

hush, you can hear a tiny SQUEE of something, the nameless asthmas of the throat of Time) — now a man, probably a truckdriver, is yelling far away and sounds like an adventurous young fellow playing in the darkness — the harmonies of air brakes stopping on two intervals, first application, the sound of it melting and echoing the second application and harmonizing — A cluster of yellow November leaves in an otherwise bare and sheepish castrated tree send up a little meek PLICK as they rub together preparing to die. When I see a leaf fall, I always say goodbye — And that has a sound which is lost unless there is country stillness at which time I'm sure it really rattles the earth, like ants in orchestras — Moan, the terrible sound now of the Public Address system in the Milk Factory, the voice like it's coming out of a stovepipe full of screens and amplified — a voice like night — a big steelrim cricket — (it's stopped) — I heard it once so loud "Please turn off the water," a woman, a rainy night, I was shocked — a car door slamming, the click, the velvet modern hinge-click before the soft slam — the soft cushioned new-car slam, flump — some man in hat and coat up to something pompous, secret, sheepish — The area breathes; it seems to want to tell something intelligible to me —¹⁸

Here, instead of remaining mutely subservient to the narrator's expansionary efforts, the environment seems not only conscious of the narrator, but anxious to converse with him. Yet this consciousness is suggested only after the narrator has attended to particular sounds, no one of which seems necessarily directed to him, but which all seem to him to display conscious organization. Mostly the organization sounds musical, as if displayed by a jazz band. (The "klaxon moaning horn," "the double 'bop bop' or 'beep beep' from railyards," "the harmonies of air brakes stopping on two intervals" are the most obvious examples of this display.) Sometimes the music sounds orchestral, as in the "little meek PLICK" played pizzicato by the dying leaves. The narrator, awed by these and other manifestations of the sonic world's intelligence, comes to a quieter, less self-assertive conclusion than he does in the diner passage. His furthest expansion is measured by the assimilation of all specific sonic perceptions into the intimation of a message. Necessarily, he must be silent. The final "space-dash" leaves room, perhaps, for "the area" to inscribe its message, as if "the area" were itself an artist in "spontaneous prose."

This second passage does not dramatize a narrative climax as clearly as the first does. But the second passage dramatizes, more clearly

than the first, Kerouac's prescription for an "outfanning movement over subject." What this difference between the passages implies is that the "spontaneous prose method" is not prescriptive in a narrow, literal sense, but that different expansions are possible given the nature of the experience. Essential to the "method," however, is that that nature is "given" in the dramatization itself; it is never predetermined. What is predetermined are the "subject" and the general shape of the movement that will result from "set[ing the subject] before the mind" (from "Set-Up"). But the "subject," when so "set," acts like the mid-point of the expanding wave; it is the primary condition of discourse — it is not necessarily the *object* of discourse. In the second passage, for instance, we might expect that the narrator is going to focus exclusively on "Cody and the road." But to evoke the hero of his book (and that hero's main habitat) as a "subject" requires that the narrator instead enter into the spirit of his relation to him. That spirit is best described by Kerouac himself in "Belief": "Submissive to everything, open, listening." What the narrator submits to "everything" is his will, that rational will which seeks to impose upon experience predetermined directions and limits. The act of submission occurs, in the present instance, with the phrase "happens to be a fog," because "happens" directs the narrator's attention to events outside his willed control. But he is compensated immediately afterwards by the assertion, not of his rational will upon the environment, but of the environment upon the rational will — that is, upon the space the rational will has vacated. "Cody and the road" are never explicitly mentioned again in the passage, yet they are present nevertheless by implication, like deities who prefer that their influence be indirect.

The third example I have chosen, from the beginning of *Dr. Sax*, is the most complicated of the three, not only because the pedagogue is set within the narration as a character, but because the environment expands within the narrator's own memories and dreams rather than within a relatively limited public space (such as that provided by a diner or by a foggy night in Jamaica, New York):

The other night I had a dream that I was sitting on the sidewalk on Moody Street, Pawtucketville, Lowell, Mass., with a pencil and paper in my hand saying to myself "Describe the wrinkly tar of this sidewalk, also the iron pickets of Textile Institute, or the doorway where Lousy and you and G.J.'s always sittin and dont stop to think of words when you stop, just stop to think of the picture better — and let your mind off yourself in this work."

Just before that I was coming down the hill between Gershom Avenue and that spectral street where Billy Artaud used to live, towards Blezan's corner store,

where on Sundays the fellows stand in bestsuits after church smoking, spitting, Leo Martin saying to Sonny Alberge or Joe Plouffe, "*Eh, batêge, ya faite un grand sarman s'foi icite*" – ("Holy Batchism, he made a long sermon this time") and Joe Plouffe, prognathic, short, glidingly powerful, spits into the large pebblestones of Gershom paved and walks on home for breakfast with no comment (he lived with his sisters and brothers and mother because the old man had thrown em all out – "Let my bones melt in this rain!" – to live a hermit existence in the darkness of his night – rheumy red-eyed old sickmonster scrooge of the block) –¹⁹

The narrator posts his stalwart, imperturbable pedagogue – unless the pedagogue posts himself there – before the dream-door at the "bottom of the mind" (from "Belief") and has the pedagogue demand, as the price of his, the narrator's own, admission, allegiance explicitly to rule number twenty-two of "Belief" and implicitly to the various other rules that surround it. That price is paid, because when the narrator moves through that door into the next paragraph, we note his behaving exactly as he did in the second example. The announced "subjects" of discourse – the "wrinkly tar," the "iron pickets," and the "doorway" – are treated not as guests of honor (at whom all possible descriptive attention must be directed), but as the conditions which make the narrative event possible. In this instance, the narrative event is much harder to localize than in the two previous instances because time and space have become more elastic. When the narrator reaches Blezan's store, he seems to have penetrated to the limits of his dream: "on Sundays" places the men standing near the store outside chronological time in a static world of perpetual recurrence; yet the narrator's presence seems to stretch that static world chronologically, freeing not only the men's speech and movement but their histories as well – a stretching forwards, allowing Joe Plouffe to walk home, and a stretching backwards, allowing the voices of his past to speak.

The narrator is perhaps most remarkable in this capacity to allow voices to speak through him, and to do so by putting those voices at the service of "spontaneous prose," by using their immediacy to help him economize on first-person description and thus accelerate his "outfanning movement over subject." "Just before that I was coming down . . ." can be described as the narrator's own voice, one anxious to report past activities accurately but unpedantically. But that voice allows other voices to assert themselves, sometimes in a single phrase, sometimes in a direct quotation, sometimes in a phrase where the asserted voice becomes indistinguishable from the narrator's own. Horror-story diction ("spectral") makes ghostly the absence of Billy Artaud; a heraldic inversion ("Gershom paved") suggests an appropriately heroic

environment for a "glidingly powerful" Joe Plouffe. Leo Martin's voice booms out at us even more forcefully than the narrator's in translating it, since the translation is subordinated within parentheses. And in "the old man had thrown em all out," the narrator yields to gossipy town voices describing a man who, when he speaks for himself ("Let my bones melt in this rain!"), sounds like King Lear.

This last example shows how the narrator can use voices to suggest two different versions of the same character or situation. He suggests yet another version when he refers to "the old man" in romantic, Wolfen terms, in the phrase "darkness of his night." That voices would proliferate around Joe Plouffe's father could not have been predicted when the paragraph began, though that the voices would have reached some momentary stability, some temporary boundary is foreseen in the "exhaustion" or "release" phase of "spontaneous prose." But the narrator is not satisfied until the boundary is stabilized rhythmically as well, and to achieve this end, to ensure that his language "shortens in race to wire of time-race of work," the narrator yields his voice to music. "Rheumy red-eyed old sickmonster scrooge of the block" not only suggests yet another version of "the old man" (as curmudgeon); it allows us to hear, for the length of time it is sustained in our minds as we read it, the orchestration of the expansion's close, in groups of ever shorter, ever more emphatic syllables.

Such mastery as Kerouac displays here over the descriptive and rhythmic possibilities of voices has not gone unnoticed by all writers and critics. Henry Miller is, I believe, honoring it in the following paragraphs from his introduction to *The Subterraneans*:

The good poet, or in this case the "spontaneous Bop prosodist," is always alive to the idiomatic lingo of his time — the swing, the beat, the disjunctive metaphoric rhythm which comes so fast, so wild, so scrimmaged, so unbelievably albeit delectably mad, that when transmitted to paper no one recognizes it. None but the poets, that is. He "invented it," people will say. Insinuating that it was souped up. What they should say is: "He *got* it." He got it, he dug it, he put it down. ("You pick it up, Nazz!")

When someone asks, "Where does he get that stuff?" say: "From you!" Man, he lay awake all night listening with eyes and ears. A night of a thousand years. Heard it in the womb, heard it in the cradle, heard it in school, heard it on the floor of life's stock exchange where dreams are traded for gold. And *man*, he's sick of hearing it. He wants to move on. He wants to *blow*. But will you let him?²⁰

Miller's question — "But will you let him?" — was asked fifteen years ago. But it could just as well be asked today because Kerouac's mastery of voices is still one that "no one recognizes" — not officially, at least. At a time when Williams' and Olson's insistence on the need of writing to take its cues from the spoken language has finally begun to win adherence, not only among those poets' *protégés*, but among teachers of and writers about literature, Kerouac's mastery of voices surely won't go unrecognized much longer. And the "spontaneous prose method," which gave that mastery its disciplinary modulations, will gain respect too, not only as the key to which the complexities of Kerouac's art might be tuned, but as the key to which to tune the minds of other writers, creative, academic, and otherwise — those who are afraid or sceptical of verbal spontaneity and need to be assured of its principles before they can surrender themselves to it.

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NOTES

- 1 A remark made on the David Susskind TV show. See Ann Charters, *Kerouac* (New York: Warner Paperback Library, 1974), p. 312.
- 2 *On the Road*, *Visions of Cody*, and *Dr. Sax* were written before *The Subterraneans* and were in part revised and rearranged before publication. A study of the mss. of these books, to determine the exact extent of the revisions, is much needed.
- 3 The most influential of the anti-Kerouacian critics has been Norman Podhoretz, who described Kerouac's prose as "inept parody of Faulkner at his worst." (See "The Know-Nothing Bohemians," *Partisan Review* XXV (1958), 305-318.) Norman Mailer's attitude towards Kerouac — an attitude more generous than most — is wary and ambivalent. (See *Advertisements For Myself* (New York: Berkley Medallion Books, 1959), pp. 428-429.)
- 4 See Krim's introduction to *Desolation Angels* (New York: Bantam Books, 1966), pp. 16, 17.
- 5 *The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Edward Waldo Emerson (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1903), I, pp. 30-31.
- 6 *The Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. A. W. Plumstead and Harrison Hayford (Cambridge: The Belknap Press, 1969), VII, p. 505.
- 7 *Ibid.* p. 217.
- 8 *The Journals . . . of . . . Emerson*, ed. Alfred R. Ferguson (Cambridge: The Belknap Press, 1964), IV p. 363.
- 9 *The Journals of Henry D. Thoreau*, ed. Bradford Torrey and Francis Allen (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1949), III, p. 293.

- 10 *The Journals of . . . Thoreau*, II, p. 441.
- 11 "Belief & Technique For Modern Prose," *Evergreen Review* II, 8 (Spring 1959), 57; "Essentials of Spontaneous Prose," *Evergreen Review* II, 5 (Summer 1958), 72-73. ("Essentials of Spontaneous Prose" appeared originally in *Black Mountain Review* 7 (Autumn 1957), 226-228, but as this text contains errors and omissions, I have used the more accurate *Evergreen Review* version.) Subsequently in this article I shall abbreviate the titles of both tracts as "Belief" and "Essentials" respectively. Since these tracts are not easy to locate, I have reprinted them at the end of this article, where I hope the reader will refer to them for his own use and pleasure, and not solely for the purpose of understanding my argument.
- 12 Warren Tallman, "Kerouac's Sound," *Evergreen Review* IV, 11 (January-February 1960), 168.
- 13 *Ibid.*, 158.
- 14 Just when he did so cannot yet be determined with certainty. I infer from Charters' *Kerouac*, however, that "Essentials" was written in 1953. (See *Kerouac*, p. 189.)
- 15 *The Complete Works of . . . Emerson*, II, p. 304.
- 16 These last suppositions must remain tentative until more work in this area is done. But see my "The Delicate Dynamics of Friendship: A Reconsideration of Kerouac's *On The Road*," *American Literature* 46, 2 (May 1974), 200-206, where an effort is made to use the term "pivot" to describe the shape of *On The Road*.
- 17 *Visions of Cody* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1972), pp. 3-4.
- 18 *Ibid.*, pp. 9-10.
- 19 *Dr. Sax* (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1959), pp. 3-4.
- 20 *The Subterraneans* (New York: Avon Books, 1959).

Essentials of Spontaneous Prose

Jack Kerouac

SET-UP. The object is set before the mind, either in reality, as in sketching (before a landscape or teacup or old face) or is set in the memory wherein it becomes the sketching from memory of a definite image-object.

PROCEDURE. Time being of the essence in the purity of speech, sketching language is undisturbed flow from the mind of personal secret idea-words, *blowing* (as per jazz musician) on subject of image.

METHOD. No periods separating sentence-structures already arbitrarily riddled by false colons and timid usually needless commas — but the

vigorous space dash separating rhetorical breathing (as jazz musician drawing breath between outblown phrases) — “measured pauses which are the essentials of our speech” — “divisions of the *sounds* we hear” — “time and how to note it down.” (William Carlos Williams)

SCOPING. Not “selectivity” of expression but following free deviation (association) of mind into limitless blow-on-subject seas of thought, swimming in sea of English with no discipline other than rhythms of rhetorical exhalation and expostulated statement, like a fist coming down on a table with each complete utterance, bang! (the space dash) — Blow as deep as you want — write as deeply, fish as far down as you want, satisfy yourself first, then reader cannot fail to receive telepathic shock and meaning-excitement by same laws operating in his own human mind.

LAG IN PROCEDURE. No pause to think of proper word but the infantile pileup of scatological buildup words till satisfaction is gained, which will turn out to be a great appending rhythm to a thought and be in accordance with Great Law of timing.

TIMING. Nothing is muddy that *runs in time* and to laws of *time* — Shakespearian stress of dramatic need to speak now in own unalterable way or forever hold tongue — *no revisions* (except obvious rational mistakes, such as names or *calculated* insertions in act of not writing but *inserting*).

CENTER OF INTEREST. Begin not from preconceived idea of what to say about image but from jewel center of interest in subject of image at *moment* of writing, and write outwards swimming in sea of language to peripheral release and exhaustion — Do not afterthink except for poetic or P. S. reasons. Never afterthink to “improve” or defray impressions, as, the best writing is always the most painful personal wrung-out tossed from cradle warm protective mind — tap from yourself the song of yourself, *blow!* — *now!* — *your* way is your only way — “good” — or “bad” — always honest, (“ludicrous”), spontaneous, “confessional” interesting, because not “crafted.” Craft *is* craft.

STRUCTURE OF WORK. Modern bizarre structures (science fiction, etc.) arise from language being dead, “different” themes give illusion of “new” life. Follow roughly outlines in out-fanning movement over subject, as river rock, so mindflow over jewel-center need (run your mind over it, *once*) arriving at pivot, where what was dim formed “beginning” becomes sharp-necessitating “ending” and language shortens in race to wire of time-race of work, following laws of Deep Form, to conclusion, last words, last trickle — Night is The End.

MENTAL STATE. If possible write “without consciousness” in semi-trance (as Yeats’ later “trance writing”) allowing subconscious to

admit in own uninhibited interesting necessary and so "modern" language what conscious art would censor, and write excitedly, swiftly, with writing-or-typing-cramps, in accordance (as from center to periphery) with laws of orgasm, Reich's "beclouding of consciousness." *Come* from within, out – to relaxed and said.

Belief & Technique for Modern Prose

List of Essentials

Jack Kerouac

1. Scribbled secret notebooks, and wild typewritten pages, for yr own joy
2. Submissive to everything, open, listening
3. Try never get drunk outside yr own house
4. Be in love with yr life
5. Something that you feel will find its own form
6. Be crazy dumb saint of the mind
7. Blow as deep as you want to blow
8. Write what you want bottomless from bottom of the mind
9. The unspeakable visions of the individual
10. No time for poetry but exactly what is
11. Visionary tics shivering in the chest
12. In tranced fixation dreaming upon object before you
13. Remove literary, grammatical and syntactical inhibition
14. Like Proust be an old teahead of time
15. Telling the true story of the world in interior monolog
16. The jewel center of interest is the eye within the eye
17. Write in recollection and amazement for yourself
18. Work from pithy middle eye out, swimming in language sea
19. Accept loss forever
20. Believe in the holy contour of life
21. Struggle to sketch the flow that already exists intact in mind
22. Dont think of words when you stop but to see picture better
23. Keep track of every day the date emblazoned in yr morning
24. No fear or shame in the dignity of yr experience, language & knowledge
25. Write for the world to read and see yr exact pictures of it
26. Bookmovie is the movie in words, the visual American form
27. In Praise of Character in the Bleak inhuman Loneliness
28. Composing wild, undisciplined, pure, coming in from under, crazier the better
29. You're a Genius all the time
30. Writer-Director of Earthly movies Sponsored & Angeled in Heaven

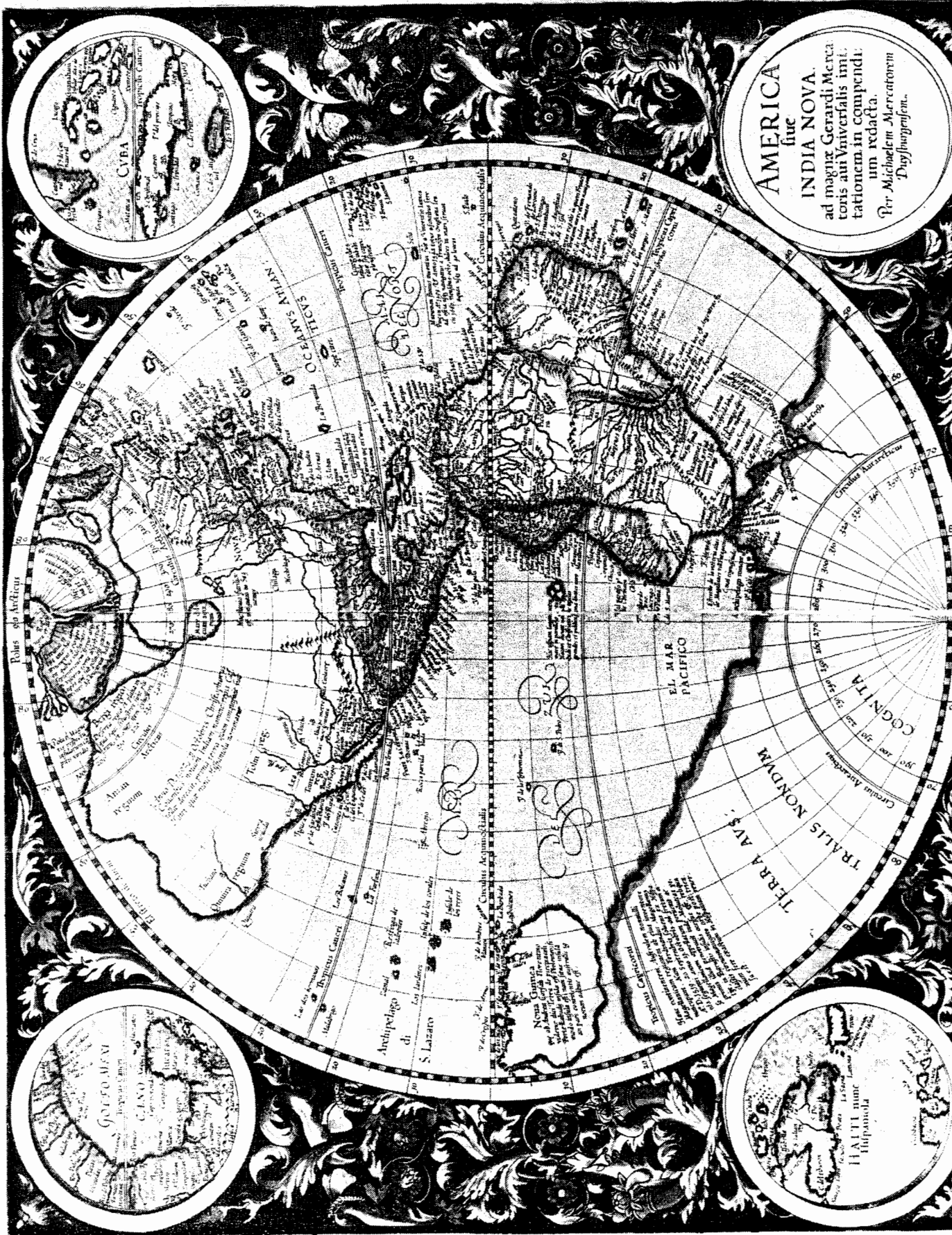
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Polaris Arcticus

Polaris Antarcticus

CYBA

GUINEO MEXI

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TRALLS
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