

'Literally One  
Damned Thing  
After Another  
With No Salvation  
Or Cease'. Jack  
Kerouac's *On The  
Road* as Textual  
Performance

MICHAEL HREBENIAK  
UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE

Fig. 12.1  
Jack Kerouac,  
original typewritten  
scroll of *On The  
Road* (1957). Ink,  
paper, tape. Photo:  
reproduced with  
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the owner



In an era more typically given to the tarring and feathering of its authors, Thomas Parkinson wrote admiringly of the Beat Generation in 1961, couching such work in experimental terms as ‘active reverie’. This was an incisive reception by an established academic whose critical acuity and outspoken political commitment prevailed, in spite of an attempt on his life the same year by an unhinged ex-student who accused him of communist sympathies (his teaching assistant was tragically killed in the attack). ‘Into this reverie come past and present’, noted Parkinson:

but the reverie is chiefly preoccupied with keeping up with the process unfolding outside and inside the narrator. Hence the long sentences, endlessly attempting to include the endless, the carelessness—even negligence—with the ordinary rules of grammatical function, so that noun, adjective, and verb interchange roles; after all, if the process is endlessly unpredictable and unfixed, grammatical categories are not relevant. It is a syntax of aimlessly continuing pleasure in which all elements are ‘like’. Release, liberation from fixed categories, hilarity – it is an ongoing prose that cannot be concerned with its origins. There are no origins and no end, and the solid page of type without discriminations is the image of life solidly continuous without discriminations in value, and yet incomplete because it is literally one damned thing after another with no salvation or cease. Even a poetic catalogue, which is by definition one thing after another, moves in blocks which have weight, and even if each unit weighs the same, the total weight increases with each succeeding integer. Not so in prose, the only limits coming from the size of the page. The ideal book by a writer of beat prose would be written on a single string of paper, printed on a roll, and moving endlessly from right to left, like a typewriter ribbon.<sup>1</sup>

Parkinson, perhaps unwittingly, conjures the unique material culture of the unrevised typewritten scroll of Jack Kerouac’s seminal novel, *On The Road* (1957), conferring not only a thematic function but a performative teleology upon the manuscript (fig. 12.1). For this is an enactment rather than representation comprised of an improvised transmission of form, consciousness and exterior world all at once. The 120ft scroll as such stands both as relic and method for registering Kerouac’s swirling meditation on memory and the re-circulation of events, gathered through his career in a weave of poetry and prose. As will be discussed, the material nature of this literary object goes some way to mitigate the avowed emphasis on oral recovery that marks the Beat text, asserting instead the visual culture of inscription to critical considerations of its writing.

The Beat Generation had coalesced in New York in the late-1940s as an informal group of young writers dedicated to reinventing the techniques of composition via the recording of extreme body-mind states across the widest range of human experience, including the marginal and taboo. The staging of the ‘Six Poets at the Six Gallery’ reading in San Francisco in October 1955, brought together East and West Coast Beats to confirm durable transitions in American civilisation, resisting efforts by a consistently hostile mainstream media to emasculate its radicalism into fashionable exotica.

Under Kerouac’s hand the term ‘Beat’ projects an alternative America during the domestic and international eruptions of the Cold War years, part of an ongoing inquiry into the construction of nationhood and a counter to the philistinism and paranoia initiated by McCarthyism. Kerouac forges an empirical American history from the Depression 1930s through a sequence of global military interventions, leading to the surfacing of international youth protest movements and their assimilation into mass culture. Driven by the ecstatic model of Bebop, his writing celebrates the principles of perpetual renewal upon which the Constitution was built, resisting that ‘One-Dimensional’ America described by Herbert Marcuse, a nation wasteful of resources and possibilities, and a bastion of counterrevolution far beyond its own hemisphere.

The search for conviviality spurs Kerouac’s immersion in a range of extreme experiences and the necessary shattering of fixed concepts of personality. The rhetoric of the ensuing narratives is vigorously performative: an act of making that arguably pre-empts the loosening of codes and relations between classes, races, and genders that marked 1960s America. A rewrite of the first version of 1948, *On The Road* belongs to Kerouac’s early to mid-period and emerges from a prolonged single performance, bearing out Parkinson’s conjecture that Beat authors are ‘perfectly happy to place themselves in a tradition of experimental writing’, and are ‘alert to the existence of writers they can claim as ancestors’.<sup>2</sup> The book thus consolidates the twentieth century’s line of speculative fiction, moving into alignment with Molly Bloom’s soliloquy at the close of James Joyce’s *Ulysses* (1922) and the associational dream logic of *Finnegans Wake* (1939), in defiance of standard conventions. The upshot of this is a new phenomenology, as Kerouac’s fellow poet, Allen Ginsberg, explains:

*On the Road* was written around 1950, in the space of a few weeks, mostly on benny, an extraordinary project, a flash of inspiration on a new approach to prose, an attempt to tell completely, all at once, everything on his mind in relation to the hero Dean Moriarty, spill it all out at once and follow the convolutions of the active mind for direction as to the ‘structure of the confession’. And discover the rhythm of the mind at work at high speed in prose. The result was a magnificent single paragraph several blocks long, rolling, like the Road itself, the length of an entire onionskin teletype roll.<sup>3</sup>

The forging of a literary model that ‘enacts in its own realm forces (whether psychological

or physiological) that structure the natural world', and 'engages the reader as a collective whole or tribe'<sup>4</sup> by foregrounding oral and muscular stimuli, stands as a vital aesthetic and political intervention in the face of the reactionary push of New Criticism, the mid-century academic orthodoxy that regarded the text as asocial and hermetic.

Kerouac's decision to forsake the expository form used for his first published novel, *The Town and the City* (1950), in itself an attempt to emulate the naturalist style of Thomas Wolfe, is inextricably linked to the letters exchanged with his mentor, Neal Cassady: 'all first person, fast, mad, confessional, completely serious, all detailed'.<sup>5</sup> The switch of medium and mentor from the 'rolling style' of author (Wolfe) to the speed of action-talker (Cassady), and from print to orality, is crucial to the manuscript culture of *On the Road*. Cassady's oral blasts complement his headlong rush across the continent and fascination with the epic insurgence of wild transit. As such he forms a prototype for Kerouac's translation of the mobility of the car driver and Bebop musician into literary style. The terms 'move' and 'mad to live' intersect throughout the narrative as key refrains, actively probing Freud's conservative relegation of free motion into 'repetition compulsion' in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*,<sup>6</sup> and generating the necessary intensity for the discovery of 'IT', 'the root, the soul'<sup>7</sup> of the book's occult enquiry.

Under the name of Dean Moriarty in the published version, Cassady's raw intellect stands as the narrator's gateway to innumerable rebirths, a shamanic agency of the masculine revealed in 'a kind of holy lightning ... flashing from his excitement and his vision'. He is canonised accordingly as the 'Holy GOOF', 'the Saint of the lot' with an 'enormous series of sins', his 'bony mad face covered with sweat and throbbing veins, saying "Yes, yes, yes"', as though 'tremendous revelations were pouring into him all the time now'.<sup>8</sup> Embodying the counter forces of metamorphosis, Cassady is positioned as a true Dionysian, a virtuoso of revolt against imperial America, itself a reversed Dionysus with control manias assimilating exhilaration for its own purposes. Kerouac's motive, more fully realised in the posthumously published metafiction of *Visions of Cody* (1973), is not to contain Cassady, but to understand and register his energies inside a manuscript field that flexes to accommodate his productions of lawlessness, art, and unrestricted sex—which frequently ebbs into grotesque misogyny—and disrupt the Market State's limitation of the human as a product of power. As Ginsberg notes, Kerouac's feral prose is tested in a 'long confessional' epistolary address to his hero and comprises:

every detail ... every tiny eyeball flick of orange neon flashed past in Chicago by the bus station; all the back of the brain imagery. This required sentences that did not necessarily follow exact classic-type syntactical order, but which allowed for interruption with dashes, allowed for the sentences to break in half, take another direction (with parentheses that might go on for paragraphs). It allowed for individual sentences that might not come to their period except after several pages of self-remembrance, of interruption and the piling on of detail, so that what you arrived at was a sort of stream of consciousness visioned around a specific subject (the tale of the road).<sup>9</sup>

Although patterned around a quest narrative, the genre's basis in Christian authority and its traditional associations of accruing territory or crossing the threshold to manhood are incidental to the book's primary enquiry, which is concerned with the regenerative techniques of euphoria. Throughout the text the word 'IT' signals a flash of ecstasy, a point of discharge at which 'meaning-excitement' finds its pure incarnation through jazz, mobility, male fraternity, or sexual union in a provisional, and typically American, release from history. 'For just a moment', reports the narrator, 'I had reached the point of ecstasy that I always wanted to reach, which was the complete step across chronological time into timeless shadows'.<sup>10</sup> Found at the juncture of erotic excitement and religious fervour embedded in the flux of perception, 'IT' evokes a Romantic gnosis—"Excess

is the pathway to wisdom" is Goethe's here-applicable axiom<sup>11</sup>—and is capitalised accordingly, reiterating D. H. Lawrence's application of the term to the retrieval of 'the aboriginal life of the continent' in 'masterless ... living, organic, *believing* community'. "The true liberty will only begin when Americans discover IT, and proceed to fulfil IT", proclaimed Lawrence in his review of William Carlos Williams' *In the American Grain* (1925), 'IT being the deepest *whole* self of man, the self in its wholeness, not idealistic halfness'.<sup>12</sup>

This non-tangible presence signals the arrival of Dionysian energy throughout *On The Road*, a resonance bolstered by allusions to 'Reichianalyzed ecstasy'<sup>13</sup> and the 'vibratory atmospheric atoms of life principle' of Old Bull Lee's orgone accumulator.<sup>14</sup> Writing at the time of Bebop's ascendancy, Kerouac renders 'IT' analogous to a soloist's technique as a means of configuring the relations between language, perception and memory. The altoman in *On The Road*:

starts the first chorus, then lines up his ideas ... All of a sudden somewhere in the middle of the chorus he *gets it* ... Time stops. He's filling empty space with the substance of our lives, confessions of his bellybottom strain, remembrance of ideas, rehashes of old blowing. He has to blow across bridges and come back to do it with such infinite feeling soul-exploratory for the tune of the moment that everybody knows it's not the tune that counts but IT.<sup>15</sup>

Having 'set out in 1947' to forge 'a huge study of the face of America itself', Kerouac swiftly determines that the Dionysian 'ruling thought in the American temperament'<sup>16</sup> cannot be transmitted via the conventional apparatus of the bound novel. His prose does not turn on 'epiphany', that single revelation within the ordinary clutter of circumstance that gels a narrative, and the plot mechanics, which Kerouac initially intended to turn within a 'classical picaresque ring',<sup>17</sup> are perforce subverted. The four circular journeys from New York that underscore the book become progressively less detailed in their revelation of mythic purpose. The chain of episodic adventures are not morally incremental, as Kerouac withholds the necessary signs for revelation of final meaning and, unlike the traditional questing hero, neither the narrator, Sal Paradise, nor his mentor accumulate terminal identities by the conclusion. That strangers drift in and out of the text like the inconsequential shadows populating *Le Mort d'Arthur*, regardless of Sal and Dean's desperate attempts to 'read' them semiotically and hail their magical significance, only adds to this.

The traditional mode of story-telling thus gives way. Content and form fuse as structural device. Kerouac's 'horizontal study of travels on the road'<sup>18</sup> is materialised within the unravelling form of the continuous page, which works free from a logic of imitation to yield a model of narrative organisation unavailable in the Western literary past. The unpunctuated experience of accretion sustains Cassady's energies in a series of non-finite, digressive plateaux. The result is a fast current, a field of action that releases not certainties, but a 'permanent ETC', to call on Alfred Korzybski's abbreviation for the inexhaustible character of non-Aristotelian forms.<sup>19</sup> The manuscript outstrips private chronicle to become an invitation to mobility and risk: an exploration of poetic form as vessel for wildness and a visual design emerging from linguistic materials in transformation. Echoing the existential quality of the calligraphic skeins of paint marking the abstract expressionist canvas, Kerouac's writing is immersed in a continuous 'becoming' where, to quote Deleuze and Guattari, the 'vocation of the sign is to produce desire, engineering it in every direction'.<sup>20</sup>

The scroll, however, also plays out the book's theme on another level, as the host of a narrative that is mythically constrained by an American frontier ideology of endless expansion, acceleration and growth: a promise embodied by the westward road, where the American male can self-actualise by sloughing off the baggage of inherited European identity, and a framework for the self-fashioning pioneer masculinity of Jackson Pollock and his fellow Cedar Tavern brawlers. This is, of course, entropic and fallacious. 'IT' might cast the linearity of Dean and Sal's continental

charge into tension with the exceptionalist belief in manifest destiny, namely that ‘everything was about to arrive – the moment when you know all and everything is decided forever’;<sup>21</sup> but in mass America, the Sublime cannot be realised geographically through the solitary traversal of vast, savage space by speed. The desire for ‘ecstasy of mind all the time’ cannot ward off the fatalism of the book’s generic coding and its location in Cold War ennui. For Dean and Sal the circuits of ‘IT’ never extend beyond a flash, plummeting almost instantly into the choral refrain, ‘everything was collapsing’, as if to convey the corrective limitations of extreme psychological states.

These contesting pressures mark the text throughout, the temporal and conceptual boundaries of the nation being an entropic dustbin of outworn conformities that continually reassert themselves and refuse to perish. Living within a conditioned narrative, Sal and Dean perform the frontier’s redundancy via an unsuspecting complicity in its commissioning by the Market State within the domestic sphere. As the scroll unravels, so too does its constituent American myth.

\* \* \*

In a 1952 letter, Kerouac asserts that he has begun to:

discover now ... something beyond the novel and beyond the arbitrary confines of the story ... revealed prose ... *wild form*, man, *wild form*. Wild form’s the only form holds what I have to say—my mind is exploding to say something about every image and every memory in—I have now an irrational lust to set down everything I know.<sup>22</sup>

Acutely sensitive to the psycho-physiological process, Kerouac finds in the continuous page a way of dramatising the mind in its incessant self-conceptions. Actions are arranged into a manuscript graph of consciousness, which reflects Kerouac’s scholarly interest in suppressed esoteric forms such as Daosim, Tantrism and Mahayana Buddhism, and associated textual traditions such as the Chinese scrolls that pre-date the production of the codex book. As Kerouac later asserts: ‘My greatest contribution to modern writing is the idea of spontaneous notation of the mind actual while writing’.<sup>23</sup>

His ensuing text could equally be considered a spatial imaginary of memory—the stated concern of his oeuvre, which he named The Duluoz Legend—via a narrative that maintains the imminence of its own initiation. The agency of the reflexive ‘I’ is written dynamically into being as the cumulative focus of understanding, a non-teleological set of effects or eternal middle, with propositions begun without knowledge of an ending. ‘The mind-system *cannot* stop’, Kerouac announces to Ginsberg in 1955, ‘the Lankavatara admits it, the habit, the seed-energy of mind cannot end’.<sup>24</sup> The crux of what he calls ‘Spontaneous Prose’ is the collapsing together of observation, interpretation and the act of recording via the technology of the typewriter. All three intersect in the scroll as a kinetic inscription of writing, a dismantling of automatic orders that schematise perception into habits of elucidation after the event.

With its visible stress on temporal juxtaposition, the material form of the prolonged single paragraph both disrupts and reinforces the novel’s legislation of casual sequence. Kerouac’s twenty-day composition could, in itself, be regarded as a context-dependent performance marked by temporary and temporal constraints, with the scroll assigned the status of primary made thing *and* secondary document of that performance. The consequence is an uncertain architecture that maps a different order of production and reproduction, with its reading a further re-performance. The latter emulates a mode of dioramic engagement—from the Greek *di* or *dia*, ‘through’, and *orama*, ‘that which is seen, a sight’—which ascribes to an invisible observer the illusion of movement through a single focus transported across a linear sequence of pictures.

The three typed-rolls taped together can be similarly aligned with postwar experiments in the material print culture of the poem associated with Dieter Roth, Bob Cobbing and Fluxus, as well as the American tradition of the broadside, extending back to John Dunlap of Philadelphia’s publication of the American Declaration of Independence on 4th July 1776, and forward to poster-poems published by City Lights in San Francisco through the 1960s that actively critiqued US imperial ambitions, and text-image collaborations between Michael McClure and Wallace Berman in the service of the former’s ‘mammalian poetics’.<sup>25</sup> Having been purchased by Jim Irsay, the owner of the Indianapolis Colts, at auction for \$2.43 million in 2001—as a successful footballer in his youth, Kerouac might have approved—*On The Road*’s manuscript now tours the world. A sixty-foot section is habitually unrolled for exhibition in a custom-made glass case as an art object in its own right, surrounded by interpretative display boards that locate its active agency within the Beat mythology. Its corporeality and colossal expanse lie in tension with its aura of frailty and ephemerality. It threatens disintegration under one’s gaze.

The representation of the scroll thus assumes a further performative connotation, simultaneously fetishised as a unique commodity valued for its scarcity *and* non-possessable as a cultural transmission. While it was eventually edited and published in standard book form as *On The Road: The Original Scroll* by Viking in 2008, the experience of its reading produces a cognitive dissonance concerning the authority of origins. Interpretation is pitched within an oscillating awareness of the mass-produced cultural object in the hand and the knowledge of its originating circumstance as an entirely different spatial composition that cannot be handled. The discordance is further exacerbated by its inevitable scrutiny against the trace memory of the bowdlerised and regularised 1957 version of the text, which is paradoxically regarded as the original in the minds of its millions of readers. As such the *sui generis* physical culture of the scroll problematises its reproduction via the available technologies of the bound book and its readerly performance through interaction with the bound pages.

The encounter with the scroll uniquely dramatises the transaction between the visual and oral cultures of text, a pressure that Johanna Drucker argues is manifested ‘in the phenomenal presence of the *imago*’, which at once ‘performs the signifying operations of the *logos*’.<sup>26</sup> To Beat writers, jazz had signalled a vital change in the formal use of language, a new dedication of the word to an American voice. Accordingly, Kerouac emphasises orality: a recovery of bodily acoustics in literary production, spurred in part by Cassady’s ‘irruption of speech, a reinstating of pleasure within reality, and a whole new mechanism of power’, to cite Michel Foucault.<sup>27</sup>

As witness to the instantaneous realisation of form on the bandstand, Kerouac reports in a 1951 letter to Cassady that he has begun to ‘re-write’ *On the Road* in ‘my-finally-at-last-found style and hope’, one that allows him to ‘come up with even greater complicated sentences & VISIONS’. The spoken emphasis of his new poetics is attributed to a Bop innovator (‘So from now on just call me Lee Konitz’) and reinforced via his recommendation that the enclosed ‘three now-typed up-revised pages’ of the book be read ‘on your tape, slowly’, adding that he had ‘already made a tape of jazz writing at [Jerry] Newman’s back room’.<sup>28</sup> As Kerouac tells Alfred Kazin three years later, these embodied written improvisations preclude any need for correction:

I’ve invented a new prose, Modern Prose, jazzlike, breathlessly swift spontaneous and unrevised floods ... it comes out wild, at least it comes out pure, it comes out and reads like butter.<sup>29</sup>

The pressure on Bop improvisers to turn it on at call, while defeating imitation and repetition, is also echoed within Kerouac’s proposals: ‘as for my regular English verse, I knocked it off fast like the prose’, he indicates to Ted Berrigan, ‘just as a ... jazz musician has to get out ... his statement within a certain number of bars, within one chorus, which spills over into the next, but he has to stop where the chorus page *stops*’.<sup>30</sup> Where *On The Road* is concerned, discursive sense is

disrupted by the given strictures of the type-roll itself, which shapes the ongoing statement. Bop structures translate into ‘blowing phrases’, the length of breath comprising a measure to link with Charles Olson’s stress on ‘the HEAD, by way of the EAR, to the SYLLABLE / the HEART, by way of the BREATH, to the LINE’ as energy in language.<sup>31</sup> Kerouac is asked about this in the same interview:

Yes, jazz and bop, in the sense of say, a tenor man drawing a breath and blowing a phrase on his saxophone, till he runs out of breath, and when he does, his sentence, his statement’s been made ... that’s how I therefore separate my sentences, as breath separations of the mind ... I formulated the theory of breath as measure, in prose and verse, never mind what Olson, Charles Olson says, I formulated that theory in 1953 at the request of Burroughs and Ginsberg. Then there’s the raciness and freedom and humor of jazz instead of all that dreary analysis.<sup>32</sup>

Lifted from the realm of silent interpretation, the traditional bias of the Western academy, the *mise-en-page* scores the work for both bardic delivery and private reading, renewing previous modernist drives—Mallarmé, Dada, Futurism—and answering Olson’s call for liberation from ‘the verse that print bred’.<sup>33</sup> The speech-text is piloted as a cell of energy. Sonic and visual components fuse through controls of measure, stressing musicality as much as visual architecture. The use of dashes and recurring syllables assist both the eye and inner ear to accrue images at pace without loss of detail. Whole turbulent paragraphs written in one breath (Kerouac’s ‘scatological buildup’) accelerate the process of deciphering phonetic symbols into sound and breath gestalts in the reader. The recording of Dean’s velocity in the opening section of *On The Road* is exemplary:

The most fantastic parking-lot attendant in the world, he can back a car forty miles an hour into a tight squeeze and stop at the wall, jump out, race among fenders, leap into another car, circle it fifty miles an hour in a narrow space, back swiftly into a tight spot, *hump*, snap the car with the emergency so you see it bounce as he flies out; then clear to the ticket shack, sprinting like a track star, hand a ticket, leap into a newly arrived car before the owner’s half out, leap literally under him as he steps out, start the car with the door flapping, and roar off to the next available spot, arc, pop in, brake, out, run; working like that without pause eight hours a night, evening rush hours and after-theater rush hours, in greasy wino pants with a frayed fur-lined jacket and beat shoes that flap.<sup>34</sup>

The passage draws its impact from the onomatopoeic use of staccato triggers (‘back’, ‘leap’, ‘stop’), repeated to convey Dean’s erratic changes of direction. The pulse of the prose then drives a rapid succession of image-statements as they shoot, collide and amass vertically in the mind. An American diction emerges that is receptive to the flow of indomitable involuntary thoughts, flush with the actual movement of things awaiting release: a performative act of attention to the dynamic ‘self-existence’ of events without impediment of hierarchy, classification, or comparison.

Such a mode of apprehension is thematically reproduced on a material level by the continuous page of the manuscript, an elastic framework that pursues no realisation of final scheme. Building from what preceded without need for procedural links or superstructure, the text corresponds with the serial movie sequence of pre-war Saturday-afternoon picture shows that fascinated Kerouac as a child and spurred him to act out their ‘long serial sagas [to be] “continued next week”’.<sup>35</sup> Such a

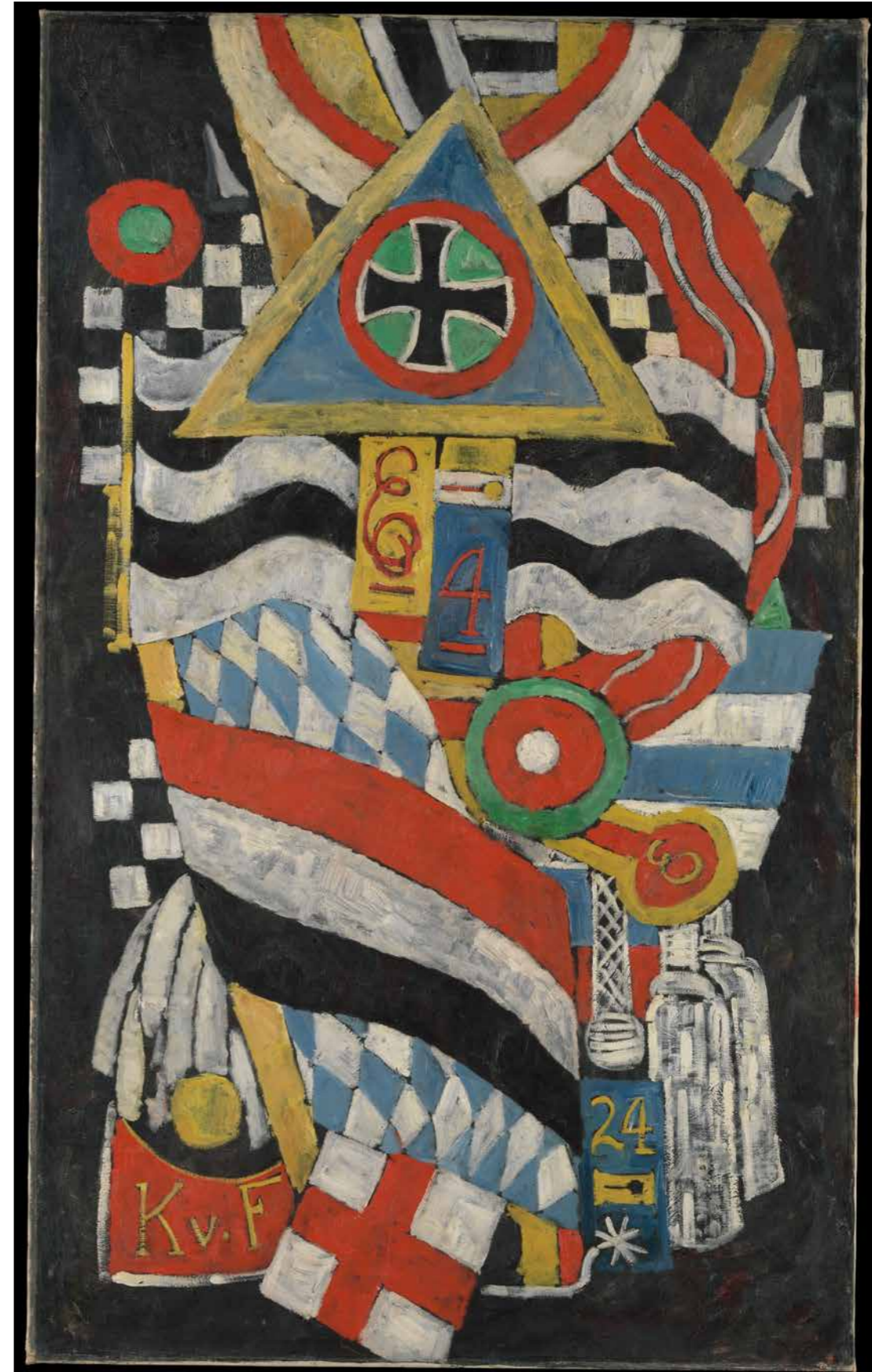


Fig. 12.2  
Marsden Hartley,  
*Portrait of a  
German Officer*  
(1914). Oil on  
canvas, 173.4 x  
105.1 cm. Alfred  
Stieglitz Collection,  
Metropolitan  
Museum of Art,  
New York, 1949,  
49.70.42. Photo:  
© Metropolitan  
Museum of Art,  
New York.

model is reflected in the superstructure of *The Duluoz Legend* and can, in turn, be located within a multidisciplinary American tradition of the sequence that stems from Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* (1855 onwards), one vitally opposed to the quick instigation and discharge of the later pop paradigm.

This principle enters the US fine arts with Marsden Hartley's four canvases, *Portrait of a German Officer* (1914) (fig. 12.2), and extends via Stuart Davis' *Eight Meter* (1927) into Mark Rothko's environmental groups, Adolph Gottlieb's tiers of discrete symbols, and Louise Nevelson's vertically piled boxes of cast-off objects swathed in monochrome, all of which emerge in the 1950s. These are joined by Jackson Pollock's numbered 'drip' series (1946 onwards), Robert Motherwell's *Elegies to the Spanish Republic* (1948–67), Jasper Johns' numbers, targets, and flags (1954 onwards), Robert Rauschenberg's mixed-media *1/4 or 2-Furlong Piece* (1981–98), and Willem de Kooning's *Women* (1950 onwards). Textually this overlaps with Ezra Pound's *Cantos* (1922–62), John Dos Passos' *USA* triptych (1930–36), William Carlos Williams' *Paterson* (1946–58), Jack Spicer's *Heads of the Town Up to the Aether* (1962), Allen Ginsberg's *Fall of America: Poems of These States, 1965–1971* (1973), and Robert Duncan's *Passages and The Structure of Rime* (c.1960–88); while in jazz it echoes the non-sonata forms of Duke Ellington and Billy Strayhorn's suites (1943–72) and extended performances by ensembles led by Ornette Coleman and John Coltrane through the 1960s. In each instance a definitive version of experience is refused through an inexhaustible reworking of expressive possibility over a given motif, pattern or sign, as attention shifts from finished artefact to inventive activity.

After the Bebop experiments of the 1940s, complementary principles of imprecision, inconclusiveness and multiplicity flourish across the US avant-garde. Crediting Jackson Pollock for having 'broke[n] the ice', Willem de Kooning identified the historical importance of his first 'all-over' webs of poured paint (*Cathedral*, *Full Fathom Five*, and *Lucifer*) from Winter 1946: a celebration of art as performance beyond genre. As the critic, Harold Rosenberg, explained:

At a certain moment the canvas began to appear to one American painter after another as an arena in which to act – rather than as a space in which to reproduce, re-design, analyze, or 'express' an object, actual or imagined. What was to go on the canvas was not a picture but an event. The painter no longer approached his easel with an image in his mind; he went up to it with material in his hand to do something to that other piece of material in front of him. The image would be the result of this encounter.<sup>36</sup>

The manuscript of *On The Road* follows the transformation of the canvas from a site where information is re-presented to a dramatisation of the mind through which the artist travels via surface alterations. Kerouac no longer chases down the mimetic subject, but seeks to make of writing an action itself that surges existentially forward by accumulated decisions, the knowledge of form and its meaning being contingent upon its appearance. As such the scroll vigorously courts surplus, a further charge within the nation's poetics that stretches back to the collision of discourses and registers producing the textual spaces of Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* (1850). Kerouac's manuscript over-reaches the novel's given spatial parameters as both enactment and metaphor of pleasure in proliferation. The Dionysian overflowing of boundary recalls Pollock's decisional cutting of the canvas after the choreographic record of his encounter with paint. Kerouac's narrative of 'remembrance ... written on the run', likewise overtakes any fulfillment of a *priori* intention enforcing completion, suggesting a model of literature that is a process, not a goal; a production, not an illustration; and a study of how memory gathers perceptions of the world.

Pollock's biomorphic vision of the relationship between the painter and the all-over topography of the canvas—'When I am in my painting, I'm not aware of what I'm doing ... the painting has a



Fig. 12.3  
Closed sleeve of  
Ornette Coleman's  
*Free Jazz* (1960),  
reproducing  
Jackson Pollock's  
*White Light*  
(1954).  
Photo: © Jack  
Hartnell.

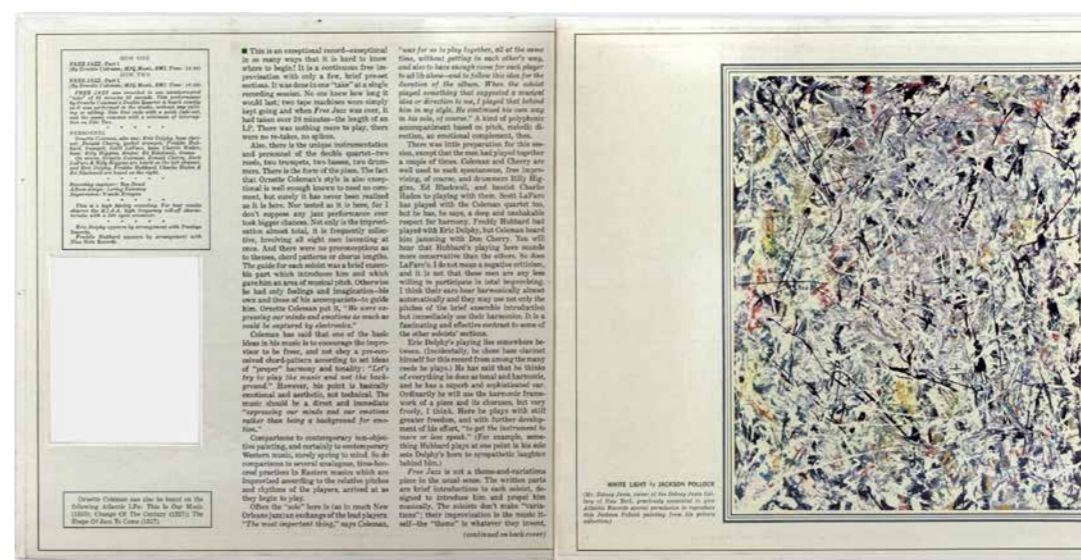


Fig. 12.4  
Open sleeve of  
Ornette Coleman's  
*Free Jazz* (1960),  
reproducing  
Jackson Pollock's  
*White Light*  
(1954).  
Photo: © Jack  
Hartnell.

life of its own. I try to let it come through<sup>37</sup>— is similarly concomitant. The writer now becomes the act of writing, which instantly comprises the page. Ideas and shapes emerge through an act of profusion, discharged at breakneck speed inside the boundless geography of a material field. The changing stages of mental activity must be discovered and inscribed as a single action, unfettered by the taxonomies of what Kerouac calls ‘discriminate thinking’. To begin constantly anew is thus to search for an axiom that applies just once: a concretisation of de Crèvecoeur’s national conceit (‘the American is a new man who acts on new principles: he must therefore entertain new ideas and form new opinions’).<sup>38</sup> Such a motive was avidly embraced across the San Francisco and Black Mountain scenes. While Lawrence Ferlinghetti spoke of ‘a continuous line from the beginning of the poem to the end, like a Pollock painting ... what I call “open form” composition, whereas Robert Duncan uses the term “Open Field”’,<sup>39</sup> Michael McClure identified a ‘gestalt across the arts’<sup>40</sup> that need not extend to homologous substitution or synchronised programme. Applying equally to the orientation of Ornette Coleman’s *Free Jazz* (1960), which reproduced Pollock’s *White Light* (1954) on its sleeve (figs 12.3—12.4), the structure of such work is, according to Robert Creeley, ‘possessed of its own organisation, which in turn derives from the circumstances of its making’.<sup>41</sup>

Echoing, too, Pollock’s discovery of new techniques—the sculptor, Harry Jackson, relates ‘that he started dripping paint because he became so excited while painting the mural for Peggy Guggenheim, that he lost hope of keeping up with his excitement using a brush’<sup>42</sup>—the outpouring vitality of Kerouac’s writing yields its own formal decorum or shaping principle from within. In a 1949 letter to Ed White, Kerouac suggests that ‘the truth’ exists not in formula, but in the transition ‘from moment to moment incomprehensible, ungraspable, but terribly clear’: the Latin root of the verb for ‘moment’ (*moveo*) conveying that swirl of movement within a *satori* of consciousness, shot through with the biographic occasion. Its rush across the brain forces the writer-hustler ‘to catch the fresh dream, the fresh thought’, in a ‘dance on the edges of relative knowledge’, for the filter of ‘any formula would give a picture of false clearness, like glass reflecting a reflection only’, as opposed to ‘the fire itself’.<sup>43</sup>

This metafactively feeds into *On The Road*: ‘Man, wow, there’s so many things to do, so many things to write!’ yells the narrator. ‘How to *begin* to get it all down and without modified restraints and all hung-up on like literary inhibitions and grammatical fears’.<sup>44</sup> The scroll is crucial to this act of morphology. Kerouac’s desire to translate experience into poetic syntax without loss of intensity hurls each given scenario into an inspired improvisation, the catalyst for discovery of reflexive relationships between experience, perception, and writing through which subjectivity is mobilised. With given coordinates of representation rejected, the subsequent appearance of the writing is necessarily unfinished or even ragged with inconsistencies. The ongoing process of construction remains omnipresent with a cross-referencing thematic to the novel, a declaration of the presence and jurisdiction of the creator in the fable. While charging through the mid-West, the manuscript of *On The Road* is evoked from within the text by the roar of the wind, which, in a gesture redolent of the magisterial *One Thousand and One Nights*, ‘made the plains unfold like a roll of paper’.<sup>45</sup>

The scroll thus charts a set of aesthetic and cultural practices that inform an entire performance purview: a record of habitation manifested as relic, which hosts the marks of human presence inscribed upon the territory of land, body, and textual surface, alike. Henri Corbin’s definition of the Sufi term, *phainomenon*, resonates at this point, as entry into the shifting, folding architecture of the imagination, where the imposition of allegorical schemata on perception, or limit on the poetic text, serves only to mutilate. Far from being merely incidental, the unique material culture of the manuscript stands as a heretical gesture that illuminates the ontology of *On The Road* and intensifies its visionary quality: a constellation, albeit temporary, of the creative imagination in its irresistible emergence.

**Michael Hrebeniak** is Director of Studies in English, and Lecturer in Literature and Visual Culture at Wolfson College and Magdalene College Cambridge. He previously taught Humanities at the Royal Academy of Music and Metropolitan Studies at NYU, and produced poetry documentaries for Channel 4 TV. Recent publications include chapters in edited collections on ecopoetics, cinematic space, photography, BBC Arena and jazz writing. His concern with interdisciplinarity informed his first monograph, *Action Writing: Jack Kerouac’s Wild Form*, which located Beat writing within the contemporary milieu of painting, music and radical politics. His first film, *Stirbitch: An Imaginary*, broached the terrains of cultural memory, habitat and the carnivalesque in relation to the medieval Stourbridge Fair. This was premiered at the Hoeng Gallery in 2019. His journalism has appeared in the Guardian and on BBC radio, and he is Convenor of the New School of the Anthropocene, part of the new Cooperative University.

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