

All wet black sunken earth danger': Cosmic Alienation and Disintegration in Jack
Kerouac's *Big Sur*

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Jack Kerouac's *Big Sur* was published in 1962. It is an autodiegetic novel that records the experiences and emotional states of Jack Duluoz, the author's fictional representative. The novel largely focuses on the sense of despair and the feelings of alienation and hopelessness that besiege Duluoz, who has relocated to the Pacific beach of Big Sur to escape the inconveniences of his newly-achieved fame and reconnect with his own self. The elegiac style of the novel accommodates Duluoz's poor condition and self-destructive odyssey through alcohol. This downfall is articulated through a series of representations of the narrator's physical decay and fits of mental annihilation. *Big Sur* pre-emptively concerns for, and consummates engagement with, the theme of death in Kerouac's writing: Kerouac stages his own mental fragmentation, physical dissolution and ultimate spiritual salvation through the misfortunes of his narrator.

I. Duluoz's projection of the place: a Thoreau-esque fantasy

Duluoz's retreat to the spot of Big Sur in the novel is meant to provide him with an environment that soothes and comforts him, away from the urban tumult

of the last few years: ‘It’s the first trip I’ve taken away from home (my mother’s house) since the publication of ‘Road’ the book that made me famous and in fact so much so I’ve been driven mad for three years’.¹ ‘Road’ in the text corresponds, obviously, to Kerouac’s famous novel *On the Road*, published in 1957. While his move is motivated by the necessity to run away from his drunken stupor, it also embodies a desire to avoid all forms of social interaction, especially ‘endless telegrams, phonecalls, requests, mail, visitors, snoopers’.² In fact, Duluoz seeks to cultivate isolation in order to reconnect with his creative forces (writing), as well as with a form of essential simplicity that antagonises material and technological progress. His intention, in his own words, is ‘to be alone and undisturbed for six weeks just chopping wood, drawing water, writing, sleeping, hiking, etc., etc.’³ Here, Kerouac refers to the romantic trope of the hermit to signify Duluoz’s desire to escape from modern civilisation and dwell in wilderness.

This trope is idiosyncratic of Kerouac’s writing in its reverence for, and idealisation of, the archetype of the primitive: it epitomises a search for a transcendental connection with nature that tallies with a Transcendentalist ethos. Indeed, Duluoz’s disengagement from the influence of modern civilisation and relocation into the woods of Big Sur references a Thoreau-esque fantasy that militates for a reconnection of the self to the natural environment. As Thoreau writes in *Walden*:

¹ Jack Kerouac, *Big Sur* [1962] (London: Flamingo, 2001), p.2.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid., p.1.

Then to my morning work. First I take an axe and pail and go in search of water [...]. I cut my way first through a foot of snow, and then a foot of ice, and open a window under my feet, where, kneeling to drink, I look down into the quiet parlour of the fishes, pervaded by a softened light as through a window of ground glass, with its brighter sanded floor the same as in summer; there a perennial waveless serenity reigns as in the amber twilight sky [...]. Heaven is under our feet as well as over our heads.⁴

In this passage, The impression of pastoral purity instigates a relationship of confidence between man and his natural environment: it implies that nature, for Thoreau, is both benevolent and transcendental in essence, that is, in direct touch with the godhead. For William Cain: ‘Transcendentalism in America accented the correspondences between each person and nature and the sheer indwelling presence of the divine in all men and women. [...] It connoted [...] the possibility that persons could make contact with divinity’.⁵ Thus *Walden*’s narrator, through isolation, contemplation and self-reliance, conceived nature as a tool to connect with the divine, which is also Duluoz’s profound desire and implicit reason for his relocation to Big Sur: as Benedict Giomo puts it, Kerouac was ‘yearning for mystical union with a transcendent reality’, which is a fundamental of his writing.⁶ This is how Duluoz devises his relocation to Big Sur: his move

⁴ Henry David Thoreau, *Walden and Civil Disobedience* [1854], ed. by Paul Lauter, New Riverside Editions (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2000), p.230.

⁵ William E. Cain, ‘Henry David Thoreau, 1817-1862: A Brief Biography’, in *A Historical Guide to Henry David Thoreau*, ed. by William E. Cain (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp.11-57 (pp.17-18).

⁶ Benedict Giomo, *Kerouac, the Word and the Way: Prose Artist as Spiritual Quester* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2000), p.176.

epitomises a forceful rejection of all forms of modern conditioning in order to engage with the fantasy of the primitive that the tradition of nineteenth-century American Transcendentalism renewed. Thus immersed in nature, Duluoz imagines his own self will be retrieved; using intuition over reason and instinct over intellect, Duluoz believes he will reclaim a lost innocence and pertain, ultimately, to the divine.

II. ‘Something’s wrong’: Alienation and the fall into the absurd

And yet, throughout his actual stay at Big Sur, Duluoz cannot connect with his new environment. His original response to the natural setting of Big Sur is illuminating: it renders a form of estrangement that typifies his disconnection from nature. The following passage describes Duluoz’s arrival at Big Sur by night:

I sense something wrong somehow, there’s an awful roar of surf but it isn’t coming from the right place, like you’d expect it to come from ‘over there’ but it’s coming from ‘under there’ – I can see the bridge but I can see nothing below it – [...] something’s wrong.⁷ [...] Besides it’s even *darker* down there than anywhere! There are glades down there, ferns of horror and slippery logs, mosses, dangerous plashings, humid mists rise coldly like the breath of death, big dangerous trees are beginning to bend over my head and brush my pack – there’s a noise I know can only grow louder as I sink down and for fear how loud it can grow I stop and listen, it rises up

⁷ *Big Sur*, p.6.

crashing mysteriously at me from a raging battle among dark things, wood
 or rock or something cracked, all smashed, all wet black sunken earth
 danger – I'm *afraid* to go down there –⁸

Here, Kerouac uses the extended metaphor of the bottomless pit. In fact, almost all the elements of nature are qualified negatively. Such adverse semantic connotations participate in the sense of threat and hostility that characterises the relationship between Duluoz and his new environment: as the autodiegetic narrator walks down towards the cabin, he is plunged in total darkness. The focalisation is internal: the reader has to rely on Duluoz alone, whose sight is hindered, and whose reports, consequently, show marks of uncertainty. Here, Kerouac plays with the codes of the horror genre, and the Gothic in particular: as Duluoz frightfully descends on Big Sur, he mimics Jonathan Harker's journey to the castle of Count Dracula in Bram Stoker's eponymous novel.⁹ The sensible difference between Harker and Duluoz, however, is that Harker walks up to the castle, and Duluoz walks down to Big Sur towards 'the Vulcan's Forge itself',¹⁰ which exemplifies, symbolically, a downfall towards hell. David Punter argues that the Gothic offers 'a statement [...] about the relation between the human, considered as founded upon a notion of self-motivation and free-will, and the

⁸ Ibid., pp.6-8.

⁹ See Bram Stoker, *Dracula* [1897] (New York: Harper Design, 2012).

¹⁰ *Big Sur*, p.17.

larger dehumanizing forces'.¹¹ Such forces are symbolised through the unusually malevolent natural environment that Kerouac describes.

Thus Duluoz becomes alienated from the natural world of Big Sur, which is devised as a constant source of threat for the narrator. Crucially, alienation, as a literary style, is a vehicle for the feeling of absurdity. For Walter Finkelstein in *Existentialism and Alienation in American Literature*, the Existentialist marks of alienation show up in literature through a distinction between 'humanised' writing – in which 'a sensitivity causes nature to flow, so to speak, into [the artist's] mind and body', and an 'alienated' one, which exemplifies the tension between the individual and his/her environment.¹² According to him, such a form of alienation 'presents the outer world as cold, hostile, forbidding, inimical, reflecting the observer's own fear, unrest and desolation'.¹³ While Finkelstein's categorisation is extremely wide, it offers, nonetheless, a literary reading of the absurd as defined by Albert Camus in *The Myth of Sisyphus*.¹⁴ For Camus, what grounds the feeling of the absurd is the individual's craving for intelligible meaning in a world that gives him none, because it is essentially undecipherable. In Camus's words: 'The absurd is born of the confrontation between the human need [for reason] and the unreasonable silence of the world'.¹⁵ In these terms, the paradigm of the absurd, as an insurmountable dichotomy between subjects and objects, sheds light on

¹¹ David Punter, *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction*, ed. by Jerrold E. Hogle. Cambridge Companion to Literature series (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p.120.

¹² Sidney Walter Finkelstein, *Existentialism and Alienation in American Literature* (New York: International Publishers, 1965), p.165.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p.166.

¹⁴ Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus* [1942], trans. by Justin O'Brien (London: Penguin Books, 1975).

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p.32.

Duluoz's confusion in *Big Sur*. Understood as 'a divorce between the mind that desires and the world that disappoints', the absurd is a 'nostalgia for unity'.¹⁶ It embodies man's confrontation with the lack of meaning in the universe and his attempts, or claims, to circumscribe it. Hence, the absurd is a deadlock that stems from the original split between man's desire to unite with the world, and its impenetrable nature, which remains unintelligible. In Kerouac's early writing, while nature was idealised and generated a humanising effect (especially in novels such as *On The Road* (1957) and *The Dharma Bums* (1958)), it now acts as a principle of alienation in *Big Sur*, which pre-empts the occurrence of the Camusian absurd. In other terms, through Duluoz's hostile relationship to the natural environment of *Big Sur*, Kerouac accommodates a narrative strategy that aims to typify a form of estrangement from nature, which is symptomatic of Duluoz's feeling of absurdity in the novel.

Duluoz's alienation from nature also implies that he is alienated from the divine, since nature is devised as a way to pertain to the spiritual essence in Duluoz's Transcendentalist conception of nature. Duluoz's will to reunite with a transcendent reality corresponds to a desire to coalesce with the divine; it is an abrogation of the distance between man and god, between matter and spirit, and between subject and object, through which the Camusian absurd collapses. However, Duluoz finds no sign of spiritual presence in *Big Sur* until the very end of the narrative. As an effect, Duluoz loses faith: 'I can hear myself again whining "Why does God torture me?" [...] you feel a guilt so deep you identify yourself

¹⁶ Ibid., p.50.

with the devil and God seems far away abandoning you to your sick silliness'.¹⁷ Later: "O how wonderful life is, how miraculous, God made this and God made that", how do you know he doesn't hate what He did'.¹⁸ Typically, the stylistics of such passages partakes in the tradition of the litany, that W.E.B. DuBois pre-empted in the 1906 poem 'Litany at Atlanta', which reproached God for failure to rescue his own people from violent enemies.¹⁹ Crucially, it is this distance between Duluoz and the divine that creates the dynamic of spiritual alienation in the novel, and which grounds a theological variant of the Camusian absurd in Kerouac's text. Consequently, Duluoz's denial of the access to spiritual and intuitive cognition of the world pre-empts a set of major crises for the narrator, as we are about to see.

III. Kerouac's end of the road? Duluoz's disintegration and triple return

This rejection of the narrator by its macrocosmic environment manifests Kerouac's break with the ethics of his early writing. As Duluoz confesses: 'I ran away from the seashore and never came back again without that secret knowledge: that it didn't want me there'.²⁰ According to Thomas Bierowski:

Big Sur is effectively an inversion of the dynamic in his earlier road novels. Gone are the wide-open vistas of America where God once spoke to him directly through the sun-shot clouds as he flew by in a car. In *Big*

¹⁷ *Big Sur*, p.96.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp.163-64.

¹⁹ Roy D. Morrison II, 'Self-Transformation in American Blacks: The Harlem Renaissance and Black Theology', in *Existence in Black*, ed. by Lewis R. Gordon, pp.37-47 (p.42).

²⁰ *Big Sur*, p.35.

Sur, Duluoz stumbles haltingly in the dark, his arm held out in front like a blind man.²¹

In effect in *Big Sur*, the potentialities that the travel offers, envisaged as a means to re-connect with nature and reach a form of transcendental being, are invalidated. In the following quotation, the narrator contemplates his backpack before his move to Big Sur: '[T]he rucksack sits hopefully in a strewn mess of bottles all empty, empty poorboys of white ports, butts, junk, horror...'.²² Here, the value of the rucksack – a metonymy for travelling – is depreciated; Kerouac makes it a fetish of past glory. The road, its symbols and its mystique have become a source of fear for Duluoz. As Giamo remarks about Kerouac:

[T]he helplessness and alienation that consumed Kerouac in his later years were direct results of the quest in itself when making that final turn before the road flattens out into a line of endless arid nothingness; the sometimes slow yet sure process of sobering up from the ecstasy of being.²³

It implies that the theme of the road and its heroes – once the source of Kerouac's picaresque writing – have become insubstantial and, in fact, counter-productive. The early excitement, the holy frenzy and Whitmanesque optimism in Kerouac's early prose, his search for what the American land had to offer, the hard-fought-for and ever-elusive 'ecstasy of being' that Giamo evokes – which translates

²¹ Thomas Bierowski, *Kerouac in Ecstasy: Shamanic Expression in the Writings* (Jefferson: McFarland, 2011), p.157.

²² *Big Sur*, p.4.

²³ Giamo, p.176.

literally as a movement towards the transcendent – is but a faded memory. This consuming alienation brings a tone of profound hopelessness to the writing. As Duluoz confesses quoting Saint Thomas, ‘you go out in joy and in sadness you return’.²⁴ His awareness that the road ends (‘I’ve hit the end of the trail’)²⁵ turns into a latent anxiety in *Big Sur*; it provides the text with an all-encompassing sense of anguish that, crucially, cannot be overcome; this evidences a major break in Kerouac’s writing.

The effects of such a form of alienation – made cosmic – enhance Duluoz’s inner-directedness. For instance, as Duluoz emerges from a nervous breakdown, his friend Ben Fagan bemoans: ‘Stop thinking about yourself, will ya, just float with the world’.²⁶ Crucially, Duluoz cannot *float with the world* because he has been rejected by its natural manifestation. The narrator’s self-centredness permeates the novel; it turns into a form of solipsism that both strengthens his feelings of estrangement and mental discomfort, and increases the narrator’s drinking habit. Therefore, as Duluoz cuts himself off from the world, he produces his own conditions for alienation and despair in return. As Finkelstein observes:

As he fixes his gaze inward, he turns away from the broad vistas of human life that might help him to self-understanding and develop him into a real ‘self’ capable of change and growth. What he presents as ‘life’ or ‘truth’ becomes a narrow, one-sided or distorted view, reflecting only his struggle

²⁴ *Big Sur*, p.37.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p.2.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p.140.

to be ‘himself’ in a world that seems to be populated with enemies and whose ground is sown with buried mines.²⁷

As a consequence, the narrator’s estrangement becomes self-consuming: Duluoz experiences physical decay and spirals into mental annihilation. His consciousness violently antagonises his surroundings, which become more hostile, incomprehensible and indecipherable than ever: ‘[...] and I realize everybody is just living their lives quietly but it’s only me that’s insane. [...] I’m beginning to read plots into every simple line’.²⁸ Duluoz’s insanity intensifies and turns into a threat of imminent disintegration of his own self in the last chapters of the novel: ‘Oh hell, I’m sick of life – If I had any guts I’d drown myself in that tiresome water but that wouldnt be getting it over at all’.²⁹ This is how Duluoz’s sense of alienation impacts his mental integrity: it involves a radical withdrawal into the self that pre-emptly an extreme dislocation of the narrator’s mind.

Typically, this style of self-centredness is linked to the unchallenged centrality of the ethos of individualism in American culture. Duluoz’s inner-directedness, although suffocating and mortiferous, epitomises the supremacy of the self, regardless of its emotional toll. Such an extreme form of self-destructive solipsism through values of individualism and liberty of the self is characteristic of Kerouac’s late writing: it is expressed in *Big Sur* through a recourse to the dynamics of alienation that is generated by a form of the absurd, defined in this instance as the discontinuity between the narrator and his natural and spiritual

²⁷ Finkelstein, p.295.

²⁸ *Big Sur*, p.134.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p.161.

environment. As Duluoz has reached the end of the road *towards the West*, he then comes back Eastward: as the last pages of the novel show, Duluoz experiences an epiphany that re-affirms his Catholic faith over a more pantheistic form of belief. From then on, Kerouac's narrators will go back East and exemplify a triple return: a return to Catholicism, Kerouac's original religion; a return to his pre-Beat days, as he relocates to Massachusetts and lives with his mother; and a return to his European roots, as his following novel (*Satori in Paris*, 1966) indicates.

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