

## Jack Kerouac's *Book of Dreams*

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*Book of Dreams* is an experimental piece of writing by Jack Kerouac (1922-1969) composed between 1952 and 1960, a time period corresponding to the most productive years of his career. Written as “a private dream diary with no intention of publication” (Charters, 1999, 327), it consists of a series of short sequences of variable length (anywhere between one line and three pages), which record Kerouac's own dreams in written form. Each sequence sketches the narrative of one specific dream – an elastic dream-sequence containing vivid imagery, rich action and sharp sensations written in present tense. These dream-sequences are freely associated with no tangible relation from one to the other; they build a corpus of dream recollections which, as Kerouac put it, “continue the same story which is the one story that I always write about” (Kerouac, 1961, 3), alluding to the *Duluož Legend*. *Book of Dreams* was originally hand-written and revised in July 1960 in Bixby Canyon, Big Sur. It was then typed by Kerouac's friend, the poet Philip Whalen for publication by City Lights Press in 1960 (Charters, 1999, 257).

Sometimes seen as a stylistic exercise for his fiction, Kerouac's *Book of Dreams* remains an accomplished work in its own right: it typifies a quintessential instance of the writer's avant-garde writing practice, using his own dreaming material as a substratum for self-disclosure and literary experimentation. In this sense, *Book of Dreams* defies genre classification: as Kerouac attempts to track

the meanderings of his own unconscious mind, the project is neither purely fictional nor strictly autobiographical; nor is it a poetical experiment *per se*, despite the creativity and originality of its language.

Assuredly, the project of *Book of Dreams* has a Freudian dimension to it: the vast number of dream-sequences contained in the book may enable the skilled reader to decipher a series of recurring motifs concealed behind the surface of dreams; motifs that may be interpreted through a psychoanalytic approach to gain an insight into the workings of the writer's psyche. Nevertheless, its literary achievement lies in its method of composition. As each dream is immediately recorded in a semi-conscious state upon waking, Kerouac aims to write his own dream experiences back to life through an electrifying syntax of spontaneous prose: "They were all written spontaneously, nonstop, just like dreams happen, sometimes written before I was even wide awake" (Kerouac, 1961, 3).

This type of writing is inspired, partly, by the modernist device of the stream of consciousness: it allows Kerouac to capture, as promptly and as directly as possible, the dream sensations and images that flashed through the mind just an instant ago. While this method fuels Kerouac's idiosyncratic spontaneous style, it also stands close to the practice of free or 'automatic writing' consecrated by the avant-garde movements of the early 20<sup>th</sup>-century, such as the Surrealists: here, Kerouac operates on a subconscious level, writing swiftly as "the mind goes on" (Kerouac, 1961, 3) in order to reify his unconscious on the page, right there and right then.

As one might expect, the contents of *Book of Dreams* escape logic and traditional conventions of representation. In most dream-sequences, focalisation is

inconsistent; rational laws are abolished, supplanted by a stretching of both time and space that suffuses the book with a surreal lawlessness which also sums up the nature of the unconscious. Cities blend into one another; nature itself morphs, in accordance with the dominant mood of the dream. These distortions in the representation enable a multiplicity of narrative digressions to occur within the sequence, with sub-plots developing “for no other particular reason than [...] the brain ripples” (Kerouac, 1961, 3), mimicking the convolutions of the dreaming mind at full speed. In addition, these sub-narratives evidence a thorough preoccupation with detail that complexifies the reading experience and may baffle the reader – to whom Kerouac addresses a warning in the Foreword. Subsequently, an implied reader will be invoked at regular intervals throughout the book, sometimes provocatively.

Crucially, *Book of Dreams* offers a striking contrast between the playfulness of its prose and the darkness of its tone. This darkness is imputable, in great proportion, to the subject matter of Kerouac’s dreams, as the vast majority of dream-sequences revolve around themes of fallen glory, persecution and misery; themes that accommodate an immoderate feeling of guilt that runs throughout the book and that matures into mild melancholy, sheer paranoia or self-destructive behaviour. A closer inspection of these themes allows us to detect a trope of inversion recurring throughout *Book of Dreams*. The first dream-sequence, for instance, opens on a failed trip *eastward*; reminding the reader that Kerouac’s dream recording is also an attempt to capture *night visions*, spectral counterparts to his westward quest for transcendence in the material world.

This doom and gloom in the text is articulated through a variety of situations in which Kerouac, with great frequency, is described as travelling, running, swimming, sailing, driving, riding cycles, trains, buses, climbing, falling, eating, drinking, smoking, chasing ghosts, watching films, missing boats, fighting, celebrating, working, writing, walking around naked, feeling lonely, being mocked, being shot at, being robbed, losing his underpants, saving cats, fornicating, dying, or succumbing to insanity. This ambience of urgency and general hostility provides the reader with a cartography of Kerouac's insecurities and anxieties: insecurities about himself in terms of self-identity, romantic involvement, (homo-)sexual desire and the fear of death, but also anxieties related to professional choices, sacrifices, achievements and failures; and those pertaining to the contemporaneous world, where modern culture is envisaged, frequently, as irremediably corrupt and threatening for the self.

These dream-sequences allow the reader to access fragments of Kerouac's existence behind the scenes; a drama that takes the form of a litany of the unconscious, and featuring many real-life characters – close friends, friends, girlfriends, friends of friends, writers, enemies and rivals, wives, siblings, a dying father, and a ubiquitous mother – adumbrating a fantasised crowd which, as the 'Table of Characters' indicates, also peopled his novels (*On the Road*, *The Subterraneans*, *The Dharma Bums*, *Maggie Cassidy* and *Doctor Sax*). It would not be out of place here to point out the overwhelming presence of Kerouac's mother, 'Ma'. Characteristically, the omnipresence of the mother figure in dreams may signal intricate Oedipal ties, which have been largely interpreted by Kerouac critics. More interestingly perhaps, it also reveals the subsistence of her gaze all

along the sequences; a chastising, peeping eye devised by Kerouac in his dreams through which is staged the schismatic encounter of a West-coast, 'King of the Beats' Kerouac with his Lowell alter-ego, 'Ti-Jean', resulting in cataclysms of guilt in dreaming form.

Simultaneously, as the reader may gain a patchy appreciation of a fraction of Kerouac's unconscious, we descend deeper into his writing art. In an expressionist vein, the prosody is intensely perceptive, compact and lively, as Kerouac plays with rhythms and sounds ("with raging whitesmash, river mouth grashin to show clash crash" (Kerouac, 1961, 114)). It is peppered with words and phrases in Joual – the Quebec variant of French that Kerouac spoke in his early childhood – and incorporates a plethora of neologisms and compounds, useful for Kerouac when conventional words fail to channel accurately what is occurring "in the Shakespearean stage of [his] dreambrain" (Kerouac, 1961, 21). The malleability of Kerouac's syntax and the relentless interplay on sounds point to the Joycean quality of the writing. For critic Nancy M. Grace, "Kerouac sensed that what he called Shakespeare's and Joyce's Heraclitean genius – meaning [...] ever shifting and not time bound – enabled them to distinguish between noise, a social phenomenon, and sound, the timeless genesis of the word" (Grace, 2007, 29). In *Book of Dreams*, the plasticity of Kerouac's language shortcuts linguistic norms; it generates a phantasmagoric vision of reality located outside socio-historical contingencies and beyond the censorship of consciousness. Additionally, Kerouac's prosody is furiously metonymic and accommodates a huge quantity of similes, repetitions and accumulations, which add a child-like quality to the writing.

These devices participate in the elaboration of a highly intuitive prose that rushes from one image to another in a flash, skipping connectives and ignoring punctuation rules. This type of prose is effervescent, fluid and elliptical; as it attempts to embrace all the visual details of the recollected dream simultaneously, it exemplifies a form of parataxis that suffuses the text with an epic sensation of speed. The result is an inexhaustible verbal outflow which is symptomatic of Kerouac's spontaneous prose – a writing method pushed to an extreme in *Book of Dreams* (but also in other works such as *Doctor Sax* (1959) and *Visions of Cody* (1972)) in order to convey the myriad images arising from the dreaming mind as vividly and as quickly as possible. In conjunction with this torrential effect, many dream-sequences present images that are coupled with sensations and emotions: Kerouac's kinetic prose becomes synesthetic, as he scribbles down not only what the dreaming mind envisions, but also what it *feels* in the very moment, too – a sensation retrieved, revitalised and passed on to the reader.

The high degree of experimentalism that *Book of Dreams* features both in its form and its contents had a decisive influence on its reception. The book had no reviews in the local press, and only two articles appeared in literary magazines at national level (Amburn, 1998, 317). This irritated Kerouac, who vituperated the “New York Marxist critics” for their lack of consideration (Clark, 1984, 184). Overall, the book sold poorly. While the lack of critical attention played an undeniable role in this, *Book of Dreams* also fell victim to the average reader's misconception of Kerouac, and who accordingly shunned his stylistic bravado. As biographer Paul Maher points out:

[...] his aesthetics were hardly ever a concern to his reading public, for much of his work was reduced fodder meant to capitalize on the name of ‘Kerouac’; under that name, most of his readers sought to fall again under the spell of *On the Road* and *not* the subconscious meanderings of his dream states. Kerouac, though, looked beyond the current perception of him. (Maher, 2004, 416)

It was only decades later that *Book of Dreams* came to be reappraised and held in respect by the literary community, as this extract from a review in *Publishers Weekly* from 14 May 2001 shows:

[M]any facets of Kerouac’s oeuvre appear here much less polished, and more naked and powerful. [...] Lost love, madness, castration, cats that speak, cats in danger of their lives, people giving birth to cats, grade school classrooms, Mel Tormé, Zsa Zsa Gabor, Tolstoy and Genet all make repeated appearances, lending the collection a repetitive, nonprogrammatic logic and exposing an unfamiliar sort of vulnerable beauty in Kerouac’s iconic persona. (Quoted in Maher, 2004, 480)

In the years following Kerouac’s precipitate death, several critics, such as Robert Hipkiss, read *Book of Dreams* as a document of primary psycho-biographical value; a repository for Kerouac’s neuroses – real or supposed – through which they could search for the origins of the evil that tormented the writer: “What stands in [Kerouac’s] way is mistrust born of the knowledge that

his artistic success has set him apart from his friends and that they are not so loving, kind, and unselfish as he might have hoped” (Hipkiss, 1976, 49). While a strict biographical interpretation of *Book of Dreams* may not be entirely adequate, the book may still be conceived as a form of confessional that works both on a psychoanalytical and a spiritual plane. Indeed, by virtue of the religious (and especially Catholic) imagery that *Book of Dreams* mobilises repeatedly, the book may be construed as a series of confessions through which the writer may gain purification by means of the cathartic power of the declaimed word (“*how can a man lie and say shit when he has gold in his mouth*” (Kerouac, 1961, 7)). Viewed from this angle, *Book of Dreams* carries an intrinsic mystical function, seen as a project in which the sinful material of carnal existence is sublimated and evaporates through the redemptive writing act; a “Jesus pilgrimage” in writing form that patently appeals to the reader’s compassion (Kerouac, 1961, 16).

Thirty years after its publication, *Book of Dreams* has been reassessed from a post-structuralist perspective, emphasising the nature of language in the book and in Kerouac’s work more generally. As Michael Hrebeniak observes:

Immersed in Eastern disciplines and disfavoring Aristotelian chains, Kerouac consistently reveals the ability to think in images, to place name against name, quality against quality, time-space against time-space, while retaining that passion for description inside the act of discovery that [Gertrude] Stein saw as the basis of poetry. (Hrebeniak, 2006, 171)



While Hrebeniak pinpoints the non-dialectical character of Kerouac's prose and insists on the primacy of the visual experience in his writing, Hassan Melehy deciphers the key relations between dream states and material reality in Kerouac's work:

[Kerouac] affirms the status of dreams as reality but also extends their vision function to everyday waking perception, in part through the close study that results from recording them. Thus he suggests that broad awareness and actualization of this function are central to the social interconnectedness of humanity, something he views as taking place in a transcendent realm that nonetheless inhabits the material world. (Melehy, 2016, 106)

This 'social interconnectedness' in 'a transcendent realm', that which, in Kerouac's words, "ties all mankind together shall we say in one unspoken Union and also proves that the world is really transcendental" (Kerouac, 1961, 3), points once again to the mystical dimension of *Book of Dreams*, where *night visions* still retain their visionary status. The higher aim of the book might very well be to reconnect humanity with the world of invisible forces, a world in which dreams constitute both a privileged method of inquiry into, and a residue of, what Kerouac conceived as universal truths, "[r]evelations of the loose mind in Essence connection" (Kerouac, 1961, 125).

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