

## Wellesley College Wellesley College Digital Scholarship and Archive

---

French Faculty Scholarship

French

---

1997

# Illusions and Frustrations in the Life and Works of Jack Kerouac

René Galand  
*Wellesley College*

Follow this and additional works at: <http://repository.wellesley.edu/frenchfaculty>

---

### Recommended Citation

Galand, René, "Illusions and Frustrations in the Life and Works of Jack Kerouac" (1997). *French Faculty Scholarship*. Paper 29.  
<http://repository.wellesley.edu/frenchfaculty/29>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the French at Wellesley College Digital Scholarship and Archive. It has been accepted for inclusion in French Faculty Scholarship by an authorized administrator of Wellesley College Digital Scholarship and Archive. For more information, please contact [ir@wellesley.edu](mailto:ir@wellesley.edu).

## Illusions and frustrations in the life and works of Jack Kerouac

Since the time of Romanticism, there has been a divorce between artists and writers, on one side, and the upper strata of society on the other. A few examples: the battle of *Hernani*, the trials of Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* and of Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du Mal* for obscenity, the war waged by the Dadaists and the Surrealists against official art and literature. In the United States, things were pretty much the same, as witness the cases of Whitman and, at a later date, of the Lost Generation, when writers and artists like Hemingway, Dos Passos, Henry Miller, Eugene Jolas, Malcolm Cowley, Man Ray, *et. al.*, sought in Montparnasse or Montmartre surroundings more favourable to creation than the America of the twenties, and of the Beat Generation, the generation of writers who became adults at the time of World War II. It was Jack Kerouac who coined the expression for him and for his friends, Allen Ginsberg, Neal Cassady, Gregory Corso, Peter Orlovsky, Gary Snyder, John Clellon Holmes, William Burroughs, Philip Lamantia, *et al.* "Beat" meant "beaten, defeated". In the slang of drug pushers, apparently, it also meant "duped, swindled". Later, it was associated to "beatific", the state of being symbolized by the smile of Bouddha as it is represented on some statues, the smile of one who has seen that everything was but an illusion and who has reached the stage of nirvana.

Jack Kerouac was baptized Jean-Louis Kirouac, son of Léo-Alcide Kéroack and Gabrielle Levesque, in the parish of Saint-Louis-de-France, in Lowell, Mass. (the priests did not pay much attention to the spelling of family names), on March 12, 1922. The name is common throughout French Canada. Here is what was told to Jack Kéroac by his father about his ancestry, but I suspect that a good part of these traditions were only a legend, and that, quite possibly, some of the details were the work of Kéroac's fertile imagination. "Kéroac", he believed, was an ancient Irish name. Isolde belonged to this clan. She was taken away by the Cornishman Tristan, who had killed her husband-to-be Morold to prove his love for her. From Cornwall, Kéroac's ancestors, named Kernuak, had emigrated to the region of Brittany which still bears the name of "Kerne" (Cornwall). Jack Kéroac's family traced their origin back to one of their descendants, the Baron François-Louis-Alexandre Lebris de Kéroac. François-Louis-Alexandre de Kéroac, who had gone to Québec to fight under Montcalm in his war against the British general Wolfe, was one of their descendants. He had acquired a great deal of land in the area of Rivière-du-Loup, where he had married an Iroquois princess. He had abandoned her to return to Brittany, but his father made him do the right thing, and he returned to his Indian bride. The French had been defeated by the British, and the baron chose to move north, living from hunting and trapping. He had seven sons. Some of his descendants mixed with Indians, others became farmers in the Rivière-du-Loup area, others emigrated to the United-States. One of them, Jean-Baptiste Kerouack, settled in Nashua, New Hampshire. One of his children, Joseph-Alcide-Léon (Léo, as he was called by his family and friends), married Gabrielle Levesque on October 25, 1915. He was Jack's father.

It is not always easy to separate fact from fiction in this account of Jack Kéroac's lineage. The following details have been provided by Ewan Konan, who is well acquainted with the families descended from the Kerouacs, families which may go by such names as Kerouac, Kirouac, Le Breton, and even Burton. It has been established that there were three Kerouac

brothers who came from Brittany to settle in Canada around 1730. Jack Kerouac's direct ancestor was actually named Maurice-Louis-Alexandre Le Bris de Kervoack. He settled in Kamouraska in 1730. Two years later, he married Louise Bernier, daughter of the late Jean Bernier, one of the "seigneurs" of Cap Saint-Ignace where he owned land ("*trente arpents de seigneurie*"). Maurice-Louis-Alexandre de Kervoack died at the age of 30, leaving three children, Louis-Gabriel, Alexandre, and Jacques. Jacques apparently died without issue, but Louis-Gabriel and Alexandre had children. It was from this Alexandre, born in 1735, that Jack Kerouac was descended. The marriage certificate relating to Louis-Maurice-Alexandre and Louise Bernier indicates that the groom came from a parish in the bishopric of Cornouaille, the most western part of Brittany. Unfortunately, it has been impossible so far to identify this parish with any certainty, since the handwriting on the document is almost illegible. Several readings have been suggested: Berrien, Kerien, or Querrien. I have seen a photocopy, and I believe the initial letter to be a "B", since it is identical to the initial letter in two other names which appear in the document, "Bernier" and "Bouchard". The actual name might be "Beriel" or "Beriet", since the final "t" is seldom crossed by the author of the document, the priest who gave his blessing to the couple. One would have to procure a complete list of the parishes in the bishopric of Cornouaille at the beginning of the XVIIIth century, see which name comes closest to "Beriel" or "Beriet", and search contemporary records to find out whether there were Kerouacs in the area. Another name appears in the marriage certificate which might shed some light on the matter. One of the witnesses was Nicolas-Jean de Kervédo, a name which is obviously Breton. So far, there is no information about his origin. The priest also spells the bridegroom's name: Maurice-Louis Le Brice de Karouac. The groom signs: Maurice Le Bris de K'voack. Many Breton families whose name begin with "ker" (which means "place, house, village"), shorten this syllable to "K" or "Kx". The marriage certificate states that a child born prior to the wedding, Louis-Gabriel, is thereby declared legitimate. One of the three Kerouac brothers, Alexandre, died in 1736 and was buried in the parish of Saint-Louis de Kamouraska. The attending priest spells his name "Alexandre Kéloaque" and adds the mention "*breton de naissance âgé environ trente ans*". Ewan Konan points out that the Kerouacs must have been of good Breton stock. This they were, of course, since they came from the bishopric of Cornouaille. But the mention "*breton de naissance*" may simply mean that the priest was merely observing a legal nicety. Brittany, until 1789, was officially a "*province réputée étrangère*". Under the clauses of the 1532 Treaty of Union with France, Brittany retained her autonomous status: she had her own Parliament, her own legal system, her own tax structure, and was not required to provide recruits for the French army. Bretons who served in the French armed forces did so as volunteers. And what about the Iroquois princess whose fate, as recounted by Jack Kerouac, mirrors the legend of Sakountala celebrated in Sanskrit literature by the poet Kalidasa? Jack Kerouac's genealogy has been established generation by generation, and the women of his lineage are, in chronological order: Louise Bernier, Elisabeth Chalifour, Ursule Guimont, Marceline Chouinard, Séverine Malenfant, Clémentine Bernier, and, finally, his mother, Gabrielle-Ange Lévêque. It is not impossible, of course, that there may have been, among all of these women's ascendants, someone who had taken an Indian spouse, or a spouse with Indian blood. Unions between French colonists and Indian natives were not all that uncommon.

Jack's father Léo worked for the newspaper *L'Étoile*, sold insurance, and started to print advertising sheets. He did quite well, but he lost a lot of money on horse-races and playing cards. Finally, he had to declare bankruptcy, and he had to go to work for other print-shops. His wife also had to go to work in a shoe-factory. They had had three children: Francis-Gérard, born in 1916, Caroline (Nin), born in 1918, and Jean-Louis, born in 1922. Jean-Louis had several successive nicknames: Ti Jean, Ti Pousse (meaning *Petit Pouce*), Jackie, and finally Jack.

Gérard was sickly. He had a weak heart, and eventually he died in 1926. He had to keep to his bed during the last two years of his life. He was a quiet and devout child, and the nuns who took care of him, seeing how good he was, and how patiently he bore his suffering, thought him a saint. Jack was not as good as his brother, and whenever he was naughty, people compared his behaviour to that of his brother, and he felt guilty. Were his sins the cause of his brother's illness? This, at any rate, is what his mother would tell him, years later, whenever she was angry with him. She may well have let him know that it would have been better if he had been the one to die. The fact remains that, all of his life, Jack was tormented by his feelings of inferiority and of guilt, and the source of these feelings was undoubtedly related to the death of his brother. Another possible cause is to be found in the racist attitudes of many WASP's at that time. In their eyes, French Canadians were no better than white Negroes. Many WASP's had only contempt not only for former slaves, but also for all immigrants who had come to seek a better life in America, and they created all kinds of pejorative names for them: coon, jig, guinea, dago, frog, Canuck, etc. At that time, in Lowell, the largest minorities were Irish, Greeks, and French Canadians. Other immigrants were to arrive in later years, the most recent ones being the Vietnamese who had sided with the Americans and who arrived after the fall of Indo-China, in the seventies. In the early years of the century, immigrants would gather around their churches. The church parish, for the French Canadians, was Saint-Louis-de-France. They lived in a kind of ghetto and spoke only their French patois, the *joual*. Kerouac has written quite a few pages in this language. Here is a sample taken from *Visions of Cody*: "*Si tu veux parler à propos d'Cody pourquoi tu'l fa -- tu m'a arretez avant j'ai eu une chance de continuer, ben arrete donc. Écoute, j'va t'dire -- lit bien. Il faut t'u te prend soin -- attend?-- donne moi une chance -- tu pense j'ai pas d'art moi français? -- ca? --idiot -- crapule -- tas d' marde -- enfant shiene [chienne] -- batard -- cochon -- buffon [bouffon] -- bouche de marde, granguele [grand-gueule], face laite [laide]-- shienculotte [chie-en-culotte], morceau d'marde, susseu, gros fou, envi d'chien culotte, ca c'est pire -- en face!-- fam toi! [la ferme] -- crashe [crache] -- varge! [frappe] -- frappe! -- mange -- foure! [fous]...*" Kerouac, like all the other children, went to the parish school where most of the lessons were taught in French, but when his parents moved, he had to go to the public school, where only English was used. He found it hard at the beginning, but he was a bright boy, and when he started high school he was ranked among the best students. He had discovered literature, writers like Hugo, Goethe, and the American poets, and he wanted to be a writer. He talked to a kind priest, who encouraged him and advised him to go college, preferably in New York. Unfortunately, his parents did not have money, and he would have to get a scholarship, but luck was with him: Jack was a jock, he played baseball and football, and he was a track star, having won 30, 40, and 300 yard races. In his final year at Lowell High he was the star of the football team, and he was recruited by Boston College, Duke, and Columbia. He chose Columbia, but the decision had not

been easy. The year before, at a dance, he had met Mary Carney, a girl who was one year older. Her father and her brothers worked for the railroad. He already had a girl, Mary Peggy Coffey, but he preferred Mary Carney. All that Mary Carney wanted was a husband, a small house, and children. Jack would have been willing to marry her, but his mother, quite naturally, told him to forget about Mary Carney and to go to Columbia. At the movies, Jack had seen Don Ameche walking down Fifth Avenue, arm in arm with Hedy Lamarr, and Jack saw himself at the Ritz with a glamorous movie by his side. He opted for Columbia. He spent the school year 1939-1940 at Horace Mann. An extra year at this prep school would make it easier for him to meet the scholastic standards of an Ivy League institution. He would live with his mother's stepmother in Brooklyn.

Kerouac did well at his new school, in class as well as on the football field. There were little things, however, which showed him that he was not like the other students. It took him one hour in the subway to go from Brooklyn to his school, and another hour to return in the evening, while many of his class-mates came to school in their fathers' cars, driven by a chauffeur. At lunch, they ate turkey sandwiches. He had to make do with peanut butter. He was not able to attend the graduation celebration: his family could not buy him the required outfit. There had been worse: he had invited Mary Carney to the big school dance. She had accepted, but his class-mates' elegant dates had looked down on a girl whose dress was not of the latest fashion. She had cried bitterly, and Jack had been unable to comfort her. They had parted for good. In later years, Jack often said that she was the only girl he had loved. However, he started his freshman year with high hopes. Someday, he would walk down Fifth Avenue like Don Ameche, but his taste in women had changed: it no longer was Hedy Lamarr on his arm, but Gene Tierney. His dream would never come true. The courses were much harder. He had many hours of football practice, and part of his scholarship had to be earned washing dishes in the dining hall. On top of everything, he did not get along with his coach, Lou Little, whose real name was Luigi Piccolo. Jack believed that his coach had turned his back on his ethnic roots to curry favor with influential WASP's. He was convinced that, in Lou Little's eyes, he and other jocks like him were only mercenaries to be exploited mercilessly and discarded as soon as they no longer produced. Lou Little's recruiters had promised that a job would be found around New York for Jack's father, but nothing ever materialized. Jack broke his leg in one of the first games, and was lost to the team for the rest of the season. He would not be a football star. He also had problems in class: he flunked a chemistry exam, and would have to repeat the course. He returned to Columbia in September 1941, but he saw immediately that things would not be better between him and his coach, and he left the university. He worked for a while in a service station, and later as a sport reporter for a Lowell paper. It was at that time that he wrote a collection of short stories, using for his title the brand name of his typewriter: *Atop an Underwood*. Eventually, he joined the crew of a cargo ship which was carrying supplies to Greenland. The United States had entered the war in December 1941. Many members of the Columbia football team had been drafted, others had enlisted. When Jack returned home from Greenland, he found a letter from Columbia: he was offered a place on the football team. He returned to Columbia in September 1942, but his relationship with his coach had not improved, and he left the team and the University for good. Never would he be like Don Ameche on Fifth Avenue, surrounded by Hedy Lamarr, Gene

Tierney, or other Hollywood stars. He started a novel, *The Sea is my Brother*. By then he had a new hope: he already saw himself as a pilot in Naval Aviation. His hopes were soon dashed. When he was called up, in December 1942, he failed the medical test. He would only be a sailor second class. Jack Kerouac could not take the discipline of the Navy. He refused to march with the other sailors, and he was put in a psychiatric ward. Eventually, in May 1943, he was discharged on psychiatric grounds. His parents had moved to an apartment in Ozone Park, Long Island. His father worked in a print shop, and his mother in a shoe factory which made army boots. Jack joined the merchant marine, working on a ship which carried bombs to Great-Britain. The crossing was quite dangerous, but the wages were high. Aboard ship, Jack found time to continue work on his novel, *The Sea is my Brother*. After returning to New York, in October 1943, he moved in with his girl friend, Edie Parker. They had many friends, and they went to night clubs where they became acquainted with singers and musicians who later became jazz celebrities, Billie Holiday, Lester Young, Art Tatum, Charlie Parker and others. Jack also liked films with the French actor Jean Gabin. He made friends with Columbia students, Lucien Carr, Allan Ginsberg, and also with William Burroughs. He smoked and drank quite a bit, and he did some drugs, benzedrin and pot. Later he would experiment with morphin, peyotl, LSD and psylocibin. On occasions he would leave Edie and sleep around with other women, if not with men. In August 1944, he was arrested by the police. His friend Lucien Carr had killed David Kammerer, a homosexual who had been harassing him for years and who had attempted to rape him. Lucien Carr, crazed by what he had done, had sought help from Kerouac, who had helped him to get rid of the murder weapon, a knife, and to hide Kammerer's glasses. The next day, Lucien Carr had surrendered to the police, and Kerouac had been held as a material witness. He did not have the money for his bail, and his father, who had been angry with him for a long time, refused to help. Léo could not understand why Jack did not want to get a job, and he did not like to see his son living with a woman to whom he was not married. Edie's family agreed to pay the bail money provided they were married first. Jack was let out of jail under police guard so that they could get married, the bail money was paid, and Jack was released the day after. He then had to go with his bride to Grosse Pointe, Michigan, and to work in the Fruehauf factories to reimburse the bail money which had been advanced to him. In October, he was able to return to New York. He resumed work on his novel *The Sea is my Brother*, and to start a new one which eventually became *The Town and the City*. In 1945 he started another novel in collaboration with William Burroughs on a new novel, *And the Hippos were boiled in their Tanks*, which was completed in 1946. The title came from a newscast about a fire in the Saint-Louis' zoo. The plot had to do with Kammerer's murder. Kerouac also earned some money working for Columbia Pictures. His father had been diagnosed with cancer, and before he died he made Jack promise that he would look after his mother. Jack promised, but it would be she who would have to look after him all of his life. Edie had left him: he drank a little too much, he did drugs, and there were too many other women.

In December 1945, Neal Cassady arrived in New York accompanied by his wife Lu Ann, a 16 year old teen ager. They came from Denver. Neal immediately became Jack's closest friend, as well as the model for Dean Moriarty, the protagonist of Kerouac's masterpiece, *On the Road*, and of Cody Pomeray, the hero of another book, *Visions of Cody*. In early March 1947,

Neal and Lu Ann returned home, and in July Jack followed them to Denver. He had no money, and he lived off friends whom he had known in New York. Neal shared his time between his wife and his girl friend Carolyn, whom he later married. Jack continued on his way across the continent until San Francisco, where a buddy had promised him work on a ship, but the job did not materialize. For a few weeks, he worked as guard for Morrison and Knudsen, and went on to Los Angeles where he met a Mexican girl. They lived together for a short while, picking up some money working in the fields, until his mother sent him money to come back East. At the end of October he was in New York, leading his old life, drinking, drugs, women and night clubs. He wrote, and his novel *The Town and the City* was nearly completed by April 1948. In the fall of 1948, Kerouac started courses at the New School for Social Research. His tuition, plus 75 dollars per month for living expenses, was paid for by his GI benefits, which he received although he had been thrown out of the Navy.

Kerouac had gone with his mother to spend Christmas of 1948 with his sister and his brother-in-law in Rocky Mount, North Carolina, when they received a surprise visit from Neal Cassady, Lu Anne (they were divorced, but Neal had left his second wife Carolyn at the time), and another friend. Kerouac returned with them to New York, and, on January 19, 1949, they left together for a journey which would take them to New Orleans, Texas, Arizona and San Francisco, where Neal abandoned them to return to his wife Carolyn. Jack and Lu Anne became lovers. *On the Road* is based on trips of this kind. Kerouac returned by train to New York, where he was by the second week of February.

*The Town and the City* had eventually been accepted by Harcourt Brace, and Jack had received a \$1000 advance, enough, he thought, to enable him to settle in Denver with his mother, his sister and his brother-in-law, but neither his mother, nor his sister, nor his brother-in-law like Denver, and they returned to North Carolina. Jack decided to go to San Francisco, where Neal Cassady had settled, and they returned together to New York, driving through Sacramento, Denver, Chicago, and Grosse Pointe, where they spent a few days with Kerouac's wife, Edie. Jack and Edie came to a decision: they would get their marriage annulled, a process which was completed the year after. At the end of August, Jack and Neal were back in New York, where Neal promptly found a mistress who, shortly thereafter, was pregnant. Thus were they, always on the go, unable to stick to a single woman. Never was Kerouac able to find a woman with whom he could live happily ever after. He married three times, had many mistresses, not to mention countless whores and, once in a while, homosexual experiences (oral sex only, as he often was to emphasize). Many women did their best to please him, but none could live very long with his drunkenness, his drugs, his fits of anger, his depressions, and his womanizing. Never could he stay long with any woman. He could not even assume the responsibility for the child he had had by his second wife. They had gotten married on December 17, 1950, and six months later they were separated. When their baby daughter was born, Jack refused to recognize her as his child, although it soon became obvious that she looked like him. Jack Kerouac did make several attempts at settling down for good, in Denver, in Rocky Mount, in Orlando, in Saint-Petersburg, on Long Island, in Hyannis, in Lowell: each time something went wrong. Throughout his life he kept crossing and recrossing the continent from coast to coast and from border to border, from New York to San Francisco, from Montréal to New Orleans, from Mexico to Chicago, not to

mention trips to England, to France, to Morocco, to Italy, to Spain and to Germany. Nowhere could his restless spirit find peace.

Kerouac had abandoned the faith of his childhood. At that time, Catholicism, among French Canadians, was often austere, puritanical, and bigoted, much as it was also in Ireland and in Brittany. Many hated the Jews because they believed them to be guilty of Christ's crucifixion. Although Kerouac no longer practiced his mother's religion, he kept searching for a new faith. Around 1954, he was attracted to Bouddhism, but after a few years he tired of its teachings. In 1957, during a stay in Morocco, he was impressed by the strong faith of Berber villagers. He felt attracted to Islam, but the attraction did not last long. In point of fact, one thing only retained its value for him all of his life: literature.

Kerouac was only twelve when he started to write his first novel, and he never stopped writing until the day he died. We have seen that he had written his first major work, the collection of short stories *Atop an Underwood*, in 1942. In 1943, after his discharge from the Navy, during his crossings of the Atlantic on the S.S. *George Weems*, he had started work on his novel *The Sea is my Brother*. He had read *The Forsythe Saga*, and he had thought of writing a series of novels which would have the legend of his life as a connecting theme. He had continued to work on *The Sea is my Brother* in New York, in 1944, and he had started another novel, *The Town and the City*, based on his childhood in Lowell, renamed "Galloway" in the book, and on his college experience. In 1945 he had begun to collaborate with Burroughs on another work, *And the Hippos were boiled in their Tanks*, a work inspired by the story of Lucien Carr and David Kammerer. *The Town and the City* was nearly completed by April 1948. The manuscript was offered to Scribner's, but it was not accepted. This was to be the fate of many other manuscripts. For many years, Kerouac would meet with disappointment after disappointment at the hands of the publishers to whom he sent his works. After Scribner's, he had turned to Harcourt Brace, and *The Town and the City*, as I mentioned earlier, had come out on March 2, 1950: it had not been received with praise. No major critic understood the book, and Kerouac, after this failure, would have trouble finding publishers for years to come. He had begun *On the Road* in 1948, and he rewrote it three times before it was finally completed in May 1951. The book was not accepted for publication until July 1955, by Viking, and it did not come out until September 5, 1957.

In the meantime, Kerouac kept writing. He spent hours at his desk, something which was painful for him because of his phlebitis. Things went better with his legs when a hobo whom he had met during his travels taught him how to improve the blood flow in his legs: he only had to stand on his head for a few minutes every day. So as not to have to change sheets in his typewriter, he used a huge roll of paper. He could type as fast as a professional typist, a skill he had learned as teenager on the linotype machine in his father's shop. Between 1942 and his death, in 1968, he wrote more than twenty books, not to mention numerous magazine articles, the film script *Pull my Daisy*, TV appearances, and countless interviews. He found his inspiration in his life, in his relationships with people, with his family, his friends, and his women. His protagonists, the Martin brothers, Sal Paradise, Leo Percepied, Ray Smith, or Jackie Duluoz, are only reflections of his personality. He devoted most of his time to his writing. He never took a steady job. Occasionally, he would work for a few months to earn a few dollars, as a brakeman



for the railroads or as a fireguard in the national forests of the Northeast, or he sold an article to a magazine. He often was housed and fed by his mother or by friends. From December 18, 1951 to the end of April 1952, for instance, he lived with Neal and Carolyn Cassady in San Francisco. With Neal's help, he was hired by the railroads. It was at this time that Carolyn, with her husband's permission, became Jack's mistress: Neal, apparently, thus found it easier to pursue other women.

In 1951 and 1952, after completing *On the Road*, Jack wrote three other novels: *Visions of Cody*, *Doctor Sax*, and *October on the Railroad Earth*. Cody Pomeray is the name Kerouac (Jackie Duluoaz in *Visions of Cody*) gave to Neal Cassady in this work. He describes Cody's childhood in Denver, and his friendship with him. In *Doctor Sax*, Kerouac returns to his own childhood in Lowell. Jackie Duluoaz pictures the world of fantasy inspired by films like *Nosferatu*, *Trader Horn*, *The Wizard of Oz*, and magazines like *The Shadow*. *October in the Railroad Earth* (first titled "Wine in the Railroad Earth") is based on his experiences while working for the railroad. In 1953, he finished *Maggie Cassidy*, a novel based on his love for Mary Carney. Shortly after he made the acquaintance of the woman who became the main character of his novel *The Subterraneans*, Mardou Fox. The affair lasted only one month, August 1953. In October, Kerouac typed up their story in three days only, with the help of benzedrin. The protagonist loves Mardou, but, like Kerouac himself, he is unable to devote his life to her, and he pushes her into the arms of another man, the poet Yuri (the name given by Kerouac to the man who took his place in the woman's heart, Gregory Corso).

At the end of January 1954, Kerouac left for California. He read about Bouddhism, and shortly after he wrote poems inspired by the masters of the haiku, Basho, Issa, and Shiki. In San Francisco, he completed the first part of the collection *San Francisco Blues*, which was to become the initial section of *The Book of Blues*, a series of poems inspired by other places, Mexico, Berkeley, Orlando, and Washington, D.C. He also wrote *The Book of Dreams*, a journal in which he described his dreams. He returned to New York January 1955, and he looked for publishers for his manuscripts. In May, he left for Mexico, where he wrote the first part of *Tristessa*, the story of his love for an Indian girl who had become a prostitute in order to buy drugs. Morphine was her only remedy for her sufferings. Her real name was "Esperanza", but Kerouac changed it to "Tristessa", since she had become for him the symbol of the sadness of human destiny. The second part of the novel was completed one year later, in 1956. Kerouac, during the summer of 1955, had also written *Mexico City Blues*, probably his best poems ever. The basic theme is the struggle between the artist's love for the beauty of creation and the equanimity before human suffering which is the goal of Bouddhist wisdom.

On September 9 1955, Kerouac returned to San Francisco where he met a new friend, Gary Snyder. Gary had studied Buddhism for many years (he later became a Zen monk in Japan), and his influence on Kerouac's mind and writings was quite strong at that time. Under the name of Japhy Ryder, he was a main character in Kerouac's novel *The Dharma Bums*. In December 1955, Kerouac returned to his sister's home in Rocky Mount, North Carolina, to spend Christmas with his family. While there, in a few weeks, with the help of benzedrin, he wrote *Visions of Gerard*. The book was finished by January 16, 1956. The theme is similar to that of *Mexico City Blues*. Gerard, in spite of his suffering, had been able to love life and to find joy in it. The artist,

through his work, must also overcome separation and loss.

On January 17 1956, Kerouac returned to California. In Gary Snyder's cabin in Marin County, he wrote *The Scripture of the Golden Eternity*, in the form of a sutra. In this work, Kerouac expounds his theories on the human spirit, on the origin of language, and on literature. He also wrote "Lucien Midnight", which was later published under the title *Old Angel Midnight*, a conversation between the writer and his accusers. The writer defends the value of art, and his accusers claim art is only an illusion, a lie.

On May 5 1956, Gary Snyder left for Japan, and Kerouac began his work for the National Forest Service on June 25. He spent two months on Desolation Peak, in Mount Baker National Forest, Washington, near the Canadian border. He watched for forest fires, and communicated with headquarters by means of a radio. At the end of the summer he returned to San Francisco. Then he went back to Mexico where he spent two months, completing *Tristessa* and starting *Desolation Angels*, a novel based on his experiences on Desolation Peak and in San Francisco. By the end of November 1956, he was back in New York. He went to spend Christmas with his family in his sister's new home in Orlando. (Florida), and on February 15, 1957 he sailed to Tangiers, where his friend Burroughs had gone to live. During an excursion to a village in the mountains, he was struck by the Berbers' deep and humble faith. While in Tangiers, he began work on a novel inspired by the months he had spent with Gary Snyder, *The Dharma Bums*. On April 5 he left for Marseilles. In Paris, he met Gregory Corso, and he returned to New York on the S.S. *Nieuw Amsterdam*. On May 5, 1957 he was on the road again: he crossed the continent from Orlando to Berkeley by bus. His mother was with him. They did not like life in California and they returned to Orlando in mid-July, but Jack could not stand the heat and humidity, and he left for Mexico a few days later, on the 23. In August he returned to New York. *On the Road* had finally been published. The novel was condemned by the critics, but readers loved it. Because of this success, Kerouac did not find it quite as difficult to find publishers. Never, however, did he make money like other writers of the time, Gore Vidal, Truman Capote, or Mickey Spillane. Kerouac, with *On the Road*, had gained money and fame, and women offered themselves to him by the thousands, but he was unable to cope with his new fame. He had always drunk a good deal of beer, wine, and whisky, but he got drunk more and more often. In bars, he got into fights. Occasionally, alcohol abuse made him impotent. In October, he went to Orlando where, in spite of all the whisky he consumed, he wrote the poems of "Orlando Blues" and completed *The Dharma Bums* between the end of October and the beginning of November 1957. At the end of December he returned to New York, where he resumed his life of alcohol, drugs, and women. He returned to Florida at the beginning of January. *The Subterraneans* came out at the end of February, and Jack returned to New York. The critics were as bad as ever. Shortly thereafter, he received bad news from his friend Neal Cassady: Neal had been sent to jail for five years: he had been charged with selling marijuana.

Kerouac had bought an old house in North Port, Long Island, for his mother and himself, but he spent a large part of his time in New York. On occasions he went on drinking binges which lasted five or six days. He also did whatever writers do to improve book sales: newspaper and magazine interviews, TV appearances, lectures and readings at colleges and universities, etc. *The Dharma Bums* came out in October 1958, but the critics were not nicer than before. At the

beginning of 1959, Kerouac collaborated on the film *Pull my daisy*. The French actress Delphine Seyrig played the part of Carolyn Cassady, and Kerouac improvised the narration. *Doctor Sax* was published at the end of April, and the critics did their usual hatchet job. They struck again after the publication of *Maggie Cassidy*, in July. Kerouac sought solace in alcohol and in other drugs like LSD. In November, he was invited to take part in a TV debate in Los Angeles, and he went on to San Francisco before returning to New York. The poetry collection *Mexico City Blues* had come out in October, and the critics had been ready with their poisonous pens. *Visions of Cody*, *The Scripture of the Golden Eternity* and *Tristessa* were published in early 1960, but things did not go better for Kerouac. His friend Lawrence Ferlinghetti offered him his seashore cabin in Big Sur for the summer, and Kerouac accepted immediately. He did not stay long: three weeks only. He needed bars and drinking companions. Neal Cassady had been freed after two years. Kerouac returned to the cabin with friends, and suffered an attack of delirium tremens. The events of this summer are the subject of his book *Big Sur*.

In spite of his bout of delirium tremens, Kerouac volunteered for Timothy Leary's experiments with psilocybin in January 1961. In August, he sold the house on Long Island and bought another one in Orlando, near his sister's. At the end of June, in Mexico, he finished *Desolation Angels*, the book based on his experience on Desolation Peak, and the poems "Cerrada Medellín Blues" (he was living in an apartment on Cerrada de Medellín). He returned to Florida at the end of August, and, in early September, with the help of benzedrin, he wrote *Big Sur* in ten nights. *Big Sur*, like *Desolation Angels*, consists of reflexions on evil, madness, and death, as well as of parts of the legend of his life. The summer of 1962, in Florida, was hot and humid, as it usually is. Kerouac, by then, was drinking a quart of whisky or more a day. His mother sent him to visit his friend John Clellon Holmes in Old Saybrook, Connecticut. Jack went on to Lowell to see the friends of his youth. *Big Sur* had been published, and the critics had behaved as usual. In December 1962, Kerouac and his mother returned to live in Northport, Long Island, in a new house. In spite of his troubles with delirium tremens, Jack continued to drink. *Visions of Gerard*, which came out in September 1963, received the usual welcome from Kerouac's critics. Things were as bad in Northport as they had been in Florida, and Kerouac's mother decided to return to Florida, but to another city, Saint-Petersburg, in August 1964. Kerouac had started work on *Vanity of Duloz*. On September 19, when he returned home, he found his mother crying: his sister had died of a heart attack. Her husband had left her for another woman. *Desolation Angels* came out on May 3, 1965, bringing no change in the critics' behavior.

On September 1st, Kerouac boarded a plane for Paris. He wanted to search for his ancestral roots. His search did not last long: he spent a good deal of his time in bars and with whores, and he returned home when he had spent the 1,500 dollars he had with him. The story of his stay in Paris and of his trip to Brittany is to be found in his *Satori in Paris*. In mid-November 1965, Kerouac drove to Lowell with two friends, passing through Albany and Cambridge. He was going to sell his house in Saint-Petersburg and return to live in New England. The house was sold in March 1966, and another one bought in Hyannis. He spent his time drinking and holding long phone conversations with his friends. In the summer, he had many visitors. Youenn Gwernig, the Breton poet, was one of them. Youenn Gwernig, as he has explained in the

introduction to his recent collection *An Dornad Plu* (Brest: Al Liamm, 1997), had made Kerouac's acquaintance in New York the year before, and Kerouac had asked him to write English versions of his poems so that he could read them. One of these poems, "Emvod" (Reunion), was inspired by their friendship.

Kerouac's mother suffered a stroke on September 9 1966. She remained partly paralyzed and could not get out of bed without help. Jack called up Stella Stampas, the sister of his old friend from Lowell, Sam Sampas. He was scheduled to go to Italy, where his Italian publisher, Mondadori, had arranged for TV appearances. Kerouac, after Sam Sampas' death in World War II, had remained close to the Sampas family, to his brothers Charlie, Tony and Nicky, and to his sister Stella. On November 11 1966, Jack married Stella Stampas. They decided to settle in Lowell, where Stella would look after his mother. Stella tried hard to put some order in her husband's life, without much success. He kept on drinking. He was able, however, to complete the novel *Vanity of Duluoaz* in May 1967. The book came out on February 6 1968, and the critics behaved as usual, although it deserves to be placed among the best books ever written. This must have been Kerouac's worst disillusion: the critics, until the end of his life, kept denying any literary or artistic value to his writings.

Neal Cassady had died in Mexico at the beginning of February. He had been found unconscious near the railroad tracks. Apparently, he had taken sleeping pills along with whisky, and he died in the hospital. The death of his old friend was a blow to Kerouac, who kept on drinking more than ever. In March, he decided to go for ten days in Europe with his brothers-in-law Tony and Nick, and with two other friends. They went through Lisbon, Geneva, Munich and Stuttgart. Kerouac kept getting drunk and spending his money on whores. His mother did not like Lowell and wanted to return to Florida. Kerouac bought a house in Saint-Petersbourg, to which they moved in September. He went to the local bars, and occasionally got into fights with other drinkers. He had, however, begun another novel, *Pic*, on the life of a black orphan named Pictorial Review Jackson. Pic's brother becomes a jazz saxophonist. This figure may well have been inspired by jazz musicians whom Kerouac had known, Lester Young or Charlie Parker. On July 19 1969, on a Sunday, Kerouac started to vomit blood. He died two days later in the hospital. Alcohol had damaged his liver and his stomach beyond any possibility of recovery.

Thirty years have gone by since Kerouac's death, and he has now taken his rightful place in the history of American literature, along with writers like Melville, Thoreau, Whitman, Jack London, Thomas Wolfe, and Henry Miller. The historical value of his works is fully recognized. Books like *On the Road* and *The Dharma Bums* shaped the consciousness of entire generations: Beatniks, hippies, flower children, the youths portrayed in such films as *Easy Rider*, *Woodstock* and *Alice's Restaurant*. Kerouac's literary influence has not been less important. He has greatly contributed to change the literary canon. Most of the critics who were so hard on him during his lifetime saw him only as the leader of the Beat Generation. They had only contempt for the Beatniks. They did not consider him as an artist, as a writer whose style deserved close study. It is true that many of his works were improvised, but improvisation and artistic form are not necessarily incompatible. Kerouac had great respect for painters who had been close friends of his, Jackson Pollock, Franz Kline and Willem de Kooning, as well as for jazz musicians like Lester Young and Charlie Parker. When Jackson Pollock let his paints flow over the canvas, he

did not do so haphazardly: the paints were chosen with care, the painting was contained within the limits of the canvas, and the movement of the hand holding the paints followed a certain rhythm. A jazz musician's improvisation also takes into account the rhythm provided by the drums and the bass. Kerouac's writings, like Pollock's paintings and jazz improvisations, have their framing limits and their rhythm. Attention must be paid, for instance, to the similarities and the contrasts between the opening and the closure, to the intermittent recurrence of themes, to the symbolic use of details: the weather (sun or rain?), the lighting (day, night, neon?), the surroundings (big city, countryside, sea, forest, mountain?), the location (Lowell, New York City, Denver, Mexico, San Francisco, Paris?), the streets (Organo, the street of prostitutes in Mexico, or Larimer, the street of bums and winos in Denver?), the colors (red like the bricks of a factory, or golden like the body of an Indian girl?), the allusions (and there are many of them: to Goethe, Blake, Mark Twain, Melville, Thoreau, Whitman, Thomas Wolfe, Dostoevsky, Rimbaud, Proust, Céline, etc; to films like *Les Enfants du Paradis*, *Nosferatu*, *La Grande Illusion*, and pictures of W.C. Fields and Groucho Marx; to Buddhist writings such as *Diamond Sutra*, *Surangama Sutra*, *Lankavana Scripture*, *Tao-Teh-King*).

What I personally find most important in the works of Kerouac, however, is his tragic vision of man's fate. It is quite close, in my opinion, to the essence of the tragic as it has been represented by the ancient Greeks. This, I believe, is indicated by the name selected by Kerouac for the protagonist of the novel *The Subterraneans*, Percepiéd. The name refers to the title of the Greek drama *Oidipous Turannos*. Oidipous, as we know, was left to die in the wilderness. His feet had been pierced so as to hang him from a tree. Oidipous could not avoid his fate. He did not want to kill his father or sleep with his mother, but his efforts to escape were to no avail. Sophocles used Oidipous' fate to awaken terror and pity in the souls of the audience. A man, even the most powerful of kings, is nothing but a toy in the hands of the gods. There is a considerable difference, however, between Kerouac and Sophocles. Kerouac's protagonists must assume responsibility for what happens to them. For Kerouac, money, honors, and even love, were only vain and empty things. Doubtless, he felt guilty about his failure to do what he should have for his father, his mother, his wives, his child, and the women who had loved him, but he had chosen another road. He even did not care about his own health in spite of the fact that doctors had warned him that a blood clot caused by his phlebitis might block a blood vessel in his brain or a coronary artery, and he did not stop drinking although he knew full well that his liver and his stomach lining would suffer severe damage from his abuse of alcohol. For Kerouac, the road to art passed through self-destruction. This is made quite clear in such novels as *Maggie Cassidy* and *The Subterraneans*. The protagonist of *Maggie Cassidy*, Jackie Duluoz, has left the woman he loved. He has chosen a hole in the night instead of the gold of life, because he wanted to sacrifice his life on the altar of art. And he hero of *The Subterraneans*, Leo Percepiéd, has lost the woman he loves because of his destructive flaw, his *hamartia*, to use the word of the ancient Greeks. Here are the final sentences of the novel: "And I go home, having lost her love. / And write this book." The artist has gambled and lost everything so that the work may rise above destruction, death, and nothingness. Did Kerouac believe that he could find salvation in art? The title chosen for the final book in the legend of his life, *Vanity of Duluoz*, makes it doubtful. The title is obviously borrowed from *Ecclesiastes*: "Vanity of vanities; all is vanity." For Kerouac,

everything turned out to be vanity: honors, love, life, and perhaps also, eventually, art.

For us Bretons, one important aspect of Kerouac's works remains to be examined: his Breton roots. His father took pride in being descended from a Breton nobleman, the Baron François-Louis-Alexandre de K rouac, and K rouac himself often mentions his ancestor. As I indicated in the beginning of this article, he provided a number of fanciful etymologies for his name. Here are a couple more, which I located in his novel *Vanity of Duluoz*: Kerouac *-ker* (house) *-ouac* (language): language of the house", and "Kernuak *-cairn* (stone) *-uak* (language): language of stone". "We are Breton and Cornish", says the author. On the sea-shore, the protagonist enjoys "the fresh Breton air" (*Vanity of Duluoz*. New York: Coward-McCann, 1967, pp. 97, 111-112, 128, 180, 186, 232, 247-248, 257). In *Visions of Cody*, first published in 1960, K rouac also mentions "my Celtic blood". The title *Vanity of Duluoz* had been at first *Vanity of Daoulas*. "Daoulas" is the name of a Breton town. The name is also phonetically similar to "De louse". In *Big Sur*, the protagonist shouts: "I am a Breton, I cry, and the blackness speaks back: '*Les poissons de la mer parlent Breton*'" (*Big Sur*. New York: Farrar, Strauss and Cudahy, 1963, p. 33). The same declaration appears in the conclusion: "*Les poissons de la mer parlent Breton -- Mon nom est Lebris de Keroack*." (p. 220). Kerouac, when he went to Paris at the beginning of 1965, wanted to search for documents kept at the *Archives nationales* and at the *Biblioth que Mazarine*, especially for the following works: *Histoire g n alogique de plusieurs maisons illustres de Bretagne*, published in 1620 by the Reverend Father Augustin du Paz, and *Histoire de la maison royale de France, des pairs, grands officiers de la couronne et de la maison royale et des anciens barons du royaume*, published by the Reverend Father Anselme in 1674. K rouac has described his efforts to locate these volumes in *Satori in Paris* (New York: Grove Books, 1966). He failed but he did find the following note in the *Armorial g n ral* of J.-B. Riestap. Suppl ment par V.-H. Rolland: "**LEBRIS DE K ROACK. Canada, originaire de Bretagne. D'azur au chevron d'or accompagn  de trois clous d'argent. D.:AIMER, TRAVAILLER ET SOUFFRIR.**" A most fitting motto, he thought, for his lineage as well as for himself. Readers will also find in *Satori in Paris* a rather funny encounter between Kerouac and the French railroad employee who announced the names of the stations to the passengers on the train. The conductor in the station of Saint-Brieuc, had pronounced: "Saint-Brieu!". Kerouac thought that the letter C should have been pronounced K, as it is in Celtic languages in such words as Carnac, Carney, Kennedy [original Gaelic spelling: *Cinneide*], for example. He had corrected the conductor's pronunciation, shouting: "Saint-Brieuck!" The conductor had shouted back: "Brrieu!", and Kerouac: "Brieuck!". The shouting match had gone on for a while: "Brieu!" -- "Brieuck!" -- "Brieu!" -- "Brieuck!" This must have been a comic scene, worthy of a film by the Marx Brothers.

Kerouac had spent only two or three days in Brittany. He had met with a Monsieur Lebris who had made a genealogical study of the Lebris de Keroack, but he did not have any new information. Kerouac had spent nearly all his money in bars and with whores, and he flew straight back to Florida. He did not explain clearly what kind of *satori* he experienced in Paris, on the way to the airport, as he talked with the cab driver, a Breton. He may have come to realize that the nobility of his Breton ancestors was only, after all, another vanity among all the vanities of Duluoz.

## Bibliography

### I. Works by Kerouac.

- The Town and the City* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1950)  
*On the Road* (New York: Viking Press, 1957)  
*The Subterraneans* (New York: Grove Press, 1958)  
*The Dharma Bums* (New York: Viking Press, 1958)  
*Doctor Sax* (New York: Grove Press, 1959)  
*Mexico City Blues* (New York: Grove Press, 1959)  
*Old Angel Midnight*, Big Table, vol. I, (Spring 1959)  
*Maggie Cassidy* (New York: Avon Press, 1959)  
*The Scripture of the Golden Eternity* (New York: Totem / Corinth, 1960)  
*Tristessa* (New York: Avon Books, 1960)  
*Lonesome Traveler* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1960)  
*Book of Dreams* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1961)  
*Pull my Daisy* (New York: Grove Press, 1961)  
*Big Sur* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1962)  
*Visions of Gerard* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1963)  
*Desolation Angels* (New York: Coward-McCann, 1965)  
*Satori in Paris* (New York: Grove Press, 1966)  
*Vanity of Duluo* (New York: Coward-McCann, 1968)  
*Pic* (New York: Grove Press, 1971)  
*Scattered Poems* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1971)  
*Visions of Cody* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1972)  
*Two early Stories* (New York: Aloe Editions, 1973)  
*Heaven and Other Poems* (Bolin, California: Grey Fox Press, 1977)

### II. Studies on Kerouac

I have made considerable use of the following works. It will be noted that all of them were published years after the death of Kerouac.

- Anna CHARTERS: *The portable Jack Kerouac* (New York: Viking, 1975)  
Anna CHARTERS: *Kerouac. A Biography* (San Francisco: Straight Arrow Books, 1973)  
Tom CLARK: *Jack Kerouac* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1984)  
Warren FRENCH: *Jack Kerouac* (Boston: Twayne, 1986)  
Roger HEINREICH: *The spontaneous fiction of Jack Kerouac* (New York: Paragon House, 1990)  
Tim HUNT: *Kerouac's Crooked Road* (Hamden, Connecticut: Archon Books, 1981)  
Gerald NICOSIA: *Memory Babe. A Critical Biography of Jack Kerouac* (New York: Grove Press, 1983)  
Translated from Reun ar C'halan, "Jack Kerouac: touelloù ha disouezheadennoù". *Al Liamm*, no 305 (1995), pp. 518-538