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Exploration of Spirituality in Jack Kerouac's *The Dharma Bums*

Abstract: This paper endeavours to advance new readings of Jack Kerouac's *The Dharma Bums* in a contemporary cultural and literary context. It is specifically dealt with a deconstructive study of his writing and preoccupied with his negotiations of spirituality within the structure of Post-War America's accelerated culture. Kerouac's liability to the modernist approaches after all, this paper contends that in its thematic and historical engrossments Kerouac's writing is evidently proficient with postmodern approaches. It also traces the narrator's search for spiritual enlightenment as portrayed in *The Dharma Bums* which engages with a discussion of Buddhism as a possible means of spiritual salvation. Having foregrounded the novel's Buddhist concerns, the study looks at the ways in which the idea of spiritual salvation through Buddhism poses a challenge to conventional patterns of western thought. Creating the mutual understanding between Buddhism and deconstructive doctrines, how the two interact in an analysis of *The Dharma Bums*.

Keywords: Spirituality, Buddhism, Postmodern, Enlightenment, Exploration

Jack Kerouac, an architect of the Beat Generation, is bankrolled as an image of Post-War independence and plentiful opportunities in America, a forerunner of the cultural transformation of the 1960s. As a pioneer of the Beats, Kerouac uses drugs both as a social declaration of insurgency and for creative acumen. In effective conversation with his contemporary America, Kerouac focuses on the cultural trends of his time while simultaneously anticipating social progressions and philosophical deliberations that would be thoroughly enunciated in the following years. His novels evince textual tensions that reflect the uncertainty of his era, expressed in the desire to abide by fixed points of reference, while at the same time recognizing the problems such a desire implies in a post-war American context of rapid cultural transformations. Kerouac's novels address these challenges, hinting towards and demonstrating a postmodern sensibility. Without losing view of the late 1940s and 1950s backdrop from which Kerouac's writings evolved, this paper examines the methods in which his linguistic, thematic and structural concerns interplay with current approaches. Pursuing the Kerouacian narrator's problematization of the search for meaning in an accelerating culture, it analyses his writing in a Post-War circumstances of ambiguity and uncertainty. In effective conversation with his contemporary America, Kerouac focuses on and often confronts the predominant cultural customs of his time. Focusing the clashes of his time, he forestalls subsequent social progressions and metaphysical deliberations, gesturing towards and at times taking a postmodern responsiveness.

The novel, *The Dharma Bums*, is narrated by Ray Smith, who, together with friends Japhy Ryder and Henry Morley, embarks on a climbing expedition in quest for spiritual enlightenment; meanwhile, the reader is also offered glimpses of the characters' boisterous life in the city. Having foregrounded the difficulties that the quest for authentic experience engenders, Kerouac now sets out to explore definitions of spirituality in Cold War America,

and to establish the degree to which Buddhist practices of the time can lead to spiritual fulfilment. In *Jack Kerouac: A Biography*, Tom Clark observes that *The Dharma Bums* “was a more conventional work than anything Jack had published since *The Town and the City*” (172).

The novel’s title from the start indicates its Buddhist concerns. In *Subterranean Kerouac: The Hidden Life of Jack Kerouac*, Ellis Amburn says that the phrase “dharma [truth] bum” was given to Kerouac by Snyder” (223). *Dharma* is a central concept in Buddhism, as meaning variously, according to context, the way, the law, righteousness, reality. Although Buddhism had a strong influence on Kerouac for a certain period of time, eventually his interest waned. Amburn believes that Kerouac’s Buddhist phase ended in 1959. In “Enlightened Attachment: Kerouac’s Impermanent Buddhist Trek,” Benedict Giomo suggests “March 1956 (when he wrote his last entry)” as the date for Kerouac’s departure from Buddhist beliefs (88). At any rate, by 1960 Kerouac had become somewhat flippant about the whole Buddhist venture.

Predictably, Kerouac’s spiritual concerns are reflected in the prose he wrote during that period. *The Dharma Bums* therefore draws considerably on Buddhist terminology, and an exploration of the ways in which Buddhism is appropriated in the novel sheds useful light on the development of Ray Smith’s spiritual quest. As in the case of the novel’s creative statures, critical opinions also vary considerably with regard to its engagement with Buddhism. In *Memory Babe: A Critical Biography of Jack Kerouac*, Gerald Nicosia believes that the novel offers substantial guidance as to “how to live in this world as a Buddhist” (627), and Ann Charters in *Kerouac: A Biography* sees Ray Smith as “a committed seeker after truth” (8). In *The Dharma Bums*, Kerouac develops the social and cultural ideas of Buddhism, and the novel is the most epical, skilful, and far-reaching conjuration of the heart

of Buddhism that was available at that time. On the other hand, it has been quick to note Kerouac's religious pluralism

Adopting a more critical viewpoint, the narrator's resort to religious consolation is sentimentalized and remains unconvincing and the main characters' discussions of Buddhism as inconclusive palavering about Buddhist theory and practice. The novel extensively deals with notions of emptiness and the void, and evinces an attempt to explore these ideas from a Buddhist perspective. As we follow the narrator in his religious explorations, we can examine how his quest for spirituality in post-war America is influenced by these concepts. We can particularly concentrate on the narrator's interpretation of emptiness as spiritual experience and see how it functions in a Buddhist context. Ray Smith's preoccupation with concepts such as emptiness and the void will be examined alongside similar Buddhist considerations, as these largely inform his quest for spiritual enlightenment. In *The Dharma Bums* there are several references to Catholicism as well, for example when Ray Smith talks about "Buddha's peace under the Bo Tree [...] Christ's peace looking down on the heads of his tormentors and forgiving them" (169). An extensive discussion of the possible overlap between the two religions could yield interesting observations with regard to Kerouac's approaches to spirituality. However, in this paper we have chosen to deal with Buddhism, as the narrator of *The Dharma Bums* is for the most part engaged in discourse with a predominantly Buddhist discourse.

The Dharma Bums engages with spiritual concerns in a late 1950s American setting, exposing the problems implicit in a quest for spirituality in Cold War America. Writing within a social and historical context of ambiguity and uncertainty, Kerouac reflects on representations of spirituality in his times. In its preoccupation with Buddhism, *The Dharma Bums* comments on the Buddhist trends that were increasingly forceful at the time, examining the nature of American appropriations of Buddhism. Representations of Buddhism in the

novel explore the various complications that arise from the attempt to find firm spiritual bearings in Western appropriations of Eastern systems of religious belief. Trying to distance himself from conventional western patterns of thought, the narrator often engages in a discourse that anticipates western deconstructive strategies, which, as we will see, often share common ground with Buddhist thought. The textual tensions that subsequently arise from this narrative endeavour invite careful consideration as to the narrator's Buddhist aspirations.

The narrator of *The Dharma Bums* sets the tone for his involvement with Buddhism early on: "I didn't give a goddamn about the mythology and all the names and national flavours of Buddhism, but was just interested in the first of Sakyamuni's four noble truths, *All life is suffering*" (14). Despite this assertion, however, Ray Smith seems particularly preoccupied with Mahayana and Zen Buddhist concepts. His frequent reflections on the concept of desolation largely condition his quest for spirituality in the novel. Zen is a blend of Indian metaphysical abstraction, Taoist paradox and Confucian pragmatism that was further developed in Japan. It is a branch belonging to the permissive, many-sided Mahayana school of Buddhism. The narrator's acute interest in the concept of desolation invites a reading of the text against a Buddhist background, as the idea of emptiness is fundamental there too; therefore Buddhist, and in particular Mahayana and Zen texts, will be used where necessary to shed light on the progression of Smith's quest for spiritual guidance.

Kerouac himself was well-acquainted with Buddhist concepts, as an organized Buddhist sect already existed in America in his time. By the latter half of the fifties, the idea of Zen had become so popularized that it achieved the status of a fad. Kerouac's involvement with Buddhism began in 1953. Kerouac's discovery of Buddhism in the late winter of 1953 and spring of 1954 but nonetheless suggests that Kerouac had been exploring key Buddhist issues since *The Town and the City* without the background of Buddhism's rich traditions. Various explanations have been offered for Kerouac's interest in Buddhism. A philosophy

that began with the premise that all life is enduring helped him to make sense of his own situation. The issue of whether Kerouac was a conscientious Buddhist disciple has given acceleration to much discussion. Considerable debate has followed since Blackburn's statement that the conviction that Kerouac is really just a failed Catholic after all, and that his Buddhism is too emotional and too eccentric to merit serious consideration, discourages any attempt to explore the place of Buddhism in the pattern of his fiction.

The Dharma Bums displays a particular concern with the notion of emptiness, which in turn bears specific Buddhist resonances. The special emphasis that the narrator places on the role of the mind begs particular attention, as it foregrounds his conceptualization of emptiness. Ray Smith declares to his family that:

Your mind makes out the orange by seeing it, hearing it, touching it, smelling it, tasting it and thinking about it but without this mind, you call it, the orange would not be seen or heard or smelled or tasted or even mentally noticed, it's actually, that orange, depending on your mind to exist! Don't you see that? By itself it's a no-thing, it's really mental, and it's seen only of your mind. In other words, it's empty and awake. (122)

Smith uses the example of the orange to illustrate his perception of emptiness. The orange, representing a manifestation of the world as it is conventionally understood by the western mind, is here placed under a different conceptual angle. Negating its conventional existence, Smith sees it as being contingent upon the mind. Thus, it is empty of meaning, depending on the mind's interpretation of it. Denying the orange an autonomous existence, Smith anticipates deconstructionist approaches that theorize relativity and destabilization.

The Buddhist philosophy at odds with western metaphysics, and instead traces affinities with more recent developments that undermine representational thinking, finally acknowledging similarities between Zen and deconstruction, for instance in their perception

of identity as a particularly fluid concept. The publication of a number of researches that seek to draw parallels between various strands of Buddhism and deconstructive thinking is indicative of a substantial overlap between the two. Similarly, Kerouac's interest in emptiness is significantly informed by a deconstructive mentality that challenges conventional representation, as is suggested by the example of the orange the narrator provides. Smith's projection of the image of the orange bears similarities to the Zen perception of emptiness. The novel displays a strong preoccupation with the notion of emptiness, and Ray Smith soon pronounces that form is emptiness and emptiness is form and we are here forever in one form or another which is empty.

The inconsistency between the characters' interpretations of Buddhism and their subsequent Buddhist pronouncements infuses their Buddhist appropriations with considerable irony, and the contradictory approaches to Buddhism in *The Dharma Bums* ultimately constitute a vivid illustration of and forceful comment upon Cold War America's negotiation of expressions of spirituality that diverge from its own signifying patterns. Prompted by the narrator's proclamations of faith in the positive quality of emptiness, most critics have read *The Dharma Bums* as a quest that results in the attainment of Buddhist enlightenment. In "Han Shan Gets Drunk with the Butchers: Kerouac's Buddhism in *On the Road*, *The Dharma Bums* and *Desolation Angels*," William Blackburn, for example, believes that up on the mountaintop Smith's "isolation has finally given him an insight into the voidness of all phenomena, including his own existence, and so he has achieved the union of *prajna* (insight) and *karuna* (compassion) that characterizes true enlightenment" (17). The novel's recourse to traditional western patterns of thought reveals much confusion on the narrator's part. Ray Smith here interprets Buddhism in a manner that contradicts his earlier approach, and considerable tension is generated by the opposing viewpoints expressed in *The Dharma Bums*. Although there is an attempt to approach Buddhist spirituality, this gesture remains

partial and incomplete. *The Dharma Bums* evinces a multitude of forceful textual contradictions, stemming from the narrator's contradictory perspectives. There are instances when through his articulation of a proto-deconstructionist discourse Smith seems to achieve an approach to Buddhist emptiness that can open the way to spiritual enlightenment. At other times, his proto-deconstructionist gestures are firmly positioned within the boundaries of western discourse. Moreover, there are occasions when traditional patterns of western thought prevail, reflecting Cold War America's response to systems that do not conform to its own signifying patterns. This variety of approaches intensifies textual tensions and exposes the degree of the narrator's disorientation when confronted with the spiritual vacuum of post-war America's effort to come to grips with historical processes that inaugurate a status of ambiguity and uncertainty. Such contradictions destabilize the narrative of *The Dharma Bums*, evincing a significant degree of dislocation instigated by the experience of emptiness. The idea of spiritual salvation through Buddhism thus becomes highly problematic; inconclusively fluctuating between western metaphysics and Buddhism, the narrator recognizes the vacuity of his spiritual quest.

In *The Dharma Bums* Buddhism is at times straightforwardly questioned on the level of plot, and the language and style of the novel similarly challenge Buddhist principles. Repeated parodies have a disruptive effect on the search for an insightful understanding of Buddhist emptiness, and eventually demonstrate that there is no solace to be found there. The narrator cannot find spiritual comfort in *śūnyatā* and achieve *satori* illumination, and the modifications and re-adjustments of Buddhist dictums and terminology effectively illustrate the inconclusiveness of Smith's religious quest. Misappropriations of Buddhist concepts, misunderstandings, language play, irony and parody all operate against a background of western logic. Although in his articulations of a proto-deconstructive discourse Smith

gestures towards a better understanding of Buddhism, he nonetheless remains bound within western conceptual frameworks that prevent him from fully embracing the Buddhist edifice.

One of Smith's ultimate goals is returning to the origin. However, the narrator does not arrive either at a spiritually comforting origin or a meaningful spiritual edifice. Rather, through parodying his narrator's efforts to be enlightened, Kerouac problematizes Cold War America's spiritual explorations and advances a forceful critique on its hegemonic attitude towards Eastern expressions of spirituality. In his spiritual explorations the narrator often advances a proto-deconstructive approach which shares common ground with Buddhist thought, but for the most part remains firmly positioned within the boundaries of western discourse. The adoption of an Oriental mentality can serve as a response to western discursive patterns in *The Dharma Bums*. Kerouac advances a forceful critique of post-War America's spiritual disorientation as reflected in such attitudes, which furthermore render the idea of spiritual salvation through illumination.

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