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EMERSON AND KEROUAC

Grievous Angels of Hope and Loss

Dedicated to America, whatever that is.

Jack Kerouac

In 1969 Gram Parsons, a young Harvard dropout, had a vision of bringing generations together through music. Parsons was born Cecil Ingram Connors III in the American South in 1946. Having worked his way through a number of bands, Parsons joined the Byrds in 1968 and was a key influence in their recording perhaps the first full-blown country-rock album, Sweetheart of the Rodeo. Later he helped found the Flying Burrito Brothers, hung around Keith Richards and the Rolling Stones while they recorded Exile on Mainstreet, and, just before he died, traveled and played with his band Fallen Angels, which included country-singer-to-be Emmylou Harris. Country-rock seemed a likely avenue by which Parsons might pursue his vision of cultural reconciliation since it covered both generational differences and deep cultural differences. In this developing genre Parsons, together with folk-poet Thomas S. Brown, wrote a song titled “Return of the Grievous Angel,” which was at one level a cross-country trucking story, “Grievous Angel” being the name of the
truck. At another level it was about Elvis’s transition from country
music to Las Vegas, to “Sin City”:

The news I could bring, I met up with the King
On his head an amphetamine crown,
He talked about unbuckling that old Bible belt,
And lighted out for some desert town.
Out with the truckers, and the kickers, and the cowboy angels,
And a good saloon in every single town.³

The song captures a synthesis of hope and loss that I would like to
thematize in this chapter.

Parsons himself, like Elvis and like Jack Kerouac, lived out the
Hank Williams syndrome and died an early death from heroin and
alcohol abuse. His was a life on the road, in transition, and always
trying to overcome the present situation—in particular trying to
bring young and old together at a difficult time in American history.
The refrain of “Grievous Angel” reveals the complexity of his story.
Having “headed west to grow up with the country,” he finds that
every quest ultimately returns him home:

Oh, and I remember something you once told me,
And I’ll be damned if it did not come true,
Twenty thousand roads I’ve been down, down, down,
And they all lead me straight back home to you.⁴

The complexity, the irony, is that the hope that drove the charismatic
Parsons to transform American music and pave the way for everyone
from the Nitty Gritty Dirt Band to the Eagles to Emmylou Harris was
always coupled with a quest for origin and a deep sense of loss. He
made this explicit in “Hickory Wind”:

In South Carolina, there are many tall pines,
I remember the oak tree that we used to climb.
And now when I’m lonesome, I always pretend
That I’m getting the feel of hickory wind.⁵

Parsons pursued Chuck Berry’s “The Promised Land” and Williams’s
“Lost Highway.” It is difficult, as one reads of Parsons’s life and leg-
Parsons’s hope of acquiring a vision of what transcends the routine of ordinary experience, if not a dominant theme, is at least a persistent one in the American philosophical and literary traditions. The evidence leaves a trail from the various conversion experiences of Jonathan Edwards to the quests of Whitman and on to the Beat Generation. Along this trail are two figures compelling for their personal and literary attention to this quest for transcendence within the confines of our ordinary experiences: Ralph Waldo Emerson and Jack Kerouac. In many ways they seem to me prototypical American “grievous angels.” “Grievous” bears an interesting array of meanings. It fits Kerouac best in considering its import of “bringing trouble” or being “sorrowful.” Emerson’s character is perhaps better captured by the sense of being “excessively strong.” But both are grievous in the sense of being provocative awokeners—if we don’t want to see them coming, it’s only because we know they will prod us or challenge us. They will call us out and have us seek our own self-transcendence.

Let me begin my description of these angels by trying to show their differences of temperament and emphases amid their commonalities, though my ultimate aim is to suggest that if we, like Parsons, keep company with both of them, we may find a fruitful way of living in an American landscape. We can seek the kind of down-to-earth transcendence that I believe both of them sought in order to bring about the kinds of human transformations that Parsons both envisioned and, in part, carried out. His influence not only on the Byrds, but also on the Eagles, Emmylou Harris, the Rolling Stones, and the very nature of American country music was immense, even if generally unnoticed. We can perhaps live with hope while remaining attentive to the reality and import of loss.

New England Transcendentalism and the Beat Generation were both young people’s social movements, movements that grew organically and received their names only after they had achieved a good bit of notoriety. Emerson and Kerouac were their respective spokespersons—or perhaps “shamans” is a better description, insofar as each
inspired those affiliated with his movement. These movements were dominated by young males. Although there were strong women among both the Transcendentalists and the Beats, they were openly constrained by their male counterparts. Their stories are still in the process of being told. In their shamanistic roles, Emerson and Kerouac have a good deal in common. They were both New Englanders; indeed, in common parlance, they lived just down the road from one another in Concord and Lowell, Massachusetts, respectively. Still, this proximity was in large part offset by differences in years and class. Both were also literary innovators: Emerson cut and pasted from his elaborate, poetic journal entries, and Kerouac developed his sketching and “spontaneous prosody” linking his sound to the bebop music that filled city nights in the 1940s and 1950s. Though both became highly visible public figures, they also lived strong internal lives—they exhibited a spirit of individualism even as they were perceived to be the leaders of public movements. They were also oddly charismatic in their quests for transcendence; both sought a vision of America that might transform their present conditions. But they lived in very different Americas.

Emerson’s America was fresh off its “first” revolution and seeking its next revolution. It was an America with actual wilderness, a growing nation with one foot in European culture and the other in its unrealized frontier. As Hegel wrote in his Lectures on the History of the World: “America is therefore the land of the future, where, in the ages that lie before us, the burden of the World’s History shall reveal itself—perhaps in a contest between North and South America. It is a land of desire for all those who are weary of the historical lumber-room of old Europe.” This America set Emerson’s tone. There are, he said, only two parties: the “party of hope and the party of memory.” He established himself as a member of the former; he was forward-looking and hopeful. “It seems so easy,” he claimed in an 1844 lecture, “for America to inspire and express the most expansive and humane spirit; new-born, free, healthful, strong, the land of the laborer, of the democrat, of the philanthropist, of the believer, of the
saint, she should speak for the human race. It is the country of the Future.”8 Thus, too, for Emerson it was a country of hope.

In Kerouac’s post–World War II America these last claims about “speaking for the human race” were already becoming questionable in the minds of various counter-culture folks. These questions were to come to a head in the time of the Vietnam War and Watergate, and they have not been well answered to date as the United States asserts itself in other venues in the world. Kerouac’s Beat Generation sought to define, or perhaps to find, their America. No wilderness and no frontier filled their American landscape. In On the Road Kerouac, as Sal Paradise, makes his first mad, exuberant race cross-country, only to find disappointment. Having alienated his San Francisco friend Reme during a drunken binge, Paradise reflects on his disappointment:

How disastrous all this was compared to what I’d written him from Paterson [New Jersey] planning my red line Route 6 across America. Here I was at the end of America—no more land—and now there was nowhere to go but back.9

It was no longer a land of the frontier and the Future. With Proust and Thomas Wolfe, Kerouac was compelled instead to explore his past, seeking origins that might settle his being. Fellow Beat Allen Ginsberg, in his addendum to Kerouac’s Visions of Cody, nicknamed Kerouac “The Great Rememberer.” It is through memory and imagination that Kerouac wrote the Duluoz legend—the legend of his own life—by way of his novels. The absence of the frontier and the future seemed to fill the Beats with a sense of loss and of being lost. They were “beat” both in the sense of being beaten down and worn out, exhausted by life, and in the sense of “beatific,” pure and clean in their poverty—the meek, it had been said in Kerouac’s strongly Catholic world, shall inherit. Kerouac, both as a Catholic and as a child of the working class, took seriously the possibilities he found in the common and the ordinary. Part of his literary power was his ability to show us the strength and the beauty of the ordinary and the less than ordinary.
For all its energy and enthusiasm, *On the Road* is not just a happy vision quest of an American youth. At first meeting, Sal’s cowboy counterpart, wild American Dean Moriarty (the same Neal Cassady who later drove Ken Kesey’s bus with the Grateful Dead aboard) is cast as a savior:

His “criminality” was not something that sulked and sneered; it was a wild yea-saying overburst of American joy; it was Western, the west wind, an ode from the Plains, something new, long prophesied, long a-coming (he only stole cars for joy rides).\(^{10}\)

By the end, the joy and the novelty wear off and the prophecy fails. Sal Paradise leaves Dean on a New York City street corner and rides off in his upscale friend’s Cadillac: “Dean, ragged in a moth-eaten overcoat he brought specifically for the freezing temperatures of the East, walked off alone, and the last I saw of him he rounded the corner of Seventh Avenue, eyes on the street ahead, and bent to it again.”\(^{11}\) Dean’s final beatness and lostness are matched by America’s own beatness in the final paragraph of the book:

So in America when the sun goes down and I sit on the old bro-ken-down river pier watching the long, long, skies of New Jersey . . . nobody, nobody knows what’s going to happen to anybody besides the forlorn rags of growing old, I think of Dean Moriarty, I even think of Old Dean Moriarty the father we never found, I think of Dean Moriarty.\(^{12}\)

Emerson’s insane angels were heaven sent and future bound: Kerouac proclaimed his friends “desolation angels” with no hope and no future. Kerouac was clearly a member of the “party of memory”—if transcendence were to be found, it would have to be by looking back-ward to our origins.

What are we to make of these studies in hope and loss? Let me begin with the caricatures. Emerson is often—still—ridiculed for espousing an egoistic, almost Ayn Rand–like self-reliance that sets one free toward one’s own and the world’s grand destiny. Emerson is also thought to be too optimistic, too Pollyanna–like. Kerouac, on the other hand, is often aligned with the hard, brooding “loner” film lives
of James Dean and Marlon Brando, whom Kerouac initially believed might play a role in the film version of *On the Road*. On any close reading of their respective work, however, Emerson and Kerouac are not so easily identifiable in these ways.

In earlier chapters we have discussed the dialectic of doing and undergoing, of acting and receiving, as a central theme in American thought. Whether one wants to attribute this to Hegel’s wide influence on American culture in the nineteenth century or to the Calvinist habit of performing good works while accepting salvation as a matter of grace, this dialectic is at the core of the American experience. Emerson and Kerouac seem well aware of this, and they work to make us aware—to awaken us. Whatever transcendence, self-overcoming, and self-revision are to occur, will occur within this dialectic. What they do, each from a historically distinct position, is to bring our attention to the mode of insight they find in their respective American natures. In “Self-Reliance” Emerson sounds his note of independence—this is the great essay of “acting” and “doing” in American thought:

> There is a time in every man’s education when he arrives at the conviction that envy is ignorance; that imitation is suicide; that though the wide universe is full of good, no kernel of nourishing corn can come to him but through his toil bestowed on that plot of ground which is given him to till. The power which resides in him is now in nature, and none but he knows what that is which he can do, nor does he know until he has tried. (CW, 2:27–28)

But the self-reliance story always appears for Emerson in a much larger context. He was never simply a rugged individualist. “We judge a man’s wisdom,” he said, “by his hope, knowing that the perception of the inexhaustibleness of nature is an immortal youth” (CW, 2:80–81). But *our* hope, and *our* doing, is for Emerson—as for the Calvinists—a function of Nature’s whole. The essay “Compensation,” which follows “Self-Reliance,” is too often overlooked. In it Emerson clearly shows that action and self-reliance are always contexted; they have their place in Nature’s history. “A little consideration,” he
warned in “Spiritual Laws,” “of what takes place around us every day would show us that a higher law than that of our will regulates events; that our painful labors are unnecessary and fruitless; that only in our easy, simple, spontaneous action are we strong, and by contenting ourselves with obedience we become divine” (CW, 2:81).

Ironically, our spontaneous, self-reliant actions are not radically free and contingent; rather, they are those actions which follow our natures that are themselves features of Nature. We find divinity and the possibility of transcendence here in our action that is aware of its obedience—its undergoing or suffering the constraints of the cosmos. Emerson’s *Nature* of the 1830s is the source of his focus on hope. This is the Nature that generates our natures, that builds hope out of real possibilities in the future. Emerson’s Nature is organic, growing, developmental, evolutionary, and temporally aligned with the future. Nature as *natura naturans* is the site of our lives and actions; its opportunities are our opportunities. We are not final but transitory, but we can make a difference and we can be more or less divine. Emerson’s hope is thus constrained by the limits with which Nature confronts us and blinds us to her final aims. As he asks in “Experience”: “Where do we find ourselves? In a series of which we do not know the extremes, and believe that it has none” (CW, 3:27). Emerson’s emphasis on hope is brought back to earth by this blindness. We may have hope but it is tempered hope, a hope that lives with the possibility of self-doubt and the risk of an uncertain future:

> There is throughout nature something mocking, something that leads us on and on, but arrives nowhere; keeps no faith with us. All promise outruns the performance. We live in a system of approximations. Every end is prospective of some other end, which is also temporary; a round and final success nowhere. (CW, 3:110)

What we are finally left with in Emerson’s focus on Nature’s hopefulness is not the closure of an idealist’s finished telos, but an exhortation to see the world’s possibilities and to bring ourselves and our actions into league with them.

Emerson occasionally saw hope in concrete actions and creations. Consider his account of the railroad: “An unlooked for consequence
of the railroad,” he said, “is the increased acquaintance it has given the American people with the boundless resources of their own soil.” Well aware, as was Thoreau, of the human costs of the railroad, he still sees its powers of illumination and inspiration. Indeed, an Amtrak trip today may still have the effect of such an acquaintance. But it is the angle of vision that is crucial. Emerson sees a Nature of energy and possibility and looks for transcending capacities in them, even as he has one eye open for the accompanying dangers of these capacities: “Railroad iron is a magician’s rod, in its power to evoke the sleeping energies of land and water.”

Kerouac’s focus on loss and return to origin is likewise embedded in a wider conception of nature. It seems fair to consider the Beat Generation as engaged in a kind of existentialism Americana. In the postwar era this generation led the way both toward social rebellion and toward a general cultural malaise. Still, Kerouac himself was never a champion of the ultimacy of the absurd—he was also no political revolutionary in a simple sense. Working through the vision of the Catholic/Buddhist being he articulated for himself, he no longer saw nature as evolutionary and growing. His late-twentieth-century nature was static, settled, a kind of Augustinian eternality to which we all must return. Where Emerson began with self-reliance, Kerouac began with the constraint of nature: the facts of death, suffering, and absence of purpose in our world. Where Emerson began with action, Kerouac began with acceptance and undergoing. Reflecting on the experience of two young boys at a simple Catholic funeral in Mexico, Kerouac recalled:

I get a vision of myself and the two little boys hung up in a great endless universe with nothing overhead and nothing under but the Infinite Nothingness, the Enormousness of it, the dead without number in all directions of existence whether inward into the atom-worlds of your own body or outward to the universe which may only be one atom in an infinity of atom-worlds and each atom-world only a figure of speech—inward, outward, up and down, nothing but emptiness and divine majesty and silence for the two little boys and me.
Thus, Kerouac’s starting point is closely akin to Emerson’s terminus where we “wake and find ourselves on a stair; there are stairs below us, which we seem to have ascended; there are stairs above us, many a one, which go upward and out of sight” (CW, 3:27).

Despite his emphasis on patience and receptivity, Kerouac was never shy about recognizing our spontaneous human energies and, indeed, spent a good bit of time revealing their powers: music, sexuality, travel, athletics, and writing, among others. What he sought was a way of understanding our energies and also of giving them purpose—only then could one find transcendence in this life. On a careless reading of the Duluoz legend, one might even think his characters exhibit more self-reliance than Emerson called for. Sal Paradise, for example, feels the intensity of the freedom he experiences on the road. As we noted earlier, however, in Kerouac’s work self-directed energy seems to go nowhere; it’s a contingent Roman candle that inevitably leads us to a “morning after” that is hungover and depressed, and senses its own lostness. The intensity and the energy, though generating moments of ambiguous insight, leave us finally adrift in Kerouac’s sad America. Unlike for Emerson, for Kerouac the railroad is not a liberating magician’s rod but a watcher of the loss and poverty of postwar America—a loss and poverty many seemed bent on keeping hidden in the 1950s. The train always takes us to and through the worst sections of American towns, and Kerouac’s visions from his days as a brakeman on the Southern Pacific remind us of this. The “whole Coast Division,” he described, “begins at those sad dead end blocks of Third and Townsend where grass grows from soot beds like green hair of old tokay heroes long slanted into the ground like the railroad men of the 19th century whom I saw in the Colorado plains at little train order stations slanted into the ground of the hard dry dustcake, boxed, mawk-lipped, puking grit . . .” and moves on past “horrible Kafka cement factories” and the “rats of South City slaughterhouses.”

In On the Road the dialectic of doing and undergoing is alive and well in a series of cross-country journeys that leave us—and the protagonists—weary and confused. But Kerouac, despite the brooding,
the loss, and the emptiness, sees in his America a source of enlightenment bound simply to the acceptance of what happens. In Jamesian terms, he acknowledges the risk we take in being and acting, and shows a willingness to live with the consequences. This is nowhere more apparent than in *Big Sur*. Here Kerouac, like Parsons’s Grievous Angel, anticipates with hope a western trip, to “grow up with the country.” Kerouac plans to stay at a friend’s cabin in then undeveloped Big Sur to refresh his life. He will contemplate and write in solitude. Instead, bound by the chains of his alcoholism, he finds himself drunk in San Francisco. At Big Sur he faces delirium tremens and the absolute failure of his purpose. When he invites friends to join him at Big Sur as he fights his demons, nothing is achieved—parties lead to depression, which leads back to drinking and to guilt. The clarity with which Kerouac is able to document his own alcoholism and its attendant paranoia is troubling at one level but redemptive at another. *Big Sur* recognizes our human lostness, but does not give in to morbidity and “the problem of evil.” It is in seeing clearly, in remembering, that Kerouac finds an avenue of transcendence for his “golden empty soul”:

> I’ll get my ticket and say goodbye on a flower day and leave all San Francisco behind and go back home across autumn America and it’ll all be like it was in the beginning—Simple golden eternity blessing all—Nothing ever happened—Not even this. . . . On soft Spring nights I’ll stand in the yard under the stars—Something good will come out of all things yet—And it will be golden and eternal just like that—There’s no need to say another word.¹⁷

Learning patience and acceptance, if it were not for the goldenness and goodness, would seem almost Stoic. But Kerouac’s Catholicism never leaves one without action; good works are still significant in disclosing the presence of grace. The acceptance of loss is but the opening condition for the acts that are selfless. Kerouac was a devotee of St. Francis, and this makes good sense of his understanding of “beat” and “beatific.” He was not only the Great Rememberer, but also the ultimate befriender of the destitute, the underclass, the crimi-
nal. The list of “friends” in the Duluoz legend, aside from the desolation angels themselves, is filled with drug addicts, hookers, migrant workers, vagrants, and others who have been left behind by American culture. For Kerouac, it is only by remembering the Golden Eternity, by returning to our ultimate origins and accepting the emptiness of nature, that we can become ready to enact a Franciscan way of life—a life of beatific action. To be fully a desolation angel or a grievous angel, one must be both beat and beatific.

Hope and loss are not so much contradictories or opposed parties as they are complementary features of a peculiarly American philosophical outlook. Straightforward hope is perhaps more Roman, straight-up loss, perhaps more Russian. Despite their different historical angles of vision, Kerouac and Emerson both tell us about ourselves: our history, our culture, our music, our literature. They are exhortatory writers and they do call us out into the world of our own experiences. These philosophical poets take up Emerson’s call to raise and cheer, to lead us into reflections on hope and loss. Writing and life are never fully separated for Emerson or Kerouac. This is a feature of culture that was inherited by Gram Parsons, Lucinda Williams, Ken Kesey, Annie Dillard, Norman Maclean, Tom Wolfe, Bob Dylan, and the Grateful Dead, among many others. As grievous angels, Emerson and Kerouac take their readers on journeys into their own experiences and into considerations of possibility and the hope and loss that go with them. In a land as wide and diverse as their America, this is no small task. The fact that their respective messages transcend generational differences suggests that we should listen to them as carefully as we can. Parsons was right in believing community was vertical as well as horizontal; community must cross time as well as space. He was also proved right in believing music to be an effective mediator of community, as we now see in American culture—as the eclecticism of the airwaves and Internet shows, we now listen across generational, cultural, and geographic divides. Rural New England boys play basketball to the sounds of hip-hop, young people listen to Jimi Hendrix, and many older folks pay attention to the contemporary scene. My suggestion is that Emerson and Kerouac, if we
make the effort to listen carefully, can also play such a mediating role in continuing to develop community in our own version of America and its nature. Emerson sings of the hope embedded in Jefferson’s Declaration of Independence, and Kerouac reminds us of our necessary openness to the lost and the beat that is engraved on our Statue of Liberty. Living in such a strange dialectic may be both difficult and worthwhile.