Buber and the Beats: Towards the application of social science to literature.

INTRODUCTION:

In late 1961, two famous Jewish authors and intellectuals met in Jerusalem, Israel. As far as binary opposites go, this congress was an interesting meeting of the minds. On the one hand was Allen Ginsberg, the poet, beatnik writer seeking, who had just finished a poem about his mother, called “Kaddish”. On the other hand, was Martin Buber, theologian, philosopher, social theorist, and Hassidic Jewish mysticist (Ginsberg, 38-39). The meeting between the author of “Howl” and I and Thou must have been unusual for both gentlemen. Two intellectuals of radically different reputations and areas of expertise meeting to discuss the meaning of life and work and spirituality and dualism and drugs and dreams and nightmares is the stuff of some epic Platonic dialog.

And the dialog between the two of these iconoclasts undoubtedly would have been timely, provocative, insightful and divergent. However, Ginsberg was only stopping off on a spiritual journey to India and the dialog between Buber and Ginsberg was short. The meeting was immortalized in a 1992 interview of Ginsberg by Roger Kamenetz (237). Excerpts of Ginsberg’s meeting with Buber were later published in Kamenetz’s 1994 book The Jew in the Lotus. Buber and Ginsberg remained correspondents and friends until Buber’s death in June of 1965 (Kamenetz 237). Ginsberg greatly enjoyed his conversation with Buber and later credited Buber and
other spiritual teachers that he met on the trip for helping Ginsberg to summon the
courage to stop taking psychedelic drugs. This epiphany was made public in
Ginsberg’s poem “The Change: Kyoto-Tokyo Express”. Ginsberg asked Buber about
bad acid trips. Buber responded, “Mark my words young man, our business is with the
human, not the nonhuman. You’ll remember my words years from hence. (Ginsberg 38-
39)”

Ginsberg would later disclose in an interview with Thomas Clark that Buber was
the classical “wise man”. Long before the aforementioned intellectual summit, Buber
had been exploring the human condition. Buber published his seminal and most
influential work in 1923, I and Thou. Drawing on the work of Feuerbach’s Essence of
Christianity and Kierkegaard's "Single One" (Friedman 55), Buber asserts that all of
human existence is governed by encounters with other humans and those encounters
can further be reduced into one of three types of interactions, I-It, I-You, and I-Thou
interactions. Julia Wood described these interactions:

In an I-It relationship, we treat other very impersonally almost as objects.
In I-It communication, we do not acknowledge the humanity of other
people; we may not even affirm their existences. Salespeople, servers in
restaurants and clerical staff often are treated not as people but as
instruments to take our orders and deliver what we want…The second
level Buber identified is I-You communication, which accounts for the
majority of our interactions. People acknowledge one another as more
than objects. But they don’t fully engage each other as unique
individuals…I-You relationship may also be more personal than
interactions with salesclerks. For instance, we talk with others in classes, on the job, and on sports teams in ways that are somewhat personal. Interaction is still guided by our roles as peers, as members of a class or team, and as people who have common interests. Yet we do affirm the existence of others and recognize them as individuals within these roles.

Teachers and students often have I-You relationships. The rarest kind of relationship involves I-Thou communication. Buber regarded this as the highest form of human dialogue, because each person affirms the other as cherished and unique. When we interact on an I-Thou level, we meet others in their wholeness and individuality. Instead of dealing with them as occupants of social roles, we see them as unique human beings whom we know and accept in their totality. In I-Thou communication we open ourselves fully, trusting others to accept us as we are, with our virtues and vices, hopes and fears, strengths and weaknesses. Buber believed that only in I-Thou relationships do we become fully human (19-21).

Buber’s theories as described in I and Thou would become one of the central governing theories for the study of interpersonal communication. Many literary critics have analyzed dialogues or conversations in novels. This writing will apply Martin Buber’s theory of the I and Thou to Jack Kerouac’s On the Road. One of the primary premises in this novel is the development of “experiential capital”. In On the Road, the protagonist, Sal Paradise is an aspiring writer. He justifies any uncomfortable treatment that he experiences on the road as acceptable because it will help him to gather experiences about which he will later write. Buber explicitly criticized such interpersonal
relational pursuits as overly concerned with I-It relationships (2). Specifically, this essay will trace the roots of conversational analysis as a valid form of literary criticism, expound upon Buber’s *I and Thou* as a possible literary prism, select a few important passages from *On the Road*, and apply portions of Buber’s *I and Thou* to those selected conversations.

**CONVERSATIONAL ANALYSIS OF LITERATURE:**

Many rhetoricians and literary critics credit Mikhail Bakhtin, a Russian literary critic, as one of the first contemporary voices to analyze conversations and dialog within literature (Crowell 340). In "Discourse in the Novel", Bakhtin posits a theory of “heteroglassia”. Loosely defined “heteroglassia” is the idea that the author is not an omnipotent, God-like constructor of the universe of the novel. Rather the novel is read by a reader. The novel and the act of interpreting the words that the novelist uses is the agency of the reader or the consumer of the literature. Just as humans use different forms of communication with each other, the reader can read the novel from a different literary perspective. Despite attempts on the part of the author to use concrete, exacting, and precise linguistic constructions, each reader decodes the author’s narration and dialog from a unique perspective, putting the “hetero” in “heteroglassia”. Bakhtin’s “heteroglassia” also encompasses the speech of characters, narrators, and even the author themselves (Klages).

It is important at this point to recognize the similarity between the Bakhtin and Buber. Buber and Bakhtin both situated meaning BETWEEN participants (Anderson and Cissna 92, 98). Buber asserts that the meaning in any interpersonal situation is arrived at only after two equal participants in a conversation address each other as I
and Thou. Bakhtin stipulated that literary meaning was arrived at only after it was constructed between writer and reader (Klages). Both of these theorist are noted for situating meaning as a dialogistically created, mutually shared, co-constructed entity.

Many literary critics have applied Bakhtin’s theories to literary conversations. More contemporary literary critics have cultivated Bakhtin’s argument even further. Morson and Emerson (249) went so far as to assert, “one must read not for the plot, but for the dialogues, and to read for the dialogues is to participate in them.” The roots of Bakhtin’s theories and forms go back for centuries. Bakhtin was considered to be associated with “Russian Formalism”. Although his school of thought is associated with formalism, his theory of “heteroglossia” is fundamentally post-structuralist and the works of Foucault and Derrida echo his placement of the reader as central agent in the interpretation of the text. Other theorists, such as H. P. Grice, took to concept of heteroglassia and conversational analysis further (Buck). Indeed, Li’s work, critiqued later in this writing, is a “representative example” of a dominant type of literary scholarship which applies the “Conversational Implicature Theory” popularized by Grice and scholars of his work. However, in the interest of brevity this writing will not elucidate those extensions.

The literary approaches of the past decade have tended to be more interdisciplinary (van Tjik, 3). Subsequently, the use of interpersonal communication theory to analyze fiction is consistent with Bakhtin’s theory of “heteroglossia” and with countless conversational analyses recently applied to literary texts. Although this application is consistent, these analyses have typically been conducted from a rather limited perspective. Either the critic analyzes the actual words spoken such as in Yang
Li’s recent analysis of Hemingway’s *The Killers*, or the critic has focused on applying literary conversation analyses that have been developed by literary critics, such as Marion Muirhead’s application of Michael Toolan’s “Conversational Turbulence” model to the fiction of Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening*. While finding neither of these works objectionable, compelling arguments could be made that both approaches are ignoring vast swathes of “undiscovered invitations” to analyze literature.

Li’s shortcomings are representative of the types of literary criticisms commonly associated with conversation analysis. Li examines “conversation activity types, conversation strategies, discourse roles, turn-taking rules and adjacency pairs”. His analysis is, of course, an outgrowth of the famous American sociologists Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson 1974 work, “A Simplest Systematics for the Organization of Turn-taking for Conversation”. While Li’s analysis is appropriate, erudite, and informed, he misses the larger context. Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson began studying conversations, so that they could better understand how humans socialized through dialogue. By applying their theories to Hemingway, Li reduces the conversational participants/characters down to how the conversation’s participants shift topics and what is said. Li never explores any emotions or feelings. Once again, Li’s work is representative of this type of application of interpersonal communication theory to literary criticism.

Muirhead’s application of Michael Toolan’s “Conversational Turbulence” model to the fiction of Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening* is also appropriate, erudite, and informed. A possible shortcoming of the type of analysis that her work represents is that this scholarship is grounded in what a literary theorist, Michael Toolan, has “approved” as
being an applicable model in his work. Toolan read several works of fiction and developed his “Conversational Turbulence” model which attempts to provide insights into conversations where participants are engaged in and trying to resolve power struggles. Toolan’s model does not appear to reflect an already robust corpus of social science about how such communication happens in the real world.

Whereas Li’s analysis is constraining because of his preoccupation with monolithic, absolute and static interpretations of text, he does apply an interpersonal communication theory appropriately to a work of fiction. Whereas Muirhead’s analysis is stultifying because it only travels as far as Toolan has paved the road. Toolan’s engineering is of questionable origins. His pavement forgoes the lime, binder, and aggregate of social science. Both of these representative examples would be greatly improved by a more robust connection with Interpersonal Communication scholarship and praxis. Li should invite us to explore how the characters might feel after their conversation. Muirhead should get right into poisoned well communication climates, strategies for dealing with a hostile listeners, and compliance gaining strategies as opposed to treading in the shallow pool as defined by Toolan. While these works can be improved upon, both represent an exciting trend in literary criticism: the application of already defined social scientific theories, or the literary equivalent of such scholarship, to literature. Furthermore, Anderson, Baxter, and Cessna (11) assert that the application of the study of dialogue bridges the gap between social science, interpersonal communication, rhetoric, literature, cultural, and mass media studies. Other scholars (Scarsella, 6) would assert that the elimination of academic fragmentation is critical for human survival.
EXISTENTIALISM AND BUBER’S I AND THOU AS A LITERARY PRISM:

Many philosophers situate Buber as an existentialist (Anderson, Baxter, Cissna 8). Buber was heavily influenced by Kierkegaard’s Leap of Faith theory by his writings "Single One" (Friedman 55). Buber took up Kierkegaard’s question, “How should I live my life?” For Buber the answer to the existentialist question was in the examination of human relationships. Just as Buber implored Ginsberg to “focus on the human instead of the inhuman” (Ginsberg 39). Buber focused on how to truly connect with others. Buber strived to have relations with others that were at least at the I-You if not the I-Thou level. Buber was a profoundly religious practitioner of Hassidic Judaism. Buber asserted that only through the realization of I-Thou relations could one have an interpersonal relationship with God (Buber 10). Buber had a distinct preference for I-You and I-Thou relationships and communication patterns. Buber would criticize the world of the I-It relationship as incomplete.

Although Buber met with Ginsberg, I believe that it is safe to assert that he would not have approved of many of the types of personal conduct commonly associated with the Beat Movement. Most of that disapproval can be chalked up to generational, religious, cultural, and personal grounds. However, I think that Buber would also disapprove of one of the fundamental themes running through On the Road. Sal Paradise, the protagonist, self-discloses that he has a sense of foreboding about his relationship with Dean Moriarty. Sal senses that he is engaged in a lifestyle that he may not completely believe in; however, because he is interested in having experiences that he will use to further his writing career he continues to participate (Kerouac 10-11).
Fundamentally, an author is commentator on the human condition. How can a author write fiction if they don’t understand people? At its most basic level, the novel is a demonstration that the author can grasp the realm of human interaction. Hence, the development of what this writing will refer to as “experiential capital” is a must for aspiring writers. A rich repertoire of experiences informs all great writing. Buber would not approve of such indulgences. His words from I and Thou speak for themselves:

It is said that man experiences his world. What does that mean? Man travels over the surface of things and experiences them. He extracts knowledge about their constitution from them: he wins an experience from them. He experiences what belongs to the things. But the world is not presented to man by experiences alone. These present him only with a world composed of It and He and She and It again. . . . As experience, the world belongs to the primary word I-It. The primary word I-Thou establishes the world of relation (2).

Concisely, in the above excerpt, Buber asserts that experience is not knowledge. Connection and relation to other people is knowledge.

Buber continues:

…in so far as man rests satisfied with the things that he experiences and uses, he lives in the past, and his moment has no present content. He has nothing but objects. But objects subsist in time that has been. The present is not fugitive and transient, but continually present and enduring. The object is not duration, but cessation, suspension, a breaking off and
cutting clear and hardening, absence of relation and of present being.

True beings are lived in the present, the life of objects is in the past (5).

This final excerpt from Buber explicates further what the primary relationship “I-Thou” is all about. The development of experiential capital is the world of I-It.

Experiential capital exists in the past. True being and connection happens in the here and now. In short, Buber’s literary prism of I-It-ness would include the following axioms:
1. Relationships built upon the accumulation of experiential capital are I-It relationships.
2. Reflections of past experiences absent present day relations are indicative of I-It relationships because I-It, subject-object relationships exist in the past. Reflecting on someone exclusively in the past tense is the gateway to I-It-ness.
3. Objectification of others is I-It-ness.
4. Relationships that embody “cessation, suspension, a breaking off and a cutting clear” are I-It-ness.
5. Relationships that “harden” that move from a place of tender empathy, relation, and connection to a place of rigid apathy, discord, aloofness, formality and coldness is I-It-ness.

The axioms and temporal natures of I-It and I-Thou thus being clearly defined, an examination of our literary text is warranted.

**IMPORTANT EXCERPTS FROM ON THE ROAD:**

First, this passage, from the beginning of the book summarizes a conversation that Sal has with his Aunt about Dean Moriarty, and a bit of narrative where Sal, the narrator, tells us why he desires to go on the road with Dean.
Although my aunt warned me that he would get me in trouble, I could hear a new call and see a new horizon, and believe it at my young age; and a little bit of trouble or even Dean’s eventual rejection of me as a buddy, putting me down, as he would later, on starving sidewalks and sickbeds—what did it matter? I was a young writer and I wanted to take off. Somewhere along the line I knew there’d be girls, visions, everything; somewhere along the line the pearl would be handed to me. (10-11)

Second, in the next to the last chapter, Dean abandons Sal in Mexico City when Sal is suddenly struck with dysentery. Dean parts ways with Sal:

"Poor Sal, poor Sal, got sick. Stan'll take care of you. Now listen to hear if you can in your sickness: I got, my divorce from Camille down here and I'm driving back to Inez in New York tonight if the car holds out." "All that again?" I cried.

"All that again, good buddy. Gotta get back to my life. Wish I could stay with you. Pray I can come back. " I grabbed the cramps in my belly and groaned. When I looked up again bold noble Dean was standing with his old broken trunk and looking down at me. I didn't know who he was any more, and he knew this, and sympathized, and pulled the blanket over my shoulders. "Yes, yes, yes, I've got to go now. Old fever Sal, good-by." And he was gone…When I got better I realized what a rat he was, but then I had to understand the impossible complexity of his life, how he had to leave me there, sick, to get on with his wives and woes. "Okay, old Dean, I'll say nothing." (303-04)
Third, on the last few pages of On The Road, Dean is reduced to an incoherent and inarticulate mess:

‘Good-by, Dean,’ I said, ‘I sure wish I didn’t have to go to the concert.’
‘D’you think I can ride to fortieth Street with you?’ he whispered. “Want to be with you as much as possible, m’boy and besides it’s so durned cold in this here New Yawk…” I whispered to Remi, No he wouldn’t have it, he liked me but he didn’t like my idiot friends…Absolutely out of the question, Sal!…So Dean couldn’t ride uptown with us and the only thing I could do was sit in the back of the Cadillac and wave at him… Dean, ragged in the moth-eaten overcoat he bought specially 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. Poor little Laura, my baby, to whom I’d told everything about Dean, began almost to cry. ‘Oh, we shouldn’t let him go like this. What’ll we do?’ Old Dean’s gone, I thought, and out loud I said, ‘He’ll be all right.’

APPLICATION:
First, in our axiom #1, Buber critiques the development of experiential capital as having agendas. Buber accu...
relationship with Dean was one of mutual usury, an It-It relationship, then they would both be better off not spending as much time with one another. If they both ultimately look at their relationship as based on an It-It theoretical footing, and clearly they do, then the relationship is doomed from the start. Furthermore, no authentic meaning can be derived from the relationship because it never exists as a genuine I-Thou relationship (Buber 5). Sal knows he is being conned and doesn’t care. Along the way they will have a good time and gain experiential capital.

Second, Dean abandons Sal while he is sick in Mexico. The dialogue that Dean uses to say good-by to Sal exudes “otherness and disconnection”. Dean announces that he is leaving for New York to marry Inez because his divorce from Camille has come through. Dean ignores Sal’s inflection and paralanguage. Dean ignores Sal’s visible pain at his stomach cramps. Dean is completely engrossed in himself and in his own private marital woes. Dean’s only emotion in this dialogue is of sympathy. Not for Sal as a sick friend, but for Sal as the confused object of a quasi-abusive relationship. Clearly Sal is being treated as an I-It by Dean in this interaction. Furthermore, based on Sal’s conclusion to this dialogue this abandonment is forcing him to look at Dean as an I-It. Sal resolves to, “say nothing”. Buber contends that the most extreme I-It relationship that one can be involved in is to ignore the existence of another, by not acknowledging them. This interaction is indicative of Axioms #3 and #4 as previously described.

Third, in the last couple of pages of On the Road, Dean seeks a ride, but is not given one. Dean complains of chills, but is not given refuge in the Cadillac. Dean requests to spend every possible moment with Sal, but is denied further contact. Sal
gets into the back seat of the big Cadillac and waves good-by. This seems so out of character for his very last interaction with a man that approximately 300 pages ago and several thousands of miles ago he had described as a “long-lost brother (Kerouac, 10)”. Buber’s theories postulate that this chilly interaction is the inevitable result of a failure to engage in dialogue. In fact, the emotional disconnectedness of Sal and Dean at the end of the novel is so intense that it almost brings Sal’s girlfriend, Laura, to tears. This interaction is indicative of Axioms 1, 3, 4, and 5.

Remi looks at Dean as an I-It; Sal looks at Dean as an I-It; Remi’s bookie/chauffeur looks at Dean as an I-It. In the end, Dean puts to the road alone, in an old overcoat, collar turned up, eyes on the street ahead of him to undertake the arduous and dangerous journey across America by himself.

Our construction of Buber’s Literary Prism, axiom #4, epitomizes the I-It relationship as, “The object is not duration, but cessation, suspension, a breaking off and cutting clear and hardening, absence of relation and of present being. In this last passage which proceeds the much referenced and acclaimed spontaneous prose ending, we see the ultimate culmination of the I-It-ness of the relationship between Dean and Sal. All their adventures expired. All their closeness eroded. All their relations: I-It-ness. Laura is almost reduced to tears at the sight of it. Sal neglects to even walk down the block with his ragged, punch-drunk, and spurned companion. Sal coldly waves from the warm cab of the big fancy car. Dean, so bummed by I-It-ness of the whole scene, doesn’t even look back. He can’t stand to ‘dig’ it any longer.

Finally, Kerouac pens, in my opinion, one of the most amazing conclusions to a novel in the history of literature:
So in America when the sun goes down and I sit on the old broken-down river pier watching the long, long skies over New Jersey and sense all that raw land that rolls in one unbelievable huge bulge over to the West Coast, and all that road going, all the people dreaming in the immensity of it, and in Iowa I know by now the children must be crying in the land where they let the children cry, and tonight the stars'll be out, and don't you know that God is a Pooh Bear? the evening star must be drooping and shedding her sparkler dims on the prairie, which is just before the coming of complete night that blesses the earth, darkens all rivers, cups the peaks and folds the final shore in, and 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. (309-310)

In the conclusion to On the Road, Sal reflects back on what he has seen about America and what he has seen in Dean. He squarely places all of these experiences as objects that he will reflect upon as being in the past. The present is devoid of on-going connection as is reduced to recollection. In this passage we see a cessation of relation and cataloging of experiences won. These thoughts and actions are both indicative of Axioms 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5.

CONCLUSION:

Imitation is the sincerest form of flattery. I will try to pen as Kerouacian an ending to this essay as possible…So in America, scholars are studying their books and graduate students are writing their papers. All of them travel to conferences and tread down
roads that were paved by French-speaking expert specialists before them. Oh, the fragmentation. Oh, clatter of academic Babel. And everyone thinks that they’ve got to blow their own theory. All of them think that they have to invent the wheel. Tonight, at a study in some quiet repose in Texas an English teacher will read this essay and think, “I’m tired of Foucault and Derrida. I’m sick of Barthes and Lacan”. I wonder what the social scientists are doing. They are probably out there listening to a conversation. Out there in some bar some place studying the mating habits of the adolescent pick up artists, out there in the world studying how people talk and fight and love and lay and travel and live. They know God is Pooh Bear. Maybe I should read a few of their articles. Maybe I could look at a couple of their lectures, because insight into the human condition is a tough thing to come by. I’m too old to run with the Millennials and the Bulls in Pamplona. I’m too old to wonder how kids interact with one another today. I am still young enough to write my name on this discipline. Maybe some of those social scientific thoughts can help deconstruct this Proust. Maybe I could apply some Buber to Ginsberg. Maybe. Afterall, I’ve got the whole world of knowledge at my fingertips. And nobody knows what the editors are thinking, Nobody knows what will get published. Everybody just knows that only a handful of degreed people will read it. I think of Jack Kerouac. I think of Jack Kerouac alone facing the big darkness brain hemorrhaging with a notebook and a pen in his hand. I think of Jack Kerouac and how his novel changed my life. I think of Jack Kerouac and the tremendous ability to tell a story and to write ‘I-It-ness’. I think of Jack Kerouac. I think of Jack KerO-U-AC!
Works Cited:


<http://www.theparisreview.org/media/4389_GINSBERG.pdf>.


