

Marks of Enlightenment?

Spontaneous Mind, the Egotistic Sublime, and Unmaking Haiku in *The Dharma Bums*

By Andrew Libby

This paper represents an attempt—a first attempt—to articulate the interface Kerouac draws on between spirituality and poetic production in *The Dharma Bums*. More specifically, it examines how he makes the sense of presence promised by his own peculiar hybrid of Buddhist practice coincident with the methods of spontaneous writing advocated and practiced by the characters in the novel as well as by the novel's author and his friends. It's not that there's any inherent contradiction in aligning a practice of cultivating a presence of mind and a poetics grounded in notions of immediacy and spontaneity. To the contrary, this association has a rich and documentable modern genealogy that includes the British romantics (I'm thinking of Blake's apocalyptic visions, of course, but more of Keats in his letters and, more problematically, W. Wordsworth), Walt Whitman, the proto-punk poet Arthur Rimbaud (though his case, too, is complex), the French surrealist project of automatic writing, the scramble of various writing projects grouped under the name "the Beats," and perhaps also the claims, implicit or explicit, of "real" or real-time aesthetics made by spoken word performers.

Nor do I see in practices of presencing—poetic or spiritual—any insurmountable incompatibility with notions of history or genealogy, even broken genealogies such as the one I just traced: A powerful mind such as Ginsberg's, in fact, worked with a wealth of historical data as it produced poetry as well as astute commentary on poetry—spontaneously. (Ginsberg's many utterances on this score show him to be acutely

conscious—however we might need to determine “conscious” here—of the historical dimension of his aural hallucination of Blake, his tutelary relationship to William Carlos Williams, and the legitimacy of using classical metrical patterns such as iambic pentameter—that is, provided they’re arrived at “organically rather than synthetically”¹ In fact it’s precisely the asymmetrical relation between the possibilities opened by such a spontaneous poetics (or poetic production) and what seems like the impossibility of giving an adequate critical account of this poetic activity that excites my interest.

I’ve divided my comments into three parts, based loosely on the eons-old song by Donovan: 1. Mountain, 2. No Mountain, 3. Mountain: Falling. And at the very end I offer, in a coda, a brief meditation on pedagogy and gratitude.

1. Mountain

Whatever else it might be—novel, typewriting, roman à clef—*The Dharma Bums* works chiefly as spiritual autobiography in the Anglophone tradition of Margarie Kempe’s *The Book of Magarie Kempe* and Bunyan’s *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners* (1666), though it might actually be more closely akin to St. Augustine’s *Confessions*, by virtue of the central organizing trope of life as journey and Augustine’s transcultural conversion that seems similar to Kerouac’s discovery of Buddhism. This tradition might lead one to take for granted the role played by the mountain in the first half of the novel, yet the mountain as a sacred place, the dwelling of a god or *genius loci*, is foreign to Buddhism. Of course practitioners may go on retreat for years in a mountain cave, but in such cases it’s the cave, not so much the mountain, and certainly no divine

¹ Ginsberg in an interview with Tom Clark (Cambridge, England: mid-May 1965); in *Spontaneous Mind: Selected Interviews, 1958–1996*, p. 19. Also published as “The Art of Poetry” (no. 8 in a series) in *The Paris Review* (Spring 1966).

aspect (or personification, or prosopopoeia) of the mountain, that serves as the site of spiritual retreat. And anyhow, meditating in a charnel ground—with the vultures and decaying remains of fellow villagers, maybe even family members—would also be highly advised. Chögyam Trungpa, Rinpoche has pointed out the prominence of mountains as a geographical concentration of divine power for many of the worlds theistic religions:

The greatest local deity in the theistic world is Jehovah of Mount Sinai. We could regard him as a local deity, as well. Or, for that matter, we could say that Shiva is the local deity of Mount Kailasa. However divine or perfect these deities are described as, their power is based on the idea of worshipping them on certain mountains, where their energy seems to arise. That reputation of divinity is generated further and further, from generation to generation, until the great-great grandchildren believe that Mount Sinai is not even an earthly mountain—it is fantastically heavenly. (1980 [Seminary] Transcripts. *Hinayana-Mahayana*, p.54)

Shakyamuni Buddha was not on a mountain when he attained enlightenment. He was meditating beside a river, under a tree. Thus if *The Dharma Bums* is indeed an instance of spiritual biography or autobiography or some other type of spiritual narrative, and if the spirituality Kerouac is working with here is Buddhism, why is there so much emphasis on the mountain climbing? Why does it make sense to the two main characters to undertake to climb this mountain? Why don't they take to the flatlands and find a tree by a nice river and let some fair maiden bring them rice milk when they're done waking up? Perhaps it would be well to consider what it means to climb a mountain, and what it is a

mountain does besides provide a place for the transmission of law? What is climbing, anyway?

2. No Mountain

I wish to approach these last questions obliquely, by first considering the representations of landscape in the first chapters of the novel. The landscape descriptions seem to be less about evoking a mood or giving an accurate account of the flora, fauna, and geographical features of this place (as one might expect from a leader—Japhy—who counts as his master John Muir) and more about making a spiritual topography that may not allow easy progress. It may disallow progress. In fact, there may be no forward movement at all on this mountain. It is, I'd like to suggest in the following reading, precisely this possibility of nonprogress toward a goal (which may or may not be there) that qualifies Kerouac's narrative as a story of the failure of enlightenment (in both the Eastern and the Western senses of the word). This failure—and not the mountain itself, a powerful figure for Abrahamic religions as for the literature of the American West—may well be what marks *The Dharma Bums* as, well, dharmic. And to make a mountain a site of possible enlightenment—and not, as Trungpa Rinpoche teaches, a place where theistic law gets transmitted, enacted, and codified—Kerouac has to rephrase what it means to be a mountain. One could say he unmakes the mountain, but it might be more precise to say he lets the mountain unbecome. The effect of this letting² is that there is, for a space of time, no mountain. But let's follow Kerouac's path here.

² I borrow this active sense of *let* from Martin Heidegger's account of the work of art. Heidegger activates—makes active—the conventionally passive force of the verb *lassen* ('to let'): In letting-happen on the other hand, there is manifested a compliance [Sich-einlassen, or 'letting itself into something'] and thus, as it were, a

Kerouac seems to offer *us* many ways to move through this space of climbing, making, and unmaking (or letting). Ray, it seems, must regress in order to move toward a state of nonbeing—or near nonbeing, like the dangerous state of “not yet being born” that Sándor Ferenczi notes in his *Clinical Diary*³,—in order to be fecund, creative, poetic. In order, that is, to produce haiku. This regression seems to mark a double movement. It may move backwards in the time of an individual life to a childlike state: “ ‘Oh this is like an early morning in China and I’m five years old in beginningless time!’”⁴. (Numerous other passages in the novel might be offered as evidence for this reversion to a childlike state.) Or it may move back through many previous lives to a blank beginning that ushers in the inexpressible, as in this especially beautiful (and long) passage:

But it seemed that I had seen the ancient afternoon of that trail, from meadow rocks and lupine posies, to sudden revisits with the roaring stream with its splashed snag bridges and undersea greennesses, there was something inexpressibly broken in my heart as though I’d lived before and walked this trail, under similar circumstances with a fellow Bodhisattva, but maybe on a more important journey, I felt like lying down by the side of the trail and remembering it all. The woods do that to you, they always look familiar, long lost, like the face of a long-dead relative, like an old dream, like a piece of forgotten song drifting across the water, most of all like the golden eternities of past childhood or past manhood and all the living and the dying and the heartbreak that went on a million years ago and the clouds as they pass overhead seem to testify (by their

nonwilling, which clears the way for the advent of truth.” (*Poetry, Language, Thought*, p. 82). The force of his aesthetic thinking lies in recasting the sense of *lassen* to allow for an opening to the unprecedented.

³ Sándor Ferenczi, *The Clinical Diary of Sándor Ferenczi* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press), entry for 2 October 1932, p.212.

⁴ Jack Kerouac, *The Dharma Bums* (New York: Penguin, 1976 [Viking, 1958]), p. 59. Hereafter page numbers are cited in the text.

own lonesome familiarity) to this feeling. Ecstasy, even, I felt, with flashes of sudden remembrance, and the feeling sweaty and drowsy I felt like sleeping and dreaming in the grass. (p. 61–2)

These memories—or more precisely this remembering—occur in a space in which agency would seem to be suspended. It is the gift of remembering that the woods offer (“The woods do that to you”), and the passage doesn’t seem concerned to mark the expected differences between human and inhuman (the woods look familiar, “like a long-lost relative”), between waking and dreaming (“like an old dream” they appear to him as he walks or reposes in the mountains, waiting for Morley), between now and ages past. What space is this that Kerouac invokes? Where are we, now?

If you’ve read even a little Romantic poetry, this passage—these woods—are likely to seem quite familiar. A similar scene of the dynamics of involuntary memory and the affective and experiential uncertainty it occasions is presented in Wordsworth’s “Tintern Abbey,” for instance; and it was Keats, in a letter to Richard Wodehouse (27 October 1818),⁵ who confirms what Ray is experiencing in the economy of losing oneself to gain poetry:

As to the poetical Character itself (I mean that sort of which, if I am any thing, I am a Member; that sort distinguished from the wordsworthian or egotistical sublime; which is a thing per se and stands alone) it is not itself—it has no self—it is every thing and nothing—It has no character—it enjoys light and shade; it lives in gusto, be it foul or fair, high or low, rich or poor, mean or elevated— . . . A Poet is the most unpoetical of any thing in existence; because he has no Identity—

⁵ *The Letters of John Keats*. A Selection Edited by Robert Gittings (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1970), p. 157–58.

. . . When I am in a room with People if I ever am free from speculating on creations of my own brain, then not myself goes home to myself: but the identity of every one in the room begins to [*for so*] to press upon me that, I am in a very little time an[*ni*]hilated—not only among Men; it would be the same in a Nursery of children: I know not whether I make myself wholly understood . . . (pp. 61–62)

(It is worth noting that Kerouac was reading the letters of Keats in 1949, as attested in a letter to Elbert Lenrow, 28 June 1949, in *Selected Letters*, vol 1: 1940–1956, ed. Ann Charters, p. 206.).

It would seem, that is, that in order to make haiku, Ray must first unmake himself, come into contact with some degree zero of ego. It's as if once you've cleared the space of the exigencies of the ego—as it were cleared away your own need for poetry—that poetry can appear. Ray razes/raises himself in order to make room for making haiku.

Conceptually this works both ways: The force of agency can flow the other way as well, as the passage above suggests. Haiku, that is, unmakes the world around it, including the self of the poet. It springs from unmaking, from a space of emptiness, from a specific deconstruction of ego that the novel doesn't deliver fully, not so much because Ray can't achieve that kind of disappearance act as narrator or character, but because the novel in its Western manifestation at this point in history, sorely reliant on character, can't let Kerouac realize his blank project, his dissolute self, the project of his self dissolving and manifesting that dissolution in words. Perhaps it's the work of words that gets in the way of the representation of the self unwinding. Who would be there to speak,

or listen to, such a story? Ray? You? Me? The mountain? —What language would it be in?

In pursuing their desire for a pure form of language, Japhy and, after him, Ray look to haiku as a poetic form, imported and translated from the East, that promises the immediacy of expression without intervening figuration. Ray reflects to himself: “Walking in this country you could understand the perfect gems of haikus the Oriental poets had written, never getting drunk in the mountains or anything but just going along as fresh as children writing down what they saw without literary devices or fanciness of expression. We made up haikus as we climbed, winding up and up now on the slopes of brush.” (p. 59) Japhy, reflecting on Ray’s compassion or *maitri* practice (pp. 68–69), concurs: “. . . as I say comparisons *are* odious, but what we’re sayin now is true” (p. 69).

The genre of haiku, then, promises freedom from the constraints and ambiguities that language, and specifically poetic or figurative language, entails. It offers the clarity of dharma. It would also, however, promise an obliteration of the differences—in for example how we know the world—that such language engenders. It might—if we buy into Japhy’s and Ray’s symbolist rhetoric—render a mountain both there and not there at the same time. It might—in an act of poetic orogeny—recast the mountain as a site of enlightenment in a double sense: both part of “objective” reality subject to the investigations of naturalists and geologists, an object of Enlightenment science, and (on the other hand) let it undo this cast of mind to become itself a Buddha. As Japhy puts it, “Look at all those patient Buddhas lookin at us saying nothing.” (p. 68) Is it the mountains, or Japhy and Ray, or the Buddhas that are saying nothing? Does saying nothing mean keeping silent? Is silence the pure language the haikus offer? Are the

mountains that aren't there, that are poems or figures of the seekers' imaginations, in fact nonincarnate teachers? If so, how do we learn to listen to the silence they're transmitting and incorporate it into our lives? If *The Dharma Bums* is dharmic, offering us truth or instruction, how do we follow its serpentine paths? Which way is up, which down?

3. Mountain: Falling

The entire mountain-climbing episode, you may recall, was initiated by an act of translation of a poem by Japhy's master, Han Shan, the master of the Cold Mountain, a monk-poet thought by some to have written in the 7th century CE, though some philologists have demonstrated that some of the poems attributed to him belong to two distinct centuries. Han Shan, whose name itself means "cold mountain," thus stands as a figure for the kind of dispersed subjectivity or mind that Kerouac seems to have been thinking of as he wrote these chapters. He also stands as a figure of a mountain himself, and of a poet. So that climbing the mountain could signify translation—an intricate interplay of reading and writing, of receiving and giving—as well as making, that is, creating poems (or mountains). And of course it can mean climbing in a literal sense: going somewhere—up. If these are the registers of the word "climbing" and if the master, Han Shan, seems to be a manner of Zen Lunatic (one of his poems, 233, begins "When Han-shen utters these words, / He may also seem like a crazy man."),⁶ an enlightened madman or holder of Crazy Wisdom, what would it mean to fall off of or away from this wild wise mountain man? Would falling from Eastern enlightenment be the same as falling back—regressing—into the Western Enlightenment's preoccupation with

⁶ Stephen Owen, ed. and trans. *An Anthology of Chinese Poetry: Beginnings to 1911*. W. W. Norton, 1996, p. 622.

mountains as things that resist the sovereignty of reason? Does the novel have us falling from enlightenment into enlightenment, again and again?

Ray, whose very name holds the promise of bringing light, fails to reach the top of the mountain, but serves afterward as a model student of negative knowledge. Not unlike Wordsworth's narrator in the Simplon Pass episode of *The Prelude*, he learns not-knowing, that is the limits of his knowledge. Ray:

Now when I went around that ledge that had scared me it was just fun and a lark, I just skipped and jumped and danced along and I had really learned that you can't fall off a mountain. Whether you *can* fall off a mountain or not I don't know, but I had learned that you can't. That was the way it struck me. (p. 87)

Ray's emphasis in "Whether you *can* fall off a mountain or not I don't know . . ." indicates his awareness that whatever knowledge he's in possession of is a knowledge of limits, a negative knowledge that knows, for instance, not what a mountain is—not the Being of mountain or some other such grandiose, monumental idea—but what happens when the boundaries between mountain and man tremble in the act of jumping down the mountain. He knows that in this interaction—this interbeing—there can be no falling, since such falling would be redundant: This interaction suspends the force of the verb "to fall": you can't, such logic would dictate, fall away from or off of your own activity or your self, especially if you, like Ray and Japhy and Keats before them, have little or no self to fall from. If you are being with the mountain, the only thing that falls is the notion of falling itself. This might also clarify Japhy's saying, "When you get to the top of a mountain keep climbing." (p. 86) Such a knowledge of limits allows for the process of learning to continue after the limit has been struck.

Yet Ray can never translate his learning not-knowing into positive knowledge; despite the promise of his name, his “light” never reaches himself fully, and he never becomes a successful teacher. Ray promises enlightenment to us, to himself, to Rosie, to his parents, and on and on. But he never delivers. He doesn’t seem able to. Instead he engages in various acts of substitution and translation in an attempt to make (it to) an enlightened state. He sits, climbs a mountain, proselytizes when home for Christmas, parties, retreats to another mountain, returns to the world below. But he can’t teach.

When he does *act* as a teacher, he botches it miserably, almost unforgivably—when Rosie falls ill and then falls down off the roof onto the pavement below. Rosie by the way haunts this novel, through and through, from the spectral promise of a first entrance as the figure of St. Teresa’s “roses from heaven, for all living creatures” to the questions she leaves us with at the end as Ray returns, Zarathustra-like, to “this world” [244]. And beyond this novel: the falling roses, the falling Rosie, seem to mimic the lotuses that fell when Shakyamuni Buddha finally expired and the earthquakes came to mark his departure into enlightenment.

Pedagogical Coda

I’d like to close with a coda of sorts, a kind of additional meditation on pedagogy and on the generosity required when teaching or learning, provided of course we can tell the difference.⁷ So this final gesture is one of going beyond, of opening, of moving softly

⁷ For the following pedagogical meditations I am indebted to my students at Hunter and Lehman Colleges, and to my teachers, Joshua Wilner and Eve Kosovsky Sedgwick. I’ll let Eve jump-start the thinking: “We may wonder afterwards whether and how we could have managed to turn into the particular teacher/therapist needed by each one [of our student/patients]. Perhaps their implication has been: Try it my way—if you’re going to teach me. Or even: I have something more important to teach you than you have to teach me.” Eve Kosovsky Sedgwick, “Pedagogy of Buddhism” in *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 2003), p. 155.

away from *The Dharma Bums*. And the closing coda has an epigraph that I offer as well. It also constitutes an effort to push on. I take it from the opening of Sapphire's amazing feat, *Push*; and she in turn takes it from a poem by William Wordsworth. I don't know where Wordsworth took it from though I'm sure the buck doesn't stop with his name. I know only what he's given us, what's survived. It's a gift, then, that's not mine to give at all but that I pass on just the same. It's more a September gift than an October gift. It's the gift I gave my students for the eleventh.

Lines

Left upon a Seat in a Yew-tree, which stands near the lake of Esthwaite, on a desolate part of the shore, commanding a beautiful prospect

If thou be one whose heart the holy forms of nature
 Of young imagination have kept pure,
 Stranger! henceforth be warned; and know that pride,
 Howe'er disguised in its own majesty,
 Is littleness; that he who feels contempt
 For any living thing, hath faculties
 Which he has never used; that thought with him
 Is in its infancy. The man whose eye
 Is ever on himself doth look on one,
 The least of Nature's works, one who might move
 The wise man to that scorn which wisdom holds
 Unlawful, ever. O be wiser, Thou!

Instructed that true knowledge leads to love;
True dignity abides with him alone
Who, in the silent hour of inward thought,
Can still suspect, and still revere himself,
In lowliness of heart.

Students readily pick up on the “bad boy” aspects of the characters in *The Dharma Bums*. But, curiously, for me at least, what they do with them is much different than my attempts to criticize or gloss over these juicy foibles. Ray of course is relatively tame; he’s just loud and he’s telling the story, after all. In the final analysis, however, he’s far more prudish than Japhy. It’s Japhy who pushes the envelope of bourgeois respectability. It’s he who organizes the orgies, it’s he who confesses his carnal desire for his sister. My students—rigorously mimetic readers that they are, and many of them social workers and nurses, the kind of professionals who have to clean up after the great debauch, after the fall, so to speak—picked up on precisely these ethical issues of reading *The Dharma Bums*. They know—not so much more or better but perhaps with a more piercing critical intelligence than my own perhaps more imposing academic critical instrumentarium can muster—they *know* that this stuff—the literature we read, the movies we watch, the lives we live (or don’t live), the deaths and loves we celebrate or mourn—are grounded in suffering, a suffering that extends through all the worlds, imaginative and real. They know this, and give it room, in their lives and in their readings. They mark it.

They have realized—in ways I here at the end of my presentation can only begin to imagine—that there is no mountain. No mountain, at least, that does not involve the

sufferings attendant to sentience—to knowing, yes, but to touching and feeling as well. No mountain that is not made by the mind and its rippling contortions as it tries to move itself away from itself.

There is no mountain. The site of enlightenment is, one story goes, flat.

There is no mountain. Here we are—queer poets all—making it happen. Here we are, making it.

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