

ON THE ROAD AT 50

Lowell scrolls are just Jack's type

REVIEW BY PAUL MCMORROW | PAUL@WEEKLYDIG.COM

Asked, late in his life, what *On the Road* was actually about, Jack Kerouac replied, "It was really a story about two Catholic buddies roaming the country in search of God. And we found him."

On this, the 50th anniversary of the publication of *On the Road*, it's strange to look around and see that nobody—fucking nobody—listened. Kerouac has been conflated with Marlon Brando and James Dean. And like Bob Dylan, Kerouac hasn't been received as a messenger so much as a vessel for his audience's hopes, fears and prejudices. He's a canvas upon which others project their own agendas; but the more we buy into Kerouac as an icon, hitchhiker, mythological rebel, sex symbol, self-help author and Hold Steady lyricist, the more we trivialize *On the Road* as a work of art, and push aside Kerouac as a

novelist who actually had something to say.

For the anniversary, Viking has published the *On the Road* scroll, Kerouac's 1951 manuscript for the novel. (The 119-foot-long document, written on taped-together sheets of tracing paper, is on display in Kerouac's hometown, Lowell, through mid-October. It begins with a gorgeous typo: "I first met met Neal not long after my father died ...") Assuming for a moment that Kerouac wasn't actually a living, drinking Gap ad, the key to what he was is in the scroll.

On the Road contains several sly shots at Ernest Hemingway, and Kerouac's letters and journals rage against slaves of the self-aware, super-stylized European writing tradition he was trying to move past. He struggled for years to find the

literary voice and narrative structure that would enable him to execute his vision for *On the Road*. Working from travel journals, he had several starts and stops, none of them satisfactory. Around Christmas, 1950, Neal Cassady sent Kerouac a wild, rambling letter about his life and his women.

Kerouac saw in Cassady's letter the uniquely American voice that he envisioned for *On the Road*. With a declaration that he had "renounced fiction and fear," Kerouac set about novelizing his travel journals in one long, coffee-fueled marathon writing session. When he was finished, he immediately began editing the draft, scribbling on the scroll in pencil.

When asked how bop was created, Thelonious Monk told an interviewer, "We wanted a music that *they* couldn't play." With *On the Road*, Kerouac was developing something *they*—Wolfe, Hemingway, Fitzgerald—couldn't write. It was a stream-of-consciousness confessional, rooted in pure emotion. Kerouac's prose mimics Monk and Charlie Parker's jazz: He types 100 words per minute, quickening the language, eliminating commas and piling on adjectives, one after another after another. The poetry and musicality of a sentence takes precedence over the rules of grammar, and even logic.

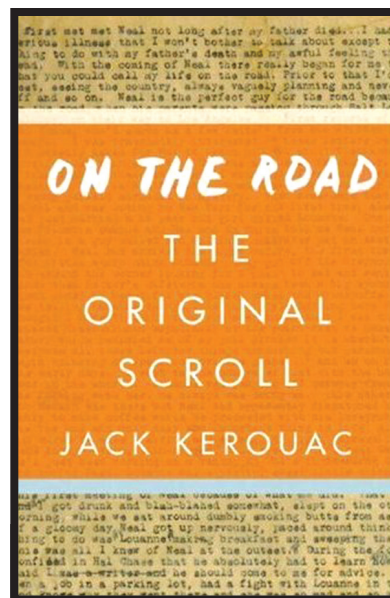
A clipping from Kerouac's library, on display in Lowell, lays out his thoughts on language usage. It's a 1958 piece from the *Partisan Review* in which Norman Podhoretz pans Kerouac as an anti-intellectual who's hiding behind the novelty of bop. Podhoretz "misses the point," Kerouac scribbles on the bottom of the article. Bop is "a reaction to the limitations of the English language."

Prior to its publication, Kerouac's editors toyed with the idea of renaming his novel *Nowhere Road*. He reacted violently because the title would undermine the novel's purpose. *Nowhere Road* is nihilist. It's aimless; there's no purpose. But Neal and Jack have a purpose. They're looking for God. The road is their purpose. They go for going's sake.

Before setting out on one road trip, Jack and Neal are confronted by Carlo

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Marx (a stand-in for Allen Ginsberg):

"What is the meaning of this voyage to New York? ... I mean, man, whither goest thou?" Their reply: "We sat and didn't know what to say; there was nothing to talk about any more. The only thing to do was go." They pile into the car and, Kerouac writes, "we were all delighted, we all realized we were leaving confusion and nonsense behind and performing our one and noble function of the time, *move*."

The "move" is the money quote, but for two Catholic buddies looking for God, Ginsberg's question—"whither goest thou?"—hangs at the center of things. Ginsberg echoes Peter, who, encountering a disembodied Jesus outside Rome, asks, "Lord, whither goest Thou? *Quo vadis?*"

Jack and Neal can't answer Ginsberg's *quo vadis* moment, because they're not *going* anywhere. Their search for God is the journey, and—as Lowell's nuns taught Kerouac—God, the Spirit, is everywhere. You can't look for God on a mountaintop or in a cathedral or a grilled cheese sandwich. Jack and Neal are monks and saints, and the road (the "holy road," as Kerouac frequently refers to it) is their monastery. They're on the road to experience creation, full of faith in the possibility of possibilities.

Likewise, the experience of reading the scroll is, in large part, about nothing more than the experience of reading the scroll. The text itself is the point, as is the technique—free-form, confessional jazz writing—that created the text. Kerouac once described himself as both a lyric poet and a lay prophet, writing, "There's a complaint in the abyss. There's a cry in the bleak air. The realm is haunted. Man haunts the earth. Man is on a ledge noising his life. The pit of night receiveth. God hovers over in his shrouds. Look out!"—not quite the type of thing you print on a T-shirt. ☉

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