

**Exile of the Beat King:
Eden, Moloch, and the Mythic American Journeys of Jack Kerouac**

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One and one-half wandering Jews
Free to wander wherever they choose
They are traveling together
in the Sangre de Cristo
the Blood of Christ Mountains
of New Mexico
--Paul Simon, "Hearts and Bones"¹

It was David Bevan who hit upon something especially poignant in his introduction to a collection of essays on exile in literature when he wrote that "exile within a place is often still more poignant than exile from a place or exile to a place. Exile, viscerally, is difference, otherness."² In attempting to explore the mythological legacy that is left to us in Beat literature, the essential hurdle for most critics to overcome is the fact that the Beats themselves were as immersed in as complex and resonant a mythology as the words they write: to drop the name of a Beat writer, especially one of "the triumvirate of principal male Beat writers—Allen Ginsberg, William S. Burroughs, and Jack Kerouac,"³ is to address, by means of synecdoche, this whole immense mythology in all its carnivalistic glory. Even to unite these names under the banner of Beat is to mythologize them. Kerouac especially found the sociocultural myth of the "Beat Generation" paralyzing to his literary voice. Ronna Johnson, among others, has claimed that "Kerouac's writing is 'secret' because his immense cultural visibility foregrounds only itself... Kerouac's iconic mass culture celebrity is signified by the media-driven 'image of Kerouac,' which is, in Kerouac's hipster argot, a 'put on' or, in Jean Baudrillard's media theory, a simulacrum." In light of Johnson's comments on "mass culture" and "celebrity," and her archetypal definition of Kerouac as a "hipster," it should become clear that to talk about the "myths/mythology of the Beat writers" has never been quite accurate enough: such an expression, to say nothing of the school of thought that has generated it, conflates at least two separate and distinct concerns under one banner. By speaking of the "mythology of the Beat writers," we might be discussing the mythology that has sprung up *around* the Beat writers, the stories concerning their personae in the sphere of the mass media and their "real-life" exploits; or else we might be speaking of the mythology that has been created *by* the Beats through the writing and performance of their (generally fictive) works. This article deals primarily with the former interpretation of the phrase, with what I call the Beats' "external mythology" because it is generated from sources outside of the texts themselves, as opposed to an

¹ Paul Simon, *Hearts and Bones*, Warner Bros. Records, 1983.

² David Bevan, ed., *Literature and Exile* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2002), 3.

³ Ronna C. Johnson, "'You're Putting Me On': Jack Kerouac and the Postmodern Emergence," *College Literature*, 27:1 (Winter 2000): 22.

“internal” mythology that comes entirely from within the collective *oeuvre* of Beat literature.

Given the many parallels and close proximity of these two mythologies in the life and work of Jack Kerouac, the popular option for the study of his work has been to bridge the gap between the two by creating a “new” mythology that is a synthesis of both its parents. But this is a dangerous method of practicing literary criticism, since a near-seamless blend of the two is often impossible, and the external mythology of the Beats is not necessarily a self-generated one. This leads us to a difficult crossroads with Jack Kerouac, for a “purely literary” reading of his texts in feigned ignorance of the details of his life is also an unsatisfactory option for most twenty-first-century scholars: gone is much of the popular taste for T.S. Eliot’s famous claim that “[p]oetry . . . is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality” and that “[t]o divert interest from the poet to the poetry is a laudable aim.”⁴ Nevertheless, if we continue to reach for an understanding of the Beats that is founded in a synthesis of internal and external mythologies, we are treading on needlessly shaky critical ground until we can separate the two mythologies long enough to gain a better understanding of each. It is for this reason that I will now put aside the literature of the Beats for a closer, though perhaps artificially isolated, examination of the *external* myths of Kerouac and others.⁵ My hope is that a deeper understanding of how they operate in relation to the internal myths of Beat literature will make future studies of the synthesis of Beat mythology more rewarding.

But my approach is not without problems of its own. In Don DeLillo’s novel *White Noise*, for example, as two characters visit the “Most Photographed Barn in America,” one wryly remarks that “[o]nce you’ve seen the signs about the barn, it’s impossible to see the barn . . . only what the others see. The thousands who were here in the past, those who will come in the future. We’ve agreed to be part of a collective perception . . . We can’t get outside of the aura.”⁶ What DeLillo exposes through the “Most Photographed Barn in America” is, in Baudrillard’s language, a simulacrum, which, for all its tongue-in-cheek silliness, is structurally and formally identical to the simulacrum that Johnson identifies as the “image of Kerouac.” And the perils of the Barn transfer well to my study of the Beats: once we have seen the Beats’ signs⁷ and absorbed their

⁴ T.S. Eliot, “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” in *Critical Theory Since Plato*, ed. Hazard Adams, (Toronto: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1992), 764.

⁵ In this essay, I take careful pains not to quote Kerouac or refer to any of his works directly. I briefly refer to *On the Road* because the book has become an icon associated with the Kerouac myth, one as critical to the construction of the mythic hero as King Arthur’s Excalibur, Thor’s Mjolnir, or perhaps more appropriately to this perennial American troubadour, Dorothy’s ruby slippers. I have made every attempt to distance myself from the temptation to examine *Visions of Cody*, *Old Angel Midnight*, *Satori on Paris*, or any of his excellent work which has not been sufficiently sensationalized and absorbed into his mythic role as the symbolic figurehead of the Beat Generation.

⁶ Don DeLillo, *White Noise* (New York: Viking, 1985), 12-13.

⁷ DeLillo, of course, means the word “signs” literally in his novel, but even his crafty prose suggests that the word can also be used in the semiotic sense, referencing any sort of marker or symbol that stands in for the barn—or in our case, the Beats.

treatment (and maltreatment) by everyone from Steve Allen to the writers of *The Simpsons*,⁸ it becomes more and more difficult to read the Beats as literary figures—even the phrase “literary figures” suggests the elevated stature the Beats were (arguably) denied during their most productive years.

Johnson’s earlier comments, which effectively tie together notions of celebrity and simulacrum, are a particularly strong example of what seems to be a popular first-paragraph observation in papers on the Beats, and especially on Kerouac: that the immense presence of the Beat Generation as a cultural myth frequently overshadows their existence not only as human beings, but as writers of remarkable social relevance. What inevitably follows from the privileging of the “put on” or the mythologized Beat figure is what can be described spatially as an ousting or an exile of identity. This is especially significant in Kerouac’s case. Critics’ tendency to interrogate works like *On The Road* through the window of expressivism is, in Lacanian terms, a *méconnaissance*: In the case of Kerouac, when we look deep into the work and see the author, we are effectively misrecognizing and mistaking for our author an author-image of some external mythic design. If we describe Kerouac, as Aimée Mitchell does, as a “Beat King,”⁹ we must be aware not only that this itself is a mythologization, but that the “Beat King” of popular suppositions and American cultural fairy-tales is not an Old Hamlet but a Claudius. For all his resemblance to the human Kerouac, the mythic Kerouac is a false pretender who is, to this day, accorded equal status by virtue of his outward similarities to the original, which might, at best, be a slight family resemblance.

In the early days of the Beats’ fame, which came to a Blakean end-of-innocence with Kerouac’s 1959 appearance on *The Steve Allen Show*, those precious few critics who chose to take the Beats’ work seriously could apply buzz words like “counter-cultural” and “reactionary” without feeling false or ironic. But there is perhaps no greater testament to the terrible swiftness of late-twentieth century mass media than the speed with which the literary movement of the Beats was elevated (and at the same time reduced) in popular circles to a “hyperreal” simulacrum. This simulacrum, this “Beatism,” has since become so wholeheartedly embraced by Western Society that it cannot be possibly called counter-cultural. As Regina Weinreich has noted, “[a] telling moment occurred in the mid-1990’s when Kerouac and Ginsberg wore khakis for *The Gap*, and Burroughs endorsed *Nike*. The early beatnik misfits, as they were thought to be, had become *cultural* icons. They had name recognition; they could sell products, a payoff for early beat bravado, and it had little to do with what they wrote.”¹⁰ In an age in which counter-cultural status is itself a selling point, we are slowly realizing that whether as a

⁸ While Lisa Simpson, the quintessential counter-cultural American Wunderkind, is frequently an effective (and occasionally referential) conduit for the internal myths of the Beat writers, the “Beatnik” parents of Ned Flanders on *The Simpsons* are an especially remarkable example of how the Beats have been reduced to an iconography, a sort of “essential gimmickry” by pop culture (see Robin Lyndenberg, “Ghostly Rhetoric: Ambivalence in M.G. Lewis’ *The Monk*,” *ARIEL*, 10:2 (1979), 70).

⁹ Aimée Mitchell, “Beatnik Montage,” *The Still: The Bi-Monthly Publication of the Western Undergraduate Film Society*, 3:3 (February 2003): 4.

¹⁰ Regina Weinreich, “The Beat generation Is Now About Everything,” *College Literature*, 27:1 (Winter 2000): 263-64; my emphasis.

marketing ploy, a side effect of some postmodernist breakdown, or simply a lack of care in how such semantics are used, the “cultural/counter-cultural” binary is, in the case of the Beats at least, being rapidly and awkwardly broken down, either into the same general notion or, at best, to a reduced cultural binary that might more accurately be described as “straight-cultural/hip-cultural.” Kerouac is both a “cultural icon,” as Weinreich states above, and a “counter-cultural icon”¹¹—playing for both teams, if we believe everything we hear about Kerouac in the media. In his essay “The Disappearing Bohemian,” David Ulin wryly notes that media events such as Ginsberg’s *Gap* advertisements are effectively “helping to turn the countercultural aesthetic from one of ideas, of art, to one of style.”¹² At the same time, it becomes difficult to understand the Beats as reactionary or even revisionary writers when they are no longer merely responding to social conditions and neuroses but generating conditions and neuroses of their own.

It is, according to many scholars, a mistake when critics place an over-emphasis on expressivist concerns when studying the Beats simply because the lives and (mis)adventures of these writers are so utterly captivating. In effect, the principal social neurosis Beat celebrity has generated within academia is the same one that the fame of a writer such as J.R.R. Tolkien has produced: an anxiety that such celebrity and widespread popularity will lead to a breakdown between fandom and “serious” scholarship, between careful study and trivial Beat fact-mongering. In the dozens of texts about the Beats, we can examine their lives and journeys down to the most minute detail. Bohemian tourists who are willing to do the research can (and frequently do) retrace the steps of Kerouac’s travels in *On The Road* with remarkable precision. The Beats are unique among American writers of the twentieth century in that they are the only group (notwithstanding single monolithic figures such as Mark Twain) whose personal correspondence and private diaries are studied with as much, or more, seriousness and regularity as their literary works are. Such study, however astute or valuable it may be, is almost wholly a study of the Beat simulacrum, and some might say that it undercuts the formalist strength and “stand-alone” value of the Beat texts themselves. It is all too easy, critics argue, when studying the Beats to become a junkie for secondary sources, and all too dangerous when authoritative texts, which make at least token attempts to duck the sensationalism of the Beat phenomenon, remain in relatively short supply. This situation leads us back to the issue of the synthesis between these systems: the synthesis is already in place, and to separate the writer from the celebrity with anything approaching certainty or permanency is not really possible. The study of celebrity, of simulacrum, and of the peculiar cultural (or counter-cultural) role of the Beats, is something we must move toward, and not away from, once we recognize that the synthesis already exists in Beat scholarship. Only by establishing a serious understanding of the Beats’ mythic role in popular culture, which has been too long dismissed as a subject of “low art,” can we resolve this problem in their writing as well.

The difficulty we have in separating these two mythologies is that there are certain “crossover points” where the external myths of the Beats themselves are

¹¹ *Sunday Herald*, “Jack Kerouac: Legends of the 20th Century,” <http://www.sundayherald.com/bestalbums2.shtml> (accessed 9 October 2004).

¹² David L. Ulin, “The Disappearing Bohemian,” *Inkblots Magazine: Literature, Culture and Technology*, <http://www.inkblotsmag.com/features/essays/disappearingbohemia.php> (accessed 9 October 2004).

subsumed into their work, and the corresponding fictive myths of the text are erroneously read back onto their authors. The most famous of these cases is probably Kerouac's character Dean Moriarty, who was undoubtedly based on (though he should not, in spite of Kerouac's own claims, be equated with) real-life road companion Neal Cassady, and yet came to be associated with Kerouac himself; slightly less well known (or, at least, less frequently examined) is Ginsberg's lovingly immortal portrait of Kerouac, both in his work and in his actions, after the latter's death as the charismatic "leader" of the Beat Generation, a role that Kerouac himself found terribly uncomfortable. The Jack Kerouac School of Disembodied Poetics in Boulder, Colorado was undoubtedly Ginsberg's brain child, and in many ways the handling and presentation of Kerouac's myth since his death have been largely controlled by Ginsberg, who was active in both the social and literary sense right up to his own death in 1997.¹³

The external myth of Kerouac that exists in popular culture today, then, owes something both to Ginsberg's mythic construction of the "Kerouac" figure and to Kerouac's own personal Frankenstein. In popular circles, his character Dean Moriarty became increasingly detached from Cassady and more frequently associated with Kerouac himself. Eventually, Moriarty became a proto-Beat archetype, a mould that Kerouac himself was expected, quite unrealistically, to fill after the immense success of *On The Road*. Moriarty—or rather the myth of "Moriarty"—in effect *became* the myth of "Kerouac" in the years to follow. To continue the Frankenstein metaphor, the creature of the Moriarty myth, perhaps because it was such a remarkably human product of Kerouac's genius, was a powerful enough construct to transcend its role as an internal mythic figure, escape the textual prison of *On The Road*, and run rampant in the extra-textual mythology of Kerouac's own life. This does not mean, however, that there was no redeeming benefit of the Moriarty-Kerouac mythic shift. In the shadow of this impossible and unlivable myth of the "Beat King," Kerouac came off better than he otherwise might have. There are numerous records¹⁴ suggesting that, in his later years, he was plagued by alcoholism, obesity, an unhealthy and possibly psychosexual obsession with his mother, and, perhaps worst of all for a figure of Kerouac's sociohistorical stature and company, right-wing conservatism, anti-Semitic, and anti-homosexual tendencies. Neither of these extremes, that of the rebellious and visionary American traveler and that of the careless, self-negligent couch philosopher, is a complete portrait of Kerouac. But there is an undeniable persistence in the twenty-first-century popular imagination of the former image over the latter. This might be the case for two reasons. First, the heroic myth of Kerouac that has endured is largely due to the heavy privileging of that myth in the work of Beat writers-turned-critics such as Ginsberg, Anne Waldman, and Lawrence

¹³ Ginsberg's obituary states that he had become, even by the mid-70s, "one of the last living voices of the Beat generation and the keeper of the flame" (*The New York Times*, 6 April 1997), perhaps alluding to his role as caretaker, conscious or otherwise, of many of the Beat myths.

¹⁴ This less-than flattering rap sheet of Kerouac's final years has been pieced together from *Beat Writers At Work* (New York: Modern Library, 1999) and James Campbell's excellent *This Is The Beat Generation*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), along with some information from Ginsberg's aforementioned obituary. These claims have been supported elsewhere, but for the sake of brevity and simplicity I have tried to limit my use of them to those examples found in these texts.

Ferlinghetti. Secondly, although Kerouac's knight-errant image was his dominant *persona* in the work of the other Beats, it was but one facet of a much more complex construction, the one facet most readily subsumed into the popular mindset by virtue of its saleability. Anne Waldman recognizes that "[t]he mythology that arose around [Kerouac's] life and work have created a fierce commercialism, spawning movies, clothing, books, even the possibility of a U.S. postage stamp,"¹⁵ and it is understandable, and even forgivable, if the more romantic Kerouac myth of the freewheeling observer, the rebellious Minstrel of the Midwest and handsome herald of the American highway, is a superior commercial logo than the image of an overweight, right-wing alcoholic. Moreover, the theme of "looking for America" is certainly to Kerouac's writing. In *On The Road*, the quest for this place is not only spiritual but also physical. In an inversion of the usual literary representation, in which a physical voyage serves as a metaphor for a spiritual journey, spiritual journeys in Kerouac's later novels, and the continued theme of questing for America, perhaps preserved the myth of Kerouac the "restless traveler," a sort of postwar knight-errant, long after his life had taken a more mundane turn.

The more romantic Kerouac myth transgresses the boundaries of Beat texts and is at once external and internal; it is a prime example of the transgressive myths that make the separation of the extra-textual Beats from the intra-textual Beats virtually impossible. Mitchell's image of "Beat King Jack Kerouac,"¹⁶ after all, has at least as much in common with the fictionalized Dean Moriarty as with Kerouac himself, and the fact that Moriarty was, in fact, based on Cassady and not on Kerouac does little to dispel this. The Kerouac-myth's persistence has much to do with a cultural need for a heroic figure such as Kerouac's, a discussion that requires at least a cursory nod to Joseph Campbell. In his remarkably popular work, *The Power of Myth*, which, like Kerouac's *oeuvre*, has been tainted by fame and success, Campbell asserts that "[t]he individual has to find an aspect of myth that relates to his own life."¹⁷ For Campbell, the key requirement of a culturally important myth is that it ought to be intelligible and hold some relevance to the reader, echoing Artaud's influential claim that "[w]e have the right to say what has been said and even what has not been said in a way that belongs to us, a way that is immediate and direct, corresponding to present modes of feeling, and understandable to everyone... a public... can be affected by all these grand notions and asks only to become aware of them, but on condition that it is addressed in its own language."¹⁸ In "No More Masterpieces," Artaud suggests the complete dismissal of those works that have lost their relevance, "that belong to extinct eras which will never live again."¹⁹ While Campbell believes that collective myths, reduced to their most essential archetypal form, are assured an eternal relevance within the human psyche because of their origins in the

¹⁵ Anne Waldman, ed., *The Beat Book: Writings from the Beat Generation*, (Boston: Shambhala, 1999), 16-17.

¹⁶ Mitchell, 4.

¹⁷ Joseph Campbell, *The Power of Myth*, (New York: Anchor, 1988), 38.

¹⁸ Antonin Artaud, "No More Masterpieces," in *The Theater and Its Double*, trans. Mary Richards (New York: Grove, 1958), 74-75.

¹⁹ Artaud, 75.

Jungian collective unconscious, he does recognize that these archetypal myths must be continually “made over” with new and varying cultural myths, whose easily deciphered cultural and social masks serve as the bridge between the myth and the audience: “As the new symbols become visible, they will not be identical in the various parts of the globe; the circumstances of local life, race, and tradition must all be compounded in the effective forms. Therefore, it is necessary for men to understand, and be able to see, that through various symbols the same redemption is revealed. ‘Truth is one,’ we read in the Vedas; ‘the sages call it by many names.’ A single song is being inflected through all the colorations of the human choir.”²⁰ What we have seen, in the case of Kerouac, is the latest name, the latest inflection, of whatever mythic archetypes he has come to embody. The cultural masks of old have been discarded, and whether for good or ill, fans of the Beat Generation and of American counterculture in general have adopted Kerouac’s image as the new face of a very old myth. But why does Kerouac make such a suitable mythic figure?

In many ways, Kerouac fills a cultural void; he occupies a place for mythic figures in the postmodern age in which there was, before him, an empty seat. At the start of an era in which symbols, concepts, and discourses raced toward obsolescence almost as soon as they were imagined, there was something stable and comforting about Kerouac, some implicit guarantee that his image would not become obsolete too quickly. This guarantee, whether conscious or not in the early days of Kerouac’s mythologization, seems to have held true. Even today, the appearance of an eternally young Kerouac peddling Gap Khakis does not seem dated; rather, like such seminal cultural icons as Jimi Hendrix and direct Beat descendant Tom Waits, “Kerouac” is a mythic figure who seems comfortably at home—at least, more comfortable than Jack Kerouac himself ever was in real life—in the limelight of a synchronistic society whose notions of time and history are no longer predetermined: “Nous nous trouvons dans un espace instable, où il n’y a plus exactement de règle du jeu. C’est-à-dire que la perspective linéaire du temps, la perspective de l’histoire ne fonctionne plus, et qu’il y a paradoxalement une curieuse réversion des choses. . . .”²¹ Baudrillard’s notion of a temporal breakdown is a Moloch of sorts, a postmodern demon spawned by the follies of men and, in the historical sense, of the pre-YHWH Semitic god, مالك (Maalik) in Arabic or מלך (Melek) in Hebrew, an entity to which our children will ultimately be subjected and sacrificed. Ginsberg’s fiery Moloch tirade from “Howl” removes the destroyer-god from his anthropomorphic Semitic roots and allows him or, rather, the Moloch principle, to become manifest in the iconography, the material, and perhaps even the essence of postmodern society: “Moloch! Solitude...Ashcans and unobtainable dollars...the incomprehensible prison...Congress of sorrows...the stunned governments...whose mind is pure machinery... whose smokestacks and antennae crown the cities...blind capitals! demonic

²⁰ Joseph Campbell, *The Hero With A Thousand Faces* (New York: Bollingen, 1949), 389-390.

²¹ We find ourselves in an unstable space where there are not exactly ‘rules of the games’ anymore. It is as if to say that the linear perspective of time, the perspective of history, no longer works, and that there is, paradoxically, a curious reversal of things. ... (my translation). Jean Baudrillard, “Au-delà de la fin: Entretien avec Jean Baudrillard,” *Les Humains Associés Revue Intemporelle*, 6 (1993/94) <http://www.humains-associes.org/No6/HA.No6.Baudrillard.1.html> (accessed 9 October 2004).

industries! spectral nations! invincible mad-houses! granite cocks! monstrous bombs!”²²

To place Moloch, Ginsberg’s intangible postmodern evil, as the adversary in the context of Joseph Campbell’s structural paradigm of the hero’s journey is at first glance a bit problematic. Campbell himself has been frequently miscast as the antithesis of thinkers like Ginsberg, blasted by a veritable orgy of hateful critics as everything from a right-wing elitist to a Nazi sympathizer: “[Campbell] was called a “romantic fascist” and virulent anti-communist, was said to have objected to admitting Blacks to Sarah Lawrence [College], and at the time of the Moon landing in 1969 to have remarked that the earth’s satellite would be a good place to send all the Jews. One woman recounted that she had been in a class of his at the height of the sixties campus upheavals; Campbell had said he would flunk any student who took part in political activism—and when she did, he made good on his threat.”²³ These anecdotal and highly circumstantial claims obscure many of Campbell’s similarities with Ginsberg, and if we take such accusations at face value, the two men might seem to have possessed opposing political and social views that were utterly irreconcilable. But both share an understanding of the postmodern condition as a synchronic “situation paradoxale qui voudrait dire qu’au fond, toutes les utopies ont été en quelque sorte réalisées,”²⁴ which can lead to a postmodern Paradise as much as to a postmodern Hell. Both men believe in the possibility of an omnipresent, urban Eden, with Ginsberg’s Edenic *credo* materializing as early as his epiphanic/masturbatory reading of Blake’s “Ah! Sun-flower” in 1948: “[h]aving turned his gaze from an illusory paradise “elsewhere,” Ginsberg...is claiming that, like the fallen Man awakened by the Lamb in Blake’s Four Zoas, he has awakened into Eden as a present reality. However, since his present reality, in non-visionary terms, is East Harlem, he envisions Eden in urban form, as the New Jerusalem.”²⁵ Similarly, in an interview with Christian journalist Bill Moyers, Campbell acknowledges the presence of an urban Eden, or at least an Eden that coexists Ginsberg’s urban pastoral sensibilities.

MOYERS: Eden was not. Eden will be.

CAMPBELL: Eden *is*. “The Kingdom of the Father is spread upon the earth, and men do not see it.”

MOYERS: Eden *is*—in this world of pain and suffering and death and violence?

²² Allen Ginsberg, “Howl,” in *Allen Ginsberg: Collected Poems* (New York: Harper and Row, 1988), 131-32.

²³ Robert Ellwood, *The Politics of Myth: A Study of C.G. Jung, Mircea Eliade, and Joseph Campbell* (New York: SUNY Press, 1999), 132. Ellwood’s claims here are simply his collection of some of the many negative allegations and anecdotes surrounding Campbell; his book *The Politics of Myth* in fact offers a much more complex and sympathetic portrait of Campbell than I have related here.

²⁴ A paradoxical situation which means that, in the end, all utopias are somehow realized (my translations); Baudrillard, “Au delà de la fin.”

²⁵ Terence Diggory, “Allen Ginsberg’s Urban Pastoral,” *College Literature* 27:1 (Winter 2000): 107-08.

CAMPBELL: That is the way it feels, but this is it, this is Eden.

When you see the kingdom spread upon the earth, the old way of living in the world is annihilated. That is the end of the world. The end of the world is not an event to come, it is an event of psychological transformation, of visionary transformation. You see not the world of solid things but a world of radiance.²⁶

Campbell's "world of radiance," for our purposes at least, can also be read as a reference to the continual audiovisual bombardments of the Information Age, in which Marshall McLuhan's often misunderstood claim that "the medium is the message"²⁷ can be expanded to suggest that the medium is also the myth. When read against the Beat sensibility in which the search for the Eden that "is" parallels the search for an Edenic America that exists somewhere beneath the United States of industry and machinery, Campbell's optimistic "world of radiance" suggests not only the mythic rapture of divine revelation, but the possibility of its appearance through the mass media, the overpowering sensory mechanisms of an electric society. In mythic terms, this radiance, this renewed arrival of Eden, is an end and an antidote to the exile of identity; it is the presence of a benevolent Divine that is a fascinating contrast to the presence of Ginsberg's Moloch in the same "world of radiance," especially because the two are not mutually exclusive. Like Schrödinger's famous Cat, which, inside its hypothetical box, can be both alive and dead at the same time, Ginsberg and Campbell's mythic postmodern society is Moloch *and* Eden at exactly the same moment. For the mythic-hero "Kerouac," as for the author Kerouac's most beloved and intrepid characters, the quest for America, within America, is both the adversarial journey and the reward of homecoming. It is a quest of recognition or perception whose climax is the realization that the spiritual, Edenic America maintains a presence with the same space—physical and conceptual—occupied by the spiritually dead Molochian America.

The Moloch/Eden contrast that is evident in Ginsberg and Campbell's world views also figures heavily in the writings of the other Beats, certainly heavily enough to warrant an analysis of its own at a later time. To provide a brief series of examples, Corso's love/hate relationship with the simultaneous bliss and horror of annihilation in "Bomb" is a manifestation of this contrast. So is Denise Levertov's moving account of the ruin of the People's Park in San Francisco, in which she examines both the creation and terrible desolation that can be wrought by individuals with a sense of sameness and community. The Park-tending hippies and the faceless authorities represent the two conflicting potentials of human community, which unite in the individual as a sort of Buddha/demon nature. The theme of the Beat lifestyle, adopted from Russian and French theorists and known as *carnavalesque*, is, at its heart, a unique blend of Eden and Moloch principles, combining the Molochian taboos of criminality, resistance to order, drug use, sexual deviance and general excess with childlike innocence, idealism, and optimism, almost to the point of flippancy. Ginsberg's "America," too, and possibly his entire body of work, constructs America with the same binary structure. His biting cynicism of North

²⁶ Campbell, "The Power of Myth", 285

²⁷ Jean Folkerts, Stephen Lacy, and Lucinda Davenport, *The Media In Your Life: An Introduction to Mass Communication*, (Toronto: Allyn and Bacon, 1998), 12.

America's mechanized and humanistically bankrupt demise (the Moloch principle) is balanced and tempered by his unflagging faith in certain aspects of the Eden principle, which, for us and for the Beats, manifests itself as a rare and exotic strain of the pandemic American Dream.

For all its cynicism, and for all the despair that wells up in the poetry of Ginsberg, Corso, Levertov, and others, there is idealism and innocence strong enough to match it. To apply the Blakean binary of Innocence and Experience, we can find nothing more innocent than the Eden principle, the state of humanity before the Fall. Conversely, there is nothing that bespeaks the Blakean Experience as both jaded awareness and tragic revelation more appropriately than the principle of "Ginsberg's Beast,"²⁸ the destroyer-figure of Moloch who, like the biblical Beast, symbolizes the arrival of the end of time and history, which Baudrillard suggests may already be at hand: "toutes les utopies ont été en quelque sorte réalisées, l'utopie de la libération, l'utopie du progrès, l'utopie de la production massive, enfin l'utopie de l'information, etc. Tout ça est en place, et nous n'en voyons plus la finalité, parce que nous avons peut-être simplement dépassé la fin, nous sommes allés ou trop loin ou de l'autre côté"²⁹ Eden *is*, as Ginsberg and Campbell have realized, but Moloch *is* as well: if we have passed the end of history, as Baudrillard seems to suggest, we are left with a society that is a scrambled and confusing *mélange* of the Eden and Moloch principles, and the task of separating one from the other, even just in one's own mind, becomes necessary in order to make life bearable.

This postmodern crisis is where the external, or extra-textual, myth of Kerouac comes in. For once, the role of the Kerouac myth puts a great deal of emphasis not on his travels, interviews, or interpersonal relations with other writers but on his ability to write, and write well, not only to observe the state of the public consciousness but also to alter it. In Campbell's *The Hero With A Thousand Faces*, the hero myth is broken down into structural archetypes lifted directly from the collective unconscious, or, perhaps more specifically, from the body of "collective myth" that manifests itself, all over the world, under the guise of sundry cultural masks. The Kerouac myth is a cultural mask for the archetypal role that Campbell describes as the "Hero as World Redeemer."³⁰ The world of Eden/Moloch into which we exile our mythic hero-Kerouac is flawed and fallen, but not beyond all hope of redemption: it is a world in which the quest-objective (Eden) and the adversary (Moloch) are closely intertwined, and it is Kerouac's quest to separate the

²⁸ The fact that so much of the Beats' work is bookended by innocence and experience, or to use slightly more charged terms, by principles of Eden and of Revelation, ought to be of special interest to biblical scholars or comparative mythologists. It opens up the possibility of fascinating new theological readings of the Beats, the possible breadth and depth of which are well beyond the scope and capabilities of this paper. Also Michelle Varanelli, "Ginsberg's Beast," in *Grubstreet*, (London, Canada: Huron University College Literary Society, 2003), 65.

²⁹ All utopias are somehow realized: the utopia of freedom, the utopia of progress, the utopia of mass production, finally the utopia of information, etc. All of this is in place, and we can no longer see any finality, perhaps because we have simply passed the end, we have gone either too far or to the other side (my translation). Baudrillard, "Au delà de la fin."

³⁰ Campbell, "The Hero with a Thousand Faces," 349.

“hip” from the “straight,” which is really a Beat-vernacular version of a complex binary that, with only slight conceptual adjustments, can be made to correspond to the time-honored theoretical binaries of substance/form, authentic/phony, or even truth/appearance, in which truth retains some last trace of the transcendental. For even if notions of “truth” itself are no longer deemed transcendent in literary theory and criticism, they remain transcendent, at least partly, in our cultural myths. The myths of our time, or, as Baudrillard might suggest, the myths of our position outside of time, are still read, analyzed, and internalized as vehicles of truth, and this is a curious situation of which the Beats were most certainly aware. As Chief Bromden so succinctly puts it in Ken Kesey’s *One Flew Over The Cuckoo’s Nest*, “it’s the truth even if it didn’t happen.”³¹

In many ways, the myth of the World-Redeemer is also crystallized in Kesey’s novel. In examining Nurse Ratched’s ward as a microcosmic society, Randle P. McMurphy occupies the same mythic space that Kerouac does in Beatnik society. Both are mythologized as world-redeemers, though Kerouac is cast, only slightly less ambitiously, as the finder and redeemer of America. Both are exposers of truth, Kerouac in the most idealized sense of the observant and epiphanic wandering minstrel, McMurphy in the more earthy sense of a sexual philanderer, a rebel against the mechanization of humanity and a general shit-disturber. In both cases, the world-redeemer is a wanderer of sorts, a figure who, in spite of his occupation of several privileged and centralized social positions (white, male, Christian), never feels entirely at home in the society he redeems. Ironically, Kerouac’s increasing discomfort with his own honorary status as Father of the Beat Generation, which he constantly downplayed, may have made him an even more appealing candidate for this mythic role. The world-redeemer’s victories always come at a high price, the loss of something dear to the hero; frequently, this plays out as the hero’s complete sacrifice of self, made manifest through the mechanisms of exile or death, the ultimate exile of identity. McMurphy pays the ultimate price for his redemption of the ward: he loses his imagination and his humanity and is reduced, through lobotomy, to a human machine. In the most obvious and celebrated of the World-Redeemer myths, Christ’s act of world-redemption is a literal sacrifice of self; in the Cross of Christianity, the altar of worship and the altar of sacrifice are one and the same. In this light, despite the best attempts of Ginsberg and others to downplay the downward spiral and tragic end of Kerouac’s last years, we find his relatively undignified fate to be an essential part of his myth. While such an end may have come from any number of causes, be they lifelong psychological problems, despair over social conditions, chemical dependency, or the brutal control of his Mémère, it is an almost universal trend among Beat writers to suggest that the largest part of Kerouac’s decline was due to the constant pressure from fans and admirers to live up to the myth that he had presumably set out for himself in *On The Road*. But contrary to all appearances, it was not the immense pressure of the myth that destroyed Kerouac; rather, it was Kerouac’s self-destruction that provided the necessary ending for the world-redeemer myth that grew out of him. In Campbell’s mythological structure, “the work of the hero is to slay the tenacious aspect of the father (dragon, tester, ogre king [or Ginsberg’s Moloch principle]) and release from its ban the vital energies that will feed the universe...the son slays the father, but the son and the father are one. The enigmatical

³¹ Ken Kesey, *One Flew Over The Cuckoo’s Nest*, (New York: Signet, 1962), 13.

figures dissolve back into the primal chaos. This is the wisdom of the end (and rebeginning) of the world.”³² Like Beowulf, Kerouac *had* to die fighting his dragon in order for his myth to attain the resonance and significance it still possesses today. The same heroically premature death is what renders James Dean and Jimi Hendrix mythic figures in ways that Marlon Brando and Eric Clapton are not. In Kerouac’s case, his mythic death is yet another example of the myth robbing the man of any final peace. Ironically, his self-destructive retreat from his own myth, which we can understand as the last stage of exile--self-imposed exile-- has been subsumed into the myth itself as its final and most important stage.

At the end of history, the hyperreal is every bit as important as the real. Kerouac’s myth is to Kerouac as Disneyland is to America, and as Baudrillard has famously declared in his *Simulations*, “Disneyland is there to conceal the fact that it is the ‘real’ country, all of ‘real’ America, which *is* Disneyland.... Disneyland is presented as imaginary in order to make us believe that the rest is real, when in fact all of Los Angeles and the America surrounding it are no longer real, but of the order of the hyperreal and of simulation. It is no longer a question of a false representation of reality (ideology), but of concealing the fact that the real is no longer real, and thus of saving the reality principle.”³³ The myth of Kerouac is one myth, and the existence of a man or even a body of writing behind the myth is another. To focus analytically on the myth, then, and to recognize its substantial reality, is to concede that the reality of myth may, ironically, be the only tangible reality we have left. It takes no great insight to recognize the strength and prevalence of cultural myths like those of Kerouac and the other Beats. But it takes courage and critical adventurousness to admit that such a myth, for all its Edenic innocence and Molochian hollowness, *is* the central postmodern reality, and the one to which all critical and cultural discussions must inevitably allow back into their midst.

³² Campbell, “The Hero With A Thousand Faces,” 352-54.

³³ Baudrillard, “From Simulations.” Trans. Paul Foss et al. *A Critical and Cultural Theory Reader*, ed. Antony Easthope and Kate McGowan, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992), 205.