A Song of Beauty and Death: Kerouac's Music of Sublimity in *Tristessa*

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Tristessa was written between 1955 and 1956, as Kerouac paid a visit to William Burroughs in Mexico City.[1] It is a story of unrequited love between Jack Duluoz, and a young Mexican woman named Tristessa, who is using and abusing morphine as she spirals into addiction. The story is grounded in the narrator's attraction to Tristessa's beauty and self-destruction – a beauty *generated* by self-destruction from the perspective of Duluoz. Kerouac celebrates his heroine as much for her beauty as for her self-destructive tendencies. In fact, it seems that Tristessa is death in disguise: through a rhetorical process of personification, Kerouac gives a physical form to his obsession with death, by making it beautiful and enticing; in one word, desirable. Tristessa embodies a remarkable oxymoron that intermingles beauty with death, joy with fright and redemption with threat, thereby suggesting a modality that partakes in the sublime.

Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), through works such as *Critique of Judgement* (1790), and *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and the Sublime* (1799), investigated our capacity to form aesthetic judgement on

[1] Jack Kerouac, *Tristessa* [1960] (New York: Penguin books, 1992).

phenomena around us.[2] For Kant, the sublime is distinct from the beautiful.[3] The beautiful is an object of contemplation that provides pleasure through its mere form. The sublime, on the other hand, involves a kind of beauty that generates a breach in rational understanding, and that stems from the amplitude and indecipherability of the phenomenon at stake: 'In the immeasurableness of nature and the incompetence of our faculty for adopting a standard proportionate to the aesthetic estimation of the magnitude of its realm, we found our own limitation'.[4] For Kant, the sublime is a fearful process, because at first, man's imagination cannot comprehend the phenomenon. Reason is deterred precisely because the sublime is devised as infinite and unbounded: '[…] the sublime is to be found in an object even devoid of form, so far as it immediately involves, or else by its presence provokes, a representation of limitlessness, yet with a super-added thought of its totality'.[5] Faced with such an extraordinary phenomenon, the receiver's imagination is unable to interpret it: it thus becomes a source of fear that threatens mental integrity.

Yet, there is also a form of enjoyment in the process: after its initial shock, the sublime generates pleasure in the subject's mind by overcoming the

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[2] See Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Judgement* [1790], trans. by James Creed Meredith, ed. by Nicholas Walker (Oxford: Oxford World's Classics, 2007), and *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and the Sublime* [1799], trans. by John T. Goldthwait, ed. by California Library Reprint (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1960).

[3] 'For it is quite conceivable that, despite all the uniformity of the things of nature according to universal laws, without which we would not have the form of general empirical knowledge at all, the specific variety of the empirical laws of nature, with their effects, might still be so great as to make it impossible for our understanding to discover in nature an intelligible order, […] so as to avail ourselves of the principles of explanation and comprehension of one for explaining and interpreting another, and out of material coming to hand in such confusion (properly speaking only infinitely multiform and ill-adapted to our power of apprehension) to make a consistent context of experience' (Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Judgement*, p.25).

[4] Ibid., p.111.

[5] Ibid., p.90.

impossibility of its representation through conceptualisation. As Gene Ray synthesises:

> First, pain: the imagination is humiliated before the power or size of nature. Then pleasure, admiration, self-respect: the fallback to reason, that power of the mind that elevates humanity above mere sensible nature, however mighty or boundless it may be. Terror and shame give way to a proud and enjoyable self-contemplation.[6]

What is crucial about this concept is that it is located within the subject. According to Kant: 'For the beautiful in nature we must seek a ground external to ourselves, but for the sublime one merely in ourselves and the attitude of mind that introduces sublimity into the representation of nature'.[7] Therefore, the sublime only exists as a phenomenon that takes place in the receiver's mind. Thus, the sublime is, *in fine*, mediated through the observer: in this regard, the irruption of the sublime in *Tristessa* is nothing more than a *vision* located in the narrator's mind.

In *Tristessa*, Kerouac celebrates the heroine's beauty throughout the novella. Tristessa is 'a beautiful girl' with a 'big sad face'.[8] Her eyes are 'dove's eyes, lidded, perfect, dark, pools, mysterious':[9] the dove, a biblical metaphor, suggests innocence and benevolence; it also stands for the holy ghost, the

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[6] Gene Ray, *Terror and the Sublime in Art and Critical Theory: From Auschwitz to Hiroshima to September 11*. Studies in European Culture and History (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), p.28.
[7] Kant, *The Critique of Judgement*, p.93.
[8] *Tristessa*, p.10.
[9] Ibid., p.26.

manifestation of the divine on earth: without contest, Tristessa is touched by grace.

Beyond her physical attributes however, it is her cultural background that Duluoz praises and fantasises about. In fact, Tristessa belongs to a specific geographical, social and cultural environment that is extremely alluring to Kerouac. From *On the Road* to *Tristessa*, Mexico is intensely idealised by Kerouac for aesthetic and ideological reasons. In Kerouac's writing, Mexico stands for the mythical South; it is devised as a safehaven for illegitimate behaviour as well as a land for opportunity, full of natural beauty and untouched by the industrious action of men, a fertile land that offers visitors the illusion of the possibility of retrieving lost innocence, in typical Romantic fashion. Not only the land but also its inhabitants are idealised. To achieve this effect, Kerouac uses the major tropes of Orientalism: universal compassion, faith in every man's holiness, a critical view of material progress, intuition as the only valid method of investigation. While the operations of Orientalism are rather stereotypical, they allow Kerouac to romanticise Mexico.

In Kerouac's literary project Mexicans are assimilated to the archetypal figure of the primitive, itself a product of Orientalism. The primitive encapsulates the quintessential relationship of cosmological unity between a people and its environment: it promotes an alleged harmony between nature and culture. We can read into this an attempt by Kerouac to adopt a Spenglerian dialectic for both ethical and aesthetic purposes,[10] in which nature is seen in opposition to culture,

[10] See Klaus P. Fischer, *History and Prophecy: Oswald Spengler and the Decline of the West*, American University Studies Series IX, History, 59 (New York: Peter Lang, 1989), pp.107-23.

childhood to adulthood, non-Westerner to Westerner, innocence to knowledge, intuition to intellect.[11] As Duluoz reports in the novella: 'Everything is so poor in Mexico, people are poor, and yet everything they do is happy and carefree […] Tristessa is a junkey and she goes about it skinny and carefree, where an American would be gloomy'.[12] For Robert Hipkiss, in Kerouac's writing 'the adulation of the so-called primitive is the obverse of the civilized lament'.[13] Tristessa's mythified origin is, in itself, synonymous with a form of cultural euphoria, it participates in the definition of her beauty. Through the dramatisation of this beauty, Kerouac creates a favourable aesthetic ground to the emergence of the sublime.

Tristessa's appearance, however idealised, remains complex. Kerouac depicts Tristessa with '[…] long sad eyelids, and Virgin Mary resignation […] and eyes of astonishing mystery with nothing-but-earth-depth expressionless half disdain and half mournful lamentation of pain'.[14] We may say that Tristessa embodies the figure of Mary; the compassion, and so forth. While this is very true, my reading, however, suggests that the novella stages a reenactment of the passion of the Christ, in which the authorial figure stands for the Creator, and Tristessa embodies the suffering of Christ as she goes through an allegorical process of crucifixion through the drugs. Indeed, Kerouac's religious depiction of Tristessa brings her close to martyrdom:

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[11] See Oswald Spengler, *The Decline of the West* [1918], trans. by Charles Francis Stkinson, ed. by Helmut Werner (New York: Oxford university Press, 1991).
[12] *Tristessa*, p.29.
[13] Robert Hipkiss, *Jack Kerouac, Prophet of the new Romanticism: A Critical study of the Published Works of Kerouac and a Comparison of them to those of J.D. Salinger, James Purdy, John Knowles, and Ken Kesey* (Lawrence: Regents Press of Kansas, 1978), p.7.
[14] *Tristessa*, p.8.

> [O]nce a year together they'd taken hikes to Chalmas to the mountain to climb part of it on their knees to come to the shrine of piled crutches left there by pilgrims healed of disease, the thousand *tapete*-straws laid out in the mist where they sleep the night out in blankets and raincoats – returning, devout, hungry, healthy, to light new candles to the Mother and hitting the street again for their morphine –[15]

In accordance with the codes of Catholicism, Kerouac punishes the transient body to elevate the soul. Hence Duluoz's paradoxical statement: 'And as I know death is best'.[16] In *Tristessa*, The body must be abjected for the soul to be saved: as Kerouac stands for Tristessa's Creator, he must degrade and destroy her carnal envelope to free her divine essence. As Kerouac writes on the last page: 'Bull and Tristessa are both bags of bones – But O the grace of some bones'.[17] This process of debasement finds its final development in self-annihilation, which in *Tristessa* is synonymous with salvation: 'I think of the inexpressible tenderness of receiving […] the sacrificial sick body of Tristessa and I almost feel like crying'.[18] Carnal existence, death and disencarnate re-birth: this pattern synchronises with the Christian dialectic of crucifixion and resurrection described in the Bible.[19] Tristessa thus embodies an intermingling of beauty and pain: these two factors interact with one another in a process of qualification and annihilation of forms.

Meanwhile, Tristessa and her band keep searching for drugs to feed their

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[15] Ibid., p.12.
[16] Ibid., p.81.
[17] Ibid., p.96.
[18] Ibid., p.53.
[19] See Joy Walsh, *Jack Kerouac: Statement in Brown: Collected Essays*, The Esprit Critique Series (New York: Textile Bridge Press, 1984).

habit: '[S]he is so high all the time, and sick, shooting ten gramos of morphine per month'.[20] They are stuck in a vicious cycle of drug addiction and sickness, in which the only release is brought by the next shot of morphine, which simultaneously intensifies and prolongs the cycle of sickness. As Kerouac writes: 'Morphine sickness [is] a sickness that goes on as long as the need [for the drug,] and feeds off the need and fills in the need simultaneously'.[21] In the second part of the novella, Tristessa's condition deteriorates. And yet, although she becomes an easy pray for death, she does not lose her auratic power:

> […] here comes a strange woman up the steps, unearthly and pale, slow, majestic, neither young nor old, I cant help staring at her and even when I realize it's Tristessa I keep staring and wondering at this strange woman.[22]

The ultimate fusion between Tristessa's grace and the destructive action of the drugs – that is between beauty and death – is made explicit at the end of the novella when, after Tristessa has fainted, Duluoz confesses: 'I can sense it now in her silence, "*This* is what you give me instead of death?" – I try to know what to give her instead – No such thing better than death'.[23] This paradox is primordial in *Tristessa*, it epitomises a form of reverence for death, of idolisation of death in the novella. In the end, death itself is a component of Tristessa's identity.

To sum up, *Tristessa* entertains an ambivalent sense of beauty, a beauty based on a process of annihilation of forms. First, Kerouac instills beauty into the

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[20] *Tristessa*, p.10.
[21] Ibid., p.22.
[22] Ibid., pp.72-73.
[23] Ibid., p.82.

text by idealising the character of Tristessa, as well as her cultural environment which is devised through an Orientalist perspective. Once the form of beauty is erected, Kerouac methodically destroys it by means of an analogy with the Christian paradigm; simultaneously, he uses morphine – a drug with ultimate self-destructive proprieties – to debase and annihilate the very form of beauty previously constructed. Crucially, this double movement tallies with that of the sublime, which encapsulates beauty and terror at the same time; in *Tristessa*, this terror is implied by the annihilation of Tristessa's body. For Kant, this terror also stems from the boundlessness and indecipherability of the phenomenon at stake; it allows for a form of transcendence that may be *felt* and recorded by the beholder of the vision.

The sense of transcendence in *Tristessa* stems, primarily, from Kerouac's syncretic representation of spirituality. For there are multiple echoes of Buddhism as well throughout the text: although we could say that Buddhism and Catholicism overlap to a large extent, it is rather Buddhism that gets entangled in a Christianised framework. As this passage shows: 'I see […] innumerable hands that have come […] to bless her and pronounce her Bodhisat […]. Her Enlightenment is perfect […]. "She's an Angel"'.[24] Kerouac mixes up religious codes as Tristessa is compared to both a Bodhisattva and an Angel. Kerouac extracts holy figures from each religious system that symbolise deliverance from the body, and places them in the narrative. This syncretism stems from several pantheistic traditions that influenced Kerouac's writing, especially the one of American Transcendentalism. In drawing inspiration from its pantheistic

[24] Ibid., p.57.

framework, Kerouac could freely disseminate a multiplicity of religious references that would not cancel one another, but reinforce the search for divine compassion in his writing. Crucially, this syncretism operates as a movement from religion to mysticism. In the passages that attempt to conflate Catholicism with Buddhism, each religious system loses its specific frame; what remains is the intuition of the divine without the medium of a normative doxa. This mysticism becomes diffuse and all-encompassing; it participates in the sublime precisely because it is indeterminate and boundless. It tallies with Theodor Adorno's definition of the sublime, 'erschütterung': 'the tremor or shudder of what is beyond imagination and conventionalized experience'.[25] In some measure, this use of syncretism manifests Kerouac's attempt to represent the unrepresentable.

In the narrative, Duluoz's room is located on the top floor of a buidling; it convokes images of a look-out post in the reader's mind.[26] As the beholder of the vision, Duluoz may watch the object of the sublime and enjoy the show. Nonetheless, as he watches, he feels more and more disturbed: 'All I wanted to do was get away', '[a]ll I wanta do is go straight home'.[27] The spectacle Duluoz attends to generates a series of paradoxical feelings: there is both delight in the act of contemplation, and a feeling of anxiety. These antagonistic feelings make Duluoz's narration quite unreliable; it becomes, at times, irrational and confused:

I've seen it a million times, in Mexico the young men want the young girls

[25] Theodor Adorno, quoted by Gene Ray, *Terror and the Sublime in Art and Critical Theory: From Auschwitz to Hiroshima to September 11*, Studies in European Culture and History (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), p.32.
[26] See *Tristessa*, p.50.
[27] Ibid., pp.28 and 37.

> – Their birthrate is terrific – They turn em out wailin and dying by the golden tons in vats of semiwinery messaferies of oy Ole Tokyo birthcrib – I lost track of my thought here.[28]

Here, the syntax indicates a floating moment during which the narrator's consciousness is disconnected, letting the flow of words pile up in rhythm until reason is finally recovered: 'I lost track of my thought here'.[29] This passage may be read as a radical instance of the aesthetic practice of Kerouac: it is rhythmic spontaneous prose, it is Modernist, it is surrealist; most importantly, this passage mimics a specific moment of the sublime, namely the temporary upholding of reason. It reproduces the process of the sublime within the *form* of the text.

In the end, the paradox of the novella is expressed aesthetically through the intensification and magnification of Tristessa by, and for, Duluoz. The multi-layered representation of Tristessa's beauty is based on a *chiaroscuro* that is ambivalent: the more Tristessa's body is degraded throughout the novella, the more desirable she becomes in the eyes of Duluoz. This rhetorical device underlines Kerouac's glorification of death throughout the text. Meanwhile, Kerouac integrates a syncretic form of spirituality to provide a boundless form of mysticism, which is both compelling in its compassionate effect, and threatening in its indecipherability. Duluoz, as the beholder of the vision of the sublime, becomes its victim: he is forced to relinquish his rational instruments. Ultimately, Duluoz's narration self-destroys; it reflects aesthetically the spell of the sublime from the point of view of the receiver. It is precisely this interplay of strategies of

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[28] Ibid., pp.55-56.
[29] Ibid.

creation and destruction at all levels of the text that epitomises a form of sublimity in *Tristessa*.

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