

**TAXICAB ENLIGHTENMENT:
ZEN AND THE IMPORTANCE OF PERFORMING KEROUAC IN
*SATORI IN PARIS*¹**

*Paul Worley
University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill*

On Amazon.com's web page for Jack Kerouac's *Satori in Paris*, readers have logged the two following contrasting comments: "Satori in Paris" explores a trip to France by Mr. Kerouac....Like many of his other great works, "Satori" perfectly captures the vibe and feel of the pre-sixties, pre-Vietnam era Beat generation.

This is by far Kerouac's most enlightening book...a must read for anyone who wants to share the experience of Eastern wisdom and thought.²

While one reader sees a snapshot of beatniks on the verge of becoming hippies, another finds a man so enmeshed in Eastern religious experience that the text, according to the reader, has inserted itself into the canon of must religious works. While presumably not written by scholars, these assertions demonstrate distinct, seemingly contradictory responses to Kerouac's work. Certainly, *Satori in Paris* relates the author's frustrating trip to France during which he sees few of the sites he tells the reader he wants to see and does none of the things he tells the reader he wants to do. Stereotypical Kerouac is on full display as he is perpetually drunk, looking for women, and long winded. The story's backdrop, however, provides insight into the patchwork of his often times confused, yet complex, mind. As with many of his other works, the story centers on a journey through which the main character is seeking to reclaim some lost part of himself, in this case Kerouac's European heritage. This journey, through luck and Kerouac's own self-destructive machinations, ends up achieving none of his

¹ Jack Kerouac, *Satori in Paris & Pic: Two Novels*. (New York: Grove Press, 1985).

²http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/tg/detail/-/0802130615/qid=1092509018/sr=1-1/ref=sr_1_1/102-6730725-8814534?v=glance&s=books.

original intentions. *Satori in Paris*, however, is not meant to be the story of yet another of Kerouac's legendary binges. Drawing on Zen tradition, Kerouac attempts to frame the book documenting his search for identity as a *kōan*, the purpose of which, in the words of Nyogen Senzaki, is to "point out that Reality is not to be captured in a thought, or a phrase, or an explanation. Reality is the direct seeing of the world as it is, not as our intellects describe it, map it, or conceive it."³ Moreover, through his use of an implied reader to whom he refers throughout the book, Kerouac establishes a relationship between author and reader similar to that between a Zen roshi and a pupil. While in Zen tradition the roshi recites *kōan(s)* which will jolt the student into awareness of the real, *Satori in Paris* provides a series of statements which jolt the reader into awareness of who Kerouac is. Instead of giving a straightforward answer to Kerouac's initial search for his roots, the work itself is left to stand on its own as a continual performance of the author's identity.

In going to France Kerouac intends to trace his family's roots back and reestablish a relationship with the main branch of his family tree. Turning up nothing in several libraries, he finally asks:

Well, why do people change their names? Have they done anything bad, are they criminals, are they ashamed of their real names? Are they afraid of something? Is their any law in America against using your own real name? I had come to France just to look up this old name of mine...(p. 72)

In a book about the author's journey to find his own French roots, the passage is more than a series of rhetorical questions, as he draws the implied reader's attention to the infinite number of reasons and circumstances that compel immigrants to change their names, in effect becoming someone else. Coming from a nation of immigrants that is, even now, increasingly more obsessed with retracing old-world lineages, Kerouac attempts to guide the implied reader into realizing this crisis of American identity by posing these questions and then outlining his own search for a European family background. As he does not provide an answer to this quandary on either the personal or national levels, he instead points

³ Nyogen Senzaki, *The Iron Flute: 100 Zen Kōans*. (Boston: Tuttle, 2000), p. viii.

to the situation and lets the reader address the problem of American identity as he/she will. Though the spelling and/or pronunciation of his name was never changed *per se*, retaining enough of its French origin for him to trace it etymologically, Kerouac's search fails to turn up an undeniable heritage. Unable to find any of the genealogical records he set out for and commenting, at one point,

Because Johnny Magee around the corner as anybody knows can, with any luck, find in Ireland that he's the descendant of Morholt's king and so what? Johnny Anderson, Johnny Goldstein, Johnny Anybody, Lin Chin, Ti Pak, Ron Poodlewhorferer, Anybody (p.52).

Kerouac indirectly dislodges the reader's own sense of having a family tree, claiming a pervasive sameness for the American experience and shocking the reader into this same realization. There is no heritage waiting to be claimed in the old world, and all one can do is grasp the American present. Without editorializing, then, he aims to show the implied reader the essence of his/her own life story: that history exists only insofar as we continue to live it in the here-and-now.

In this reading, Kerouac's failure to either obtain genealogical records or visit the landmarks he wants to see is not failure as such. In a sense he lives out the just described present tense of history. Separated from his ancestors by centuries and books which were supposedly burned in the Nazi bombardment of Paris, his family history can only be endowed with as much meaning as he, Kerouac, intends to give to it. This point is driven home throughout the novel as Kerouac provides the reader with wildly conflicting accounts of his family name claiming, among other things, that the name itself comes from both Russian "to love" and French for "house in the field." As much as these connotations may/may not be a part of his name, they become a part of his name in the present because he believes them to be so. More so than heraldry records, he, like the Johnny Anybody he chides above, is master of his own ancestry, able to create or recreate both himself and his lineage at a whim.

The spiritual side of this awakening comes from more than his appropriation of the Zen term *satori* as a means to define the enlightenment resulting from his journey. The two churches he plans to go see are St. Louis de France and Sainte Chapelle. While he immediately goes to see St. Louise de France, a church that shares its name with the one where he was baptized in Lowell, Massachusetts, he never makes it to Saint Chapelle,

passing it on his way to the airport. That he goes to one and not the other reflects his own spiritual ambivalence, highlighted by his inadvertently passing by St. Chapelle in the cab of the taxi driver whom Kerouac claims gives him his *satori*. The first church, St. Loius de France, represents Kerouac's childhood as seen in the woman at the church giving Kerouac twenty centimes so as to teach her children, in the author's words, *caritas*, or charity. As such, the church itself stands for what can be learned in the world through instruction. Saint Chapelle, on the other hand, which Kerouac points out more than once houses a piece of the True Cross, represents, in Zen terms, that which cannot be taught. Although he desires to go there, he does not until, unexpectedly, he passes by it in the cab, saying "Is *that* la Sainte Chapelle? I meant to see it." As with the questions he poses to the reader, Kerouac himself receives no answer from the cab driver, who merely addresses the other passengers, "Ladies....you're going where?" (p. 117). Whether or not the edifice in question is even St. Chapelle is irrelevant. On his way out of town Kerouac believes he *does* see the cathedral, and this confident perception of the exterior world serves as the basis for his enlightenment. Without being shown or told, he *knows*.

From the outset of the book Kerouac tells the reader, "Somewhere during my ten days in Paris, I received an illumination of some kind that seems to've changed me again," and relates this experience to "*satori*: the Japanese word for 'sudden illumination,' 'sudden awakening,' or simply 'kick in the eye'—Whatever something *did* happen" (p. 7). Although unsure about what to call his experience, beginning with the book's title he frames it as *satori* and continues to call it that throughout the work. This label is significant in that, as a self-professed though questionable Catholic, Kerouac is aware of Christian mystical traditions through the lives of the saints. Indeed, Kerouac and those of his milieu, rather than having a spiritual affinity for Christian figures, are more apt to identify themselves with "the so-called 'Zen lunatics'—the great Zen figures of old China and Japan like Han Shan and Ikkyu who were less known for living a disciplined monastic life than for manifesting their spiritual depth and freedom through outrageous behavior."⁴ Kerouac, having nothing but the aforementioned vague notion that *something* happened to him on his trip,

⁴ Robert S. Ellwood, "Conservative and Radical Themes in American Zen: Three Writers" *Zen in American Life and Letters*, ed. Robert S. Ellwood (Malibu, CA: Undena Publications, 1987), p. 148.

cannot even reference the exact moment it happened, claiming it came from either just talking to French people, on a train, in a hotel, or in a cab, among other places. That he relies on his understanding of Zen to define his experience and resultant enlightenment is more than affectation. In doing so, he attempts to make sense of an experience that Western traditions provide him no means to interpret. The constant in all the above situations is that he is talking to people, coming to realize that, whatever claims he makes to the contrary and though no one tells him this directly, he is not French. On page 43 he says he is already homesick, despite the fact that, in a sense, he has come to find his ancestral home, and ends the book by leaving France abruptly, without accomplishing anything he sets out to do. While his goals are frustrated, he is not, as one critic says, “the tourist as postmodernism’s representative man,” unable to engage his surroundings on any level.⁵ On the contrary, he uses the term *satori* as a way to interpret what happened to him in France, make sense of his experience, and bring it to the reader.

The intent of this paper is not to posit that Jack Kerouac was a Zen Buddhist. As he points out, “I became a drunk. Why? Because I like ecstasy of the mind” (p. 28), and “I’m not Buddhist, I’m a Catholic” (p. 69). It is true that Alan Ginsberg and many others feel that these and other, more vulgar, comments are representative of a man operating in the mode of a true Zen master.⁶ Alan Watts, on the other hand, places Kerouac squarely into a category he calls Beat Zen. Too self-conscious, subjective, and strident to be representative of what he sees as true Zen, Watts relegates Kerouac to a group of rather half-hearted hangers-on⁷. Watts’ opinion, however, while useful to an interpretation of the sincerity of Kerouac’s religious stance, cannot be used to discount Zen’s influence on his method of composition and the ultimate goal of his work. As Kerouac states at the beginning of chapter 2, the intention of *Satori in Paris* is to be a “tale that’s told for companionship and to teach something religious, of religious

⁵ Udo Nattermann, “*The Last International Novel*,”

<http://english.cla.umn.edu/travelconf/abstracts/Nattermann.html>.

⁶ See Alan Ginsberg, “Kerouac’s Ethic” *Un Homme Grande: Jack Kerouac at the Crossroads of Many Cultures*, ed. Pierre Ancyiol (Ottawa, Carlton University Press: 1990), pp. 41-44.

⁷ Alan Watts, *Beat Zen, Square Zen, and Zen* (San Francisco, City Lights Books, 1959), p. 9.

reverence, about real life, and in this real world which literature should (and here does) reflect” (p. 10). Kerouac’s method of getting at this unmitigated reality was one of unpremeditated, spontaneous composition. While not necessarily something he always practiced, writing down the record of an experience immediately in the fashion which it was recalled, in Kerouac’s words, allowed him to “speak for things,” freeing himself of artifice and permitting an almost supra-linguistic communication to take place between author and reader. Kerouac’s work could not replace the real world, but it could provide a perfect, blow by blow account of it, leading to the reader to perceive it directly in the manner of a Zen *kōan*. Referred to as typing, not writing, by Truman Capote, this process has both Western and Eastern roots. While the moment of composition itself is frequently likened to Yeats’ trance writing, the ultimate goal behind Kerouac’s ambition lies beyond *mimesis* and closely resembles Zen traditions in the visual arts like the flung-ink style of painting. An “expression in form of the self without form” these works, of which Figure 1, Sesson Shukei’s Splashed Ink Landscape is an example, are companions to the Zen *kōan*, exercises that “block understanding so that sudden Enlightenment might result.”⁸ Similarly, the book as expressed in Kerouac’s meandering, non-linear style is to be a performance of the experience, not an imitation of it. I will stop short of saying that Kerouac specifically meant the work to be read in this Japanese tradition but, when reading a book like *Satori* in which he is consciously drawing on non-Western constructs, the reader must take this possibility into account. His verbosity, abrupt chapter breaks, and obscure rambling draw attention to Kerouac’s own confusing experience, bringing the reader directly into contact with what he experienced as “enlightenment” rather than telling about it.

Figure 1 Sesson Shukei, *Splashed-ink Landscape*, c. 1504-1589
(Reproduced courtesy of the Ackland Art Museum)

⁸ Diane Divelbess, “Zen and Art” *Zen in American Life and Letters*, ed. Robert Ellwood. (Malibu: Undena Publications) pp. 36-48.