

# Pirates and Farmers

**I** AM going to explain this to you very simply. All human creatures are divided into two groups. There are pirates, and there are farmers. Farmers build fences and control territory. Pirates tear down fences and cross borders.

There are good pirates and bad pirates, good farmers and bad farmers, but there are *only* pirates and farmers. They are very different kinds of creatures, and some pirates even recognize the importance of farmers. My late friend Roger Miller, a famous pirate, wrote this in a song after a visit with his tax attorney, "Squares make the world go round," he wrote, "Sounds profane sounds profound/But Government things can't be made do/By hipsters wearin' rope-soled shoes."

Farmers, on the other hand, *always* hate pirates. What's more, farmers always *recognize* pirates even when the pirate being recognized has yet to recognize him or herself as a pirate. One of the ways that pirates come to recognize themselves as pirates is through the experience of being recognized and persecuted by farmers. There are many unaware pirates, however, in workplaces around the world, who wonder why they are never invited to the weenie roast. They are pirates, but they just don't know, and you should know who you are before you turn forty-five, buy an assault weapon, and wipe out a nursing college.

So you should try some things out. Enter the territory of some farmer-friendly enterprise, like the Department of Motor Vehicles, or the student union at the University of Alabama, or the boardroom of AIG. If everyone glares at you sullenly and touches their wallet pocket, you may be a pirate. If you think you're a pirate, ablaze with exasperation, you probably are, but you should research further. Commit some petty offenses: park in a handicapped zone, jaywalk, refuse to return the attached form in triplicate, or just take an Incomplete in Hegel and His Times, and then never write the paper.

If these transgressions don't get your panties in a bunch, it's a pirate's life for you. Embrace your moment of self-awareness and get on with life. You are not the *only* pirate in the world, and remember this: *pirates are born and not made*. It's not something your mother did to you. It's not something the government did to you or any of those amazing things Counselor Rick did to you in the shower at summer camp. You were *born* a pirate! Raise that skull and crossbones! Sail away!

Never forget that one of the chief causes of personal unhappiness in the US of A, where farmer culture is all but hegemonic, is the denial of pirate identity, because farmers always know who's a pirate. Pirates don't always know what they are. Very often the children of pirates, who are in fact pirates them-selves, seek to deny their piratical natures and pass as farmers in order to rebel against their pirate parents. This rarely works out well in the long run, but sometimes it does. Take the case of Melinda, an accidental recidivist. She grew up during the 1950s in a pirate family of hard-line communists. As a consequence, Melinda grew up hating Communism, which she associated with people smoking cigars and shouting about Fascism in the kitchen while Aunt Tilly played old 78s of Mahler symphonies at top volume on the phonograph. Melinda wanted to play Ruth Brown and The Clovers but there was no help for it. These circumstances

led Melinda to associate being a pirate with being a communist.

So Melinda resolved to become a farmer. In her sophomore year at Berkeley, she met a young man from Wisconsin who had renamed himself Earth Free. He wanted to be a farmer, too, so they moved to Oregon to be farmers together. Fortunately, they almost immediately came upon a commune called Free Earth. They took this as a sign and joined forthwith. Here they lived happily in a derelict school bus. They smoked marijuana cigarettes, had group sex, and did very little farming at all. In this way, by virtual happenstance, Melinda's pirate nature was able to reassert itself. Things did not turn out so well, however, for Melinda's daughter J. L. (Janis Lives). Having grown up naked and dirty in a bus, sorting seeds and stems, and listening to Electric Flag and Canned Heat, J. L. came to associate being a pirate with being a hippie, and she really hated hippies.

Thus it was, when J. L. herself finally matriculated at Berkeley, she immediately became a communist. Unfortunately, the communists she fell in with were not *pirate* communists, they were *farmer* communists—tenured communists with an infrastructure of ideological imperatives and dietary laws that made an orthodox Shiite festival look like a Flaming Lips concert. Almost immediately J. L. was caught smoking. Then, not long thereafter, in rebellion against a childhood of tofu and sprouts, she was observed scarfing down a Big Mac. From there, it was only a short step to the ideological heresy that got her ostracized. This involved a sex act employing an object that could only serve to perpetuate the commodity fetishism of late-capitalist culture. Today, J. L. works as a dental assistant in Encinitas, where she is not a happy camper.

This demonstrates a common fallacy: that of associating the eternal distinction between pirates and farmers with the petty local fashions that define political and cultural ideologies in the twentieth century. We can't be any firmer on this point.

There are right-wing pirates and left-wing pirates; there are right-wing farmers and left-wing farmers, but there are *only* pirates and farmers. The good thing about farming is that it keeps you busy at home and pays steady subsidies. The good thing about piracy is that it is cosmopolitan; you get to move around, and when it pays at all it pays *very well*. This might seem a fair enough trade-off, but it often spells doom for extremely competent pirates who, having amassed mountain ranges of Spanish doubloons, gold bullion, jewelry, and brass cannons find themselves feeling peckish and down in the mouth from all the rushing about that is intrinsic to the pirate lifestyle. They find themselves, say, driving down US40 through Arkansas with their pirate crew. Glancing over to the side of the road, they see a beautiful horse farm with white fences and green pastures full of elegant thoroughbreds. The animals' sleek coats are gleaming in the sun. Pristine, white, colonial-style stables, with cupolas and weather vanes blaze like a dream of Monticello and, way back there among the trees, at the top of a circular drive, they glimpse an antebellum mansion.

Seeing all this, the successful pirate remarks to his pirate crew: "I've worked damned hard at piracy, you know, and worked damned long. I've raped, pillaged, plundered, and sent many a king's man to a watery grave. The wake behind my schooner has looped the world a hundred times. So why shouldn't I seek a bit of refuge and respite. Why shouldn't I retire to a horse farm just like this? I have enough hard capital to buy this damn farm with the rings on my right hand."

Herein resides the paradox of pirate retirement. You can't do it. Piracy is a genetic proclivity. You strap on your peg leg, don your eye patch, take a swig of rum, and die at the helm or by the blade, or you end up destitute in Port Royale, sitting on the dock of the bay. At this point in the captain's reverie, one hopes that the successful pirate's hearty comrades will speak up firmly. Honoring the tradition of pirate democracy, they will say:

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Your pirates ain't your farmers, Cap'n Jack. Farmers *hate* pirates something fierce, and even if you buy a farm, consort with farm animals, and wear a farmer hat, they will know you for a pirate. They will mobilize and take action, and what do pirates know of farmer fighting—of farmer martial arts—of water districting, tax assessing, zoning, easements, and such? What pirate with a single *cojone* knows dick about subcontractors, plumbing contractors, or any other kind of contractor? About condemnations, imminent domain, and rights of way? To be honest, Cap'n, your forthright pirate way of fighting would be naught but child's play to them. They would run you down in the road, steal you blind, sue you till your toes hurt, and, worst of all, *you could not sail away!* You would just be there, becalmed on this farm in the middle of nowhere, and even if you overcame all these obstacles through the auspices of a corrupt farmer lawyer, you know what they would do? They would shoot your dog and burn your horses in their stalls.

## American Cool

**D**URING the 1970s, when I was a tyro, every new work of art that I found refreshingly self-evident was immediately dubbed “cool and ironic” by someone important. I remember a “cool and ironic” Bridget Riley, an Andy Warhol, a Lynda Benglis, a Richard Tuttle, a John McCracken, and a Barry Le Va. None of them were “cool and ironic,” and they had nothing in common beyond the possibility that they might not *be* ironic, but these were the halcyon days of Poststructuralism. Art was either what it appeared to be or the opposite of what it appeared to be. Under this regimen, “cool and ironic” became a preemptive catchphrase for not believing your eyes, and the damage it wrought has been incalculable.

Today, I suspect that the catchphrase “cool and ironic” papers over a catastrophic abyss in the transatlantic art culture that came into being during 60s and 70s, because, for Europeans, irony is more than a rhetorical figure, it is a justifiable mode of deflection and defense. For Americans, cool is more than a rhetorical figure; it is an official form of democratic cultural politesse. This is distressing because, if the visual cultures of New York, Berlin, Milan, Los Angeles, Paris, and London could be intellectually united under the auspices of “cool and ironic,” we would have a clear field of play. They are *not* compatible, however, nor are the

cultures that “cool and ironic” purported to unite. (Over dinner one night, Bob Hughes informed me that I could never get drunk enough to be an Englishman. He was right, but then he shrank back from a nice spoon of flake.)

So, generally speaking, Europeans are historically accustomed to serving many masters. I have known senior Europeans who have lived in Belgium, France, and Germany without leaving the house—depending on the day of the week—so, of necessity, they do irony very well. Some brand of repression is presumed. Sigmund Freud, Karl Marx, Bertolt Brecht, Marcel Duchamp, and Francis Picabia are sublime ironists, counterintuitive ghosts with vague secrets and opaque agendas. Except for Alain Robbe-Grillet, Charles Lamb, and Bridget Riley, Europeans just don’t get cool. My friend Peter Schjeldahl assures me that not one European understands Roy Lichtenstein’s *Whaam!* [1963] that hangs at the Tate Modern. “They think it’s about war,” the artist told me later. “It’s about love at first sight.”

The option of being cool or ironic has crossed the Atlantic, of course, but the world still flies apart because cool and irony are contraindicated means to the same end. They each enable us to speak our minds while maintaining a small margin of deniability. When we use irony, we suppress the intellectual *sense* of what we say. When we use cool, we suppress the *urgency* of what we mean. By simultaneously suppressing urgency and subverting sense, we devolve into lame sarcasm. We recreate the gay patois of my parents’ generation. We speak in italics, featherlight and ever so faintly. “That Gary Cooper is so *intellectual*.”

“Contextual irony” is the term that appears most often in critical writing of this period. This worked one time only. When Warhol’s Marilyns were hung in the hallowed galleries of the Whitney Museum of American Art, hallowedness perished. Today, the artistic desecration of vestigial hallowedness is embarrassing for everyone—although Vanessa Beecroft stirred up some geriatric

chubbies with her naked girls at the Guggenheim. Today, “cool” and “irony” mean *nothing at all*, nor does “flatness,” “resistance,” “diversity,” “transgressive,” “interrogate,” or any of the other catchphrases that pepper art publications.

I’m embarrassed just typing the words, because words are important to me, and I intend to take them seriously one last time. After this, I promise, just italics and charm, and everything will be *so intellectual*. But, just for a moment, presume that I am usually right about potential longevity of art. I have an art critic’s skill set—good eyes, eidetic memory, proper languages, catholic taste, and a long familiarity with the artists and the works in question. Presume further that I am familiar with the history of Classical rhetoric. Along with Quintilian and many other writers, I insist that evidence must exist for any work to bear the attribution of irony, and none of the works I have mentioned meet that criteria, so why bother dubbing cool works ironic when they can pass for either.

An ironic statement asserts an altogether antagonistic meaning than it appears to be offering by some *identifiable sign*. In bureaucratic cultures where there is no free expression, irony is required to elude the wrath of one’s betters. Jonathan Swift’s *A Modest Proposal* argues that cooking and consuming Irish babies would solve the Irish population problem and the famine to boot. This is neither modest nor a proposal. It is ironic. The dissonance between the tea and crumpets *mise-en-scène* and the heroic diction of Alexander Pope’s *The Rape of the Lock* brews up a deliciously ironic cocktail.

Cool is something altogether different. It is the act of being *seen* being oneself. It is theater without drama, demonstration without pleading, distinction without discrimination, and dissent without violence. For those of us who live in a world bereft of our betters amidst a surfeit of free expression, cool is a valuable resource. Cool people are not noisy or boring. They eschew



footnotes and asseveration. Expressive flailing is verboten. You simply declare some specific truth to be self-evident on one's own authority, and the music flows out like a Miles Davis solo. You amaze your peers by investing the evangelical urgency of your eccentric opinions with sotto voce buoyancy, killing them softly.

They can still get you, though, because professors, evidently, harbor secret powers. One night in New York, after a talk about California art, I actually confronted a "cool and ironic" professor-critic, now dead, with the lunacy of his position on McCracken. His answer was that McCracken made *dead, silent things* that could still be enriched by irony in the professor's elevated historical consciousness of late-capitalist production. This act of Marxist ventriloquism, he argued, could make McCracken's work useful to students who, being students, will happily use a lie to make an A. So words still have their coded uses.

Years ago, I was introduced before delivering a university lecture. My appointed introducer described my life's labor as "a personal testament" and a "cool, ironic critique of contemporary culture." I delivered my lecture anyway, although, in academic parlance, "personal testament" and "cool and ironic critique" mean "Don't trust this guy—the wine is corked." Irony in art, of course, precludes irony in diction, so before I said a word, my host had robbed my case of all general urgency. He had preempted the public relevance of my remarks and prepared the ground for his own post-lecture seminar during which everything he agreed with was banal, and anything he disagreed with was naïve.

So I lost and the institution won, but what did they win? Dog biscuits? More growling time in the manger? Had I been quick enough as I mounted the podium, I should have announced that, yes, I was trying to be cool: because cool is the prevailing manner of democratic politesse. But really, kids, who would resort to *irony* in Iowa City? The university boasts a writers' workshop with ironists thick on the ground. Irony presumes repression, and

presuming repression where none exists makes you look like a clown. Also why should anyone be *personal* in *Iowa City*? Again, they *have* a writers' workshop to do this work, and I am not a personal person.

More to the point, you are actually *invited* to universities to be sneered at and babysit students in the dead of winter. This public service has no celebrity perks and doesn't pay diddly, so one doesn't solicit speaking gigs. One responds to invitations because one should. And I always try to tell the truth. I try to be cool. I don't even know how to *do* irony, and no critic has had need of it since Leigh Hunt, who was incapable of it. Hunt *was* sent to poet's prison for dissing the Prince of Wales. Lord Byron visited him in the pokey and brought along some wine. They played cards and talked of poesy.

In the absence of princes and Wales, there is no punishment for naughty lecturers in the United States beyond resentment. It's hard to demote someone without a job, to bankrupt someone with no money, or to steal power from someone without any, although I could, I suppose, be banished. This would deny me the pleasure of staring out a sealed window into the eternal snow in a blonde motel room at a Best Western, then bundling up and bouncing off through the snowstorm in some undergraduate's Volkswagen for cheap Thai food with the junior faculty. Once banished, I would be forced to play cards in gaudy casinos all weekend, drink free drinks, and smoke cigarettes, so, trust me, I am *never* ironic.

So the villain in my story is the loveless marriage between art and the "liberal arts." If this were a happy union, Cambridge, Mass, would be Paris in the 20s. Unfortunately art is not a liberal art. It does not constitute a body of knowledge in any traditional sense. It has scrap heaps of theories and oodles of information but no true proof, internal conformation, dictionary, or stable contextual reference. In class, I could tell my students who made

something, when it was made it, where it was made, and what it's made from. I could share my knowledge of local iconography, and tell some jolly historical anecdotes. Then I would have to remind my students that Ellsworth Kelly's oeuvre arises out of an odd triangle created by a woman's shoulder in a sweater in a painting by Max Beckmann, so forget about everything I just said. QED.

Even so, we should look at any art that is more interesting than the wall on which it hangs. We may read paintings, too, if we wish, but there is no urgent need of it. For the last thirty years, however, in the aftermath of the liberal-arts putsch, professors really do need theoretical space eaters to fill up the hours. The whole deconstructive schlimazel is tailored to help them force-feed images to unwilling captives with the clock ticking. So what is a professor to say about Cy Twombly? I would say: "Well kids, Cy is cool. He can do this, and you can't with your crippled little hands." A sequence of Twombly images would pass in silence, during which students might have some ideas of their own.

That would be that. And *what's* that? Twenty seconds in a long class. As a consequence, the coolest, silent art of the last century goes untaught or misconstrued, and this amounts to willful academic suppression. I have always felt that great art aspires to a kind of musical silence—in John Cage's sense of bounded quiet—and I have spent my career struggling for words to address silent art, because it is my taste and because the effort exerts stress on my critical language. Sadly, this improves the prose, but not always the art.

Here is the problem: the traditional democratic politesse of American art abjures any sign of "repression," and "superiority." Progressive critics deem this brand of decorum in American art "complacent." My English friend Jeremy Gilbert Rolfe once characterized Abstract Expressionism as abstract repressionism, and he was not far wrong. American art *is* complacent. Even the work of Jackson Pollock can pass for the production of a superior

tapestry designer with a great wrist. Harold Rosenberg called it “apocalyptic wallpaper,” and *he* was not far wrong. Read Clement Greenberg bestowing Kenneth Noland [the most complacent artist in the *beau monde*] with a red flag for his buttonhole, and you get the idea.

George Washington, however, was certifiably cool, as was Charles S. Peirce, Henry James, Gertrude Stein, Warhol, and Kelly. They embody their beliefs in public while declining to plead them. In this particular sense, cool is a peculiarly American virtue. It is the manner *de jour* of jazzmen, power forwards, jefes, and California painters. Wearing dark shades is an African inheritance. They are the icons of cool. Cool people even wear shades indoors. The fate of cool American art, after its apotheosis in the 60s, may be attributed mostly to fashion, of course, but it owes something to the institutional triumph of Walter Benjamin’s warm rabbinical-romanticism and a Marxist sociology that is only marginally concerned with physical objects, totally unconcerned with empirical correlatives, and deeply obsessed with a culture damned by irony, angst, repression, spectacle, false consciousness, and *mauvaise foi*.

The classical exemplum of cool comes from a passage in Cicero’s *De Oratore*. The author declares that he can enter the Forum at its far end, observe a speaker on the podium from that distance [over a hundred yards], and without hearing a word, ascertain the effectiveness of the speaker and the equity of his case. From this example, Cicero derives his concept of the orator who need not speak at all, who need only mount the dais to make the quality of his virtue and his case visible through the presence of his body. The deep historical link between classical rhetoric and Renaissance painting [in both its design and pantomime] resides in this ideal of the orator as a silent object of virtue. In Christian times, this idea of visible virtue was reconstituted as a condition of grace, but it remains the very emblem of cool—of that which need only be seen to be believed.

To make the American connection with cool more emphatic, I should note that Washington, in his time, was recognized as the historical embodiment of Cicero's oratorical ideal. His writings and speeches are Senecan and straightforward, the furthest thing from brilliant. His generalship was fierce, brave, and intelligent. His presidency was studious and professional, notable mostly for the power he refused, the powers he limited, and the alliances he didn't make. He gave away most of the power he had been granted, because the crown is not yours until you can refuse it.

And yet, for the citizens of that tiny republic on the edge of the Atlantic, and, for all the brilliant, erratic lawyers, farmers, and adventurers who constituted its revolutionary cabal, he was the one indispensable creature, and he didn't really stand *for* anything. He simply stood—the embodiment of everything the republic might be. Accounts of Washington's power and influence always begin with his carriage; the way he stood, sat, walked, or rode. Washington's ease in the saddle became a metaphor for the ease with which he settled disputes. More surprising to moderns, accounts of Washington's physical graces never presumed them to be cosmetic. They were presumed to be embodiments of republican virtue, and Washington never did or said anything to disabuse anyone of this notion.


Because of our respect for his triumph, however, not nearly enough is made of Washington's predisposition to take risks, of his flashes of violent anger at the card table or on the battlefield. Ferocity and daring are important attributes for a rebel general, and they clarify the means through which Washington became himself. Otherwise, there were no perfidies, hypocrisies, vendettas, secret vices, or outstanding debts to sully the image because Washington was that man—the incarnation of virtue, invulnerable to tell-all gossip, because there was nothing to tell beyond the remembrances of those who saw him ride.

Consider Washington's deportment at the Second Continental

Congress, which could never have been assembled without his guaranteed presence. Throughout the deliberations, the shouting and wrangling, the nitpicking and backbiting, Washington sat with hands in his lap and his legs crossed, saying little to nothing. Occasionally, when the debate became especially heated or seemed to divagate from its purposes, Washington would shift his weight in his chair and cross his legs the other way. At that moment, as if he had turned the tiller on the Ship of State, the debate would take a new direction. That, my friends, is cool and the very emblem of the way cool art functions in a secular society. It sits there, or hangs there, a seamless, candid incarnation of recognizable power investing our anxious quarrels with decorum. [It seems inappropriate, somehow, to shout in the presence of a floating, glowing Robert Irwin disc.]

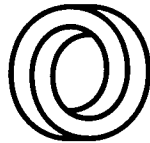
The epitome of Washington's cool was his serious reluctance to run for a second term. He was ultimately persuaded to do so, but his reservations speak volumes about the nature of cool. Washington's argument was that, since his was a short-lived family, there was a good chance that he might die in office, and it was Washington's one simple desire to be *seen relinquishing power*, that he might be the first American to be *seen stepping down from office*. He was ultimately seen doing so, and the world is better for it. Washington is greater for having done it, because giving away power is the essence of cool. You can always go get more power if you want to, and no one's life is worse for giving it away.

So, critical fashions aside, the issue at the heart of the schism between cool and irony is the question of how art might best serve the ends of democracy. Does it do so by presuming repression and adopting the noisy, servile ironies that must ultimately make it so, or does the work of art simply behave in a democratic manner, presenting itself to us as a cool, powerful embodiment of these values? Does it treat us as fellow slaves or as fellow citizens? I prefer the latter and remain beguiled by the possibility that



the generous equanimity and visible integrity of cool objects  
might, by their very presence, reduce the clamor, create a  
democracy and promote the idea that the truth need only be seen  
or spoken and never spoken for.

## On the Road Forever



**ON THE ROAD** narrates the travels of its author, Jack Kerouac [called Sal Paradise in the book], his friend Neal Cassady [called Dean Moriarty in the book], and their friends as they bounce around the North American continent in the late 1940s, like a twelve-rail snooker shot. Sal is the drifter and dreamer; Moriarty is the hustler and jailhouse aristocrat, and neither character demonstrates much in the way of goal-oriented behavior beyond hipster enthusiasm in the quest for fun, girls, adventure, beatitude, and eating that old white line down the highway. Kerouac transforms the narrative of their travels into the last, great hymn to America as a giant landscape you can taste on your tongue, an expanse that means something magical and tolerates whatever the heart can imagine. It is also the longest book ever written in a rush of unrelenting kindness, without a trace of malice. Over the years, Kerouac has served up his America, as if on a platter, to thousands upon thousands of young Americans, myself among them. He has sent them out into the drift and into the night with enough generosity to keep them fairly safe.

This year, 2007, marks the fiftieth anniversary of *On the Road's* first publication. This means I read it for the first time fifty years ago, when I was in my early teens. I bought the book off the rack,



in hardcover, because we were a transient family and the title, *On the Road*, seemed to promise some insight into that peculiar gift and affliction. I remember every detail of my reading the book: the upstairs bedroom of my grandparents' house in south Fort Worth, the dusty scuffs that the black-cloth cover of the book acquired in the process of my reading it; the weave of the tumbled sheets on which I wrestled with Kerouac's language, the shadows cast by my reading lamp on the flowered wallpaper, and the creak of my footsteps on the chilly hardwood floor as I walked from the bed where I was reading to the bathroom where I continued to read.

The book didn't change my life, thank God. It did something better. It confirmed my life as it was. It made me feel breathless and weightless, as if the world were expanding and I was being blown through it like a bubble. It made my own world make a kind of sense, and bestowed on my restless parents a kind of hipster nobility—so I did not read the book again for more than fifteen years. I was afraid that it would not live up to itself. Other authors, Jean-Paul Sartre, Hermann Hesse, and Rainer Maria Rilke, had let me down on rereading. They made me feel like an idiot for my original enthusiasm, so I held off on *On the Road*. When I did read it again, in my early thirties, I was ten years into my life as a professional writer myself, and it was like being hit by a truck.

It was so much better than I ever would have imagined that I wanted to cry. Today, I regard *On the Road* as one of those mysterious icons that renew themselves with every reading, like a candle that burns a different color every time you light it, that somehow evokes pure sentiment without becoming too sentimental. Very few books fall into this category, Hemingway maybe, but not much else. On the lighter side, Kerouac's book also has some cultural parallels with the movie *Spinal Tap*, and, perhaps, I am demeaning Kerouac by this comparison, but *Spinal Tap* and *On the Road* get what they set out to get absolutely right.

*Spinal Tap* is the single work of art in any media that nails the heart of rock and roll for those of us who played it—nails it with so much precision that it's hard to sort your memory of the film from your memory of your life. (I, too, have wandered in the underground labyrinth of the Agora in Cleveland. I, too, have perused astrological charts prepared by girls who are “with the band.”) The same may be said of *On the Road*. It rides with you down every road you travel like an aura indistinguishable from fact.

What ties *Spinal Tap* together with *On the Road* most profoundly, however, is that they both get sadder every time you read the book or see the movie. The first experience is pure joy, absolute, stunning recognition. With each subsequent experience the truth gets tougher; there is more rage in the lunacy and outrageousness. The folly of vanity and demented hope becomes more excruciating. The intensity of the transient pleasure burns like a sparkler in your gut. Today, five times through it, *On the Road* is the saddest, most loving, and candid book in the world. So loving and candid that I feel tentative even writing about it. The book meant so much to Kerouac—*was* so much of Kerouac that he hardly wrote a decent word after other people started writing about it. Thankfully, it took six years to get *On the Road* published, and, during these years, Kerouac produced a parade of speed-crazed masterpieces full of lowbrow ecstasy.

During its long life, *On the Road* has had its seasons. In the first ten years of its public vogue, it was a skyrocket that announced the future of everything. In its second decade, it was an “old-school” skyrocket, a Charlie Parker-John Coltrane skyrocket, that was mostly read by musicians in vans and buses out on the midnight highway. For my musician friends, *On the Road* had the aura of an ancestral text, an American Odyssey whose innocence one had to touch to keep the faith. Everyone who did the road read *On the Road*—from Waylon Jennings to Jeff Beck to Stevie Ray Vaughn to Ian Hunter, to Butch Trucks of the Allman

Brothers. Then, around 1980, *On the Road*'s enthusiasts divided into two schools: University litterateurs had come to appreciate "Kerouac's oracular voice," and outlaw homosexuals, like Robert Mapplethorpe and John Rechy, recognized, in the haunted relationship of Sal and Dean, America's first great gay love story, their Anna Karenina. They passed the book around. It lived, and this is how art lives.

About ten years ago, I uncovered a fourth wave. I taught the book in a graduate art-theory seminar, along with Pynchon, Bolano, Gaddis, Robbe-Grillet and Barthelme. All the tough guys hated Kerouac's book. They thought the characters were lazy and self-absorbed. The gay guys hated it too, because the characters were so disorganized and unfocused on their career options. The young women in the class, however, loved it all. I could see the light in their eyes and the promise behind it. They got it, and I was amazed. Here is one of the major "boy books" in the history of American literature, and these young women were identifying with it, not with its women, who were kind of wussy, but with its tonalities, the tempos, and the ever-receding ephemeral grail.

Somehow, somewhere in the depths of Kerouac's tangled sexuality, he would have been happy about this, I think—happy that he had written a book for all seasons, and all sexes, too. Now, as Auden said of Yeats, Kerouac has become his admirers, and anyone who wants to be a writer, wants to *read* a writer, or just touch the pure gift should read *On the Road* because Kerouac, like Dickens [and almost no one else], can make it float and go. There is a vast difference between works that are written quickly and those that read quickly. Kerouac could do both. He was never as fast at writing as he claimed, but he could drive the words on. He could lift them up off the hard scrabble of the crusty world and let them float like autumn leaves carried along on this little cushion of joy as they hurtled forward. And no matter how sad

or horrendous the events being narrated, that cushion of joy is still there, like a clear stream running over pebbles. No story in Dickens or Kerouac is so abject that you do not feel the joy of the author who is writing it. That's writing. The rest is just telling the story, and nobody remembers the story of *On the Road*. They remember the trip.