**Kerouac’s Vision of Anguish:**

**An Interpretation of the Dynamics of Dis-integration in *Big Sur***

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In the early pages of *Big Sur* – one of the works of the *Duluoz Legend* – the reader catches the narrator in a state of exhaustion and alcoholism.[[1]](#footnote-1)The narrator’s downfall, which in great measure echoes Kerouac’s own falling into disgrace, is concomitant with his relocation to the Californian area of Bixby Canyon, initially envisioned as a perfect getaway from the city.This type of retreat into the wild is typical of Kerouac’s fictions. It allows the narrator to flee from the contingencies of modern life and withdraw, at least temporarily, from what is perceived as the stifling social environment of post-war America.The narrator’s reclusion, nevertheless, turns out to be largely counterproductive: it *should* have worked out for Duluoz, but it is notworking out, and this paper will offer one possible interpretation for this failure.

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While this escape into nature is unmistakably reminiscent of that of Thoreau in *Walden* [1854], a major work from the tradition of American Transcendentalism, it is in fact Emerson I want to bring up today.[[2]](#footnote-2)In his essay ‘Nature’, Emerson focuses on the ways in which individuals both encapsulate and exemplify the essence of nature:

Man is conscious of a universal soul within or behind his individual life, wherein, as in a firmament, the natures of Justice, Truth, Love, Freedom, arise and shine. This universal soul […] is not mine, or thine, or his, but we are its; we are its property and men.[[3]](#footnote-3)

The spirit of nature is conceived as the origin of the transcendental self for Emerson. For him, all individuals partake in a greater unity, termed ‘universal mind’ (or ‘universal soul’), which is spiritual in essence and which epitomises a principle of creation.[[4]](#footnote-4) As he puts it in ‘History’: ‘Of the universal mind each individual man is one more incarnation’.[[5]](#footnote-5) For Emerson, the divine is not conceived as an external and omnipotent godhead; rather, it is envisioned as a form of pantheist divinity that directly penetrates the here and now, subjects and objects, all together.

Crucially, Kerouac attempts to integrate the spiritual implications of nature as conceived by Emerson into his work, oftentimes repositioned within a Catholic framework. It suffuses his writing with a transcendental drive that provides early texts such as *On the Road* [1957] with a sense of continuity between self and nature,as this passage illustrates:

We had reached the approaches of the last plateau. Now the sun was golden, the air keen blue, and the desert with its occasional rivers a riot of sandy hot space and sudden Biblical tree shade. […] ‘Man, man,’ I yelled to Dean, ‘[…] wake up and see the golden world that Jesus came from, with your own eyes you can tell!’ […] he looked to heaven with red eyes, he almost wept. […] Great fields stretched on both sides of us; a noble wind blew across the occasional immense tree groves and over old missions turning salmon pink in the late sun. The clouds were close and huge and rose.[[6]](#footnote-6)

This passage is characteristic of Kerouac’s idealisation of nature, which is rendered spiritual in essence through the use of allegories; these allegories allow Kerouac to depict a form of transcendental euphoria that emerges in a mystical brand of pastoral. Here, a continuum materialises between Kerouac’s narrator, his local environment and the divine; this continuum manifests a homogeneity between the self and transcendental nature. It tallies, largely, with the Emersonian ethos, which promotes an ‘organic relationship between the self and the cosmos’ through nature.[[7]](#footnote-7)

The search for this type of transcendence acts as one of the main narrative thrusts of Kerouac’s road novels. In the first pages of *On the Road*, Kerouac writes:

I could hear a new call and see a new horizon, and believe it at my young age; […] 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.[[8]](#footnote-8)

The precious ‘visions’ that Kerouac mentions here provide the passage with a mystical inflection: they refer to the insight of a universal principle that is transcendental in nature.[[9]](#footnote-9) For Erik Mortenson in *Capturing the Beat Moment*: ‘[T]he visionary state reveals the truth of the world – it is a peak behind the curtain of reality that provides an authentic glimpse of the universe’.[[10]](#footnote-10) These visionary states allow an access to the essence of the universal mind, which in turn provides the individual with a creative impetus: ‘[T]he heightened moment is what provides the possibility for a new trajectory into the void, a chance to change the direction of one’s life’.[[11]](#footnote-11) This suggests that visions act as a gateway for the emergence of a transcendental form of being. Through the visionary state, the individual may comprehend, and eventually *embody*, the spiritual essence of the world. This fundamental relation of man to the cosmos, of inner to outer nature, constitutes a moral code that is paramount in Kerouac’s writing. It also allows for a definition of a transcendental ontology that makes the embodiment of a universal principle of creation the ultimate form of authenticity in existential terms.

Coming back to *Big Sur*; the narrator’s relocation to Bixby Canyon may be viewed as an attempt to achieve a higher form of being that channels the transcendental essence of nature, which is conceived as regenerative for the self – something that Duluoz badly needs at this point. However, in the opening of the novel, the excitement and the enthusiastic tone of his early prose have faded away, replaced with an impression of doom and gloom:

But the rucksack sits hopefully in a strewn mess of bottles all empty, empty poorboys of white ports, butts, junk, horror… ‘One fast move or I’m gone’, I realize, gone the way of the last three years of drunken hopelessness which is a physical and spiritual and metaphysical hopelessness you cant learn in school no matter how many books on existentialism or pessimism you read.[[12]](#footnote-12)

This passage falls short of the narrator’s anticipatory celebrations of travel in *On the Road*: it announces the deleterious mood of the novel.As Duluoz awakes in his hotel room before departure, feeling the after-effects of a night of heavy drinking:

[T]he face of yourself you see in the mirror with its expression of unbearable anguish so haggard and awful with sorrow you cant even cry for a thing so ugly, so lost, no connection whatever with early perfection and therefore nothing to connect with tears or anything: it’s like William Seward Burroughs’ ‘Stranger’ suddenly appearing in your place in the mirror – Enough! ‘One fast move or I’m gone’.[[13]](#footnote-13)

This scene is crucial: excessive drinking, far from reconnecting the narrator with ‘early perfection’ (that of the transcendental and the visionary), estranges him, an estrangement made tangible through the permutation of references between Burroughs and Camus through the novel *The Stranger* [1942].[[14]](#footnote-14)

Kerouac uses a mirror to not only emphasise that the novel acts as a portrait of the artist, but also to indicate that the narrator’s look is reflexive, a crucial element in the occurrence of a Sartrean form of anguish. That is to say, Duluoz’s look is directed both outwards, towards the mirror object, and inwards, towards his own reflection: it builds a reflexivity into the text. As Allard Den Dulk pinpoints, reflexivity occurs ‘when consciousness turns its attention towards itself, towards the consciousness that “has” the experience and that performs the reflection upon it’.[[15]](#footnote-15) Through this operation, consciousness monitors the self and reflects upon it at the same time. Thus, through the interplay of the mirror, consciousness becomes *self*-consciousness; in other terms, the self becomes the object of the reflexive look. In *Big Sur*, the object of the narrator’s look is precisely his own nauseous condition apprehended in the reflection of the mirror,a condition that ‘comes over [him] in the form of horror of an eternal condition of sick mortality’.[[16]](#footnote-16) It is a fear of non-being that typifies the prospect of his own nullification as conceived by a reflexive type of consciousness, and which prompts him to say: ‘One fast move or I’m gone’; ‘I’ve got to escape or die’.[[17]](#footnote-17) For Sartre in *Being and Nothingness*: ‘Anguish is precisely my consciousness of being my own future, in the mode of *not-being* it’.[[18]](#footnote-18) Defined as such, anguish corresponds to the emotional symptom of nothingness, or ‘dread before nothingness’.[[19]](#footnote-19) It stems from the individual’s self-reflection, which reveals the potentiality of the annihilation of his or her own self. Therefore, the spectacle of desolation that the mirror reflects is internalised by Duluoz and turned into a devastating anguish – in his own words, ‘the face of yourself you see in the mirror with its expression of unbearable anguish’.[[20]](#footnote-20)

This anguish in the writing is fostered through Kerouac’s recourse to an aesthetics that is both largely modernist, and Romantic in essence. Obviously, the autodiegetic narration emphasises the self-reflective look of the narrator, which adds to the confessional dimension of Kerouac’s project. It provides the reader with a point of reference from which he/she may examine the narrator’s responses to the inflections of his own consciousness. According to Aaron Sultanik:

The allusiveness of Modernism, with all its tangents and cotangents in stream of consciousness and the modern novel, […] denotes an insipient and binding reflexivity; when conjoined with realism in ‘modern realism’, the term is used to signify the priority of a subjective imagination or consciousness as it apprehends and reconstructs everyday reality. […] Modernism is realism reinvented, its phenomenological origins in the superseding inner vision of the artist.[[21]](#footnote-21)

Therefore, in *Big Sur* the spectacle is not that of death, but of its reflection by, and through, the narrator’s own self.

At the same time, Kerouac injects a sense of morbidity into the narrative, as if the narrator projected his anguished self towards the outer world. Duluoz encounters death in a multitude of forms during his stay at Big Sur. There is the crashed car on the beach, which metonymyses the narrator’s end of the road as much as his own downfall.There is also the death of his cat, Tyke; the death of a mouse in Monsanto’s cabin*, the dead otter* floating away in the ocean; the death of Billie’s goldfishes.[[22]](#footnote-22) These allusions to death in the text, ‘all these DEATH things piling up suddenly’, are highly allegorical: they enable the outer events to symbolise the narrator’s inner states.[[23]](#footnote-23) For Benedict Giamo: ‘At this point of the novel, it is no longer necessary for Duluoz to keep reading the signs for, by now, he clearly embodies them; the collapse of signifier and signified is thus fleshed out’.[[24]](#footnote-24) This semiotic interplay suggests that what Duluoz can see is what he *feels*: in his wanderings around Big Sur, his visions of death also become the consciousness of death, ‘the constant reminder of death not the least of which was the death of my peaceful love of Raton Canyon now suddenly becoming a horror’.[[25]](#footnote-25) In this sense, the outer world is reflected on the narrator’s inner space, and vice versa.

This correspondence between outer and inner states in Kerouac’s writing stems in great part from the Romantic foundation of American Transcendentalism, in which outer phenomena is related to the inner world.As Emerson writes in ‘Nature’: ‘In the woods, we return to reason and faith. There […] I become a transparent eyeball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or parcel of God’.[[26]](#footnote-26) Crucially, the Emersonian precept of the ‘all-seeing eye’ may also be apprehended on an aesthetic level in Kerouac’s own writing through the echo of the outer onto the inner. Kerouac might be hinting at it in ‘Belief & Technique for Modern Prose’, in which he writes that ‘[t]he jewel center of interest is the eye within the eye’.[[27]](#footnote-27) This ‘eye within the eye’ may be interpreted as the writer’s capacity to reach, and embody, the vision of the universal mind; in which case, the writing may retrieve an impetus that is potentially visionary, and that counterbalances the sense of stasis typified by the narrator’s crises of anguish. However, it may also be read as ‘the I within the eye’ and, reciprocally, ‘the eye within the I’. This interpretation suggests that Kerouac’s prose also seeks to objectify, and reify the self in written form. From this perspective, writing is envisaged as a strategy that allows the movement of consciousness to exist in a constant state of introspection. Here, Kerouac’s ‘eye within the I’ – in the narrative context of *Big Sur* – actualises Duluoz’s consciousness of death in return; it maintains the experience of anguish throughout the narrative.[[28]](#footnote-28) Thus, in *Big Sur* the very nature of the writing stimulates the occurrence of a form of nothingness in the text. As the narrator’s consciousness acts both as a receptacle for, and a producer of death, death becomes a way of *being* for Duluoz.

In great measure, it is the narrator’s fixation on his own nothingness that clutters his vision and demobilises the intuitive self. It can be argued that Duluoz monitors his afflictions relentlessly without being able to channel his own *intuitive* insights; intuitive insights that are paramount in an Emersonian context, because they enable a way of being that is potentially transcendental. As Robert Caponigri pinpoints, ‘the faculty which [intuition] symbolizes is the most direct channel between man and the realm of absolute spiritual reality’.[[29]](#footnote-29) Envisaged as the voice of nature speaking through man, intuition corresponds to the channel through which the self may acquire the impulse to act and concomitantly regenerate itself. It may be viewed as the medium through which the vision is synthesised into a higher form of being for Emerson. Crucially, Duluoz’s anguish generates a self-reflection that locks the look inwards. As Duluoz’s vision scans his own interiority, it fails to connect the self with the transcendental essence of nature. The narrator’s inwards vision, as it projects the deathliness of his own reflection outwards onto his environment, impedes the access to intuition; it circumvents the possibility for an intuitive form of being. Duluoz’s anguish, therefore, participates in the dismantling of his transcendental self: it removes him from the Emersonian continuum between the intuitive self and the universal principle of creation. This *dis-*integration, as it fosters a discordance between self and nature, precipitates Duluoz’s decay in the narrative; it also illustrates the loss of the visionary in the novel, revealing the increasing inability of Kerouac to recognise the sacred aspects of nature.

Hence, *Big Sur* illustrates the narrator’s inability to retrieve a *modus vivendi* that is foregrounded in the realisation of visions of a transcendental nature. Consequently, Duluoz spirals into a feeling of impotence, because he has no access to a genuinely regenerative experience at Raton Canyon. In this sense, Duluoz’s crisis is properly existential because it is, first and foremost, ontological. Nevertheless, *Big Sur* is not a repudiation of the picaresque tradition: the difference between *Big Sur* and *On the Road* is one of tone and ethos, not one of genre. The multiple hardships that Duluoz goes through are meant to emphasise the dramatic tension of the narrative, which rushes towards a climax both in narrative terms – through the final spiritual liberation of the hero – and in aesthetic terms, through Kerouac’s sound poem, ‘SEA’, that closes the novel.[[30]](#footnote-30) Rather, this structure suggests that the mode of the picaresque contains its own possible inversion. As Duluoz mentions, quoting Thomas à Kempis: ‘You go out in joy and in sadness you return’, an allegory that confirms the centrality of the trope of inversion in *Big Sur*.[[31]](#footnote-31)This predicament places the narrator – and *a fortiori* Kerouac himself –at a critical turning point; it forces the former to reinvent his own self, and the latter to think of new ways of writing. As Sartre pointed out, anguish ‘constitutes the future as possible’; by closing existing ways of being hitherto explored, it opens up new horizons for the creative self in the near-future.[[32]](#footnote-32)

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To conclude, *Big Sur* may be viewed as symptomatic of an evolution in Kerouac’s writing: the novel epitomises a transition from the experience of visions in transcendental and mythical terms – as illustrated in his early travel writing – to something more contemplative and introspective but equally ecstatic (as anticipated in works such as *Tristessa* for instance) wih the episode of the cross at the end of *Big Sur.* This separation from *inner* nature also suggests that Duluoz cannot cohere with his natural environment at Big Sur, as Kerouac makes it clear through the scenes of the narrator’s descent on Raton Canyon. It implies that Duluoz is alienated from *outer* nature as well – to be explored in another paper!

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