision makes on Duluoz is clear from its terrifying nature. Although eventually he is comforted by seeing Christ on the cross, he initially focuses on the

horrific aspect of it, and its strong link to suffering and death. After seeing this image, Duluoz questions his involvement with Buddhism: “I lie there in cold sweat wondering what’s come over me for years my Buddhist studies and pipesmoking assured meditations on emptiness and all of a sudden the Cross is manifested to me—My eyes fill with tears” (157). This experience, with its strongly emotional, visual nature, clearly marks the end of Kerouac’s Buddhist period. The vivid nature of the vision and the emotional quality of the prose reveals the strong pull Kerouac feels toward the religion of his youth, and reveals the comfort that the author finds in Catholicism. This comfort is manifested in the character of Duluoz: tormented throughout *Big Sur*, he becomes far more peaceful after the vision of the Cross. Sitting on the porch of the cabin just before the novel’s ending, Duluoz falls asleep: “suddenly hopelessly and completely finished I sit there in the hot sun and close my eyes: and there’s the golden swarming peace of Heaven in my eyelids. . . . I’ve fallen asleep” (164). When he awakens, his equilibrium returns, although his situation remains unchanged: “Blessed relief has come to me from just that minute—everything has washed away—I’m perfectly normal again . . . all’s well again” (164).

Visions of Gerard also contains Catholic themes and imagery. The brief novel is the story of the life of Kerouac’s brother, Gerard, who died at the age of nine, and it contains rich descriptions of the devout French-Canadian Catholic community in which Kerouac grew up. In this work, Kerouac celebrates the holiness of Gerard’s short life, often comparing his brother to Christ or a saint. Early in the novel, he writes of Gerard’s kindness, “My own brother, a spot of sainthood in the endless globular Universes and Chillicosm—his heart under the little shirt as big as the sacred heart of thorns and blood depicted in all the humble homes of French-

Canadian Lowell” (7). Kerouac also describes the day-to-day religious rituals of his childhood:

Gerard and all the boys did special novenas at certain seasons and went to confession on Friday afternoon, to prepare for Sunday morning when the church hoped to infuse them with some of the perfection embodied and implied in the concept of Christ the Lord.

(31)

One of the most vivid Catholic images in the book is a vision of heaven that Gerard has soon before his death. Falling asleep at school, he sees “a great White Virgin Mary with a flowing robe ballooning partly in the wind and partly tucked in at the edges. . . . On her breast, a crucifix of gold, in her hand a rosary of gold, on her head a star of gold” (52). The vivid Catholic imagery in this work serves as evidence for the impact the religion of Kerouac’s youth had on him throughout his life, even as he explored other religious traditions.

Tristessa also contains vivid Catholic imagery, although, unlike in *Visions of Gerard*, these images are blended with those of degradation and addiction, reflecting the milieu that attracted the adult Kerouac. In *Tristessa*, Kerouac recounts his experiences in Mexico City with Esperanza Villanueva (called “Tristessa” in the work), a prostitute and drug addict. Kerouac fell in love with Villanueva, idolizing her as a holy figure. While Villanueva might be considered a moral degenerate within the strictures of American society, Kerouac idealises her as the ideal woman, viewing her life of poverty as ascetic and holy. Furthermore, Tristessa professes to be Catholic, practicing her religion while inhabiting the degraded setting of the Mexico City slums. Kerouac’s glorification of Tristessa is a rebellion against American conformity and condemnation of outsider forms of life, but it also goes a

step further. Kerouac uplifts Tristessa through the vehicle of Catholicism, making her way of life appear not just as an alternative to Western society, but a truly holy, religious path.

The imagery central to this work is that of Tristessa as a holy Catholic figure. Kerouac often likens her to the Virgin Mary, describing the “Virgin Mary resignation” of her face even as, while intoxicated, she and Duluoz ride in a cab through one of the worst districts of Mexico City (8). He also refers to her as “the sad mutilated blue Madonna” when, later, Duluoz returns to Mexico City and finds her having slipped even further into the clutches of addiction (73). Tristessa is also likened to Christ throughout the work. Kerouac utilizes Christ-like imagery when he describes his thoughts on what it would be like to be sexually intimate with Tristessa: “I think of the inexpressible tenderness of receiving this holy friendship from the sacrificial sick body of Tristessa and I almost feel crying or grabbing her and kissing her [sic]” (53). The phrase “sacrificial sick body” brings up associations of the crucified Christ. The idea of “receiving” this body also draws comparison to the Eucharist, in which worshipers consume the bread and wine which represents the broken body of Christ. Later, when stumbling in the streets of the city, sick from withdrawal, she falls three times (86), like Christ carrying the cross. This work, along with *Big Sur* and *Visions of Gerard*, illustrates how the Catholic imagery to which Kerouac was exposed in his youth—such as the crucifix and the Virgin Mary—and the religious ideas behind this imagery made its way into the author’s adult work, even as he experimented with other religious traditions such as Buddhism.

Perhaps surprisingly, though, it is *On the Road* (a work maligned as a celebration of hedonism and anarchy) that is Kerouac’s most effective Catholic

novel. The rest of this chapter is devoted to exploring Catholic themes within this work. The first section explores the sacramental universe Kerouac creates in *On the Road*. After exploring what sacrament can mean, and its importance within the Catholic faith, I analyse the textual evidence for such a sacramental universe. The next section explores the role of loss—“unproductive expenditures”—within this sacramental universe, and traces how the movement of the novel is based upon a form of loss that can be viewed as sacramental. The character Dean Moriarty is the focus of the final section of the chapter. Moriarty can be viewed as a “fool for Christ” who imitates Christ’s self-sacrifice and degradation, finding salvation within such ignominy. This chapter’s analysis makes it clear that *On the Road* can be viewed as a religious novel which illustrates the importance of the Catholic faith to an author who defined the Beat Generation.

***On the Road’s* Sacramental Universe**

In *On the Road*, Kerouac presents an alternative vision of reality to the environment of post-war America, the burgeoning capitalism of which lent itself to a materialistic culture he felt was devoid of spiritual richness. Paul Giles writes that Kerouac’s “Catholic sensibility” is “at odds with the dominant ethos of American culture” (396). This dissatisfaction pushes the author “toward psychological flight and a desire to collapse within [his] texts all conventional social structures” (Giles 396). *On the Road’s* protagonists, Sal Paradise and Dean Moriarty, set out to do just that. The two restore sanctity to America by adopting a worldview which serves as an alternative and corrective to the materialism of the nation’s mainstream. Sal and Dean’s worldview is one in which physical reality is redolent with a divine aspect that can be experienced through ritual. This idea of the invisible mediated through

the visible is at the core of Catholicism, integral to one of its major theological facets: the sacraments.

The term *sacrament* is used in many different ways. It can refer to seven liturgical rites performed within the Catholic Church: baptism, confirmation, eucharist, penance, anointing of the sick, matrimony, and holy orders. Catholics understand these rites to have a mediating function, symbolizing through a physical, visual action—typically, a ceremony which takes place in church—an inexpressible divine truth. These ceremonies are viewed as “symbolic expressions of sacred realities” (Martos 15). An important aspect of the sacraments is their ritualized, performative nature. In sacramental practice, it is the public performance of a specific action which puts the worshipper in contact with the divine. For example, the breaking of the bread and the words spoken over the bread and wine before the Eucharist is consumed facilitate the worshippers’ participation in the death and resurrection of Christ. These actions, like those of a dramatic performance, are scripted. To be effective, the actions follow this sacred script—although, as in dramatic performance, there is room for some improvisation. After the performance of these scripted actions, the material goods are transformed into their divine reality: the body and blood of Christ.

Such is the importance of the sacraments to the Catholic tradition that they do not just stay in the church; their significance expands into everyday life, saturating the Catholic view of the world. Susan Wood writes: “If one defines a sacrament as a visible expression of an invisible reality, one discovers that Catholics live in a world saturated with sacred presence” (398).⁷ In this sacramental world, “finite, material reality is revelatory of the divine and communicates God’s presence and activity on our behalf” (Wood 340). While it is in liturgy and ritual that the idea of the visible

mediating the invisible begins, this idea creates a view of material reality as revelatory of the divine that saturates the Catholic's view of the world, in which God is present in all creation.

Giles writes that a Catholic novelist does not have to “discuss the church at all; an author can be Catholic who represents life in a ‘sacramental’ way” (394). Kerouac is precisely this type of Catholic author. In *On the Road*, Kerouac's characters inhabit a sacramental universe that reflects the author's Catholicism.⁸ There are two types of sacramental experience in the novel. The first is spontaneous—everywhere Sal looks, he sees the holy: an invisible, divine reality is suggested by the everyday sights of America. This reflects the Catholic sacramental view of the universe, and shows how the idea of the invisible mediated by the visible spills over from church and ritual into everyday life. The second type of sacramental experience is ritualised, in which Sal and Dean perform a particular action—typically one of waste, loss, and motion—which directly transforms a reality which they had previously experienced as quite ordinary into something divine, and serves to resacramentalise the American landscape. While the ritual sacramental experiences are the strongest in the work, driving the novel's action, the spontaneous ones are also important, as they illustrate how the sacramental view of the universe suffuses the Catholic's view of the entire world.

On the Road is full of instances in which Sal spontaneously experiences physical things in a sacramental way, viewing them as holy not because of what they are, but because of what they signify and what they mediate.⁹ When Sal makes such associations, he often associates the visible reality with a past event. This parallels the action of anamnesis, an “essential liturgical [element]” the function of which is “making present an event or person from the past” (Wood 343, 44). During the

performance of a sacrament such as the Eucharist, “the past and the future are gathered into the present moment through memorial, presence, and anticipation” (Wood 344), and Christ’s past sacrifice is experienced within the present action of the sacrament. John Lardas explains that anamnesis is “[p]rimarily used as a tool for recalling the mystery of the Eucharist” (244). He continues, stating “Under the assumption that bodily death is actually rebirth, anamnesis is a representation of events that have shaped, and continue to impinge upon, the present” (244).¹⁰ For example, an early description of Dean signifies to Sal the forgotten places of his childhood, and past and present are blended when Sal sees his face: “the sight of his suffering bony face with the long sideburns and his straining muscular sweating neck made me remember my boyhood in those dye-dumps and swim-holes and riversides of Paterson and the Passaic” (7). Furthermore, although it is not made explicit here, Dean’s face resembles that of Christ’s in typical crucifixion imagery, with its “suffering bony face” and “straining” neck. The image ties together Dean’s appearance, Sal’s boyhood, and a subtle suggestion of Christ’s presence in all creation.

Sal experiences more strongly this sense of sacramental unity, including the combining of past and present characteristic of anamnesis, during his time in New Orleans. He looks out at some boats on the water, and thinks of old acquaintances:

Old Big Slim Hazard had once worked on the Algiers ferry as a deckhand; this made me think of Mississippi Gene too; and as the river poured down from mid-America by starlight I knew, I knew like mad that everything I had ever known and would ever know was One.

(147)

Here, again, past and present come together. The presence of water, which at once, paradoxically, symbolizes birth and death, facilitates Sal's sacramental experience.¹¹ The "One" he senses at this moment can be understood as a divine, transcendent unity behind apparent, material reality.

Sal's most intense experience of this sacramental unity comes when, while in San Francisco, he sees a woman in a fish and chip shop with a "terrified look" (172). The sight of this woman causes Sal to fall into a reverie in which he imagines that this woman was his "mother of about two hundred years ago in England, and that I was her footpad son" (172). He feels a collapse of time into an eternal unity, which is, again, reinforced by the symbol of water:

I stopped, frozen with ecstasy on the sidewalk. I looked down Market Street. I didn't know whether it was that or Canal Street in New Orleans: it led to water, ambiguous, universal water, just as 42nd Street, New York, leads to water, and you never know where you are. (172)

Here, Sal experiences a "complete step across chronological time into timeless shadows" (173). Such a step across time is characteristic of the sacramental experience: this melding of present and past allows Sal to experience the sense of timelessness that is at the core of anamnesis.

These spontaneous sacramental experiences serve as illustrations of the Catholic worldview which saturates *On the Road*. In this worldview, the created world is not just material, but has a divine reality behind its physical appearance. In the sacramental world, past, present, and future are not always separate categories, but ones that can be collapsed when the divine is mediated through the created world. Although sacraments do have a sacred script that structures them, these

spontaneous sacramental experiences illustrate the flexibility of the sacramental worldview, and illustrate how these rituals can be adapted, moved from the context of the church and liturgy to the everyday world.

The second type of sacramental experience in *On the Road* is that linked to ritual and performance. An ecstatic, divine aspect of reality is unlocked when Sal and Dean perform particular, deliberate actions of loss. As a protest against the normative, capitalist American economy, Sal and Dean set up and participate in an economy based upon loss, which, for them, functions as a sacrament: through ritualised squandering of goods or capital, the two are able to liberate material reality from a purely economic context and resacramentalise America.

Kerouac's Catholic, sacramental view of the material world can be viewed as opposed to the prevailing worldview of capitalist America, which was heavily influenced by the Calvinist strain of Protestantism. Catholicism's conflation of the divine and material spheres, made evident in the sacraments and the sacramental view of the universe, is anathema to this Calvinist-influenced worldview. Although sacraments are present in the Calvinist strain of Protestantism, their function is typically less important than it is in Catholicism. In Catholicism, God is strongly experienced through the sacraments, which involve physical objects such as wine, bread, and water. This tendency to find God in the created world expands into all creation, making it "diaphanous with the divine" (Wood 340). Catholics view natural things as good, and as the major medium for God's grace: "at the core of the Catholic faith lay the claim that all of creation is a gateway to the creator and that matter and spirit are not antithetically opposed to one another" (Eire 77). However, some Protestants, particularly the Calvinists and the Puritans they influenced, have a different view of the material world. The Calvinist view of sin bred a suspicious

attitude toward the material world: “Since Calvinists believed the soul was innately sinful, the self and all its earthly attachments must be vanity” (Barnstone, Manson, and Singley xv). This led worshippers to eschew material things and view them as obstacles to experiencing the divine, resulting in a view of the divine and material spheres as separate and opposed.

Max Weber argues in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* that these different views of material reality led to different attitudes towards wealth and production in Catholicism and many forms of Protestant Christianity. Weber links the Puritan, Calvinist American religious tradition’s belief that the material world is separate from the divine to the capitalist economic system that arose in the country. Weber’s ideas inspired Georges Bataille, who, though not a theologian, provides a helpful framework for understanding economy, loss, and the relationship these things bear to the sacred in Kerouac’s work.¹² Bataille contrasts the medieval economy, which he associates with Catholicism, to the capitalist economy, which he associates with Protestantism. The medieval economy is marked by “nonproductive consumption of the excess wealth,” whilst the capitalist economy has no tie to the sacred, and is instead focused upon the production of more wealth: it “accumulates and determines a dynamic growth of the production apparatus” (*Consumption* 116). Bataille holds the contentious belief that by creating a purely utilitarian world view, the Reformation “destroyed the sacred world, the world of nonproductive consumption, and handed the earth over to the men of production, to the bourgeois” (*Consumption* 127). Bataille believes that with the rise of movements such as Calvinism, which condemned the material world as a source of temptation rather than a sacrament through which to experience the divine, “[t]he sanctification of God was thus linked to the desacralization of human life” (*Consumption* 124).

However, in the Catholic worldview, objects retain their sacred, symbolic, non-economic value because their visible reality is a conduit for invisible, divine reality, which has no monetary or productive power. Louis-Marie Chauvet comments on this symbolic value, which he considers to be a “beyond value” (121), and contrasts it with marketplace value. He elaborates: “Either falling short of or surpassing the realm of utility, symbolic exchange . . . occurs in the order of non-value” (266). For Chauvet, such symbolic exchange underlies the function of the sacrament, and the “gratuitous and gracious relation that is effected between humankind and God in the sacraments” (266). This symbolic value is the object’s true worth, and can only be realized when the marketplace value is stripped away, and the object functions as a symbol: “The symbol *touches what is most real* in our world and allows it to come *to its truth*” (117). He continues: “Water never comes so close to its ‘truth’ as when it functions both as sepulcher of death and bath of rebirth; the fundamental metaphor of human existence” (123). This non-economic value of objects creates an economy of symbolic exchange—a sacramental economy—which can be contrasted to a capitalist economy, which is based on material value.

The underlying principle of this (anti-)economy is loss, not production: to restore an object’s beyond-value or sacred significance, its marketplace value must be somehow destroyed or lost. Bataille states that what can take the object out of the limiting world of market value—“material utility”¹³—is “destruction, whose essence is to consume *profitlessly* whatever might remain in the progression of useful works” (*Consumption* 58). Bataille opposes these “useful works” with “unproductive expenditures” such as “luxury, mourning, war, cults, the construction of sumptuary monuments, games, spectacles, arts, perverse sexual activity (i.e. deflected from

genital finality);” he states that “all these represent activities which . . . have no end beyond themselves” (“Notion” 169). These unproductive expenditures “constitute a group characterized by the fact that in each case the accent is placed on a *loss* that must be as great as possible in order for that activity to take on its true meaning” (“Notion” 169). In Bataille’s view, it is through actions of unnecessary material loss that true value, “beyond-value,” is restored.

On the Road’s action follows the movement of the sacramental (anti-) economy. The novel alternates periods of stasis and motion. During the periods of stasis, the characters save or accumulate capital or energy, typically by exploiting the normative economy for a time. They usually do so by taking odd jobs that allow them to save a small amount of money. This amount provides just enough of an excess to allow them to break the stasis—by covering travel costs—and move on.¹⁴ The act of squandering this small amount of excess capital functions as a sacrament: it serves as a ritual action which imbues a physical object with divine significance and enables in the participant experiences of transcendence and spiritual exaltation. It is while Sal and Dean are in motion that they experience their surroundings sacramentally, feeling a transcendence of the material world, an exaltation, an experience of “beyond-value.” *On the Road* contains two major actions of sacramental loss: the first are expenditures, i.e. actions of material loss—either inadvertent loss of time or effort or wilful squandering or destruction of material goods. It is the latter, which has a ritual, highly sacramental nature, which facilitates the strongest experiences of the divine. The second form of loss in *On the Road* is the progressive self-destruction of the character Dean Moriarty, whose downfall drives the action of the book and makes him, in Sal’s eyes, into a “HOLY GOOF” (194). These two deliberate actions of loss—material expenditure and personal

degradation—facilitate a sacramental experience of the world which serves as an alternative and corrective to the prevailing American, capitalist worldview of the mid-twentieth century, which is based upon the accumulation of wealth and material goods, and whose goal is growth.

“Unproductive Expenditures” and Sacramental Experience

The earliest ritualised acts of loss in *On the Road* are those of the type Bataille terms “unproductive expenditures.” These extravagant, wasteful acts liberate material reality from a purely utilitarian or productive function, and restore sacredness to it. They are often deliberate, taking on the function of the liturgical sacramental ritual, which enables the participant to see the divine reality behind the material. Experiencing the physical world in this sacramental way allows Sal and Dean to transcend a society focused on material value. Each part of the novel contains action of waste that intensifies as the work progresses. As more and more is wasted and lost, and the action of loss becomes more intentional and ritualised, Sal and Dean’s sacramental experiences of their world intensify.

Although the loss that takes place in Part One is only a loss of time and energy rather than money or goods, and the loss lacks a ritualised context, the section is important because it sets up the action of the sacramental anti-economy: a vacillation between waste and loss and the sacramental experience and spiritual enrichment it facilitates. It also illustrates Sal’s interaction—and dissatisfaction—with the normative economy. In this section, he is nearly an outsider to this economy, but dabbles around its edges by either taking or attempting to take odd jobs. It is this limited participation in the normative economy that makes sacramental loss possible, and, rather than existing in opposition, the sacramental

economy feeds off the normative economy and through this parasitism is able to release material reality from its bonds.

Part One of the novel is characterised by loss of time and energy, though at this point, Sal's movement is more purposeful than in later sections. He retains a link to the normative economy, either through attempting to secure employment or actually being employed in the two major episodes contained in the section. Additionally, Sal's first move onto the road has a clear objective: to go to San Francisco to visit his friend Remi Boncoeur and take employment on a ship there. However, Sal arrives in San Francisco two weeks late, and upon his arrival spends his time attempting to write "a shining original story for a Hollywood studio" (63) and working briefly as a barracks guard. Eventually Sal falls out with Remi and his girlfriend Lee Ann, with whom he has been living. Sal comments on the sense of loss he feels at this point: "Everything was falling apart. . . . How disastrous all this was compared to what I'd written him from Paterson, planning my red line Route 6 across America" (77). Here, the "red line Route 6" represents motion with clear purpose: the quickest, most expedient route across the country. Sal feels as though this direct route is anathema to the trajectory of waste and loss that his trip has taken. He has wasted time and energy both getting to San Francisco and whilst living with Remi and Lee Ann. He also loses the friendship of Remi, whom he believed "would never talk to me again" (77) after their tumultuous time together.

It is this loss of time, energy, and friendship that provides the impetus for Sal to get back on the road, and thus to experience the world sacramentally. Just after he has decided to leave, Sal climbs a nearby mountain, and the view of the landscape suffuses him with a sense of the sacramental:

I spun around until I was dizzy, I thought I'd fall down as in a dream, clear off the precipice. . . . And before me was the great raw bulge and bulk of my American continent; somewhere far across, gloomy, crazy New York was throwing up its cloud of dust and brown steam. There is something brown and holy about the East; and California is white like washlines and emptyheaded . . . (78-79)

To Sal, the landscape is not just a landscape, but part of the sacramental universe: it induces in him a “dizzy” dreamlike feeling as he experiences not just what is seen, but what is unseen. Although he is looking at the San Francisco landscape, Sal does not describe the physical appearance of what he sees. Instead, his focus is on the invisible reality that the visible reality suggests and symbolizes: that is, America as a whole, and the unseen parts that make up that whole, such as California, New York, the East Coast, and the “great raw bulge and bulk” that lay between. This experience—recorded in the last sentence of Chapter 11—fortifies Sal for his departure onto the road that comes at the beginning of Chapter 12.

In the second half of Part One, Sal re-enters the normative economy for a time. During this period he only makes enough money to survive; there is no surplus to waste, and Sal ultimately finds it unfulfilling. After leaving Remi's home with no true destination in mind, Sal meets a Mexican girl. They take jobs picking cotton, and during this time, Sal earns only enough to provide for his most basic needs: “Every day I earned approximately a dollar and a half. It was just enough to buy groceries in the evening on the bicycle” (97). With no excess and thus no possibility for sacramental loss, Sal becomes restless; as the seasons change, he “could feel the pull of my own life calling me back” (98). This comment makes it clear that Sal sees participation in the sacramental, loss-based economy as an integral part of his

life, one that exerts a very strong influence on his behaviour. Sal decides to leave for New York, but to do this, he requires capital. Unable to gain this capital in any other way, he resorts to the help of others: “I shot my aunt a penny postcard across the land and asked for another fifty [dollars]” (98). The cross-country action of the postcard foreshadows Sal’s upcoming movement: the money allows Sal to get back on the road, where the sacramental experience of the American landscape is enabled. Whilst staying with Terry, Sal describes his surroundings in bleak terms: “I huddled in the cold, rainy wind and watched everything across the sad vineyards” (98). Here, Sal is at the mercy of the elements, reduced to passively experiencing his surroundings as only what they are, rather than as signifiers of divine reality. A vineyard is a typical Christian symbol, but in this static mode, Sal only sees the vineyard’s outer reality rather than experiencing it fully as a sacramental sign. But on the road, Sal’s descriptions of the scenery he views are suffused with the sacramental, signifying his perception of a “beyond-value” behind what is evident. Looking out at the Arizona landscape, Sal focuses on not the separate towns he passes— “Indio, Blythe, Salome” (103)—but the enormous, unseen whole which they signify: “the American landscape. . . . Every bump, rise, and stretch in it mystified my longing” (103).

In Part Two of the novel, the intensity of wasteful action increases: rather than just wasting time and energy, Sal and Dean wilfully squander money. As the wasteful action intensifies, so does the characters’ sacramental experience of the world. As Part Two begins, the reader learns that Dean has been participating in not only the normative economy, but also conventional family life. For the year that has passed between the two sections, he has settled with his second wife, Camille, and worked on the railroad to support her and their baby. The action of Part Two begins

when this period of calm is shattered as “suddenly he [Dean] blew his top while walking down the street one day. He saw a ’49 Hudson for sale and rushed to the bank for his entire roll. He bought the car on the spot. . . . Now they were broke” (110). This action of waste, in which Dean squanders his savings—which he has accumulated through participation in the normative economy—gets Sal and Dean back on the road, where they will gain sacramental experience of the divine.

Dean’s divine experience occurs immediately after the two set out on the road in the new Hudson. The unproductive expenditure of his savings, and the motion it facilitates, allows Dean to experience his material surroundings in a sacramental way. Once in motion, he finds everything he sees and does to be holy—so much so, in fact, that he is reassured of God’s existence:

And all this time Dean was tremendously excited about everything he saw, everything he talked about, every detail of every moment that passed. He was out of his mind with real belief. “And of course now no one can tell us that there is no God. . . . Everything is fine, God exists, we know time.” (120)

All Dean’s material surroundings facilitate in him a feeling of “real belief”—a sacramental experience—and mediate to him the presence of God, strengthening his faith. This spiritual enlightenment comes at the expense of Dean’s savings, of the static accumulation of capital that drives the capitalist economy but that stunts the sacramental (anti-)economy.

Sal also experiences God when he loses money through gambling, an activity that operates outside the normative economy. Sal and Dean go to New Orleans to visit Bull Lee, and toward the end of this visit, Sal and Bull attend horse races. By gambling, one enters a non-normative economy. Rather than spending excess capital

to acquire goods, or saving or investing it in order to gain more capital, one who gambles places his surplus capital into the realm of chance, opening it to the possibility of either gain or loss. Bataille mentions “competitive games” such as horse racing, and the gambling that takes place in these games, as examples of “unproductive expenditure.” In these games, he states, “Considerable sums of money are spent for the maintenance of quarters, animals, equipment or men. As much energy as possible is squandered . . . the loss of insane sums of money is set in motion in the form of wagers” (“Notion” 170). All of Sal and Bull’s gambling results in loss: “Bull went over to the slot machine and threw a half-dollar piece in. The counters clicked ‘Jackpot’—‘Jackpot’—‘Jackpot’—and the last ‘Jackpot’ hung for just a moment and slipped back to ‘Cherry.’ He had lost a hundred dollars or more just by a hair” (152). Sal and Bull’s bet on a race also ends in loss, but enables for Sal an experience of God. Typical of Sal’s sacramental experience of the world, he views one of the horses’ names as an archetypal symbol: “There was one horse called Big Pop that sent me into a temporary trance thinking of my father, who used to play the horses with me” (153). However, Sal does not act on his intuition to bet on Big Pop, and he and Bull lose:

I was just about to mention it to Old Bull when he said, “Well I think I’ll try this Ebony Corsair here.”

Then I finally said it. “Big Pop reminds me of my father.”

He mused for just a second. . . . Then he went over and bet on

Ebony Corsair. Big Pop won and paid fifty to one. (153)

Just as Dean’s experience of God in the car is dependent upon the wasteful expenditure of his savings, Sal’s experience of “Big Pop” is catalyzed by the horse race, which is an “unproductive expenditure” in which loss is inherent. Old Bull’s

reaction to the loss reflects its power to place people in contact with an unseen reality. He remarks: “You had a vision, boy, a vision. Only damn fools pay no attention to visions” (153). He explains that “visions” like Sal’s allow people to get in touch with another level of reality: “Mankind will someday realize that we are actually in contact with the dead and with the other world” (153).

Sal and Dean also experience the divine aspect of reality when they go to hear the jazz pianist George Shearing at Birdland. Their experience of hearing this jazz music provides a key insight into the relationship between music, sacramentality, ritual, and loss. That Sal and Dean experience the divine whilst listening to music is not surprising: music is a traditional vehicle for experience of God, and is an integral part of Christian worship.¹⁵ It functions in a sacramental manner by suggesting the unseen realm of God. Jeremy Begbie states that, during the mediaeval period, Platonic and Augustinian thought influenced a tendency to “look beyond material sounds to the order or beauty they reflect or point to rather than to welcome them as valuable *embodiments* of God-given order or beauty in their own right” (214). Music also functions as evidence for the inherent goodness of material objects. Begbie writes:

Music comes by pushing air from our lungs through vocal cords, plucking taut wire, drawing rough hair over catgut, depressing a key, stimulating the cone of a loudspeaker . . . it can remind us that goodness, beauty, and truth can be embodied by and expressed in such objects. (216-17)

The music Sal and Dean hear is also sacramental in that it has a performative aspect like that of both liturgical ritual and dramatic performance. The musical

performance is structured: the musicians, like priests, occupy the stage as the audience, like worshippers, look on.

The fact that it is jazz music, rather than more traditional, classical music of worship, provides links between the musical experience and Sal and Dean's sacramental experiences thus far in the novel. Jazz is an improvisational form of music, in which musicians depart from the written notes to add their own, but it has an underlying structure that keeps it from becoming chaotic. Valentine Cunningham writes: "Improvisation always requires a given melody/theme/chord-sequence as base (really 'free jazz' isn't so much improvisation as composition)" (73). Begbie also comments on this tendency:

For the Christian, to be free is not fundamentally to enjoy some supposedly blank space before us, or to increase options, but to be at peace with God and one another and thus at home in a God-given world.

In music, perhaps this is nowhere clearer than in improvised music. For a blues pianist, for example, the chord pattern is there in the full sense of given to enable elaboration. Structure enables freedom. (249)

This freedom within a higher structure parallels the nature of Sal and Dean's trip: although it often seems like chaos, it has a ritualised aspect, a structure. The sacramental anti-economy underlies Sal and Dean's sacramental experiences, and they improvise variations on the theme of material loss enabling spiritual enlightenment throughout the novel, whether in squandering savings or wasting time on tortuous cross-country drives.

Finally, the link between sacramentality and loss is strengthened when Dean's strongest religious experience during the performance comes not while the musician is on stage, but after his departure. When Sal and Dean listen to Shearing, Dean reacts like a man seeing a vision of the divine: "Dean was sweating; the sweat poured down his collar. 'There he is! That's him! Old God! Old God Shearing! Yes! Yes! Yes!'" (128). This experience actually strengthens after the music stops, illustrating the key role of loss and absence to Sal and Dean's divine experience. When Shearing departs, Sal and Dean are left with a sense of expectation and resolution: "God was gone; it was the silence of his departure. . . . Dean was popeyed with awe. . . . It made me think that everything was about to arrive—the moment when you know all and everything is decided forever" (128). Here, physical loss (the musician's departure) triggers spiritual gain: "awe," accompanied by a sense of transcendence and calm assurance. This action parallels the action of the sacramental economy, in which loss is gain: the exaltation Dean feels at Shearing's departure is like that Sal and Dean experience as they squander their money on cars and gambling.

The action in Part Three is also characterized by deliberate, ritualised destruction. In this section, Sal and Dean stay with a family in Denver, planning to depart eventually for New York. A brief period of calm and stasis passes, but things eventually get out of control. After an altercation with the family's neighbours, Dean decides to have a night of madness: "'Woo-hee!' he yelled. 'I'm gonna git drunk tonight'" (220). He steals several cars, although police are nearby, until finally "he returned with still another car, a battered coupe, stopped it in a cloud of dust in front of the house, and just staggered out and went straight into the bedroom and flopped dead drunk on the bed" (222). Because Sal and Dean fear they will be

caught by the police for this incident, it serves as a catalyst for movement. In the morning, Dean realizes what he has done, and tells Sal: "Listen, we're going to wind up in jail if we don't get out of here this very instant" (224). The night of madness serves as a ritual which forces Sal and Dean into the movement which catalyses sacramental experience. In order to get back on the road, they go to a travel bureau to get a ride, and experience a stroke of good fortune: "there was a tremendous offer for someone to drive a '47 Cadillac limousine to Chicago" (225). This car, like the Hudson, is sacrificed to sacramental motion. Its condition gets worse and worse as the trip continues at breakneck speed: "Not two miles out of Denver the speedometer broke because Dean was pushing well over 110 miles an hour" (226). The damage is worse when they arrive in Chicago: "In his mad frenzy Dean backed up smack on hydrants and tittered maniacally . . . the car was an utter wreck. . . . It had paid the price of the night" (242). Superficially, this section may seem to be simply anarchic and destructive. But an understanding of the deliberate, ritualised nature of the acts of destruction allows the actions to be viewed as acts of religious loss. All the seemingly chaotic episodes in this section, beginning with Dean's resolution to "git drunk," continuing with his car-stealing escapades and culminating in the wreck of the Cadillac, are all deliberate choices made by Dean rather than simply misfortunes. Now, at their most "beat" state in the novel, Sal and Dean are primed for the beatific experiences which, in the sacramental anti-economy, always follow such degradation.

It is after reaching this nadir at the end of Part Three that Sal and Dean have their most ecstatic, sacramental experience in the novel: their trip to Mexico, which provides most of the action in Part Four. The direct impetus for the trip is personal loss: Dean's relationship with his second wife Camille has ended, and he wants to go

to Mexico in order to obtain an expedient divorce. Again, in order to make the trip, Dean squanders savings that would be better spent on his children. Before he comes to meet Sal so they can begin their trip, Sal reflects: "I knew Dean had gone mad again. There was no chance to send money to either wife if he took all his savings out of the bank and bought a car. . . . Behind him charred ruins smoked" (259).

Sal's observation about "charred ruins" is hyperbolic, but reflects the level of unnecessary destruction Dean has participated in throughout the work, the capital he has sacrificed to motion and sacramental experience.

Once Dean and Sal arrive in Mexico, everything in the country takes on a holy aspect: in Mexico, they are "awake" while in Laredo they were "half dead." It is as though they have been resurrected, exalted through the action of loss that has taken place throughout the novel and through their subsequent movement.

Previously, their sense of the holy has been quite vague; now, their sense of symbolism grows sharper, as Sal and Dean make several direct comparisons between their surroundings and Biblical imagery. This suggests the strengthening of their religious experience. Upon arriving in Mexico, Dean states, "We've finally got to heaven" (277). This attitude is reflected in Sal's descriptions of the Mexican landscape. He describes the shadows as "sudden Biblical tree shade" (299) and the scenery as if it is the Holy Land: he "yelled to Dean, 'wake up and see the shepherds, wake up and see the golden world that Jesus came from, with your own eyes you can tell!'" (299).

The trip that Sal, Dean, and a travelling companion make to a brothel whilst in Mexico serves as a prime example of an "unproductive expenditure" which facilitates sacramental experience. The visit can be viewed as such due to the fact that the three spend a large quantity of their travel money on an unnecessary

expense: “The bill was over three hundred pesos, or thirty-six American dollars, which is a lot of money in any whorehouse” (289). Illicit sexual activity is one of the types of action that Bataille believes to epitomise “unproductive expenditure” (“Notion” 169). After this experience of loss, the brothel and Mexico itself is viewed as even more holy. At this point, Sal refers to it as “this strange Arabian paradise we had finally found at the end of the hard, hard road” and “a pornographic hasheesh daydream in heaven” (289). The trip to Mexico and the sacramental experience Sal and Dean undergo there can be seen as a culmination of the action of loss that has taken place throughout the work. The combined loss of time, energy, money, and well-being in the first three parts of the novel accumulates value within the sacramental economy, and enables the strong sacramental experience near the end of the work.

Throughout *On the Road*, Sal and Dean perform actions of loss which function sacramentally, allowing the two to access the divine, invisible world inherent within their visible surroundings. Their world is not a capitalist, materialistic one but a sacramental universe: a particularly Catholic worldview. Some of their sacramental experience is spontaneous, such as when the sight of a particular scene catalyses an experience of the material world as a symbol of a higher, divine reality. Often attending this symbolic experience is the collapse of present, past, and future characteristic of anamnesis. But Sal and Dean’s strongest sacramental experiences, including direct experiences of the divine, come as a result of the deliberate squandering of material resources. Throughout the main action of the novel, Sal and Dean make “unproductive expenditure” into a sacramental ritual. The action of the work vacillates between periods of stasis, during which the two collect enough excess capital to squander, and exuberant motion. It is whilst in

motion, which is enabled by the destruction of capital and goods, that the protagonists experience their world sacramentally. This action of waste, often lambasted by critics as mindless hedonism, is in fact very controlled. It parallels a highly rule-bound aspect of Catholicism: the liturgical ritual, which, through a stereotyped, scripted action, imbues an object with a non-material, transcendent value. *On the Road* appears to be a record of madness, with seemingly meaningless motion and wholesale waste of money and goods. But a closer look reveals that it is a *controlled* madness, a particularly Catholic madness, a madness that Kerouac views as the only way to release the holy aspect of the material world which has been subjugated to a capitalistic focus on monetary value and growth.

Dean Moriarty: Fool for Christ

The idea of controlled madness is central to the second major form of loss that drives the sacramental experience and action of *On the Road*: that undergone by Dean Moriarty, who can be viewed as embodying the figure of a mad, yet saintly “fool for Christ” through his masochistic imitation of Christ’s humiliation and death. Just as actions of loss bring about spiritual gain in the sacramental (anti-)economy, Dean’s experiences of spiritual ecstasy are also catalyzed by loss. Throughout the novel, he undergoes personal degradation and wilful self-destruction. Such action can be linked to the crucified Christ: the ultimate action of loss, perhaps, is that of the sacrifice of human life, such as that which takes place in the crucifixion. Bataille believes this type of sacrifice to enable participation in the sacred. He writes, “Sacrifice destroys an object’s real ties of subordination; it draws the victim out of the world of utility and restores it to that of unintelligible caprice” (*Religion* 43). Doing so takes the object out of the capitalist economy and places it within the

sacred economy: “Sacrifice restores to the sacred world that which servile use has degraded, rendered profane” (*Consumption* 55). The crucifixion is just this type of sacrifice; the extreme form of loss enacted in it enables the salvation of humanity.

Bataille writes:

From the very first, it appears that sacred things are constituted by an operation of loss: in particular, the success of Christianity must be explained by the value of the theme of the Son of God’s ignominious crucifixion, which carries human dread to a representation of loss and limitless degradation. (“Notion” 170)

This idea of sacred loss is at the heart of the theological doctrine of kenosis. Kenosis is a theological term referring to “the self-emptying of the divine Son, building upon the famous hymn of Phil 2” (R. Williams 223).¹⁶ Kenosis posits an understanding of Christ which focuses on Christ’s suffering at his crucifixion, which is viewed as the pinnacle of loss and humiliation. It is Christ’s willingness to descend from the divine world into the lowest form of human existence, and to die a humiliating and painful death on the cross, to lose the most “valuable” thing of all—his own life—that enables the salvation of humanity. The term kenosis comes from the Greek verb used in Philippians 2:7, *kenos*.¹⁷ Arthur Charles provides a helpful account of the many various meanings of this word, which is

mostly used for objects. However, when used for persons it means not having something with someone, e.g. being with empty hands. Thus, it means empty, something without content, basis; it can also mean empty of truth or power, and is used to show something without result or profit. (4)

The other form of the verb, *kenoo*, means “to empty, and thus indicates to destroy, to bring to nothing, to plunder or render void” (Charles 4). At the heart of all these definitions is the idea of unproductive, loss-based action, linking kenosis to the sacramental (anti-)economy, in which symbolic, not monetary or material value, is restored through loss. Through the crucifixion, which is the ultimate action of loss, sinful humanity is restored to its lost sacred state. John Saward explains:

A God who empties himself and becomes a slave, who endures mockery and humiliating death, and yet is raised from the dead in glory, exposes the lie, the real madness, of living only for self; God’s ecstasy-in-Incarnation, his leaping down from heaven, demonstrates once and for all that self-preservation leads to death, while self-oblation leads to eternal life. (6-7)

Christ himself is not the only human figure who can be seen to embody kenosis: it can also be exemplified in “fools for Christ.” The phrase “fools for Christ” comes from St. Paul in 1 Cor. 4.10, and refers to those who imitate Christ’s kenosis through actions of waste, loss, excess, and lack of self-preservation.¹⁸ Saward writes, “The world believes that power and glory come through calculating self-preservation. The world can make no sense of the word of the cross, of Christ-wisdom crucified, and so regards it as ‘insanity’” (3). Fools for Christ, according to Saward, live a peripatetic existence (44), voluntarily take on poverty (68), and have an utter disregard for caution (69). These things are all unproductive, going against societal norms of self-preservation and material accumulation. Stanislas Breton also explores the figure of “fools in the cause of Christ” who, he writes, “[repeat] in their creative way that divine ecstasy that draws the divinity from the placid domain of ontology where it has been held captive” (32). Breton continues, stating that “These

blessed ones . . . have heard the call of the Beatitudes” (32); they “assess the relativity of public norms and commonly accepted values” (32) and “reject every permanent dwelling place” (34).¹⁹ The fool for Christ is not just a biblical figure, but one relevant for modern times. In *Queer Fish*, John Schad comments on Michel Foucault’s view of figures such as Dostoevsky and Nietzsche as reinvigorating this “madness of the Cross,” allowing “Christ to regain the glory of his madness, for scandal to recover its power as revelation” (Foucault 78, 79, qtd. in Schad 1). Schad states that in the late nineteenth century “certain forms of Christianity do indeed seem to become, once more, an affront to reason and its various, though often occasional, partners—such as truth, knowledge, science, sense, thought, Enlightenment, consciousness, seriousness, even the academy” (1).

In *On the Road*, Kerouac reinvigorates the figure of the fool for Christ. The second major way that actions of loss enable spiritual gain is through this very figure. The Greek term for the form of insanity which defines a fool of Christ is *moria*, and the figure in *On the Road* who most embodies St. Paul’s “fool for Christ” is the fittingly named Dean *Moriarty*. The novel provides a record of Dean’s extravagant loss, the descent and emptying out of the character. Through this emptying out, Dean can be viewed as a “fool for Christ” who imitates Christ’s kenosis, which can be viewed as an “unproductive expenditure” in itself.²⁰ Fools for Christ participate in ritualised actions of loss which parallel Christ’s kenosis, enable sacramental experience of the world, and thus set these individuals apart as saintly and holy, though they may appear foolish. Each section of the book charts a new stage in Dean’s descent, like textual Stations of the Cross. As the book progresses, he empties himself out more and more, moving from exuberance to madness to, finally, exhausted silence. The kenotic condition epitomized by Dean Moriarty has a

wider significance in Kerouac's work than just *On the Road*: it typifies the "beatness" for which Kerouac named his generation. Gregory Stephenson writes:

For Kerouac the condition of weariness, emptiness, exhaustion, defeat, and surrender is antecedent to and causative of a state of blessedness. In being Beat the ego is diminished and in abeyance, the false, external self is temporarily weakened or circumvented, and the psyche thus becomes receptive, responsive to its deeper, more sublime aspects, the *imago Dei*. (*Daybreak* 23-24)

This "weariness, emptiness, exhaustion, defeat, and surrender" is at the core of kenosis, and is what enables fools of Christ, like Dean Moriarty, to achieve a state of saintly idiocy.

Dean's divine madness is apparent even at the beginning of the book. At this early point, he is "mad"—a word Kerouac uses in a positive sense, signifying energy and renewal. When Sal is "feeling that everything was dead" (1), Dean provides the perfect foil to his torpor: "He was simply a youth tremendously excited with life" (4). This vigour, from the beginning, links Dean to the sacred: Sal states, "a kind of holy lightning I saw flashing from his excitement" (4). But also, from the beginning, this "excitement" has a dangerous edge, linked to crime and dissolution: Sal calls Dean "the holy con-man with the shining mind" (5). But at this point, the edgy side of Dean is not dangerous: "his 'criminality' was not something that sulked and sneered; it was a wild yea-saying overburst of American joy" (7). Dean's exuberance initially revives Sal, and sets the novel in motion.

However, not everyone is as impressed by Dean's effulgence as Sal. Like Christ, and the fools who follow in his footsteps, Dean endures the mockery, rejection, and betrayal of many who know him. Slavoj Žižek comments on the role

of betrayal in the story of Christ, viewing it as part of what he sees as a “perverse economy” (16) inherent in Christianity: “since his [Christ’s] betrayal was necessary to his mission (to redeem humanity through his death on the Cross), did Christ not need it?” (15). Žižek continues, “In all other religions, God demands that His followers remain faithful to Him—only Christ asked his followers to *betray* him in order to fulfill his mission” (16). In *On the Road*, most of Dean’s friends and acquaintances turn against him as his downfall progresses. Many of them question his motives for the wasteful actions he continuously participates in. Rather than defend himself, Dean is silent in the face of this criticism. Roland Major questions Dean’s relationships:

Major talked to Dean like this; “Moriarty, what’s this I hear about you sleeping with three girls at the same time?” And Dean shuffled on the rug and said, “Oh yes, oh yes, that’s the way it goes,” and looked at his watch, and Major snuffed down his nose. I felt sheepish rushing off with Dean—Major insisted he was a moron and a fool. (46)

At this early point in the book, Dean is viewed as a “moron and a fool,” but Sal can see that his foolishness is regenerative, and “rushes off” to follow Dean’s example.

A further betrayal occurs in Part Three, when Dean’s cousin Sam Brady, whom Dean considered his “absolute hero” as a child (216), rejects him, saying:

Now look, Dean, I don’t believe you any more or anything you’re going to try to tell me. I came to see you tonight because there’s a paper I want you to sign for the family. Your father is no longer mentioned among us and we want absolutely nothing to do with him, and I’m sorry to say, with you either, any more. (217)

As Dean falls further and further, the censure he faces strengthens: now he is not just criticized and questioned, but exiled from his family, thus made into an outsider figure that typifies the “fool for Christ.”

The last time that Dean is mocked—this time by Galatea Dunkel—he is directly presented as a holy fool. Galatea says to Dean, “You’ve done so many awful things I don’t know what to say to you” (194). Sal then, watching Dean’s reaction, sees the saintly aspect of his friend’s madness:

And in fact that was the point, and they all sat around looking at Dean with lowered and hating eyes, and he stood on the carpet in the middle of them and giggled—he just giggled. He made a little dance. . . . I suddenly realized that Dean, by virtue of his enormous series of sins, was becoming the Idiot, the Imbecile, the Saint of the lot. . . .

That’s what Dean was, the HOLY GOOF. (194)

Galatea then continues her tirade, to which Dean still does not respond: “Where once Dean would have talked his way out, he now fell silent himself” (195). It is now, with Dean near the lowest point of his downfall, that Sal describes him as “BEAT—the root, the soul of Beatific” (195). At this point in the novel, Dean is broken down, degraded, mocked. But as Sal explains, this state of degradation is literally the “root” of beatific exaltation, epitomized by Christ’s crucifixion, when he reaches exaltation at the apex of his kenotic degradation.

Indeed, the further Dean slips into degradation, the more exalted he becomes. In Part Two, after Dean wastes his savings on the Hudson, Sal begins to see the more destructive side to Dean’s exuberance, which he has come to view as “madness”: “The madness of Dean had bloomed into a weird flower” (112). But the terms which Sal uses to frame Dean’s madness are those of regeneration: “blooming” and

“flower.” This regenerative madness epitomizes the fool for Christ. At the beginning of Part Three, Sal goes to find Dean, whose newfound disgrace is reflected in his physical appearance: “He was wearing a T-shirt, torn pants hanging down his belly, tattered shoes; he had not shaved, his hair was wild and bushy, his eyes bloodshot” (188). Dean then relates to Sal a new series of misfortunes. Recently, while under the influence of marijuana, he went to his first wife, Marylou, and asked her to kill him. By doing this, he literally offers himself up as a sacrifice: the ultimate form of loss. Dean tells Sal: “I gave her the gun and told her to kill me. She held the gun in her hand for the longest time. I asked her for a sweet dead pact. She didn’t want. I said one of us had to die. She said no. I beat my head on the wall” (185). He then hits Marylou, and the action leads to suffering and physical decline. Dean tells Sal, “my thumb only deflected off her brow and she didn’t even have a bruise and in fact laughed, but my thumb broke above the wrist” (185). The thumb becomes infected, and the penicillin Dean is prescribed causes an allergic reaction and a litany of subsequent health problems (186). But this physical suffering and humiliation, which has brought Dean to his lowest point in the novel, has only served to exhilarate him. After enumerating these misfortunes to Sal, Dean says, “And yet—and yet, I’ve never felt better and finer and happier with the world and to see little lovely children playing in the sun and I am so glad to see you, my fine gone wonderful Sal, and I know, I *know* everything will be all right” (186). Dean’s sense of elation only heightens as Part Three progresses. Toward the end of the section, in a Detroit Skid Row cinema, “Dean was so exhausted and out of his mind that everything he saw delighted him. He was reaching another pious frenzy” (247).

Dean's descent is complete at the end of the novel, which ends on a note of loss and dissatisfaction, and with the final, most serious betrayal: Sal's betrayal of Dean. In Part Five, Sal and his girlfriend Laura plan for Dean to come meet them in New York and to move west to San Francisco together, but "suddenly Dean arrived anyway, five and a half weeks in advance, and nobody had any money to go through with the plan" (304). And when he arrives, Dean is far different from the "exuberant youth" that he was at the beginning of the novel, who talked for entire cross-country trips. The loss and waste he has effected throughout the novel has caught up with him, and he is literally emptied out. This emptiness is manifested in his uncharacteristic silence. Sal describes Dean when he arrives in New York: "And he stared with rocky sorrow into his hands. 'Can't talk no more—do you understand that it is—or might be—But listen!'" (304).

The final stage in Dean's kenosis comes when Sal betrays his friend by choosing to remain in New York when Dean leaves. Previously, Sal has always followed Dean, taking part in his holy madness. Before Dean leaves New York to go back West, Sal has plans to go to a Duke Ellington concert with his old friend, Remi. Remi also betrays Dean, whom Sal introduces to him: "They did meet, but Dean couldn't talk any more and said nothing, and Remi turned away" (306). Dean then asks Sal and Remi "D'you think I can ride to Fortieth Street with you?" but Remi, who had booked a car for the evening, "wouldn't have it, he liked me but he didn't like my idiot friends" (307). Sal does not defend Dean to Remi, or accompany his friend to Penn Station, where he is beginning a new journey across the country:

the only thing I could do was sit in the back of the Cadillac and wave at him. . . . Dean, ragged in a motheaten overcoat he brought specially

for the freezing temperatures of the East, walked off alone, and the last I saw of him he rounded the corner of Seventh Avenue, eyes on the street ahead, and bent to it again. (306-07)

The action of bending reflects Dean's final lowliness, the result of the exhausting loss of energy, time, money, and personal well-being throughout the novel. The expenditures that drive the action of the book have finally caught up with Dean, and it is when he is at his lowest point—exhausted and silent, no longer a figure of energising madness—that he is betrayed by his closest disciple, Sal. But this does not mean that the novel's quest for exaltation has been unsuccessful. This final betrayal can be viewed as a necessary one, as part of Žižek's "perverse economy" inherent in the story of Christ: in order for Dean to fulfil his mission, to fully imitate Christ, it is essential that he be betrayed in this way. Within the loss-driven sacramental (anti-)economy this final loss completes Dean's kenosis, his descent into beatness and therefore sainthood.

Chapter Five

“A Humane yet Dark Tribute to Life”: The Eucharist in the Work of Gregory

Corso¹

“My feast was in the easy blood that flowed” (Corso, “From Another Room” 7)

Although the Beat writer Gregory Corso was one of the most visible Beats during the 1950s and 60s, his work is not always considered to be a major part of the Beat canon. Marilyn Schwartz explains:

Corso’s work has been almost totally disregarded by serious reviewers. His lack of canonical status as a writer, the rawness of his talent, and perhaps his reportedly abrasive manner with poetry audiences and interviewers have resulted in slighting treatments of him as a mere Beat celebrity. (118)

But these reviewers’ disregard of Corso is a mistake. His work is highly relevant to the post-war period, exploring the possibility of religious redemption in the shattered, uncertain mid-twentieth century world. Corso does so through the lens of an unorthodox understanding of the Catholic faith into which he was indoctrinated as a child. He views some aspects of Catholicism, such as the institutional Catholic Church, as outdated, and others—particularly those related to the body, such as the crucified Christ and the Eucharist—as containing potential for reinvention and thus healing and renewed faith.

A major theme in Corso’s work is that of the sacrament of Eucharist, which has historically been the focus of much debate. This major sacrament, with its focus on the body of Christ, seems to come to the forefront of religious discourse during times of upheaval: as Corso illustrates, it is relevant to the post-war world, and it was

at the heart of a debate during the Reformation, another major period of reconstruction. The debate focuses on Christ's presence in the Eucharist, and whether it is literal—the explanation favoured by Catholics—or, as most Protestants believe, more symbolic. Corso himself believes the Eucharist is literal, involving the consumption of the actual flesh and blood of Christ, and in his work he explores what such an explanation implies. He explores the problems and tensions inherent in such a view—the taboos it breaks, the possibility of violence it contains, the implications for the body. Through such exploration, Corso illustrates how the Eucharist, understood literally, can have potential for healing the fractured post-war world, giving believers a new way of understanding their relationship to Christ and God. Corso's new understanding of the Eucharist seeks to regenerate and update Catholicism for the twentieth century.

Some critics have addressed the role of spirituality in Corso's writing, though none fully appreciate the importance of the Eucharist to his work. While Gregory Stephenson and Michael Skau do not delve deeply into Corso's religious attitudes in their respective works, they both highlight the poet's desire for salvation for the bleak post-war world, and his reliance on imagination to accomplish such redemption. Skau believes that Corso, along with the rest of the Beats, "sought to reinvigorate and reenergize the arts, the American people, and the people of the world. Their goal was nothing less than . . . a miracle to restore humanity to an Edenic existence" (49-50). Stephenson states that Corso's work "represents an attempt to redeem the human psyche from its fallen state, from its exile, and restore it to true being" (*Exiled Angel* 7). He comments on the transformational aspect of Corso's work: it "den[ies] conventional perceptions of reality, and affirm[s] magic, wonder, joy and beauty" (*Exiled Angel* 8). Corso attempts, through various

techniques, “a transformation of ‘the real world’ into a realm of the mysterious, the magical and the marvellous” (*Exiled Angel* 13). Stephenson and Skau both link this transformational tendency to the overall Beat search for a new form of consciousness, as seen most notably in the work of Burroughs and Ginsberg. Skau writes:

Corso believes that imagination can provide the power to transcend limits through the “new consciousness.” . . . This “new consciousness” is dependent upon an expanded sense of freedom, the emancipated power of humanity’s recognition of the individual as God. (31)

Both Stephenson and Skau view Corso’s untraditional use of language as a method of expanding consciousness in such a manner. Stephenson states that Corso’s “expressive, explosive, explorative utilisation of language is at once destructive and constructive, subverting traditional modes of thought and conventional notions of reality, as it exalts desire, freedom, and vision” (*Exiled Angel* 30). Examples of such lingual subversion include his use of suffixes in unexpected ways to create new words, as in “Eden Were Elysium”: “Spring; the leaves are reborn, / The egg is precocial, / The transhumanescence begins” (9-11). He also juxtaposes unrelated words, such as “Pie Glue!” and “Radio belly! Cat shovel!” in one of his best-known poems, “Marriage” (34, 53). Through this play with word formation and usage, Corso creates surreal and unexpected imagery in his poetry, and forces the reader to think about language in new ways.²

While Marilyn Schwartz focuses on many of Corso’s most striking themes, she only comments briefly on Corso’s spiritual attitudes. Like Stephenson and Skau, she highlights the use of imagination and transformation to escape the real in Corso’s

work, linking Corso's poetic imagination to his need to escape the "horrors" of the post-war world. She writes:

From the beginning of his career, Corso understandably esteemed poetry as the art necessary to "explain some horrors" of life to himself. . . . He therefore regards his vocation not as the making of poems but as the exercise of poetry's power to transform and thereby redeem experience through acts of imaginative perceptions. (120)

Schwartz links this transformational tendency in Corso's work to another of his focal points: that of destruction. She argues that Corso's preoccupation with destruction is not nihilistic, however, but positively transformative:

Corso . . . works to keep tearing down both the orthodoxies of conventional society and his own closely held beliefs, which confine the imagination in static perceptions of experience, and to keep building new truths. Paradoxes and self-contradiction, alogical juxtapositions of images, violent reversals of the denotation and connotations of words—these are among the techniques by means of which Corso annihilates established ways of seeing and constructs new visions. By continually altering "how one looks at a thing," Corso attempts to extend perception beyond the obvious to unseen possibilities present in experience. (120)

I argue that the transformation Schwartz discusses here is central to the Eucharist, in which bread and wine are transformed into flesh and blood. Destruction and creation are also inherent in the Eucharist and the crucifixion which it commemorates: Christ's body must be destroyed to bring about the salvation of humanity. But Schwartz does not link these themes of destruction, transformation,

and creation to Corso's Catholicism; thus, her analysis of the author's work, though strong in most respects, is incomplete.

Kirby Olson is the only critic to address Corso's Catholicism in depth. Olson comments on Corso's treatment of themes of food and eating, and links them to the author's Catholicism. Rather than linking them to the Eucharist, though, he views them as a reaction to the idea of Catholic "stability" (8) and the ideas of Catholic theologian Thomas Aquinas.³ Olson explains:

The great chain of being that St. Thomas Aquinas articulated, which places things at the bottom, then animals, then humans, who occupy an intermediate realm, and then various kinds of angels, and finally God himself at the peak, is challenged by Corso throughout his poetry. (8)

Olson also states that Corso explores "whether eating is a spiritual activity" (28-29).

But Olson views this as expressed more through the idea of the food chain, and whether or not it is ethical to eat animals, than as connected to the Eucharist.

Although this idea of the food chain might be seen to be linked to Catholicism, I argue that themes of food and eating in Corso's work are more strongly related to the Eucharist, which is a far more central Catholic practise.

Olson also analyses Corso's view of Christ's crucifixion and resurrection, writing: "The Crucifixion, from within the surrealist viewpoint, is simultaneously an outrage and a cry for mercy, as are the shocking transgressions of the serial killer" (143). He continues, discussing the influence of the bodily aspect of the crucifixion on Corso's work:

It is this transgression upon the body parts of another that is at the basis of the value of Corso's (and most surrealist) writings.

Throughout his writings, from the earliest to the last, we are continually reminded of the cannibalistic nature of the food chain, its predatory aspects, and to some extent this constitutes its beauty, its voluptuousness. (144)

Here, Olson comes closest to an appreciation of Eucharistic themes in Corso's work, but he still does not engage fully with them. His analysis lacks an awareness of the relation between Corso's fascination with bodily transgression and his understanding of the sacrament of Eucharist, which is strongly linked to ideas of incarnation and embodiment, and which Corso views as potentially crossing bodily taboos.

Stephenson, Skau, Schwartz, and Olson identify many interesting issues in Corso's poetry: his subversive transformation of language, his analysis of the paradoxical relation of destruction to creation, his preoccupation with the dark side of eating, his similarly dark view of the crucifixion. But without an awareness of how these major issues are linked to Corso's understanding of the Eucharist, a comprehensive investigation of Corso's religious attitudes, and their link to his poetry, cannot be achieved. Through an analysis of Corso's view of the role of religion—particularly Christianity—in the contemporary world, his exploration of the often sinister tensions he sees as present in the literally understood Eucharist, and finally his use of these darker elements as positive and regenerative, one can appreciate that the author's untraditional Catholicism and understanding of Eucharist is at the heart of his work. In this chapter, I provide such an analysis by first addressing two poems that deal directly with the role of religion in a post-war, post-bomb society: "Bomb" and "St. Francis Holding the Church from Falling." These poems make it clear that Corso feels that Christianity needs to be revised in order to meet the needs of the twentieth century. The next section investigates poems from

Corso's first three collections of poetry, illustrating how his understanding of the Eucharist underlies much of his poetics. I then move into an examination of the Eucharist in his only novel, *The American Express*, focusing on how his radical understanding of the sacrament provides an updated view of Catholicism relevant for the post-war world.

Christianity's Role in the Post-War World: "Bomb" and "St. Francis Holding the Church from Falling"

Corso directly addresses the role of Christianity in the post-war world in his poetry. He shows, in "Bomb," that he is fully aware of the influence of the detonation of the nuclear bomb on traditional religious belief. Corso believes many of Christianity's trappings are no longer relevant post-bomb. This position is expressed in "Bomb" and "Saint Francis Holding the Church from Falling" from the five-poem cycle "Saint Francis." Like the character Carrol Grilhiggen in *The American Express*, Corso feels that he needs "A God of the new consciousness" since the existing church, if it does not acknowledge and respond to the new pressures of the post-bomb world, will lose its relevance and power: "The Catholic Church is done—your God has not changed. Man changes, therefore God must change—" (22). But Corso remains a believer at heart, separating Christ, who he views as retaining regenerative power, from what he believes to be a dated institution. From these two poems, it is clear that Corso believes that redemption can be found in the rapidly changing post-war world. This redemption is achieved through the destruction of some existing, traditional religious institutions, and a renewed, revised understanding of others to create a new understanding, a religion for the "new consciousness."

In “Bomb,” Corso directly addresses the failure of traditional religion and conceptions of God to accommodate the chaos wrought by the nuclear bomb. He also explores the potential for creation and spiritual renewal through destruction and violence. Corso illustrates his awareness that the bomb greatly affects human religious belief, and even has the potential to destroy established conceptions of God. In “Bomb,” Corso expresses his belief that the changes of the twentieth century—such as the violent destruction of the bomb—usher in an opportunity to reshape religion. The bomb’s devastation forces the re-evaluation of long-standing structures that Corso views as outdated. As it shocks people into a new understanding of these structures, it paves the way for dynamic renewal.

At the beginning of “Bomb,” Corso examines the nature of violence throughout history, placing the atomic bomb into a continuum of natural and manmade carnage. He highlights the violence inherent in nature, such as the “mischievous thunderbolt” (3). The next line catalogues the tools for violence men have created throughout the ages, from the primitive “bumpy club of One Million B.C.” to medieval devices such as “the mace the flail the axe” (4). The role of violence within the Christian tradition is also addressed as Corso alludes to figures who have used violence in their service of God: “hath not St. Michael a burning sword St. George a lance David a sling” (7).

Corso goes on to illustrate how the bomb has reshaped and reordered the world, using vivid metaphors of literal displacement:

Turtles exploding over Istanbul

The jaguar’s flying foot

soon to sink in arctic snow

Penguins plunged against the Sphinx

The top of the Empire state
 arrowed in a broccoli field in Sicily
 Eiffel shaped like a C in Magnolia Gardens
 St. Sophia peeling over Sudan (31-38)

The bomb throws iconic visual symbols of geographical areas—both natural, such as turtles, jaguars, and penguins, and manmade, such as the Sphinx, the Empire State Building and the Eiffel Tower—into hectic disarray. This vivid visual imagery illustrates not only the physical devastation the bomb wreaks on the natural world, but also its symbolic impact: it casts the structures through which humans understand their world, here symbolised by iconic architecture, into utter chaos.

The bomb also has the potential to destroy a major concept through which humans understand and organise their experience: that of God himself. After the bomb's blast, Corso describes God as "abandoned mock-nude / beneath His thin false-talc'd apocalypse" (97-98). Here, God is left behind by those who cannot assimilate their ideas of God to the devastation that occurred during the war. These horrors were so great that the biblical idea of the apocalypse, dramatically narrated in the New Testament, pales in comparison to this nuclear Armageddon, appearing "thin" and "false" beside it.

Corso then describes the failure of God in the face of the bomb in terms of sound. The bomb's sound is deafening, but, in contrast, God is described as both deaf and soundless. God's deafness in the face of the great boom of the bomb can be read as a metaphor for the rigidity of Christianity in the face of the post-bomb world: Corso sees the church as turning a deaf ear to the changes of the mid-twentieth century. This deaf God is juxtaposed against images of the bomb: "He cannot hear thy flute's / happy-the-day profanations / He is spilled deaf into the Silencer's warty

ear” (99-101). Corso then describes the sterile silence of God’s kingdom in the face of the booming bomb; the once-regal sounds of God’s realm are now blocked, impotent: “His kingdom an eternity of crude wax / Clogged clarions untrumpet him / Sealed angels unsing him” (102-04). Clarions and angels traditionally praise God with their music, but now they can only “untrumpet” or “unsing” him: these images suggest either silence, as they no longer feel they can praise God, or a mocking of God and his lack of glory. The image of God’s “kingdom” as “an eternity of crude wax” (102) strengthens these sonic metaphors of silence and impotence. “God’s kingdom” can be understood as the physical world, and the image of it as “wax”—a material easily melted or moulded—highlights its vulnerability in the face of the fiery bomb. This image could also imply an idea that the traditional understanding of the world as God’s kingdom, ruled over and thus made safe by him, is undermined by the bomb and the destruction and vulnerability it brings. Utterly displaced by the nuclear bomb, made deaf and silenced, his kingdom in shambles, God finally becomes, like thousands of others, a casualty of the bomb: “A thunderless God A dead God / O Bomb thy Boom his tomb” (105-06).

But the destruction of major modes of human philosophy—even God’s death—does not mean there is no hope for redemption in the world. Corso praises the bomb using language and imagery of Christian creation. This suggests that the “dead God” Corso presents earlier in the poem symbolizes only the death of traditional religion as it stands, which the author views as oppressive and outdated. It does not sound the death knell for all aspects of Christianity, some of which Corso views as having potential for renewal. For example, in lines mixing Christian themes of creation, traditional hosannas of praise to God, and images of spring, Corso expresses his belief in the regenerative power of the bomb: “Hosannah Bomb

/ Gush the final rose O spring Bomb / Come with thy gown of dynamite green” (64-66). He also puts the bomb in the role of God, making it an all-powerful, almost omniscient figure:

O Bomb in which all lovely things
moral and physical anxiously participate
O fairylike plucked from the
grandest universe tree
O piece of heaven which gives
both mountain and anthill a sun (141-46)

Such a description of the bomb reflects its extreme power. The bomb—like God, or perhaps in place of God—is a “moral and physical” centre, encompassing all creation. For Corso, the bomb is, also like God, a benevolent creator, a “piece of heaven” providing the world with light. Corso also alludes to the bomb’s great power when he refers to “thy field the universe thy hedge the geo” (72) and calls “The stars a swarm of bees in thy binging bag” (74).

The juxtaposition of these images of destruction and creation form another nexus of comparison to God: like God’s power, the power of the bomb can be used for destruction as well as for creation. This is the great paradox Corso sees at the heart of the bomb, the same paradox inherent in the crucifixion: a greatly destructive act can, if understood in a particular way, have the potential for the greatest good. Like the crucifixion, the atomic bomb brings together opposites, as Corso illustrates when he describes how the bomb can both “exhaust deluges of celestial ghouls” (88) and “From thy appellational womb / spew birth-gusts of great worms” (89-90). The idea of celestial ghouls—half angelic, half demonic—joins opposites, as does the bomb. The paradox of the creative potential within destructive power is symbolised

in his image of a womb spewing worms, which are associated with the decay of carrion.

Creation and destruction exist side by side in the bomb, as they do in the crucifix and Eucharist, and just as in these two Catholic symbols, the creative, salvific side prevails. After a litany of destruction—“BOOM ye skies and BOOM ye suns / BOOM BOOM ye moons ye stars BOOM” (167-68), the poem concludes on a note of renewal:

Flowers will leap in joy their roots aching
 Fields will kneel proud beneath the halleluyahs [sic] of the wind
 Pinkbombs will blossom Elkbombs will perk their ears

Know that the earth will Madonna the Bomb (178-84)

In these lines, joy is expressed with the Christian word “hallelujah,” and the earth’s taking in and nurturing of the bomb is expressed through the unconventional use of the proper noun “Madonna” as a verb, suggesting the mothering of something divine and salvific. The destruction wrought by the bomb can pave the way for a new world: by clearing away old religious conceptions and reinventing those aspects thereof which have potential in the modern world, there is a possibility for equilibrium and enlightenment.

One of Corso’s most overtly Catholic works, a five-poem cycle on St. Francis, expresses similar ideas to those in “Bomb.” The poem is concerned with the casting aside of old religious structures and the retaining and reinventing of others to create a “new consciousness.” In the third poem of the cycle, “Saint Francis Holding the Church from Falling,” Corso does not directly condemn the

church, but implies that it has lost some of its relevance in the face of industrial and technological advances:

“The Church is steadfast”

Computers pistons engines hydros dynamos museum it;

All is real estate.

What once gave light to dark

Now gives dark to light. (1-5)

Here, the quotation marks around the first line set it apart from the rest of the poem.

The following lines can be seen as a repudiation of the insistence that Christianity remains “steadfast” in the modern world. Corso uses the word “museum” in a characteristically nonstandard way to create a vivid image of the church as outdated. Elements of the modern world “museum” the church: it seems to be an artefact with no use, like a curiosity in a museum showcase, though it is given the same reverence as a priceless antique. Lines four and five seem to indicate that the church, in this new role, no longer has a positive effect on the world, but a negative one: it sheds “darkness” on modern events, attempting to cover them up or deny them, rather than seeing them for what they are and addressing them directly.

In “Saint Francis Holding the Church from Falling,” as in “Bomb,” Corso does not suggest a complete renunciation or destruction of religion, but a move away from traditional modes of understanding it. He writes, “The Church should not fall / But walk away / And leave behind the glory of its stay—” (6-8), indicating that some aspects of the church— “the glory of its stay”—still contain potential. It is not the outward elements of the church, such as the “mink-necked ecclesiastic” (10), the “Trinket tabernacles” (11) or “morning high mass” (12) that Corso views as enduring, but the crucified Christ:

I see Christ a skeleton on the cross.
 If the Church falls and stone does fall,
 If Church-idea is forgotten and ideas are forgotten,
 I know within my soul that Christ will always be. (18-21)

Here, Corso views Christ as having the potential to defeat anything that might occur, even the horrors of the modern world: “Nothing can erase that wonder of man; / Not bomb nor anti-Christ nor thought nor me” (22-23). In “Bomb,” God is defeated, irrelevant and deaf when faced with the tumult of the contemporary world. But in this work, Christ crucified survives, as he serves as a figure of identification for this suffering, tortured world. Corso’s faith that Christ can defeat—and thus help mankind defeat—these horrors is evident in the penultimate line of the poem, in which he states that “Christ is the victory of man” (24). In some of his other work, Corso explores how Christ can facilitate such redemption. Corso argues that this redemption is found through the Eucharist, which embodies Christ’s sacrifice of his own life. In the sacrament, Corso sees elements of the salvific destruction and violence similar to that explored in “Bomb.”

Corso’s Transubstantial Poetics

In Corso’s poetry from the 1950s and early 60s, the author explores themes of eating, cannibalism, and how these things are related to Catholicism and the Eucharist. The Eucharist is a sacrament of initiation, through which believers become Christians and enter the church. It takes the form of a liturgical ritual in which the worshipper eats bread and drinks wine—which represents Christ’s body and blood—to commemorate Christ’s sacrifice on the cross. This sacrament has been present since the beginning of Christianity; it is based upon Jesus’ words to his

apostles at the Last Supper, which directly refer to the consumption of Christ's flesh and blood as food:

Then Jesus said unto them, Verily, verily I say unto you, Except ye eat the flesh of the Son of man, and drink his blood, ye have no life in you. Whoso eateth my flesh, and drinketh my blood, hath eternal life: and I will raise him up at the last day. For my flesh is meat indeed, and my blood is drink indeed. He that eateth my flesh, and drinketh my blood, dwelleth in me, and I in him. (John 6.53-56)

The conception of this central sacrament changed during the Reformation, when people questioned anew exactly what was happening at the Last Supper. At this point, the Eucharist became a highly divisive topic. The heart of this controversy was whether or not Jesus' body and blood are actually present in the bread and wine that are constituents of the Lord's Supper, or whether the bread and wine serve only as symbols of Christ's flesh and blood. Catholics believe that, during the performance of the Eucharist in the liturgy, the bread and wine is literally displaced by the flesh and blood of Christ, although the appearance of bread and wine is seen to remain. The Fourth Lateran Council, in 1215, codified this doctrine and termed it *transubstantiation*. This real presence of Christ's flesh and blood in the Eucharist was reaffirmed by the Council of Constance, in 1415, and Trent, in 1551.⁴ There has also been reaffirmation of the idea of transubstantiation in the twentieth century: in 1965, Pope Paul VI issued *Mysterium Fidei*, which countered twentieth-century Dutch theologians who were "trying to explain the real presence without employing the Scholastic concept of transubstantiation" (McBrien 764).⁵ Vatican II, issued in 1962, reaffirms the idea of transubstantiation, while stating that Christ is also present in other constituents of the church service. Susan Wood states that Vatican II:

taught that Christ is really present in the Word, in the presider, and in the assembly in addition to his special presence in the Eucharist (SC 7). Christ is present sacramentally so that the unity of all in Christ may be achieved. This is our reconciliation with God and our salvation (351).⁶

Protestants, however, believe that the Eucharist has a more symbolic function.

Martin Luther and his followers believed in the doctrine of consubstantiation, which means that the consecrated bread and wine in the Eucharist are both bread and wine and the flesh and blood of Christ. Lutherans believe that during Eucharist, Christ's physical "presence is *revealed* by the Word, and particularly through the words 'This is my body' and 'This is my blood'" (Wainwright 1). This differs from transubstantiation, in which the bread and wine are utterly transformed, no longer believed to retain the substance of food and drink. Other Protestants believe that the Eucharist is only symbolic of Christ's body and blood. John Calvin, a theologian who exerted a strong influence on the American Puritanism which continued to influence mainstream America during the post-war years, denies the presence of Christ's actual flesh and blood in the Eucharist (McBrien 764).

Central to the Protestants' objections to the doctrine of transubstantiation is an aversion to the idea that, during transubstantiation, Christ's flesh is eaten. Lee Wandel states that many reformers wondered: "How could Christ's body and blood, understood as 'human' and therefore bounded in time and matter, be present in every Eucharist, subjected to the physical pain of mastication and the horrors of digestion?" (21). While some of the Protestant reformers' objections reflected the new advances in natural science—new scientific knowledge made it difficult to reconcile what was happening in the Eucharist with what was known about matter—others seem based in a horror or disgust about what occurs during the Eucharist if the

bread and wine are transubstantiated into the flesh of Christ. Ulrich Zwingli, a major Reformation theologian, found the idea of consuming Christ's flesh to be disturbing: "For Zwingli, Christ's body could not be corporeally present in every morsel of bread; indeed it horrified him to think of human beings taking Christ's physical body into their mouths and grinding it with their teeth" (Wandel 102).

The idea of eating Christ's flesh can be compared to cannibalism, as several scholars have noted.⁷ Of course, Catholics view the act as something very different, based upon a complex theological framework.⁸ But Protestants have used this link to cannibalism as an attack against Catholicism, particularly during the Reformation. Michael Davies highlights some Protestant qualms about the idea of eating God, providing a quotation from a Reformation-era Protestant:⁹

This latter point [the idea of eating Christ's flesh] seems to be a particularly offensive concept to English Protestants who rebelled, with "reason" on their side, against the idea that Christians could be termed "GOD-EATERS" . . . or even worse, "that the omnipotent Christian God (transformed into mere bread) may be gnawed at and consumed 'by Worms, Weasels, Rats and Mice,' and any other vermin." (qtd. in Davies 30)¹⁰

This marginalisation of and horror concerning cannibalism is also present in modern Western society. Westerners view cannibalism with a strong sense of horror and disgust. It is one of the strongest societal taboos, seen as morally wrong and abhorrent. Societies suspected of participating in cannibalistic behaviour are viewed as a dangerous, even subhuman Other: W. Arens states that the "charge [of people as cannibals] denies the accused their humanity" (140). Cannibalism is also often linked to the idea of the primitive, irrational, and unconscious; it is opposed to the

rational, scientific, and modern, and often is an aspect of a magical worldview. The issue of cannibalism is complicated by its often paradoxical significance. Just as the crucifixion is viewed as both a horrific act of torture and suffering and a glorious act resulting in the salvation of humanity, the typically horrific act of cannibalism can also take on a sacred significance, depending upon the context in which it is performed. As Arens points out, “eating flesh is “the most profane act imaginable unless conducted in the context of a highly charged symbolic event” (140). Such a “highly charged event” is most often a religious ritual. Through religion, “the most profane act imaginable” is completely reconceptualised: “the very same notion of eating flesh and blood is transformed into the most sacred of all acts” (Arens 160).

The issue of cannibalism in the Eucharist is further complicated by another uneasy association: the sacralising of eating the flesh and blood of a deity which takes place in the sacrament also takes place in ancient, non-Christian religions. The Aztecs, for example, are believed to have participated in human sacrifice to bring them closer to their gods, in rituals that bring up parallels to the Eucharist that believers would find unpalatable. Peggy Sanday’s accounts of Aztec human sacrifice resemble descriptions of the Eucharist: “By the act of consecration the sacrificial victims were incarnated as gods. Through eating the victim’s flesh, men entered into communion with their gods, and divine power was imparted to men” (7). Sanday continues: “For the Aztec, the consumption of human flesh was part of a sacrament bringing humans into communion with the gods. The Aztec focused not on the consumption of flesh but on the sacred character of the event” (18). Both Aztec sacrifice and the Eucharist are based upon the idea of worshippers eating the flesh of deities who have been sacrificed. Additionally, both Catholic believers and Aztecs believe that eating the deity imparts a form of spiritual gain: whether “divine

power” gained by men on earth for the Aztecs, or salvation after death for the Christians. Both acts also contain an inherent paradox. In each, a cannibalistic act which was normally treated with disgust becomes a sacred act.

The potential connection between the transubstantial Eucharist and cannibalism which appalled Protestant reformers is certainly provocative. The debate about the nature of the Eucharist applies not only to religion, but also raises compelling issues of what it means to be human, to be embodied, to eat and even to be eaten. In his work, Corso explores these issues, which are of particular relevance during the post-war period, when the body becomes a major focal point for religious discourse. Mary Timothy Prokes writes, “In the twentieth century, bodily horrors have been inflicted on individuals, races and nations to an extent unimaginable in earlier periods of history” (28). Corso investigates all these issues through his exploration of the visceral, paradoxical aspects of the transubstantial Eucharist, ranging from cannibalism to the links between the sacrament and human sacrifice in other “primitive” religions. By drawing attention to and exploring these themes, he shows that Catholicism, as a religion for the “new consciousness”—a post-Holocaust, post-bomb consciousness—retains its relevance in the twentieth century. Corso believes that an acknowledgement and exploration of the unsettling aspects of eating Christ’s flesh can help believers come to terms with the horror of modern life. It is through this ultimate sacrifice of Christ’s body, when he gives it to his believers to eat, that Christ shows that he understands the horrors they have experienced, and offers himself up for comfort and salvation.

The idea of literal Eucharist shapes Corso’s poetics, which indirectly explore the ideas and tensions beneath the surface of this understanding of the Eucharist. Many of the aspects of transubstantiation, such as its concern with transformation

and symbolism, bear similarities to literary, particularly poetic, devices. This link between transubstantiation and literature, which is explored in Douglas Burnham and Enrico Giaccherini's *The Poetics of Transubstantiation*, can aid an understanding of the use of transubstantiation in Corso's poetry. In his article in the anthology, Andy Mousley writes:

While the term transubstantiation carries a specific, context-bound association, the concept also raises the issue of how terms or "substances" may paradoxically lose their substantiality in the process of being transformed into something else. . . . To understand transubstantiation in a metaphorical sense is to multiply one's options, in such a way as to release the term from its particular, religious orbit of meaning into such varied analogues, metonyms and metaphors as translation, transition, transsexuality, magic, adaptation, metamorphosis, and alchemy. (55)

This understanding of the relation between poetry and transubstantiation provides the reader with a new perspective on Corso's work. For example, his transformation of the real world into something that goes beyond the laws of natural science, which Stephenson and Olson discuss, can be viewed as more than a vague Beat urge to transcend accepted ideas of "reality." It is *transubstantial*, linked to a traditional Catholic ritual. His understanding of the Eucharist also underlies his tendency toward metamorphosis, his transformation of language: as Olson states, he is an "alchemist of language" (16). Finally, by viewing Corso's ideas about eating through the lens of transubstantial poetics, their connection to Catholicism can be appreciated. Corso's view of food and eating is not a reaction to Thomistic theology, as Olson suggests, but reflects a radical understanding of the Eucharist and

its link to the crucifixion. Through imagery of food and eating in his poetry, Corso acknowledges and embraces the dark side of these traditional Catholic elements. It is through an exploration of these aspects of the Eucharist that, Corso believes, the sacrament can be reinvented for a modern world full of violence and horror.

Corso's transubstantial poetics are evident in his earliest work. The first poem in Corso's first collection of poems, *Vestal Lady On Brattle*, entitled "Sea Chanty," explores the hidden cannibalistic aspect of eating. Although this poem, like most of Corso's early poetry, does not refer directly to the Eucharist, it contains related themes which, considering Corso's preoccupation with the Eucharist, can be read as related to it. Certainly, this poem tells us much about Corso's ideas about food and eating. The first stanza tells of how the sea "ate" the narrator's mother; the second reads:

Upon the shore I found a strange yet beautiful food;
 I asked the sea if I could eat it,
 and the sea said that I could.
 —Oh sea, what fish is this
 so tender and so sweet?—
 —Thy mother's feet—was its answer. (7-12)

Here, the narrator eats a food the substance of which is not the same as its appearance: what appears to be a "strange yet beautiful food" or "fish" is in fact the narrator's mother's dismembered corpse. Just as the bread and wine in the Eucharist, which appear innocent and ordinary, become a meal of flesh and blood that has potential to disturb believers, the seemingly "beautiful food" becomes a repugnant, taboo meal in the poem.

“The Vestal Lady on Brattle,” an early poem from the collection of the same name, can be viewed as an exploration of themes beneath the surface of the Eucharist, such as sacred cannibalism and links between the Christian ritual and “primitive,” pagan rites. The poem describes a “vestal lady” (2) who “is up at dawn, as is her custom” (3). The vestal lady then performs several actions which can be understood as ritualistic:

[she] peers down; hovers over a wine-filled vat,

and with outstretched arms like wings,

revels in the forming image of child below.

Despaired, she ripples a sunless finger

across the liquid eyes; in darkness

the child spirals down; drowns.

Pain leans her forward – face absorbing all –

mouth upon broken mouth, she drinks . . . (9-16; ellipsis in original)

Stephenson interprets this poem as a description of an actual act of cannibalism: “an aged woman devours a child; a vampiric, cannibalistic act that is apparently part of her daily regimen” (*Exiled Angel* 11). However, it is not clear from the poem that this is what is happening. In the poem, there is only an “image of child.” This phrase is ambiguous, and the act taking place could be symbolic: the child might exist only in the mind of the vestal lady. Such a symbolic interpretation of this line links the vestal lady’s act to the Eucharist. The wine in the Eucharist is believed to mediate a bodily aspect of Christ—his blood—and coming from a Catholic background, Corso would readily view wine as a symbol of the body; a “child” could easily symbolically exist in the vestal lady’s “vat of wine.”

The imagery in “The Vestal Lady on Brattle” is not purely Catholic, though: it contains other subtle nods to other, “primitive” forms of sacrifice and cannibalism. The figure of the vestal lady is a nod to the ancient goddess Vesta and the vestal virgins of pagan mythology; wine is a familiar element of classical mythology, relating to the god Bacchus. After the vestal lady drinks the wine, she is “drunk with child” (20): as in both the “primitive,” Aztec sacrifice described above and in the Eucharist, the body that she has incorporated has become a part of her own.¹¹

“Don’t Shoot the Warthog,” a poem in Corso’s next collection, *Gasoline*, also explores themes of killing then cannibalising an innocent figure. In this poem, an innocent child is slaughtered and eaten, just as the innocent Christ is incarnated, crucified, and gives his body to be eaten in Eucharist. In the first stanza, the narrator accosts a “child” who “came to me / swinging an ocean on a stick” (1-2). He “gave him a kick” and then “drove him down the streets / down the night of my generation” (5-6). At first, people are drawn to the child, just as believers were drawn to Christ early in his life: “children lept [sic] in joy to the name / and running came. / Mothers and fathers bent their heads to hear” (9-12). The final stanza, which bears similarities to Ginsberg’s *Howl*, with its images of angels on rooftops, describes the child’s demise:

The child trembled, fell,
and staggered up again,

I screamed his name!

And a fury of mothers and fathers
sank their teeth into his brain.

I called to the angels of my generation
on the rooftops, in the alleyways,

beneath the garbage and the stones,
 I screamed the name! and they came
 and gnawed the child's bones. (14-23)

In this section, lines 14-15 evoke the image of Christ falling whilst carrying the cross to Calvary. As Schwartz comments, "Analogues to the passion of Christ are suggested by a mob's sacrifice of the child and its devouring of his flesh and bones, a violent, contemporary communion banquet" (123). The images of eating and cannibalism in the poem are more violent than those typically associated with the Eucharist, though: the child is eaten not reverently but in "fury." The images "sank their teeth into" and "gnawed the . . . bones" are just the visceral images of chewing the sacrificial body that Reformed theologians such as Berengar and Zwingli found so unpleasant.

"This Was My Meal," also contained in *Gasoline*, provides more evidence for Corso's sacramental view of food and eating, in which food mediates the divine. This idea of direct experience of God through food and drink is the key aspect of the Eucharist. In this poem, Corso explores the disturbing aspect of this link: the idea of cannibalism as divine experience. "This Was My Meal" describes a family dinner—a mundane, domestic setting linked to the idealised family life that was a cornerstone of mainstream post-war America. But Corso's view of the food served subverts this traditional scene. Corso views each component of his dinner as a symbol of the divine. Stephenson states that this transformation illustrates the power of creativity, stating that the poem "celebrates the imagination in its purest and most potent form, as it is exercised by children. An ordinary . . . meal . . . occasions in the fantasy of a child an extraordinary adventure in which wonders and marvels abound" (*Exiled Angel* 28). But Corso's view of the food is not "fantasy": it is a sacramental

understanding based upon Corso's Catholic worldview, in which food mediates the divine. Although it is somewhat less apparently and powerfully redolent with the divine than the Eucharist, the link between food and the divine still exists, for Corso, within an ordinary meal.

In "This Was My Meal," food has two strong associations: as a conduit for divine experience and as an object of disgust, associated with cannibalism. In the poem, the two associations coexist, as they do in the Eucharist. But the sacramental understanding of food is divorced from its familiar context of liturgical ritual, which enhances the unsettling effect of the poem. Corso begins the poem with the line, "In the peas I saw upside down letters of MONK" (1); he views a religious figure, a human link to the divine world, symbolised in his humble, ordinary dinner. Then, he moves on to the next part of his meal and through it a stronger experience of the divine is mediated: "I cut through the cowbrain and saw Christmas / & my birthday run hand and hand in the snow" (5-6). The fact that it is "cowbrain" that is the main dish adds a level of disgust to the meal; "cutting through" a brain seems medical, rather than gustatory, and is tinged with horror instead of relish. This slicing through mediates in Corso a feeling that Christmas—the birthday of Christ—and his own birthday are coming together, suggesting that Corso feels a kinship with Christ as he breaks not bread, as in the Eucharist, but the brain. The deeper he cuts, the stronger the experience: "I cut deeper / and Christmas bled to the edge of the plate" (7-8). This bleeding recalls Christ's death, bringing up several uneasy associations: the blood of Christ as experienced in the Eucharist, and thus the cannibalistic aspect thereof. This same cannibalism is inherent in Corso's cutting through the brain and in his father's eating of the brain: "I turned to my father / and he ate my birthday" (9-10). As in "The Vestal Lady on Brattle," although there are no overt references to

the Eucharist in this poem, below the surface of Corso's sacramental understanding of food lurks many of the disturbing, often downplayed aspects of the Eucharist.

In the poem "Transformation and Escape," Corso delves still deeper into Eucharistic themes. Here, the author provides a subverted image of heaven, in which bodily destruction leads to freedom and enlightenment. The poem begins when the narrator enters heaven, which is not described in a traditional way, but as a miasma of sweet foodstuffs: "I reached heaven and it was syrupy / It was oppressively sweet" (1-2); "everything smelled of burnt chocolate" (8). In a world as rife with peril as the modern world, Corso sees the idea of heaven as dated, quaint, sickly sweet. After seeing God, who is "a gigantic fly paper" (6) and clashing violently with St. Michael, who was "hacking away at my hair" (10), the narrator then dismembers himself: "I snatched St. Michael's sword / and quartered myself" (13-14). This dismemberment brings him—or at least his torso—closer to God: "my torso whizzed at God fly paper" (17). The dismemberment causes the rest of the narrator's body to fall into utter confusion: "my legs sank into some unimaginable sog" (18); "My spirit stopped by my snared torso"; "My skull! / Only skull in heaven! / Went to my legs" (31-33).

After being dismembered, Corso's body undergoes even more turmoil when he is physically transformed into an animal: "They took my legs away. / They sentenced me in the firmament of an ass" (43-44). This readiness for transformation is a part of Corso's transubstantial poetics: Corso's is a world in which substances easily morph into each other, or have true identities which differ from their accidents, or appearances. In this transformed state, the narrator "schemed escape" (48), until finally:

The time had come.

I cracked my jaws.
Broke my legs.
Sagged belly-flat on plow
on pitchfork
on scythe.
My spirit leaked through the wounds.
A whole spirit pooled.
I rose from the carcass of my torment.
I stood on the brink of heaven.
And I swear that the Great Territory did quake
when I fell, free. (60-71)

Here, it is the narrator's utter physical destruction that leads to his freedom. This parallels Christ's kenotic sacrifice on the cross and its ultimate salvation of humanity. Through Christ's broken body—"the carcass of his torment"—humanity is made "free." It is this ultimate sacrifice which is commemorated in the Eucharist.

In his first three collections of poetry, Corso explores themes related to Catholicism and the role of the church, separating aspects of the religion he sees as rejuvenating from those he views as stagnant or repressive. Corso views the Eucharist as regenerative, and focuses on the sacrament in his poetry, exploring controversial aspects thereof such as the link between a literal Eucharist and cannibalism, links between Eucharist and pre-Christian, "primitive" human sacrifice, and the role of food as facilitating both divine experience and horror. Corso also extends his idea of Eucharistic transubstantiation, exploring related themes such as transformation and metamorphosis, and performing his own alchemy on language. In his transubstantial poetry, Corso subverts such familiar aspects of human life as

religion, food, and language, forcing his reader to grapple, as he is, with a new religious consciousness for the post-war world.

The Breaded and the Fried: The Eucharist in *The American Express*

While Corso begins to explore some unsettling aspects of the transubstantiated Eucharist in his early poetry, it is in his only novel, *The American Express* (1961) that he fully develops his radical understanding of the sacrament. Unfortunately, this work is often neglected in existing criticism, which tends to focus on his poetry. Although the novel can be haphazard, with a din of undeveloped characters seemingly running back and forth with no unifying aim or themes, it contains some of Corso's strongest, and most significant, Catholic imagery. In this work, he makes a clear statement that the Eucharist has a crucial importance in bringing Catholicism into the "new consciousness," functioning as a way to reconcile the horrors of war and modern life with Christian theology. Corso views the sacrament—if literally understood—as having the capability to serve a healing, conciliatory function in the face of horrific experience.

Such a view aligns Corso with traditional and more radical Catholic views of the Eucharist. Traditionally, the Eucharist is viewed as having a healing, restorative aspect, mediating between God and creation. Mary O'Neill writes, "At the heart of each act of thanksgiving that Catholics call Eucharist is the confidence that this God comes to restore the Creation, broken and sullied by sin, in the person of Jesus Christ" (282). Corso too believes that the Eucharist can "restore" the broken post-war world, though in a far less traditional way. A more radical view of the Eucharist, like Corso's, is held by Marilyn McCord Adams, who explores how Catholic belief can be reconciled with the overwhelming horrors of the modern

world.¹² Adams views the Eucharist as a vital aspect of Catholicism that both addresses and provides restitution for horrific events. An awareness of Adams' ideas provides a useful lens through which to understand Corso's similar—though far less structured—conception of the Eucharist in *The American Express*. Like Corso, Adams views the Eucharist as a way to come to terms with horrific events on both a personal and a social scale. Although Corso's understanding of the Eucharist is even more literal than Adams', both believe that the idea of corporeal presence in the sacrament serves as a catalyst for dealing with the violent emotions one might have toward God after experiencing the type of unprecedented horror that occurred during the Second World War. For both, the sacrament serves as a way to reconcile traditional Catholic theology with the modern world.

Adams' major concern is with theodicy, which explores how belief in a benevolent and all-powerful God can be reconciled with the existence of evil. She wonders, particularly, how one can retain belief in God when one suffers “horrors,” events that are highly traumatic, far beyond the reach of the suffering most people encounter in their lives.¹³ Such a question is particularly relevant in the post-war world. Humanity had suffered horrors during two world wars, including the Holocaust and the atomic bomb of the Second World War. Adams believes that a literally understood Eucharist facilitates reconciliation between horrors and Catholic theology. This interpretation of the sacrament allows believers to work through their suffering and questioning. Through the incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection, which is repeated in the Eucharist as Christ literally gives his flesh to his believers to be eaten, Adams believes Christ “defeats” atrocious horror. She writes that, in the face of horrors, “God must “re-creat[e] our relationship to our material world, so that we are no longer radically vulnerable to horrors. The bodily resurrection of Christ is

a representative down-payment on this” (“Biting” 79). It is the Eucharist that completes the process of healing. Referring to the Reformation debate over the nature of the Eucharist, Adams writes, “Horrors invite a distinctive stance on these controverted issues. Horrors push us to . . . embrace a strong doctrine of corporeal presence” (*Christ and Horrors* 283). She supports such an understanding of the Eucharist partly because of her strong view of the Eucharist as a meal, and finds a purely symbolic understanding of the Eucharist, such as that supported by Calvin and Zwingli, unsatisfying. Eating is bodily, literal; it implies a strong vulnerability on the part of eater and eaten (“Biting” 85). In the Eucharist as Lord’s Supper, “we meet *embodied* person to *embodied* person, make shared food the material medium with which to eat and drink, bite and chew our way into social identities and shared lives” (*Christ and Horrors* 292).

But Adams does not embrace a fully literal interpretation of the Eucharist; instead, she supports the doctrine of impanation:

According to this theory, just as the divine Word becomes in-carnate (en-fleshed) when it assumes a particular human nature into hypostatic union with itself; so the Divine Word becomes empanate (em-breaded) when—at the moment of consecration—it hypostatically assumes the Eucharistic bread nature on the altar. (“Biting” 74)

But this does not mean that Christ is not corporeally present in the bread. Adams clarifies, “the Divine Word assumes the Eucharistic bread the way that He assumes the human nature. In consequence, Christ’s Body will have two natures—human nature and bread nature” (*Christ and Horrors* 305). Through impanation, “It becomes metaphysically possible for us to interact with Christ as with other

embodied persons: to reach out for comfort, to ingest for nurture, to strike out in anger and confusion” (*Christ and Horrors* 306). It also allows a believer to interact with Christ’s body “without turning Eucharistic reception into the biting and tearing of raw meat” (“Biting” 89).

Although she emphasises the point that eating the impanated Christ is not the same as “tearing raw meat,” it is still this violent, visceral bit of the Eucharist which Adams views as a locus of identification with the tormented body of Christ. Through the aspect of the sacrament that Zwingli and Berengar found so difficult—the idea that, in the Eucharist, Christ is chewed with the teeth, swallowed, excreted—Adams believes that victims can come to terms with horrors:

God in Christ crucified offers us His flesh to chomp and bite and tear with our teeth, invites us to get even, horror for horror, invites us to fragment God’s own Body in return for the way God has allowed horrors to shred the fabric of our lives. God in Christ crucified invites us to come with anger and tears, with shame and humiliation poured out to the point of exhaustion. (*Christ and Horrors* 294)

The Eucharist, thus understood, serves as restitution, as humans are invited to bite and rend the host just as they have been rent by suffering: “In holy eucharist . . . God acknowledges and accepts responsibility for our plight” (*Christ and Horrors* 309).

The bread, which represents Christ’s body, serves as a “sacrifice to absorb and serve as the target we bite and chomp and tear with the teeth, returning horrors for horrors to God” (*Christ and Horrors* 309). Rather than accepting suffering quietly, repressing feelings of violence and rage toward God, the Eucharist invites the believer to explore these difficult emotions. The literally-understood Eucharist “confronts us with our violent, vindictive, and destructive emotions—with the

horrifying reality that we can be angry and confused enough to tear ourselves and one another to pieces, even to kill God!” (“Biting” 94). But it is only through addressing these aspects of life and the Christian faith that one can keep faith in trying times, and “appreciate how God in Christ crucified sets us free” (“Biting” 94).

Although Adams’ discussion of the propitiatory function of the Eucharist facilitates a novel view of the sacrament, making it relevant for the post-war world, some of her views can be seen as contradictory. She embraces the doctrine of impanation, which allows the believer to interact bodily with Christ without directly eating his flesh during the sacrament, but the aspects of the impanated Eucharist that she views as having a healing function are those related to flesh-eating: “biting and chomping,” “flesh,” and the idea that we can “fragment God’s own body.” But she only feels comfortable doing these things as understood through the doctrine of impanation: fragmenting Christ’s body as bread, rather than Christ’s body as his body. Corso too believes that the violent aspects of the Eucharist—the biting and tearing of flesh—have a healing, transformative potential, but he explores what happens if they are, in fact, utterly literal. A firsthand account of his childhood experience with the Eucharist suggests that Corso holds such a strongly literal view of the sacrament. The author “took Holy Communion, but the wafer got stuck in a tooth. ‘I literally believed that I had a bit of God’s flesh and blood stuck in my teeth, like a piece of steak or something. I felt damned, like the worst creature in hell, I had God stuck in my teeth’” (qtd. in Olson 5).¹⁴ This quotation makes it clear that Corso not only holds a literal view of the Eucharist, but also sees it as having a disturbing aspect, one with potential not only to bring blessing, but, potentially, a curse—just as in Arens’ descriptions of cannibalism as both a highly sacred and also a highly transgressive act. In *The American Express*, Corso explores the full

potential of the tensions and contradictions inherent in the Eucharist, and illustrates how his literal understanding of the sacrament can reinvent it as a healing experience for a world torn apart by horror.

In *The American Express*, Corso explores the significance and implications of a literally understood Eucharist through a debate between two characters, Simon and Carrol, who are both interested in bringing about a religious “new consciousness,” though they argue about exactly how to do so. Carrol visits a Cardinal to “say goodbye to the Christian faith forever” (21), as he feels it is no longer relevant in the modern world. “God has not changed,” he states, “Christianity has nothing to do with the making of the new consciousness. They hate change” (22). But in order to leave Christianity, Carrol pledges allegiance to another Christian figure:

“I will leave Christianity forever!” resounded Carrol. “I will hail Lucifer as the emancipator!”

“My dear child,” sighed the Cardinal, “are you not aware that Christianity is as much the result of Lucifer as Lucifer is of Christianity? You cannot accept the one and deny the other.”

“Mine is a different Lucifer! A new nice Lucifer! One who can cope with the new consciousness!” (23)

At surface level, Carrol’s embrace of Lucifer might seem to be a childish, contrary reaction against established religion, or a stance adopted for its shock value, but it is more complex than that. Understanding Corso’s view of Lucifer allows insight into Carrol’s allegiance to the figure; the author sees Lucifer as a figure of rebellion and renewal, rather than evil. In a 1956 letter to Allen Ginsberg, he writes, “Is not Lucifer the first free thinker? Is he not emancipator of worlds? The eternal rebel?”

Lucifer is love” (*Accidental Autobiography* 7). Unlike mainstream Christians, who view Lucifer as entirely evil, Corso seems to view Lucifer in a more positive light as a part of Christianity, but as an outsider figure within it. Corso’s Lucifer is an outcast and non-conformist who can be seen as a “rebel,” like the figure of the hipster idolised by the Beats.

As the novel continues, Corso links Lucifer to his major theme of eating and Eucharist as having strong potential for renewal. Carrol remains fixated upon Lucifer, and a disturbing incident—and one linked to the act of eating—intensifies his obsession. In a random act that is out of character for Carrol, he slaughters his father’s pig.¹⁵ Corso describes the incident:

He [Carrol] had never killed before.

“At what ferocity must I issue my assault?” wondered he.

And he put his entire strength into the act of killing. (46)

This incident confronts the unsettling connotations of the food chain: it is a pig that Carrol kills, an animal which is one of the most commonly eaten ones in the Western world. Rather than glossing over this slaughter, Corso describes the violence inherent in it: the “axe” that Carrol uses to kill the pig (46), and the “entire strength” it takes to kill the pig. It is through engaging with food in this disturbing way that Carrol gains spiritual enlightenment. In the next chapter of the novel, Carrol tells Rodger Wolfherald, “After I killed the pig I was suddenly overcome with a convulsive sensation. I was experiencing a vision. I heard the voice of Lucifer. . . . He said, ‘Young Mr. Grilhiggen, take me back to heaven’” (47). After this vision, Carrol vows to return Lucifer to heaven (47). Carrol’s act and subsequent enlightenment parallels that inherent in the Eucharist and other forms of sacrifice

and even sacred cannibalism, in which a violent act followed by an act of consumption brings one closer to the divine.

The incidents discussed thus far indirectly address themes of eating and Eucharist, but Corso's most direct expression of his belief in a literal Eucharist—in this work and his poetry—occurs later in the novel, during an argument between Carrol and Simon. Carrol's view of Lucifer pits him against Simon, although both are interested in creating a "new consciousness" by revising and updating religion. The point of contention between Simon and Carrol is Simon's belief that Christ and Lucifer are the same. During their time at seminary together, Simon and Carrol argue over this point until, in order to prove his point to Carrol, Simon cuts up and fries a crucifix. This transgressive, taboo act serves to shock Carrol into thinking about Christ and theology in new ways. Through breaking several taboos, frying the crucifix can be seen to illustrate that Christ can be viewed as a figure of rebellion and renewal, particularly when experienced radically through a transubstantial Eucharist.

Simon encourages Carrol to challenge his ideas of Christ by subverting the idea of consuming the body of Christ during Eucharist. To do this, Simon changes the context of this consumption. One major way that he does this is by highlighting, rather than downplaying, the horror inherent in the Eucharist through decontextualising the typically highly ritualised event, placing it into the ordinary context of a meal. In a liturgical setting, the ritual nature of the Eucharist, with the reading of the Bible and the priest's blessing and raising of the host, can shift focus from what Corso sees as the intrinsic quality of the sacrament: the consumption of flesh and blood. Some have criticised this aspect of Catholicism, including Geoffrey Wainwright, who states that "The liturgies seem to have gone to excess in disguising the fundamental phenomenological feature of the eucharist" (18). Some qualities of

the Eucharist could be seen as distracting a worshipper's focus from the idea of the sacrament as a meal consisting of Christ's flesh. The familiarity of the ritual and its structured nature could have a desensitizing effect. The Eucharist is a familiar act, repeated weekly at Mass under the direction of an authority figure, the priest. Also, the worshipper believes that Christ rose from the dead after crucifixion, and that his bloody sacrifice redeems humanity. This knowledge of a glorious outcome reduces the horror of the initial act. But Simon's cutting up and frying of a crucifix places focus directly on the idea of Christ's actual flesh and blood as ordinary meal.

Simon instigates the incident in order to make Carrol understand Christ in a more radical, active, and bodily way. He asks Carrol, "have you ever thought of Christ in the strangest situation you could possibly imagine?" (108). Carrol seems to believe that there is enough mystery surrounding the traditional conception of Christ, and so he does not need to participate in Simon's imaginings: "I do not intend to add ceremony to the mystery already posed" (108). Simon counters, "it is man's duty, aye, his nature to see such a mystery in every possible light imaginable" (108). Carrol continues to argue from a traditional standpoint, stating that the only way to "see Christ" is to "believe in Him. Those who seek other ways are in doubt and therefore do not see" (108). But Simon wants Carrol to understand Christ more than visually: he wants him to understand him *bodily*. And so Simon decides to take drastic action to prove his point. He describes his actions: "It was no sense talking to him [Carrol]. So I decided to act" (108). It is only through a body-directed *action*, like the action necessary for the performance of Eucharist, that Simon believes Carrol can understand his point about Christ.

Simon then cuts up and fries the crucifix. This action breaks several taboos, and might even be seen as sacrilegious, although it contains in it the basic elements of the sacrament of Eucharist:

I went up to the altar and with a knife I chopped off bits of the huge chalk crucifix. Carrol immediately began to pray for me. "Save your prayers," I said. "There's yet more to be done. I am not finished!" And I gathered all the pieces of Christ, stuffed them in my cassock, and led Carrol to my cell. . . . And I got out my frying pan, poured some olive oil into it, lit the little kerosene burner, and as the oil began to boil I dropped the pieces of Christ into it. (108)

Here, Christ's flesh is placed into the context of an everyday meal, resembling that described in "This Was My Meal." The act of frying—an everyday manner of preparation like baking or boiling—is a simple and familiar one, associated with the everyday preparation of meals, and one that annihilates the sense of distance that can occur during a liturgical, ritualised Eucharist. The specific details, such as the "olive oil" and the "frying pan" place Simon's act squarely in the everyday sphere of literal consumption of meals, rather than the sacred space of the church in which much is symbolic. These specific details call to the forefront Corso's conception of a transubstantial Eucharist, charging Simon's act with a sense of transgression and horror, although nothing is occurring in his Eucharist that is different from a liturgical one—apart from the presentation. Simon calls attention to this sense of horror as he directly addresses Carrol: "'Carrol,' I said, 'have you ever thought of frying bits of Christ?' I had chopped off an entire foot and he watched it fry with horror in his eyes" (108). Like the reader, Carrol is shocked by the literal action,

and its cannibalistic overtones, that are brought to the forefront of the ritual when it is removed from its liturgical, sanctioned context.

Simon's frying of the crucifix is related to his conception of Christ as a figure of the new consciousness: a rebellious figure of renewal like Lucifer, and a figure who directly addresses horror. Such a Christ resembles the one that Adams describes, one who allows believers access to his body, offering it as a space for them to express and work through the violent emotions that come about in response to horrors. In this scene, Corso presents Christ as a humble, everyday meal, not a chalk-white statue hanging on the wall of a church. But Corso goes further than Adams with his literal understanding of the Eucharist, exploring what can happen if believers literally eat Christ: Christ, by giving his body to be rent by his believers during the Eucharist, shows that he understands and wants to offer restitution for the horrors inherent in the modern world. The act Corso describes in *The American Express* is thus significant not only to the post-war world, but also to major debates surrounding the Eucharist in Catholic theology since the Reformation.

Chapter Six

Conclusion

The work of the major Beat Generation authors expresses a plethora of religious and spiritual attitudes. William S. Burroughs' world and work is shaped by his belief in a "magical universe." Allen Ginsberg's writing, particularly his earlier poetry, is shaped by the mystical experience he believes himself to undergo; his interpretation of this experience bears similarities to the Jewish exegetical tradition. Kerouac and Corso embrace sacramental, Catholic worldviews. All these varied systems of belief challenge the prevailing Western attitudes toward the physical world as bound by scientific law. The major Beats all view material reality as behaving in irrational ways: controlled by the magician, in the case of Burroughs; subject to the direct revelation of a deity, as in Ginsberg's mystical experience; as sacramental, in the case of Kerouac, or as transformational, as in the transubstantial poetics of Corso. These eclectic spiritual attitudes are all based in existing systems of belief (magic, Judaism, Catholicism), and by identifying with these religious and spiritual forms, the Beat authors establish themselves as traditional yet marginal. These three belief systems, while long-standing, are marginal in the landscape of mid-twentieth century America, which was largely a Protestant, Calvinist- and Puritan-influenced nation. Thus, the Beats reconcile tradition with their rebellious stance.

Although Burroughs is the least likely Beat author to be considered spiritual, analysis of his work reveals an abundance of spiritual beliefs—most notably, a belief in a "magical universe"—which colour the main themes and forms of his work, such as the routine and the cut-up. Burroughs' work from the fifties and sixties is concerned with the desire to transcend the limitations of the material world and the

human body and mind, as expressed in the spiritual quest which shapes *Junky*, *Queer*, and *The Yage Letters*. Such a desire is an essential characteristic of spirituality. In *Junky*, Lee's quest is shaped by the search for junk, in which he hopes to find transcendent experience. He learns that the new life junk promises contains in it the threat of death: through his addiction to junk, Lee is put at the mercy of his bodily urges and processes. In *Queer*, Lee's goal is intimacy with others, through which he hopes to overcome his human limitations via a literal merger with his love object. But Lee finds it impossible to connect with his chosen partner in the text, Eugene Allerton, and again, his quest fails. In "In Search of Yage," Lee seeks out the South American drug *yagé*, and although it is unclear at the end of the text whether it fully provides him with the transcendent experience he has sought throughout, it brings him more satisfaction than anything he has previously found along his quest.

Burroughs' own experimentation with *yagé* opened his consciousness and influenced his shift from the more traditional style he used for the three quest books to the avant-garde style characteristic of *Naked Lunch*. He moves on from this style to something even more unorthodox: the cut-up technique. Burroughs believes this technique can enable him to surpass mental limitations, breaking through a control system he believes to be inherent in language and tapping into a "magical universe." Burroughs imagines this "magical universe" as an alternative to the rational, empirical worldview of Western Modernism; in the magical universe, individual agency is of utmost import, the future can be divined, time travel is possible (via the cut-up's disruption of linear narrative), and spirits exist and influence events.

The influence of the Jewish tradition is evident in the work of Allen Ginsberg. This tradition values the interpretation of sacred source texts. Crucial to

this exegesis is the individual interpreter and the spontaneous, associative qualities of the human mind. Ginsberg's exploration of the Jewish tradition can be seen as a reaction against the modern Western worldview's tendency toward truth and unity. The influence of Judaism is evident in his textual, auditory mystical experience of the voice of William Blake. After this experience, Ginsberg creates a poetics of textual interpretation—drawn from the Jewish exegetical tradition of midrash—based upon these experiences. He uses his alleged mystical experiences as “source texts,” reframing and variously interpreting them in his earliest poetry. In some of his later work, Ginsberg revises canonical Jewish texts and forms in the manner of the Jewish sages. He reworks texts like the *mashal*, the Kaddish, and the prohibitions of Leviticus, tailoring them to his individual situation. On a larger scale, Ginsberg's Jewish poetics might be a possible influence on the widely recognised Beat belief that the poet serves as a priest or prophet, which Ginsberg himself enthusiastically espoused: “Poet is priest” (“Death to Van Gogh's Ear” 1). In the Jewish tradition, after the Biblical period, Jews believe that God rarely, if ever, speaks directly to his people. Thus, there is a tendency to locate God in the text of the Torah and experience the deity through reading and interpreting this sacred text. Similarly, the Beat writers view writing as a sacred act, and literature as a route to salvation.

Although in his later work, Ginsberg's thematic material seems to shift to an exploration of Eastern-tradition religions, a poetics of interpretation grounded in the Jewish tradition is still evident in his work. At this point, he is reading and revising Buddhist texts such as the Buddhist refuge prayer, which he incorporates into the poem “Angkor Wat.” In this poem, Tony Trigilio writes, “the authenticity of the speaker's prayer—and his conception of sacred language—is at stake as the poet

questions whether homosexual desire is compatible with Eastern spiritual practice” (*Buddhist Poetics* 30). Ginsberg approaches Buddhism from a Jewish perspective, using familiar interpretive techniques: the incorporation of a traditional prayer, as in *Kaddish*, and the reconciling of religious dogma and homosexual desire, as in “Many Loves.” In “Hum Bom,” Ginsberg combines the monosyllabic tone of Eastern chants with his own political ideas about the atom bomb, and experiments with haiku form in “Milarepa Taste.” Underlying these poems is a tendency toward reinterpreting traditional forms to suit Ginsberg’s individual needs. This is the same tendency that underlies the poetics of interpretation which guided his work from 1948 to 1963.

Jack Kerouac’s work is shaped by his Catholic faith. Although it lacks the overt Catholic imagery of works such as *Visions of Gerard*, *Tristessa*, and *Big Sur*, *On the Road* is the author’s most effective Catholic novel. Sal Paradise and Dean Moriarty inhabit a sacramental universe which serves as an alternate social vision to Protestant-influenced capitalist America. This sacramental universe is driven by a loss that takes the form of the wilful squandering of money and goods, and the self-destructive decline of Dean, the holy fool. While these actions of loss may at first appear to be chaotic or self-indulgent, they exist within a ritual framework paralleling that of the Catholic sacraments: a specific action, such as the squandering of excess capital or the imitation of Christ’s kenotic decline, serves to place the protagonists in touch with divine aspects of the created world. Kerouac feels that America has been de-sanctified by a capitalist economy which deprives the material world of its divine aspect, and Sal and Dean’s quest in *On the Road* can be seen to re-sanctify America through the sacramental worldview of Catholicism. At the heart of Kerouac’s “beatness,” which defined a generation of authors and Americans, is

the sacred loss which drives the action of *On the Road*. Such “beatness” is typified by the “unproductive expenditures” and the kenotic degradation of Christ and those who are “fools” for him.

The work of Gregory Corso engages with many of the major issues of the post-war period. He addresses the impact of violent historical events during the Second World War, such as the atomic bomb and the Holocaust; the role of religion, particularly Christianity, after these events; and how Christianity can retain its relevance in conditions which make traditional religious belief seem impossible. Corso believes that belief can prevail, though: through a literal understanding of the sacrament of Eucharist, typical of the Catholicism into which he was indoctrinated as a youth and had an ambivalent relationship with as an adult, Christ can be re-imagined for the broken post-war world as a rebellious, regenerative figure. This conception of Eucharist is central to Corso’s early poetry and his only novel, *The American Express*.

Corso’s Catholicism remains central to his understanding of the world—and thus his work—throughout his career. In his later work from the 1970s and 80s, Corso’s main focus seems to shift from his earlier Catholic sensibilities and poetics of transubstantiation, but while Corso does explore some new themes, his Catholicism remains a shaping force on these poems. *Elegiac Feelings American* seems influenced by his fellow poet, Allen Ginsberg: the poems are longer, like Ginsberg’s later work, and are more political, focused on the state of America. However, Corso still retains his Catholic sensibility whilst conveying his political ideas: in “The American Way,” he criticises what Christianity has become in America, stating that “They are frankensteining Christ in America / in their Sunday campaigns” (1-2). He then uses a Eucharistic metaphor to criticise the way popular

American society and culture understands Christ: “I am telling you the American Way is a hideous monster / eating Christ making him into Oreos and Dr. Pepper / the sacrament of its foul mouth” (37-39). A Christ made of sugary convenience foods might be a modernized Christ, reflective of some sort of new consciousness, but this is not the “new consciousness” of which Corso dreams. It is through his Catholicism that Corso engages, in his work, with some of the most compelling debates of the twentieth century. Corso’s work encompasses history, religion, and what it means to be human and embodied in a rapidly advancing world in which those things seem to be under constant threat.

Taken as a whole, the work of the four major Beat Generation authors provides evidence that the spiritual and religious beliefs of the movement are not vague and anarchic, or solely dedicated to the exploration of non-Western traditions such as Buddhism. Their work engages with the traditions that shaped the Western world, particularly America. Beat literature also serves to re-enchant an America they felt had been disenchanted by an over-reliance on technology and science and fractured by two world wars. Their work’s quality of spiritual protest harks back to the traditions on which the country was founded. It also serves as compelling evidence that traditional religion can, in some of its forms, celebrate the individual and his subjectivities; it has potential to be a tool of rebellion and social protest, not just a “control system” of the status quo. As the Beats attempted, during the post-war period, to make sense of the chaotic world around them through the systems that have shaped humanity’s belief for centuries, to find some solace, some *salvation*, the authors created the work that defined a movement and a generation.

Notes**Chapter One**

¹ Charters goes on to explain more about the Beat Generation and its role in the American social and literary scene in the rest of her Introduction (xv-xxvi), which provides a concise yet complete overview of the movement for readers unfamiliar with the Beats.

² This source was originally printed in *Esquire*, March 1958.

³ A similar story is published in *Interzone* under the title “The Junky’s Christmas.”

⁴ Like Prothero and Grace, I feel that some level of interdisciplinarity can sharpen a discussion of religion and spirituality in the Beats’ work. Grace argues that Beat scholarship might be improved with the “perspectives and methods of two or more disciplines to solve problems or answer questions that are beyond the scope of a single discipline” (820). She continues, “Beat literature can be interpreted from many individual perspectives, but the common thread connecting its practitioners, the melding of life and art, calls for interdisciplinary approaches” (820). Prothero argues that a discipline which is relevant to the Beats is religion, particularly American religion: “My thesis is that the beats were spiritual protesters as well as literary innovators and ought, therefore, to be viewed at least as minor characters in the drama of American religion” (208). I agree with Prothero and Grace that a somewhat interdisciplinary approach to a study of Beat religion and spirituality can be illuminating: while the texts are always my primary focus, it can be helpful to set some parameters for a literary discussion by briefly visiting other disciplines.

⁵ Lardas focuses on these three Beats, as does Tytell (*Naked Angels*). Other critics who do so include Johnson (37) and Prothero (208).

⁶ Lawlor also agrees with expanding the canon around the three major authors, writing: “The Beat literary movement . . . is chiefly represented by Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac, and William S. Burroughs, but dozens of other writers are associated with the Beat spirit” (Introduction xiii).

⁷ Foster continues to point out that “If one is talking, however, about the ‘Beat Generation’ as a sociological rather than as a literary movement, then Snyder, McClure, Whalen, and so forth might be grouped with Burroughs, Corso, Ginsberg, and Kerouac” (3). But he acknowledges the drawbacks of such an approach: “The word *beat* in the larger sense might also include writers from the 1960s such as Diane di Prima, LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka), Ed Sanders, Clark Coolidge,

and Anne Waldman—writers, that is, whose poetry and fiction were influenced by the Beats or were at least similar to theirs. At that point, however, one is including a very large portion of contemporary innovative or avant-garde writers—so large, in fact that the word again loses precision” (3).

⁸ O’Neil’s piece first appeared in the November 30, 1959 issue of *Life* magazine, and Ciardi’s in *Saturday Review*, February 6, 1960.

⁹ Many of the major contemporary critics of the Beats concur. Foster writes, “Their fame assured that they would be read, yet they were perhaps better known for their personalities and the values they represented than for their books” (xii). Lawlor also agrees, stating that the Beats’ “themes and artistry went largely unnoticed while a popular, often sensationalized image of the Beats was consolidated” (Introduction xv). And if the Beats’ literary merit is not neglected in favour of their fame, it is subordinated to the generation as cultural ephemera: “It is as if most critics still seem reluctant to view the literature of the “Beat Generation” as anything more than cultural phenomena” (Bartlett, “Dionysian Vision” 115).

¹⁰ Such biographically-focussed works include Cook’s *Beat Generation* and Campbell’s *This is the Beat Generation*. There is even a graphic novel telling the stories of the Beats’ lives, Pekar’s *The Beats: A Graphic History*. Some volumes of photographs of the Beats have also been published, such as Tytell’s *Paradise Outlaws: Remembering the Beats* and Greenough’s *Beat Memories: The Photographs of Allen Ginsberg*; the latter is based on an exhibition of photographs taken by Ginsberg.

¹¹ Further complicating the idea of establishing clarity around the major Beat authors’ religious and spiritual attitudes is their own tendency to speak in vague, confusing ways about their spiritual attitudes, and even to express contradictory views. For example, Kerouac writes that the Beat Generation has “a beatific indifference to things that are Caesar’s, for instance, a tiredness of that, and a yearning for, a regret for, the transcendent value, or ‘God,’ again, ‘Heaven’ the spiritual regret for Endless Love which our theory of electromagnetic gravitation, our conquest of space will prove, and instead of only techniques of efficiency, all will be left, as with a population that has gone through a violent earthquake, will be the Last Things . . . again. We all know about the Religious Revival, Billy Graham and all, which the Beat Generation, even the Existentialists with

all their intellectual overlays and pretenses of indifference, represent an even deeper religiousness, the desire to be gone, out of this world (which is not our kingdom), 'high,' ecstatic, saved, as if the visions of the cloistral saints of Chartres and Clairvaux were back with us again bursting like weeds through the sidewalks of stiffened civilization wearying through its late motions" ("Aftermath" 49-50; ellipsis in orig.). Such a statement is inherently confusing, and nothing finite about Kerouac's spirituality can be determined from it. Complicating the situation more, the Beat authors often take an ad-hoc approach to their spiritual beliefs. Throughout their spiritual journeys, the Beat authors state spiritual and religious positions, then, dabbling in other traditions, sometimes revise their stance and make new statements which contradict previous ones. However, this does not mean that these ideas, in flux as they are, cannot be analysed with as much precision and clarity as possible on the part of the scholar.

¹² For extended, scholarly definitions of widely used religious terms including religion and spirituality, see Taylor. The essays contained in Braun and McCutcheon deal with the problem of defining religion, and also explore related terms such as religious experience, ritual, and the sacred. Braun and McCutcheon's anthology also provides analyses of movements such as modernism, Romanticism, and postmodernism with a particular focus on these movements' religious aspects.

¹³ Hinnells also raises this question about the objective existence of religion, and whether it exists as simply a "construct" (Introduction 2). Hinnells himself is an example of a scholar who believes that "an act or thought is religious when the person concerned thinks they are practicing their 'religion'" ("Why Study" 6).

¹⁴ It is important to note that many theologians might object to Clarke and Byrne's emphasis on religion as a human construction. However, my investigation operates from outside such a theological standpoint, and I support Clarke and Byrne's understanding of religion in this way. Additionally, I think such a definition reflects the Beats' own conception of religion; they approach faith as something to be shaped by the individual, rather than as strict, sacred dogma to which one must conform.

¹⁵ For another complete study of Christian spirituality, see Holder.

¹⁶ It is important to note some things about Black's investigation. First, since this data was collected by word of mouth, it only reflects a popular understanding of the term. Second, since this research was done in an analytic setting, one can see both why the patients and Black himself would have a pre-existing interest in focusing upon the inner workings of the mind. The inner self and human brain is the focal point of psychoanalysis, and it is expected that a psychoanalyst would locate spirituality within the human psyche, reconceptualising religion and spirituality as an aspect of the mind. Furthermore, this definition neglects the long-standing meaning of spirituality within religious discourse, which is important to a more complete understanding of the term.

¹⁷ A full discussion of the modern, and of the related postmodern—complex, controversial concepts in themselves—is beyond the scope of this paper. The understanding of the modern I put forth here is one of many understandings thereof. Of this understanding, Griffin writes, “modern thought has . . . been characterized by the acceptance of a particular view of the world, according to which the basic units of nature are understood in a purely *mechanistic* way, and a particular view of human experience, according to which the perception of the world beyond the self is limited to *sense*-perception” (52). Scholars quoted in *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodern Theology* agree with Griffin. Vanhoozer defines modernity as “social forces and institutional forms—secularization, industrialization, bureaucratization—that embody the Enlightenment ideals of rationality, individual autonomy, and progress” (“Theology” 7). Harvey defines it as “a secular movement that sought the demystification and desacralization of knowledge and social organization in order to liberate human beings from their chains” (13, qtd. in Vanhoozer, “Theology” 7). This urge expressed itself, Hyman believes, in “the desire for an all-encompassing mastery of reality by rational and/or scientific means” (11, qtd. in Vanhoozer, “Theology” 8).

¹⁸ Secularisation theory “contends that modernity is intrinsically and irreversibly antagonistic to religion. As a society becomes increasingly modernized it inevitably becomes less religious” (Douglas and Tipton 14). It is based on the ideas of Sigmund Freud, Karl Marx, Emile Durkheim, and Max Weber, who believed that changes of modernisation, such as the rise of science and the diminishing importance of communities, would bring about a decline in religious belief. For a more contemporary discussion of secularisation theory, see Bruce. These ideas have sparked much debate, and have drawn opponents like Eliade and Greeley, along with scholars of American

religion who see the American religious landscape, which continues to flourish even after industrialisation and modernisation, as evidence against secularisation theory.

¹⁹ Although Heelas and Woodhead do acknowledge a slight subjective turn within traditional religion, they believe that it is not particularly significant. They feel that subjective-life explorations within this area, while they do address an individual's subjectivities and personal experiences, usually have the goal of subordinating one's individual way to God's will than exploring these subjectivities fully. However, one must note that the purpose of Heelas and Woodhead's research is to search for evidence for a complete "spiritual revolution," not just a subjective turn; when they downplay the importance of a slight subjective turn within organized religion, it is because this turn does not provide definitive confirmation for their spiritual revolution claim.

²⁰ For a complete study of these new religions, see Glock and Bellah. They focus on the religious revival in 1960s America, exploring new religions, Eastern-tradition religions, and new Western-tradition religions. Ellwood's *Alternative Altars: Unconventional and Eastern Spirituality in America* also addresses the American religious revival. This work has a wider historical scope, reaching back to the nineteenth century, but is less comprehensive than Glock and Bellah's study. Also, Ellwood's separation of religion into traditional and excursus, or non-traditional, is problematic in the same way that Heelas and Woodhead's division of religion and spirituality is—it neglects the fact that many elements of traditional religion can be seen as having qualities of excursus, or outsider religion, such as the martyrs and ascetics of the Christian tradition. Tipton's "The Moral Logic of Alternative Religions" looks at the new religions as a reaction to the failure of some of America's founding principles and longstanding traditions. Other studies of American religion include sections on these new religious movements such as McLoughlin, Wuthnow 151-72, Allitt 116-47, and the later chapters of Marsden. Harvey and Goff provide documentary evidence of countercultural religious movements, 73-131.

²¹ In the introduction to *Religion, Modernity, and Postmodernity*, Heelas describes this tendency: "People no longer feel obliged to heed the boundaries of the religions of modernity. Instead, they are positively encouraged to exercise their 'autonomy' to draw on what has diffused through the culture . . . they show a 'willingness to combine symbols from (previously) disparate codes or

frameworks of meaning.’ They—so to speak—raid the world, drawing on whatever is felt desirable: the religions (perhaps shamanism and Christianity); the religious and the non-religious (perhaps yoga and champagne). . . . And sometimes this is done by fusing the previously marked off: and hence the popularity of the term ‘hybridity’ among postmodern theorists” (5).

²² Isherwood and Stuart state of the discipline, “One of the aims of body theology is to help the Church to construct a new anthropology, a new understanding of human nature, that recognizes the centrality of embodiment” (149). Isherwood and Stuart also comment on the emergence of body theology: “Until recently there has been no method available that allowed for the theological valuing of bodily experience. Traditional Christian theology . . . has always viewed the body as less important and more prone to sin than the mind. Theology, therefore, had to spring from reason and spirit if it were to hold any credibility” (33). For more discussion of body theology, see also Prokes.

²³ For example, the church became less hierarchical in structure. Mass was given in vernacular language, instead of Latin, and the priest faced toward the congregation instead of away from it. The church relaxed requirements for Catholic believers, such as abstaining from eating meat on Fridays, fasting before mass and attending confession regularly (Allitt 81, Marsden 246). While previously the church had preached that there was no salvation outside the Catholic Church, now it reached out to Protestants and stopped considering Protestant theology incorrect. For a book-length study of the Second Vatican Council, see Greeley.

²⁴ Radical Jewish theologians, such as Richard Rubenstein and Sherwin Wine, believe that in the wake of the Holocaust, belief in a benevolent, personal deity is no longer viable. For an overview of Jewish theology after the Holocaust, see Cohn-Sherbok.

²⁵ While the following discussion provides evidence for the existence of a strong subjective turn within American religious history, it is important to note that my discussion does not purport to be a full survey of American religious history. I only highlight those aspects thereof which aid an understanding of the context of the Beats’ literary work. A more thorough study of American religious history is far beyond the scope of this paper, but many such studies exist. For a comprehensive study that focuses on American religious history since the country’s beginning, see Marsden. For a focus on religious revivals throughout American history, see McLoughlin, who

characterises the 1960s religious revival as a Fourth Great Awakening of American religion. For an informative overview of American religious history from the vantage point of the Beats' time period, see Hudson (1965). There also exist many studies of post-war American religion. For essays from major American religious scholars, and a comprehensive view of mainline and alternative religions during this time, see Douglas and Tipton. For an analysis of the years 1941-1960, see Marty, vol. 3. For a study of the relationship between the emergent technologies of the twentieth century and American religion, see Gilbert. Ellwood's *The Fifties Spiritual Marketplace: American Religion in a Decade of Conflict* provides a detailed study of the 1950s, focusing on important events in American history, culture, and religion for each year of the decade.

²⁶ Outside this American context, it is important to note that the subjective turn is also a shift rooted in the Reformation, when reformers like Luther broke away from the institutional medieval church.

²⁷ Of Romanticism, Marsden comments: "Romanticism, a broad mood with many varieties, typically stressed that the superior spiritual dimension of reality could be discovered in ordinary experience only if individuals remained open to the subjective, intuitive, imaginative, and emotive dimensions of their experience. One could intuitively see through the natural to the transcendent. Thus, special revelations became relatively less important, while the creative dimensions of each unique individual became relatively more important" (78).

²⁸ Other critics mention Buddhism in the work of the Beats, but do not analyse it thoroughly. For example, Holmes ("Unscrewing" 10), Lawlor ("Eastern Culture" 95-97), Merrill (27-36), Tytell (*Naked Angels* 26-28) and McClure (74-81) mention the Beats' interest in Buddhism. Foster (61-62), Tytell (*Naked Angels* 210), and Lardas (239-49) also briefly discuss Kerouac's interest in the religion, while Lott provides a short analysis of how Kerouac expresses some of his Buddhist beliefs in his work. Fields provides a section on Beat Buddhism, though this is more of a social and historical study than a literary one. Mortenson and Augustine provide a more literary analysis of Beat Buddhism in essays in *The Emergence of Buddhist American Literature*.

²⁹ While I focus on an understanding of the term "beat" as a state of degradation (being beat-down) leading to ecstasy (beatitude), the term can be understood in a few different ways. For

example, it can be linked to the jazz music the Beat writers admired. Coupe writes, “It is generally acknowledged that it [‘beat’] refers to the ‘beat’ of bebop music, admired so much by the Beat generation” (2). It is from this jazz context that the term takes on its other meaning, as beaten down or degraded. Charters writes: “The word ‘beat’ was primarily in use after World War II by jazz musicians and hustlers as a slang term meaning down and out, or poor and exhausted. The jazz musician Mezz Mezzrow combined it with other words, like ‘dead beat’ or ‘beat-up,’ when he used it with humorous exaggeration in his book *Really the Blues*” (xvii). This usage of the term was first overheard by the major Beat authors through their contact with the New York underground scene. Charters continues: “In 1944 the word ‘beat’ as used by a Times Square hustler named Herbert Huncke came to the attention of William Burroughs, a Harvard graduate living in New York whom Huncke had introduced to heroin. . . . As Ginsberg remembered first hearing the word ‘beat,’ the ‘original street usage’ in Huncke’s speech meant ‘exhausted, at the bottom of the world, looking up or out, sleepless, wide-eyed, perceptive, rejected by society, on your own, streetwise’” (xvii-xviii). Kerouac comments on this original sense of beat: “The word ‘beat’ originally meant poor, down and out, deadbeat, on the bum, sad, sleeping in subways” (“Origins” 61). The third meaning of beat, as beatific, can be seen to grow out of this “beat-down” understanding of the term. Kerouac believed “that the word possessed deeper allusive qualities and meant something mysterious and spiritual” (xviii). Kerouac himself elaborates in a 1959 interview: “Beat doesn’t mean necessarily beat-up. It may mean that. But it can also mean beatific. Beats are mystic vagrants, always penniless but not necessarily uneducated” (“Interview with Kenneth Allsop” 105). While it may at first seem counterintuitive, Beat as beat-down is intimately tied to beat as beatific: it is “a rejected state with the potential for physical joy and spiritual redemption” (Lardas 119-20).

³⁰ Stephenson elaborates on the various ills the Beats suffered in what he identifies as the first stage of the Beat movement: “This first stage was characterized by violence, desperation, confusion, and suffering among the early Beat group and their associates. During this period David Kammerer was killed; Lucien Carr, Neal Cassady, and Gregory Corso were incarcerated; Carl Solomon and Allen Ginsberg were institutionalized; Bill Cannasta and Joan Burroughs were killed; William Burroughs was addicted to opiates and lived in exile; Michael McClure underwent

his dark night of the soul; and Lawrence Ferlinghetti and Jack Kerouac pursued their separate and solitary wanderings” (*Daybreak* 3).

³¹ Bush discusses the theme of beatness as an experience of finding exaltation within degradation in reference to two peripheral Beats, Herbert Huncke and Neal Cassady, the latter of whom was the real-life inspiration for a main character in *On the Road*, Dean Moriarty. Bush identifies Huncke and Cassady as “mythic heroes of exhaustion” (132), stating that “their beauty is as real and compelling as any sacrificed hero” (132) and identifying Cassady as “sacrificial victim” and “scapegoat” (146). Indeed, it is Huncke and Cassady’s “beat” state that exalts them thus: “The saint and hero merit social approval by practising on themselves the ‘magnificent destruction which represents the ideal of their society’” (132). And finally, it was this very degradation carried out by Beat saints like Huncke and Cassady that was crucial to achieving salvation: “The hope of the Beats . . . was that through breakdown was the hope of breakthrough” (135).

³² A detailed discussion of the meaning of sacrament and sacramental is to follow in Chapter Four, but a simple definition of the term can be an experience of the holy, particularly of the Christian God, mediated through the created—i.e., material or physical—world. Stephenson seems to stretch even this simple definition to accommodate various forms of religious or quasi-religious experience.

³³ Coupe clarifies what is meant by *via positiva* and *via negativa*, writing: “The *Via Positiva* is about ‘befriending creation’: it affirms ‘creation as blessing’; it involves a psychology of trust and expansion’; it knows holiness to be ‘cosmic hospitality’ and ‘humility as earthiness’; it is based on a theology of incarnation. The *Via Negativa* is about ‘befriending darkness’; it involves a willingness to be ‘emptied’; it embraces ‘nothingness’; it teaches us to ‘let pain be pain’, so that we are purged of attachment to the self; it is based on a theology of the cross. Ultimately, one finds that the *Via Positiva* and the *Via Negativa* are complementary, so that whichever path one takes one finds that one has simultaneously taken the other. God is darkness as well as light” (74). The original source which Coupe quotes here is Fox 134-39 and 132-72.

³⁴ A full discussion of the crucial influence of Blake on Ginsberg’s work is to follow in Chapter Three.

³⁵ Coupe elaborates: “The God of the Jewish scriptures – what he [Blake] as a Christian, called the Old Testament – Blake identified with the abstract, inhuman deity of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment. . . . Moreover, according to his dramatic rewriting of the New Testament, that God—who had never existed in the first place, except as a human projection—could be said to have departed once and for all with the birth, death, and resurrection of Jesus. For if Jesus showed us how to realise our own divinity, then we were now freed from the obligation to worship a deity distinct from ourselves” (101).

³⁶ Even when Lardas does address other influences on the Beats’ spirituality, he focuses on influences that I would argue are less central. Lardas identifies Buddhism, Scientology, and psychedelics (respectively) as Kerouac, Burroughs, and Ginsberg’s most important religious interests apart from Spengler (229-30). However, I would argue that these interests, while present, are certainly not the major, shaping forces on the writers’ systems of belief.

Chapter Two

¹ From a quotation from Burroughs, quoted in Mottram, p. 40, no source given.

² For a discussion of these control systems and the role of power and addiction, see Mottram 46-101. Tytell also briefly discusses Burroughs’ preoccupation with control systems (116-17, 126). For a discussion of Burroughs’ themes of control and addiction, as well as the mythology Burroughs creates to dramatize the struggle between agents of control and agents of freedom, see Skerl, *Burroughs*, chapters two and three. Other critics choose to explore other themes: for a discussion of homosexuality in Burroughs’ work, see Russell; for analysis of Burroughs’ understanding of Oswald Spengler’s philosophy, see Lardas.

³ For book-length studies on the subject of the form and function of magic in medieval romance, particularly in the works of Chrétien de Troyes, see Sweeney, A. Wilson, and Carasso-Bulow.

⁴ In *Yvain* the eponymous hero, trapped in the fountain knight’s castle, is given a ring that will make him invisible, and later, the hero, having gone mad in a forest, is cured with a magical ointment (A. Wilson 54). Sweeney comments that when a character in medieval romance needs such magical aid, the character “has not completely matured” (87).

⁵ As Burroughs' work progresses, the function of the routine changes. In Burroughs' next work, *The Yage Letters*, the routine loses its magical context; a major routine in this work, "Roosevelt After Inauguration," serves as a vehicle for satirical social criticism. In *Naked Lunch*, *The Nova Trilogy*, *Exterminator!*, and *The Wild Boys*, it becomes textual, rather than oral, serving as a stylistic device that fragments the text into shorter vignettes rather than a traditional single narrative. While the routine loses its magical aspect after *Queer*, it still often portrays scenes of total control, as in *Naked Lunch*'s "talking asshole" routine and *The Soft Machine*'s "The Mayan Caper."

⁶ Both Stull and Skerl (*Burroughs*) have commented on the quest in Burroughs' early work. While I agree with Stull that "Burroughs' early work . . . is structured as a quest first for the 'final fix' and later for what [Joseph] Campbell calls 'the freedom to live' and 'the ultimate boon' that can revive the dying world" (15), I disagree with his conclusion that Lee finds this boon in his knowledge of the "junk universe" (16).

⁷ For my analysis of *The Yage Letters*, I use the latest publication of the work, which is entitled *The Yage Letters Redux*. The parenthetical references throughout my discussion of *The Yage Letters* refer to this work.

⁸ See Solotaroff 88 and Hassan 61. Murphy also concurs, writing: "For many critics, Burroughs' use of the cut-up technique in the [Nova] trilogy was proof a priori that his writing could no longer be interrogated for objective meaning or structure . . . his use of cut-ups meant that Burroughs could no longer be treated as an author, that his writings were no longer his. . . . Other readers refused to grant cut-ups even that much merit, and claimed that the procedure eliminated the possibility of aesthetic value" (103).

⁹ Miles confirms this view (268), and Burroughs himself states in *The Job* that he intended the cut-up to break down the control system of language. He writes, "The word of course is one of the most powerful instruments of control. . . . Now if you start cutting these up and rearranging them you are breaking down the control system" (18).

¹⁰ For a list of different types of divination, see Mair 240. For examples of different types of divination by chance arrangement, see Radha 14 and 17, Loewe 38, and Davidson 117.

¹¹ For a fuller explanation of the possible cause of synchronistic occurrences, which is beyond the scope of this paper, see Jung 446-47.

Chapter Three

¹ “When the Mode of the Music Changes” 249. The entire quotation reads, “The only poetic tradition is the voice out of the burning bush. The rest is trash, and will be consumed.”

² Guttman states of Ginsberg’s rejection of American norms: “one important type of young radical is certainly the long-haired, drug-inspired dropout who is dead set against the ‘middle-class hang-ups’ of an older generation. Allen Ginsberg is his bard” (173). For a full description of the Beat writers’ rejection of American and Western culture, see Tytell, *Naked Angels* 3-30. Ginsberg himself is outspoken in his criticism of American culture in many of his poems. He also expresses this opinion in interviews; see “Myths Associated with Science” and “Epilogue.”

³ For an exhaustive discussion of Ginsberg’s understanding of Buddhism and its effects on his work, see Trigilio, *Allen Ginsberg’s Buddhist Poetics*. See also Augustine, Mortenson, and Tonkinson 89-137. For Ginsberg’s own discussions of his Buddhist and Hindu beliefs, see *Allen Verbatim*. Morgan also provides some discussion of Ginsberg’s experimentation with Buddhism throughout his biography of the author.

⁴ Ginsberg describes his complex, blended religious beliefs in various, contradictory ways throughout his life. In a May 22, 1941 journal entry, he identifies as “an atheist” (*Martyrdom and Artifice* 14). Contradicting this early statement, he identifies himself as “Jewish” when explaining the long lines of *Howl* (“Art of Poetry” 25), as “an excitable visionary Jewish Buddhist” (Interview with Pivano 118), and again as a “Buddhist Jew with attachments to Krishna, Siva, Allah, Coyote, and the Sacred Heart” (qtd. in Faas 247). He does identify with his Jewish heritage in that Jews have a history of being radical or liberal politically, and opposed to the white, conservative status quo. Michael Schumacher writes, “he identified with Judaism ‘because it’s part of my background, particularly in America, the old Jewish socialist, anarchist scene’” (12).

⁵ It is difficult to define the term “mystical experience,” and, like *spirituality*, it is understood in various ways in various disciplines and works. When I use the term in this chapter, I use it to refer to a direct experience of the divine, typically characterised by sensory hallucinations.

⁶ This interview was originally printed in the Spring 1966 issue of *The Paris Review*, and is number VIII in a series.

⁷ See Arnold chapter four, Boman, Atkins, and Handelman 3-50 for more detailed explanations of this distinction. Note that there is debate about the Jewish tradition running in opposition to the Western; Stern believes that rabbinic Judaism exists more on the borders of Western culture, drawing influence from the Hellenistic, rather than in opposition to it (“Moses-Cide” 196, *Midrash and Theory* 5-6, 16).

⁸ Such a tendency, Handelman argues, is “characteristic of Greek thought in general” (33). She cites Boman, who agrees, stating that “various meanings could, for the Greeks, converge into one concept and thus into one comprehensive unity” (qtd. in Handelman 33). Earlier in her argument, she cites Aristotle as an example of such Greek thought, writing that “Aristotle further restricted his logic by making the parts of his arguments univocal terms; ambiguous or equivocal terms have no place in his science, and are relegated to the ‘inferior’ sphere of rhetoric” (13).

⁹ Handelman supports this claim, stating, “There are midrashim which seek to clarify ambiguities in the text” (68). For further support, see also Kugel 92 and Hartman, “Midrash” 345.

¹⁰ Avery-Peck explains that B. is the abbreviation for the Babylonian Talmud, and B. M. is Baba Mesia.

¹¹ Avery-Peck goes on to state that, although he can be bound to rabbinic interpretation, God is still the final authority: “exactly by placing the power to define Torah in human hands, the rabbis in fact make the powerful point that, despite the way the events of history made things seem, God still exists, still rules over the people and land of Israel, and still can be depended upon to bring redemption. It is only for these reasons that the Torah still matters at all, still must be explicated, still must be followed. But, in the Rabbinic system, the God who had been understood to make and destroy nations, to show his will through splendid and miraculous deeds, is pictured as moving rather in response to the intentions and perceptions of everyday Jews who engaged in the study of, and therefore the creation of, revelation; who lead their daily lives in accordance with divine precepts. . . . In this way, the rabbis put the individual—not God—at the center of creation, ascribing to the everyday Jew the power to impart to the world order and meaning” (227-28).

¹² For a complete discussion of this tendency, termed “normal mysticism,” see Kadushin, chapter 6.

¹³ For example, Julian of Norwich has a visual hallucination of God showing her a hazelnut (389-90); Ignatius of Loyola has multiple visions of Christian figures such as the Madonna and child and the Holy Trinity (Egan 428); St. Francis and St. Bonaventure both see an apparition of an angel or “seraph” with six wings (King 74, 76). Catherine of Siena does believe that she hears God’s voice, but he speaks to her in words not found in any sacred text, discussing different types of tears (Egan 360-63).

¹⁴ For other firsthand accounts of the experience, see “Eternity,” *The Book of Martyrdom and Artifice* (264-66, 278-80), *The Letters of Allen Ginsberg* (48), *Mystery in the Universe: Notes on an Interview with Allen Ginsberg* (6), and “Prose Contribution to Cuban Revolution” (138). Schumacher (95-99) and Portugés (10-20) also discuss Ginsberg’s mystical experience in their work. In these accounts, the event is described in ways similar to the “Art of Poetry” account. However, the earliest account Ginsberg gives of the experience, in *The Book of Martyrdom and Artifice*, describes the experience differently. While walking the streets of New York, he experiences a feeling of illumination, which he describes as an “overpowering draught of knowledge” and “a recognition of that aspect of the imagination which is referred to as the eternal” (265). Then, he returns to his apartment and consults the Blake text. This differs from the other accounts, in which the text brings about the mystical experience.

¹⁵ Poems that directly refer to Ginsberg’s mystical experience include “Two Sonnets,” “On Reading William Blake’s ‘The Sick Rose,’” “The Eye Altering Alters All,” “Vision 1948,” “Do We Understand Each Other?,” “The Voice of Rock,” “Refrain,” “Psalm I,” “Psalm II,” and “Stanzas: Written at Night in Radio City.” Others may refer indirectly to the experience.

¹⁶ For a complete discussion of Hartman’s application of midrash to literature, see his introduction to *Midrash and Literature* and “The Struggle for the Text.”

¹⁷ Stern writes, “Rather than primarily determining the Torah’s meaning, or its multiple meanings, midrashic interpretation seems often to be more concerned with maintaining the Torah’s presence in the existence of the Jew, with bridging the gap between its words and their reader, with

overcoming the alienation, the distance of Torah, and with restoring it to the Jew as an intimate, familiar presence” (*Parables* 44).

¹⁸ See “Poet’s ‘Voice’” 257 and “The Art of Poetry” 36.

¹⁹ These prohibitions read, “Thou shalt not lie with mankind, as with womankind: it is abomination” (*The Bible: Authorized King James Version*, Lev. 18.22) Later verses discuss the punishments for such sins: Leviticus 18.29 reads, “And thou shalt not let any of thy seed pass through the fire to Moloch, neither shalt thou profane the name of thy God: I am the Lord,” and Leviticus 20.13 reads, “If a man also lie with mankind, as he lieth with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination: they shall surely be put to death. Their blood shall be upon them.”

²⁰ This quotation is taken from *Journals: Mid-Fifties* 311; the second set of brackets in the quotation are Trigilio’s own. Peter Orlovsky is Ginsberg’s partner.

²¹ Before the poem, Ginsberg cites three verses from Leviticus in his journal; two which deal with the prohibition on homosexuality, and one which deals with idolatry. He writes:

Leviticus 18:

21 “And thou shalt not let any of thy seed pass through the fire to Moloch, neither shalt thou profane the name of thy God: I am the Lord.”

22 “Thou shalt not lie with mankind, as with womankind: it is an abomination.”

29 “For whosoever shall commit any of these abominations, even the souls that commit them, shall be cut off from among their people (*Journals* 299).

²² These numbers refer to the lines of the poem, which appears on *Journals* 300-02.

²³ Throughout this section, Kaddish—unitalicized—refers to the original Jewish prayer, while *Kaddish*—italicized—refers to Ginsberg’s poem.

Chapter Four

¹ Prothero believes that Catholicism is less of an influence than Buddhism on Kerouac’s work, which “did inspire more of [the Beat authors] than any other” religious tradition (217). For Prothero’s discussion of the interaction between Buddhism and Kerouac’s Catholicism, see 216-19. Jones sees Kerouac’s Catholicism as more influential than does Prothero—stating that

Kerouac “remained a Catholic” throughout his life (*Map* 109). However, Jones still discusses the faith with reference to Kerouac’s Buddhism, never exploring it as a single shaping force (*Map* 102-15). Giamo sees both faiths as important to Kerouac’s work, stating that Kerouac’s interest in Buddhism was sincere, “at once deeply personal, intellectual, and spiritual” (89). While Giamo does state that eventually, Kerouac leaves behind his interest in Buddhism and turns back to Catholicism—“by 1961 Buddha, though still a major hero-figure for Kerouac, has taken a back seat to Christ; and, after 1960, Kerouac is introduced to his readers not as ‘beat,’ but as a ‘strange solitary crazy Catholic mystic” (169)—he sees Kerouac’s faith as largely a hybrid mix of Buddhism and Catholicism.

² For Giles’ discussion of Kerouac, see chapter 16, “The Beatific Vision: J. P. Donleavy and Jack Kerouac,” 394-424.

³ Jones views Kerouac’s Buddhism as a response or counterpoint to his Catholicism, stating that the author’s Buddhism “functions as a Catholic heresy” (*Map* 107). He continues, “Mahayana Buddhism provided [Kerouac] with a conceptual order to balance against the mundane Catholic rituals he learned at home and in school as a child. As the complement to the ritualism of his family religion, he found himself drawn to an abstruse doctrine that required introspection, contemplation, and analysis. [Catholicism] was mostly practice and little theory, while Kerouac’s Buddhism appeared to many of his friends to be mostly theory and little practice” (109).

⁴ Hipkiss states that Kerouac became interested in the religion in late 1953 (41), while Lardas dates it to early 1954 (229). The first time Kerouac mentions the religion in his journal is 26 July 1950 (*Windblown World* 362-63).

⁵ See *Letters 1940-1956*, pp. 457-599. An example of a typical letter mixing Buddhist and Catholic themes—with no explanation provided—is Kerouac’s letter to Stella Sampas, from 12 October 1955, in which he writes of “the Noble Gotama Buddha” before describing how he spent time “in meditation in the absolutely deserted afternoon church of Ste. Jeanne D’arc” (*Letters 1940-1956* 526).

⁶ In a 1961 postcard to student Bill Michell, Kerouac stated, “I am a Catholic Conservative” (*Letters 1957-1969* 324). In a letter to student Carroll Brown, the author describes *On the Road* as “really a story about 2 Catholic buddies roaming the country in search of God. And we found

him” (*Letters 1957-1969* 330). In a 1963 letter to Robert Giroux, Kerouac describes praying to the Virgin Mary to make him “stop being a maniacal drunkard. . . . So far, every prayer addressed to the Holy Mother has been answered” (*Letters 1957-1969* 408).

⁷ L. Cunningham (10) and Leeming (xxxiii-xxxiv) also comment on the sacramental mediation of the invisible through the visible.

⁸ There is evidence that Kerouac himself, like the characters in *On the Road*, viewed the world in a sacramental way. In a 1950 notebook, Kerouac lists “Times God Made Himself Manifest.” Included in the list are experiences of the material world, such as “Lights of Ireland, 1943,” “Morphine 1945” and “Streaming Honey—1949” (*Holograph “Souls on the Road”*).

⁹ This Catholic worldview can be contrasted to a Platonic one, in which the material and the divine are considered separate, and the divine is more highly valued than the material: material objects are simply lesser copies of the perfect world of forms. Kerouac does not deny the material world as the Platonic philosopher Socrates does, or view the divine and the material as dualistic. In Kerouac’s Catholic, sacramental world view, the material world does not just suggest a divine reality, but is suffused with the divine, and thus considered holy.

¹⁰ Lardas also links Kerouac’s “sketching method” of prose composition to anamnesis (244). However, Lardas views this as also linked to Kerouac’s Buddhism and interest in Oswald Spengler, while I see it as a purely Catholic theme.

¹¹ Wright calls water “‘the commonest archetypal image of the unconscious,’ which is both a threat of death through drowning and a promise of rebirth, regeneration, renewal, cleansing and refreshment” (144-45).

¹² Unlike Bataille, many thinkers did not accept Weber’s theories so easily. *The Protestant Ethic* inspired controversy and various criticisms ranging from the idea that Weber misunderstood aspects of both Calvinism and Catholicism, to “mistak[ing] the nature of the causal relation between Puritanism and modern capitalism” (Giddens xxiv). My concern is not with the correctness of Weber’s ideas, but the nuance they can bring to my discussion of Bataille, Kerouac, and religious loss.

¹³ Material utility is “limited to acquisition (in practice, to production) and to the conservation of goods; on the other, it is limited to reproduction and to the conservation of human life (to which is added, it is true, the struggle against pain . . .)” (Bataille, “Notion” 167).

¹⁴ Bataille comments on the function of this excess energy, stating that “The living organism, in a situation determined by the play of energy on the surface of the globe, ordinarily receives more energy than is necessary for maintaining life; the excess energy (wealth) can be used for the growth of a system (e.g., an organism); if the system can no longer grow, or if the excess cannot be completely absorbed in its growth, it must necessarily be lost without profit; it must be spent, willingly or not, gloriously or catastrophically” (*Consumption* 21). For an extended explanation of the role of squandering this excess, rather than using it for growth, see Part One of *Consumption*, 19-41.

¹⁵ For a comprehensive discussion of the history and function of music in Christianity, see Begbie.

¹⁶ For a discussion of kenotic Christology and its progression since the Reformation, see A. Torrance 212-19. For a timeline and explanation of kenotic Christology, see Evans.

¹⁷ This verse is part of the kenotic hymn of Phil. 2.5-11, which reads, “Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus: Who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God: But made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men: And being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross. Wherefore God also hath highly exalted him, and given him a name which is above every name: That at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of things in heaven, and things in earth, and things under the earth; And that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”

¹⁸ This verse reads, “We are fools for Christ's sake, but ye are wise in Christ; we are weak, but ye are strong; ye are honourable, but we are despised.”

¹⁹ For extended comment on the figure of the fool for Christ, see Breton 31-46.

²⁰ Through his exploration of kenosis in *On the Road*, Kerouac takes place in a wider-scale revival of interest in kenosis in post-war religious thought. Kenosis' concern with the human body links to the widespread interest in body theology during the post-war period. Many post-war thinkers, such as Emmanuel Levinas, Jacques Derrida, Luce Irigaray, Julia Kristeva, and Hélène Cixous

viewed the figure of the crucified Christ as relevant to their fractured, post-bomb world; they focused on its fragmentation and insistence on no set truth or narratives.

Chapter Five

¹ *The American Express*, 130.

² For a more extensive analysis of Corso's nonstandard use of language in his poetry, see Skau 114-27.

³ Olson states that Corso would have been instructed in Thomistic theology: "Born in 1930, he would have been introduced to the Thomistic conception of the universe, because Thomistic thought was declared the official philosophy of the church in 1879 by Pope Leo XIII" (8).

However, such a claim is difficult to back up with evidence. There is a possibility that Corso was not exposed to Thomistic ideas at a young age, or, even if he was, it is impossible to know if he absorbed them and retained knowledge of them into his adult life.

⁴ The Council of Trent also affirms the eminence of Eucharist among the sacraments. McBrien writes, "Trent taught that the Eucharist is not simply one of the sacraments but is pre-eminent among them because Christ is present in the Eucharist even before the sacrament is used (*Decree on the Most Holy Eucharist*, chapter III, Session XIII, 1551); Vatican II declared that 'the Liturgy . . . most of all in the divine sacrifice of the Eucharist, is the outstanding means whereby the faithful can express in their lives, and manifest to others, the mystery of Christ and the real nature of the true Church' (*Constitution of the Sacred Liturgy*, n. 2). The Eucharist is indeed 'the source and summit of the entire Christian life' (n. 11)" (757; ellipsis in orig.).

⁵ The Sacred Congregation of Rites (1967) affirms the meaning of the Eucharist: "At the Last Supper, on the night when he was betrayed, our Savior instituted the Eucharistic sacrifice of his body and blood. He did this in order to perpetuate the sacrifice of the Cross throughout the centuries until he should come again, and so to entrust this beloved spouse, the Church, a memorial of his death and resurrection: a sacrament of love, a sign of unity, a bond of charity, a paschal banquet in which Christ is eaten, the mind is filled with grace, and a pledge of future glory is given to us" (qtd. in Wood 349).

⁶ The source “SC” to which Wood refers here is Vatican II (1996) “The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy,” *Sacrosanctum Concilium*.

⁷ Several scholars have commented on an element of cannibalism inherent in the Eucharist, particularly in the doctrine of transubstantiation. Kilgour states, “there is a potential for cannibalism in the sacrament of the Eucharist” (15). Yarrington agrees: “cannibalism . . . at a literal level underlies transubstantiation with its transformation of bread into flesh and wine into blood” (165). Freud also acknowledges this association: “An interesting parallel to the replacement of object-choice by identification is to be found in the belief of primitive peoples, and in the prohibitions based upon it, that the attributes of animals which are incorporated as nourishment persist as part of the character of those who eat them. As is well known, this belief is one of the roots of cannibalism and its effects have continued through the series of usages of the totem meal down to Holy Communion” (qtd. in Kilgour 229). The original source of this quotation is Freud, *The Ego and the Id* 19.

⁸ Kilgour comments on the difference between cannibalism and communion, stating that “communion sets up a more complicated system of relation in which it becomes difficult to say precisely *who* is eating *whom*. It is a ritual to restore a primal unity, in which man and God are returned to an original identity, ideally not through absolute identification but through the obfuscation of identity and rigid role-playing. Both God and man play “host,” a metaphor that itself has a variety of meanings which permit both identification and differentiation. Man is a host in that he literally takes God, in the form of the Host, into himself. . . . The act is one of reciprocal incorporation, as both are identified by the single word and substance, the Host, so that the absolute boundary between inside and outside, eater and eaten, itself appears to disappear. Such a flexible definition of communion would appear to provide the beginnings of a model for relations that go beyond the binarisms which lead to cannibalism. It is a relationship which is mutually constructed so that the identities of the two terms are not fixed and determined absolutely but emerge through and exchange involving a balance between identity and differentiation. As reading is imagined as a form of communion, the partaking of an incarnated meaning, it could prove suggestive for interpretation and the devouring of texts” (15).

⁹ Davies gives the original source of the quotation as Henry Pendlebury, *A Plain Representation of Transubstantiation* (London: 1687).

¹⁰ Even before the division of Protestant and Catholic Christianity during the Reformation, the interpretation of the Eucharist was a focus for theological debate. Adams discusses a pre-Reformation debate centred on the Eucharist, to which the same concerns are central: “In the mid-eleventh century, a Eucharistic controversy erupted between Lanfranc (later the first Norman archbishop of Canterbury) and Berengar (deacon of the Church of St. Maurice of Angers). Berengar held that in the sacrament Christ was present to the believer spirit-to-spirit. Lanfranc contended for transubstantiation, insisting that the body of Christ comes to be literally located where the bread used and still seems to be. Berengar lost the debate and throughout the rest of his career was made repeatedly to swear formulae such as this: ‘I, Berengar, acknowledge . . . that the bread and wine which are placed on the altar are after consecration not only a Sacrament but also the real body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, and that with the senses . . . not only by way of Sacrament but in reality, these are held and broken by the hands of priests and are crushed by the teeth of the faithful’” (Adams, “Biting” 69; 1st ellipsis in orig.). This statement contains vivid language of the consumption of flesh, the very idea which so disgusted Berengar and which would become a major Protestant criticism of Catholic Christianity.

¹¹ Although Corso does not, most likely, mean that the woman is literally “with child,” or pregnant, here, the joining of the words suggest this image of pregnancy, during which two bodies exist as one.

¹² Although Adams is Episcopalian, her interest in mediaeval theology roots her in Catholicism, and her understanding of the Eucharist is helpful to my analysis of Corso.

¹³ Adams defines “horrors” as “evils the participation in (the doing or suffering of) which constitutes *prima facie* reason to doubt whether the participant’s life could (given their inclusion in it) have positive meaning for him/her on the whole” (*Christ and Horrors* 32).

¹⁴ The original source is Corso, “When I Was Five” 85-86.

¹⁵ Skau also comments on this act being out of character for Carrol, calling the incident “one of the most puzzling episodes in Corso’s novel” (59). He continues, “This brutal act appears so out of character for Carrol that its function in the novel can only be explained on a symbolic level” (59-

60). Skau argues that the character of Carrol is based on Kerouac (59), and links the pig-killing incident to Kerouac's football career: "the killing of [Carrol's] father's pig symbolizes Kerouac's slaughter of his father's dreams of Jack's 'pigskin' success" (60). However, such an explanation seems a bit farfetched; the significance of the incident, I argue, is more fluently linked to Corso's Catholic view of the Eucharist.

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