

Re-Remembering Gerard: Using Beat Author Jack Kerouac's Letters to
Lead Students to a Deeper Understanding of his Novels

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Perhaps no one is more responsible for Beat author Jack Kerouac's limited place in the American literature classroom of today than Kerouac himself. While his Roman à clef, *On the Road*, remains a staple on class reading lists across America, his other novels¹ have fared less well with scholars, although *Big Sur* and *The Dharma Bums* remain highly regarded by Beat aficionados. A cursory discussion of Kerouac's writing style most commonly calls to mind Truman Capote's famous quip, "That's not writing, that's typing" (Krebs). At best, he is often seen as a diarist privileged to be surrounded by fascinating people whom he had only to describe as they were. At worst, Kerouac has been reduced in the study of 20th century American literature to the role of necessary historical footnote. One reads *On the Road* not for its own merits but for the purpose of understanding work that came later from such authors as Hunter S. Thompson, Tom Wolfe, Ken Kesey, and Charles Bukowski. To take such a view is to lose the value of his explorations into concepts of faith, fraternity, and the role a group of 1940s artists and scholars played in paving the way for the innovations and rebellions of the 1960s and '70s. When freshman Columbia football player Jack Kerouac fractured his leg and spent much of his recovery contemplating a path of learning and creating beyond the confines of university lecture halls (Maher, Kerouac, 72-73)—a path that would lead him into lifelong alliances with such future literary greats as Allen Ginsberg and William S. Burroughs—it is no exaggeration to suggest that he embarked on a life that would ultimately influence generations of future American writers. This alone

¹ Kerouac published 13 novels during his lifetime, as well as several collections of poems, essays, and spiritual writing.

highlights the value of expanding his place in the study of American literature.

Ironically, it was Kerouac himself who set in motion a misconception about his most famous novel that remains popular today, more than 50 years after its publication. With a perversity that categorized his interactions with the press throughout his lifetime, Kerouac insisted that he had written *On the Road* over a period of three weeks (*On the Road* viii-xi). Although Kerouac claimed to have been under the influence of no stronger a stimulant than coffee (Charters, 1957-1969, 276), he found few takers for this version of the story. Instead, *On the Road* found its place as an exceptional, lightly fictionalized travelogue, written by a gifted but drug-addled author. As authors like Ken Kesey and Hunter S. Thompson adopted and advanced Kerouac's *spontaneous prose*, his writing came to be viewed more as a window into a particular time and place than as valuable works of literature. However, the comparatively recent availability of Kerouac's letters and private papers has enabled scholars to move past the legend he wove around his work and see the extent to which he crafted his novels. And the first myth to fall was the three-week masterpiece. Despite Kerouac's suggestion that he wrote *On the Road* in a brief blaze of inspiration in 1951, his letters and notebooks reveal that he began work on the book as early as 1948 (Charters, 1940-1956, 169-70), making his efforts in the summer of 1951 a process of compilation rather than writing.

In order to appreciate Kerouac's novels as works of literature, rather than gifted journalism, one must first gain an appreciation of the extent to which Kerouac adapted the events of his life to suit his literary goals. To that end, *Visions of Gerard*, the first novel in Kerouac's *Legend of Duluoz*² provides a clear example through which students of literature can compare Kerouac's fiction to earlier letters recounting the events that inspired the novel. By contrasting personal letters

² In a 1951 letter to his agent, Kerouac identified 13 novels in the *Legend of Duluoz*, two of which were never written. *Visions of Gerard* was the first book and *On the Road* was the sixth (not counting an unwritten novel) (Charters, 1940-1956, 326).

exchanged between Kerouac and his friend and muse, Neal Cassady, with *Visions of Gerard*, this paper seeks to demonstrate the value inherent in an intertextual approach to teaching Kerouac's work: one that embraces nonfiction accounts of his personal life as a means to illuminate themes within his novels.

In December 1950, Kerouac received a letter from Cassady, which he credited with inspiring the spontaneous prose style of writing that found its first published expression in Kerouac's most famous work, *On the Road*. Although not an author, per say, Neal Cassady was a prominent figure in both Beat writing and the 1960s LSD movement, appearing in several Kerouac novels under the names Dean Moriarty and Cody Pomeray. He was also mentioned in Alan Ginsberg's poem "Howl" and appeared as the hammer-wielding bus driver in journalist Tom Wolfe's book, *The Electric Koolaid Acid Test*, about Ken Kesey and the Merry Pranksters. Although Cassady's 1950 letter to Kerouac, which only survives today in fragmentary form, appears to have been primarily focused on his complicated sex life, Kerouac was impressed by its free-flowing style and passed the letter along to several friends in an unsuccessful attempt to get the work published (Cassady 244-55).

Reading the surviving excerpt, it's not difficult to appreciate why the letter failed to find a publisher. Although one can see a certain fluid exploration of interpersonal relationships that hints toward Kerouac's later signature prose, Cassady's work lacks the poetic style and fascination with the Beat Generation's cast of characters that marked Kerouac's work, and the writing itself tends toward the overwrought. Consider, for example, this passage, in which Cassady leaves one of his girlfriends, Joan, who has recently been released from the hospital after aborting his child, to buy second-hand clothes, apparently for an upcoming job interview.

Oh, unhappy mind: trickster! O fatal practicality! I was wearing really filthy clothes but had a change promised me by a friend who lived at 12th and Ogden Sts. So as not to hangup my dwarf

cabbie savior when we went to see his buddyboss next A.M., my foolish head thought to make a speedrun and get the necessary clean impediments now. (Cassady 247)

Leaving Joan, Cassady rushes off into the Denver streets, and, after shifting gears to explicitly describe a past sexual relationship with a local teenager he calls Cherry Mary, he admits to stopping at a bar on the way home from his shopping expedition and getting arrested for statutory rape after trying to pass along Cherry Mary to a drinking buddy. Thus ends the segment of the story that survives. The fate of the rest of the letter is a matter of dispute. Kerouac apparently claimed that a representative for Ace Books named Gerd Stern accidentally dropped the letter over the side of his houseboat. Stern denied this account, insisting he returned the letter to Allen Ginsberg after Ace rejected the manuscript (Cassady 244).

Disparate, and often contradictory, recollections of this kind are common to the Kerouac "legend," adding further complexity to efforts to determine what constitutes true history and whether that history is relevant to appreciating Kerouac's novels. It appears, at times, that Kerouac wrote his life just as he wrote his novels. Whether or not the houseboat incident is true, it certainly made for a better "story" than the idea that the letter was simply lost as it changed hands from one reader to another. Indeed, Kerouac's decision to refer to his novels collectively as the *Duluo* Legend points toward what is perhaps the most accurate means of describing his writing. Rather than choosing between fiction and nonfiction labels, it might serve his work best to refer his collective body of work—including letters, journals, poems and novels—as legend.

Whatever the ultimate fate of what became known as the "Joan Anderson letter," the document had an immediate and powerful impact on Kerouac. Days before the end of 1950, Kerouac responded with the first in a series of lengthy letters to Cassady, opening with sentence, "The time has come for me to write a full confession of my life to you"(Charters, *1940-1956*, 246). The purpose of these letters was to

confess his sins in the "bleakness of this mortal realm" (*Charters, 1940-1956, 247*)—starting, apparently, with his earliest transgressions. The importance of these letters within the development of Kerouac's signature writing style cannot be overstated. The first installment was written immediately after reading the Joan Anderson letter and represents Kerouac's first conscious attempt at the spontaneous prose style that marked most of his subsequent novels.

However, these confessional letters are significant for more than being the point of origin for Kerouac's spontaneous prose. During the period of months Kerouac drafted the letters to Cassady, he was rapidly approaching the 25th anniversary of the death of his elder brother, François Gerard Kerouac, who passed away from rheumatic heart disease when he was nine and Jack was four (Maher Jr., *Kerouac, 19*). Given that impending marker, it is not surprising that the first two letters deal extensively with Gerard. In fact, several stories shared in the letters later appeared in the novel *Visions of Gerard*, Kerouac's allegorical memoir of his brother's final months. It is this overlap that allows for an examination of the relationship between Kerouac's life—at least as he chose to relate it to others—and his deliberate efforts at writing fiction. The extent to which the letters and the book converge and diverge reveals a great deal about the way that Kerouac crafted his novels.

Visions of Gerard, which was written in 1956 but not published until 1963, effectively beatifies the eponymous character, Gerard Duluoze, and presents him as an idealized representation of the Beat faith Kerouac frequently infused in his novels, blending Catholicism, Buddhism, and family myth about his dead brother into a spirituality that is unique to his body of work. Gerard is presented as a local saint, who at one point is actually taken during a dream up to heaven in a cart pulled by white lambs (*Visions of Gerard 52-53*). The novel is extremely reverent to Gerard's memory, making frequent references to the boy's kind acts and his role as a spiritual teacher within the semi-fictional Duluoze family.

Yet, in the 1950-1951 confessional letters to Cassady, Kerouac relates a darker, more complex vision of Gerard Kerouac's life: one in which Gerard runs the gamut from holy son, to prankster elder brother, to a frightening, hate-filled "haunter" at the side of his baby brother's crib. These letters, in which Kerouac claims to have renounced "fiction and fear" and vows to share his life story with complete honesty (Charters, *1940-1956*, 248), paint a much more ambivalent picture of the dead boy. Taken together, the letters and the novel suggest a strong conflict between Kerouac's loyalty to his mother Gabrielle's understandably rose-colored recollections of her lost eldest son and the darker images that had taken hold of Kerouac's consciousness after a lifetime spent in the shadow of an absent saint. They also illuminate the extent to which, perhaps more than any other Kerouac novel, *Visions of Gerard* was influenced by Gabrielle, who, according to comments throughout the letters, spoke of Gerard's life often and at length. Finally, they demonstrate Kerouac's role as author—and not merely chronicler—deliberately choosing a much different thematic path for the novel than he shares in the letters.

So that both the novel and the letters can be interpreted on the same level—as examples of Kerouac's legend writing—it's important to establish that neither represents the author's genuine personal memories of Gerard, despite Kerouac's labelling of the letters as honest confession. In a 1945 letter to his sister Caroline, Kerouac admitted that he had only one memory of his brother: that of being slapped across the face (Charters, *1940-1956*, 87). The other stories of Gerard and his goodness were provided by their parents, in particular, Gabrielle. In the same letter, Kerouac tells Caroline that he has been told by a psychoanalyst that he is suffering guilt from having possibly wished Gerard dead as a young boy. Kerouac later identifies this "psychoanalyst" as author and friend William S. Burroughs (Charters, *1940-1956*, 259). Taken in this light, both versions of Gerard's life represent attempts by Kerouac to communicate his brother's impact on him in literary, rather than faithful biographic, form. Since Gabrielle

Kerouac outlived all her children, it is likely that Kerouac excised his darker, less-favorable impressions of his brother from the novel in deference to her. Although Gabrielle acknowledged that she didn't read all her son's books (Maher, *Empty Phantoms*, 150), she would certainly have been expected to read one about the life of her lost child.

Both versions of the Gerard story begin in a similar fashion, with the depiction of a day when Gerard rescues a mouse caught in a trap outside a market in the boys' childhood hometown: Lowell, Massachusetts. Gerard brings the injured mouse home and makes it a basket in which to recuperate. However, while Gerard is at school, Nanny, the family cat, eats the mouse, leaving only the tail behind (*Visions of Gerard* 8-10; Charters, *1940-1956*, 252). In the Cassady letters, Gerard merely scolds the cat for its viciousness. It is a story Kerouac has listened to all his life, and he laments his inability to recount it faithfully to Cassady, saying:

My mother heard every word of it; the text has been translated to me a million times, now it's garbled. If I could only have heard his exact words. Don't you see, Neal, I've never told you, I believe my brother was a saint, and that explains all. (Charters, *1940-1956*, 252)

In the later novel, Kerouac converts his mother's recollection of Gerard's anger into spiritual righteousness, as he lectures the cat that "We'll never go to heaven if we go on eating each other and destroying each other like that all the time!" Ti Jean Duluoz, Kerouac's four-year-old alter ego, is present for the lecture and comments, "I was amazed and scared in the corner, as one might have felt seeing Christ in the temple bashing the moneychanger tables" (*Visions of Gerard* 11).

Not long after Gerard's encounter with the mouse, Kerouac describes—both in the letters and the novel—the arrival of hundreds of birds at Gerard's windowsill to feed on breadcrumbs. This time, Gerard's saintliness finds stronger expression in the letters, and Kerouac confides to Cassady that his brother "spoke to them, the infant saint, and do you believe that he spoke to them of the Lamb? This is

precisely what he talked about to the little birds" (Charter, 1940-1956, 252-53). The novel is less explicit on this point, suggesting only that Gerard called the birds his "little Angels," and that the breadcrumbs were set out after they had flocked to his windowsill, not before (*Visions of Gerard* 19). However, both the letters and the novel express a similar finale to the scene: although the birds alight on the windowsill in droves, they will not let the boy touch them.

At this point in the letters, we glimpse something of the personality of the formidable Gabrielle Kerouac. Although Kerouac is too young to remember this scene, he assures Cassady that:

...my mother heard every word. You know my mother, you know she was capable of hiding in the hall and peeking around the doorjamb to hear every dear word uttered by my little saintly brother. She reported it to me years later. (Charters, 1940-1956, 253)

This second reminder that these accounts of saintliness come from his mother's recollections is telling, particularly given the darker turn that the letters take soon after. In both the novel and the early portions of the letters, Gabrielle is co-author, having drilled these stories into her surviving son's head from an early age. The heavy doses of spirituality that appear in both versions of Gerard's life stand in contradiction to a common dismissal among critics of the influence Kerouac's Catholicism had on his writing: that his Catholic faith was little more than a reflection of his French-Canadian heritage. If we can assume, and I believe that we can, that it was Gabrielle who told Kerouac that Gerard spoke to the birds about "the Lamb," it becomes clear that Catholicism was much more than a cultural relic in the Kerouac home. Indeed, Kerouac follows up the letter's description of the birds with the following comment, which was depicted in more detail in the novel:

Let me just add, when he died the nuns came in a solemn file to my house—but we will get to that. Only my mother fully knew what was going on. The sight of this holy child slowly dying

might have affected her mind at the time, and her stories about him may today be exaggerated, but I have verification, plus a pain in my heart, sufficient unto these pages. (*Charters, 1940-1956, 253*)

There is one final parallel scene across both accounts, which should be acknowledged before going on to discuss the darker impressions Kerouac included in the letters but omitted from the novel. This is the single memory he consistently claims as his own: having been slapped across the face by Gerard. In both accounts, the causal event is Ti Jean's inadvertent damage to something Gerard fashioned from his Erector set. In the letters, Kerouac mentions only a vague recollection of the extent of his transgression: possibly knocking a portion of the structure over or perhaps only pushing a wrench to the floor (*Charters, 1940-1956, 259*). In the novel, Ti Jean's demolition of his brother's masterpiece is total, offering a more solid excuse for the slap (*Visions of Gerard 104*). In the letters, Gerard dies within days of the altercation (*Charters, 1940-1956, 259*), while the Gerard Duluoze of the novel lingers on for several more weeks into July, outliving Gerard Kerouac by more than a month³ (*Visions of Gerard 107-09*). Given the overall beatific impression of Gerard throughout the novel, it is likely that this shift in timing was deliberate, to deflect any implication of a connection between the slap, Gerard's death, and William S. Burroughs' earlier suggestion that Kerouac might have resented the boy and wished for him to die.

Thus far, the telling of Gerard's story across the letters and the novel has been fairly consistent and strongly suggestive of Gabrielle Kerouac's influence. However, once Kerouac has faithfully recounted to Cassady the family tradition of Gerard's sainthood, his self-described confession begins to turn dark and strange, and he tells a series of stories that never make it into the published novel and were clearly not recounted to him by Gabrielle. It's impossible to say with any certainty

³ François Gerard Kerouac died on June 2, 1926 Paul Maher, Jr., *Kerouac: His Life and Work* (Lanham, Maryland: Taylor Trade Publishing, 2007) 19.

what portion, if any, of these stories is based on direct memory beyond the slap. Kerouac insists that at least one scene in the series of events is "one clear memory of companionship with the strange Gerard" (Charters, 1940-1956, 255). However, Kerouac's recall of even relatively contemporary events was often disputed by the real-life counterparts of the characters who populated his novels. Zen poet Gary Snyder, who was the basis for Japhy Ryder in *The Dharma Bums*, once wrote to Kerouac, who had been asking for his opinion of the book, "I told you I liked it... but that doesn't make it right" (*The Dharma Bums* xv). Alene Lee⁴, who became Mardou Fox in *The Subterraneans*, was even more explicit in her criticism, telling interviewers that "These were not the times as I knew them and the people, with the exception of his friends, were not as I knew them" (Gifford and Lee 207). Given that Kerouac would have been, at most, barely four years old at the time the stories in question would have taken place, it's prudent to take his identification of any part of them as memory with a grain of salt.

In his letter to Cassady, Kerouac prefaces his specific story by describing alleged local folklore concerning the house on Beaulieu Avenue⁵, where the Kerouac family lived when Gerard died:

First, they said that our house was built over an ancient sunken cemetery; this was probably just a crazy rumor started by old French Canadian mammies that sit around by the dozen sewing and chatting in the strange, red afternoons of Lowell. Nevertheless, it was supposed to be true, and Gerard, my sister Caroline and I were properly scared. (Charters, 1940-1956, 254)

Kerouac then proceeds to relate an incident in which plaster falls mysteriously from the parlor ceiling, and someone, whom he does not identify, suggests that the souls buried under the house are shaking in

⁴ In *Jack's Book: An Oral Biography of Jack Kerouac*, Alene Lee was identified under the pseudonym Irene May.

⁵ Biographer Paul Maher, Jr. identifies the address as Beaulieu Street Maher Jr., *Kerouac: His Life and Work* 18..

their graves. This spooky event is quickly followed by a night when Jack and Caroline, who share a room, see mysterious lights flashing on the ceiling. They hurry to Gerard, bedridden in a private room by this point, for consolation, but he only confirms their worst fears: that the ghosts beneath the house have returned to haunt them. Kerouac quickly reveals that it was, in fact, a neighborhood boy using a flashlight to scare them. He suspects that Gerard was in on the prank, although he cannot say for certain (Charters, 1940-1956, 255-56).

This, at last, sounds like the behavior of a nine-year-old boy, even a sickly one, and it's possible to speculate that this is another family story, perhaps passed along by a family member with a slightly more balanced recollection of Gerard. However, the experience, whether hazily remembered, absorbed through family myth, or generated entirely from Kerouac's imagination, darkens even further before it ends. Kerouac tells Cassady that, shortly before or after the incident of the lights, he awoke in the middle of the night to find Gerard standing over his crib. This is not the gentle, kindly boy portrayed in the novel. Instead, Kerouac says:

The figure had wild unruly hair and seemed intent on me with hate. I drove it out of my mind at once that it was Gerard risen like a ghost from his bed of miseries—yet, it was Gerard and no one else. In utter dark of that time-night I stared back with rue at my haunter. Stiff, stiff, he never moved, never said a word, never barely breathed, and so persistent in his sullen, lidded look into my babycrib soul that I, in innocence, fell asleep impatiently to forget. These are the beginnings of my mysteries. Was it my brother? Of course it was my brother. Who was my brother? (Charters, 1940-1956, 256)

There, in that final sentence lies the crux of the conflict between the novel *Visions of Gerard* and the confession to Neal Cassady: "Who was my brother?" Somewhere, in the midst of family lore, infant memory, the imagination of a gifted storyteller, and the guilt suggested by Burrough's so-called psychoanalysis, Kerouac struggles to present

some unified portrait of his brother: a boy who had grown to near-mythical proportions almost before the younger Jack had reached an age of any true awareness. The slap, the flashing lights, and the vaguely remembered feelings of resentment toward a sickly brother have all merged to convert St. Gerard into a terrifying spectre and left Kerouac with the conviction that he is somehow responsible for it all. He summarizes this murky, frightening relationship with Gerard toward the close of the second letter, as he muses about the funeral and his lingering guilt:

Did I...wonder at the unforgettable and enigmatic night he had come to my cribside and stood over me like a gaunt and ragged phantom? After all I knew of his great goodness, what then was this vigil in the dark, and why had it frightened me, and why did I secretly believe he probably hated me after all? Because I cannot remember this first enigma's facts maybe I'll never know an enigma again and all's been lost. He who had been my great kind brother had also been my hater in the night. (Charters, 1940-1956, 272)

Perhaps the key to appreciating the disparate renderings of Gerard Dulouoz/Kerouac in *Visions of Gerard* and the 1950/1951 letters to Neal Cassady lies in the opening of the first letter: "The time has come for me to write a full confession of my life to you" (Charters, 1940-1956, 246). He doesn't use the word "autobiography" or even "recollection" because he is not relating history. The true events of his brother's life are likely forever beyond his powers of recall. Rather, he is confessing what is perhaps the greatest sin he can fathom with relation to his family: doubting the legend of St. Gerard. His confession is not that he saw flashes of light on the walls or woke to a confusing vision. It is that he recalls his brother as less than divine and perhaps even fears him. And worse, he speculated that this beatified boy, whom Kerouac had been told all his life was an emissary from God, had been capable of hating him and perhaps even summoning the ghosts from beneath the house to harm him.

Several lines into this initial letter, he offers Cassady the option to either burn or publish the confession, depending upon what he feels would be best for Kerouac's soul. This is likely mostly bombast. Neal Cassady's own writing was only published posthumously, and he would not have had access to editors, nor was Kerouac famous enough at that point, prior to the publication of *On the Road*, to make such a thing likely. However, this statement does reinforce the argument that the letters can be read as examples of Kerouac's autobiographical fiction, since the author himself suggested that they could be counted among his publishable materials. In fact, the confession letters were not published until 1995, well after both Cassady and Kerouac's deaths. Read together, the letters and the novel offer readers a special opportunity to experience the same story through the complex, shifting lens of Kerouac's authorial viewpoint. He makes and remakes the myth of his brother's short life, facing perhaps not reality, but at least his impressions of it.

The 50th anniversary of the publication of *On the Road* in 2007 and the 40th anniversary of the author's death in October 2009 have sparked a resurgence of interest in Kerouac's body of work. In 2001, the original scroll manuscript of *On the Road* was purchased by Jim Irsay for 2.4 million dollars, making it the most expensive manuscript ever sold at auction. Neal Cassady's collected letters were published in 2004, allowing the public the opportunity to read, in part, the infamous Joan Anderson letter, which Kerouac claimed had made the writing of *On the Road* possible. Yet *Visions of Gerard* remains among Kerouac's lesser known novels. It's interesting to reflect that, in his initial enthusiastic response to the narrative style he admired so much in Cassady's letter, Kerouac chose to write, not about his recent wanderings across the United States and Mexico, but about a young boy who had been dead for a quarter of a century. I suggest that *Visions of Gerard* and Kerouac's related confessional letters to Neal Cassady are worthy of a closer look by scholars and interested readers alike, as they shine a light on the way that Kerouac interacted with

memory and story to create his self-titled *Legend of Duluoz*: a chronicle that encompasses most of his novels and of which both *On the Road* and *Visions of Gerard* are vital parts. Teachers of Kerouac's novels will find that *Visions of Gerard* functions as an excellent introduction to a deeper study of Kerouac, his body of work, and his place in the study of 20th century American literature: as a complex, conflicted storyteller wrestling with questions of memory and faith that hold more relevance to the contemporary literature student than a simple window into 1940s and '50s America.

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