



ARTISTIC EXPEDITION OF JACK KEROUAC'S DEVELOPMENT IN *DOCTOR SAX: FAUST PART THREE*

A. Ganga Devi* Dr. C. Santhosh Kumar**

*PhD, Research Scholar, Department of English, Annamalai University, Annamalai Nagar.

**Associate Professor, Dept. of English, DDE wing, Annamalai University, Annamalai Nagar.

The year 1952 marked the turning point in the artistic life of Jack Kerouac, the most influential and controversial postmodern American novelist. Emboldened by his transition into spontaneous prose, Kerouac set out to mine not his present condition, but the historicity of his own childhood. In 1952 he did so, travelling to Mexico City to stay with William Burroughs and writing what is arguably his finest novel, *Doctor Sax: Faust Part Three*.

Kerouac's admonishment to himself here to see the picture better would later appear as a sketching description in an alternative version in his "Belief & Technique of Modern Prose," his 1959 "to-do list" version of "Essentials," written the same year *Doctor Sax: Faust Part Three* is first published. That Kerouac alludes to a dream in the opening paragraph is also telling, as *Doctor Sax: Faust Part Three* is itself based on a dream that the author had in 1948. The novel is conceived around the same time as *On the Road*, but after beginning *Doctor Sax: Faust Part Three* as a children's novella, he abandoned it in favour of the more traditional Road novel. Even so, Kerouac often alludes to the story in *On the Road*, as *Doctor Sax: Faust Part Three* appears in sections such as the "Shrouded Traveller," a mysterious entity that refuses to escape Kerouac's poetic landscape.

As it falls within the chronology of this study, *Doctor Sax: Faust Part Three* represents a significant step in Kerouac's mastery of his spontaneous prose method. Unlike many of his other novels, *Doctor Sax: Faust Part Three* follows in the same artistic direction of *Visions of Cody*, a continuation of his non-horizontal and postmodern emphasis on process over product. However, unlike in his Visions novel, Kerouac is able to reign in the excesses of his performative writing method, composing a novel that does not forfeit content for the sake of spontaneous form.

Doctor Sax: Faust Part Three resides somewhere in between the literary voices of *On the Road* and *Visions of Cody*, composed in what he would call his "middle style" (2) says Jim Samps in the "Introduction" of *Doctor Sax and the Great World Snake*. Perhaps for this reason *Doctor Sax: Faust Part Three* is published in 1959, fourteen years before the much more loosely composed Visions novel is deemed worthy for print. In *Understanding Jack Kerouac*, Matt The ado asserts of the Sax novel that it is Kerouac's "most well-structured book... in this coming of age story Kerouac for the first time used his newly developed spontaneous prose to recover in depth his own private past" (92). Mixed in with the reality of this autobiographical impetus of the novel, Kerouac provides an inter-textual and self-reflexive survey of his childhood imagination. It is not just a story of the self, but of the many competing discourses that make up a continuing sense of the self. Kerouac provides a collection that ranges from and speaks of his sense of nationality, ethnicity, spirituality, and regionalism. The result is a novel that Kerouac boasted, "It's the greatest book I ever wrote, or that I will write" (410) quoted by Gerald Nicosia in *Memory Babe: A Critical Biography of Jack Kerouac*.

The question is why Kerouac considered the novel his finest work, and the purpose of this paper is to investigate this claim. To do so, it is argued that the "middle style" of *Doctor Sax: Faust Part Three* is a contribution to our understanding of spontaneous prose, one that provides performative recourse for doing what his two earlier novels could not: namely, provide balance for an experimental fiction that would sacrifice neither the invention of content nor form.

The novel, *Doctor Sax: Faust Part Three*, itself is divided into six separate "Books," and it is told in two narrative voices. "Jack Duluo" is bifurcated according to age, as young "Jackie" and older "Jack" share the story of a young French-Canadian boy growing up in Lowell, Massachusetts during the 1930s, much like Kerouac's own



childhood. Jackie handles the first person accounts, while Jack relays narrative from a more detached and reflective perspective.

Doctor Sax: Faust Part Three represents the final step in the artistic expedition of Kerouac's development and use of spontaneous prose. It is one of the few novels where Kerouac is able to commit to his performative voice, before fame and the ravages of alcohol would send him spiraling into the abyss of literary delusion. This paper traced the creative forces of Dr. Sax, a novel where Kerouac for the first time is able to fuse his artistic imagination in both form and content. By utilizing the historiographical contribution of Diana Taylor's scenario and the literary theory of Gregory Ulmer's *Mystory*, it is argued here that Kerouac produces his most successful use of spontaneous prose in *Doctor Sax: Faust Part Three*. By producing a narrative that sacrifices neither the story nor the voice in which it is spoken, Kerouac is able to communicate the doing of spontaneity in novel length fashion for the first time. According to Gregory L. Ulmer, *Teletheory: Grammatology in The Age of Video*, *Mystory's* "primary purpose ... is to help the composer articulate the ground of invention" (247). *Mystory* is used here then to articulate a more systematic understanding of Kerouac's inventive prose generally and its expression in Dr. Sax specifically. It is in the function of *Mystory's* inventive capacity that helps articulate how spontaneous prose works as a discourse of personal and communal discovery.

According to Ulmer, *Mystory's* voice constitutes "that of the group (collective) in me" (290). Accordingly, Ulmer offers four categories of *Mystory* discourse: career, family, entertainment, and the community to show how each function in lieu of one another. *Mystory* is written in the simultaneity of these discourses at any given time. By drawing upon career discourse and Taylor's conception of the performance scenario, it is argued here that Kerouac's reverential is utilized to achieve a performative update. Both the archive and the repertoire of this literary classic allow Kerouac a means by which he achieves sophistication to the post-literary aims of his spontaneous prose.

In addition, the scenario of this gothic tradition allows him to return once again to the symbol of the ghost, a symbolic mainstay of the novel. The autobiographical impetus of the death of his brother Gerard provides Kerouac the performance of the uncanny operating within the memory and dream of Dr. Sax's aesthetics. According to Nicholas Royle, *The Uncanny*, "The uncanny is never simply a question of a statement, description or definition, but always engages a performative dimension, a maddening supplement, something unpredictable and additionally strange happening in and to what is being stated, described or defined" (16). To provide this function of the uncanny aesthetic Kerouac provides the figure of Dr. Sax/The Shadow to map another discourse onto the uncanny one provided by his family.

The popular literary tradition of the U.S. is performed as another distinct influence, something Kerouac distinguished as being part of what it meant to be Beat itself. In "The Origins of the Beat Generation" he writes that the:

Beat Generation goes back.... to the wild and raving childhood of playing the Shadow...and our fathers wore straw hats like W.C. Fields. It goes back to the completely senseless babble of the Three Stooges.... It goes back to the inky ditties of old cartoons.... to Lamont Cranston so cool and sure suddenly becoming the frantic Shadow going mwee hee hee ha ha in the alley of New York imagination.... To Joan Crawford her raw shanks in the fog.... Like my grandfather this America is invested with wild selfbelieving individuality and this had begun to disappear around the end of World War II with so many great guys dead ... when suddenly it began to emerge again....(57-9)

Kerouac's sense of identity is itself performed via the doing of the popular imagination, and in *Doctor Sax: Faust Part Three* he utilizes popular culture as a means of marking his own sense of national and individual identity. The interrogation of Catholic dogma shows itself to be another discourse further enmeshed into that of the uncanny aesthetic operating consistently over the course of the novel. Kerouac weaves its spectral rituals and



signs into ones already provided for him in his career, family, and entertainment discourses, and at the end he provides a sense of hope that many of his other novels lack.

According to Ulmer, one of the effects of the *Mystory* project is the sense of discovery a writer receives as a result of dialogizing its discourses. He writes that “The surprise it produces in the writer first of all is the ... equivalent of the uncanny, marking the place of the inmixing of self and other in the unconscious” (120). Although this paper has explored Kerouac’s use of discourses topically as supplied by Ulmer’s categories, the enmeshment of these discourses must be emphasized. Kerouac’s use of spontaneous prose often times lends itself to writing via separate voices in tandem.

For example, in *Doctor Sax: Faust Part Three* he writes:

So I began to see the ghost of Zap Plouffe mixed with other shrouds when I walked home from Destouches’ brown store with my Shadow in my arm. I wanted to face my duty—I had learned to stop crying in Pawtucketville (in Centraville it is Ste. Thérèse and her turning plaster head, the crouching Jesus, visions of French or Catholic or Family Ghosts ... you know some old gray ash-faced dead ghost is waxing his profile to candlelight and suffocating flowers in the broon-gloom of dead relatives kneeling in a chant and the son of the house is wearing a black suit Ah Me! ... what phantom is pursuing you?). Doctor Sax had knowledge of death ... but he is a mad fool of power, a Faustian man, no true Faustian’s afraid of the dark—only Fellaheen—and Gothic Stone Cathedral Catholic of Bats and Bach Organs in the Blue Mid Night Mists of Skull, Blood, Dust, Iron, Rain burrowing into earth to snake antique. (43)

In this sketch, Kerouac provides the symbol of the ghost as his jewel centre of interest.

From its inference, Kerouac produces the flow of all the separate discourses from which he interrogates the overarching interest of the spectre. The Shadow, family deaths, Goethe’s *Faust*, and the Catholic images of his childhood all inform his interest in the uncanny symbol of the ghost. But far from being nonsensical, Kerouac’s use of spontaneous prose is articulated here by a systematic appreciation of intertextual foci. Here, too, Kerouac shows his interest in going beyond a mere speculative investigation of autobiographical interest. According to Ulmer the *Mystory* project is different every time, according to the separate discourse subjects utilized by the writer. He writes that *Mystory* generally is valuable only to the extent that it encourages others to turn to their own archives—as a relay and not as a model.

Kerouac’s *Doctor Sax: Faust Part Three* is itself a cultural relay, as it incorporates not only his story but also the story of collective national, ethnic, literary, and spiritual identities. It is the story of pre- and post-war America, the haunting of a personal and collective history. “What phantom is pursuing you?” provides his cultural relay, a moment where Kerouac invites his audience to think of their own *mystoriographical* project. In this question - or dare - Kerouac opens up the scope of tracing the spectre of history and his multi-faceted sense of identity. Here and in other writing he also opens up a means for understanding the achievement of his spontaneous prose.

Spontaneous prose viewed as *Mystory*, as performative writing, shows us that a mode of expression belongs to no one individual, and so the general critical fixation on Kerouac’s life is somewhat misplaced. Spontaneous prose is wrought instead, as a relay of the collective mind. Hopefully, as a result of focusing beyond his biography and looking at how Kerouac’s performative writing works, his readers too can contribute to both the archive and the repertoire of its imagination.

Kerouac’s homage to place in which he is writing the novel shows his integration of yet another community discourse, an integration that provides him another way to frame the novel not just as a personal story, but also as a spiritual alternative for the community. His story is a story of a cultural collective, whether found in classical,



popular, familial, or community discourses. The novel itself is his most optimistic, where he challenges and comes to accept the precepts of his faith. No wonder then that it is his personal favourite.

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