

**From Self-destruction to Self-creation and Back Again:  
The Paradox of Thanatos in Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg**

**Tanguy Harma**

Submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Department of English and Comparative Literature

Goldsmiths, University of London

Sept. 2017

## **Declaration of authorship**

I, Tanguy Harma, hereby declare that this thesis and the work presented in it is entirely my own. Where I have consulted the work of others, this is always clearly stated.

- 27-09-2017

Tanguy Harma

## **Acknowledgements**

I have benefited enormously from the support of my main supervisor, Caroline Blinder, whose suggestions, feedback and infinite patience have been invaluable. I am grateful to my parents for providing some of the funding necessary for the realisation of this project. I am also thankful to the ECL department at Goldsmiths for its support, Richard Bolley, Jacqueline Rattray and the GLITS experience, Pdraig Kirwan and Tamar Steinitz. Last but not least, I want to thank all friends and conference fellows for all the discussions and positive energy, as well as proofreaders for their reliability, Johanna O'Shea, Lana Durjava, Francesco Gadioli, Patricia Connolly, Jeremiah Spillane, and former workmates from the Mousetrap.

## Abstract

My thesis investigates the antithetical movements of self-destruction and of self-creation in a selection of works by Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg. In order to shed light on this paradox, I use the mythological figure of Thanatos, which is conceptualised as a principle of death within life as well as one of life within death. The figure of Thanatos will enable me to trace the ways in which various strategies in the writings both create, and destroy, the texts on multiple levels.

I work with two distinct critical methods to illuminate these paradoxical movements. In the first part of the thesis, the analysis is foregrounded in a combination of French Existentialist theory with precepts from the American Transcendentalist tradition in order to define an American variant of Existentialism. This framework allows the trope of alienation, and its impact on both self and text in *Big Sur* [1962], to come to the fore. *Big Sur* is read as a novel that plays on motifs of self-destruction in an unprecedented way in Kerouac's writing. In 'Ginsberg's 'Howl' [1956], the figure of Moloch is interpreted as a principle of nothingness in the poem. Moloch is understood in relation to various forms of engagement both Existentialist and transcendental in essence.

In Part 2, Kerouac's *Tristessa* [1960] is analysed from the perspective of the Kantian Sublime. In *Tristessa*, the narrator's desire for the eponymous heroine emanates from the projection of a romanticised form of deathliness that channels the Sublime, and that threatens the self and the text in return, thereby conjuring the paradox of Thanatos.

## Table of contents

Declaration of authorship.....	p. 2
Acknowledgements .....	p. 3
Abstract .....	p. 4
Table of contents .....	p. 5
INTRODUCTION .....	p. 7
LITERATURE REVIEW .....	p. 28
Towards an American Variant of Existentialism: Ruby Chatterji, George Cotkin, Walter Kaufmann, Lewis Gordon and Others .....	p. 28
Jean-Paul Sartre’s Nothingness and Engagement .....	p. 32
Albert Camus’s Concept of the Absurd and the Revolt.....	p. 39
Norman Mailer’s Brand of Existentialism.....	p. 45
Friedrich Nietzsche, the Dionysian and the ‘New Vision’ .....	p. 54
Oswald Spengler, Michael D’Orso and the Myth of the Primitive .....	p. 62
Immanuel Kant’s and Arthur Schopenhauer’s Definitions of the Sublime.....	p. 65
Robert Hipkiss and Kerouac’s Romanticism.....	p. 71
PART 1. EXISTENTIALISM MEETS TRANSCENDENTALISM: EXISTENTIALIST FORMS OF THANATOS IN GINSBERG’S ‘HOWL’ AND IN KEROUAC’S <i>BIG SUR</i> .....	p. 73
Introduction to Part 1.....	p. 74
SECTION 1. DESTRUCTION AND ALIENATION IN <i>BIG SUR</i> AND IN ‘HOWL’ .....	p. 82

1.1.1. Before Departure: Anguish and the Loss of the Visionary in <i>Big Sur</i> .....	p. 83
1.1.2. Moloch as a Principle of Socio-historical and Spiritual Alienation in 'Howl' .....	p. 107
1.1.3. The Arrival at Big Sur: Estranged from Nature .....	p. 129
SECTION 2. ENGAGEMENT, MOVEMENT, AND DISENGAGEMENT IN <i>BIG SUR</i> AND IN 'HOWL' .....	p. 159
1.2.1. Socio-historical and Transcendental Forms of Engagement in 'Howl' .....	p. 160
1.2.2. Breathing the Poem In and Out: Ginsberg's Poetics of Performativity and Engagement in 'Howl' .....	p. 186
1.2.3. The Experience at Big Sur: Vision of Death, Stasis, Movement .....	p. 207
1.2.4. An American Variant of Disengagement in <i>Big Sur</i> .....	p. 235
1.2.5. The Existentialist Figure of Thanatos in <i>Big Sur</i> and in 'Howl' .....	p. 269
PART 2. A SUBLIME FORM OF THANATOS: THE FANTASY OF DEATH IN KEROUAC'S <i>TRISTESSA</i> .....	p. 281
Introduction to Part 2. ....	p. 283
2.1. Tristessa's Beauty: Body, Land, Myth .....	p. 287
2.2. The Cultivation of Death: Variants of Crucifixion .....	p. 301
2.3. Beyond All Measure: Buddhism and Religious Syncretism .....	p. 310
2.4. The Sublime Vision of Death in <i>Tristessa</i> .....	p. 323
CONCLUSION .....	p. 334

## Introduction

My research focuses on two novels by Jack Kerouac (1922-1969) and one long poem by Allen Ginsberg (1926-1997). It is a literary, philosophical and aesthetic exploration of Kerouac's *Tristessa* [1960], *Big Sur* [1962] and of Ginsberg's 'Howl' [1956] that seeks to apprehend the manifold manifestations of Thanatos in the writings.<sup>1</sup> In the thesis, Thanatos will be envisaged as a conceptual figure brought into existence by means of the prospect of annihilation that the selected texts of Kerouac and of Ginsberg, each in its own fashion, formulate. It will enable us to examine the interplay of creative and destructive strategies that the writings articulate. This introduction will situate the methodological framework I employ and offer a brief recontextualisation of the mythological figure of Thanatos. I will then indicate how the idea of Thanatos will be applied throughout the thesis, before presenting the two writers and introducing the texts I have selected in relation to this conceptual figure. Eventually, I will highlight the two distinct critical methods used to decipher the paradox of Thanatos in the writings, which are Existentialist theory and the metaphysical concept of the Sublime.

Kerouac and Ginsberg are often seen as popular icons and major representatives of the 'Beat generation', a media construct from the 1950s. This term, it may be argued, bears a certain relevance in a sociological context. In the aftermath of World War II, the United States championed a cultural model that

---

<sup>1</sup> Jack Kerouac, *Tristessa* [1960] (London: Penguin Books, 1992) and *Big Sur* [1962] (London: Flamingo, 2001); Allen Ginsberg, 'Howl', in *Howl, Kaddish and Other Poems* [1956], Penguin Modern Classics (London: Penguin Classics, 2009), pp. 1-13.

relied on conformism, a prosperous economy, and social control. The ‘Beat generation’, many critics have argued, came into existence as a reaction to this conformist environment.<sup>2</sup> What its members shared on a basic level was a fundamental disagreement with the post-war status quo; a disagreement that sought to resist, and contest, the various atomising forces of post-war America in order to reclaim an existential sense of selfhood through the central value of experience.<sup>3</sup>

Nevertheless, this phrase remains mostly ineffectual in the context of my thesis. For the sake of a classification that loosely coheres sociologically and culturally, this designation operates a series of reductions that tend to homogenise the movement it refers to; disregarding the essential plurality of the group and thus overlooking significant divergences between individual members. For this reason, the term ‘Beat generation’ is too generic for my research project: too imprecise for an evaluation of the literary subtleties and idiosyncrasies of Kerouac’s and Ginsberg’s writing. Consequently, in my thesis each writer and each text will be dealt with individually, and compared on the basis of their literary features. This procedure allows for a conceptual reading of Thanatos and an examination of how this figure opens up major differences in the work of Kerouac and in that of Ginsberg respectively. It will offer an original framework that will enable us to illuminate the selected texts from a fresh perspective,

---

<sup>2</sup> See James Campbell, *This is the Beat Generation: New York – San Francisco – Paris* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1999), and Steven Watson, *The Birth of the Beat Generation: Visionaries, Rebels, and Hipsters, 1944-1960*, *Circles of the Twentieth Century* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1998).

<sup>3</sup> In the words of John Tytell: ‘Beginning in despair, the beat vision was elevated through the shocks of experience to a realization of what was most perilous about American life’ (*Naked Angels: The Lives and Literature of the Beat Generation* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1976), p. 4).

thereby setting my work apart from more conventional approaches to Beat studies.

The texts from Kerouac and from Ginsberg selected are bound, on a fundamental level, by their ability to encapsulate the paradox of a desire that seeks extinction as its finality. What Kerouac's *Tristessa* and *Big Sur* – two works from the *Duluoz Legend* – and Ginsberg's 'Howl' have in common is an obsession with the potentiality of death, which, I will argue, functions as the main narrative and aesthetic force.<sup>4</sup> In these texts, death resonates equivocally as both a destructive pattern and a creative one; it is this ambivalence that allows the idea and figure of Thanatos to take centre stage.

The origins of Thanatos are to be found in Greek mythology. Neither a divinity nor a simple mortal, Thanatos was a daemon, an emanation of Hades, the God of death who governs the immense Underworld.<sup>5</sup> Daemons are spirits, forces in nature that materialise as wills and drives, and whose essence is not morally determined.<sup>6</sup> A major figure from Ancient Greece, Thanatos was evoked in many tales and poems, as in the *Orphic Hymns* for instance:

---

<sup>4</sup> The works of *The Duluoz Legend* comprise *The Town and the City* [1950], *On the Road* [1957], *The Subterraneans* [1958], *The Dharma Bums* [1958], *Maggie Cassidy* [1959], *Doctor Sax* [1959], *Tristessa* [1960], *Big Sur* [1962], *Visions of Gerard* [1963], *Desolation Angels* [1965], *Satori in Paris* [1966], *Vanity of Duluoz* [1968] and *Visions of Cody* [posthumous, 1972].

<sup>5</sup> In Greek mythology Hades is one of the six original Olympian Gods, sons of the Titans. These Gods were Demeter, Hestia, Hera, Zeus, Poseidon and Hades himself. In the aftermath of the war against the Titans, Zeus ruled over the land, Poseidon ruled over the oceans, and Hades ruled the Underworld. See Homer, 'Book XV', in *The Iliad* [c. ninth century BC], trans. and rev. by Martin Hammond (London: Penguin Classics, 1987), pp. 234-52.

<sup>6</sup> In this sense, original 'daemons' must not be confounded with the christianised version of demons.

## 87. To Death

Hear me, you who steer

the paths of all mortals

and give sacred time to all

from whom you are distant.

Your sleep tears the soul

free from the body's hold,

whenever you undo

nature's powerful bonds,

bringing the long slumber,

the endless one, to the living.<sup>7</sup>

As Apostolos Athanassakis's latest adaptation of the hymn shows, Thanatos is addressed as a powerful lethal entity who signifies the termination of life. This apprehension of Thanatos tallies with other writings from Ancient Greek poets, such as *The Theogony* by Hesiod [c. eighth century BC], a work that sheds light on Thanatos' genealogy.<sup>8</sup> A son of Nyx, Goddess of the night, and Erebus, God of darkness, Thanatos' twin brother is Hypnos: the symbolism attached to this heredity signals an intermingling of life with death; it suggests that Thanatos may be traced through a mythological form of deathliness. In the tradition of Ancient Greece, Thanatos' function is to serve Hades' demand for human lives; he does so

---

<sup>7</sup> Orpheus, 'Orphic Hymn 87', in *The Orphic Hymns* [c. sixth century BC], trans. and rev. by Apostolos N. Athanassakis and Benjamin M. Wolkow (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013), pp. 66-67.

<sup>8</sup> See Hesiod, 'The Theogony', in *Theogony – Works and Days – Shield* [c. eighth century BC], trans. and rev. by Apostolos N. Athanassakis (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2004), pp. 11-57.

by bringing the living towards the world of the dead. As one of Hades' emissaries and servant of the Underworld, Thanatos is the link between the world above ground and the world beneath: he may be interpreted as a principle of death within life as well as a principle of life within death.

Initially through close textual analysis, I will examine the manifestation of these nullifying drives in the texts, which seek to turn being into nothingness, movement into stasis, beauty into decay, and life into death.<sup>9</sup> These principles of negation will be interpreted as a series of threats against textual integrity; threats articulated both in the narrative, and within the textual material itself. In Ginsberg's poem and in Kerouac's two novels, I will show that this sense of nullification is not only emblematic of their works; it is also used as a textual strategy that seeks to conquer the fear of self-annihilation through the writing itself, in a variety of ways that have not heretofore been examined. The presence of various tropes of negation within the primary sources is central for the theoretical articulation of the paradox of Thanatos, just as it is central for an appreciation of their effects on the texts in terms of self-destruction, as well as self-creation. I will demonstrate that each work produces a reaction on the narrative and aesthetic planes, in order to counter this menace of disintegration, a reaction that is potentially creative both for the characters' selves within the narrative and for the text. Consequently, an argument will emerge in which the

---

<sup>9</sup> These nullifying drives are evocative of Freud's theory of the death drive (see Sigmund Freud, 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle' [1920], trans. by C.J.M. Hubback, ed. by General Books, International Psycho-Analytical Library, 4 (Memphis: The International Psycho-Analytical Library, repr. 2010)). Nevertheless, the idea of Thanatos cannot be strictly equated with Freud's death drive, which as a psychoanalytical notion remains too specific to apprehend the multiple facets of the paradoxical figure of Thanatos in my thesis.

antithetical construction of narrative and aesthetic forms is prompted paradoxically by an initial strategy of destruction.

Therefore, Part 1 of the thesis will combine Existentialist theory with a series of precepts from the American tradition of Transcendentalism to decipher an ontological and aesthetic form of Thanatos in Kerouac's *Big Sur* and in Ginsberg's 'Howl'. The first section will highlight the articulation of the trope of alienation in the texts. The figure of 'Moloch' in 'Howl', and the sense of separation between the narrator and transcendental nature in *Big Sur*, will be regarded as the original strategies of destruction in the writings. In line with the Existentialist ethos, these threats to both self and text will be apprehended as catalysts for strategies of creation. Therefore the second section will scrutinise how the texts strive to counter the various menaces of nullification, which will shed light on the manifestation of an Existentialist form of Thanatos. I will examine the diverse forms of engagement in 'Howl' in terms that are both Existentialist and transcendental, and demonstrate the ways in which Ginsberg's recourse to a poetics of transcendental performativity may be seen as defeating the forces of nothingness in the poem. In *Big Sur*, I will analyse the reasons for the narrator's inability to existentially engage and transcend his condition, and explore Kerouac's writing in relation to stasis and movement. Eventually, I will show that the narrator's disengagement in *Big Sur* enacts a form of revolt that is spiritual in essence and that is counterproductive for the self.

Using the metaphysical framework of the Kantian Sublime, Part 2 will seek to decipher the paradoxical figure of Thanatos in Kerouac's *Tristessa*. I will show that the novella cultivates a form of nullification that constitutes,

paradoxically, its main impetus. This unique combination of beauty, desire and death in Kerouac's work carries at its core the very essence of its revocation; it is this fundamental tension that resonates with the paradox of Thanatos. Firstly, I will examine the variety of literary devices that Kerouac uses to qualify the beauty of his heroine. I will demonstrate that Tristessa personifies a romantic form of deathliness, whose impact on the narrator is evocative of the Kantian Sublime. I will then argue that Duluoz's absorption of, and destabilisation by, Tristessa, denotes a yearning for the transcendent that is as idealistic as it is nihilistic. This desire for death, I will show, is sublimated through the text itself: while it is embodied, primarily, in the character of Tristessa, it is also directed at the narrative, as the fatal beauty of the heroine menaces the narrator's own integrity. Ultimately, the idealisation and magnification of death in *Tristessa* will be conceived as a strategy of construction of forms that bears the stigma of their imminent dissolution. This dialectical articulation between the elevation of beauty and its subsequent demolition, and between desire and disintegration, will be envisaged as a reconfiguration of the interplay between processes of creation and of destruction that is characteristic of the figure of Thanatos.

Kerouac was the object of a great misunderstanding in the history of American literature. The stereotypical image of ruthless, carefree vagabond is a commonplace that falls nowhere near to the literary project that he eventually created. Kerouac's fascination with death is both equivocal and oracular; it places him within a long tradition of artists and writers whose engagement with death is romantic, paradoxical and troubling. Many of Kerouac's biographers, such as Ann Charters and Gerald Nicosia, have famously portrayed him as submerged by

feelings of desolation and soaked in anguish.<sup>10</sup> Both have underscored the impact of the death of Kerouac's nine-year-old brother, Gerard, in an attempt to explicate his saturnine disposition. Other biographical critics, such as Joy Walsh, have emphasised the Roman Catholic education that Kerouac received as a child, which greatly contributed to his sense of guilt throughout his lifetime.<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless, these biographical critics have largely neglected the impact of the figure of Thanatos in reading Kerouac's writing aesthetically. Behind the apparent ramble and shamble of Kerouac's early novels such as *On the Road* [1957], an inflection of dismay and sorrow pierces the text, as other critics – James Campbell for instance – have detected:<sup>12</sup>

The action of *On the Road* may be joy, but the scaffolding holding it in place is despair: 'Where go? What do? What for?' [...] Kerouac had fought back against his black dogs with kicks – but the dog – purposelessness – had got him.<sup>13</sup>

The impression of doom and gloom that surfaces in the writing is made more and more explicit as Kerouac's career progresses. Crucially, it is met with an aesthetics that both accentuates and transcends this distinct sense of torment, an

---

<sup>10</sup> See Ann Charters, *Kerouac: A Biography* (San Francisco: Straight Arrow Books, 1973), and Gerald Nicosia, *Memory Babe: A Critical Biography of Jack Kerouac* (New York: Grove Press, 1983).

<sup>11</sup> See Joy Walsh, *Jack Kerouac: Statements in Brown: Collected Essays*, The Esprit Critique (New York: Textile Bridge Press, 1984).

<sup>12</sup> See Jack Kerouac, *On the Road* [1957], Penguin Modern Classics (London: Penguin Books, 2000).

<sup>13</sup> Campbell, p. 182.

aesthetics that is key to the manifestation of the paradox of Thanatos in Kerouac's work.

Ginsberg's writing is also immensely equivocal in terms of how it presents, and plays with, motifs of self-creation and self-destruction. In his poems his voice is underpinned by the poetical form of the free verse.<sup>14</sup> This free form, which shuns the formal constraints of traditional poetry, allows Ginsberg to craft an aesthetics that embodies, within its very lines, the claims for liberation that many of his poems speak of in their contents. Meanwhile, Ginsberg's participation in the counter-cultural politics of the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s fuelled his literary project, which is informed by a trope of social and political protest. In many poems, the socio-historical conditions of the post-war era are envisaged as constricting and nullifying: they are pitched against pleas for the emancipation of the self. This confrontation, which is formulated in terms that are ontological, social and spiritual, epitomises a yearning for deliverance that is typical of his writing. Ginsberg's conception of the spiritual brings him in line with the nineteenth-century tradition of American Transcendentalism in particular, whose pantheistic framework constitutes a major influence on his poetry. This pantheistic model was itself established as a central element of eighteenth-century Romanticism and referenced in a profusion of writings by William Blake (1757-1827), William Wordsworth (1770-1850) and Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772-1834). Accordingly, many Ginsberg critics, such as Tony Trigilio, situate Ginsberg as part of a Blakean lineage and interpret his poetical practice as an

---

<sup>14</sup> This form was introduced by the American poet Walt Whitman (1819-1892) a century earlier.

attempt to actualise the tradition of the Prophetic.<sup>15</sup> For Trigilio, the communication of the mystical experience demands a language that is capable of ‘transforming observation into vision [by] blurring the boundaries between prophet and God’.<sup>16</sup> In Ginsberg’s writing this visionary quality is partially achieved by operating at both an intra-, and extra-diegetical level, that is to say within the poem and through it at the same time. It is underpinned by a poetical device that is decisive in the elaboration of antithetical forces in ‘Howl’.

Although both Kerouac and Ginsberg drew inspiration from their own life to varying degrees, the autobiographical quality of the vast majority of their works must be brought back into a literary context. Both belong to a lineage of American writers for whom the entangled components of one’s own identity constitute the starting point for creative expression. It provides them with a backdrop upon which the prose artist and the poet, each in their own way, can freely create and operate within a plethora of literary traditions. Their works, following on from the traditions of Romanticism, of American Transcendentalism and of modernism, to quote a few, become ways to express the multiple facets of their consciousness, leaving the reader with the echo of a *voice* that is highly idiosyncratic. In Ginsberg’s writing this voice is conceived by the poet as a medium between men and the divine, whose function is to receive and transmit divine insights; it is also the embodiment of a motion between the historical and the universal, a transition that is pivotal for the paradox of Thanatos in ‘Howl’. In Kerouac’s case, this voice

---

<sup>15</sup> See Tony Trigilio, *Strange Prophecies Anew: Rereading Apocalypse in Blake, H.D., and Ginsberg* (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2000). This tradition, and the ways in which it is used by Ginsberg in his poetry, will be examined in greater detail in Part 1 of the thesis.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15.

has been assimilated into a form of ‘spontaneous’ prose, a consensual designation in Kerouac studies that refers to his method of writing, and that seeks to describe the distinctive nature of the flux of consciousness used in a great number of his works.<sup>17</sup> This type of writing will be revisited through close analysis; it will be central for the analysis of the figure of Thanatos in both *Tristessa* and *Big Sur*.

In the tradition of epic poems, ‘Howl’ articulates the mythical as well as various aspects of social reality in order to indicate the possibility of transcendence. Relying on the poetical device of the long line to relate the adventures of his contemporaries, the first part of the poem is grounded in a torrential and incantatory voice that celebrates the desire for existing unconditionally and resolutely in the here and now. This lust for life in ‘Howl’ is highly ambivalent: it integrates a sense of danger that acknowledges the prospect of death at each and every moment. This menace becomes the main focus of the second part of the poem, in which the post-war American predicament is envisaged as a fabric of constraints fundamentally detrimental for the self. These representations enable the poem to function as a social critique, as well as on a mythical level through Moloch, a predatory figure from the Old Testament used as an epitome of annihilation. In other words, Moloch allows ‘Howl’ to operate, amongst other things, as a modernised variant of the Apocalypse.

In so doing, Ginsberg stages a series of antagonisms in ‘Howl’ between the secular and the spiritual, between the material and the ideal, and more

---

<sup>17</sup> Critics have engaged with Kerouac’s aesthetics of ‘spontaneous’ prose from various perspectives. See Preston Jr Whaley, *Blows Like a Horn: Beat Writing, Jazz, Style, and Markets in the Transformation of US Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), and Michael Hrebeniak, *Action Writing: Jack Kerouac’s Wild Form* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2006), to quote but a few.

generally between the temporal and the universal. These conflicts are foregrounded, as several critics have shown, in a language that serves to destroy as much as to create.<sup>18</sup> Meanwhile, the tensions that ‘Howl’ brings forth, both in its form and its contents, are transcended through an intuitive approach, a legacy from an Emersonian tradition, as we will see in more detail. Meticulously examined by Paul Portugés in *The Visionary Poetics of Allen Ginsberg*, breath patterns in ‘Howl’ have a crucial importance: they allow Ginsberg to present the visionary experience through the writing.<sup>19</sup> This poetical device will be interpreted as supporting a strategy that potentially enables spiritual transactions between the personal and the universal: it will be instrumental in illuminating the manifestation of the figure of Thanatos through the poem.

*Tristessa*, published three years after *On the Road*, manifests both a break and a continuity in Kerouac’s writing. In the novella, Jack Duluoz sets out to Mexico and falls in love with a young Mexican woman, Tristessa, an embodiment of death whom he sets his heart on. The scale of values that underpins the novella may well be familiar to the Kerouac reader; it displays an adamant reverence for the exotic and the primitive, whose combination is perceived, here again, as a wager for authenticity. Kerouac’s depictions of local culture, of the land and of its inhabitants – including those of the ‘Fellaheen’ – are, of course, largely

---

<sup>18</sup> See Trigilio, *Strange Prophecies Anew*, and Charles Molesworth, *The Fierce Embrace: A Study of Contemporary American Poetry* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1979).

<sup>19</sup> See Paul Portugés, *The Visionary Poetics of Allen Ginsberg* (Santa Barbara: Ross-Erikson, 1978). Ginsberg himself also produced a great number of analyses and commentaries upon his own poetical technique; some of them will be mentioned in Part 1 of the thesis.

romanticised and not to be taken at face value.<sup>20</sup> Many critics, including Michael D’Orso, have highlighted the discrepancy between the material and historical reality of foreign cultures and the fictionalised world of the *Duluoz Legend*, which relies heavily on Orientalist tropes.<sup>21</sup> D’Orso contextualises Kerouac’s work in perspective to that of controversial historian Oswald Spengler (1880-1936), who theorised, in *The Decline of The West* [1918], the rise and fall of civilisations and envisaged modernity as symptomatic of a form of civilisational decay.<sup>22</sup>

According to D’Orso, Spengler’s dialectical articulation manifests itself in Kerouac’s writing through a staging of the prototypical antagonism between innocence and knowledge, between intuition and reason, and between the East and the West more generally. Part 2 on *Tristessa*, will amongst other things examine how Mexican culture is mythologised in this context. The celebration of an Otherness that is highly fantasised translates into an ethics of beauty in Kerouac’s work that reveals its Romantic lineage, a point argued by Robert Hipkiss in *Jack Kerouac, Prophet of the New Romanticism* [1978].<sup>23</sup>

In *Tristessa*, this composite form of beauty is conveyed exclusively through the narrator’s own vision of the eponymous heroine. In a modernistic vein, Kerouac’s autodiegetic narrator Jack Duluoz exemplifies a stream of

---

<sup>20</sup> Kerouac’s recourse to the term ‘Fellaheen’ is erroneous both culturally and historically. Nevertheless, from a literary perspective, the symbolism attached to this term is significant in Kerouac’s work, as we will see in Part 2 of the thesis.

<sup>21</sup> See Michael D’Orso, ‘Man Out of Time: Kerouac, Spengler, and the “Faustian Soul”’, *Studies in American Fiction*, 11 (1983), 19-30.

<sup>22</sup> See Oswald Spengler, *The Decline of the West* [1918], trans. by Charles Francis Stkinson, ed. by Helmut Werner, rev. by Arthur Helps, abridged edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991).

<sup>23</sup> See 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). Hipkiss’s work will be useful for discerning the remnants of a Romantic tradition in Kerouac’s writings, as I will explore in more detail in the literature review.

consciousness that scrutinises the narrator's own perceptions, a device that is key in the elaboration of a form of sublimity in the text. Meanwhile, this extant subjectivity in *Tristessa* also enables Kerouac to play with – and subvert – various codes of desire. Using the damaging effects of lethal drugs on Tristessa's frail anatomy, Kerouac debases and crucifies the heroine, whose body is almost totally obliterated by the end of the novella: 'Tristessa [is a] bag of bones – But O the grace of some bones'.<sup>24</sup> In other words, the more Tristessa is degraded, the greater the narrator's enchantement. With this paradox in mind, which is that of a sublime form of Thanatos, I will show that the grandeur of the text lies in the formulation of desire through, and by, the magnification of suffering. As I will argue, Kerouac's interplay with the religious codes of Buddhism and of Catholicism is instrumental in this regard. In *Tristessa*, Kerouac tends to distort the moral guidelines of the Christian paradigm to accommodate, or strengthen, an underlying masochistic impulse, a major ingredient in the amplification of the narrator's passion; a trope signalled by Benedict Giomo in *Kerouac, the Word and the Way*.<sup>25</sup> Kerouac's liminal use of religious frameworks gives way to a syncretism that is pivotal in his writing. This will be analysed in more detail in the thesis through the work of John Lardas especially.<sup>26</sup> Crucially, this tropism for death in *Tristessa* epitomises a transcendental pursuit that brings the writing to the limits of literary representation.

---

<sup>24</sup> *Tristessa*, p. 96.

<sup>25</sup> See Benedict Giomo, *Kerouac, the Word and the Way: Prose Artist as Spiritual Quester* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2000). In this work, Giomo deciphers the religious symbolism of the novella and interrogates Kerouac's utilisation of the Christian tradition; he shows how Catholicism blends with a variant of Buddhism that is largely corrupted, but that nonetheless provides the novella with a syncretic quality.

<sup>26</sup> See John Lardas, *The Bop Apocalypse: The Religious Visions of Kerouac, Ginsberg, and Burroughs* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001).

Poles apart, *Big Sur*, in telling the story of a man tired with life and spiralling into mental decay and physical exhaustion, signifies the defeat of the forces of desire. The novel focuses on the narrator's own downfall, which in great measure echoes Kerouac's own falling into disgrace. In *Tristessa*, death was glamorised, put on a pedestal and kept at good distance. In *Big Sur*, death is looming large on the horizon of Bixby Canyon; devoid of the protective shield of sublimation, it is now made concrete and, in fact, palpable: 'The words I'd studied all my life have suddenly gotten to me in all their serious and definite deathliness, never more I be a "happy poet" "Singing" "about death" and allied romantic matters'.<sup>27</sup> This downfall is concomitant with the narrator's relocation to the Californian area of Big Sur, initially envisioned as a perfect getaway from the city. This type of retreat into the wild is typical of Kerouac's fictions; it is also, however, unmistakably reminiscent of Henry David Thoreau's *Walden; or, Life in the Woods* [1854], a seminal work from a major tradition – that of American Transcendentalism – that Kerouac consistently references throughout the novel, as we will see.<sup>28</sup> Simultaneously, this move also 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.<sup>29</sup> The narrator's reclusion, nevertheless, turns out to be largely counterproductive, as stasis sets in and engulfs self and text altogether. While the numerous episodes of crises prompt a remodelling of the narrator's identity, the final event of a Christian epiphany –

---

<sup>27</sup> *Big Sur*, p. 186.

<sup>28</sup> Henry David Thoreau, *Walden; or, Life in the Woods* [1854], ed. by Stephen Fender, Oxford World's Classics, 3<sup>rd</sup> edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

<sup>29</sup> For Tytell, the post-war years reconfigured the social pact. The individual, Tytell argues, became 'the victim of circumstances, and [post-war values] no longer granted him the agency of his own destiny' (*Naked Angels*, p. 9).

where, once again, death is the essence – manifests a major break in Kerouac's work.

The dramatic intensity of *Big Sur* relies on the tension brought by a prose that is intricately modernist in its presentation of the narrator's ultimate confession, as he spirals towards disintegration. By means of an autodiegetic narration, Kerouac's writing in *Big Sur* operates a self-reflective look that accentuates the sense of anguish that the novel conveys; 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. As several critics, including Michael Hrebaniak and Erik Mortenson have pointed out, the writing is indexed on these very movements of consciousness: it provides the prose with a fluidity that is typical of Kerouac's technique, and that is set against the nullifying fixity of the narrative.<sup>30</sup> The spectacle, therefore, is not that of death, but of its reflection by, and through, the narrator's own self, whose antithetical dynamics of assertion and nullification represent the paradox of Thanatos in *Big Sur*.

Concurrently creative and destructive for the self, the textual strategies of Kerouac's *Big Sur* and of Ginsberg's 'Howl' will be approached from an ontological viewpoint in Part 1 of the thesis through the definition of an American variant of Existentialism. The strategies used by Kerouac in *Tristessa* will be apprehended from a metaphysical perspective through the concept of the Kantian Sublime in Part 2. The combination of these conflicting strategies, their impact for

---

<sup>30</sup> See Hrebaniak, *Action Writing: Jack Kerouac's Wild Form*, and Erik Mortenson, *Capturing the Beat Moment: Cultural Politics and the Poetics of Presence* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2011). Mortenson's work is foregrounded in the analysis that Beat writings are located at the confluence of modernism and postmodernism; for Mortenson, this is what enables them to 'craft a conception of subjectivity that grounds the individual in the world and allows him or her to constantly mutate and adapt' (p. 12).

the self and for the texts, and the ways in which they interact with the writing styles of each author and with the literary and philosophical traditions that they reference, will enable us to clarify the figure of Thanatos in order to shed a novel light on the paradoxical nature of the selected works, a vital feature that has too often been overlooked in Beat studies.

Primarily in Part 1, I will use the concepts of nothingness and engagement defined by Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980) in *Being and Nothingness* [1943] and in 'Existentialism & Humanism' [1946], as well as the notions of the absurd and of the revolt elaborated by Albert Camus (1913-1960) in *The Myth of Sisyphus* [1942].<sup>31</sup> These concepts will allow some of the paradoxical dynamics that Ginsberg's poem 'Howl' and Kerouac's novel *Big Sur* set forth to emerge. By grasping the ontological problems introduced in these texts, an appreciation of the paradoxical figure of Thanatos from an Existentialist perspective also comes to light. Nevertheless, relying solely on an intercontinental movement of philosophy in order to examine two literary works that are inherently American in their making – especially with regards to the manifold traditions that both Kerouac and Ginsberg relayed through their writings – is deeply problematic. Both Sartre and Camus – who will be thoroughly distinguished in my thesis – partake in a European tradition of Humanism that situates ontological preoccupations within an atheistic frame of reference. In fact, neither Sartre's argument in *Being and Nothingness* or in his explanatory essay 'Existentialism & Humanism', nor that of

---

<sup>31</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology* [1943], trans. by Hazel E. Barnes, rev. by Arlette Elkaïm-Sartre (Oxon: Routledge Classics, repr. 2007), and 'Existentialism & Humanism' [1946], trans. by Philip Mairet, 3<sup>rd</sup> edn (London: Methuen, 2007); Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus* [1942], trans. by Justin O'Brien (London: Penguin Books, 1975).

Camus in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, venture beyond the atheistic foundations of their respective ontological models. For Sartre, the recourse to the transcendental is a facticity, a mark of inauthenticity.<sup>32</sup> Similarly for Camus, the divine is conceived as superfluous to the existential man; it is devised in *The Myth of Sisyphus* as an appeal that abolishes the tension of the absurd, a tension that must be preserved at all costs in order to enable a form of authentic being, as we will see in more detail.<sup>33</sup> Hence, while some of the principles of Sartrean and Camusian theory allow certain aspects of the texts to be illuminated, Part 1 aims to extend the scope of the ontological propositions of Sartre and of Camus in order to include, and reverberate, the essential spiritual dimensions of both Ginsberg's 'Howl' and Kerouac's *Big Sur*.

Consequently, Part 1 will also examine a selection of Transcendentalist writings from the nineteenth century by Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882) and by Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862). The recourse to some aspects of the American Transcendentalist tradition in this part will seek to determine a theoretical framework that fuses the Existentialism of Sartre and that of Camus with aspects of Emerson and of Thoreau. The aim is to define an American form of Existentialism crucial for an understanding of the ontological facet of the figure of Thanatos. Through a combination of the fundamentals of Sartrean theory with a selection of Emersonian precepts gleaned from 'Nature' [1836], 'History' [1841]

---

<sup>32</sup> 'Everything is indeed permitted if God does not exist, and man is in consequence forlorn, for he cannot find anything to depend upon either within or outside himself. He discovers forthwith, that he is without excuse. For if indeed existence precedes essence, one will never be able to explain one's actions by reference to a given and specific human nature; in other words, there is no determinism – man is free, man is freedom' (Sartre, 'Existentialism & Humanism', pp. 37-38).

<sup>33</sup> Vice versa for Camus: 'The absurd, which is the metaphysical state of the conscious man, does not lead to God' (Camus, p. 42).

and ‘Self-reliance’ [1841], I will reformulate the central notions of nothingness and of engagement in a way that will illuminate the American ontological environment of both Ginsberg’s ‘Howl’ and Kerouac’s *Big Sur*.<sup>34</sup> Similarly, I will connect the tenets of Camusian Existentialism with some of Thoreau’s main precepts as presented in *Walden* and in ‘Life Without Principle’ [1863], in order to determine an Americanised version of the absurd and offer a definition of the revolt that occurs within Kerouac’s *Big Sur* in particular.<sup>35</sup> I will show that the Idealism of Emerson and of Thoreau pertains to forms of transcendental ontology compatible, in some measure, with the twentieth-century Existentialist frameworks of Sartre and of Camus.<sup>36</sup> This American variant of Existentialism in my thesis, which assimilates four different theoretical models, will reveal the figure of Thanatos in the primary texts.

In Part 2 of the thesis, I will use the theoretical framework of the Kantian Sublime in order to decipher another aspect of the paradoxical figure of Thanatos. Since Edmund Burke’s seminal work *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Sublime and the Beautiful* [1756], the concept of the Sublime has been profusely revisited by varied philosophical movements and trends, from the Enlightenment to

---

<sup>34</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, ‘Nature’ [1836], ‘History’ [1841], and ‘Self-reliance’ [1841], in *Ralph Waldo Emerson: Nature and Selected Essays*, ed. by Larzer Ziff, Penguin Classics, 3<sup>rd</sup> edn (London: Penguin Books, 2003), pp. 35-82, pp. 149-73 and pp. 175-203 respectively.

<sup>35</sup> Thoreau, *Walden*; and, ‘Life Without Principle’ [1863], in *The American Transcendentalists: Their Prose and Poetry*, ed. by Perry Miller (New York: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1957), pp. 308-29.

<sup>36</sup> Olaf Hansen, in his work *Aesthetic Individualism and Practical Intellect: American Allegory in Emerson, Thoreau, Adams, and James* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), explores some of the multiple ontological touchpoints between American Transcendentalism and Existentialist theory. This relation will be at the centre of the critical method of Part 1 of the thesis, and will be developed in more detail throughout the analysis.

Romanticism and postmodernism.<sup>37</sup> Nonetheless, in order to prioritise the literary analysis of the ambivalent nature of Kerouac's work, this concept will be mainly filtered through a selection of works by Immanuel Kant (1724-1804). Therefore the method in this part will be based almost exclusively on a series of definitions extracted from Kant's *Critique of Judgement* [1790], which will allow a further definition of the contradictions and complexities of Kerouac's work.<sup>38</sup>

The Sublime, as we will see in more detail, takes the form of a subjugating vision developed in the mind of the beholder, for whom the object of scrutiny encapsulates a form of beauty so radical that it calls forth the very prospect of his/her own liquidation. This paradigm partially explains the nature of the relationship that Kerouac builds in *Tristessa* between Duluoz, the narrator and beholder of the vision, and the main character in the novella, Tristessa herself. Through the narrator's objectifying gaze, Tristessa is glamorised and fantasised at will: positioning Duluoz and Tristessa, respectively, as the subject and the object of the phenomenon of the Sublime. Kerouac, I will argue, offers an idealisation of death through Tristessa; the novella elevates a macabre desire in the form of a romantic longing for self-destruction. In this context, the Kantian Sublime will be used as a theoretical frame to apprehend another facet of Thanatos in the thesis; allowing the paradoxical strategies of creation and destruction in Kerouac's writing to emerge more forcefully.

---

<sup>37</sup> Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Sublime and the Beautiful* [1756], ed. by James T. Boulton, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (London: Routledge, 2008).

<sup>38</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement* [1790], trans. by James Creed Meredith, rev. and ed. by Nicholas Walker, Oxford World's Classics (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

These theoretical interplays will be analysed in greater detail both in the literature review and at the beginning of each part of the thesis. They will be instrumental in examining the ways in which the texts incorporate a strategy of decay and nullification that paradoxically engenders processes of creation. The superimposition of these two antithetical movements in the writings will shed light on the paradoxical nature of Thanatos in my thesis.

## Literature review

Towards an American Variant of Existentialism: Ruby Chatterji, George Cotkin, Walter Kaufmann, Lewis Gordon and others

Part 1 of this thesis will be grounded in a theoretical framework located at the crux of Existentialist theory and an American tradition of Transcendentalism. The question of what constitutes an American form of Existentialism is problematised by Ruby Chatterji in her preface to *Existentialism in American Literature* [1983] in the following terms:

Which aspects of existentialist thought have appealed to the modern American consciousness and why? How far such elements have been properly integrated or merely adapted to existing constellations of traditional American values and in the process modified, perhaps even distorted or transformed?<sup>1</sup>

In fact, a certain number of American cultural critics – amongst them Norman Mailer, George Cotkin and Davis Dunbar McElroy – have emphasised the presence of idiosyncratic Existentialist motifs throughout the cultural and literary landscape of post-war America. Their works will be useful entries into the ways

---

<sup>1</sup> Ruby Chatterji, 'Preface', in *Existentialism in American Literature*, ed. by Ruby Chatterji (New Delhi: Arnold-Heinemann, 1983), pp. 9-15 (p. 12).

in which Existentialism has risen out of and has accommodated itself within American literature. George Cotkin, in *Existential America* (2003), argues that ‘American existentialism should be seen as more than a case study in the diffusion of European ideas’.<sup>2</sup> As his work aims to ‘trace expressions of existential thinking both as received from European sources and as growing from American minds’, Cotkin shows that Existentialism in America was not exclusively imported from Europe, it was also generated within American culture.<sup>3</sup> Such an interpretation envisages American Existentialism as a compound of both European and indigenous influences; thus acknowledging the idea that the phenomenon of Existentialism in America is as much an effect of transcontinental movements of philosophy as it is a by-product of the autarchical production of American ideas.

Walter Kaufmann, in his essay ‘The Reception of Existentialism in the United States’, stands up to Chatterji’s argument by focusing on the European sources of American Existentialism; he argues that ‘American philosophy may turn out to be comparable to Roman philosophy: mainly derivative’.<sup>4</sup> Deliberately provocative, Kaufmann stresses the importance of Existentialism as primarily a European movement of philosophy that paves the way for the emergence of Existentialist ideas in North America in the post-war era. Nonetheless, the argument that America is dependent upon European thought overlooks the implications of historical and cultural discontinuity between the two continents. Through such an affirmation, Kaufmann partly undermines the sovereign impulse

---

<sup>2</sup> George Cotkin, *Existential America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), p. 9.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Walter Kaufmann, ‘The Reception of Existentialism in the United States’, in *Existentialism, Religion, and Death: Thirteen Essays* (New York: New American Library, 1976), pp. 90-119 (p. 91).

of a nation that has been independent for over two centuries, and which has long since produced an intellectual and cultural framework of its own.<sup>5</sup>

Such a debate on the possibility or impossibility of a genuinely American form of Existentialism is indirectly tackled by Lewis Gordon. In the introduction to his anthology *Existence in Black* [1997], Gordon aims to disentangle ‘existentialism’, understood as a fully contextualised movement of thought in twentieth-century Europe, from what he terms the ‘philosophy of existence’, an ontology that lays claims to a form of universalism:<sup>6</sup>

We can regard *existentialism* – the popularly named ideology – as a fundamentally European historical phenomenon. It is, in effect, the history of European literature that bears that name. On the other hand, we can regard *philosophy of existence* [...] as philosophical questions premised upon concerns of freedom, anguish, responsibility, embodied agency, sociality, and liberation. Unlike fashionable standpoint epistemologies of the present, philosophy of existence is marked by a centering of what is often known as the ‘situation’ of questioning or inquiry itself.<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup> ‘Kaufmann’s introduction to the volume [*Existentialism: From Dostoevsky to Sartre*, 1956] and the samples of Existentialism that he chose all designated existentialism as part of the European philosophical tradition. [...] Kaufmann’s selections and his introduction make clear that he intended to appropriate existentialism as a discipline of European philosophy’ (Cotkin, p. 148).

<sup>6</sup> Lewis R. Gordon, ‘Introduction: Black Existential Philosophy’, in *Existence in Black: An Anthology of Black Existential Philosophy*, ed. by Lewis R. Gordon (London: Routledge, 1997), pp. 1-9 (p. 3).

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

Gordon uses the term Existentialism to signify a popular movement of thought that is, amongst other things, historically determined. In fact, many works (such as Anna Boschetti's 1988 *The Intellectual Enterprise: Sartre and Les Temps Modernes* for example), have explored how the specific conditions of post-war French society allowed for the emergence of Sartre's writings, who in return sought 'to adapt the product (his work) to the tastes of his market'.<sup>8</sup> Boschetti's perspective echoes the one of Marxist critic Sidney Walter Finkelstein, who, in *Existentialism and Alienation in American Literature* [1965], argues that 'existentialist philosophy is not a discovery and expression of "eternal truths," but a product of a special, historical social situation'.<sup>9</sup> What Boschetti, Finkelstein, and Kaufmann share is a reading of twentieth-century Existentialism as a by-product of specific socio-historical conditions.

Compared to such readings, Gordon's definition of a philosophy of existence extends well beyond the phenomenon of a specifically mid-twentieth-century European Existentialism, and points towards a more transcendental quality. Chatterji refers to this type of Existentialism, understood as a philosophy of existence, when she claims that:

Existentialism vindicates the individual despite his limitations and failures by insisting that he can transcend facticity in his own consciousness. By paradoxically making the ineffectual individual both creator and arbiter of his own values, existentialism allows him to retain the last vestiges of his

---

<sup>8</sup> Anna Boschetti, *The Intellectual Enterprise: Sartre and Les Temps Modernes* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1988), p. 31.

<sup>9</sup> Sidney Walter Finkelstein, *Existentialism and Alienation in American Literature* (New York: International Publishers, 1965), p. 135.

human dignity through a neo-stoic affirmation of the self in metaphysical revolt.<sup>10</sup>

Such a conception of Existentialist theory positions the self on a universal scale that overcomes socio-historical determinants both in its epistemology and in its ontology. In so doing, Chatterji provides Existentialism with a universalist essence that assumes an empirical legitimacy. For her, ‘existentialism as a transplant on American culture is existentialism with a difference, having been adapted and modified in subtle and sophisticated ways to meet American requirements’.<sup>11</sup> These modifications, occurring at the intersection of Existentialist theory and American culture, create the conditions for an Existentialist variant of Thanatos in the texts analysed here. In both Kerouac’s and Ginsberg’s writings, a nineteenth-century tradition of American Transcendentalism in particular, contains elements that can be seen as precursors for a distinctly Americanised form of Existentialism.

### Jean-Paul Sartre’s Nothingness and Engagement

In order to show how the American Transcendentalist tradition may be envisaged as a type of ontology that predates an American variant of Existentialism, the next paragraphs in this section will define the central notions of nothingness and engagement, and of the absurd and the revolt employed by Sartre and Camus

---

<sup>10</sup> Chatterji, ‘Preface’, in *Existentialism in American Literature*, ed. by Ruby Chatterji, pp. 9-15 (p. 14).

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15.

respectively. Through these ideas, various key themes and tropes emerge that are essential for an understanding of Kerouac's and Ginsberg's work; themes and tropes that have hitherto been neglected in favour of more biographical and socio-cultural readings.

Sartre's concept of engagement may be viewed as a response to what he himself termed nothingness. Sartre, in *Being and Nothingness*, argues that

consciousness is a being, the nature of which is to be conscious of the nothingness of its being. [...] My consciousness [...] constitutes itself in its own flesh as the nihilation of a possibility which another human reality projects as its possibility. For that reason it must arise in the world as a *Not*; it is as a *Not* that the slave first apprehends the master.<sup>12</sup>

Sartre conceived nothingness as the end-product of an operation of consciousness that reflects upon the self and devises its own annihilation. It is established in the ability of consciousness to reflect upon its self-negating capacity; in other words, nothingness corresponds to a situation in which one envisages the possibility of one's own death.<sup>13</sup> As McElroy explains:

---

<sup>12</sup> Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, p. 70.

<sup>13</sup> This implies that, for Sartre, self and consciousness cannot be equated: 'Sartre will argue that rather than innate, the self is an imaginary construct, outside consciousness, object not subject of consciousness, a continuous creation held in being by belief. The self or ego, the "I" and the "me", are synthetic products of consciousness, unified not unifying, transcendent not immanent' (Christina Howells, *Sartre: The Necessity of Freedom* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), p. 2).

[W]ith every apprehension of being, man also apprehends the possibility or ‘threat’ of non-being. [...] This threat of non-being puts man in a state of basal anxiety. Man is anxious because he is agonizingly aware of the threat of annihilation to his precious individuality, a threat from which there is no final and positive escape except death, the thing he most fears.<sup>14</sup>

In other words, the intrinsic threat that this nothingness poses to the self may be defined as the consciousness of death.

Against nothingness, Sartre put forward the concept of engagement, or commitment, which encapsulates the movement of volition towards action. This commitment to action formally opposes the emasculating effects implied by Sartrean nothingness. For Mitchell Aboulafia in *The Mediating Self*:

[O]nce one becomes aware of one’s relationship to [...] the power of the negative (which one has internalized and which resides in consciousness), one can act to negate aspects of the not-self, and in altering them, thereby alter the horizon of one’s self.<sup>15</sup>

In addressing nothingness, Sartre seeks to mobilise the self through a form of a commitment *in the here and now*, which is as affirmative as it is self-generating.

According to Sartre in his essay ‘Existentialism & Humanism’: ‘Man is nothing

---

<sup>14</sup> Davis Dunbar McElroy, *Existentialism and Modern Literature: An Essay in Existential Criticism* [1963], 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1968), p. 5.

<sup>15</sup> Mitchell Aboulafia, *The Mediating Self: Mead, Sartre and Self-determination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), p. 100.

else but what he purposes, he exists only insofar as he realizes himself, he is therefore nothing else but the sum of his actions, nothing else but what his life is'.<sup>16</sup> It entails that, for Sartre, actions engender the self; they become an essential ontological component of one's own being. For Jacob Golomb:

[W]e can say that actions are not actions of the self: rather, the self is a product of a series of actions. Hence it is more correct to speak of 'actions generating me', some of them generating me authentically, than to speak of 'my actions'. One's authenticity is, then, the sum total of authentic self-generating actions.<sup>17</sup>

The reciprocal nature of such a commitment to action – actions that will re-generate the self in return – corresponds to the Sartrean position of authenticity. For Sartre: '[A]lthough his personal fate is simply to perish, [man] can triumph over it by inventing "purposes," "projects," which will themselves confer meaning both upon himself and upon the world of objects – all meaningless otherwise and in themselves'.<sup>18</sup>

From an ontological perspective, actions also re-create the self for Ralph Waldo Emerson. While Emerson predates Sartre, the Romantic German tradition he comes from displays a deep concern with the self and its ability to create itself through action. As we will see in more detail, Emerson's precepts in 'Nature', in

---

<sup>16</sup> Sartre, 'Existentialism & Humanism', p. 47.

<sup>17</sup> Jacob Golomb, *In Search of Authenticity: From Kierkegaard to Camus* (London: Routledge, 1995), p. 151.

<sup>18</sup> Sartre, 'Existentialism & Humanism', p. 14.

‘History’ and in ‘Self-reliance’ may be envisaged as the base for a transcendental ontology in which the individual’s most intimate relation to the very moment is also crucial for a form of authenticity. As Hansen points out, for Emerson

*[b]eing now* is the allegorical moment of the birth of time, and all the work that goes into construction of *that* particular allegorical configuration that allows this birth to happen is part of man’s assertion of his selfhood against the constraints of his past.<sup>19</sup>

It is this ontological preoccupation at the core of Emersonian Transcendentalism that brings it in line with some of the tenets of Existentialist theory. As Emerson concludes in ‘Nature’: ‘Build therefore your own world. As fast as you conform your life to the pure idea in your mind, that will unfold in great proportions’.<sup>20</sup> This statement implies that Emersonian forms of engagement embody a self-creative quality similar to that of Sartrean Existentialism. The self-creative aspect of these forms of engagement will have fundamental consequences for how we may define the paradoxical figure of Thanatos in the context of Kerouac’s and Ginsberg’s works. For Roseline Intrater:

Existentialism, as formulated by Jean-Paul Sartre, swept away accepted notions of predetermined selfhood, substituting in their place the theory of Nothingness at the core of the self, and posited a concurrent concept of

---

<sup>19</sup> Hansen, p. 86.

<sup>20</sup> Emerson, ‘Nature’, p. 81.

Freedom comprehensive enough to include the capacity to choose one's own selfhood, and to choose it repeatedly anew.<sup>21</sup>

Thus, the transactions of Sartrean engagement trigger a series of major implications for the self. These implications will be examined from within an American literary context, and inspected in relation to the work of Kerouac and Ginsberg both in terms of contents and aesthetics throughout Part 1 of the thesis.

The idea of Sartrean engagement also makes a lot of sense in a Beat context, partly because it marries the aesthetic with the socio-historical. According to Naomi Zack in her article 'Race, Life, Death, Identity, and Good Faith':

At any rate, there is an existential return to the here and now after the realization of death's inevitability and readiness, which, assuming that one does nothing except wait for death, would seem to entail a fresh commitment to one's life, or a realignment of one's fundamental attitude towards one's life. The new upsurge (be it spontaneous or artificial) or the deliberate change in attitude, means that one [...] has more energy as an agent [...]. [T]here is very likely more freedom as an agent, and a higher

---

<sup>21</sup> Roseline Intrater, *An Eye for an 'I': Attrition of the Self in the Existential Novel*, *American University Studies 3: Comparative Literature*, 16 (New York: P. Lang, 1988), p. IX.

value placed on freedom so that limitations on agency become less tolerable.<sup>22</sup>

What Zack suggests is that the outward direction of the phenomenon of Sartrean engagement has the capacity to impact the fabric of socio-historical reality. Sartrean Existentialism is, primarily, a phenomenology that attempts a confrontation with the materiality of history. In Sartrean engagement, the process works from nothingness towards the field of historical reality with self-realisation only a by-product of this operation. Consequently, the effects of Sartrean engagement may be envisaged as a political gesture in opposition to a variety of structures that oppress the self. This engagement is visible in Ginsberg's 'Howl' as the radical commitment of the main protagonists to their concomitant historical and social reality. In this sense, Sartrean authenticity materialises through various forms of actual and often political commitment in the texts; as this thesis will investigate, Ginsberg and Kerouac further problematise the socio-historical conditions of the post-war era in relation to their characters' own selfhood in the writings.

Therefore, it is through an engagement with the conditions of existence that a Sartrean definition of Thanatos appears: once the individual's own nothingness has been formulated and renounced, he/she can engage with the world through a commitment to action. Hence, within the framework of Sartrean Existentialism, Thanatos resides in the consciousness of the possibility for self-annihilation. This consciousness, in turn, projects the self into being in the world.

---

<sup>22</sup> Naomi Zack, 'Race, Life, Death, Identity, Tragedy, and Good Faith', in *Existence in Black*, ed. by Gordon, pp. 99-109 (p. 103).

In other words, Thanatos is embodied in the existential reaction that seeks to re-create the self dynamically through an engagement with historical reality.

Crucially, such an existential reaction is progressive in its structure. As Sartre explains:

[D]eath haunts me at the very heart of each of my projects as their inevitable reverse side. But precisely because this 'reverse' is to be assumed not as *my* possibility but as the possibility that there are for me no longer any possibilities, it does not penetrate me.<sup>23</sup>

Yet it is nothingness that fuels a commitment to imminent reality. As nothingness then gives birth to engagement, it is the succession of these two antithetical moments and their implications for the self in ontological and socio-historical terms that establishes an Existentialist version of Thanatos that is typically Sartrean within the writings of Kerouac and Ginsberg.

### Albert Camus's Concept of the Absurd and the Revolt

In Camus's work, the notion of revolt is also linked to a state of consciousness that takes the predicament of the absurd as its starting point. In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus claims that 'what is absurd is the confrontation of the irrational

---

<sup>23</sup> Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, p. 568.

and the wild longing for clarity whose call echoes in the human heart'.<sup>24</sup> Camus's conception of the irrational corresponds to a world perceived as helplessly unfathomable: 'The world itself, whose single meaning I don't understand, is but a vast irrational'.<sup>25</sup> Therefore, as the individual craves meaning, the world gives him/her none because it is essentially indecipherable. Conversely, Camus's emphatic 'wild longing for clarity' corresponds to the subject's frustrated will to comprehend the world.<sup>26</sup> According to Camus,

that odd state of soul in which the void becomes eloquent, in which the chain of daily gestures is broken, in which the heart vainly seeks the link that will connect it again, [...] it is as it were the first sign of absurdity.<sup>27</sup>

In other terms, the absurd embodies man's confrontation with the lack of meaning in the universe, and his attempts to circumscribe it. For Golomb:

Camus invites us to accept the immanently absurd world – in the original sense of *absurdus*: i.e. an incongruous universe devoid of the harmony and meaning that ordinarily dwell in things through the power of an ordering principle allegedly external to our world.<sup>28</sup>

---

<sup>24</sup> Camus, p. 26.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p. 31.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., p. 26.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p. 19.

<sup>28</sup> Golomb, p. 169.

Hence, the absurd is a deadlock that stems from the original split between man's desire to unite with the world, and the impenetrable and unintelligible nature of that world. In Camus's words: 'The absurd is born of the confrontation between the human need [for reason] and the unreasonable silence of the world'.<sup>29</sup> Thus, for Camus, the paradigm of the absurd, as an insurmountable dichotomy between the self and surrounding objects, defines the human condition.

This definition of the absurd causes a reaction, which Camus described as a form of revolt:

The absurd man thus catches sight of a burning and frigid, transparent and limited universe in which nothing is possible, but everything is given, and beyond which all is collapse and nothingness. He can then decide to accept such a universe and draw from it his strength, his refusal to hope, and the unyielding evidence of a life without consolation.<sup>30</sup>

The revolt is an ontological position that consists in both acknowledging the absurd – as the horizon of the human condition – and rising above it; that is to say, it aims to orient the self towards both accepting, and breaking the formal impossibility of the absurd. The phenomenon seeks to breach the wall of the absurd by means of a series of experiences that exemplify a life-affirming movement; it is 'the movement by which man protests against his condition and

---

<sup>29</sup> Camus, p. 32.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p. 58.

against the whole of creation’.<sup>31</sup> According to Camus: ‘Now if the absurd cancels all my chances of eternal freedom, it restores and magnifies on the other hand my freedom of action. That privation of hope and future means an increase in man’s availability’.<sup>32</sup> Thus, Camus’s revolt is rooted in the freedom of the self to create its own framework of experiences: this is the essential requirement for Camusian authenticity. As Richard E. Baker pinpoints, for the absurd man ‘the world offers no meaning, and [one] must create his own’.<sup>33</sup> Such a revolt, then, is essentially a creative act. For Golomb: ‘To rebel is to create one’s authentic self despite obstacles laid down by commissars of various stripes. To rebel is to create one’s authenticity in a world of immanence, a world lacking any transcendental telos or rational principles’.<sup>34</sup> Through a practice of freedom that translates as an engagement in the here and now against the forbidding nature of the world, the subject may embrace his/her own self authentically and transcend his/her condition simultaneously.

Paradoxically then, the Camusian revolt encapsulates both acceptance and rebellion. This paradox is explored in more detail by Robert Solomon:

[L]ife is absurd – in the sense that we cannot comprehend it, find its purpose, its meaning. And so we revolt against that absurdity, create meanings in the face of the Absurd, not denying it but confronting it,

---

<sup>31</sup> John Foley, *Albert Camus: From the Absurd to Revolt* (Stocksfield: Acumen, 2008), p. 59.

<sup>32</sup> Camus, p. 56.

<sup>33</sup> Richard E. Baker, *The Dynamics of the Absurd in the Existentialist Novel*, *American University Studies 19: General Literature*, 31 (New York: P. Lang, 1993), p. 43.

<sup>34</sup> Golomb, p. 191.

keeping it alive. To use up everything that we are given, to assert our will to live without hope or meaning – that is happiness.<sup>35</sup>

For Solomon, as the subject acknowledges the occurrence of the absurd, he/she may overcome it only through an acceptance of its meaninglessness. This surrender, in turn, enables a ‘will to live without hope or meaning’, which is both an exhilarating insurrection against the absurd, and the essence of Camusian authenticity.<sup>36</sup> Crucially, this is the main function of the unresolved conflict of the absurd. For Foley, ‘Camus is here not simply concerned by the fact that the world remains unintelligible, but more importantly he is concerned by the fact that it remains unintelligible in ways meaningful to humankind’.<sup>37</sup> That is to say, the very act of revolt does not seek to nihilate the absurd condition: it must maintain the tension necessary to direct the self towards authentic experience and ultimately enable the creation of one’s own values.

The interplay of destruction and creation that the Camusian revolt exemplifies recalls the paradox of Thanatos. For Solomon, Camus’s revolt epitomises ‘the certainty of a crushing fate, without the resignation that ought to accompany it’.<sup>38</sup> For Baker:

[K]eep the absurd alive in front of you, because this is the point at which life begins; [...] This is the primary principle of the absurd. It must

---

<sup>35</sup> Robert C. Solomon, *Introducing the Existentialists: Imaginary Interviews with Sartre, Heidegger and Camus* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1981), p. 70.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> Foley, p. 7.

<sup>38</sup> Solomon, p. 54.

consciously be kept alive within the individual and acknowledged, or there is a return to the tendencies of suicide.<sup>39</sup>

Baker suggests that one needs to recognise the absurd in order to be able to transcend it through a radical act of creation. It is through this essential antagonism that the revolt typifies the figure of Thanatos: as it generates a form of utmost being *despite* the impossibility of reaching ultimate being, it allows the subject to exist authentically within the condition of the absurd.

This paradox is illustrated by Camus through an interpretation of the myth of Sisyphus in his eponymous work. Sisyphus, an arrogant king from Greek mythology, is condemned for the rest of his life to roll a boulder up a mountain only to see it falling down again. For Camus, '[t]hat is the hour of consciousness. At each of those moments when he leaves the heights and gradually sinks towards the lairs of the gods, he is superior to his fate. He is stronger than his rock'.<sup>40</sup> In these terms, the revolt corresponds to a celebration of life: it is 'a lucid invitation to live and to create, in the very midst of the desert'.<sup>41</sup> Duluoz, Kerouac's autodiegetic narrator, embodies a form of the absurd condition to a great extent. In Part 1, this variant of the absurd and of the revolt will be recontextualised within the several traditions to which Kerouac refers in *Big Sur*, especially that of Thoreau's Transcendentalism. I will show that for Thoreau nature may be envisaged as a form of the absurd that paradoxically acts as a vector for a type of

---

<sup>39</sup> Baker, p. 2.

<sup>40</sup> Camus, p. 109.

<sup>41</sup> Solomon, p. 7. We may decipher a Nietzschean influence in this passage. Indeed, it recalls Nietzsche's Dionysian figure Zarathustra, who, in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* [1883], lyrically urged men to transcend their condition through an empowering acceptance of the tragedy of existence.

authenticity. This reformulation of the articulation of the absurd and the revolt will allow us to apprehend an Existentialist form of Thanatos in the context of Kerouac's writing, and of *Big Sur* in particular.

### Norman Mailer's Brand of Existentialism

Another crucial text in the context of an American variant of Existentialism is 'The White Negro' [1957] by Norman Mailer (1923-2007).<sup>42</sup> A very controversial piece that was defamed by many critics, its political claims, along with the racial assumptions they were based upon, made it highly polemical.<sup>43</sup> As the essay attempts to identify the major sociological forces of 1950s America, its philosophical background rests on a specific version of Existentialism that will be deciphered in Part 1 of the thesis.

Mailer opens his essay with an image of the state of Western civilisation at the dusk of World War II. As he evokes the atrocity of World War II, Mailer blames the technology of war for the destruction of millions. He then concludes that hazardous risks generated by historical and political contexts have soared to an unprecedented level in the post-war Western world. It is this cultural anxiety that seals Mailer's relationship with Existentialist thought, and more precisely the knowledge of the advent of fatality at any time, depending on the configuration of history. Starting from the consciousness of the transience of life and the absurdity

---

<sup>42</sup> Norman Mailer, 'The White Negro' [1957], in *The Penguin Book of the Beats*, ed. by Ann Charters (London: Penguin Books, 1993), pp. 582-605.

<sup>43</sup> Such as Ned Polski for instance. See 'Ned Polski's Comments' in Norman Mailer, *Advertisements for Myself* [1959] (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), pp. 320-22.

of the human condition, Existentialists such as Sartre and Camus elaborate a position of social responsibility. This position corresponds to an incantation, as Cotkin put it, to ‘create the world anew’, a position fulfilled through commitment and action, or what Mailer defines as *experiences*.<sup>44</sup> For Mailer, too, the philosophical problem that Existentialism poses suggests a strong, life-affirming response: ‘[O]ne exists in the present, in that enormous present which is without past or future, memory or planned intention, the life where a man must go until he is beat’.<sup>45</sup> In accordance with the Existentialist model, this reaction typifies an engagement founded upon a form of nothingness. As Mailer argues:

The American Existentialist – [...] the man who knows that if our collective condition is to live with instant death by atomic war, relatively quick death by the State [...] or with a slow death by conformity with every creative and rebellious instinct stifled, [...] if the fate of twentieth century man is to live with death from adolescence to premature senescence, why then the only life-giving answer is to accept the terms of death, to live with death as immediate danger, to divorce oneself from society, to exist without roots, to set out on that uncharted journey into the rebellious imperatives of the self.<sup>46</sup>

Here, Mailer’s definition of the Existentialist subject in an American context is tainted with a form of individualism that is profoundly seditious: it clashes with

---

<sup>44</sup> Cotkin, p. 3.

<sup>45</sup> Mailer, ‘The White Negro’, in *The Penguin Book of the Beats*, ed. by Charters, pp. 582-605 (p. 584).

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

the imperative for social responsibility of Sartrean Existentialism in particular. This individualistic tendency at the core of Mailer's model for an American Existentialism is highly ambivalent; it will be pivotal in the analysis of a form of Thanatos in Kerouac's *Big Sur*, one that is quintessentially solipsistic and potentially detrimental for the self.

In similar terms, Mailer's response perfectly embraces the pressing will for the American (anti-)hero to oppose the Establishment, that is, in essence, to *rebel* against the forces that jeopardise his/her own liberty. Mailer grounds his demonstration on a particular view of society that is not dissimilar to that of the eighteenth-century philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778). Rousseau postulated the fundamental benevolence of man as an individual entity, and denounced the corruption of this same man by the body of society. Mailer echoes Rousseau when he acknowledges that 'the affirmation implicit in the proposal is that man would then prove to be more creative than murderous and so would not destroy himself'.<sup>47</sup> Meanwhile, as Mailer devises a way to get rid of the atmosphere of repression that permeated post-war America, he promotes a retreat into the private, subject-centred world where each individual strives for satisfaction. This engagement to the self is a notion that will be developed extensively in Part 1 of the thesis, in relation to Kerouac's narrator in *Big Sur* in particular.

For Mailer, the only American character able to embrace and embody such an ontological position is the archetype of the 1950s American hipster.<sup>48</sup> Although in 'The White Negro' American hipsters often fit in the theoretical framework of

---

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., p. 601.

<sup>48</sup> 'The American existentialist – the hipster' (ibid., p. 584).

continental Existentialism, there is something intrinsically American in their desire to follow a particular faith, a specific form of commitment. According to Mailer:

To be a real existentialist [...] one must be religious, one must have one's sense of the 'purpose' – whatever the purpose may be – but a life which is directed by one's faith in the necessity of action is a life committed to the notion that the substratum of existence is the search, [whom] end [is] meaningful but mysterious.<sup>49</sup>

In other terms, Mailer's belief is that Existentialism makes sense in an American context, partly because it is grounded, first and foremost, in the spiritual.

According to Mailer:

The real argument which the mystic must always advance is the very intensity of his private vision – his argument depends from the vision precisely because what was felt in the vision is so extraordinary that no rational argument, no hypotheses of 'oceanic feelings' and certainly no sceptical reductions can explain away what has become for him the reality more real than the reality of closely reasoned logic.<sup>50</sup>

---

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., p. 587.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., p. 588.

What Mailer suggests is that his own view of Existentialism relies on a transcendental conception of the human experience that surpasses the constraints of reason, even if it still originates in man. In this sense, the American Existentialist project may be viewed as compatible with a variety of spiritual traditions in which the responsibility of the self is established. Part 1 of the thesis will illuminate how this functions in a very American literary context.

At the same time, Mailer interprets hipsters as individuals who rebel against the cultural norms of society. They are essentially libertarian, anti-bureaucratic, anti-authoritarian and predominantly individualistic. Using their own lingo, they are fundamentally critical of the official discourse – and media – of post-war America.<sup>51</sup> For Cotkin, hipsters are envisaged as ‘religious and existential luminaries, transcendent creatures wailing against Mailer’s three Cs of death: conformity, consumerism, and cancer, all the devil’s pride’.<sup>52</sup> In this sense, they come as a frontal reaction to the other sociological force identified by Mailer in his essay and referred to as the ‘squares’.<sup>53</sup> The squares, in Mailer’s dialectical argument, correspond to the silent majority of post-war America, conformist and conservative. As Mailer puts it:

One is Hip or one is Square (the alternative which each new generation coming into American life is beginning to feel), one is a rebel or one

---

<sup>51</sup> ‘Hipsters’, Mailer mentions, have adopted a specific dialect, since institutionalised language is regarded as co-opted and is not to be trusted. This use of a parallel language exemplifies the coexisting mode of existence – as set apart from the cultural mainstream – that hipsters aim to achieve. The specificity of this lingo is that it cannot be learnt in any way, but only *experienced*, a notion that exemplifies the didactic basis of the hipsters’ subculture. See *ibid.*, pp. 595-96 especially.

<sup>52</sup> Cotkin, p. 187.

<sup>53</sup> Mailer, ‘The White Negro’, in *The Penguin Book of the Beats*, ed. by Charters, pp. 582-605 (p. 585).

conforms, one is a frontiersman in the Wild West of American night life, or else a Square cell, trapped in the totalitarian tissues of American society, doomed willy-nilly to conform if one is to succeed.<sup>54</sup>

From this caricature, we could say, philosophically speaking, that the hipster is essentially Nietzschean, located beyond morality, wallowing in the lone truth of the immanent experience; while on the other hand, the square is Socratic in essence, referring to the past to perform the present and shying away from experiencing what lies off the path of the daily routine. Mailer's sociological categories, however, are incredibly stereotypical. The dualistic struggle between hipsters and squares loses its relevance if it is not interpreted as the two extremes of a polarity. Mailer, as he intends to provoke the Establishment, shows no concern for nuances and indulges in a radicality that becomes too systematic to be effective.

Deeply problematic is the fact that the distinction between hipsters and squares is foregrounded in a racial argument: the origins of the hipster, according to Mailer, are to be found in the standards provided by African Americans: '[T]he source of hip is the negro'.<sup>55</sup> Pointing out the historical conditions of their exploitation, Mailer argues that African Americans were prompted to develop a survival strategy in which a 'burning consciousness of the present' would construct their own values, codes and culture outside mainstream society.<sup>56</sup> The evocation and utilisation of African Americans in 'The White Negro' is

---

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., p. 585.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., p. 588.

questionable in many regards. As Mailer promotes a way of life that imitates that of African Americans, he forgets that white hipsters had the *choice* of an alternative lifestyle from a sociological perspective, which was not the case of African Americans, whose experience was bounded and largely determined by the segregationist policies of the 1950s. Besides, as Mailer equates African American with the primitive, the psychopathic and the sexual, he reduces them to a social and ethnic caricature. In essentialising African Americans, Mailer adopts a racialising perspective that legitimates cultural and ethnic stereotypes.

Meanwhile, this caricature of African Americans and of hipsters allows Mailer to introduce the figure of the psychopath, a radical embodiment of the traits previously established. The psychopath, according to Mailer, is defined as a wild child encaged by society, who wishes to break free and lead an unfettered existence. The reference to the psychopath in ‘The White Negro’ is utterly provocative. The recourse to this term, which is designed to scare the Establishment, reveals a deliberate will to dramatise the clash between the socio-cultural forces of post-war America. In the meantime, Mailer’s use of the figure of the psychopath also becomes a critique of various psychiatric practices and jargon.<sup>57</sup> Nevertheless, for Mailer the psychopath comes up as the perfect subject for Existentialism: all that he regards in existence is the space-time of the here and now, in accord with no other laws but those of his own will. He has internalised Western society’s individualism and shamelessly revels in the utmost expression of his selfish interests. Thus free of guilt, the psychopath commits his energy to a never-ending quest for experiences to satisfy his desires. In the words of Mailer:

---

<sup>57</sup> Mailer’s use of the term in the context of ‘The White Negro’, ironically enough, turns the ideological hierarchy upside down without cancelling it.

Orgasm is his therapy – he knows at the seed of his being that good orgasm opens his possibilities and bad orgasm imprisons him. But [...] the apocalyptic orgasm often remains as remote as the Holy Grail, for there are clusters and nests and ambushes of violence in his own necessities [...] so the conditions of his life create it anew in him until the drama of his movements bears a sardonic resemblance to the frog who climbed a few feet in the well only to drop back again.<sup>58</sup>

Mailer's description of the figure of the psychopath recalls the recurrent character of Cody in Kerouac's novels. Cody's exuberant, impetuous attitude reflects an engagement with his immediate environment that is both highly physical and profoundly instinctual. His energy, like that of Mailer's prototypical psychopath, is grounded exclusively in his primal impulses. It generates a form of being that is immensely creative, but also fundamentally self-destructive, a paradox that illustrates a distinct facet of the figure of Thanatos, as we will explore in Section 2.

Meanwhile in 'The White Negro', the sexual is integrated into the politics that the essay champions. It becomes embedded in its social project, as Mailer advocates a profusion of experiences – including those that are sexual in nature – to defeat the forces of inertia, conservatism and censorship.<sup>59</sup> From this

---

<sup>58</sup> Mailer, 'The White Negro', in *The Penguin Book of the Beats*, ed. by Charters, pp. 582-605 (p. 593).

<sup>59</sup> In this sense, Mailer's conceptualisation of the sexual tallies with that of D.H. Lawrence (1885-1930). Through novels such as *Women in Love* [1920] and the then-

negotiation between the satisfaction of desires and the economy of the instant, an ontological sense of movement as absolutely crucial emerges. As Mailer writes:

It is this knowledge [of antinomical psychic forces] which provides [...] a dialectical conception of existence with a lust for power, a dark, romantic, and yet undeniably dynamic view of existence for it sees every man and woman as moving individually through each moment of life forward into growth or backward into death.<sup>60</sup>

Here, the relationship to the psychological is primordial. Often overlooked by commentators, Mailer's ontology assumes that existence encapsulates antithetical psychic drives that govern instinctual responses. From this perspective, Mailer's figure of the psychopath intensely resonates with the Freudian theory of the sex drive and death drive.<sup>61</sup> This ontological formulation of movement, which is central for an Existentialist reading of Mailer's essay, is also significant in a literary and aesthetic context as it aids an understanding of Cody's instinctive form of engagement in Kerouac's *Big Sur*.

---

censored *Lady Chatterley's Lover* [1928], Lawrence fully integrated the sexual within a multilayered continuum that sought to render the density and intricacies of life experiences, a writing strategy that exemplifies a decidedly modernist aesthetics.

<sup>60</sup> Mailer, 'The White Negro', in *The Penguin Book of the Beats*, ed. by Charters, pp. 582-605 (p. 588).

<sup>61</sup> See Freud's seminal essay 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle'.

Friedrich Nietzsche, the Dionysian, and the 'New Vision'

Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900), in *The Birth of Tragedy out of the Spirit of Music* [1872], gives a definition of the Dionysian which is intrinsic for an understanding of the paradoxical form of Thanatos that Cody's character exemplifies in Kerouac's work.<sup>62</sup> Nietzsche's concept of the Dionysian is foregrounded in the notion of the 'will to power'.<sup>63</sup> The will to power is axiomatic in his philosophical system; it corresponds, in Nietzsche's terms, to a tremendous movement of volition, one that strives for self-realisation. Influenced by Arthur Schopenhauer (1788-1860), Nietzsche conceived the world as a mass of energy intent on release. Nonetheless, the quasi-totality of this yearning will never be fulfilled: this is what both philosophers regard as the origin of suffering. Meanwhile, Nietzsche took great care in removing the *direction* of the discharge of that mass of energy. In other words, Nietzsche discarded ethical safeguards so that the full blow of energy could expand freely in an attempt to transcend the human condition, for better and for worse. Regardless of the outcome, the will to power acts as a catalyst that precipitates the individual to the forefront of action. In this regard, Nietzsche's concept of will to power may be seen as foundational in the consummate commitment to experiences that Existentialist theory brought forward. According to Kaufmann in 'Nietzsche & Existentialism, '[w]hat interests

---

<sup>62</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy out of the Spirit of Music* [1872], trans. by Shaun Whiteside, ed. by Michael Tanner, Penguin Classics (London: Penguin Books, 1993).

<sup>63</sup> See Nietzsche, *The Gay Science: With a Prelude in Rhymes and an Appendix of Songs* [1882], trans. and rev. by Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, Random House, 1974).

Nietzsche beyond nihilism is possible attitudes that man might adopt toward an absurd world'.<sup>64</sup>

The will to power thus understood, is a seminal component of Nietzsche's philosophical system, which is integrated into his lifelong preoccupation with the human condition. Nietzsche's first book, *The Birth of Tragedy*, offers an extended definition of the concepts of the Apollonian and the Dionysian. A resolutely arbitrary work, its style is impulsive and riddled with ambiguities, as many critics such as James I. Porter in *The Invention of Dionysus* have underlined.<sup>65</sup> *The Birth of Tragedy* is grounded in the primacy of art and the aesthetic experience: 'Art is the supreme task, and the truly metaphysical activity of this life'.<sup>66</sup> Later: '[O]ur highest dignity lies in the meaning of works of art – for it is only as an aesthetic phenomenon that existence and the world are eternally justified'.<sup>67</sup> For Nietzsche, tragedies in particular materialise the suffering and purposelessness of existence, as well as the possibility for human transcendence.

More specifically, Nietzsche defines the concepts of the Apollonian and the Dionysian as systemic categories, and yet insists that they cannot be held as dialectical opposites. The Apollonian, associated with the plastic arts, is concerned with aesthetics, the modalities of the appearance of reality. As we take pleasure in apprehending forms, the purpose of the Apollonian work of art is to be as *beautiful* as possible to diffuse its soothing qualities into the heart of men. The finality of Apollonian art is, in other terms, to reach a 'happy lingering in will-less

---

<sup>64</sup> Kaufmann, 'Nietzsche & Existentialism', in *Existentialism, Religion, and Death*, ed. by Kaufmann, pp. 28-38 (p. 31).

<sup>65</sup> See James I. Porter, *The Invention of Dionysus* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000).

<sup>66</sup> Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, p. 9.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 32.

contemplation': it aims to overcome the individual's suffering through 'eternal glorification of the phenomenon'.<sup>68</sup> And yet, Nietzsche argues, the individual is fully aware of the artistic illusion. Although a valuable tool in the 'taming of horror through art', the Apollonian addresses the feelings and emotions of existence on the surface; it remains pure phenomenon – sensory perception – and cannot reach the core of manhood.<sup>69</sup> Thus, the Apollonian may be conceived as a product of the apprehension of forms enabled by aesthetics but deprived of metaphysical impact. It soothes at best, but is unable to transform. It may please the senses, but cannot transcend the human condition.

The Dionysian, on the contrary, involves the intimate wisdom of *noumena*: it enables insights into what Nietzsche terms 'the nature of the real' itself, that is, the essence of things, the 'thing-in-itself'.<sup>70</sup> For Nietzsche, it is music, and in particular tragedy set to music, that allows this process: 'The tragic spectator is overcome by a sure presentiment of supreme delight attained along a road of destruction and denial, so that he feels that the very depth of things is speaking perceptibly to him'.<sup>71</sup> Here, the Dionysian appears as an outlook beyond phenomena: it has the capacity to deeply connect with the essence of existence on a metaphysical level *beyond* aesthetics perceptions. In the words of Nietzsche:

Dionysiac m[e]n [...] have truly seen to the essence of things, they have understood, and action repels them; for their action can change nothing in the eternal essence of things, they consider it ludicrous or shameful that

---

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., p. 105 and p. 80 respectively.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., p. 40.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., p. 104.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., p. 100.

they should be expected to restore order to the chaotic world.

Understanding kills action, action depends on a veil of illusion. [...] True understanding, insight into the terrible truth, outweighs every motive for action.<sup>72</sup>

This ‘insight’, termed ‘the Wisdom of Silenus’, can be drawn together, in a certain measure, with Camus’s myth of Sisyphus, where the individual gets to the realisation that his fate is both helpless and purposeless.<sup>73</sup> While this realisation – which exemplifies the acceptance of the absurd condition – leads to the revolt and to a subsequent engagement with the here and now for Camus, it signifies the first step of the transcendental process of the Dionysian for Nietzsche. In so doing, the Dionysian exhumes the most ancient and profound sense of tragedy that inhabits humanity. It is this specific conception of the tragic that foregrounds the occurrence of transcendence for Nietzsche, but also for Cody in Kerouac’s work; as I will examine in Section 2, this is what triggers Cody’s tremendous energies, which in turn engulf world and self together.

Meanwhile, for Nietzsche the greatest power of Greek tragedies comes from the chorus, which constitutes the momentum of the Dionysian. Strictly speaking, the transcendental phase occurs when the subject breaks loose from the *principium individuationis*, the principle of individuation within oneself.<sup>74</sup> Before the chorus, each subject is devised as possessing an individuated consciousness

---

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., p. 39.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid. See Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*.

<sup>74</sup> See Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, p. 52.

that separates men from one another, one of the primary causes for human suffering for Nietzsche:

The true Dionysiac suffering amounts to a transformation into air, water, earth and fire, and [...] we should therefore see the condition of individuation as the source and origin of all suffering and hence as something reprehensible. [...] In these ideas we already have all the component parts of a profound and pessimistic view of the world, and at the same time the mystery doctrine of tragedy: the basic understanding of the unity of all things, individuation seen as the primal source of evil, art as the joyful hope that the spell of individuation can be broken, as a presentiment of restored oneness.<sup>75</sup>

Crucially, the chorus phase of tragedies nullifies this principle of individuation and enables a sense of 'Oneness'.<sup>76</sup> It connects the subject with his/her peers, envisaged as a pristine community of men: the burden of suffering is thus shared between all of them to the point where it is nullified. In the end, when this process of division is completed, men will have transcended their own individual fate as they joined in the human mass held in a common ecstasy. In the words of Nietzsche:

---

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> The term 'Oneness', as used by Nietzsche, is based on the philosophical assumption that 'underlying all individual appearances is a single, fundamentally unchanging Oneness' (Michael Tanner, *Nietzsche: A Very Short Introduction*, Very Short Introductions Series (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 13).

This chorus beholds its lord and master, Dionysus, and hence it is always a chorus of votaries: it sees how he, the god, suffers and is exalted, and it therefore does not act itself. In this function of complete devotion to the god, it is the supreme, Dionysiac expression of nature, and therefore, like nature, it speaks under the spell of wise and oracular sayings. Sharing his suffering, it is also wise, heralding the truth from the very heart of the world.<sup>77</sup>

Hence, the Dionysian involves a release from the private tragedy of the self by sanctifying the disappearance of individuality for the mass; this process, enabled by the chorus of Greek tragedies, is the essence of the Dionysian transcendence. More importantly for how the figure of Thanatos appears in the following analysis, the Dionysian impulse both destroys and creates: it destroys the individual's sense of private consciousness and turns the tragedy of existence into a communion that is transcendent by nature. Since the greatest Dionysian deliverance partakes in the destruction of the sense of individuation in subjects to elevate them into a transcendent oneness, it is both essentially destructive *and* creative and thus commensurate with the paradox of Thanatos. Thus, the Dionysian process, envisioned as a 'coming to terms with [private] existence', and as an exultation in 'ceasing to be one', relies on a particular form of self-destruction to be operative.<sup>78</sup>

---

<sup>77</sup> Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, p. 44.

<sup>78</sup> Michael Tanner, 'Introduction', in *The Birth of Tragedy*, ed. by Tanner, pp. I-XXXIV (p. XVIII).

Collaterally, in *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche offers a virulent attack on Euripides and Sophocles, who, as playwrights using a dialectical method that stems from Socratic fundamentals, introduced reason on stage and neutralised the effect of the Dionysian. The Dionysian process operates intuitively and subconsciously. In building situations where the audience had to rationally work out the plot, these two playwrights, in their own fashion, emptied the tragedy's choruses of their substance and undermined the occurrence of the Dionysian: 'This disruption of the function of the chorus, which Sophocles recommended [...] in his dramatic practice [...] is the first step towards the annihilation of the chorus'.<sup>79</sup> In the end, all that remained was a dramatised epic, where instinct and intuition had been replaced by the rational power of the intellect, and where rhetorics superseded art. This depreciation of reason is used by Nietzsche in *The Birth of Tragedy* to contrast and promote, the instinctual, the main modality of the Dionysian. This celebration of the non-rational and the intuitive reverberates in Kerouac's writings as well as in Ginsberg's poems, where it takes the form of a tropism for the spontaneous and for the mystical that is used both as a gateway to the transcendental, and as an epistemological foundation for a social critique.<sup>80</sup>

This Nietzschean legacy can be traced through what the early group of the Beats termed the 'New Vision', a reservoir of ideas meant to feed and stimulate literary imagination and production.<sup>81</sup> The 'New Vision' was made out of a large theoretical and literary corpus that included works from William Butler Yeats

---

<sup>79</sup> Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, p. 70.

<sup>80</sup> Many Beat critics, such as Campbell and Watson for instance, have pointed out the Nietzschean legacy of Beat writings in general.

<sup>81</sup> The term 'New Vision' was coined by Lucien Carr (1925-2005) and by Ginsberg in the mid-1940s (see Watson, p. 39).

(1865-1839), Wystan Hugh Auden (1907-1973), Franz Kafka (1883-1924), André Gide (1869-1951), Albert Camus and Oswald Spengler amongst others. While these works are extremely diverse, they all challenge, in their own ways, the epistemological framework of rationality that underpins the project of modernity; just as they express the transcendental in various forms. By applying these ideas to the work of Kerouac and Ginsberg, three axiomatic rules emerge: first and foremost, the belief that unrestrained, ‘naked self-expression is the seed of creativity’.<sup>82</sup> Secondly, ‘the artist’s consciousness is expanded by derangement of the senses’.<sup>83</sup> And thirdly, ‘art eludes conventional morality’.<sup>84</sup> Undoubtedly, the ‘New Vision’ owes a debt to Nietzsche’s fundamentals: it features a profound suspicion towards conventional and dialectical systems of thought. While such statements had partly been given artistic substance in the past, the relevance of the Beats’ ‘New Vision’ remained in its relation to history, as it sought to explore literary traditions and philosophical frameworks that clashed with the cultural context and dominant values of post-war America in their substance as well as in their approaches.

---

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., p. 27.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid. This statement in particular fits in the tradition founded by Thomas De Quincey (1785-1859), Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772-1834), Rimbaud and the Surrealists, and has been taken up, later on, by Aldous Huxley (1894-1963) and poet and singer Jim Morrison (1943-1971). It revisits the belief in the access to the transcendental through intoxication. See Aldous Huxley, *The Doors of Perception; and, Heaven and Hell* [1954], Vintage Classics, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (London: Vintage Books, Random House, 2004).

<sup>84</sup> Watson, p. 27.

Oswald Spengler, Michael D'Orso and the Myth of the Primitive

The 'New Vision' also included references to cultural decline. According to D'Orso in 'Man Out of Time: Kerouac, Spengler, & the Faustian Soul', Ginsberg envisaged, as soon as 1944, 'some kind of spiritual crisis in the West and the possibility of Decline instead of infinite American Century Progress'.<sup>85</sup>

Ginsberg's observation tallies with the thesis of Spengler, whose work *The Decline of the West* figured in the corpus of the 'New Vision'.<sup>86</sup> *The Decline of the West* argues vehemently against the cultural logic of rationalism and foresees the collapse of Western civilisation. Spengler envisions cultures as 'historical phenomena which encompass the common elements shared by particular individuals, groups, peoples, and nations at any given time in history'.<sup>87</sup>

Establishing an analogy with living organisms, he postulates that cultures go through stages of growth, decay, and death. Meanwhile, Spengler devises history as a juxtaposition of cultural forms that are cyclical in their structure: he could thus predict, in principle, what would reoccur in the near-future in studying past historical events.<sup>88</sup> Spengler assumes that what determines the movement of a cultural cycle – whether one of growth or of decay – is its degree of connection to nature. According to Spengler, a culture rises and thrives whenever it displays an intuitive connection of a people – and more generally the whole community of the

---

<sup>85</sup> D'Orso, p. 19.

<sup>86</sup> See Oswald Spengler, *The Decline of the West*.

<sup>87</sup> Klaus P. Fischer, *History and Prophecy: Oswald Spengler and the Decline of the West*, *American University Studies 9: History*, 59 (New York: P. Lang, 1989), p. 125.

<sup>88</sup> These cycles may run into one another. That is not to say that they influence each other: Spengler's analysis of cultures does not admit cross-cultural references, which constitutes a major epistemological flaw in the light of orthodox cultural theory.

living, referred to as the microcosm – to its natural environment, or macrocosm. For Spengler, such a connection to nature accounts for the vitality of a culture, which may thus harmoniously develop. On the contrary, the disconnection of a culture from the natural and the instinctual triggers a decaying movement. Meanwhile, for Spengler the values of rationality, positivism and critical investigation are envisaged as fundamentally corrupted. What Spengler regards as the ultimate mark of deliquescence of a culture is the loss of faith and the celebration of materialism.<sup>89</sup>

These key ideas from Spengler's theory will emerge later in the literary analysis in relation to Kerouac's *Tristessa*. Fundamentally, for Spengler a culture must exemplify nature in order to develop; this requirement at the core of Spengler's model calls forth the figure of the primitive. In many regards, as Part 2 will show, Kerouac's character of Tristessa in the eponymous novella tallies with the stereotypical figure of the primitive, from her cultural background to her intuitive inclination for transcendence. The figure of the primitive man partakes in a rhetoric that is concerned, essentially, with intuition and instinctual response: for Spengler, 'pure life lies beyond cause and effect, law and measure'.<sup>90</sup>

Simultaneously, the primitive man is living in the here and now: his basic instincts are untamed.<sup>91</sup> Conversely, the figure that opposes that of the primitive

---

<sup>89</sup> Spengler disregards causality as a valid historiographical method. For Spengler, 'a historical event is not caused: it grows' (Fischer, p. 182). Consequently, Spengler grounds his own method of investigation in historical morphology through the inspection of homologies. Works of art are crucial in this regard: Spengler interprets them as exemplifications of the nomadic theme of a culture. For Spengler, history has more to do 'with man's longings, aspirations, dreams, or hopes' rather than mere reason (*ibid.*, p. 180).

<sup>90</sup> Spengler, p. 115.

<sup>91</sup> Such a conception of the primitive man recalls Mailer's characterisation of the hipster in 'The White Negro'.

man is the one of the ‘Faustian man’, who, as the paragon of modernity, corresponds to the end-product of Western civilisation.<sup>92</sup> The modern Faustian man is disconnected from nature; he devises the world through reason and critical inquiry and constantly projects himself in the future. In line with the values of the Enlightenment, the Faustian man disregards intuition and grounds his beliefs in rationalism, in materialism and in technological progress.

In ‘Man Out of Time: Kerouac, Spengler, & the “Faustian Soul”’, D’Orso reads Kerouac’s novels as exemplifying the dichotomy between primitive man and Faustian man:

Kerouac’s novels are more than journals of hedonistic, decadent, sensation-starved people, they are more than escapist, and they are more than portraits of escapists. Kerouac’s central characters are fleeing from the ramifications of Spenglerian civilization – the deadness of life divorced from nature, the omnipresent specter of life’s end, and the weight of time. But they are also moving toward a definite, if indescribable and perhaps unattainable, goal – the experience of ‘It’ and a union with the ‘pure Present’. They are torn between flight and pursuit, looking behind and ahead, and Kerouac’s novels are chronicles of their struggles.<sup>93</sup>

For D’Orso, Kerouac reiterates the Spenglerian dialectic by dramatising the gap between the innocent and spontaneous world of childhood and the colder and more rational world of adulthood. For him, Kerouac is not only reacting against

---

<sup>92</sup> Spengler, p. 97.

<sup>93</sup> D’Orso, p. 28.

modernity, he observes an intense commitment to a search for transcendence that expresses itself along the lines of a Spenglerian primitiveness. D'Orso's reading of the influence of Spengler in Kerouac's work makes a lot of sense; nevertheless, Kerouac uses Spengler mainly through the emergence and consistent use of a literary trope of innocence and primitiveness, he does not entirely abide by the politics and ethics of the historian. This opposition between the archetypes of the primitive and the modern Faustian man, between subjects of rise and decline of civilisations, will be deciphered in more detail in the analysis to show how the figure of Thanatos may emerge from the cultural background of *Tristessa*.

#### Immanuel Kant's and Arthur Schopenhauer's Definitions of the Sublime

Kant, in *Critique of Judgement* – a work influenced by the writings of Burke (1729-1797) – developed the concept of the Sublime as an aesthetic category of its own. In investigating our capacity to form an aesthetic judgement on phenomena around us, Kant distinguished the Sublime from the beautiful. The beautiful is an object of contemplation that provides pleasure through its mere form.<sup>94</sup> The Sublime proceeds from the beautiful; in addition, it generates a *tremor* in the beholder's consciousness, a shock symptomatic of a breach in rational understanding. The origin of this tremor lies in the amplitude of the scale of the phenomenon:

---

<sup>94</sup> The Kantian category of the beautiful shares many similarities with the Nietzschean concept of the *Apollonian*: both generate a peaceful enjoyment that soothes the individual through its mere aesthetic qualities.

But in what we are wont to call sublime in nature there is such an absence of anything leading to particular objective principles and corresponding forms of nature, that it is rather in its chaos, or in its wildest and most irregular disorder and desolation, provided it gives signs of magnitude and power, that nature chiefly excites the ideas of the sublime.<sup>95</sup>

Hence, the Kantian Sublime may be apprehended through both perception and imagination. At first, the individual is at a loss to figure out the phenomenon; his/her reason is deterred precisely because the Sublime is boundless: '[T]he 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'.<sup>96</sup> Faced with such an extraordinary phenomenon, the receiver's mind is unable to interpret it: as he/she cannot rationally conceive the nature of the object that he/she is contemplating, it becomes a 'source of fear'.<sup>97</sup>

This temporary loss of the ability to rationally comprehend the object of contemplation is pivotal in Kant's definition of sublimity.<sup>98</sup> While the Kantian

---

<sup>95</sup> Kant, *The Critique of Judgement*, p. 92.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid, p. 90. In this sense, the phenomenon of the Sublime is transcendent in itself for Kant.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid., p. 109.

<sup>98</sup> In so doing, Kant reveals his philosophical method. As he writes in *The Critique of Judgement*, 'in respect of nature's merely empirical laws, we must think in nature an endless multiplicity of empirical laws, which yet are contingent so far as our insight goes, i. e. cannot be cognized a priori. In respect of these, we estimate the unity of nature according to empirical laws, and the possibility of the unity of experience, as a system according to empirical laws, to be contingent. [...] Hence judgement is compelled, for its own guidance, to adopt [this principle] as an a priori principle, that what is for human insight contingent in the particular (empirical) laws of nature contains nevertheless unity of law in the synthesis of its manifold in an intrinsically possible experience – unfathomable, though still thinkable, as such unity may, no doubt, be for us' (ibid., p. 23).

notion of the beautiful operates a single movement from subject to object, the Sublime features a second movement that returns from the object to the subject:

Susceptibility to pleasure arising from reflection on the forms of things (whether of nature or of art) betokens, however, not only a finality on the part of Objects in their relation to the reflective judgement in the Subject, [...] but also, conversely, a finality on the part of the Subject, answering to the concept of freedom, in respect of the form, or even formlessness, of objects. The result is that the aesthetic judgement refers not merely, as a judgement of taste, to the beautiful, but also, as springing from a higher intellectual feeling, to the *sublime*.<sup>99</sup>

That is to say, after the initial disruption of one's rational capacities, the Sublime generates pleasure by overcoming the impossibility of its representation through the power of conceptualisation. For Kant, this self-reflection is fundamentally gratifying: through it, reason eventually defeats nature. According to Gene Ray, it provokes a form of elation:

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,

---

<sup>99</sup> Ibid, p. 33.

however mighty or boundless it may be. Terror and shame give way to a proud and enjoyable self-contemplation.<sup>100</sup>

Hence, the Sublime engenders a series of heterodox affects: it combines a form of pleasure that originates in the contemplation of a beauty of an extraordinary nature, with a feeling of terror generated by the disruption of reason implied by the unearthly character of that same object of contemplation. Ideally, it also provides a sense of contentment that stems from the ability to ultimately rationalise the phenomenon witnessed. For John Goldthwait, this emotional turmoil has been suggested earlier by Burke: ‘Burke had explained the emotion of the sublime as a feeling of fear which grips one in the presence of some mighty object, but then turns to delight when one learns that he is not in actual danger’.<sup>101</sup> Thus, the Sublime fuses beauty with awe, joy with fright, reason with imagination, pleasure with dismay. Crucially, this definition of the Kantian Sublime is reminiscent of the character of Tristessa in Kerouac’s eponymous novel, whose grace – seen from the narrator’s eyes – contrasts with her tendency to self-destroy. An epitome of beauty that hosts the promise of imminent dissolution, Tristessa will be conceived as an embodiment of sublimity, as I will show in Part 2.

Withal, Kant’s concept of the Sublime is located within the subject: ‘For the beautiful in nature we must seek a ground external to ourselves, but for the

---

<sup>100</sup> Gene Ray, *Terror and the Sublime in Art and Critical Theory: From Auschwitz to Hiroshima to September 11* [2005], *Studies in European Culture and History*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), p. 28.

<sup>101</sup> John T. Goldthwait, ‘Translator’s Introduction’, in Immanuel Kant, *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime* [1799], trans. by John T. Goldthwait, ed. by California Library Reprint, 5<sup>th</sup> edn (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), pp. 1-38 (p. 35).

sublime one merely in ourselves and the attitude of mind that introduces sublimity into the representation of nature'.<sup>102</sup> Therefore, it 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. Consequently, from a Kantian perspective, *Tristessa* does not stand for *a* version of the Sublime, but for Duluoz's, who stands not only for the receiver of the Sublime, but also for the initiator of the phenomenon. This relation will enable us to monitor the impact of *Tristessa* – devised as an object of sublimity – on the narrator's own self and on the text.

Schopenhauer's definition of the Sublime in *The World as Will and Representation* [1818], while relatively close to that of Kant in its form, differs in its ethical significance.<sup>103</sup> For Schopenhauer, the overpowering phenomenon of the Sublime is designed to break free from the constant yearning that frustrates the individual. It becomes a means towards transcendence:

But these very objects, whom significant forms invite us to a pure contemplation of them, may have a hostile relationship to the human will in general [...]. They may be opposed to it; they may threaten it by their might that eliminates all resistance, or their immeasurable greatness may reduce it to nought. Nevertheless, the beholder may [...] forcibly tear himself from his will and its relations, and giving himself up entirely to

---

<sup>102</sup> Kant, *The Critique of Judgement*, p. 93.

<sup>103</sup> See Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation* [1818], Vol. II, trans. by Edward F.J. Payne, ed. by The Falcon's Wing Press, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn, 2 vols (New-York: Dover Publications, 1969), II, Chapter 39 (pp. 200-07).

knowledge, may quietly contemplate, as pure, will-less subject of knowing, those very objects so terrible to the will. He may comprehend only their Idea that is foreign to all relation, gladly linger over its contemplation, and consequently be elevated precisely in this way above himself, his person, his willing, and all willing. In that case he is then filled with the feeling of the *sublime*; he is in the state of exaltation, and therefore the object that causes such a state is called *sublime*.<sup>104</sup>

Hence, for Schopenhauer the experience of the Sublime is apprehended as pleasurable in itself, mainly because it embodies the potentiality for a temporary suspension of one's 'willing'.<sup>105</sup> When replaced within Schopenhauer's metaphysical framework, the phenomenon of the Sublime has the capacity to disrupt the observer's rational awareness, understood at that part of the self in which all willing emerges and develops into an experience of self-alienation.

For Schopenhauer, this disruption of the rational capacities of the self through the Sublime is envisaged as something desirable:

Yet as long as personal affliction does not gain the upper hand, but we remain in aesthetic contemplation, the pure Subject of knowing gazes through this struggle of nature, through this picture of the broken will, and comprehends calmly, unshaken and unconcerned, the Ideas in those very

---

<sup>104</sup> Ibid., pp. 201-02.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid. In Schopenhauer's metaphysics, human suffering is caused by eternal yearning and unfulfilled desire, which he terms 'willing' in his writings. According to him, this willing is fostered through the interplay of reason, which must be circumvented in order to attempt to liberate oneself from suffering.

objects that are threatening and terrible to the will. In this contrast is to be found the feeling of the sublime.<sup>106</sup>

Thus, the Sublime is viewed as a strategy to get rid of the limitations of the self *through self-destruction* and move towards a form of transcendence. This equivocal experience of sublimity, which is foregrounded, partly, in self-nullification, will be envisaged as particularly meaningful in relation to Kerouac's narrator in *Tristessa*. Indeed, for Schopenhauer too, sublimity is, above all, a phenomenon taking place in the mind of the observer:

The feeling of the sublime arises here through our being aware of the vanishing nothingness of our own body in the presence of a greatness which itself, on the other hand, resides only in our representation, and of which we, as knowing subjects, are the supporter.<sup>107</sup>

This menace for the self, which paradoxically embodies the possibility for its own transcendence, will be instrumental in the delineation of Thanatos in *Tristessa*.

### Robert Hipkiss and Kerouac's Romanticism

Robert Hipkiss's *Jack Kerouac, Prophet of the New Romanticism* is useful to grasp the full implications of Kerouac's Romantic aesthetics.<sup>108</sup> Hipkiss relocates

---

<sup>106</sup> Ibid., p. 204.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid., p. 206.

<sup>108</sup> See Hipkiss, *Jack Kerouac, Prophet of the New Romanticism*.

Kerouac within a Romantic lineage and focuses on the motifs of anxiety and distress that haunt his writings: ‘It was Kerouac who captured best the essential, driving desperation that motivated Beat behaviour’.<sup>109</sup> It is the nature of this romantic desperation that Hipkiss seeks to decipher in his work. Hipkiss investigates Kerouac’s interplay with the trope of lost innocence, which he links to the tone of melancholy in his writing: ‘[Kerouac’s novels] celebrate a child’s vision of innocence that cannot come again but which Kerouac desperately holds onto as the only true vision of purity and goodness in a corrupt world’.<sup>110</sup> In fact, what Hipkiss seeks to apprehend is Kerouac’s recognition of the suffering of existence in, and through his writings. However, what Hipkiss fails to notice in *Jack Kerouac, Prophet of the New Romanticism* is that this suffering, which often takes the form of self-destruction in Kerouac’s novels, is also used as a strategy for self-creation both in narrative and in aesthetic terms, and that this too may partake in a form of Romanticism. It is this very paradox that my thesis will focus on, continuing to restore an essential component of the Romantic trope in Kerouac’s writings that Hipkiss rightly, but insufficiently, spelt out.

---

<sup>109</sup> Ibid., p. v.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid., p. 2.

**PART 1.****EXISTENTIALISM MEETS TRANSCENDENTALISM:****EXISTENTIALIST FORMS OF THANATOS IN GINSBERG'S 'HOWL'****AND IN KEROUAC'S *BIG SUR***

‘[T]he same old singsong sad song truth of death...because the reason I yell death so much is because I’m really yelling life, because you cant have death without life’.<sup>1</sup>

‘Real holy laughter in the river! They saw it all! the wild eyes!  
the holy yells! They bade farewell! They jumped off the  
roof! to solitude! waving! carrying flowers! Down to the  
river! into the street!’<sup>2</sup>

This first part of this thesis aims to illuminate the presence of Thanatos as outlined in the introduction through an Existentialist reading of Ginsberg’s poem ‘Howl’ and Kerouac’s novel *Big Sur*. In order to decipher how Thanatos operates within the primary texts, I will refer to the philosophical tradition of mid-twentieth-century European Existentialism, and more particularly to the works of Sartre and Camus.<sup>3</sup> Sartre’s concepts of nothingness and commitment in *Being and Nothingness* and in ‘Existentialism & Humanism’, and Camus’s notions of the absurd and the revolt as developed in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, will be seen to filter into a form of American Existentialism in which the concept of Thanatos as introduced previously occupies a primary place. Sartre’s nothingness and commitment and Camus’s absurd and the revolt will also be interpreted in the context of the nineteenth-century tradition of American Transcendentalism. For this purpose I will focus on a small selection of the work of Emerson and Thoreau. Emerson’s essays ‘Nature’, ‘History’ and ‘Self-reliance’, and Thoreau’s

---

<sup>1</sup> *Big Sur*, p. 15t0.

<sup>2</sup> ‘Howl’, p. 9.

<sup>3</sup> Although Camus, admittedly, was not a systematic philosopher, he will be regarded as an important contributor to twentieth-century European Existentialist theory in my thesis.

*Walden* and ‘Life Without Principle’ are the primary texts. While the Transcendentalism of Emerson and that of Thoreau differ radically, the touchpoints of their works form an essential part of an American tradition which, in turn, has deeply influenced Kerouac’s writings and Ginsberg’s poetry in particular.<sup>4</sup> More importantly, these Transcendentalist ideas will be established as a crucial resource with which to contextualise and interpret an Existentialist version of Thanatos as it plays out in the works under investigation. As David Bowers observes:

[...] by reawakening – even among its critics – an interest in the great problems of human nature and destiny, transcendentalism conferred upon American literature a perspective far wider and deeper than that proposed by its own formulated doctrines, the perspective of humanity itself.<sup>5</sup>

Hence, this part will connect Ginsberg’s and Kerouac’s writings to specific aspects of Existentialist theory, recontextualised within a more Transcendentalist American tradition.

However, it must be made clear from the onset that there is no such thing as a self-contained Existentialist philosophical system. As McElroy argues in *Existentialism and Modern Literature*:

---

<sup>4</sup> ‘Having freed itself [...] from its earlier tendencies either blindly to imitate or blindly to reject European models, American literature here for the first time sloughed off provincialism, and [...] attained, paradoxically, the rank and quality of world literature’ (David Bowers, ‘Democratic Vistas’, in *American Transcendentalism: An Anthology of Criticism*, ed. by Brian M. Barbour (London: University of Notre Dame Press, 1973), pp. 9-21 (p. 9)).

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10.

It cannot be said, except in a very general way, that there is a philosophy of existentialism: there are only existentialistic thinkers. [...] nowhere does there exist a comprehensive system of thought which can be called the philosophy of existentialism.<sup>6</sup>

Thus, while the selected concepts articulated by Sartre and Camus will be used as a method of investigation, Ginsberg's 'Howl' and Kerouac's *Big Sur* cannot properly be called Existentialist works; their scope and range are by no means limited to the Existentialist field. Nevertheless, both texts project – in their own ways – a struggle to assert and maintain a sense of selfhood and integrity in their narratives that is accordingly reflected in their stylistic choices. In both Kerouac's and Ginsberg's writings, the forces of nullification breed self-creation, or precipitate self-destruction. Therefore, I will use the dialectical interplay between Sartrean nothingness and engagement and the Camusian absurd and the revolt in the texts to analyse their obsessive concern with the autonomy of the self in terms that are ontological, socio-historical and aesthetic. The ways in which the primary sources interact with these concepts will enable us to define an Existentialist form of Thanatos, one that reflects an essential paradox within these works; the reading will operate both within an Existentialist perspective and within the wider landscape of American literature and philosophy.

Thanatos, defined in the *Orphic Hymns* as an entity serving Hades, the God of death in Greek mythology, takes on a specific form in the context of Part 1

---

<sup>6</sup> McElroy, p. 5.

of the thesis. As he connects the world of humans to the Underworld, Thanatos embodies a decisive bond between subjects and their cessation of being, that is between existence and non-existence. It is the combination of these two contradictory states that foregrounds the definition of Thanatos as it operates in the works of Kerouac and of Ginsberg. As an agent of decay and death, the mythological Thanatos offers his victims a chance to reflect upon the phenomenon of existence; he induces a special form of consciousness engendered by the type of situations that are featured in 'Howl' and in *Big Sur*. Oftentimes, these situations correspond to predicaments that, by their very nature, threaten the self: referred to as 'limit-situations' in Existentialist theory, they demand an ontological response that addresses the menace of nullification, a response that is existential in essence.

As we are about to see in more detail, such situations are depicted through various paradigms in the texts. In Ginsberg's 'Howl', the conditions of being are circumvented by an annihilating principle that is ubiquitous, and that is incarnate in the figure of 'Moloch' in Part 2 of the poem. This threat at the core of the poem creates the main dialectical articulation in 'Howl', which I will examine in terms that are ontological and socio-historical as well as spiritual and poetical. This articulation will be apprehended both from an Existentialist and a Transcendentalist perspective and interpreted as a conflict between the characters' immediate and unconditional desire for self-realisation, and Moloch's negating and alienating power. In *Big Sur*, Kerouac largely focuses on the sense of despair and hopelessness that besiege the narrator, Jack Duluoz, who has relocated to the Pacific beach of Big Sur to escape the inconveniences of his newly-achieved

fame. There, the narrator finds himself spiralling into decay and self-destruction, through the debilitating effects of alcoholism and through a general sense of disillusionment and alienation. The elegiac style of the novel echoes the narrator's downfall, which is exemplified by his physical and mental decay. An agonising novel, it describes a series of crises and ordeals that Duluoz goes through in order to find salvation. In substance, the narrator's realisation of his decrepit condition is what creates the limit-situation in the novel. It is encapsulated in the rhetorical phrase '[o]ne fast move or I'm gone' in the first chapters of *Big Sur*; this limit-situation is precisely what determines the ontological framework of the narrative.<sup>7</sup>

The awareness of one's own demise is paramount in Existentialist theory: this is what initiates the reaction towards engagement.<sup>8</sup> As the prospect of one's own death is internalised by consciousness, being becomes aware of its finitude, or rather, of its perimeter for action. As Lucio P. Ruotolo explains: 'The difficult idea that every structure of consciousness is dialectically part of that chaos which negates it strikes us with full resonance in the writing of Martin Heidegger'.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, in *Being and Time* [1927], Heidegger elaborates an ontological position that is highly paradoxical: 'As potentiality-for-Being, Dasein cannot outstrip the possibility of death. Death is the possibility of the absolute impossibility of Dasein. Thus death reveals itself as *that possibility which is one's ownmost*'.<sup>10</sup> That is to say, not only does 'Dasein' – Heidegger's term for consciousness and its reflexive capacity – integrate the prospect of immanent dissolution in its

---

<sup>7</sup> *Big Sur*, p. 4.

<sup>8</sup> See section on Sartre and Camus in the literature review, pp. 32-45.

<sup>9</sup> Lucio P. Ruotolo, *Six Existential Heroes: The Politics of Faith* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1973), pp. 3-4.

<sup>10</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* [1927], trans. by John Macquarrie & Edward Robinson (New York: Harper Perennial, 2008), p. 294.

essence, it realises the subject's ownmost potentiality-for-Being *at the same time*.<sup>11</sup> Therefore, Heidegger's potentiality-for-Being, as it stamps death onto consciousness, concomitantly fulfils one's ownmost self.

This ontological proposition implies that processes of self-destruction generate forms of self-creation. It is this very contradiction that Walter Kaufmann spells out in the following quotation:

Unquestionably, the acceptance of the fact that I must die (my running ahead to my death in thought) may forcibly remind me of the limited amount of time at my disposal, [...] and thus become a powerful incentive to make the most of my Being here and now.<sup>12</sup>

The radical ambivalence of such a form of being, which intermingles death and life, self-destruction and self-creation, constitutes the source of authenticity for Heidegger.<sup>13</sup> Authenticity is characterised by a form of ultimate being achieved through the realisation of one's ownmost and uttermost self in relation to the present moment. For Golomb in *In Search of Authenticity*: '[...] only Being-towards-Death can be *fully* meaningful and authentic. Each time we entertain the possibility of dying we undertake an assessment of our Being. In our anticipation

---

<sup>11</sup> 'Dasein' is defined by Heidegger as 'this entity which each of us is himself and which includes inquiring as one of the possibilities of its being' (ibid., p. 27).

<sup>12</sup> Kaufmann, 'Existentialism & Death', in *Existentialism, Religion, and Death: Thirteen Essays*, ed. by Kaufmann, pp. 193-214 (p. 201).

<sup>13</sup> This is what Heidegger termed 'Being-towards-death', or 'Being-unto-death': "'Dying" stands for that *way of Being* in which Dasein is *towards* its death' (Heidegger, p. 291). According to Chatterji: 'Heidegger cryptically defined death as "the possibility of the impossibility of any existence at all", and urged that this fact be constantly embraced in all decision-making as the existent's inward awareness that his being is a "being-towards-death"' (Chatterji, 'Existentialist Approach to Modern American Drama', in *Existentialism in American Literature*, ed. by Chatterji, pp. 80-98 (p. 83)).

we define our existence’.<sup>14</sup> For Heidegger it is precisely the consciousness of death that generates a form of utmost being.

This existential reaction, which is fundamentally antagonistic, encapsulates the paradox of Thanatos: it is grounded in the premise that the very consciousness of death endows existence with a volition that, in principle, is beneficial for the self, and that materialises through the notion of engagement. Here, Thanatos will be seen as operating a junction between being and non-being: this junction exemplifies a dynamic of decay and annihilation of the self – a form of non-being internalised by the subject’s consciousness – that culminates, simultaneously and paradoxically, in a self-creative movement towards authentic being: ‘In facing death one’s authenticity is maximally disclosed, because the forces which work to suppress it are so very formidable’.<sup>15</sup> This antithetical dynamic, from stasis to movement, and from the consciousness of death to the potentiality for ultimate being, embodies the paradox of Thanatos, and I will analyse the ways in which it operates in ‘Howl’ and in *Big Sur*.

Consequently, Part 1 of the thesis will trace the interplays between Sartrean nothingness and commitment, and between the Camusian absurd and the revolt, to illuminate the ontological tensions between being and non-being, and reveal an Existentialist version of Thanatos within the texts. In ‘Howl’, I will show that the main characters enter a struggle against Moloch – understood both in its mythical and temporal dimensions – to retrieve a space for the ideal self, as Ginsberg offers a series of poetical variations on the theme of euphoria on both a historical and ahistorical level. In Kerouac’s novel, the narrator’s relocation to Big

---

<sup>14</sup> Golomb, p. 107.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 110.

Sur offers him a chance to transcend his doomed condition and reconnect with self and nature. Nonetheless, the narrator's retreat is largely problematic: Kerouac stages Duluoz's mental fragmentation, physical dissolution and ultimate spiritual liberation through a religious epiphany configured in terms that reference a liminal version of Catholicism.

## **SECTION 1.**

### **DESTRUCTION AND ALIENATION IN *BIG SUR* AND IN 'HOWL'**

In Section 1, I will explore the ways in which Kerouac and Ginsberg articulate a trope of alienation that is fundamentally threatening for the self, and which will be conceived as a set of strategies of destruction in the writings. I will show that this alienation stems from a primordial nothingness that takes a plethora of forms in the texts, from the loss of the visionary to the estrangement from nature in *Big Sur*, and to the figure of Moloch conceived as a principle of negation in 'Howl'. These strategies of alienation in the writings partake in the formulation of an Existentialist Thanatos; they will be examined in relation to Emerson's and Thoreau's transcendental conception of nature in particular, to define the ontological problems in the texts with more accuracy.

### 1.1.1. Before Departure: Anguish and the Loss of the Visionary in *Big Sur*

The opening of *Big Sur* manifests a radical break from Kerouac's previous road novels. The excitement and the enthusiastic tone of his early prose have faded away, replaced with an impression of doom and gloom from the very first pages. This subsection will show that this rupture in the writing is imputable, in great measure, to a specific type of nothingness that surfaces in the text *before* the narrator's departure for Big Sur. The next paragraphs will seek to decipher the nature of this nothingness; a nothingness that generates a form of alienation that will be envisaged as one of the main strategies of destruction in the text, and that is paramount for the definition of an Existentialist form of Thanatos in *Big Sur*. In order to characterise the form that this alienation takes in Kerouac's novel, I will work with a definition of Sartrean nothingness that will be articulated through Emerson's conception of nature.

In 'Nature', Emerson examines a series of metaphysical statements that deal with the origin of man and the purpose of existence. For Emerson, nature incarnates a principle of creation that is envisioned as the 'not-me':

Philosophically considered, the universe is composed of Nature and the Soul. Strictly speaking, therefore, all that is separate from us, all which Philosophy distinguishes as the NOT ME, that is, both nature and art, all other men and my own body, must be ranked under this name, NATURE.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Emerson, 'Nature', p. 36.

In ontological terms, this 'not-me' parallels Sartre's notion of nothingness, which in *Being and Nothingness* is interpreted as 'an always possible nihilation of my possibles which is outside my possibilities'.<sup>2</sup> Hence, in a Transcendentalist context, nature is to Emersonian engagement what nothingness is to Sartrean commitment. That is to say, for Emerson nature may be conceived as the origin of the transcendental self; simultaneously, it induces an existential reaction that realises its highest potentialities. This relationship between self and nature, and between consciousness and nothingness, in Kerouac's writing and in the opening of *Big Sur* in particular, will be scrutinised in this subsection.

More specifically, Emerson's essay focuses on the ways in which individuals both encapsulate and exemplify the essence of nature. For Emerson, '[t]he foundations of man are not in matter, but in spirit'.<sup>3</sup> That is to say, man is conceived in relation to a greater spiritual force:

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 he calls Reason; it is not mine, or thine, or his, but we are its; we are its property and men.<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, p. 558.

<sup>3</sup> Emerson, 'Nature', p. 77.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 49.

For Emerson, all individuals partake in a greater unity that is essentially spiritual and that exemplifies a universal principle of creation. According to Charles Mayo Ellis:

That belief we term Transcendentalism [...] maintains that man has ideas, that come not through the five senses, or the powers of reasoning, but are either the result of direct revelation from God, his immediate inspiration, or his immanent presence in the spiritual world.<sup>5</sup>

What Ellis identifies as ‘ideas’ – that is, man’s original motives – stem from a primeval agency that is linked to the godhead. Therefore for Emerson, man is predicated by the creative spirit of nature, which he terms the ‘universal mind’:<sup>6</sup> ‘Of the universal mind each individual man is one more incarnation’.<sup>7</sup> In effect, for Emerson every element within the microcosm is envisioned as connected to the macrocosmic principle of creation – that is, the godhead – and tends towards assimilation into the divine. It implies that 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.<sup>8</sup> This relationship in Kerouac’s writing – but also in Ginsberg’s poetry, as we will see – will be interpreted both as an engagement with the phenomenon of nature that integrates, to various extents, the pantheistic model of American

---

<sup>5</sup> Charles Mayo Ellis, ‘An Essay on Transcendentalism’ [1842], in *The American Transcendentalists*, ed. by Miller, pp. 21-36 (p. 23).

<sup>6</sup> Emerson, ‘History’, p. 150.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> This pantheistic form of divinity references several traditions of non-Western origin, as well as the one of eighteenth-century Romanticism. These influences will be developed in more detail through the analysis of the writings.

Transcendentalism, as well as an aesthetic strategy that seeks to idealise the familiar and the mundane.<sup>9</sup>

Crucially, Kerouac attempts to integrate the spiritual implications of nature as conceived by Emerson into his work. It suffuses his writing with a drive that provides early texts such as *On the Road* with a sense of continuity between self and nature. As Kerouac writes in *On the Road*:

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.<sup>10</sup>

This passage is characteristic of Kerouac’s idealisation of nature: a sense of solemn beauty radiates from the scene. Through a plethora of elements partaking in the divine, Kerouac endows nature with a spiritual aura. He echoes the Idealism

---

<sup>9</sup> As Ellis defines it: ‘[Transcendentalism] asserts the continual presence of God in all his works, spirit as well as matter; makes religion the natural impulse of every breast; the moral law, God’s voice in every heart, independent on interest, expediency or appetite, which enables us to resist these; a universal, eternal, standard of truth, beauty, goodness, holiness, to which every man can turn and follow, if he will’ (Ellis, ‘An Essay on Transcendentalism’, in *The American Transcendentalists*, ed. by Miller, pp. 21-36 (p. 27)).

<sup>10</sup> Kerouac, *On the Road*, p. 273.

of Emerson, for whom nature is spiritual in essence: ‘Nature satisfies by its loveliness, and without any mixture of corporeal benefit’.<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless, Kerouac associates the natural beauty of the narrator’s environment with a form of spiritual benevolence that references Catholic salvation through the evocation of the Christ, a reference that partly conflicts with Emerson’s pantheistic frame. This allegory may be interpreted as a premonition regarding Duluoz’s passage into the wilderness in *Big Sur* which mirrors that of Christ into the desert.

Notwithstanding, 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.<sup>12</sup>

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.<sup>13</sup>

---

<sup>11</sup> Emerson, ‘Nature’, p. 43.

<sup>12</sup> Bowers, ‘Democratic Vistas’, in *American Transcendentalism*, ed. by Barbour, pp. 9-21 (p. 19).

<sup>13</sup> Kerouac, *On the Road*, pp. 9-10.

This passage references an optimistic exuberance that stems, partly, from an eagerness to rediscover America and offer a prophetic vision of its opportunities.

According to Peggy Pacini:

*On the Road* is a five parts' song on the American (Western) myth theme, on the desire to cover this gigantic continent, to encompass it, to be fused with it, to decipher it in order to identify and locate oneself. The means to achieve this is motion, traveling across the continent.<sup>14</sup>

For Pacini, the theme of discovery is not only intrinsically linked to that of identity in Kerouac's writing; it also impacts selfhood. Indeed, in the former passage, the precious 'visions' that Kerouac mentions are pivotal for the narrator's own being.<sup>15</sup> Providing the passage with a mystical inflection, they refer to the insight of a universal principle that is transcendental in nature. In *Capturing the Beat Moment*, Mortenson apprehends the manifestation of visions in Beat writings as a source of action:

For Beat Generation writers, the 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. By eradicating mental structures and

---

<sup>14</sup> Peggy Pacini, 'Roots Always Precede Routes: *On the Road*, through a Glass Darkly', *E-rea*, 8.2 (2011) <doi:10.4000/erea.1629> (p. 9).

<sup>15</sup> Kerouac, *On the Road*, pp. 9-10.

preconceptions, the vision provides an opportunity to see the past in a new light, thus creating potential for change.<sup>16</sup>

For Mortenson, visionary states allow an access to the essence of the universal mind, which in turn provides the individual with a creative impetus: ‘The heightened moment is what provides the possibility for a new trajectory into the void, a chance to change the direction of one’s life’.<sup>17</sup>

When repositioned within the context of Emersonian Transcendentalism, the relation that Mortenson establishes between the visionary state and a form of being that is fundamentally self-creative suggests that visions act as a gateway for the emergence of transcendental being. Essentially, the visionary state articulates a process by which the external becomes a conduit for the internal. In the words of Emerson: ‘The lover of nature is he whose inward and outward senses are still truly adjusted to each other’.<sup>18</sup> Through the visionary state – regarded as a mystical concordance between the inner and the outer, that is, between self and nature – the individual may comprehend, and eventually *embody*, the spiritual essence of the world.<sup>19</sup> This phenomenon is, primarily, an end-product of the circulation of the flux of the universal mind within the individual: for Emerson, ‘[t]here is one mind common to all individual men. Every man is an inlet to the same and to all of the same’.<sup>20</sup> This fundamental relation of man to the cosmos, of inner to outer nature, constitutes a moral code that is paramount in Kerouac’s

---

<sup>16</sup> Mortenson, p. 71.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 83.

<sup>18</sup> Emerson, ‘Nature’, p. 38.

<sup>19</sup> The access to the experience of the transcendental on the site of the self is achieved by means of the performance; it channels the prophetic dimension of Ginsberg’s poetry as well, as we will see later in this section.

<sup>20</sup> Emerson, ‘History’, p. 149.

writing. For Bowers: '[This feature] is expressed most clearly in the Transcendentalist principle that the structure of the universe literally duplicates the structure of the individual self, and that all knowledge therefore begins with self-knowledge'.<sup>21</sup> This relation 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. For Emerson: 'Self-existence is the attribute of the Supreme Cause, and it constitutes the measure of good by the degree in which it enters into all lower forms'.<sup>22</sup> Ideally then, the moral duty of man – as a microcosmic element – is to connect to the macrocosm to realise the divine nature of existence and honour the principle of creation for Emerson.

From an aesthetic perspective, the integration of this trope into prose by means of the allegory relies on a recognition that the mythical resides in the narrativisation of the landscape, a mainstay of Kerouac's writing. As he writes in *Big Sur*:

The empty blue sky of space says [...] 'Dont call me eternity, call me God if you like, all of you talkers are in paradise: the leaf is paradise, the tree stump is paradise, [...] the man is paradise, the fog is paradise'.<sup>23</sup>

Here, the narrator's vision pertains to a sense of divinity that penetrates each and every element of his environment. It corresponds to the aesthetic corollary of the pantheistic conception of nature in the transcendental model of Emerson: for

---

<sup>21</sup> Bowers, 'Democratic Vistas', in *American Transcendentalism*, ed. by Barbour, pp. 9-21 (p. 16).

<sup>22</sup> Emerson, 'Self-reliance', p. 191.

<sup>23</sup> *Big Sur*, p. 30.

Larzer Ziff, Emerson, in his essay 'Nature', is '[...] validating that message of the divinity of the human soul by describing the effects of the selfsame divinity in the apparent world'.<sup>24</sup> Kerouac's use of allegories in sequences which describe nature relies on a regionalism that is particularly lyrical: as these descriptions link the local and the physical to the universal and the spiritual, they heighten the romantic tone of the prose. For Hansen: 'Allegory as a mode of thought tries to recapture again and again the astonishment about the mere chance of the *right moment* for the *right insight*'.<sup>25</sup> They allow Kerouac to depict a form of transcendental euphoria that emerges in a mystical brand of pastoral. The recourse to allegories enables Kerouac to elude literal modes of representation through the use of figurative language, and to find an alternative means through which to convey the visionary experience in writing form: 'The bright emergence of mystic oneness that the solitary mystic seeks is, when encountered in a corresponding natural state [...], too much for mortal flesh and mortal mind to bear'.<sup>26</sup> Hipkiss implies that the subject's cognitive faculties are at a loss to make sense of the mystical event. From this perspective, Kerouac's allegorisation of nature may be viewed as an aesthetic device that aims to reflect the contours of a mystical experience, which cannot be fully comprehended or grasped by the subject.

In great measure, it is the narrator's failure to access the universal mind – and thereby to truly engage and actualise his own self – that Kerouac dramatises in *Big Sur*. The next paragraphs will show that it is partly this ability to generate visions, that is, to realign the self with the spiritual essence of nature and access

---

<sup>24</sup> Larzer Ziff, 'Introduction', in *Nature and Selected Essays*, ed. by Ziff, pp. 7-27 (p. 18).

<sup>25</sup> Hansen, p. 104.

<sup>26</sup> Hipkiss, *Jack Kerouac, Prophet of the New Romanticism*, p. 57.

transcendental being, that Duluoz has lost in *Big Sur*, and that propels his disintegration.

In the following passage, the narrator contemplates his backpack before his move to Big Sur:

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, or how many jugs of vision producing Ayahuasca you drink.<sup>27</sup>

This passage is particularly revealing if we read the rucksack as a metonymy for travelling. Its value is depreciated; Kerouac makes it a fetish of past glory, as it patiently waits like a former lover to be taken back into favour. The rucksack is now part of a decaying, as well as decadent, environment of empty bottles, consumed cigarettes and trash; it provokes an unambiguous feeling of 'horror' that is reminiscent of a form of existential angst, as the reference to 'existentialism' in the quotation suggests.<sup>28</sup> The association of the theme of travel with a feeling of horrific panic is an unexpected combination in Kerouac's writing. This passage falls short of the narrator's anticipatory celebrations of

---

<sup>27</sup> *Big Sur*, p. 4.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

travel in *On the Road*, as we have seen earlier: it announces *Big Sur*'s deleterious mood.

Meanwhile, the last part of this quotation makes it clear that in *Big Sur*, artificial means are ineffectual to retrieve the visionary: '[N]o matter [...] how many jugs of vision producing Ayahuasca you drink'.<sup>29</sup> Ayahuasca, a plant with potent hallucinatory effects, has a mystical connotation in a Beat context; nonetheless, Kerouac renders it inoperant in the novel.<sup>30</sup> Concurrently, the narrator's vision is further blurred by his heavy drinking. Thomas Bierowski, in *Kerouac in Ecstasy*, offers a romantic and mystical interpretation of the value of drinking in Kerouac's writings, which he envisages as a liminal religious practice:

[A]ccording to one common translation of the Latin root of the term (*re-ligare*), the function of religion is to 're-connect', even as ligament connects muscle to bone, strength to strength. So if you give Kerouac any credence at all as a seeker of mystical experience, as a shaman performing on the page, then you have to start with his primary means of reconnecting with the divine essence and proceed from there. [...] 'The drunken consciousness', as William James aptly indicates, 'is one bit of the mystic

---

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Ayahuasca is more frequently referred to as 'yage' in Beat literature. According to William S. Burroughs: 'Yage is space time travel. The room seems to shake and vibrate with motion. The blood and substance of many races, Negro, Polynesian, Mountain Mongol, Desert Nomad, Polyglot Near East, Indian – new races as yet unconceived and unborn, combinations not yet realized pass through your body' (William Burroughs, *Naked Lunch* [1959], p. 92, quoted by Marcus Boon, *The Road of Excess: A History of Writers on Drugs* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), p. 260). As Marcus Boon analyses: '[Ayahuasca involves] the breaking down of the symbolically ordered, overcoded Western imagination into a corporeal hyperspace in which many imaginal spaces coexist, like different operating systems on a single computer. Every imaginal space, every way of moving in, through, and out of the world, which is to say, every "human potential", is available' (Boon, pp. 260-61).

consciousness, and our total opinion of it must find its place in our opinion of that larger whole' (387).<sup>31</sup>

Referring to William James's concept of the 'drunken consciousness', Bierowski interprets the recourse to alcohol in Kerouac's writing as a tool to generate visionary states and literally bridge ('re-ligare') the chasm between man and the divine.<sup>32</sup> The terms of the operation seem accurate: while alcohol impacts and alters the perception of the senses, Bierowski's hypothesis also channels the essential masochistic dimension of Kerouac's writing; a dimension that contrasts, nevertheless, with Emerson's Transcendentalist model.<sup>33</sup>

In *Big Sur*, however, James's 'mystic consciousness' has turned into a 'drunken hopelessness which is a physical and spiritual and metaphysical hopelessness'.<sup>34</sup> Duluoz's drinking as depicted in the early pages of *Big Sur* is shown to be ineffective, an inappropriate means to realise a form of transcendental being, as the narrator's mind is wholly fixated on the recognition of death. 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

---

<sup>31</sup> Thomas Bierowski, *Kerouac in Ecstasy: Shamanic Expression in the Writings* (Jefferson: McFarland, 2011), pp. 172-73.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> This dimension will be deciphered in more detail in Part 2 of the thesis through the analysis of *Tristessa*.

<sup>34</sup> *Big Sur*, p. 4.

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'.<sup>35</sup>

This scene is crucial for the analysis. In this passage, excessive drinking, far from reconnecting the narrator with 'early perfection' (that of the visionary and the transcendental), estranges him from the promise of it.<sup>36</sup> The allusion to Camus's 1942 novel *The Stranger* is revealing: Kerouac deliberately conflates the two writers in order to place Burroughs in the context of Camus. By underlining the reference to Camus via Burroughs, Duluoz's sense of alienation is given both an internal and external dimension. Simultaneously, Kerouac aims to picture the condition of the artist in *Big Sur*: as a scruffy Duluoz watches his reflection in the mirror, all he can see is disorientation and pathetic depravity, which work as a metonymy for Kerouac's suffering at his own public misconception:

[A]ll over America highschool and college kids thinking 'Jack Duluoz is 26 years old and on the road all the time hitch hiking' while there I am almost 40 years old, bored and jaded in a roomette bunk crashin across that Salt Flat.<sup>37</sup>

Here, Duluoz reflects on what he thinks he is on the one hand, and how readers and admirers conceive of him on the other; this gap informs the narrator's weary

---

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., pp. 4-5.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., p. 3.

feelings in the opening of *Big Sur*. As John Clellon Holmes points out, Kerouac's books were 'used as bibles for hipness by the Beatniks, derided as incoherent mouthings by the critics, and treated as some kind of literary equivalent of rock'n'roll by the mass media'.<sup>38</sup>

As we return to the former quotation from *Big Sur* that dramatically renders Duluoz's repulsion at his own reflection, 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 nothingness.<sup>39</sup> In fact, Duluoz's look is directed both outwards, towards the mirror object, and inwards, towards his own reflection. As Allard Den Dulk explains, reflexivity occurs when 'consciousness turns its attention towards itself, towards the consciousness that "has" the experience and that performs the reflection upon it'.<sup>40</sup> Through the interplay of the mirror, consciousness becomes *self-consciousness*; the spectacle of desolation that the mirror reflects is internalised by Duluoz and turned into a devastating anguish: '[T]he face of yourself you see in the mirror with its expression of unbearable anguish'.<sup>41</sup> For Sartre in *Being and Nothingness*: 'Anguish is precisely my consciousness of being my own future, in

---

<sup>38</sup> John Clellon Holmes, 'The Great Rememberer', in *Selected Essays*, vol. 2: *Representative Men: The Biographical Essays*, ed. by Holmes (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1987), pp. 113-35 (p. 132). For Holmes, the public misconstruction of Kerouac encompasses all strata of American society, from the Beatnik poseur to the mass media critics and the average media consumer. The rendering of this situation in *Big Sur* through Duluoz allows Kerouac to stress the sense of isolation and alienation that beset him in the post-*On the Road* years.

<sup>39</sup> See above, pp. 94-95. Also, see section of the literature review on Sartre's definition of nothingness, pp. 33-34.

<sup>40</sup> Allard Den Dulk, *Existentialist Engagement in Wallace, Egger & Foer: A Philosophical Analysis of Contemporary American Literature* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2015), p. 26.

<sup>41</sup> *Big Sur*, p. 4.

the mode of *not-being* it'.<sup>42</sup> In other terms, as Ann Fulton suggests, it is 'dread before nothingness'.<sup>43</sup> Hence, anguish corresponds to the emotional symptom of nothingness; it stems from the subject's self-reflection – an essential condition – which reveals the potentiality of the annihilation of his/her own self. In substance, the self becomes the object of the reflexive look: 'Self-reflection means a [form of] consciousness that takes the unreflected 'I' [...] as its *explicit* object'.<sup>44</sup>

In *Big Sur*, the object of the narrator's look is precisely his own nauseous condition apprehended in the reflection of the mirror. For McElroy:

We [...] suffer from the anxiety of doubt and meaninglessness: which is to say, the threat of non-being to all our beliefs and ideas. And, as a final blow, our apprehensions of the threat of non-being to the results of all our actions creates in us an anxiety of guilt and condemnation.<sup>45</sup>

McElroy's use of the term 'anxiety' channels Sartre's definition of anguish: it corresponds to the fear of non-being.<sup>46</sup> This fear of non-being is the prospect of one's own nihilation as conceived by a reflexive type of consciousness, which is that of the narrator looking at his own reflection in the mirror in the opening of *Big Sur* and which prompts Duluoz to say: 'I've got to escape or die'.<sup>47</sup> This consciousness of imminent self-annihilation in the first pages of *Big Sur* is the

---

<sup>42</sup> Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, p. 56.

<sup>43</sup> Ann Fulton, *Apostles of Sartre: Existentialism in America, 1945-1963* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1999), p. 73.

<sup>44</sup> Dulk, p. 39.

<sup>45</sup> McElroy, p. 5.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>47</sup> *Big Sur*, p. 5.

essence of a Sartrean form of nothingness. Consequently, Duluoz's hopelessness in the first pages of the novel – apart from a symptom of his poor condition and general fatigue – is also a by-product of the inwardness of his look, which translates into an insufferable feeling of anguish. Hence, Bierowski's reading of drinking as instrumental for the achievement of transcendental states must be reversed in order to make genuine sense. Duluoz's anguish in *Big Sur*, foregrounded in a form of nothingness, is also an awareness of his own decay fuelled, in great measure, by excessive drinking. From this perspective, Duluoz's drinking acts as an agent of alienation that maximises his crisis, rather than reduces it, because it confines him to nothingness.

This confinement, in turn, becomes one of the causes of his downfall. As Kerouac writes in the first pages of *Big Sur*:

Enough! 'One fast move or I'm gone' so I jump up, do my headstand first to pump blood back into the hairy brain, take a shower in the hall, new T-shirt and socks and underwear, pack vigorously, hoist the rucksack and run out [...], hike thru lost alleys of Russian sorrow where bums sit head on knees in foggy doorways in the goopy eerie city night I've got to escape or die, and into the bus station.<sup>48</sup>

Here, the staccato rhythm that springs from the accumulation of short actions and the occasional ellipsis peter out into a sharp sense of gloom. For the narrator the existential choice is repeated: 'One fast move or I'm gone', 'I've got to escape or

---

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

die'.<sup>49</sup> Simultaneously, the reiteration of this limit-situation acts as an incentive for immediate action: 'I jump up', 'I run out'.<sup>50</sup> Through this incentive, Duluoz's vision is projected outwards; it records the 'lost alleys of Russian sorrow', which conveys his woeful visual perception as he gazes at the San Francisco district of Russian Hill from the hotel window.<sup>51</sup> Similarly, the lugubrious image of the bum in a pitiful position works as a projection of Duluoz's own possible future: 'That feeling when you wake up with the delirium tremens with the *fear* of eerie death dripping from your ears'.<sup>52</sup> The outer world is reflected on the narrator's inner space; as, vice versa, Duluoz projects his anguished self towards the outer world. This close relationship between the interior space and the external world, between the inner and the outer, is an aesthetic feature widely used by Kerouac that stems both from the American Transcendentalist tradition, and from the modernist impetus of his writing. For 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. [...]

---

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., p. 4.

Modernism is realism reinvented, its phenomenological origins in the superseding inner vision of the artist.<sup>53</sup>

The modernist quality of Kerouac's writing emphasises the confessional dimension of his project, which, as it seeks to absorb the world and re-present it through prose – thereby rendering private life public – discloses the writer's interiority.

This projection of the inner onto the outer and vice versa is paramount for comprehending the narrator's wretched condition from the onset of the novel – a condition that will deteriorate as the narrative proceeds. In great measure, it is Duluoz's fixation on his own nothingness that clutters his vision and disrupts his potentiality for authentic being. For Giamo:

[T]he helplessness and alienation that consumed Kerouac in his later years were direct results of the quest in itself when [...] 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.<sup>54</sup>

What Giamo fails to see is that it is not the road in itself that 'flattens out into a line of endless arid nothingness'; rather it is Duluoz's consciousness.<sup>55</sup> In *Big Sur*, the 'ecstasy of being' evoked by Giamo takes the form of an introspective furore

---

<sup>53</sup> Aaron Sultanik, *Inventing Orders: An Essay and Critique in 20th Century American Literature (1950-2000)* (Lanham: University Press of America, 2003), pp. 12-13.

<sup>54</sup> Giamo, p. 176.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*

as Duluoz monitors his afflictions relentlessly without being able to channel his own intuitive insights.<sup>56</sup> In an Emersonian context, such insights are underpinned by intuition, defined as ‘that deep force, the last fact behind which analysis cannot go, [in which] all things find their common origin’.<sup>57</sup> For Robert Caponigri, ‘the faculty which [intuition] symbolizes is the most direct channel between man and the realm of absolute spiritual reality’.<sup>58</sup> Thus envisaged as the voice of nature speaking through man’s self, intuition is fundamental from an ontological perspective: it corresponds to the channel through which the self may acquire the impulse to act and concomitantly regenerate itself. An essential link between man and the universal spirit of creation, intuition may be conceived as the medium through which the vision is synthesised into a form of being that is quintessentially authentic for Emerson.<sup>59</sup>

Crucially, while Duluoz’s vision scans his own interiority – a recurrent motif in the various passages analysed above – it fails to connect the self with the transcendental essence of nature. Additionally, it projects the deathliness of his own reflection outwards onto his environment, which, in turn, dismantles the expression of his intuitive self. Hence, Duluoz’s anguish generates a self-

---

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Emerson, ‘Self-reliance’, p. 187.

<sup>58</sup> Robert Caponigri, ‘Brownson and Emerson: Nature and History’, in *American Transcendentalism*, ed. by Barbour, pp. 239-56 (p. 242).

<sup>59</sup> Emerson’s transcendental interpretation of the intuitive is not completely contradictory with that of Kant’s, an important thinker on the concept of intuition. As Richard A. Smyth points out: ‘Kant’s line of reflection is perfectly transparent for anyone who does not insist on explaining intuitions by the relations in sense-experience. Discursive representations are ones that can hold for every object (*für alle Objecte*) but we can only have intuitive representations of a totality of objects (*des All der Objecte*), and for this reason ideas such as the idea of Nature (conceived as the systematic totality of all real objects) must be regarded as intuitions’ (Richard A. Smyth, *Forms of Intuition: An Historical Introduction to the Transcendental Aesthetic* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1978), p. 143). We will come back on the concept of intuition and its function in the writings in the next section.

reflection that locks the look inwards; this is what undermines the emergence of visionary states, and furthermore the potentiality to achieve a a transcendental form of being that is regenerative and self-creative. It is precisely this form of nothingness in the first pages of the novel that removes the narrator from the continuum between self and the universal principle of creation that Emerson promotes through his writings; this form of nothingness, as it fosters a discordance between self and nature, precipitates the loss of the visionary in the novel. While this has major consequences within the narrative for Duluoz's physical confrontation with nature at Big Sur, it also reveals the increasing inability of the writer to recognise its sacred aspects, as we will see in the next subsection.

Thus, as Duluoz's visions dry out, they are replaced by a type of anguish – a function of the 'reflective apprehension of the self' – to the detriment of a more varied, fluid and intuitive expression of experiences.<sup>60</sup> The occurrence of anguish in the text positions the narrator in a critical predicament which, to some extent, echoes that of Samuel Beckett's characters in the play *Waiting for Godot* [1953].<sup>61</sup> According to Murray Roston in *The Search for Selfhood in Modern Literature*:

[T]he tragic condition of humankind, the exploration of earthly suffering, now merges with an awareness of the ludicrous ineffectuality of all

---

<sup>60</sup> Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, p. 54.

<sup>61</sup> See Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot: A Tragicomedy in Two Acts* [1952], 4<sup>th</sup> edn (London: Faber and Faber, 2010).

mortals, stripped as they are of their potential for grandeur or majesty, their every attempt at achievement inevitably ending in a pratfall.<sup>62</sup>

In the context of Kerouac's writing, this tragic sense of failure is exemplified by Duluoz's incapability to retrieve a *modus vivendi* that is foregrounded in the realisation of visions of a transcendental nature, thus preventing a genuinely regenerative experience. From this perspective, Duluoz's crisis is properly existential because it is, first and foremost, ontological. For Bierowski:

*Big Sur* proves to be an 'anti-road' novel that examines both the desperate alcoholic stasis characteristic of Kerouac's last years, and the demise of 'the road' as a viable myth in modern American culture. [...] In fact, except where a blissfully drunk Duluoz wills the highway to be the ecstatic thoroughfare it was in his earlier novels, *Big Sur* consistently shows the mystique of the American Road to be a failed experiment that is no longer descriptive of the narrator's (or America's) primary impulses.<sup>63</sup>

Bierowski locates this change in Kerouac's writing in the failure of the road to provide an entry into what Kerouac seeks; those 'primary impulses' towards freedom and liberation are now merely tantamount to 'myth[s]'.<sup>64</sup> In so doing, Duluoz spirals into a feeling of impotence that demobilises the self. This incapacity to reconnect with America becomes then equated with an ontological

---

<sup>62</sup> Murray Roston, *The Search for Selfhood in Modern Literature* (Houndmills: Palgrave, 2001), p. 167.

<sup>63</sup> Bierowski, p. 156.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*

condition of inauthenticity. The doomed tonality of *Big Sur*, in which Kerouac's narrator appears devastated by a form of nothingness and anguish, is heightened by his previous journeys, the sense of mobility now turned to stasis.

This stasis in the opening of *Big Sur* can be read as an aesthetic mark of a form of a Sartrean nothingness in the text; typifying the narrator's fear of the 'nihilation of all [his] possibilities', it simultaneously reflects Duluoz's unprecedented apprehensiveness about travelling.<sup>65</sup> As Duluoz reckons: 'I've hit the end of the trail and cant even drag my body any more'.<sup>66</sup> Accordingly, the very geographical position of Big Sur metaphorises the end of the road: located on the Pacific coast, it sits on the furthest western line of the American continent. It symbolises both the ultimate limit of the westward expansion of America and the immensity of the ocean, now horrific and anxiety-provoking. For Pacini:

Staying on the road is the only means to pursue the illusion of a space to discover: a space within. Introspection will then lead him to a confrontation of his own destiny as a North American exile searching for his roots.<sup>67</sup>

Hence the termination of the road in symbolical terms places the narrator – and *a fortiori* Kerouac himself – at a critical turning point; it forces him to reinvent his own self to think of new ways of writing. As Mortenson points out: 'Kerouac's work must be seen not as unconstrained flow or limited boundary but as a

---

<sup>65</sup> Kaufmann, 'Existentialism and Death', in *Existentialism, Religion, and Death*, ed. by Kaufmann, pp. 193-214 (p. 210).

<sup>66</sup> *Big Sur*, p. 2.

<sup>67</sup> Pacini, p. 10.

continual negotiation that sheds light on the possibilities and limits for spatial rebellion in America'.<sup>68</sup> Hence, Duluoz's recognition of the limit-situation in both geographical and ontological terms illustrates a form of dead end; concomitantly, this dead-end is also pointing to a potential way out. This way out is envisioned as the 'fast move' in the phrase '[o]ne fast move or I'm gone'; the potentiality of Duluoz's escape plan in his realisation that '[he has] got to escape or die'.<sup>69</sup> Paradoxically then, and as Sartre pointed out, anguish 'constitutes the future as possible'; by closing existing ways of being hitherto explored, it opens up new horizons for potential authentic being in the near-future.<sup>70</sup> Therefore Duluoz's anguish in *Big Sur* positions him onto the plane of existential engagement, as the next section will explore; a positioning that is paramount for the emergence of the existential figure of Thanatos in the novel.

The themes of the road and its heroes – the source of Kerouac's picaresque writing – have now become counterproductive for the narrator's being, the value attributed to the road in his early novels reversed both figuratively and literally. According to 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 Raton

---

<sup>68</sup> Mortenson, p. 46.

<sup>69</sup> *Big Sur*, p. 5.

<sup>70</sup> Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, p. 56.

Canyon, Duluoz stumbles haltingly in the dark, his arm held out in front like a blind man.<sup>71</sup>

It is this ideal vision of a pastoral and mystical America that has been lost in *Big Sur*. Kerouac dramatises Duluoz's disjunction from nature and the divine, both referencing and removing him from an American Transcendentalist tradition.

That is not to say that *Big Sur* is a repudiation of the picaresque tradition: despite the distinct hopelessness that invades the narrative, 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 text, 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: Sounds of the Pacific Ocean at Big Sur' that closes the novel.<sup>72</sup> Rather, this structure suggests that the mode of the picaresque contains its own possible inversion. According to Howard Mancing:

Although it is common to speak of the permutations through which the picaresque novel passes as it is adapted to the French Enlightenment, the age of existentialism, or the postmodern era, [...] the protean change and adaptation are essential features of the genre from the start. There is no

---

<sup>71</sup> Bierowski, p. 157.

<sup>72</sup> See *Big Sur*, pp. 191-215.

single, sustaining, or controlling theme, worldview, tone, philosophy, or attitude that characterizes the genre.<sup>73</sup>

It entails that the hero's – or anti-hero's – experiences, far from being systematically regenerative, allow for a series of disruptions that fracture the unity of his/her own self. In this context, *Big Sur* may be viewed in parallel with *On the Road*; it may be interpreted, to a certain extent, as its disillusioned alter ego that mourns visionary states and the access to a form of transcendental being, which Kerouac's 'IT' encapsulated throughout *On the Road*. According to Duluoz, quoting Thomas à Kempis: 'You go out in joy and in sadness you return'.<sup>74</sup> This allegory confirms the centrality of the trope of inversion in *Big Sur*. This is one of the sources of the melancholy tone that the novel incorporates, and which will be defined in more detail in this thesis; it is emblematic of a yearning for the myths of the transcendental potentialities of travel. If *On the Road* served to display the journey as a means towards liberation, a sense of stasis becomes all-pervasive and self-disruptive in *Big Sur* through the narrator's growing sense of anguish and self-alienation.

### 1.1.2. Moloch as a Principle of Socio-historical and Spiritual Alienation in 'Howl'

'Howl' is a long poem made of four parts (including the 'Footnote to "Howl"') in the tradition of epic poetry. Described by Portugés as 'a visionary record of

---

<sup>73</sup> Howard Mancing, 'The Protean Picaresque', in *College Literature*, 6:3 (1979), 182-204 (p. 200).

<sup>74</sup> *Big Sur*, p. 37.



him to reveal the divine.<sup>79</sup> Such a conception of the role of the poet, which is largely Emersonian and Romantic in inspiration, is fundamental for the analysis of ‘Howl’: it positions Ginsberg as a conveyor of the visionary; his duty is to receive the vision and pass it on to the audience via the poem. This is one of the major differences between Kerouac’s and Ginsberg’s literary practice: while Kerouac’s novels such as *On the Road* attempt to represent the visionary moment through mimesis, the medium of poetry allows Ginsberg to *perform* the vision by building it into the poem itself, as we will see in more detail.<sup>80</sup> Through ‘Howl’, Ginsberg seeks to establish a continuum between himself, his audience and the transcendent in order to reveal the divine: this is what situates him in the tradition of the Prophetic.

Thus, throughout Part 1 of ‘Howl’, Ginsberg reports a series of actions and experiences performed by ‘the best minds of [his] generation’ – also referred to as the ‘angelheaded hipsters’ – who occupy the post-war era.<sup>81</sup> These characters are simultaneously envisioned – as the last phrase of the former quotation indicates – as ‘burning for the ancient heavenly connection to the starry dynamo’: one of Ginsberg’s multiple metaphorical variations that illustrates a yearning for the

---

<sup>79</sup> Richard Gray, *American Poetry of the Twentieth Century* [1976], Longman Literature in English Series (London: Longman, 1990), p. 22.

<sup>80</sup> This is what led Ginsberg to devise ‘a theory and practice of poetry that would allow him to communicate his visions and his heightened awareness of reality to an audience bent on denying the mundane as well as the sublime’ (Portugés, ‘The Poetics of Vision’, in *On the Poetry of Allen Ginsberg (Under Discussion)*, ed. by Lewis Hyde (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1984), pp. 131-40 (p. 131)). This aspect of Ginsberg’s poetry, and the implications of the Prophetic tradition in ‘Howl’, will be deciphered in more detail in the next section. Notwithstanding, it may be argued that Kerouac also attempts to build the visionary moment into *Big Sur* through the poem ‘SEA: Sounds of the Pacific Ocean at Big Sur’ that closes the novel, as I will explore at the end of Section 2.

<sup>81</sup> ‘Howl’, p. 1.

divine.<sup>82</sup> In fact, the poem is consistently referencing the temporal and the universal simultaneously. As Gray highlights, two voices overlap in ‘Howl’ as the poem mingles ‘myth and social protest’.<sup>83</sup> In *The Fierce Embrace*, Molesworth explores what he defines as a form of bi-vocality in Ginsberg’s poetry in more detail:

From the beginning of his career, Ginsberg has constructed a poetry made up of a special blend of two voices: one, a putatively universal voice that would claim implicitly of its lonesomeness that ‘it’s Ours’; the other, a frankly personal voice that insistently chronicled the growth and movement of a discrete, historically singular people.<sup>84</sup>

What Molesworth identifies as Ginsberg’s ‘frankly personal voice’ is that of the chronicle which is grounded in immediate historical reality and which strives towards social liberation.<sup>85</sup> The ‘universal voice’ is the mythic, Blakean voice that craves a form of transcendental connection with the divine and spiritual liberation.<sup>86</sup>

---

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

<sup>83</sup> Gray, p. 277.

<sup>84</sup> Molesworth, p. 52.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid. This temporal voice brings Ginsberg close to the poets of the San Francisco Renaissance, whose members, including Michael McClure, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Philip Lamantia, Philip Whalen and others, also partook in the Beat movement to some extent. One of the main characteristics of their poetry is the integration of the field of the political through direct representations of the conditions of the concomitant reality of the poet. See Linda Hamallan, ‘Regionalism Made Good: The San Francisco Renaissance’, in *Reading the West: New Essays on the Literature of the American West*, ed. by Michael Kowalewski (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 213-30 (especially pp. 218-22).

<sup>86</sup> Molesworth, p. 52.

This universal voice in 'Howl' stems from a Romantic tradition greatly influenced by the pantheistic preoccupations of Emersonian Transcendentalism and by the poetry of Walt Whitman (1819-1892).<sup>87</sup> Like Whitman, Ginsberg used the poetical device of the long line as a vehicle for prophesying America. According to Tytell, Ginsberg saw himself as having made 'personality the centre and subject of [his] work' through an emphasis on the energies and creative potentialities of the individual, exemplified by the exaltation of the self through his poems.<sup>88</sup> This sense of an energised self, inherited from Whitman, is key in 'Howl': it makes the poet highly receptive to his own inflections of consciousness, able to thus perceive and relay the experience of the divine that is found, primarily, within the self for Ginsberg. Ginsberg's record of the tribulations of 'the best minds of [his] generation' by means of a voice that fuses the universal with the temporal allows him to ground the mythical in socio-political reality.<sup>89</sup> Crucially, it is the intermingling of these two voices in 'Howl', that of the universal and the mythical with that of a historical and social awareness, that enables a reading of forms of alienation and of engagement in the poem that are both Existentialist and Transcendentalist.

Part 2 of 'Howl' is instrumental in this regard, as Ginsberg introduces the mythical figure of Moloch.<sup>90</sup> Through Moloch, Eliot Katz argues, 'Ginsberg is

---

<sup>87</sup> 'The literary implications of Emerson's teachings were also to be writ large by a disciple. Walt Whitman found in Emerson the central reasons for his poetry' (Ziff, 'Introduction', in *Nature and Selected Essays*, ed. by Ziff, pp. 7-27 (p. 24)).

<sup>88</sup> Tytell, p. 15. See Walt Whitman, 'Song of Myself' [1855], in *Leaves of Grass: The First (1855) Edition*, ed. by Harold Bloom, 150<sup>th</sup> Anniversary edn (New York: Penguin, 2005), pp. 28-96.

<sup>89</sup> 'Howl', p. 1.

<sup>90</sup> As Ginsberg reported in 'Notes Written on Finally Recording "Howl"' [1959]: 'I had an apartment on Nob Hill, got high on peyote, and saw an image of the robot skullface of Moloch in the upper stories of a big hotel glaring into my window; got high weeks later

able to reveal the cause of his compatriots' existential frustration to be a set of intertwined, oppressive aspects of religious, sexual, familial, political, artistic, historical, and economic institutions'.<sup>91</sup> For Katz, Moloch is envisaged as a principle of oppression that is all-pervasive. Indeed, as I am about to show in this subsection, Moloch may be apprehended as an epitome of destruction in 'Howl' that articulates forms of alienation on both the socio-historical and spiritual planes, in accordance with the bi-vocality of the poem. Part 2 of 'Howl' opens with the following lines:

What sphinx of cement and aluminum bashed open their skulls  
and ate up their brains and imagination?

Moloch! Solitude! Filth! Ugliness! Ashcans and unobtainable  
dollars! Children screaming under the stairways! Boys  
sobbing in armies! Old men weeping in the parks!

Moloch! Moloch! Nightmare of Moloch! Moloch the loveless!<sup>92</sup>

Moloch is a figure from the Old Testament: as Jason Shinder explains in the introduction to *The Poem that Changed America*, Moloch was named 'after the Canaanite fire god who was worshipped by the sacrifice of children'.<sup>93</sup> In

---

again, the visage was still there in red smoky downtown metropolis, I wandered down Powell street muttering, "Moloch, Moloch" all night and wrote *Howl II* [Part 2 of "Howl"] nearly intact in cafeteria at foot of Drake Hotel, deep in the hellish vale' (in *On the Poetry of Allen Ginsberg*, pp. 80-83 (p. 81)).

<sup>91</sup> Eliot Katz, 'Radical Eye: Political Poetics and "Howl"', in *The Poem that Changed America: 'Howl' Fifty Years Later*, ed. by Jason Shinder (New York: Farrar, 2006), pp. 183-211 (pp. 199-200).

<sup>92</sup> 'Howl', p. 8.

<sup>93</sup> Jason Shinder, 'Introduction', in *The Poem that Changed America*, pp. XV-XXVI (p. xvi).

introducing Moloch as a sphinx made of contemporary materials, Ginsberg creates Moloch as an embodiment of aggression directed at the characters throughout Part 1. While intermingling the ancient with the modern, the poet offers an actualisation of the legendary figure of Moloch, whose appetite for human lives stands for a principle of annihilation as well as purification in Biblical terms. Envisaged as a predator that spreads squalor, despair and misery, his appetite for destruction is vast and disruptive of the characters' existence. As the following lines suggest:

Moloch who entered my soul early! Moloch in whom I am a  
consciousness without a body!<sup>94</sup>

As he inflicts a sense of disincarnation that obliterates the body, Moloch epitomises a principle of destruction that threatens the characters' integrity. Concurrently, this principle of destruction is also directed at the poem itself, as the radical change in poetics evidences.

The stylistic features of Part 2 differ largely from those of the first part of the poem. The lines of Part 2 are short and unadorned, with numerous exclamations that imbue an incantatory feel. This effect is achieved, partly, through Ginsberg's split of the long line. As Ginsberg himself comments: 'Here the long line is used as a stanza form broken into exclamatory units punctuated by

---

<sup>94</sup> 'Howl', p. 9.

a base repetition, Moloch'.<sup>95</sup> The fragmentation of the long line, as it disrupts the rhapsodic rhythm of Part 1 allows a sense of turbulence to surface in the poem.

According to George Bowering:

Part II is the natural series of noun clusters & exclamation (!) points that come from the throat of a son about to be sacrificed, the outcry that has little time. [Ginsberg] rips thru formal logic in presentation, to the bare communication available in words direct from the soul.<sup>96</sup>

In Part 2, the lines are dry, piercing and aggressive, they encapsulate an essential harshness that is meant to outrage and mimic the brutality and violence of Moloch towards its subjects. Ginsberg's split of the long line is instrumental: the smaller phrase units correspond to the narrator's rantings; they are quick, short and extremely vivid, as if the narrator were choked by the imminence of his own annihilation. These phrases intensify the breathing pattern: they convey a sense of urgency, as if death were to strike and silence the poet forever. These stylistic features induce anxiety. They act as an existential menace directed at the poetical form itself; they funnel an awareness of immediate threat that matches the sense of ruin and doom that Moloch incarnates.

Crucially this threat, which is imbedded in the poetics of Part 2, is also internalised: 'Moloch who entered my soul early'.<sup>97</sup> This line is another Biblical

---

<sup>95</sup> Ginsberg, 'Notes Written on Finally Recording "Howl"', in *On the Poetry of Allen Ginsberg*, ed. by Hyde, pp. 80-83 (p. 81).

<sup>96</sup> George Bowering, 'How I Hear "Howl"', in *On the Poetry of Allen Ginsberg*, ed. by Hyde, pp. 370-78 (pp. 376-77).

<sup>97</sup> 'Howl', p. 9.

reference in 'Howl': here, Ginsberg associates Moloch with the original sin. As Adam and Eve were cast out from the Garden of Eden in retaliation for eating the forbidden fruit, this sin is the foundational event of the human condition according to the Old Testament. The equation of Moloch with the original sin in 'Howl' foregrounds the distance between men and God in the poem, as men become simple mortals tied to history from this point onwards. This allegory positions Ginsberg within the Romantic tradition of William Blake, whose own Moloch ('Molech') served as a model for Ginsberg.<sup>98</sup> According to James Heffernan:

Blake regarded Moloch [...] as the presiding spirit of the brazen age, the second of the seven great periods of the Fall. In this period the Titans worshipped Urizen, 'thundergod of moral law and tyrannical power... in a cult of death consisting largely of human sacrifices'.<sup>99</sup>

Blake's Moloch, embodied through Urizen, originates in the Old Testament and is also associated with the Fall. Blake's Urizen epitomises the conceptual mind within men and women. The Urizenic mentality, as the essence of abstraction, is precisely what shuts men out of the experience of the divine. For Bowers:

---

<sup>98</sup> See William Blake, 'The Flight of Moloch' [c. 1810], an illustration of Milton's poem 'On the Morning of Christ's Nativity', in *John Milton: On the Morning of Christ's Nativity: With Illustrations by William Blake and a Note on the Illustrations by Martin Butlin*, [ed. by Martin Butlin], limited edn (Andoversford: Whittington Press & Angscot Productions, 1981), p. 15.

<sup>99</sup> James A. Heffernan, 'Politics and Freedom: Refractions of Blake', in *On the Poetry of Allen Ginsberg*, ed. by Hyde, pp. 256-59 (p. 257). Blake associated a ruler to each period: they are, chronologically, Lucifer, Moloch, the Elohim, Shaddai, Pachad, Jehovah, and Jesus. See Herman Northrop Frye, *Fearful Symmetry: A Study of William Blake* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, repr. 1969), p. 131.

[I]ntuition and imagination offer a surer road to truth than abstract logic or scientific method. It is a corollary to [Emerson's] belief that nature is organic, and corresponds to the technical distinction between the reason as intuition and the understanding as logical analysis.<sup>100</sup>

From this perspective, Ginsberg's recourse to the mythical figure of Moloch tallies with an Existentialist interpretation of death, whose internalisation makes it an essential component of the characters' ontology. It also precipitates the emergence of a chasm between the individual and the divine, a split that is paramount for a Transcendentalist reading of the poem, as I will show.

Meanwhile, the line 'Moloch in whom I am a consciousness without a body' suggests that Ginsberg's characters are contained in a greater predicament that Moloch himself epitomises.<sup>101</sup> That is to say, Moloch is not only incorporated within the characters' selves, he is also incarnate in the physical world and thus operates as a signifier on a socio-historical level too. This is shown in the numerous apocalyptic representations of post-war Western culture in Part 2:

Moloch! Moloch! Nightmare of Moloch! Moloch the loveless!

[...]

Moloch whose mind is pure machinery! Moloch whose blood

is running money! Moloch whose fingers are ten armies!

---

<sup>100</sup> Bowers, 'Democratic Vistas', in *American Transcendentalism*, ed. by Barbour, pp. 9-21 (pp. 18-19).

<sup>101</sup> 'Howl', p. 9.

Moloch whose breast is a cannibal dynamo! Moloch  
 whose ear is a smoking tomb!

Moloch whose eyes are a thousand blind windows! Moloch  
 whose skyscrapers stand in the long streets like endless  
 Jeovahs!

[...]

Moloch whose love is endless oil and stone! Moloch whose  
 soul is electricity and banks! Moloch whose poverty is  
 the specter of genius! Moloch whose fate is a cloud of  
 sexless hydrogen! Moloch whose name is the Mind!

[...]

Moloch! Moloch! Robot apartments! Invisible suburbs! Skel-  
 eton treasuries! Blind capitals! Demonic industries!  
 Spectral nations! Invincible mad houses! Granite cocks!  
 Monstrous bombs!<sup>102</sup>

In this passage, Ginsberg relocates the figure of Moloch within the cultural paradigm of the modern Western world. Moloch is depicted as a mechanical, cold, mercantile and ultimately inhuman entity; he embodies the productive apparatus of post-war industry, which is referenced through a series of allusions that stress its predatory character. Here, and throughout Part 2 more generally, Ginsberg conveys a sense of misanthropy that stems from the materialistic ethos of post-war America.

---

<sup>102</sup> Ibid., pp. 8-9.

Ginsberg uses Moloch as an extended metaphor for the conditions of modernity, which are epitomised by the brutality of modern-day capitalism in particular. Katz views Moloch as a group of private interests that threatens the integrity of the American nation as well as that of its citizens: ‘Ginsberg [...] believed the power elite were cemented by common interests into a group, and he named this group Moloch’.<sup>103</sup> Katz envisages the poem as a social critique: he reads Ginsberg as a thorough opponent to corporate power in particular, which is interpreted as a corrosive force that corrupts the democratic values of the American nation. Indeed, Ginsberg’s Moloch features an obvious political dimension that is central in the poem. As with Sartre, Ginsberg channels the political radicalism of those commentators of the period, such as Norman Mailer, who primarily made ontological and humanistic use of Marxist social critique. For Mailer, ‘corporations cannot be trusted. [...] I’ve called it the Big Empty. The corporation is psychopathic. It does not care about its past; it has very little interest in its previous history; it has very little interest in its future’.<sup>104</sup> Mailer’s distrust of the corporations and of their ethics, which he equates with the ‘psychopathic’, resonates with the cynicism of post-war America and its obsession with pecuniary interests.<sup>105</sup> For McElroy: ‘The inference [of capitalism] is, of course, that increased production of goods is all that is ever needed to increase the sum of human happiness’.<sup>106</sup>

---

<sup>103</sup> Katz, ‘Radical Eye: Political Poetics and ‘Howl’, in *The Poem that Changed America*, ed. by Shinder, pp. 183-211 (p. 197).

<sup>104</sup> Mailer, *On God: An Uncommon Conversation* [2007], ed. by Michael Lennon (London: Continuum, 2008), pp. 213-14.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid. We will return to Mailer’s definition of the ‘psychopathic’ as developed in his 1957 essay ‘The White Negro’ in particular in the next section.

<sup>106</sup> McElroy, p. 22.

This social critique in Part 2 of ‘Howl’ plays a crucial role for the overall significance of the poem in an Existentialist context. As an embodiment of industrial and corporate America, Ginsberg uses Moloch as an extended metaphor for post-war capitalism, which, as a form of productivism, objectifies man and squashes his subjectivity. Such a reading relocates ‘Howl’, in part, to the socio-historical discourse of late Existentialist theory. As Ronald Srigley analyses in *Albert Camus’s Critique of Modernity*:

This type of [modern liberal or bourgeois] regime, typified in [Camus’s] *The Fall* by two cities – Amsterdam and Paris – does not silence its population through mass killing, as do totalitarian regimes. But Clamence claims that it does have its own ‘kind of liquidation’. In such regimes the complete rational organization on which it rests slowly nibbles away at every aspect of life – job, family, leisure time – until one is left with nothing but ‘an immaculate skeleton’. [...] One is, as Clamence puts it, ‘cleaned up’, which means that one is spiritually dead and thus ready for participation in the modern bourgeois regime.<sup>107</sup>

It is precisely those ontological implications of post-war capitalism in Ginsberg’s ‘Howl’ that disable the characters’ capacity to become existentially authentic. For McElroy:

---

<sup>107</sup> Ronald D. Srigley, *Albert Camus’ Critique of Modernity* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2011), p. 102.

[T]he very thing which made individual freedom a possibility – the mechanization of the means of production, a competitive economic system, and democracy – has tended more and more to force man into that state of complete isolation which he fears so greatly. The result has been that modern man has become a cog in a vast machine, and he is made to work for inhuman ends. [...] The world he has built has become his master; the work of his own hands has become a god before whom he bows down.<sup>108</sup>

What McElroy pinpoints is the way that the machine has outgrown modern man, and ultimately controls his fate. As Ginsberg put it in ‘Howl’:

Moloch whose mind is pure machinery!

[...]

Moloch whose breast is a cannibal dynamo!<sup>109</sup>

Here, Ginsberg renders a sense of the overpowering nature of Moloch by illustrating how modern man falls victim to the productive apparatus of the post-industrial era, which dehumanises him in return. As Zack pinpoints: ‘Oppression limits agency, subjectively, which is not surprising because oppression always limits agency objectively – it always curtails the liberties of those oppressed’.<sup>110</sup>

---

<sup>108</sup> McElroy, p. 8.

<sup>109</sup> ‘Howl’, p. 8.

<sup>110</sup> Zack, ‘Race, Life, Death, Identity, Tragedy, and Good Faith’, in *Existence in Black*, ed. by Gordon, pp. 99-109 (p. 102).

These forms of inauthentic being within the cultural context of the post-war era imply a shift from the paradigm of *being* to one of *having*, as Moloch encapsulates a process of estrangement through the logic of capitalism that emasculates the possibility of being. As objects rule over subjects, the value attached to the self is nihilated. For Charles Crowe: ‘Capitalist society, [George] Ripley believed, also enslaved man by making him a thing rather than a person, an instrument of work and ends alien to his nature’.<sup>111</sup> Accordingly, Ginsberg shows through Moloch that material accumulation constitutes the main reason for being in the context of post-war America. According to Amy Hungerford:

Reinforcing the Old Testament prophetic aura, the speaker of ‘Howl’ invokes the Old Testament idol, Moloch, as the embodiment of an American society that he [Ginsberg] says in a 1956 letter to the reviewer, Richard Eberhart, ‘confounds and suppresses individual experience’.<sup>112</sup>

It is this suppression of individual experience in post-war America that Ginsberg relays through Moloch. From this perspective, Ginsberg echoes Camus in *The Myth of Sisyphus*: ‘A man wants to earn money in order to be happy and his whole effort and the best of a life are devoted to the earning of that money. Happiness is forgotten; the means are taken for the ends’.<sup>113</sup> In Thoreau’s essay ‘Life Without Principle’, the commodification of American society in the

---

<sup>111</sup> Charles Crowe, ‘This Unnatural Union of Phalansteries and Transcendentalists’, in *American Transcendentalism*, ed. by Barbour, pp. 147-55 (p. 150).

<sup>112</sup> Amy Hungerford, ‘Postmodern Supernaturalism: Ginsberg and the Search for a Supernatural Language’, *The Yale Journal of Criticism*, 18:2 (2005), 269-98 (p. 274).

<sup>113</sup> Camus, p. 93.

nineteenth century pre-empt the anxieties of Ginsberg's post-war era: 'If I should sell both my forenoons and afternoons to society, as most appear to do, I am sure that for me there would be nothing left worth living for'.<sup>114</sup> What Ginsberg, Camus and Thoreau all depict in different ways is man hell-bent on pecuniary, material objectives and thus deprived of the possibility of realising his ownmost potentialities in existential terms. Part 2 of 'Howl' may be read as a vision of man's existential inauthenticity within the paradigm of modernity, but it is also a vision of humanity in denial with its roots in nineteenth-century Transcendentalism.

Through the phrase 'Moloch whose fingers are ten armies!' as well as through the reference to the 'smoking tomb', Moloch also typifies the military-industrial complex.<sup>115</sup> As Heffernan points out, 'Moloch becomes the specter of the military-industrial establishment, the embodiment of everything in modern American civilization that feeds on the sacrifice of human blood or human imagination'.<sup>116</sup> Ultimately, Ginsberg foresees a tragic, self-destructive end, as he hints at the atomic bomb, one of the major technological achievements of the era: 'Hiroshima, [...] the stink of burning human flesh; the horror of thousands of seared, featureless, and sightless upturned faces; the thought of men turned into animals without minds or souls – these things make for a somewhat troubled

---

<sup>114</sup> Thoreau, 'Life Without Principle', in *The American Transcendentalists*, ed. by Miller, pp. 308-29 (p. 313).

<sup>115</sup> 'Howl', p. 8. As Ginsberg put it in 'Introduction to "Smoking Typewriters"' [1981]: 'The chutzpah of those scholars of war who chatter endlessly their priggish syntax in praise of a "free market" of goods and ideas! Half the national budget enslaves us for life behind the bureaucratic iron of a military industrial reformatory equipped with radioactive showers' (in *Allen Ginsberg: Deliberate Prose: Selected Essays: 1952-1995*, ed. by Bill Morgan (London: Penguin Classics, 2001), pp. 28-32 (p. 29)).

<sup>116</sup> Heffernan, 'Politics and Freedom: Refractions of Blake', in *On the Poetry of Allen Ginsberg*, ed. by Hyde, pp. 256-59 (p. 256).

sleep'.<sup>117</sup> Moloch, 'whose poverty is the specter of genius', manufactures war, leaving no place for humanistic values, self-fulfilment and the creative impulse of man outside the demands of modern civilisation.<sup>118</sup> As Mark Schorer points out:

[Part 2] becomes an indictment of those elements in modern society that, in the author's view, are destructive of the best qualities in human nature and of the 'best minds'. Those elements are [...] predominantly materialism, conformity and mechanization leading toward war.<sup>119</sup>

The result is an environment that generates a mental representation of a fundamentally hostile and threatening world. In Existentialist terms, this psychological condition translates ontologically as a consciousness of the negation of one's ownmost and uttermost potentialities for being. For Gene Feldman: 'Man [...] cannot be totally blind to the continual collapse [of his environment]; he glimpses the portents of chaos everywhere and correspondingly grows aware of his own nakedness and impotence – his nothingness'.<sup>120</sup>

Consequently, the internalisation of the menace that Moloch embodies coincides with the characters' consciousness of death. The figure of Moloch both elicits that negation and corresponds to it. It is this that can be interpreted in an Existentialist context as a form of nothingness; a nothingness that operates, as Dulk suggests, as 'the source of "nothings", of "non-beings" in the world' for the characters of the

---

<sup>117</sup> McElroy, p. 19.

<sup>118</sup> 'Howl', p. 9.

<sup>119</sup> Mark Schorer, quoted by Lawrence Ferlinghetti in 'Horn on *Howl*', in *On the Poetry of Allen Ginsberg*, ed. by Hyde, pp. 42-53 (p. 48).

<sup>120</sup> Gene Feldman, 'Introduction', in *The Beat Generation and the Angry Young Men*, ed. by Gene Feldman and Max Gartenberg (New York: Citadel Press, 1984), pp. 1-11 (p. 9).

poem.<sup>121</sup> Such a form of nothingness, illustrated in Moloch, threatens any true individual experience; more than the lack of potentiality for authentic being, Moloch also epitomises the threat of non-being from a political perspective.

This is how Moloch is represented as primarily anthropophagous and fundamentally hostile; he attacks the self both in historical and mythical terms. Concomitantly, Moloch also seeks to nullify the potentiality for a transcendental form of being. The bi-vocality of the poem also presents Moloch as that which impedes the characters' access to the transcendental and the spiritual:

Moloch whose eyes are a thousand blind windows! Moloch  
 whose skyscrapers stand in the long streets like endless  
 Jeovahs!<sup>122</sup>

The new divinity Ginsberg refers to is manufactured and duplicated at will, which desacralises it in the monotheistic context of Judaism. Through this simile, Ginsberg chastises the false idols of materialism as he grieves for the disconnection from nature and spirituality. Meanwhile, through the term 'Jeovahs' Ginsberg alludes to the act of witnessing: here, the poet may be devised as blinded by the artefacts of modernity.<sup>123</sup> This reading is supported by the allusion to the 'thousand blind windows', which implies that Moloch attempts to impede the formulation of the poet's vision, even though he does not succeed.<sup>124</sup> This paradox generates a tension illustrated through the exclamatory poetics of Part 2 that

---

<sup>121</sup> Dulk, p. 36.

<sup>122</sup> 'Howl', p. 8.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid.

mirrors the disquietude and the exasperation of the poet, just as it is conveyed metaphorically through the title of the poem. For Richard Eberhart, 'Part 2 is a howl against everything in our mechanized civilization which kills the spirit, assuming that the louder you shout the more likely you are to be heard'.<sup>125</sup>

This mutually exclusive dialectic between Moloch's materialistic values and Ginsberg's conception of the spiritual, expands the ontological and aesthetic context of the poem. This fusing, however, between the existential, the transcendental and the spiritual, is also relayed by Mailer in many of his writings. Mailer theorised a version of American Existentialism that attempted to conciliate a form of Sartrean engagement with a mystical conception of the self. For Mailer too, the conditions of post-war modernity lend themselves to a corporate mechanised world:

[L]et's say the Devil would want to fashion a universe on His or Her own terms. [...] an immensely technological universe where the need for existence – individual existence – and the concomitant need for soul would be less. That might be more to the Devil's taste: individual units functioning in relation to other individual units. Less spiritual. More mechanized. That seems to be the prevailing tendency in the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries – more and more interchangeable units, ready to serve a corporate machine.<sup>126</sup>

---

<sup>125</sup> Richard Eberhart, 'West Coast Rhythms', in *On the Poetry of Allen Ginsberg*, ed. by Hyde, pp. 24-25 (p. 25).

<sup>126</sup> Mailer, *On God*, p. 37.

Mailer works against the direction of institutional corporate culture. In particular he contests the relevance and benefits of its technological achievements, which he reads in spiritual and moral terms. In some measure, Mailer's rhetorical discourse tallies with that of Ginsberg: 'The stakes are too great – an America gone mad with materialism, a police-state America, a sexless and soulless America'.<sup>127</sup> By implication, Moloch appears to epitomise an end-point in history, one that nullifies both spirit and self. In fact, Ginsberg laments the loss of an America whose identity is created through the pursuit of the lyrical rather than the purely monetary:

[This America is n]ot the wild and beautiful America of the comrades of Walt Whitman, not the historic America of William Blake and Henry David Thoreau where the spiritual independence of each individual was an America, a universe, more huge and awesome than all the abstract bureaucracies and authoritative officialdoms of the world combined.<sup>128</sup>

Here, Ginsberg offers an idealised vision of America: it is referred to simultaneously as virgin territory and a non-regulated sphere through which a conception of spirituality based on literary effort emerges, an allusion to Romanticism and to the creative possibilities of the visionary impulse.

Navigating between several spiritual traditions in his writing, Ginsberg nonetheless returns to a pantheistic interpretation of the spiritual that is both epic

---

<sup>127</sup> Ginsberg, 'Poetry, Violence, and the Trembling Lambs or Independence Day Manifesto' [1959], in *Deliberate Prose*, ed. by Morgan, pp. 3-5 (p. 5).

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*

in a lyrical sense, beholden to the expansive vision of Whitman, and political in its reliance on Thoreau's individualism. These are the ideas and values that risk being obliterated by the rational and institutional organisation of post-war America:

Visions! Omens! Hallucinations! Miracles! ecstasies! Gone down  
the American river!

Dreams! Adorations! illuminations! Religions!

[...]

Breakthroughs! Over the river! Flips and crucifixions! Gone down  
the flood! Highs! Epiphanies! [...] down on the rocks of Time!<sup>129</sup>

In this passage, Moloch once again seeks to sever the characters' access to the transcendental. In an Emersonian context, Moloch embodies the hindrance between the characters' selves and their own intuition. For Emerson, as well as for Ginsberg, the expression of divinity can only be channelled through the self: 'Who hath access to this universal mind is a party to all that is or can be done, for this is the only and sovereign agent'.<sup>130</sup> It implies that, for Emerson, ultimate being is the outcome of the intermingling of the self's spiritual essence with nature. Where this transcendental commingling fails to occur, the individual remains separate from the principle of creation and cannot actualise his/her own self; in other words, a form of an ontological degeneration occurs. In the last resort, if the individual cannot actualise his/her own self, his/her being cannot be

---

<sup>129</sup> 'Howl', p. 9.

<sup>130</sup> Emerson, 'History', p. 149.

authentic: he/she is alienated from the principle of self-creation and thus remains stuck in an Emersonian form of nothingness.

It is this type of nothingness that Moloch seeks to propagate in 'Howl': 'Moloch who frightened me out of my natural ecstasy!'<sup>131</sup> Here, Moloch is viewed as impeding the transactions between the self and the spiritual essence of the universal mind; he has partly succeeded in nullifying the poet's potentiality to reach and embody the divine, thus impeding the emergence of the visionary *through* the poem, in Part 2 especially. As a consequence, Ginsberg and his characters are threatened by a lack of ontological actualisation that results from the loss of the potentiality to channel the transcendental self. According to Emerson: 'As we degenerate, the contrast between us and our house is more evident. We are as much strangers in nature as we are aliens from God'.<sup>132</sup>

Thus, as we read the poem as a Transcendentalist piece of writing through an Existentialist apparatus, Ginsberg's characters are bound to self-destroy under the reign of Moloch, conceived as a paragon of existential and transcendental nothingness who 'bash[es] open their skulls and [eats] up their brains and imagination'.<sup>133</sup> If the self is at risk of being nihilated by the socio-historical conditions of modernity, the historical moment of post-war America that Moloch epitomises represents a form of cultural degeneration that triggers this ontological disintegration. Moloch, as a ubiquitous agent of alienation, seeks to abrogate the self and therefore nihilates the very essence of authentic being, understood both as

---

<sup>131</sup> 'Howl', p. 9.

<sup>132</sup> Emerson, 'Nature', pp. 73-74.

<sup>133</sup> 'Howl', p. 8.

the characters' potentiality for being in an Existentialist context, and their transcendental and literary heritage.

Another way to read this, would be to see 'Howl' as a staging area for this contention between being and non-being. In Section 2, I will show how Ginsberg attempts to liberate the self from existential and spiritual alienation in order to access a form of authentic being that is also intrinsically transcendental. These forms of engagement in and through 'Howl', will be seen as intrinsic to the poem's content and structure; as they seek to defeat the ubiquitous nothingness that Moloch typifies, they will be central to illuminate the paradox of Thanatos in the poem.

### 1.1.3. The Arrival at Big Sur: Estranged from Nature

It is in Big Sur that Duluoz, before his move to Raton Canyon, becomes firmly engulfed by a form of nothingness; his experiences, rather than aid in a move towards transcendence, do the opposite. Moreover, the moment when Duluoz descends into the canyon at Big Sur becomes another tipping point in the novel: it is a marker for something crucial within the larger narrative of *Big Sur*, and within Kerouac's writing more generally. In this subsection, I will show that Kerouac, through Duluoz's descent on Big Sur, also seeks to establish a rupture between the narrator and *outer* nature. Going back to Thoreau's precepts on nature from the perspective of Camusian Existentialism the characteristics of Duluoz's estrangement become a veritable strategy of destruction in the novel.

In *Big Sur*, Kerouac charts one man's removal from the world of commercial transactions and domesticity. The narrator's goal is to dwell closer to nature and retrieve a sense of unity. More specifically, the object of the narrator's retreat in *Big Sur* is to provide him with an environment that will take him away from the tumult of the last few years. As Duluoz confesses in the opening: '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'.<sup>134</sup> Duluoz's intention, in his own words, is to 'be alone and undisturbed for six weeks just chopping wood, drawing water, writing, sleeping, hiking, etc., etc.'. <sup>135</sup> Duluoz's desire for isolation and quietness translates into a search for a connection with nature that will palliate the disarray of urban life and liberate him from a growing sense of confusion and meaninglessness.

Unmistakably, this narrative arc is reminiscent of Thoreau's *Walden*. *Walden* is an experiment in a form of self-reliance motivated, partly, by a desire to get away from society. As Thoreau writes:

It would be some advantage to live a primitive life and frontier life, though in the midst of an outward civilization, if only to learn what are the gross necessities of life and what methods have been taken to obtain them.<sup>136</sup>

---

<sup>134</sup> *Big Sur*, p. 2.

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1.

<sup>136</sup> Thoreau, *Walden*, p. 12.

To achieve this objective the narrator wishes to spend two years in the wild, away from any form of civilisation – even though in reality he is only a mile from the nearest settlement. As the opening of *Walden* reads:

When I wrote the following pages, or rather the bulk of them, I lived alone, in the woods, a mile from any neighbor, in a house which I had built myself, on the shore of Walden Pond, in Concord, Massachusetts, and earned my living by the labor of my hands only. I lived there two years and two months.<sup>137</sup>

Thoreau's relocation to Walden, which is grounded in the desire for a radical form of self-sufficiency, illustrates both his need for isolation, and an aspiration to be immersed in nature. The narrator seeks, in his own words, '[t]o anticipate, not the sunrise and the dawn merely, but, if possible, Nature herself!'<sup>138</sup> This tropism for nature in *Walden*, which echoes that of the narrator in *Big Sur*, will be envisaged as a form of engagement towards and with nature, a central notion that will enable us to approach both works from an Existentialist perspective.

In order to get closer to nature, both writers position their narrators in a cabin that has a similar function: it is used as a refuge and a retreat from which to reflect upon and write down their experiences. In both instances, the environment gains its value from being sites wherein the narrators can monitor their relationships to nature. As Thoreau writes:

---

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5.

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 17.

When I first took my abode in the woods, [...] my house was not finished for winter, but was merely a defence against the rain [...]. This was an airy and unplastered cabin, fit to entertain a travelling god, and where a goddess might trail her garments. The winds which passed over my dwelling were such as sweep over the ridges of mountains.<sup>139</sup>

Thoreau's cabin is modest and open to the natural elements. For Thoreau, its mere evocation generates a form of elation that is almost transcendental in itself. This effect, as we are about to see, is conveyed by a lyricism that relies heavily on an allegorical type of the pastoral. As Hansen points out: 'The task of the writer, according to Thoreau, was to combine restraint and suggestiveness, which, in terms of mimesis, meant to capture the infinite within the single instance'.<sup>140</sup> Hansen implies that Thoreau's writing seeks to establish a correspondence between the particulars of nature and a universal principle of creation. In *Big Sur*, Duluoz's cabin is as humble as that of Thoreau's.<sup>141</sup> Its situation, deep in nature, provokes a similar feeling of jubilation:

Though there are faults to Monsanto's cabin like no screened windows to keep the flies out in the daytime just big board windows, so that also on

---

<sup>139</sup> Ibid., p. 78.

<sup>140</sup> Hansen, p. 137.

<sup>141</sup> Although Duluoz inhabits the cabin periodically throughout the novel, it technically belongs to Lorenz Monsanto (a pseudonym for Kerouac's friend and publisher Lawrence Ferlinghetti).

foggy days when it's damp if you leave them open it's too cold [...] – It's all marvelous – and at first it's so amazing to be able to enjoy dreamy afternoon meadows of heather up the other end of the canyon [...].<sup>142</sup>

While Thoreau's cabin faces Walden's pond, Duluoz's faces the Pacific ocean: stretches of water are used as a synecdoche to signify the ubiquity and availability of natural elements, which both authors attempt to pierce and penetrate. For Thoreau: 'A lake is the landscape's most beautiful and expressive feature. It is earth's eye; looking into which the beholder measures the depth of his own nature'.<sup>143</sup> This relation of outer to inner phenomena by means of the senses (sight, in this instance) is axiomatic to Thoreau's writings: 'The inner life can be understood only as part of the larger life of nature'.<sup>144</sup> Nevertheless, while Thoreau's pond works as a metaphor that faithfully reflects the person sitting on the edge of the pond – 'a mirror in which all impurity presented to it sinks'<sup>145</sup> – Kerouac's Pacific ocean in *Big Sur* is too unruly to properly reflect the narrator: 'And I'd get scared of the rising tide with its 15 foot waves yet sit there hoping in faith that Hawaii warnt sending no tidal wave I might miss'.<sup>146</sup> This turmoil may be viewed as a menace to the self that severely distorts the narrator's reflection: it sends back an image of fear that typifies Duluoz's anguish. From this perspective,

---

<sup>142</sup> *Big Sur*, p. 18.

<sup>143</sup> Thoreau, *Walden*, p. 168.

<sup>144</sup> David M. Robinson, *Natural Life: Thoreau's Worldly Transcendentalism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004), p. 21. This correspondence, which stems in great part from the eighteenth-century Romantic tradition, is similar to that established by Emerson between the outer and the inner, as seen in subsection 1.1.1.

<sup>145</sup> Thoreau, *Walden*, p. 170.

<sup>146</sup> *Big Sur*, p. 26.

in *Big Sur* the Pacific ocean may be envisaged as a metaphor for the nothingness that Duluoz is at risk of being submerged in.

Despite crucial differences in the imagery, both works share, to a certain extent, a similar aesthetic strategy that typifies a trajectory from the local to the universal, and from the common to the sacred. In Kerouac's writing, and in the first half of *Big Sur* in particular, this animistic impetus is channelled through a tendency to romanticise nature. As he writes in *Big Sur*:

Marvelous opening moment in fact of the first afternoon I'm left alone in the cabin and I make my first meal, wash my first dishes, nap, and wake up to hear the rapturous ring of silence or Heaven even within and throughout the gurgle of the creek.<sup>147</sup>

The sentence starts with a description of the narrator's execution of the most common daily tasks, and ends with an intimate feeling of the presence of the divine located within his immediate natural environment. As Giamo points out:

Duluoz expresses the importance of the simple virtues of life so necessary to self-reliance and well-being. [...] Reminding one of the naturalistic poetics of Thoreau, Duluoz contemplates the look of the valley centuries ago, recent and ancient Indians who once lived there, the changing depth of the creek over the decades, the ancestors of rocks, the silt that will cover

---

<sup>147</sup> Ibid., p. 15.

Sur a billion years from now, the fog, leaves, trees, sand, sea, and the transiency of all life. The meditations end in a lyrical flourish that enfolds all of creation into an animistic paradise in the here and now.<sup>148</sup>

Here, Giomo alludes to Thoreau's 'naturalistic poetics', a central feature of Kerouac's writing.<sup>149</sup> Thoreau's aesthetics emerges from a type of contemplative passivity that allows the writer to convey the corporeality of nature through language. For Hansen:

By writing *as part* of nature the writer would produce sentences that would be like nature: 'a writer, a man writing, is the scribe of all nature; he is the corn and the grass and the atmosphere writing' (*Journal*, p. 254).<sup>150</sup>

In great measure, it is this writing strategy – which is Romantic in origin – that foregrounds the movement from the particulars of natural phenomena to the apprehension of its universal oneness and from the physical to the spiritual.

Simultaneously, this movement also implies that natural phenomena themselves must be transcended through writing. Or, as Thoreau put it, '[n]ature is hard to be overcome, but she must be overcome'.<sup>151</sup> For Thoreau, this overcoming does not contradict the physicality of the writing; rather, it is complementary. According to Robinson: 'Perception, as represented by Thoreau

---

<sup>148</sup> Giomo, p. 183.

<sup>149</sup> Ibid.

<sup>150</sup> Hansen, p. 137.

<sup>151</sup> Thoreau, *Walden*, p. 198.

through the perfectly impressionable pond surface, is thus a process of merger or unification'.<sup>152</sup> For Thoreau, the self, and more particularly the body, filters the essence of creation through the physicality of nature and communicates it to consciousness.<sup>153</sup> As Thoreau writes in *Walden*: 'All sensuality is one, though it takes many forms; all purity is one. It is the same whether a man eat, or drink, or cohabit, or sleep sensually. They are but one appetite'.<sup>154</sup> Hence, Thoreau's tropism for nature in the writing seeks to capture the spiritual essence that lays behind it. As Robinson points out, '[t]he empirical accumulation of facts could be justified only as one stage of a process that ultimately aimed at an explanation of the inclusive whole of nature'.<sup>155</sup> This process, which is essentially transcendental, is what interrelates the self with the godhead, and the mundane with the holy. Such correlations are transacted through incessant and concomitant upwards and downwards movements in the writing structure in terms that are spiritual, and which provide a mystical and intuitive basis for Thoreau's naturalistic writing.

These are only some of the links, in narrative and aesthetic terms, that can be traced between *Big Sur* and *Walden*. Meanwhile, the intertextual relations between the two works are not limited to these analogies: both novels feature a similar ontological framework. For Thoreau nature is central to the way individuals relate to their own existence. For many critics (John Hildebidle for instance), Thoreau was primarily an experimental naturalist.<sup>156</sup> Not only did he

---

<sup>152</sup> Robinson, p. 121.

<sup>153</sup> 'Thoreau had to emphasize the self – as did Emerson – but he also had to identify the self with the body' (Hansen, p. 133).

<sup>154</sup> Thoreau, *Walden*, p. 198.

<sup>155</sup> Robinson, p. 118.

<sup>156</sup> 'However, the appropriate distinction between Thoreau and the tradition of amateur naturalism is not to be made on the basis of professionalism or even of accuracy. The true naturalist, to put it simply [...], is interested in explaining the marvelous; Thoreau's

scrutinise the phenomenon of nature; in his writings he sought to evidence its fundamental role in how we perceive our own beings. As James McIntosh argues: ‘Ultimately, nature with all its incoherency is one for Thoreau, one subject and one source for his being’.<sup>157</sup> Paralleling the aesthetic strategy, Thoreau’s ontology in *Walden* relies on a movement from the empirical towards the ideal: the perception of natural phenomena ultimately pertains to a type of consciousness that reveals the unity and ubiquity of a universal principle of creation.<sup>158</sup> As the individual is wholly immersed in and in touch with the macrocosmic environment, nature may be experienced through his/her senses and therefore has the capacity to impact his/her own being. As Thoreau writes in *Walden*: ‘The indescribable innocence and beneficence of Nature – of sun and wind and rain, of summer and winter – such health, such cheer, they afford forever! [...] Shall I not have intelligence with the earth?’<sup>159</sup> For Thoreau, nature ultimately pertains to the godhead; it is the physical expression of the metaphysical principle of creation, which is universal and a-temporal. Such a conception of nature in *Walden* is conveyed in ways that sometimes recall Emerson’s rhetorical address in ‘Nature’: ‘[...] here in Walden, the same woodland lake that I discovered so many years ago; [...] it is the same liquid joy and happiness to itself and its Maker, ay, and it *may* be to me’.<sup>160</sup>

---

concern is to make the ordinary marvelous’ (John Hildebidle, *Thoreau: A Naturalist’s Liberty* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983), p. 25).

<sup>157</sup> James McIntosh, *Thoreau as Romantic Naturalist: His Shifting Stance towards Nature* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1974), p. 18.

<sup>158</sup> This is the sense of Thoreau’s rallying cry in *Walden*, ‘walk even with the Builder of the universe’ (p. 293).

<sup>159</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 126.

<sup>160</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 174.

Crucially, for Thoreau it is precisely when the self seeks to penetrate, and mingle with, the natural world – and therefore with the spiritual essence of creation – that the individual can access an authentic form of his/her being.

According to Robinson:

Thoreau's 'self' was being 'devoured', merging with all that was around and all that he was aware of. Both his surroundings at the pond and the disciplined awareness that they helped to make possible worked to undermine the dichotomy of participant and observer that structures ordinary perceptual awareness.<sup>161</sup>

This attempt at reducing the space between self and nature plays a central role in Thoreau's ontology. It typifies 'the desire to be one with the earth', which is, arguably, Duluoz's main pursuit in *Big Sur*.<sup>162</sup> As Duluoz declares: 'So easy in the woods to daydream and pray to the local spirits and say "Allow me to stay here, I only want peace" and those foggy peaks answer back mutely Yes'.<sup>163</sup> For Robinson, this engagement towards nature manifests 'a wish for a liminal experience in which the boundaries of self and nature evaporate, and we experience an unusual sense of both harmony and elevation'.<sup>164</sup> It exemplifies the individual's striving for his/her own inclusion into nature and the divine, *even though* the operation is doomed because nature is intrinsically forbidding and its spiritual essence fundamentally impermeable. As Thoreau claims: 'I love nature

---

<sup>161</sup> Robinson, p. 83.

<sup>162</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 95.

<sup>163</sup> *Big Sur*, p. 18.

<sup>164</sup> Robinson, p. 119.

partly because she is not a man, but a retreat from him. None of his institutions control or pervade her. There a different kind of right prevails'.<sup>165</sup> Or, as Hansen puts it, 'Thoreau respected nature's essential otherness'.<sup>166</sup>

In Thoreau's Transcendentalist model, the self's ultimate integration within nature remains a fantasy that acts as an unattainable and yet necessary horizon. For Robinson: 'Nature was the emblem of the perfected order of things, as Emerson had argued, and thus it became for Thoreau the best way to express his own inspiration toward wholeness'.<sup>167</sup> Nevertheless, while nature cannot be embodied for Thoreau, it has the potential to point the individual towards a form of higher being. As Thoreau claims: 'I found in myself, and still find, an instinct toward a higher, or, as it is named, spiritual life, as do most men, and another toward a primitive rank and savage one, and I reverence them both'.<sup>168</sup> According to Hansen, Thoreau's sense of selfhood 'is profoundly related to the tension between the subjective, momentary impression and the knowledge that the immediate is implicitly part of a sequence. The self, therefore, exists as a double, its self-experience is essentially schismatic'.<sup>169</sup> What Hansen underlines is the double status of the self in Thoreau's form of Transcendentalism: it is the end-product of both sensual experience and universal consciousness; in other words, it is physical and metaphysical at the same time. Thus, it is the residual physicality of the self that is problematic, as it prevents total inclusion into nature. For Hansen: 'Thoreau introduced his own physicality as the battleground of opposing

---

<sup>165</sup> Thoreau, *The Journal of Henry David Thoreau*, p. 511, quoted by Hansen, p. 129.

<sup>166</sup> Hansen, p. 129.

<sup>167</sup> Robinson, p. 23.

<sup>168</sup> Thoreau, *Walden*, p. 189.

<sup>169</sup> Hansen, p. 131.

forces in nature'.<sup>170</sup> The physicality of the incarnate self acts as an interface for perception: while it plays a major role in the interpretation of the transcendental character of nature as we have seen, it is also what prevents the individual from directly merging with nature. Ultimately, and in spite of every attempt, the self is bound to remain intrinsically separate from nature.

This predicament provokes a series of ambivalent affects: there is both hope for a form of transcendence, as well as disillusionment. This ambivalence is an essential part of the duality of Thoreau's Transcendentalism: while it proceeds from empirical reality, it simultaneously references a type of Idealism that leans on transcendence for meaning. As Robinson observes, for Thoreau 'Idealism had to be transcribed into a larger philosophical synthesis, an "eclectic" philosophy that would preserve the values of both empiricism and idealism'.<sup>171</sup> It is this synthetic epistemology that, in great measure, instils Thoreau's writing with an inevitable sense of melancholy; a melancholy that can be traced throughout *Big Sur* as well. According to McIntosh:

[Thoreau] fashions in the course of each work (though not necessarily at its climax or end) a more thoughtful attitude that is a synthesis of his wish for involvement and his sense of separation. This third attitude is the result of a romantic learning process: his desire for involvement and his sense of separation work together in a dialectic. Thoreau does not employ this dialectic intentionally. Instead, it is a semipermanent phenomenon of his

---

<sup>170</sup> Ibid., p. 127.

<sup>171</sup> Robinson, p. 112.

mind that imbues his writing whether or not he chooses to call attention to it.<sup>172</sup>

This conflicting movement of convergence with and divergence from nature also marks Kerouac's *Big Sur*:

Ah, life is a gate, a way, a path to Paradise anyway, why not live for fun and joy and love or some sort of girl by a fireside, why not go to your desire and LAUGH... but I ran away from the seashore and never came back again without that secret knowledge: that it didn't want me there, that I was a fool to sit there in the first place, the sea has its waves, the man has its fireside, period.<sup>173</sup>

This passage exposes Duluoz's dry realisation of the impervious character of nature. The onomatopoeia and the capitalisation in the first part of the passage signal an ironical sense of disappointment: they support Duluoz's resigned confession, and he is brought to the recognition that neither paradise nor the seashore – and nature in general – are accessible to him. Kerouac illustrates it syntactically by cutting short Duluoz's flow of thought at the end of the passage: it implies that Duluoz is cut off from his *inner* nature as well. It suggests that Duluoz is bound to remain alien to nature, and forever ignorant of its essence.

Later on, as Duluoz comes back to Big Sur with several of his friends, Kerouac writes: 'The sight of the canyon down there as we renegotiated the

---

<sup>172</sup> McIntosh, pp. 10-11.

<sup>173</sup> *Big Sur*, p. 35.

mountain road made me bite my lip with marvel and sadness'.<sup>174</sup> Although this combination of affects is heterodox, it is not contradictory: it embodies Duluoz's unremitting attraction to nature, shortcut by the realisation that 'the sea has its waves, the man has its fireside, period'.<sup>175</sup> Yet, it is not nature that is deficient. As Mitchell R. Breitwieser suggests in *National Melancholy*, oftentimes Kerouac's narrators 'posit a flaw in themselves as desirers rather than in desire itself: they imagine themselves to be only fitfully loyal to their own desire, incapable of sustained devotion'.<sup>176</sup> Thus the intrusion of sadness in Duluoz's anticipation of his next immersive experience in nature is not exclusively an outcome of the physical impossibility to integrate, it is a way to lament the shortcomings of the physical and temporal self. From this perspective, *Big Sur*'s prevailing tone of melancholy is the affective by-product of the romantic longing for transcendence that is typical of Kerouac's writing, not dissimilar to Thoreau's sense of isolation at Walden.

Crucially, this search for the greatest possible closeness to nature recalls Camus's ontological interplay between the absurd and authentic being. For Camus as we have seen, the absurd epitomises the 'divorce between the mind that desires and the world that disappoints': it is a 'nostalgia for unity'.<sup>177</sup> In the Camusian model, this primordial sense of separation must be acknowledged. Concomitantly, the absurd operates as an ontological horizon to be transcended; it encapsulates a

---

<sup>174</sup> Ibid., p. 77.

<sup>175</sup> Ibid., p. 35.

<sup>176</sup> Mitchell R. Breitwieser, *National Melancholy: Mourning and Opportunity in Classic American Literature* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), p. 260.

<sup>177</sup> Camus, p. 50.

fundamental negation that is used, paradoxically, as a tool for self-creation.<sup>178</sup> As we transpose Camus's model to Thoreau's transcendental ontology, the absurd may be found in the insatiable cravings of the self towards nature: it materialises itself in a yearning for a transcendent connection with nature, even though its essence is bound to remain impervious. Accordingly, Camus's doomed statement, 'the world evades us because it becomes itself again', could be Thoreau's own in *Walden's* chapter 'Higher Laws', in which he reaffirms the separateness of his own human character:<sup>179</sup>

We are conscious of an animal in us, which awakens in proportion as our higher nature slumbers. It is reptile and sensual, and perhaps cannot be wholly expelled; like the worms which, even in life and health, occupy our bodies. Possibly we may withdraw from it, but never change its nature. I fear that it may enjoy a certain health of its own; that we may be well, not pure.<sup>180</sup>

For McIntosh: 'Thoreau wants to be involved in nature; yet he feels that he is apart from it, either because he values the distinctiveness of his human state, or because he distrusts the nature he confronts, or both'.<sup>181</sup> Thus apprehended within a Camusian context, this unbridgeable gap between the self and the phenomenon

---

<sup>178</sup> See section on Camus in literature review, pp. 39-45.

<sup>179</sup> Camus, p. 20.

<sup>180</sup> Thoreau, *Walden*, p. 197.

<sup>181</sup> McIntosh, p. 10.

of nature, whose essential quality is impenetrability, may be interpreted as a Thoreau-esque form of the absurd.

Still, this absurdity is far from purely negative. For Thoreau, the attempt to overcome this failure to integrate with nature exemplifies a type of engagement that is fundamentally self-creative. As Hansen explains:

The clear view of the unattainable lends identity to our existence in this world *because* we cannot integrate the cosmos. So then, whatever shape each individual's existence will have, its identity is derivative of a purity of vision which can only be defined in terms of its unworldliness. Hence the worldly, practical consequences of our quest for identity.<sup>182</sup>

It is this self-creative character in Thoreau's transcendental ontology that channels a Camusian type of authenticity. For Camus, the experience of the absurd prompts an engagement with one's immediate environment which, as it funnels the creative act, inherently generates authentic being: 'The world offers no meaning, and [one] must create his own'.<sup>183</sup> This paradox is reverberated through Thoreau's form of engagement as well, which is exemplified by the self's attempt to commingle with natural phenomena – *an attempt which is bound to fail*, as seen. Thus, for Thoreau this type of engagement cannot be anything *but* an engagement *towards* nature, in the same way that the Camusian form of engagement cannot be an engagement *in* the world (as it is for Sartre), but *towards* it. In other words, although the self cannot be wholly and perfectly integrated into nature, it actively

---

<sup>182</sup> Hansen, p. 4.

<sup>183</sup> Baker, p. 43.

strives for its inclusion. This is a form of being for Thoreau, which may be equated with a type of existential authenticity.

These correspondences afford a crucial link between the American Romantic tradition and a continental form of rationalism and pragmatism which is usually seen as its antithesis. Nonetheless, and as I am about to show in the next paragraphs, this variant of the absurd is what renders a sense of the inconsistencies in the writing in *Big Sur*, especially in relation to the narrator's crises. As Baker foresees: 'It is because humans demand meaning in an unresponsive world that the absurd exists, and concrete human problems arise in our acute awareness of this dichotomy'.<sup>184</sup>

In *Big Sur*, Kerouac dramatises Duluoz's failure to relate harmoniously to and cohere within his natural environment. The narrator's project to get closer to nature may be traced through Thoreau's transcendental ontology: in principle, Duluoz's engagement towards nature should allow for a form of higher and potentially transcendental being that would be fundamentally regenerative. The location of *Big Sur* is itself indicative of a form of transcendental harmony that not only bears similarities to Thoreau's *Walden*, but can also be contextualised in an Emersonian sense. For Ziff:

Emerson saw that the West was not just another region adding its voice to those of the North and the South but was an imperfectly articulated idea. It

---

<sup>184</sup> Ibid., p. 2.

was the spirit of the continent answering back to the Europeanization of the seabord.<sup>185</sup>

What Emerson meant by the term ‘seabord’ was the historical East, more particularly the states of the Original Thirteen Colonies, which point to the European origins of the American nation.<sup>186</sup> Through this geographical binary, the west for Emerson epitomised hope for a new nation whose civilisational project relied, primarily, on natural abundance and an expansionist ethos, far from the cold artificiality of the modern megapolises of the colonised East. Nonetheless in *Big Sur*, as Duluoz runs away from the big city (San Francisco), his attempt at reconnecting with nature fails irremediably. The next paragraphs will show in more detail the ways in which Duluoz, as he goes down Raton Canyon for the first time to reach Monsanto’s cabin, feels estranged from nature, pictured as a force that is inimical and frightful, ‘[a]n angry war that doesn’t want [him] pokin around [...] – It is a dark clangor in the rain forest and doesnt want no skid row bum to carry to the sea’.<sup>187</sup>

As Duluoz arrives at night to Big Sur:

I sense something wrong somehow, there’s an awful roar of surf but it isnt 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 – The bridge continues the coast highway from one bluff

---

<sup>185</sup> Ziff, ‘Introduction’, in *Nature and Selected Essays*, ed. by Ziff, pp. 7-27 (p. 20).

<sup>186</sup> Ibid.

<sup>187</sup> *Big Sur*, p. 9.

to another, it's a nice white bridge with white rails and there's a white line  
 runnin down the middle familiar and highwaylike but something's  
 wrong.<sup>188</sup>

In this passage Kerouac uses the extended metaphor of a bottomless pit to describe Raton Canyon. As Duluoz walks down towards the cabin, he is plunged into total darkness. The focalisation is strictly internal: the reader has to rely on Duluoz alone, whose sight is hindered, and whose reports, consequently, are unreliable; all that Duluoz can hear is the sound of the 'awful roar of surf' whose origin confuses him.<sup>189</sup> The punctuation features numerous breaks, either through commas or dashes: it marks the narrator's hesitations and betrays how difficult it is for him to make sense of his experience through words. Meanwhile, the white line of the bridge provides him with an impression of familiarity, which is immediately contradicted by the feeling that there is 'something wrong', a phrase repeated twice in the quotation, as if his subconscious is trying to break through.<sup>190</sup> This contradiction in the text is evocative of the uncanny, a trope which in the context of *Big Sur* epitomises the narrator's sudden unease with nature, and thus the experience of absurdity. For Baker: 'The absurd may be experienced because nature is indifferent to people, making the world seem strange, dense, or foreign even if familiar objects are perceived. We are solitary in a world with which we have nothing in common'.<sup>191</sup>

---

<sup>188</sup> Ibid., p. 6.

<sup>189</sup> Ibid.

<sup>190</sup> Ibid.

<sup>191</sup> Baker, p. 2.

Two pages later, the narrator's estrangement intensifies. As Duluoz is halfway through his descent towards Monsanto's beach cabin, he feels more and more alarmed:

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 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.<sup>192</sup>

This passage reveals a fundamental dichotomy between Duluoz and his immediate natural environment. Almost all the representative elements of nature are described negatively: 'horror', 'slippery', 'dangerous' repeated twice, 'dark things', and the poetical adjectival accumulation 'wet black sunken earth danger'.<sup>193</sup> Such connotations participate in a paradigm of threat, and even of death, as Duluoz's description of his surroundings echoes a grave. Destruction is mentioned explicitly through verbal forms such as 'crashing', 'smashed', 'cracked', while death is evoked by means of an oxymoron, 'breath of death', whose rhyming consonant reinforces the semantic value of the last word, 'death',

---

<sup>192</sup> *Big Sur*, p. 8.

<sup>193</sup> *Ibid.*

enhancing the macabre and uncanny atmosphere of the scene.<sup>194</sup> For Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle, the uncanny's main function is to 'mak[e] things *uncertain*: it has to do with the sense that things are not as they have come to appear through habit and familiarity, that they may challenge all rationality and logic'.<sup>195</sup> At this point in the novel Kerouac's use of the uncanny is instrumental, rendering nature suddenly alien – and even adverse – to the narrator; it allows death to make itself palpable *through* nature, which is then internalised by Duluoz and feeds his anguish. Meanwhile, as Duluoz descends in fright on Big Sur, he mimics Jonathan Harker's journey to the castle of Count Dracula in Bram Stoker's eponymous novel [1897].<sup>196</sup> The sensible difference between Harker and Duluoz, however, is that Harker walks up to the castle and Duluoz walks down to Big Sur, towards what he terms 'the Vulcan's Forge itself': it symbolises a downwards fall into hell that is reminiscent of Dante's *Inferno*.<sup>197</sup> Thus, this passage in *Big Sur* may also be seen as an allusion to the Christian myth of the Fall and humanity's estrangement from the divine.

The sudden incapacity of the narrator to fit in the natural environment of the canyon – originally conceived as idyllic – is a direct consequence of the alienating principle that sits at the core of the absurd. For Golomb:

Camus invites us to accept the immanently absurd world – in the original sense of *absurdus*: i.e. an incongruous universe devoid of the harmony and

---

<sup>194</sup> Ibid.

<sup>195</sup> Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle, 'The Uncanny', in *The Gothic*, ed. by David Punter and Glennis Byron (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), pp. 283-87 (p. 283).

<sup>196</sup> See Bram Stoker, *Dracula* [1897], Deluxe edn (London: Penguin Classics, 2011).

<sup>197</sup> *Big Sur*, p. 17.

meaning that ordinarily dwell in things through the power of an ordering principle allegedly external to our world.<sup>198</sup>

For Camus the chasm between the self and the world must be accepted in order to transcend the absurd condition and thus enable authentic being. It is precisely this sense of sudden separation from the natural world that Duluoz cannot endure. In the middle of one of Duluoz's crises, Kerouac writes: 'I can hear myself again whining "Why does God torture me?" [...] you feel a guilt so deep you identify yourself with the devil and God seems far away abandoning you to your sick silliness'.<sup>199</sup> 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'.<sup>200</sup> Here, Kerouac plays with the form of the litany: Duluoz makes himself into a Christ-like figure in order to explore the sufferings of the abandoned self. For Golomb: 'The pathos of the absurd stems directly from the acute realization that there is an unbridgeable gap between our need for meaning and happiness, and reality, which is unresponsive to this need'.<sup>201</sup> As Duluoz reckons: 'To me [Big Sur]'s just an inhospitable madhouse of the earth'.<sup>202</sup>

In most religious litanies however, the individual is positioned at the bottom of the theological continuum, from where he may look up to – and implore – a superior godhead conceived *ex nihilo*; this clashes both with Duluoz's project

---

<sup>198</sup> Golomb, p. 169.

<sup>199</sup> *Big Sur*, p. 96.

<sup>200</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 163-64.

<sup>201</sup> Golomb, pp. 173-74.

<sup>202</sup> *Big Sur*, p. 91.

of self-reliance in *Big Sur*, and with the pantheistic framework of American Transcendentalism. For Bowers:

Instead of being dependent, as in the early orthodoxies, upon Divine Grace – upon a kind of flooding of the mind by light from without – the power of the inner light was now grounded in the nature of the mind itself, becoming merely one mental faculty among others and subject, therefore, to the same degree of individual control. It was converted, in other words, from a ‘revelation’, an act and agency of God, into an ‘intuition’, an act and agency of man.<sup>203</sup>

What Bowers underlines here through the concept of the ‘inner light’ is the implicit immanence that stems from the pantheistic dimension of Emersonian Transcendentalism, a dimension that in many ways is incompatible with the precepts of traditional Christian theology.<sup>204</sup> Instead, such passages in *Big Sur*, in which the narrator laments his failure to relate to God, imply that Duluoz’s alienation from the natural involves, simultaneously, a segregation from the spiritual. This link, which is consistent with both Emerson’s and Thoreau’s conception of nature as mystical in essence, shows that Kerouac works at the edge of the Transcendentalist tradition, even if it is reconfigured in Christian terms.

Accordingly, Duluoz’s sudden estrangement from nature in the novel reflects Kerouac’s break in terms of writing between *On the Road* and *Big Sur*. As

---

<sup>203</sup> Bowers, ‘Democratic Vistas’, in *American Transcendentalism*, ed. by Barbour, pp. 9-21 (p. 13).

<sup>204</sup> Ibid.

Kerouac writes in *Big Sur*, the spot feels ‘as tho once inhabited by Gods or giants of some kind but long ago vacated [...] and the evil lurked somewhere’.<sup>205</sup> For Hipkiss: ‘Nature is neither purposeful nor caring, and the age-old geologic formations of Big Sur seem cold and indifferent entirely to man’s fate and to their own’.<sup>206</sup> It is this de-mystification of nature in *Big Sur* that renders an acute sense of alienation in the writing.

For Finkelstein in *Existentialism and Alienation in American Literature*, alienated writing ‘presents the outer world as cold, hostile, forbidding, inimical, reflecting the observer’s own fear, unrest and desolation’.<sup>207</sup> Finkelstein’s observation – although useful – nonetheless downplays the possibility that alienation comes, first and foremost, from a sense of rupture between self and nature. For Bowers: ‘[American Transcendentalism] interpreted material nature mystically as a “veil” or symbol of the divine; [it] maintained that every individual can penetrate the veil to discover divine truth for himself without the aid of traditional authority or even logic’.<sup>208</sup> In *Big Sur*, it is Duluoz’s inability to penetrate this veil – the physical envelope of transcendental nature – that most effectively renders his alienation.

This permanent sense of estrangement makes for a compelling effect in *Big Sur*, as Kerouac articulates the trope of alienation in an unprecedented way. As argued, this alienation is frequently described through a Thoreau-esque form of the absurd, the doomed attempts of the individual to bridge the gap between the

---

<sup>205</sup> *Big Sur*, p. 12.

<sup>206</sup> Hipkiss, *Jack Kerouac, Prophet of the New Romanticism*, p. 54.

<sup>207</sup> Finkelstein, p. 166.

<sup>208</sup> Bowers, ‘Democratic Vistas’, in *American Transcendentalism*, ed. by Barbour, pp. 9-21 (p. 11).

self and the impenetrability of nature. Thoreau's form of the absurd, as we have seen, acts as an instrument for authentic being: it promotes an engagement towards nature through which the individual experiences a form of higher being that is potentially transcendental, and that simultaneously re-creates the self. Meanwhile for Duluoz in *Big Sur*, absurdity becomes a chronic condition that profoundly and durably estranges him from both nature and the divine. As Kerouac writes:

The once pleasant thumpthump gurgle slap of the creek is now an endless jabbering of blind nature which doesn't understand anything in the first place – My old thoughts about the silt of a billion years covering all this and all cities and generations eventually is just a dumb old thought.<sup>209</sup>

The structural variation from Thoreau's type of absurdity, however, is that in *Big Sur* this estrangement stems, primarily, from an explicit rejection of the narrator by nature itself: 'I ran away from the seashore and never came back again without that secret knowledge: that it didnt want me there'.<sup>210</sup> In this sense, Duluoz's alienation in the novel is less suggestive of a de-mystification of nature than of an inversion of its transcendental and self-creative potentialities. Kerouac's allusion to Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Doctor Jekyll and Mister Hyde* [1886] in *Big Sur* supports this interpretation: 'I'm reading (of all things) (shudder) *Doctor Jekyll and Mister Hyde* – Small wonder maybe that I myself

---

<sup>209</sup> *Big Sur*, p. 98.

<sup>210</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 35.

turned from serene Jekyll to hysterical Hyde in the short space of six weeks'.<sup>211</sup>

This reference may be taken at face value for a permutation of Duluoz's being throughout *Big Sur*, which shifts from self-creative and potentially transcendental, to self-destructive and strictly non-transcendental; this reading suggests that the narrator's identity is not only multifaceted, it is also inconsistent at heart. More interestingly perhaps, it may be read as a subversion of the moral value attributed to the outer environment in the novel. Although nature is still conceived as animistic during Duluoz's descent on Big Sur, its spiritual essence is substituted for a force that is, fundamentally, malevolent, '[a]s tho nature had a Gargantuan leprous face of its own with broad nostrils and huge bags under its eyes and a mouth big enough to swallow five thousand jeepster stationwagons [...] without a sigh of reminiscence or regret.'<sup>212</sup>

Once again, the recourse to a Gothic imagery is instrumental. It allows Kerouac to transgress the Transcendentalist view that nature is, in essence, regenerative, and to justify Duluoz's decay in *Big Sur*. For Stephan Karschay:

[T]he Gothic mode [...] is not only transgressive, [...] it] also delights in all manners of transgressions in its depicted worlds, it offers yet another intersection with the notion of degeneration: [...] it is no exaggeration to

---

<sup>211</sup> Ibid., pp. 13-14.

<sup>212</sup> Ibid., p. 78. This personification is reminiscent of Ginsberg's Moloch in Part 2 of 'Howl' as well.

claim that the concept of transgression is also built into the very fabric of degeneration.<sup>213</sup>

Through the ontological transvaluation that the Gothic mode enables, nature in *Big Sur* may be envisaged as vampiric by nature, as harmful for the self. Not only does its Otherness preclude the potentiality for authentic being for Duluoz, it also embodies a degenerative force that preys on the narrator's self. As an effect, his self-reliance is severely undermined:

Back at the cabin I cant chop wood for fear I'll cut a foot off, I cant sleep, I cant sit, I cant pace, I keep going to the creek to drink water [...], 'No!' I almost yell, 'I mean I'm so exhausted I dont wanta do anything or see anybody' [...] (as an example of how really psychotically suspicious and loco I was getting).<sup>214</sup>

In this passage, nature does not act as a vector for authentic being anymore; it has become inimical and threatening. It becomes synonymous with a sense of anguish above all. Here, the narrator's experience is far from that of Thoreau's in *Walden*:

Then to my morning work. First I take an axe and pail and go in search of water, if that be not a dream. After a cold and snowy night it needed a divining rod to find it. [...] I cut my way first through a foot of snow, and

---

<sup>213</sup> Stephan Karschay, *Degeneration, Normativity and the Gothic at the Fin-de-Siècle*, ed. by Joseph Bristow, Palgrave Studies in Nineteenth-Century Writing and Culture (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), pp. 25-26.

<sup>214</sup> *Big Sur*, p. 162.

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.<sup>215</sup>

Thoreau's involvement with nature fosters a sense of harmony in this passage: while the impossibility of perfect integration is implicitly accepted, the narrator's contact with his natural environment evidences a sensibility towards its transcendental potential. Simultaneously, Thoreau fashions a mirroring effect between outer and inner nature: the narrator's contentment with the purity of nature reflects the intuition of its spiritual essence, as the last phrase indicates.

Whereas, in *Big Sur* the correspondence between the outer and inner – between what Duluoze can see, and what he feels – suggests that the moral corruption of nature in the novel reflects a degeneracy embodied in his own self, a view that tallies with both the Transcendentalist ethos of Kerouac's writing and with the Gothic tonality of the passage. For Karschay:

[The] Gothic also suggests that the other can never be completely expelled from the self's cultural space. [...] the self retains too many features of the Other to allow for an all-encompassing exorcism. So even when the Other

---

<sup>215</sup> Thoreau, *Walden*, p. 230.

appears as an external threat posed by a powerful foreigner, the intimate connection between self and Other remains tangible.<sup>216</sup>

The essential malevolence of nature that Duluoz perceives as he goes down Raton Canyon thus corresponds to a fundamental deathliness within himself. In Existentialist terms, his vision of death in lieu of transcendental nature translates as a form of nothingness which, in turn, alienates the self. In this sense, the visionary impulse of Kerouac's former novels is undermined. Consequently, Duluoz becomes impotent and spirals towards self-disintegration: "I'm going crazy [...] maybe I'll have to, maybe we'll have to leave or something, I think I'll die here"<sup>217</sup>.

Nonetheless, in *Big Sur* this deterioration of nature – both outer and inner – is an effect, not an end: it stimulates the dramatisation of the Christian dialectic of sin and salvation and of redemption through sacrifice. In other words, it produces a narrative that is fundamentally masochistic; a masochism facilitated by a malevolent rather than benevolent God.<sup>218</sup> As Kerouac writes:

That big wind blasts and roars, it's all yellow sunny and blue fury everywhere – I see the rocks wobble as it seems God is really getting mad for such a world and's about to destroy it: big cliffs wobbling in my dumb

---

<sup>216</sup> Karschay, p. 214.

<sup>217</sup> *Big Sur*, p. 170.

<sup>218</sup> This masochistic dimension, which is paramount in Kerouac's writing, will be explored in more detail in Part 2 of the thesis.

eyes: God says 'It's gone too far, you're all destroying everything one way or the other wobble boom the end is NOW'.<sup>219</sup>

In this passage the whole natural setting of *Big Sur* is shaken by the wrath of God, who is about to unleash the Apocalypse, an image that reflects the narrator's inner turmoil and paroxysmic anguish. Meanwhile, this use of the moral codes of Catholicism, in which the divine is as punishing as it is redemptive, is superimposed on the Transcendentalist foundations of the text; both traditions join forces in *Big Sur* to signify the narrator's estrangement from nature, which, instead of being merely passive becomes fundamentally dynamic and performative. It is not just nature that contributes to Duluoz's self-destruction; nature is also turned into a divine instrument of retaliation. As Duluoz admits, halfway through his descent on Raton Canyon: 'I am *affrayed* in the old Edmund Spenser sense of being *frayed* by a whip'.<sup>220</sup> Nonetheless, the hardships Duluoz faces might ultimately orientate him towards a form of salvation, as we will see in the next section.

---

<sup>219</sup> *Big Sur*, p. 160.

<sup>220</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.

## SECTION 2.

### ENGAGEMENT, MOVEMENT, AND DISENGAGEMENT IN *BIG SUR* AND IN 'HOWL'

Section 2 explores the strategies of creation in Jack Kerouac's *Big Sur* and in Allen Ginsberg's 'Howl' – both in terms of content and aesthetics – that resist the prospect of nullification outlined in Section 1. In Existentialist theory, nothingness and absurdity are the main generators for the search for authenticity previously witnessed in the texts outlined here. They also initiate forms of engagement, that function as distinct creative strategies in the texts. It is the superimposition of these strategies onto those of alienation and destruction, as analysed in the last section, that will be viewed as constituting an Existentialist form of Thanatos. Hence, this section will examine the ways in which the multifarious forms of engagement, that Ginsberg's 'Howl' and Kerouac's *Big Sur* exemplify, may (or may not) defeat the sense of nothingness that both texts articulate. In Ginsberg's 'Howl', I will use Emerson's idea of intuition as proof of a type of transcendental performativity to show how the poem embodies a creative dynamic. Meanwhile in Kerouac's *Big Sur*, the notion of engagement is highly contradictory. When directed outwards, it exemplifies a movement of high intensity that rushes towards collapse; when directed inwards, it is reflexive and demobilising and ultimately takes the form of a disengagement not dissimilar to that of Thoreau in *Walden*. An American version of an Existentialist Thanatos will emerge from these two types of engagement and their damaging effects on the self through the solipsism that they entail.

### 1.2.1. Socio-historical and Transcendental Forms of Engagement in 'Howl'

In 'Howl', as we have seen, Moloch typifies a nullifying principle that creates a necessary tension in terms that are poetical and mythical, but also social and spiritual. In this subsection, I will show that 'Howl' also illustrates the struggles of the self in an Existentialist environment, albeit one that also uses a lineage of Transcendentalist thought to articulate a particular notion of selfhood. To that end, the next paragraphs will focus on Part 1 of 'Howl' and analyse the impact of the 'Footnote to "Howl"' for the rest of the poem.

In Part 1, Ginsberg uses a series of stanzas which contain short narrative sequences that illustrate the characters' experiences. As the following passage shows:

[A]ngelheaded hipsters

[...]

who ate fire in paint hotels or drank turpentine in Paradise

Alley, death, or purgatoried their torsos night after night

with dreams, with drugs, with waking nightmares, alcohol and

cock and endless balls,

[...]

who walked all night with their shoes full of blood on the

snowbank docks waiting for a door in the East River to

open to a room full of steamheat and opium,

[...]

who sang out of their windows in despair, fell out of the subway  
 window, jumped in the filthy Passaic, leaped on negroes,  
 cried all over the street, danced on broken wineglasses  
 barefoot smashed phonograph records of nostalgic Euro-  
 pean 1930s German jazz finished the whiskey and threw  
 up groaning into the bloody toilet, moans in their ears  
 and the blast of colossal steam-whistles.<sup>1</sup>

According to Ginsberg, Part 1 was written ‘in one afternoon, a huge sad comedy of wild phrasing, meaningless images for the beauty of abstract poetry of mind running along’.<sup>2</sup> While the images contained in Part 1 seem erratic and out of control, they are hardly ‘meaningless’.<sup>3</sup> In fact, all of the experiences presented in the quotation above are fraught with a sense of danger. The multiple references to sex, drugs and death are set against a background of general urgency. The last stanza of this passage is particularly epic: from a song of despair to a toilet cubicle, the protagonist ‘fell out’, ‘jumped’, ‘leaped’, ‘cried’, ‘danced’, ‘smashed’, ‘finished the whiskey’ and eventually ‘threw up’.<sup>4</sup> Here, the succession of action verbs without connectives is key: it speeds up the narrative sequence and creates an effect of rush.<sup>5</sup> Meanwhile, this line is fuelled by

---

<sup>1</sup> ‘Howl’, pp. 1, 5 and 6.

<sup>2</sup> Ginsberg, ‘Notes Written on Finally Recording “Howl”’, in *On the Poetry of Allen Ginsberg*, ed. by Hyde, pp. 80-83 (p. 80).

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> ‘Howl’, p. 6.

<sup>5</sup> This aesthetic feature is often used by Kerouac as well; it provides his writing with a sensation of speed that is central to the spontaneous effect of his prose, as we will see in more detail in the section.

violence, which is evoked both in physical and ideological form through the implicit reference to fascism; it suffuses Part 1 with a sense of brutality, as if the characters are seeking to escape an imminent threat. For George Bowering: ‘Ginsberg itemizes the true story staggering of his martyrs who cower, get busted, purgatory their bodies, see lightnings in their brains [...]. He is interested in motion, soul motion, emotion, to break thru the motionless world of Time’.<sup>6</sup> This ‘motionless world of Time’, a phrase from ‘Howl’, refers to a specific historical time, that of post-war, post-industrial America that is ruled by Moloch, the metaphorical incarnation of nothingness, as seen in Section 1.<sup>7</sup>

The frenetic effect that these actions generate, as in the last stanza quoted above, emerges from the exalted tonality of Part 1 of the poem. According to Tytell:

The experiences in ‘Howl’, certainly in the opening part of the poem, are hysterically excessive and frantically active. It is the sheer momentum of nightmare that unifies these accounts of jumping off bridges, of slashing wrists, of ecstatic copulations, of purgatorial subway rides and longer journeys, a momentum rendered by the propelling, torrential quality of Ginsberg’s long line, a cumulative rhythm, dependent on parallelism and the reception of initial sounds’.<sup>8</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup> George Bowering, ‘How I Hear “Howl”’, in *On the Poetry of Allen Ginsberg*, ed. by Hyde, pp. 370-78 (p. 372).

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. See ‘Howl’, p. 2.

<sup>8</sup> Tytell, p. 19.

Tytell highlights the exuberant character of the narrative sequences, which rely in great part on the frantic rhythm of its lines. Crucially, the use of free verse, a legacy from amongst others Whitman, is highly instrumental in achieving this effect. As Ginsberg claims: ‘Everybody assumes [...] that [Whitman’s] line is a big freakish uncontrollable necessary prosaic goof. No attempt’s been made to use it in the light of early XX Century organization of new speech-rhythm prosody to *build up* large organic structures’.<sup>9</sup> The free verse form is central to Ginsberg’s poetry: as it dispenses with formal conventions of metre, rhythm and rhyme, it promotes a poetics that is more flexible and open to spontaneous expression and experimentation in terms of sound and pace.<sup>10</sup> Simultaneously, each stanza is introduced by means of an anaphora, ‘who’, which creates a dramatic accumulation and suffuses the poem with an incantatory tone.<sup>11</sup> As Ginsberg explains: ‘I depended on the word “who” to keep the beat, a base to keep measure, return to and take off again onto another streak of invention’.<sup>12</sup> While Ginsberg uses it primarily for rhythmic purposes, it also allows him to tie one stanza to the next, and create a huge accumulation in the form of a catalogue. As Ferlinghetti remarks, ‘Ginsberg strives to include all of life, especially the elements of suffering and dismay from which the voice of desire rises’.<sup>13</sup> Meanwhile, the

---

<sup>9</sup> Ginsberg, ‘Notes Written on Finally Recording “Howl”’, in *On the Poetry of Allen Ginsberg*, ed. by Hyde, pp. 80-83 (p. 81).

<sup>10</sup> As Ginsberg confesses: ‘I thought I wouldn’t write a *poem*, but just write what I wanted to without fear, let my imagination go, open secrecy, and scribble magic lines from my real mind – sum up my life’ (Ibid., p. 80).

<sup>11</sup> ‘Howl’, pp. 1-7.

<sup>12</sup> Ginsberg, ‘Notes Written on Finally Recording “Howl”’, in *On the Poetry of Allen Ginsberg*, ed. by Hyde, pp. 80-83 (p. 81).

<sup>13</sup> Ferlinghetti, ‘Horn on *Howl*’, in *On the Poetry of Allen Ginsberg*, ed. by Hyde, pp. 42-53 (p. 46).

anaphora also emphasises the intensity of the poet's address and stresses its declamatory effect.

The juxtaposition and accumulation of such narrative sequences, underpinned by the frenetic rhythm of Ginsberg's oratorical long lines, provide Part 1 of 'Howl' with a sense of action and performativity essential for an Existentialist reading of the poem. For Tytell:

Ginsberg's poetry is characteristic of the Beat desire *to be*, affirming existence as a positive value in a time of apathy. The quest for experience is as obsessive and all-consuming in 'Howl' as in *On The Road*. Whether these experiences are destructive or not is of less importance than the fact of contact, especially the kind of experience that allows an individual to discover his own vulnerability, his humanness, without cowering.<sup>14</sup>

While Tytell pinpoints the ambivalent nature of experience in Beat writings, he also suggests that the 'quest for experience' in the texts may be equated with the characters' pursuit of authenticity and self-discovery via an engagement with reality.<sup>15</sup> Thus, the integration of Moloch with both the dominant cultural values and socio-economic conditions of the post-war era corresponds to a larger process of mythification; a mythification constitutive of the characters' consciousness of death as well. Consequently, the relation of Part 2 to Part 1 of 'Howl', which is that of Moloch to Ginsberg's characters, but also that of inertia and contemplation to dynamism, establishes the terms of a Sartrean dialectic between being and

---

<sup>14</sup> Tytell, p. 19.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

nothingness in 'Howl'. This fundamental antagonism – between the affirmation of the characters' sense of selfhood in Part 1 and the menace of nullification that Moloch embodies in Part 2 – highlights the ways in which the poem addresses the problem of being in the context of a hostile environment. According to Richard Lehan in *A Dangerous Crossing: French Literary Existentialism & the Modern American Novel*:

Even as threats to the self from centralized sources of power become more real, modern man seems compelled to re-create himself in the face of these limits – to affirm his sense of life against the continuing forms of institutional death which surrounds him.<sup>16</sup>

Thus, in accord with the ontological interplay between Sartrean nothingness and engagement, Moloch generates the characters' desire for engagement in Part 1 of 'Howl'. Moloch is not only the chief agent of nothingness in 'Howl', he is also an entry into a decidedly Existentialist version of Thanatos within the poem.

From this perspective, the actions performed by Ginsberg's characters in Part 1 may be viewed as a series of confrontations with the adverse environment of post-war America that typifies their commitment to reality. In 'Howl', this encounter of the self with the materiality of history can be hazardous and even perilous; as the following stanza shows:

---

<sup>16</sup> Richard Lehan, *A Dangerous Crossing: French Literary Existentialism and the Modern American Novel*, Crosscurrents / Modern Critiques Series (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1973), pp. XIX-XX.

[...] who were burned alive in their innocent flannel suits on Madison Avenue amid blasts of leaden verse & the tanked-up clatter of the iron regiments of fashion & the nitroglycerine shrieks of the fairies of advertising & the mustard gas of sinister intelligent editors, or were run down by the drunken taxicabs of Absolute reality.<sup>17</sup>

Here, references again to the military-industrial complex are fused with the new forms of the leisure industry of post-war America. Ginsberg uses an extended metaphor of war to signify the ways in which the historical environment itself becomes bellicose and hostile. As Ginsberg's characters attempt to realise themselves within the field of historical reality, their very integrity is jeopardised. In the above stanza, the self is denied by a principle of reality, understood in this context as the ever-normative and controlling socio-historical environment of post-war America. This permanent sense of danger suggests that, in the last resort, the forms of being that the characters exemplify throughout Part 1, are always at risk. This implies a fundamental tension between the characters' demand for absolute self-realisation and the resistance they encounter emblematised in Moloch. This tension articulates two antithetical movements: that of the characters' desire to unconditionally live in the here and now and the alienating and self-suppressing impulse of Moloch, who, as a centre of nothingness and principle of alienation in mythical terms as well as in a post-war American context, also controls the physical space of historical reality. This conflictual

---

<sup>17</sup> 'Howl', p. 5.

relationship between forms of engagement and forms of nothingness engenders a very distinct version of Thanatos in 'Howl'.

In Existentialist terms, the conflict between the characters' engagement and the material conditions of an uncompromising reality is what creates the self.

At the end of Part 1, Ginsberg writes:

the madman bum and angel beat in Time, unknown, yet  
                                   putting down here what might be left to say in time  
                                   come after death,  
 and rose reincarnate  
 [...]  
 with the absolute heart of the poem of life butchered out of  
                                   their own bodies good to eat a thousand years.<sup>18</sup>

Here, Ginsberg attempts to condense all the preceding stanzas into an abstraction that glorifies the experiences in Part 1. The 'angel beat in Time' that Ginsberg evokes could very well be Kerouac himself, 'putting down here what might be left to say in time come after death' alluding to Kerouac's writing.<sup>19</sup> In this passage, Ginsberg's characters defy their own mortality by means of a consummate engagement with life. For Lehan: 'Existential man is the sum of what he does: his meaning follows from his actions and not some preconceived notion about human nature. He is man in motion. His values cannot be divorced from experience'.<sup>20</sup> In

---

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 8.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Lehan, pp. XV-XVI.

this sense, 'Howl''s Part 1 typifies a series of claims for liberation that in themselves constitute the characters' sense of selfhood; actions that illustrate an engagement with the here and now.

This form of being, which is regenerative in essence, is symptomatic of a form of Sartrean engagement in the poem; it is also consistent with the American tradition of epic poetry that Whitman, and on another register T.S. Eliot, embraced before Ginsberg.<sup>21</sup> In a certain measure, 'Howl' extends Eliot's epic poem 'The Waste Land' in its vision of modernity.<sup>22</sup> For Gray:

The great American epics [...] strategy would be to create a hero rather than celebrate one and to make rather than record the history that surrounds him. They would, in effect, jettison the third-person hero of traditional epic [...]; and in his place they would put the poet himself as a representative, democratic man who discovers his identity and values in the course of writing, on his own and on our behalf.<sup>23</sup>

Put concisely, the epic imparts the poetical agency with a sense of both action and community, which in 'Howl' is embodied in the 'best minds of my generation'

---

<sup>21</sup> See Walt Whitman's 'Song of Myself', in *Leaves of Grass: The First (1855) Edition*, ed. by Bloom, pp. 28-96, and T.S. Eliot's 'The Waste Land' [1922], in *T.S. Eliot: The Wasteland*, ed. by Stephen Coote, Penguin Critical Studies, revised edn (London: Penguin Books, 1988), pp. 33-64.

<sup>22</sup> For John Whittier-Ferguson: 'The Waste Land takes us to the roots of our civilization, beyond mere first-person anguish and insight, towards the most powerful, most primitive symbols and narratives underlying the "stony rubbish" of modernity and the isolated self' (John Whittier-Ferguson, 'Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot, and the Modern Epic', in *The Cambridge Companion to the Epic*, ed. by Catherine Bates (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 211-33 (p. 217)).

<sup>23</sup> Gray, p. 13.

and the ‘angelheaded hipsters’ that Ginsberg associates with.<sup>24</sup> Furthermore, the epic champions a heroic dimension that is contingent, yet circumstantial: ‘To Bakhtin, the epic is antithetical to modern man’s suspicion of absolutes and to our belief that heroism, if it exists, lies in a momentary act rather than fixed character traits’.<sup>25</sup> It entails that the epic character relies on an adversarial relationship that fosters a sense of performativity within the narrative: its momentum lies in an act of defiance. It is this confrontational drive in the poem that is heroic in a mythical sense; it translates as an incentive to commit to the here and now in order to claim a future otherwise jeopardised. As the heroic agency embarks on an odyssey that seeks to defeat the forces of oppression, it builds, reciprocally, the heroic contents of its own existence. Simultaneously, as Gray argues:

The essential form of such epics would have to be open because the process of self-discovery would be perceived as a continuous one: the poet could never cease exploring until the end of his life and, besides, each reader could and should continue such explorations for himself, following the paths the poet had signposted.<sup>26</sup>

From this perspective, the very form of the epic is suitable for the emergence and cultivation of a type of Existentialist authenticity in the poem; it is the very engagement with Moloch that, paradoxically, shapes its identity. This

---

<sup>24</sup> ‘Howl’, p. 1.

<sup>25</sup> John P. McWilliams Jr, *The American Epic: Transforming a Genre: 1770-1860*, Cambridge Studies in American Literature and Culture (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 6.

<sup>26</sup> Gray, p. 13.

Existentialist reading allows the characters in 'Howl' to become, in a sense, the product of their own struggle against Moloch. This characteristic in 'Howl', as it connects the mythical with the real, allows the ontological struggle against Moloch to be social as well as personal.

In 'Howl', this commitment to historical reality, which is both individual and collective, funnels a spiritual form of being at the same time; a type of being that seeks to counter the principle of alienation that Moloch articulates on a spiritual level. In accordance with the bi-vocality of the poem, I will demonstrate that Ginsberg's characters, as they commit to historical reality, concomitantly engage with the universal spirit of creation, a form of being that is potentially transcendental in 'Howl'.

In the 'Footnote to "Howl"', Ginsberg writes:

Holy! Holy! Holy! Holy! Holy! Holy! Holy! Holy! Holy! Holy!

Holy! Holy! Holy! Holy! Holy!

The world is holy! The soul is holy! The skin is holy! The nose  
is holy! The tongue and cock and hand and asshole holy!

Everything is holy! everybody's holy! everywhere is holy!

everyday is in eternity! Everyman's an angel!<sup>27</sup>

This 'Footnote' constitutes a fierce affront to literary conventions both in terms of form and content.<sup>28</sup> It features a free, chanting verse inspired by Buddhist psalms;

---

<sup>27</sup> 'Howl', p. 12.

its excessive iterations make for a frenzied scansion that produces an epileptic effect and signals a climactic sequence. Meanwhile, its language juxtaposes elements of slang with words indicative of the sacred. As Ginsberg collapses and equates the profane with the divine, he also critiques the fundamentals of those organised religious systems whose doxa is grounded in the segregation of man from the transcendent. Through the language of the 'Footnote', Ginsberg presents all existing objects and subjects as divine in essence; he illustrates a pantheistic conception of the world where '[e]verything is holy' and 'everybody's holy'.<sup>29</sup> Thus, the 'Footnote to "Howl"' echoes Emerson's Transcendentalist proselytising, or as Emerson writes in 'History':

To the poet, to the philosopher, to the saint, all things are friendly and sacred, all events profitable, all days holy, all men divine. For the eye is fastened on the life, and slights the circumstance. Every chemical substance, every plant, every animal in its growth, teaches the unity of cause, the variety of appearance.<sup>30</sup>

Emerson posits the existence of a spiritual and universal principle of creation. Just as Ginsberg's 'Footnote' celebrates the existence of a creative spirit universal and incarnate in all things and individuals he also delivers a message of immediate salvation.

---

<sup>28</sup> On its publication, 'Howl' was censored and tried for obscenity. For a full report of the trial, see Ferlinghetti, 'Horn on *Howl*', in *On the Poetry of Allen Ginsberg*, ed. by Hyde, pp. 42-53.

<sup>29</sup> 'Howl', p. 12.

<sup>30</sup> Emerson, 'History', p. 155.

Ginsberg, crucially, insisted that he was influenced by a mystical experience in which he heard the voice of William Blake reading one of his poems, ‘Ah, Sun-Flower!’ [1794]. As Barry Miles reports in his biography on Ginsberg:

‘The peculiar quality of (Blake’s) voice was something unforgettable because it was like God had a human voice, with all the infinite tenderness and mortal gravity of a living Creator speaking to his son’. [...] Everywhere he noticed evidence of a living hand, even in the arrangement of bricks, and he was aware that each brick had been placed there by someone [...]. He felt he must tell someone about his experience, and in a state of extreme elation, he crawled out onto the fire escape and tapped on the next-door window. ‘I’ve seen God!’ Allen cried.<sup>31</sup>

This episode, whilst partly self-mythologising nonetheless had a significant impact on Ginsberg’s writing. For Gray: ‘This experience [...] implicates him in what he has called the “messianic thing”: the sense, inherited from Whitman, that he is a “chosen, blessed, sacred poet” whose vocation is to prophecy to America’.<sup>32</sup> As Ginsberg confirms, ‘that’s the way I began to see poetry as the communication of the particular experience – not just any experience but *this* experience’.<sup>33</sup> Hence, the ‘Footnote to “Howl”’ in itself should be repositioned within the framework of the Prophetic tradition: it can be seen as a poetical

---

<sup>31</sup> Barry Miles, *Ginsberg: A Biography* (London: Viking, 1989), pp. 99-101.

<sup>32</sup> Gray, pp. 300-01.

<sup>33</sup> Ginsberg, ‘A Blake Experience’ [1966], in *On the Poetry of Allen Ginsberg*, ed. by Hyde, pp. 120-30 (p. 126).

variation of Ginsberg's self-reported hallucinations and visions, through which the ubiquitous presence of a divine principle was revealed to him. In this sense, the 'Footnote' is more than simply an immediate commentary on Parts 1, 2 and 3 of the poem.

Later in the 'Footnote', Ginsberg writes:

Holy Peter holy Allen holy Solomon holy Lucien holy Kerouac  
 holy Huncke holy Burroughs holy Cassady holy the  
 unknown buggered and suffering beggars holy the hideous  
 human angels!<sup>34</sup>

Ginsberg's Beat comrades are envisioned with an aura of unconditional divinity that stems from their absolute being in the here and now. They are yoked to 'unknown buggered and suffering beggars' and 'hideous human angels' who are also 'holy', a line through which Ginsberg subverts the value attributed to the base and the common and suggests that it is equally sacred.<sup>35</sup> Not unlike the Transcendentalism of Emerson, who promoted spiritual transactions between the low and the high, between microcosm and macrocosm, and between the temporal and the divine, Ginsberg elevates the physical to a higher plane. For Emerson:

The invariable mark of wisdom is to see the miraculous in the common.

[...] To the wise, therefore, a fact is true poetry, and the most beautiful of

---

<sup>34</sup> 'Howl', p. 12.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

fables. [...] Whilst the abstract question occupies your intellect, nature brings it in the concrete to be solved by your hands.<sup>36</sup>

For Emerson, the universal principle of creation is also embodied in the individual.<sup>37</sup> As Ginsberg proclaims, ‘the madman is holy as you my soul are holy!’<sup>38</sup> This line reaffirms the implications of Emersonian pantheism in Ginsberg’s ‘Footnote’. For Ginsberg:

When I wrote ‘Howl’, I thought it was like something in the Gnostic tradition [...] What I didn’t anticipate was that there were so many companions of the Holy Spirit in America – or that *everybody* is really inhabited by the Holy Spirit. By Holy Spirit I mean the recognition of a common self in all of us and our acceptance of the fact we’re all the same one.<sup>39</sup>

Here, Ginsberg invokes Gnosticism – a liberal tradition with Judaeo-Christian roots – which conceives the divine as encapsulated within man, thereby channelling the Romantic and Emersonian pantheistic framework. He also underlines the democratic foundations and expression of this tradition, which allows each of its members to relate to the oneness of the divine through personal

---

<sup>36</sup> Emerson, ‘Nature’, p. 80.

<sup>37</sup> Following on from the Romantic poets of the eighteenth century such as Blake and Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772-1834), for Emerson as well as for Ginsberg, the self is made, partly, sacred.

<sup>38</sup> ‘Howl’, p. 12.

<sup>39</sup> Ginsberg, Interview with Paul Carroll [1969], in *Allen Ginsberg: Spontaneous Mind: Selected Interview, 1958-1996*, ed. by David Carter, Penguin Modern Classics (London: Penguin Books, 2001), pp. 159-96 (p. 174).

experience. This is how the pantheistic environment of the poem also fosters a motif of spiritual immanence that is crucial for a transcendental form of being in 'Howl'.

For Emerson, as well as for Ginsberg, what is at stake in a transcendental ontology is the embodiment – and performance – of the divine impulse; that is the spiritual principle of creation made immanent. Crucially, this is what enables the notion of engagement to be defined from a Transcendentalist perspective as well. For Emerson, man's commitment to the world is a function of the creative spirit of nature, which is located both around and within him; in his own words, the sum of man's actions corresponds to 'the application of [man's] manifold spirit to the manifold world'.<sup>40</sup> That is to say, man's relation to history is a corollary of the principle of creation that precedes him. As Emerson claims:

Facts encumber [men], tyrannize over them, and make the men of routine, the men of *sense*, in whom a literal obedience to facts has extinguished every spark of that light by which man is truly man. But if the man is true to his better instincts or sentiments, and refuses the dominion of facts, [...] then the facts fall aptly and supple into their places; they know their master, and the meanest of them glorifies him.<sup>41</sup>

What Emerson suggests here is spectacular: it is a pronouncement on the capacity of man to rule out historical causality through a mere expression of his/her will and unconscious desire. Thus, historical material reality – envisaged as the plane

---

<sup>40</sup> Emerson, 'History', p. 150.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 168.

upon which actions materialise and accumulate – is conceived as strictly subordinate to the will of man, itself an emanation of the original spirit. This means that for Emerson, man *precedes* history: ‘[...] the thought is always prior to the fact; all the facts of history preexist in the mind as laws’.<sup>42</sup> This is one of the fundamentals of Emersonian Transcendentalism: it establishes the primacy of spirit above matter, which achieves its actualisation in historical time through man. Such a view of man, however, is largely romantic: the zeal with which American Transcendentalism in general, and Emerson’s in particular, dismiss the imposition of socio-historical structures upon the individual is both – in this respect – a strength and a major flaw.<sup>43</sup>

Therefore in Emerson’s Transcendentalist ideal, the individual – conceived as part of a larger collective, as well as a channel for the spiritual principle – manifests the divine will by means of his/her actions, that is, his/her commitment to historical reality. As Emerson concludes, ‘in the light of these two facts, namely, that the mind is One, and that nature is its correlative, history is to be read and written’.<sup>44</sup> In other terms, history comes into being through the individual’s attempts to write him/herself into reality, using facts to his/her better advantage:

The world exists for the education of each man. [...] He must sit solidly at home, and not suffer himself to be bullied by kings or empires, but know that he is greater than all the geography and all the government of the

---

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 149.

<sup>43</sup> Ironically, nineteenth-century American Transcendentalism may itself be recontextualised and read principally as a by-product of a specific combination of social, historical and cultural factors, as Perry Miller suggests in his article ‘From Edwards to Emerson’, in *American Transcendentalism*, ed. by Barbour, pp. 63-81.

<sup>44</sup> Emerson, ‘History’, p. 171.

world; he must transfer the point of view from which history is commonly read, from Rome and Athens and London, to himself.<sup>45</sup>

Thus, for Emerson, history is always in some measure biographical: ‘We are always coming up with the emphatic facts of history in our private experience and verifying them here. All history becomes subjective; in other words there is no proper history, only biography’.<sup>46</sup> It implies that history is, in fact, incarnate for Emerson:<sup>47</sup>

History no longer shall be a dull book. It shall walk incarnate in every just and wise man. You shall not tell me by languages and titles a catalogue of the volumes you have read. You shall make me feel what periods you have lived.<sup>48</sup>

Hence, for Emerson history is harnessed to the self: ‘Without hurry, without rest, the human spirit goes forth from the beginning to embody every faculty, every thought, every emotion which belongs to [the universal mind], in appropriate events’.<sup>49</sup> That is to say, history is envisioned as a physical space that is a function of the universal mind; it is conceived as a mere by-product of the universal principle of creation *ingrained in man*.

---

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., pp. 152-53.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., p. 153.

<sup>47</sup> Accordingly, on a cultural scale, ‘[e]very law which the state enacts indicates a fact in human nature; that is all’ (ibid., p. 154).

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., p. 171.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., p. 149.

Through the performance of his/her inner idea – that is the enactment of his/her *intuition* – the individual concomitantly realises the divine principle. As Emerson writes in ‘Nature’:

We learn that the highest is present to the soul of man; [...] it does not act upon us from without, that is, in space and time, but spiritually, or through ourselves: therefore, that spirit, that is, the Supreme Being, does not build nature around us, but puts it forth through us.<sup>50</sup>

In other words, man’s engagement manifests itself through the realisation of the godhead by means of purely intuitive actions. As a consequence, the enactment of intuition foregrounds a higher form of being for Emerson, because it allows the performance of divinity upon the site of the self. Thus Emerson’s Transcendentalism, just like Sartrean and Camusian forms of Existentialism, typifies a form of engagement that also realises the self. For Sartre, however, an individual may achieve his/her most authentic form of fulfilment through a commitment to socio-historical reality.<sup>51</sup> As Dulk observes, ‘the individual realizes that he is both the person who acts *and* who he becomes *through that action*’, this commitment allows the self to define, and re-create, itself.<sup>52</sup> In a related manner, for Camus ‘[t]he way to live with the absurd on the verge of the abyss is not to seek external salvation but to turn to self-creation or creation in

---

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., ‘Nature’, p. 73.

<sup>51</sup> See section on Sartre in literature review, pp. 32-39.

<sup>52</sup> Dulk, p. 205.

general'.<sup>53</sup> To a large extent, then, the imperative for self-realisation that both Sartre and Camus championed mirrors Emerson's search for a transcendent self, one of the fundamentals of Emersonian Transcendentalism. This search, according to Bowers,

[is grounded in] the belief that individual virtue and happiness depend upon self-realization, and that self-realization, in turn, depends upon the harmonious reconciliation of two universal psychological tendencies: first, the expansive or self-transcending impulse of the self, its desire to embrace the whole world in the experience of a single moment and to know and become one with that world; and second, the contracting or self-asserting impulse of the individual, his desire to withdraw, to remain unique and separate, and to be responsible only for himself.<sup>54</sup>

What Bowers describes through the combination of the transcending forces of both self and individual is nothing less than the creative interplay of the spiritual principle ingrained in man. Just as nature encapsulates the spiritual principle that actualises it, the individual's actions in the physical world channel the realisation of his/her own self.<sup>55</sup>

Consequently, the actions in Part 1 of 'Howl', interpreted in Sartrean terms as the characters' commitment to historical reality, may also be viewed

---

<sup>53</sup> Golomb, p. 175.

<sup>54</sup> Bowers, 'Democratic Vistas', in *American Transcendentalism*, ed. by Barbour, pp. 9-21 (p. 17).

<sup>55</sup> For Emerson, 'nature is the symbol of spirit' ('Nature', p. 48).

from an Emersonian viewpoint as attempts to fulfil their intuition, to exemplify the creative spirit of the universal mind:

[...] who studied Plotinus Poe St John of the Cross telepathy and  
                   bop kabbalah because the cosmos instinctively vibrated  
                   at their feet in Kansas,  
 who loned it through the streets of Idaho seeking visionary  
                   indian angels who were visionary indian angels,  
 who thought they were only mad when Baltimore gleamed in  
                   supernatural ecstasy,  
 who jumped in limousines with the Chinaman of Oklahoma on  
                   the impulse of winter midnight streetlight smalltown rain,  
 who lounged hungry and lonesome through Houston seeking  
                   jazz or sex or soup, and followed the brilliant Spaniard  
                   to converse about America and Eternity, a hopeless task,  
                   and so took a ship to Africa.<sup>56</sup>

These courses of action are spontaneously motivated, either implicitly or more explicitly, by a mystical drive towards the transcendent, as the references to ‘St John of the Cross’, to the ‘kabbalah’ and to the ‘visionary’ indicate.<sup>57</sup> The line ‘Baltimore gleam[ing] in supernatural ecstasy’ recalls the illustrations of Blake, in which the presence of divinity is shown through a shimmering impression.<sup>58</sup>

---

<sup>56</sup> ‘Howl’, p. 3.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

These allusions reaffirm the presence of a creative principle that is spiritual in essence; they suggest the impulse upon which Ginsberg's characters act. This impulse in turn generates a type of engagement in the poem that is spiritual by nature. For Emerson in 'Self-reliance':

Here is the fountain of action and of thought. Here are the lungs of that inspiration which giveth man wisdom and which cannot be denied without impiety and atheism. We lie in the lap of immense intelligence, which makes us receivers of its truth and organs of its activity. [...] we do nothing of ourselves, but allow a passage to its beams.<sup>59</sup>

This passage implies that for Emerson intuition is conceived as a by-product of the circulation of spirit through man. As Ziff puts it: 'Man in his fullest state thinks poetically, taking the tropes that furnish his mind from the natural world around him. The spirit that is present behind nature does not act upon us from without but acts within us'.<sup>60</sup> This entails, as Hansen points out, that '[m]an could finally become the maker of his own self, with the aid of God, who had given up hiding behind nature and instead revealed himself in man's demiurgical abilities to abstract from nature'.<sup>61</sup> In Part 1 of 'Howl', the enactment of the creative spirit through the characters' intuitive actions stems from the embodiment of the universal mind within the self; this is what induces a form of being that is both authentic in an Existentialist context, and potentially transcendental.

---

<sup>59</sup> Emerson, 'Self-reliance', p. 187.

<sup>60</sup> Ziff, 'Introduction', in *Nature and Selected Essays*, ed. by Ziff, pp. 7-27 (p. 17).

<sup>61</sup> Hansen, p. 116.

Meanwhile in 'Howl', some of these actions are underpinned by basic drives whose expression is deeply instinctive and, often, sexual:

[...] who copulated ecstatic and insatiate with a bottle of beer  
 a sweetheart a package of cigarettes a candle and fell  
 off the bed, and continued along the floor and down  
 the hall and ended fainting on the wall with a vision  
 of ultimate cunt and come eluding the last gyzym of  
 consciousness.<sup>62</sup>

This stanza alludes to the sexual prowess of Neal Cassady, 'NC, secret hero of these poems, cocksman and Adonis of Denver'.<sup>63</sup> Here, the sexual is made into an inextinguishable source of physical energy conveyed through the relentless and euphoric rhythm of Ginsberg's uninterrupted long line; an outpouring that defeats stasis. In fact, Ginsberg attempts to render the sexual act concomitant with the manifestation of the creative spirit. The difference with the Emersonian intuition, however, is that the sexual in 'Howl' is grounded in the corporeality of instinct rather than in the idea: it is biologically predetermined. As Ginsberg seeks to combine the sexual with the physical expression of the spiritual principle of creation, a deliberately provocative vision of a homosexual America emerges:

The tongue and cock and hand and asshole [are] holy!

[...]

---

<sup>62</sup> 'Howl', p. 4.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

Holy the cocks of the grandfathers of Kansas!<sup>64</sup>

While the sexual in particular pertains to the instinctual, most of the actions that the characters perform in Part 1, like those of the former stanza, rely on a truly intuitive impetus unaffected by determinisms of any sort. It is precisely the intuitive nature of these actions that may potentially trigger a transcendental form of being for the characters in the poem, one that is dependent upon the realisation of what Ginsberg terms the ‘soul’ in ‘Howl’.<sup>65</sup> As the last line of the ‘Footnote’ reads:

Holy the supernatural extra brilliant intelligent kindness of the  
soul!<sup>66</sup>

Through this Blakean image, the soul – another image of transcendence and universality – is made paramount; this is what fuels intuition both in Ginsberg’s poem, and in Emerson’s transcendental ontology. As a component of the self that is also pre-empted by the divine, the soul may be conceived, in part, as ahistorical, which has crucial consequences for an American form of Existentialism in the poem. It generates a form of engagement that extends both horizontally, through a democratic application of the divine principle to all subjects and objects, as well as vertically towards the godhead, *which is included in the self*. This verticality is

---

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., p. 12.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., pp. 12-13.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., p. 13.

a corollary of Emersonian Idealism, which postulates that spirit is antecedent to matter and ideas precede actions. As Emerson claims: ‘Spirit is the Creator. Spirit hath life in itself. And man in all ages and countries embodies it in his language as the FATHER’.<sup>67</sup> Emerson posits a hierarchy between man and its creator, between the individual’s existence and the universal spirit. Simultaneously, this verticality translates ontologically as a form of a self-centredness: it generates a type of engagement that originates in the self. For Caponigri:

The individual is freed from historical dependence and set up on the ultimate plane of Being itself. In the ultimate order of Being, his individual life has been orientated toward the absolute which he is admonished to recognize as his sole cause.<sup>68</sup>

Crucially, the direction of this type of engagement differs from that of the Existentialism of Sartre and Camus, as both promote a commitment directed exclusively outwards towards historical and social reality. As Sartre put it:

Man makes himself; he is not found ready-made; he makes himself by the choice of his morality, and he cannot but choose a morality, such is the pressure of circumstances upon him. We define man only in relation to his commitments.<sup>69</sup>

---

<sup>67</sup> Emerson, ‘Nature’, p. 49.

<sup>68</sup> Caponigri, ‘Brownson and Emerson: Nature and History’, in *American Transcendentalism*, ed. by Barbour, pp. 239-56 (p. 246).

<sup>69</sup> Sartre, ‘Existentialism & Humanism’, p. 59.

Moreover, Emerson's form of engagement also diverges from that of Existentialist theory at the level of its configuration. In effect, the chief ontological implication of the Emersonian model is that essence precedes existence, which is consistent with the pantheistic framework of American Transcendentalism. According to Hansen, for Emerson '[h]istory, as it turns out, is a sediment, a reminder of the fact that something has taken place *before*'.<sup>70</sup> This primordial force within man, which is spiritual in nature, is at odds with the Existentialism of Sartre, for whom existence precedes essence: '[Man] will not be anything until later, and then he will be what he makes of himself. Thus, there is no human nature, because there is no God to have a conception of it'.<sup>71</sup> Hence, the divine essence of nature has no reality for Sartre. His atheistic outlook makes man's consciousness the only repository of authenticity: Sartre starts strictly from the phenomenological existence of the subject, who, through an act of consciousness, projects his/her own self outwards in historical reality.<sup>72</sup> Not coincidentally this is something that Ginsberg clarifies:

The notion of the void in the West may be claustrophobic and dark mainly thanks to Jean-Paul Sartre [...], a 'bummer' as we know it in later terminology. But that sense of bummer is a very Western and theistic notion. In the East, the notion of 'open space' or 'accommodating space' is

---

<sup>70</sup> Hansen, p. 83.

<sup>71</sup> Sartre, 'Existentialism & Humanism', p. 29.

<sup>72</sup> '[E]xistence comes before *essence* – or, if you will, [...] we must begin from the subjective' (ibid., p. 27).

considered a liberation from the limitation of horizon or boundary wherein a theistic God image is the ultimate reference point.<sup>73</sup>

Here, Ginsberg implicitly equates space with the transcendent: it is envisioned as fundamentally fluid, unbounded and all-encompassing. This conception of the macrocosm allows him to devise a form of being which, although shaped by the circumstances of the here and now, can continuously regenerate itself. While this merger is viewed as intrinsically authentic and liberatory for Ginsberg, it also enables him to integrate the transcendental with the existential, and in 'Howl' conflate the mythical with the real.

Returning to 'Howl', the characters' engagement is thus not only socio-historical, it is also inherently spiritual. This transcendental ontology at the core of Ginsberg's 'Howl', and the ways in which it is articulated through Moloch, has crucial consequences for how Thanatos operates in the context of the poem.

### 1.2.2. Breathing the Poem In and Out: Ginsberg's Poetics of Performativity and Engagement in 'Howl'

In 'Howl', Ginsberg's characters enact a form of engagement that is spiritual. This engagement gives way to a higher form of being, a being that is potentially transcendental from an Emersonian perspective. In this subsection, I will examine the ways in which Ginsberg's 'Howl' exemplifies a form of authenticity through the writing itself. I will argue that Ginsberg crafts a poetics of performativity that

---

<sup>73</sup> Ginsberg, 'Kerouac's Ethic' [1990], in *Deliberate Prose*, ed. by Morgan, pp. 358-73 (p. 363).

hails from Emersonian Transcendentalism. Through Emerson, a Sartrean and socio-historical reading of engagement becomes crucial for how we decipher an Existentialist version of Thanatos in 'Howl'.

In Part 1 of 'Howl', the rendering of spontaneity is key; it expresses the characters' passion for movement, and pre-empt a form of writing that is, in the last resort, deeply intuitive. As Ginsberg writes in 'Howl':

Peyote solidities of halls, backyard green tree cemetery dawns,  
 wine drunkenness over the rooftops, storefront boroughs  
 of teahead joyride neon blinking traffic light, sun and  
 moon and tree vibrations in the roaring winter dusks  
 of Brooklyn, ashcan rantings and kind king light of  
 mind.<sup>74</sup>

In this stanza, Ginsberg's writing relies on a spontaneity reminiscent of Kerouac's in works such as *Visions of Cody* [posthumous, 1972].<sup>75</sup> Each of the phrasal elements participates in the elaboration of a paratactical image, profoundly peculiar and almost surreal; the juxtaposition of these elements creates an impression of eagerness and abundance. It produces a declamatory effect that turns the poet's address into what appears to be an unlimited stream of images.

According to Ginsberg:

---

<sup>74</sup> 'Howl', p. 2.

<sup>75</sup> As Portugés pinpoints, Kerouac had a huge influence on Ginsberg's aesthetics: as his 'tutor-in-prosody and the originator of the idea of spontaneous writing, [Kerouac] was insisting that Ginsberg abandon his academic training that led him to compose over-written stanzas based on the notion of autonomous art forms' (Portugés, *The Visionary Poetics of Allen Ginsberg*, pp. 56-57).

Speak now, or ever hold your peace, write whatever comes to mind, adding vowels, adding alluvials, adding to the end of the sentence, and then rather than revising, if you have a new thought, go on to articulate it in the next sentence.<sup>76</sup>

This type of composition, which seeks to capture an instantaneous state of mind, demands a high level of syntactical freedom; it generates a flux of imagistic phrases meant to conform to the fluctuations of the poet's own consciousness, rather than to the strict conventions of language. Allowing the expression of one's ownmost perceptions, this method renders a highly subjective presentation of the poet's world.

For Ginsberg, such a writing technique implies the suppression of the revisioning process:

[A]nything that the mind passes through is proper and shouldn't be revised out, almost anything that passes through mind, anything with the exception of self-consciousness. Anything that occurs to the mind is the proper subject. So if you are making a graph of the movements of the mind, there is no point in revising it. Because then you would obliterate the actual markings on the graph.<sup>77</sup>

---

<sup>76</sup> Ginsberg, 'Early Poetic Community' [1971], Interview with Robert Duncan, in *Allen Verbatim: Lectures on Poetry, Politics, Consciousness*, ed. by Gordon Ball (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1974), pp. 131-50 (p. 144).

<sup>77</sup> Ginsberg, 'Craft Interview with Allen Ginsberg' [1971], Interview with Mary Jane Fortunato, Lucille Medwick, and Susan Rowe, in *Spontaneous Mind*, ed. by Carter, pp.

In Part 1 of 'Howl' each word, each phrase and each line corresponds, in principle, to an immediate realisation of the *right there and right then*, sometimes at the expense of rational meaning, as in the line 'storefront boroughs of teahead joyride neon blinking traffic light'.<sup>78</sup> As Ginsberg explains:

Usually during the composition, step by step, word by word and adjective by adjective, if it's all spontaneous, I don't know whether it even makes sense sometimes. Sometimes I do know it makes complete sense, and I start crying. Because I realize I'm hitting some area which is absolutely true. And in that sense applicable universally, or understandable universally. [...] In that sense prophecy, because it touches a common key [...]. It's that you know and feel something which somebody knows and feels in a hundred years.<sup>79</sup>

The sense of truth Ginsberg refers to stems from what he perceives to be a higher form of consciousness. As Portugés points out:

The spontaneous method of composition came to him as a unique, courageous approach to creativity, a complete turn-about from the rational and contrived idea of art as a perfectly finished product. He would rely on

---

245-58 (pp. 251-52). Nevertheless, Ginsberg admitted to arranging minor details to finalise his poems, which may be viewed, strictly speaking, as a form of revision that would not have been deemed appropriate by the early-twentieth-century avant-garde pioneers of formal spontaneity such as the Dadaists or the Surrealists for instance.

<sup>78</sup> 'Howl', p. 2.

<sup>79</sup> Ginsberg, 'The Art of Poetry' [1966], Interview with Tom Clark, in *Spontaneous Mind*, ed. by Carter, pp. 17-53 (p. 26).

‘the immediate flash material from the mind as it came from the complete unconscious.’ [...] This approach reinforced Ginsberg’s ideas about Blake and Plotinus and their insistence that true knowledge is intuitive.<sup>80</sup>

This intuitive knowledge is Ginsberg’s move towards spiritual immanence – that is, the recognition of the immediate presence of divinity primarily within the self – ‘the immediate flash material from the mind as it came from the complete unconscious’.<sup>81</sup> The formulation of this transcendental wisdom in poetical terms is what underpins the prophetic quality of the poem, the alliterative ‘kind king light of mind’ materialises a continuum between the self and the divine.<sup>82</sup>

In accordance with the Blakean tradition, the poem is conceived as a vessel which moves towards the transcendent, and more specifically as an organic body that must reflect the divine. In order to achieve this effect, Ginsberg resorts to the intuitive rather than the rational. Thus, Part 1 of ‘Howl’ steers away from systemic logic and causality, the prerogatives of Moloch in order to capture intuition in its purest form. As Ginsberg argues:

I focus on the verbal transaction level, then my mind goes blank and I’m left only with words. So I must go on with the next thought. I do not know what I do. On what multitudes of levels do I operate? I get lost. I tell lies. I follow what comes in my mind next. [...] I get some very strangely unexpected verbal and imagual connections this way [...]. In the course of

---

<sup>80</sup> Portugés, *The Visionary Poetics of Allen Ginsberg*, p. 56.

<sup>81</sup> Ginsberg, quoted by Portugés in *ibid.*

<sup>82</sup> ‘Howl’, p. 2.

this notation I finally get out beyond what I'd anticipated and discover what it is that's underlying in my whole mind and soul at the moment.<sup>83</sup>

For Ginsberg what is written on the page is meant to be an exact mirror image of the ideas passing through the mind at that very instant: 'Mind is shapely, Art is shapely. Meaning Mind practiced in spontaneity invents forms in its own image'.<sup>84</sup> Such a practice is consistent with the axiom of Emersonian Transcendentalism, in which ideas precede matter: in this instance, the intuition in the poet's mind precedes its materialisation in writing form.<sup>85</sup>

Meanwhile, spontaneous writing allows Ginsberg to disrupt an *ordinary* form of consciousness – that of the rational and the profane, we might say – in order to reach and embody a *visionary* type of consciousness: 'The notion of spontaneity [...] tri[es] to get below the conscious mind for the sake of honesty and the hope that free-association and exploration will produce hitherto unexpected truths or unrecognized rhythms and images'.<sup>86</sup> In Ginsberg's case, this form of spontaneity, although it partly draws on the unconscious through the interplay of free-association of words, images and sounds, operates on a *supra-*level of consciousness rather than below it. Because it is holistic: it positions the self on a transcendental level, a level both intuitive and universal. As Ginsberg

---

<sup>83</sup> Ginsberg, 'What Way I Write' [1960], in *Deliberate Prose*, ed. by Morgan, pp. 255-57 (pp. 256-57).

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 'Notes Written on Finally Recording "Howl"', in *On the Poetry of Allen Ginsberg*, ed. by Hyde, pp. 80-83 (p. 81).

<sup>85</sup> In this sense, Ginsberg's spontaneous method differs from that of automatic writing commonly used by the Surrealists, who sought to disable all forms of consciousness in the writing process to let the pen run freely on the page. For Portugés: 'Ginsberg's transcription of the minute particulars of the mind then, is the ultimate phenomenological perception, in Husserl's best sense. The essence of his spontaneous method becomes: "How do we think?"' (Portugés, *The Visionary Poetics of Allen Ginsberg*, p. 62).

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., pp. 58-59.

puts it: 'I assume, actually, that there is one consciousness that we all share on the highest level, that we are all one Self, actually, that we are all one Self with one being, one consciousness'.<sup>87</sup>

Thus the writing in Part 1 of 'Howl' is put at the service of the transcendental; it mobilises an intuitive type of consciousness that materialises itself through a form of spontaneity in the writing. In fact, Ginsberg hints at such devices in one of the stanzas of Part 1 of 'Howl':

who dreamt and made incarnate gaps in Time & Space through  
 images juxtaposed, and trapped the archangel of the soul  
 between 2 visual images and joined the elemental verbs  
 and set the noun and dash of consciousness together  
 jumping with sensation of Pater Omnipotens Aeterna  
 Deus.<sup>88</sup>

This stanza is a reference to his own use of elliptical juxtapositions in 'Howl', a poetical feature widely used by William Carlos Williams (1883-1963) in his epic poem *Paterson* [1946-1958].<sup>89</sup> Williams had a huge influence on Ginsberg's writing, as he himself acknowledged: 'By 1955 I wrote poetry adapted from prose seeds, journals, scratchings, arranged by phrasing or breath groups into little short-line patterns according to ideas of measure of American speech I'd picked

---

<sup>87</sup> Ginsberg, 'Identity Gossip' [1971], in *Allen Verbatim*, ed. by Ball, pp. 3-13 (p. 5).

<sup>88</sup> 'Howl', p. 7.

<sup>89</sup> William Carlos Williams, 'Paterson' [1946-1958], ed. by Christopher MacGowan, rev. edn (New York: New Directions, 1995).

up from W.C. Williams's imagist preoccupations'.<sup>90</sup> Williams relied heavily on the device of the ellipsis to convey a sense of physicality – of 'objectness' – in his poetry. As Gray suggests, ellipsis gives rise to 'a disjuncture that stops mind-flow, arrests normal consciousness, and creates a temporal void'.<sup>91</sup> For Ginsberg in 'Howl', ellipses allow him to create 'incarnate gaps' that reveal 'the archangel of the soul', enabling a quivering of consciousness that allows one to glimpse at the divinity within oneself.<sup>92</sup> By generating innovative phrasal combinations, they initiate 'a temporary suspension of habitual thought'.<sup>93</sup> Through the use of ellipses, Ginsberg attempts to shortcut traditional routes of consciousness; a means of retrieving a centre of perception that is as ideologically neutral and unbiased as possible in order to process the contents of the visionary moment.<sup>94</sup> For Mortenson: 'The visionary's job is to reach that stillpoint in the present that, once attained, dissolves the self into a 'momentless' moment that subsumes past, present, and future into a meaningful and immediate whole'.<sup>95</sup>

Not only ellipses, but also repetitions, play a major role in the disarrangement of habitual patterns of consciousness. Ginsberg uses a great deal of anaphoras, especially. As Portugés observes:

---

<sup>90</sup> Ginsberg, 'Notes Written on Finally Recording "Howl"', in *On the Poetry of Allen Ginsberg*, ed. by Hyde, pp. 80-83 (p. 80).

<sup>91</sup> Gray, p. 302.

<sup>92</sup> 'Howl', p. 7.

<sup>93</sup> Gray, p. 302.

<sup>94</sup> In *Ideogram: Modern American Poetry*, Laszlo K. Géfin comments upon the elliptical phrase 'hydrogen jukebox' in 'Howl' (p. 2) in particular. He concludes that, 'instead of simply baffling the reader's mind, these juxtapositions are now made to function like sudden electrical discharges, jolting the mind to grasp relations where there seemed to be none before, or which were obscure until Ginsberg's projective act illuminated them' (Laszlo K. Géfin, *Ideogram: Modern American Poetry* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1982), p. 124).

<sup>95</sup> Mortenson, p. 83.

Ginsberg was also impressed with the rhythmic pulsation that the Hebrew prophet [...] employed. In Jeremiah, the repetition of ‘He hath’ at the beginning of almost every line created a hypnotic rhythm that was not only indicative of the Hebraic form of prayer, but a technique used in most religious settings to create a feeling of inspiration and piety.<sup>96</sup>

A device widely used in the Scriptures and in many other sacred texts, repetitions convey a hypnotic mood that gradually overwhelms the individual’s consciousness in order for them to be able to enter a mystical frame of mind. In ‘Howl’, repetitions provide a rhythmic basis to the rhapsody, which organises the torrential flow of experiences and images of Part 1. For Portugés: ‘The *rhythm* of the catalogue, then, becomes the element of control, freeing the mind for associations without the restriction of trying to make sense or follow a linear flow of thought’.<sup>97</sup> Portugés suggests that in ‘Howl’ repetitions are used as a form of counterconditioning, a way to ultimately connect the self with the primordial essence of the universal mind without being contravened by the processing of historical reality. In Ginsberg’s own words:

[I]f [...] you’re able to turn off the phantasm consciousness that beclouds sense consciousness of the immediate present, then you have sharper sense consciousness, smell, taste, touch, optical, because you’re not beclouding

---

<sup>96</sup> Portugés, *The Visionary Poetics of Allen Ginsberg*, p. 85.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 88.

the doors of perception with preconception, you're not inventing universes which overlie this universe.<sup>98</sup>

Ultimately, the spontaneous character of Ginsberg's poetics in Part 1, which is strengthened by the devices of elliptical juxtaposition and iteration, aims to accentuate the intuitive aspect of the creative process.

Such devices allow Ginsberg to re-create the visionary moment in 'Howl'. Nevertheless, for Emerson intuition is primarily an act of immanent creation that exemplifies the spiritual principle of the universal mind. One of the roles of the poet, as Emerson saw it, was to produce a suitable medium for the formulation of the transcendental in the here and now, rather than *re*-produce the contents of a past experience. According to Charles E. Mitchell:

Emerson called on the poet not simply to revitalize old forms of expression but to create new expressions that have an immediate vitality of their own, to give words 'a power which makes their old use forgotten' [...]. Emerson's poet is 'a liberating God' who gives the present its own voice, enabling the work of creation to begin across the culture [...].<sup>99</sup>

In order to realise the divine essence of creation, intuition must be embodied and acted out. It implies that for Emerson, the primary function of poetry is fundamentally performative: in the Whitmanesque tradition, it seeks to present the

---

<sup>98</sup> Ginsberg, 'Identity Gossip', in *Allen Verbatim*, ed. by Ball, pp. 3-13 (p. 9).

<sup>99</sup> Charles E. Mitchell, *Individualism & its Discontents: Appropriations of Emerson, 1880-1950* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1997), p. 159.

divine essence of being and exemplify it in the immediate present, rather than represent a divine event of the past through conventional writing. Ginsberg's poetical practice, as the next paragraphs will investigate, answers Emerson's call in a very specific way.

The very poetics of 'Howl', and of Part 1 in particular, is grounded in breath units. According to Ginsberg: 'Ideally each line of "Howl" is a single breath unit. [...] My breath is long – that's the Measure, one physical and mental inspiration of thought contained in the elastic of a breath'.<sup>100</sup> In an Emersonian context, breathing may be interpreted as an elemental and existential act that is completely instinctive. The act of breathing fosters an organic relation from nature to the self and from the self to nature through inspiration and expiration respectively. In this context, breathing – and the twofold movement it exemplifies – articulates both the immanent and the transcendent dimensions of being. Thus breath – for Ginsberg – is the physical imprinting of one's own connection with the creative spirit of nature.<sup>101</sup> The involvement of the body itself in the rhythmic composition of the poem by means of breath is of great importance in 'Howl'. As Portugés analyses:

Ginsberg's rhythmic units are dictated by his breathing patterns; the breathing patterns in turn are controlled by the particular emotion he is experiencing; thus, the emotions give rise to the breath which is notated by rhythmic units separated by punctuation and articulated in words.

---

<sup>100</sup> Ginsberg, 'Notes Written on Finally Recording "Howl"', in *On the Poetry of Allen Ginsberg*, ed. by Hyde, pp. 80-83 (p. 81).

<sup>101</sup> Vice versa, intuition may be interpreted as the spiritual corollary of inspiration.

Language, in this schema, the language of poetry, becomes an extension of the physiology of the body.<sup>102</sup>

Portugés's comment implies that in Ginsberg's poetry, breath can be modulated according to the poet's own emotions, provided that breath and emotions can be coupled. For Gray, this combination allows the poet to '[r]eify experience by creating an awareness of bodily "depth sensibility"'.<sup>103</sup> As an effect, the language that the poetical association of breath with emotion creates is pre-cognitive; it manifests itself organically and intuitively, as 'rhythmic units [...] articulated in words'.<sup>104</sup> In other words, it is the author's intuition that shapes the poem, a conception that tallies with that of Emerson's in 'The Poet':

For it is not metre, but a metre-making argument that makes a poem – a thought so passionate and alive that like the spirit of a plant or an animal it has an architecture of its own, and adorns nature with a new thing. The thought and the form are equal in the order of time, but in the order of genesis the thought is prior to the form.<sup>105</sup>

By contrast, words themselves become subservient, they punctuate rhythm rather than generate it. In 'Howl', this defiance towards words themselves is also a way to elude the socio-cultural determinations of conventional language, the very

---

<sup>102</sup> Portugés, *The Visionary Poetics of Allen Ginsberg*, p. 79.

<sup>103</sup> Gray, p. 279.

<sup>104</sup> Portugés, *The Visionary Poetics of Allen Ginsberg*, p. 79.

<sup>105</sup> Emerson, 'The Poet' [1844], in *Nature and Selected Essays*, ed. by Ziff, pp. 259-84 (pp. 263-64).

language typified by Moloch, wholly subjected to the interferences and manipulations of historical reality.<sup>106</sup>

Ginsberg's idea of using breath as a means to reclaim a form of physicality within language stems from the Objectivist poets, and especially from the poetical strategy of 'projective verse' defined by Charles Olson (1910-1970). Olson crafted a poetry that felt like 'an extension of physiology', and which had a major impact on Ginsberg.<sup>107</sup> More specifically, Olson, and other poets such as Louis Zukofsky (1904-1978), shaped a poetics that sought to shortcut the superfluities and circumvolutions of language in order to focus attention on the raw physicality and immediacy of objective reality and its energies. Consequently, as Gray suggests, Olson conceives the poem as 'the act of the instant', rather than 'the act of thought about the instant'.<sup>108</sup> Both Olson and Ginsberg used breath as a means to enter reality as directly and as organically as possible. The body and its breathing function are central here: conceived as the physical and instinctive envelope of the intuitive self, the body is thought to be the most efficient instrument not only to draw closer to the spiritual essence of nature, as in Thoreau's transcendental model, but to literally attempt to embody it in an Emersonian fashion.<sup>109</sup> This equation between human breathing and poetical

---

<sup>106</sup> For Ginsberg: 'Recent history is the record of a vast conspiracy to impose one level of mechanical consciousness on mankind and exterminate all manifestations of that unique part of human sentience, identical in all men, which the individual shares with his Creator. The suppression of contemplative individuality is nearly complete' (Ginsberg, 'Poetry, Violence, and the Trembling Lambs or Independence Day Manifesto', in *Deliberate Prose*, ed. by Morgan, pp. 3-5 (p. 3)).

<sup>107</sup> Ibid., 'Words and Consciousness' [1971], in *Allen Verbatim*, ed. by Ball, pp. 25-34 (p. 28).

<sup>108</sup> Gray, p. 279.

<sup>109</sup> For Emerson: 'As a plant upon the earth, so a man rests upon the bosom of God; he is nourished by unfailing fountains, and draws at his need inexhaustible power' ('Nature', p. 73).

rhythm requires a line that be reasonably long, in the tradition of Whitman. For Gray:

[Ginsberg] needed, he saw, to do what Williams and before him Whitman had done, ‘to adapt . . . poetry rhythms out of . . . actual talk rhythms’; and he now recognised Whitman’s long line as an appropriate precedent, a possible vehicle for what he called ‘my romantic – inspiration – Hebraic-Melvillian bardic breath’.<sup>110</sup>

Crucially, as Ginsberg seeks to embody his poetics, it becomes, in turn, fundamentally performative. Breath, as Gray points out, is used as a means to ‘liberate the self from the mind and place it firmly in physical movement, [...] it does not seek to describe but *to enact*’.<sup>111</sup> Such an enactment, pairing the natural laws of breathing with the rhythm of the poem, is what Ginsberg terms ‘the Measure’ in the former quotation.<sup>112</sup>

This pairing has great potential within the framework of the Emersonian tradition. Ginsberg’s poetical device of the measure is not merely an aesthetic feature rooted in the physiological: it is transcendental as well as ontological. This is what is hinted at, once again, in one of the stanzas of Part 1 of ‘Howl’:

---

<sup>110</sup> Gray, p. 301.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid., p. 281. As Jonah Raskin points out: ‘After a year of writing and rewriting, “Howl” [...] became a poem about the act of writing and the act of performing poetry’ (‘Allen Ginsberg’s “Howl” and the 6 Gallery Poetry Performance’, In *Performing Poetry: Body, Place and Rhythm in the Poetry Performance*, ed. by Cornelia Gräbner & Arturo Casas, *Thamyris Intersecting: Place, Sex, and Race*, 24 (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2011), pp. 24-32 (p. 31)).

<sup>112</sup> See above, p. 196.

to recreate the syntax and measure of poor human prose and  
stand before you speechless and intelligent and shaking  
with shame, rejected yet confessing out the soul to  
conform to the rhythm of thought in his naked and  
endless head.<sup>113</sup>

Ginsberg's 'confessing out [of] the soul to conform to the rhythm of thought'  
alludes to this spontaneous type of writing.<sup>114</sup> According to Gray:

What [Ginsberg] is after, he has suggested, is 'the poem *discovered* in the  
mind and in the process of writing it out on the page'. The long line is the  
base, but what organises and sustains it, over the distance, is a strategy of  
association and juxtaposition. 'Its natural inspiration that keeps it moving',  
Ginsberg has said of his poetry, 'disparate things put together'.<sup>115</sup>

It is this 'natural inspiration' in the poem that is deeply Romantic and  
Emersonian, and potentially transcendental.<sup>116</sup> It may be interpreted, literally, as a  
rhythmic poetics that aims to relate the poet's self-expression with the divine  
essence of the universal mind in the most organic and symbiotic way possible.  
This is how in 'Howl', the rhythm of Ginsberg's breath works together with the

---

<sup>113</sup> 'Howl', pp. 7-8.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid.

<sup>115</sup> Gray, p. 302.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid. As Emerson put it: 'Doubt not, O poet, but persist. Say "It is in me, and shall out."' (Emerson, 'The Poet', p. 283). Ginsberg had a clear awareness of the potentialities of a poetics of breath in the literary context of the Transcendentalist tradition: 'You can teach breathing [...] inspiration being a matter of breath' (Ginsberg, 'Advice to Youth' [1971], Interview with Robert Duncan, in *Allen Verbatim*, ed. by Ball, pp. 103-30 (p. 109)).

spontaneous character of his syntax. This form of expression dissolves representations of past and future to linger on the presentation of the transcendental moment made incarnate and a-temporal. As Ginsberg declared, ‘the spirit of the universe was what I was born to realize’.<sup>117</sup> Most importantly, it brings to light a type of Emersonian engagement in ‘Howl’ that has crucial consequences for the figure of Thanatos.

Thus, Ginsberg’s integration of a breathing pattern within Part 1 of ‘Howl’ endows the spontaneous actions of the characters with a sense of live performance. As Ginsberg explains:

[T]he ... rhythmic ... units ... that I’d written down ... were basically ... breathing exercise forms ... which if anybody else repeated ... would catalyze in them the same *pranic* breathing ... physiological spasm ... that I was going through ... and so would presumably catalyze in them the same *affects* or emotions.<sup>118</sup>

The catalysing process Ginsberg evokes here is paramount: through the control of breathing sequences, Ginsberg thought he could alter the reader’s *own* consciousness by communicating his emotional and affective disposition through the reading act. As Portugés clarifies:

---

<sup>117</sup> Ginsberg, ‘The Art of Poetry’, Interview with Tom Clark, in *Spontaneous Mind*, ed. by Carter, pp. 17-53 (p. 37).

<sup>118</sup> Ibid., ‘Improvised Poetics’ [1980], Interview with Michael Aldrich, Edward Kissam, and Nancy Blecker, in *Spontaneous Mind*, ed. by Carter, pp. 124-58 (p. 141).

So he realized, after writing the ‘Moloch’ section, that it was possible for him to give forth prophetic rhapsodies and change consciousness by carefully inducing in his readers the same breathing units he was experiencing during his meditative, illuminative writing periods.<sup>119</sup>

In other terms, Ginsberg seeks to embody the visionary within the rhythm of the poem itself, so that his intuition in writing form may be passed on to the reader, or indeed to a community of readers upon the act of reading the poem.

The communication of the poet’s vision to the reader through the transmission of his breathing patterns also has certain Existentialist ramifications, because the responsibility for realising the transcendental act lies, ultimately, with the reader, and not with the poet. According to Hungerford: ‘He wishes not to persuade his listener, but to make the listener arrive at a consciousness that coincides with Ginsberg’s but that nevertheless appears to arrive from the reader or listener himself’.<sup>120</sup> It is the reader’s own breathing that generates the visionary moment for him/herself – an exemplification of his/her engagement – which regenerates his/her own self in return, and which corresponds, in principle, to a form of authenticity: ‘Authenticity lies in the created products of consciousness – it is the creative process itself’.<sup>121</sup> Nonetheless, this authenticity is partly subdued in practice: as the reader is meant to absorb the poet’s own movements of consciousness to produce the transcendental vision, he/she *duplicates* them instead of forming his/her own. That is to say, the reader imitates the poet’s

---

<sup>119</sup> Portugés, *The Visionary Poetics of Allen Ginsberg*, p. 80.

<sup>120</sup> Hungerford, p. 280.

<sup>121</sup> Golomb, p. 132.

ownmost and innermost self instead of embodying his/hers; in so doing, he/she exemplifies a form of being that shifts towards a form of Existentialist inauthenticity: for Sartre, '[e]very man, without any support or help whatever, is condemned at every instant to invent man'.<sup>122</sup> Conversely, Ginsberg's transmission of his own intuition to the community of readers may be viewed in some measure as an act of authority that jeopardises the free interplay of signs; a form of authorial control that conflicts with the Sartrean conception of individual responsibility as much as with the Emersonian precept of self-reliance.<sup>123</sup>

When good is near you, when you have life in yourself, it is not by any known or accustomed way; you shall not discern the footprints of any other; you shall not see the face of man; you shall not hear any name; – the way, the thought, the good, shall be wholly strange and new.<sup>124</sup>

For Emerson, the radical autonomy of the self is not only a moral necessity, it is the sole suitable approach for acquiring a form of being that is potentially transcendental. Furthermore, Ginsberg fails to dispel the chronology of his own transcendental idea: what reaches out to a contemporary reader of 'Howl' is not the autonomous realisation of the transcendent in his/her own flesh – an impossible premise in creative writing – but rather an awareness of this realisation

---

<sup>122</sup> Sartre, 'Existentialism & Humanism', p. 38.

<sup>123</sup> As Sartre put it in 'Existentialism & Humanism': 'One can choose anything, but only if it is upon the plane of free commitment' (ibid., p. 65).

<sup>124</sup> Emerson, 'Self-reliance', p. 190.

as envisioned by Ginsberg, who in 1948 himself envisioned it through his Blake hallucination.<sup>125</sup>

Theoretically however, Ginsberg's breathing technique in 'Howl' makes a lot of sense both in Emersonian and in Sartrean terms, because it seeks to channel the ownmost and most intuitive self into being through writing. As a poetical feature of the visionary that is meant to realise the creative spirit of the universal mind, the transmission of this vision seems to imply a universal realisation of the creative spirit. That is to say, each and every reader, in any context, has a chance to tap in to Ginsberg's visionary consciousness as he/she recites the poem, and potentially *ideally* embodies the original visionary impulse. For Emerson: 'It is the universal nature which gives worth to particular men and things'.<sup>126</sup> Thus the poem becomes a means to both reach, and exemplify, the universal mind collectively. Once again this characteristic partly corresponds to the way in which Emerson conceived of creative writing, and of poets in particular. As he wrote in 'History': '[Man] finds that the poet was no odd fellow who described strange and impossible situations, but that universal man wrote by his poem a confession true for one and true for all'.<sup>127</sup> This confession, as the poet's intuition that embodies the transcendental experience, is ideally made by a community of readers as well, who are given the tools to enact this same intuition in unison.

---

<sup>125</sup> As Portugés underlines: '[Ginsberg] had learned a method of catalyzing emotions in his readers that might achieve for them the catalyzed visionary state that Blake had induced in him' (Portugés, *The Visionary Poetics of Allen Ginsberg*, p. 83). The relation of causality in this *mise en abyme* is chronological, and in theory contravenes to the Emersonian precept of radical immanence and self-reliance. It is a collateral effect of the historical materiality of the medium of printed poetry, which instantly grounds the artwork and its reception in both time and space.

<sup>126</sup> Emerson, 'History', p. 151.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 166.

Accordingly, Ginsberg's injunction to realise the creative spirit through a universal, collective and transcendent form of poetics is meaningful from a social perspective; as the performative function is multiplied by the number of participants who engage in the act of reading. As Eberhart observes about poetry readings in the Bay area in the 1950s:

Hundreds from about sixteen to thirty may show up and engage in an enthusiastic, freewheeling celebration of poetry, an analogue of which was jazz thirty years ago. The audience participates, shouting and stamping, interrupting and applauding. Poetry here has become a tangible social force, moving and unifying its auditors, releasing the energies of the audience through spoken, even shouted verse, in a way at present unique to this region.<sup>128</sup>

For Eberhart, the performative aspect of poetry fosters its social function. In fact, the proliferation of performances in historical reality creates a cumulative effect that endows Ginsberg's visionary poetics with a social dimension. From this perspective, the collective enactment of intuition in the poem, which may be conceived as an Emersonian form of engagement, also becomes a Sartrean conception of social commitment through the realisation of the audience's ownmost self.<sup>129</sup> This sense of universal enactment relies on an extension of the

---

<sup>128</sup> Eberhart, 'West Coast Rhythms', in *On the Poetry of Allen Ginsberg*, ed. by Hyde, pp. 24-25 (p. 24).

<sup>129</sup> For Sartre, there is a direct correspondence between individual and social responsibility: 'Resignation is my will for everyone, and my action is, in consequence, a commitment on behalf of all mankind' (Sartre, 'Existentialism & Humanism', p. 32).

organic, Ginsberg's poetics of breath for instance; it typifies a shift from the individual to the collective, from the private to the public, and from the poetical to the political. For Mortenson:

Ginsberg's insistence on crafting poetry through an authentic body provides the basis for a deeper communication between reader and writer to be established. But here, Ginsberg takes bodily intersubjectivity even further by exploring the social possibilities that getting back to the body allows.<sup>130</sup>

This poetical feature grows into a political strategy in 'Howl'; allowing the spontaneous quality of Ginsberg's writing to become performative at a collective level. Ultimately, the poem itself is turned into an immediate performative act that is as creative as it is self-creative, with the reader both exemplifying and embodying the poem; we might say that the reader breathes the poem in and out both literally and figuratively. For Golomb: 'In creating one's self, one may become both a genuine artist and a work of art'.<sup>131</sup> It is this enactment which, as it projects the innermost and ownmost self in historical reality, also channels a Sartrean type of authenticity.

In the end, Ginsberg's poetical strategy in Part 1 of 'Howl' may be viewed as an attempt to capture the intuitive performance of the self. It means, as we have seen, that Ginsberg's enactment of intuition through the writing is performative and transcendental, immediate and prophetic, ontological and universal at the

---

<sup>130</sup> Mortenson, p. 181.

<sup>131</sup> Golomb, p. 145.

same time. On a fundamental level, it relies on an aesthetic practice of transcendental performativity that is Emersonian in content, Sartrean in form, and which is therefore deeply authentic, both in a Transcendentalist and Existentialist context. Most importantly, it promotes a strategy of engagement in ‘Howl’ that is existential by nature: it seeks to negate the principles of alienation that the poem articulates both intra-, and extra-diagetically – that is both *in*, and *through* the writing – in order to liberate the self.

### 1.2.3. The Experience at Big Sur: Vision of Death, Stasis, Movement

In the first pages of *Big Sur*, Duluoz, as he walks away from society, is estranged from his natural environment as well as from his own self. The narrator’s feelings of alienation in *Big Sur* arise, in great part, from a sense of separation from nature that, as previously analysed, exemplifies a variant of absurdity. It also stems from a form of nothingness configured in a different type of anguish; one that takes a more transcendental perspective on the self. In fact, Duluoz embodies, to a certain extent, the existential condition. For Lehan:

The estrangement of the modern hero cannot be separated from his loss of belief in God, history, society, and the rational self. Meaning lost to madness, fixity giving way to displacement, man striving to define himself

in the world growing more inimical to the individual – all of these elements are part of the existential view of man.<sup>132</sup>

This sense of alienation enables the existential hero to react against the crushing nothingness that besieges him/her in an attempt to retrieve authentic forms of being. The fact that these attempts operate through a strategy of engagement is crucial in this respect. As Ruotolo explains in *Six Existential Heroes*, Existentialist engagement manifests itself through a ‘continually expanding vision of self and of the world. No abstraction, the catalyst for this dynamic expansion of consciousness is paradoxically “nothing”’.<sup>133</sup> Hence in *Big Sur*, the reader may expect Duluoz, who epitomises the existential condition, to eventually try and recapture a restorative authenticity through a form of self-creative *engagement*. In the next paragraphs I will analyse the ways in which the text both fails and succeeds in transcending this sense of alienation and stasis through the narrative, as well as through the stylistics of the writing. These attempts at formulating an existential response against destruction and nullification will be interpreted as strategies of creation instrumental in the definition of Thanatos.

While in principle, Duluoz is positioned on the plane of engagement in the novel, this engagement remains rather elusive and problematic on an intradiegetical level. After a few nights spent in Monsanto’s cabin in *Big Sur* in Chapters 4 and 5, Duluoz already feels a sense of nostalgia for the city he escaped: ‘And it’s finally only in the woods you get that nostalgia for “cities” at

---

<sup>132</sup> Lehan, p. XVIII.

<sup>133</sup> Ruotolo, p. 3.

last, you dream of long gray journeys to cities where soft evenings'll unfold like Paris'.<sup>134</sup> In fact, Duluoz tends to desire what he has opted out of. This tendency, which brings him back to a reinvented past, or projects him forward into a mythical future, hampers his ability to inhabit the present, and therefore thwarts his potentiality for authentic being. His permanent indecision illustrates the difficulty in committing to his choices from an Existentialist perspective and from realising his ownmost and innermost self, which is also a consequence of his sense of being rejected by nature: 'It's time to leave, I'm now so scared by that iodine blast by the sea and by the boredom of the cabin'.<sup>135</sup> According to McElroy: 'Having lost Paradise, the unity with nature, [man] has become the eternal wanderer (Odysseus, Abraham, Faust)'.<sup>136</sup> This is true for Duluoz, who, running between Big Sur and San Francisco, cannot properly settle in one place or the other: this restlessness strengthens his feeling of estrangement.

Kerouac makes Duluoz increasingly unresponsive; meanwhile, he also injects a sense of morbidity into the narrative, as Duluoz encounters death in a multitude of forms during his stay at Big Sur. As he arrives on the spot:

[Y]ou emerge from pleasant little wood paths with a stem of grass in your teeth and drop it to see doom – And you look up at that unbelievably high bridge and feel death for a good reason: because underneath the bridge, in the sand right beside the sea cliff, *hump*, your heart sinks to see it: the

---

<sup>134</sup> *Big Sur*, p. 17.

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 36.

<sup>136</sup> McElroy, p. 4.

automobile that crashed thru the bridge rail a decade ago and fell 1000 feet straight down and landed upsidedown, is still there now.<sup>137</sup>

Kerouac evokes the stereotypical figure of the innocent wanderer with a ‘stem of grass in [his] teeth’, which may be seen as an allusion to Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass* [1855], and through it a reference to the energies of the self, of nature and of the body.<sup>138</sup> However, this phrase – which conjures a picture of an effervescent, blooming nature – is brutally interrupted by the narrator’s sight of ‘doom’.<sup>139</sup> This sense of fatality is internalised by Duluoz, as the onomatopoeia ‘hump’ suggests a skipped heartbeat.<sup>140</sup> The presence of this car, on the very beach of Big Sur, metaphorises Duluoz’s end of the road as much as his downfall. There is also the news of the death of Tyke, Duluoz’s cat; the death of a mouse that Duluoz killed incidentally as he left rat poison in Monsanto’s cabin, and the death of Billie’s goldfishes.<sup>141</sup> A little earlier, Duluoz has spotted a dead otter floating away in the ocean, as the group drives up to Nepenthe to wash away a hangover with relaxing baths and yet more alcohol. Duluoz is taken aback by the spectacle of this otter:

‘Look out there floating in the sea weeds, a dead otter!’ – And sure enough  
it is a dead otter I guess, a big brown pale lump floating up and down

---

<sup>137</sup> *Big Sur*, pp. 10-11.

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.*, see pp. 42, 95 and 146.

mournfully with the swells and ghastly weeds, my otter, my dear otter, my dear otter I'd written poems about.<sup>142</sup>

The dead otter Duluoz sees may be interpreted as the reflection of his own self. Once vigorous and instinctive, he now views himself as a 'pale lump', a heavy body depleted of life, a wrecked carcass with no sense of direction – of engagement – at the mercy of currents, a prey to the natural elements that have turned against him.<sup>143</sup> As Duluoz loses momentum, it is as if death has taken over, pushing him towards a form of ontological dissolution.

These allusions to death in the text, 'all these DEATH things piling up suddenly', are highly allegorical in Kerouac's writing: they enable the outer events to symbolise the narrator's inner states.<sup>144</sup> For 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'.<sup>145</sup> 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. As Duluoz confesses, he can literally 'feel death' in return.<sup>146</sup> These signs of death operate, in the narrator's own words, as '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'.<sup>147</sup> This correspondence between outer and inner states in *Big Sur* stems in great part from the Romantic

---

<sup>142</sup> Ibid., p. 91.

<sup>143</sup> Ibid.

<sup>144</sup> Ibid., p. 68.

<sup>145</sup> Giamo, p. 187.

<sup>146</sup> *Big Sur*, p. 10.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid., p. 92.

foundation of Emerson's Transcendentalism, for whom outer phenomena is related to the inner world and vice versa. 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'.<sup>148</sup> This statement implies that the maintenance of the continuum between the self and nature – both outer and inner, as the image of the woods indicates – is conceived as a moral injunction that vouchsafes the individual's relation to the creative principle of a universal mind.

Crucially, the Emersonian precept of the all-seeing eye is also present on an aesthetic level in Kerouac's own writing through the echo of the outer onto the inner. Kerouac alludes to it in 'Belief & Technique for Modern Prose' [1959]: 'The jewel center of interest is the eye within the eye'.<sup>149</sup> This 'eye within the eye' may be interpreted as the writer's capacity to reach, and embody, the vision of the universal mind.<sup>150</sup> In this sense, this literary feature foregrounds the potential for a transcendental and visionary type of writing that echoes that of Ginsberg, as analysed earlier.<sup>151</sup> Notwithstanding, this feature may also be read as 'the I within the eye' and, reciprocally, 'the eye within the I'.<sup>152</sup> This interpretation suggests that Kerouac also intends to produce a prose that objectifies and reifies the self through writing, key for the narrative dramatisation necessary for his literary project on multiple levels. For Hrebaniak: 'The first-person narrators in Kerouac's novels assume a temporary identity within the movements of language and

---

<sup>148</sup> Emerson, 'Nature', p. 39.

<sup>149</sup> Kerouac, 'Belief & Technique for Modern Prose' [1959], in *The Portable Beat Reader*, ed. by Ann Charters (London: Penguin Classics, 1992), pp. 58-59 (p. 59).

<sup>150</sup> Ibid.

<sup>151</sup> See subsection 1.2.2. on Ginsberg's poetics of performativity.

<sup>152</sup> Kerouac, 'Belief & Technique for Modern Prose', in *The Portable Beat Reader*, ed. by Charters, pp. 58-59 (p. 59).

perception as he dramatizes the mind incessantly conceiving itself. [...] his Legend stands as a graph of consciousness moving'.<sup>153</sup> Foregrounding the links between consciousness, writing and the self, writing is envisaged as a strategy that allows the movement of consciousness to exist in a constant state of introspection. In the end, for Hrebeniak, 'the Legend becomes its own subject, each text emerging through the agency of the reflexive "I" and written into being as part of observation'.<sup>154</sup> This process resonates with the interplay of consciousness in Sartrean Existentialism. As Aboulafia explains: 'To achieve cognitive self-knowledge would require, for Sartre, a subject that could simultaneously be its own object'.<sup>155</sup> Hence, Kerouac's 'eye within the eye' – read as an 'I within the eye' and an 'eye within the I' – actualises Duluoz's consciousness of death in return; it maintains the experience of anguish throughout the narrative.<sup>156</sup>

As a consequence, this anguish produces an inertia that demobilises the self, and that keeps the narrator from truly and authentically engaging with his environment. As Billie – Duluoz's girlfriend in the second part of the novel – asks Duluoz to make good on their romantic engagement, he turns her down: 'Billie I dont wanta get married. I'm afraid... [...] I wanta go home and die with my cat'.<sup>157</sup> Later, as Duluoz is due to meet Henry Miller – the writer, we are told, who prefaced one of his books – the plan fizzles out at the last minute:<sup>158</sup> '[...] already feeling awful guilt about Henry Miller anyway, we've made an appointment with him about a week ago and instead of showing up at his friend's house in Santa

---

<sup>153</sup> Hrebeniak, p. 149.

<sup>154</sup> Ibid., p. 150.

<sup>155</sup> Aboulafia, p. 125.

<sup>156</sup> Kerouac, 'Belief & Technique for Modern Prose', in *The Portable Beat Reader*, ed. by Charters, pp. 58-59 (p. 59).

<sup>157</sup> *Big Sur*, p. 146.

<sup>158</sup> Ibid., p. 162.

Cruz at seven we're all drunk at ten'.<sup>159</sup> Here, the reference to Henry Miller is more than reverential; it evokes a harsh contrast between Duluoz's torpor in *Big Sur* and the sense of potency and self-celebration that Miller's writing style exemplifies: 'To go forward into death! Not backward into the womb. Out of the quicksands, out of the stagnant flux!'<sup>160</sup> Meanwhile, Duluoz's tone of voice is apologetic: in fact, it is as if Duluoz admitted that he is not even trying to meet Miller. This abortive attempt enables a form of guilt to surface in the narrative: a symptom of Duluoz's bad faith, in which 'consciousness, instead of directing its negation outward turns it towards itself'.<sup>161</sup>

The narrator's general lack of commitment – or, in Sartrean terms, his lack of responsibility – adds to the deleterious tone of *Big Sur*: his irresolution imbues the novel with a romantic hue that is almost nihilistic. As Kerouac writes in the second part of the novel:

So I keep coming back but it's all an insane revolving automatic directionless circle of anxiety, back and forth, around and around [...] – from the woods I see those three shadowy heads whispering me by the stove – What's Dave saying? – And why do they look like they're plotting something further? – Can it be it was all arranged by Dave Wain via Cody that I would meet Billie and be driven mad and now they've got me alone in the woods and are going to give me final poisons tonight that will

---

<sup>159</sup> Ibid.

<sup>160</sup> Henry Miller, 'Creative Death', in *The Wisdom of the Heart* [1941] (London: Edition Poetry, 1947), pp. 7-18 (pp. 17-18).

<sup>161</sup> Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, p. 71.

utterly remove all my control so that in the morning I'll have to go to a hospital forever and never write another line?<sup>162</sup>

Here, Duluoz's crises of anxiety become paroxysmic. Such crises, which are fuelled by an introspective look, engender a form of being that is phobic and paranoid. A fearful and panicking Duluoz moves in circles and spirals towards insanity, which may be envisaged as the end-product of a type of anguish that intensifies during his stay at Big Sur.

The sequential recording of the experiences of the sick self is an inversion of the writing project of French novelist Marcel Proust (1871-1922). Proust, a writer Kerouac often alluded to, wrote about his own past experience as he lay sick in bed. In the preface to *Big Sur*, Kerouac writes:

My work comprises one vast book like Proust's except that my remembrances are written on the run instead of afterwards in a sick bed. *On the Road, The Subterraneans, The Dharma Bums, Doctor Sax, Maggie Cassidy, Tristessa, Desolation Angels, Visions of Cody* and the others including *Big Sur* are just chapters in the whole work which I call *The Duluoz Legend*. In my old age I intend to collect all my work [...], leave the long shelf full of books there, and die happy. The whole thing forms one enormous comedy, seen through the eyes of poor Ti Jean (me),

---

<sup>162</sup> *Big Sur*, p. 174.

otherwise known as Jack Duluoz, the world of raging action and folly and also of gentle sweetness seen through the keyhole of his eye.<sup>163</sup>

Nevertheless, in Kerouac's *Big Sur* self-reflection becomes a process that dismantles the intuitive self and that fosters nothingness in the text. Thus, as the narrator's consciousness acts both as a receptacle for and a producer of death, death becomes a way of *being* for Duluoz. Ultimately in *Big Sur*, the narrator is left feeling 'sick, disgusted, frightened, in fact terrified'; Duluoz remains stuck in anguish.<sup>164</sup> This spiralling into nothingness, which derives from a reflexivity lodged in the writing, from the narrator's sense of separation from nature and spirit and from the blocking of his vision, is not resolved until the denouement in Chapters 37 and 38, in which Duluoz experiences an epiphany: 'Suddenly as clear as anything I ever saw in my life, I see the Cross'.<sup>165</sup> Here, he finally succeeds in opening his inner, spiritual eye as he gazes at a ghostly cross.

Meanwhile, as Duluoz spirals into anguish and decay on the beach of Big Sur, he hears the hallucinatory voice of the sea at the end of his third week: 'GO TO YOUR DESIRE DONT HANG AROUND HERE'.<sup>166</sup> In narrative terms, this voice is a pretext for Duluoz to eventually listen to his inner self. From an Existentialist viewpoint, the sea's injunction offers Duluoz a chance to transcend his nothingness, not through yet another strategy of escape, but through authentic engagement with the world. As Duluoz goes back to San Francisco to get together with his friends, Kerouac writes:

---

<sup>163</sup> Ibid., preface to *Big Sur*.

<sup>164</sup> Ibid., p. 3.

<sup>165</sup> Ibid., p. 179.

<sup>166</sup> Ibid., p. 35.

Because anyway old Dave Wain is back and Dave I can see him rubbing his hands in anticipation of another big wild binge with me like we had the year before when he drove me back to New York from the west coast [...] – And Dave's never met the great Cody and will be looking forward to that – So me and Ben leave the park and slowly walk to the bar on Columbus Street and I order my first double bourbon and gingerale.

The lights are twinkling on outside in that fantastic toy street, I can feel the joy rise in my soul – I now remember Big Sur with a clear piercing love and agony and even the death of Tyke fits in with everything.<sup>167</sup>

Kerouac conveys an impression of familiarity through the excessive use of polysyndetons. They generate a sensation of speed, as Kerouac provides an uninterrupted flux; a flux of facts and actions around him combined with his own impressions, memories and fantasies. As Hipkiss points out: 'In *On the Road*, *Visions of Cody*, *Big Sur*, and the other confessional narratives [...], one association triggers the next; sights, sounds, and smells of one place at a time merge into another in the same sentence'.<sup>168</sup> The various sequences of this passage are interconnected through the association of ideas: the mental image of Dave Wain's jubilation at the forthcoming party, along with the evocation of a trip by car from one end of the continent to the other, and so forth. The next phrase

---

<sup>167</sup> Ibid., p. 47.

<sup>168</sup> Hipkiss, *Jack Kerouac, Prophet of the New Romanticism*, p. 83.

merges these two images: it features the thought of a promising meeting between Dave and Cody. In semiotic terms, Kerouac, by using image-led writing, moves from an associative structure into an amalgamation of emotions; he attempts to synthesise images through a type of writing that condenses as well as expands. In so doing, the writing mimics the movements of the transcendental self, which is both immanent and transcendent, wanting to be in the here and now and rising above the corporeal, immediate world at the same time. Here, Kerouac's writing retrieves an impetus that is potentially visionary, and that counterbalances the sense of stasis typified by the narrator's crises of anguish. I will show in the next paragraphs that this other type of writing in *Big Sur*, instead of assisting the sense of nothingness that the narrative propels, is used to a different effect: it epitomises a form of engagement that is crucial.

The evocation of Cody in the former quotation constitutes another form of engagement in this respect. Cody is the narrator's partner in crime and a reoccurring figure throughout *The Duluoz Legend*.<sup>169</sup> His ebullient nature and restless temperament bear a striking contrast to the text. As Kerouac presents him in *Big Sur*: 'And tho the wild frenzies of his old road days with me have banked down he still has the same taut eager face and supple muscles and looks like he's ready to go anytime'.<sup>170</sup> This description is largely homoerotic. In Kerouac's writing, sexual desire is envisaged as a tropism for physical movement, a conception not dissimilar to that of Ginsberg in 'Howl'.<sup>171</sup> Here, Cody, as Ginsberg's 'cocksman and Adonis of Denver', embodies the radical opposite of

---

<sup>169</sup> Cody is introduced as the mythic Dean Moriarty in *On the Road*. Both names are pseudonyms for Kerouac's friend Neal Cassady.

<sup>170</sup> *Big Sur*, p. 58.

<sup>171</sup> See above, pp. 182-83.

Duluoz's general state of immobility, of lethargy and of impotency.<sup>172</sup> His eagerness to 'go anytime' is ontologically revealing: it typifies a form of being in motion, highly energetic, impulsive and fugacious, the antithesis of what Duluoz has become.<sup>173</sup>

As in his previous novels, Kerouac conveys Cody's frantic engagement through the trope of the automobile:

There he is wearing goggles working like Vulcan at his forge, throwing tires all over the place with fantastic strength, 'this one's no good' down on another, bing, bang, talking all the time a long fantastic lecture on tire recapping [...] Rushing up and ripping tires off car wheels with a jicklo, clang, throwing it on the machine, starting up big roaring steams but yelling explanations over that, darting, bending, flinging, flaying, till Dave Wain said he thought he was going to die laughing or cry right there on the spot.<sup>174</sup>

Cody's new occupation as tire recapper may be viewed as a form of driving by proxy. Here, the reference to mechanical sports – which contrasts with the organic natural world of *Big Sur* – functions as a metonymy to signify Cody's colossal energy and yearning for movement. In this passage, it is as if Cody were driving at full speed, as Kerouac renders his impetus mythical – through the simile of Vulcan – as well as physical, through several onomatopoeias and the juxtaposition

---

<sup>172</sup> 'Howl', p. 4.

<sup>173</sup> *Big Sur*, p. 58.

<sup>174</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 60.

of action verbs in gerundive form. For Bierowski: ‘Cody lays into the task with the same strength and loquacious energy that made the myth of Dean Moriarty so charismatic. [...] Cody, like [Vulcan], is a powerful underground center of heat and commotion’.<sup>175</sup>

Indeed, as Kerouac writes later in the novel:

When Cody comes to a narrow tight curve with all our death staring us in the face down that hole he just swerves the curve saying ‘The way to drive in the mountains is, boy, no fiddlin around, these roads dont move, you’re the one that moves’.<sup>176</sup>

Through colloquial language, Kerouac renders Cody’s own self mobile and makes it coincide with mechanical velocity. The insatiable energy that Cody encapsulates, as it finds a physical extension through the device of the automobile, is a permanent challenge addressed to the forces of conservatism, immobility and stasis. As Cody fuses with the machine, we might say that his driving is confounded with his being, a death-defying entity both ontologically and figuratively, a negation of ‘all [their] death staring [them] in the face’.<sup>177</sup> This force of negation recalls what Finkelstein terms ‘the existentialist death-hauntedness’, ‘the need to act posited not as a demand of one’s social

---

<sup>175</sup> Bierowski, p. 161.

<sup>176</sup> *Big Sur*, p. 114.

<sup>177</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 114.

relationships and awareness of historical forces, but as an answer to death'.<sup>178</sup> As Sartre puts it in *Being and Nothingness*: 'As it seems to us, death by being revealed to us as it really is frees us wholly from its so-called constraint'.<sup>179</sup> This suggests that as Cody attempts to transcend stasis and nothingness, he embodies a dynamic principle of creation that celebrates being in the here and now. From this perspective, the fierce momentum and resolute forwardness that Cody encapsulates accentuates his ecstatic performativity on the one hand, and Dulouoz's descent into stasis and nothingness on the other.

Thus, Kerouac renders Cody's whole being concomitant with motion and, to some extent, with the phenomenological movement of Sartrean engagement: for Sartre, '[t]here is no reality except in action'.<sup>180</sup> This type of engagement is also reflected in Cody's direct speech:

'[...] so we've come here to not only thank you and see you again but to celebrate this, and on top of all that, occasion, goo me I'm all so gushy and girly, hee hee hee, yes that's right come on in children and then go out and get that gear in the car and get ready to sleep outdoors and get that good open fresh air, Jack on top of all that and my heart is jess OVERflowin I got a NEW JOB!! Along with that splissly little old beautiful new jeep! A new job right downtown in Los Gatos [...] now Ma you come in here, meet old Pat McLear here, start up some eggs or some of that steak we

---

<sup>178</sup> Finkelstein, p. 278.

<sup>179</sup> Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, p. 566.

<sup>180</sup> Ibid., 'Existentialism & Humanism', p. 47.

brought, open up that vienn roossee wine we brought for drunk old Jack  
that good old boy [...]'.<sup>181</sup>

The interplay on sounds and the use of onomatopoeias, alliterations and rhythmic phrases such as 'drunk old Jack that good old boy' convey a tone enthusiastic and almost child-like.<sup>182</sup> Simultaneously, the straightforward expression of affects in this passage is made physical through an unruly syntax that mimics the emotional thrust of actual talk, as if the reader him/herself were attending to the scene. Short words, along with minimal punctuation, strengthen the velocity of the passage. As Cody moves from one idea to the other without finishing, his speech exemplifies a continuum that corresponds to a sense of instantaneity above all. As Kerouac writes in 'Essentials of Spontaneous Prose' [1959]: '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'.<sup>183</sup> That is to say, Kerouac's writing relies on the streaming of his multifarious, immediate perceptions of the here and now to give the illusion of spontaneity.<sup>184</sup> This is what creates a permanent flux in the prose.

---

<sup>181</sup> *Big Sur*, p. 109.

<sup>182</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>183</sup> Kerouac, 'Essentials of Spontaneous Prose' [1959], in *The Portable Beat Reader*, ed. by Charters, pp. 57-58 (p. 57).

<sup>184</sup> Such a method of composition echoes that of Ginsberg, as we have seen earlier: 'Speak now, or ever hold your peace, write whatever comes to mind' (Ginsberg, 'Early Poetic Community', Interview with Robert Duncan, in *Allen Verbatim*, ed. by Ball, pp. 131-50 (p. 144)).

This transient feature at the core of Kerouac's prosody turns the writing into something remarkably fluid. For Hrebeniak, this fluid quality in the writing echoes D.H. Lawrence's notion of plasm:

Lawrence's use of 'plasms', a scientific term signifying permanent mutation as opposed to substance, could be a primer for Kerouac's fictions. His mobile act of writing is also spurred by a continuous creation/destruction dialogue, which flows beyond known territories and breaks apart their vertices.<sup>185</sup>

Hrebeniak reflects on the radical nature of Lawrence's prose, which he describes as liquiform. While their writing remains vastly dissimilar, Kerouac's prosody in the passages on Cody are, in some measure reminiscent of Lawrence's modernistic experiments. As Hrebeniak observes: 'the motive is not to contain Cassady [Cody] but to understand and register his energies inside an open field without compromise'.<sup>186</sup> It implies that, through Cody's speech, nothing simply is; everything *becomes*. Or, in Kerouac's own terms: 'STRUCTURE OF WORK [...] language shortens in race to wire of time-race of work, following laws of Deep Form'.<sup>187</sup> Such a premise shows that for Kerouac, form precedes the essence of his writing, this is what defines its contents to a great extent; it parallels Sartre's ontological precept of the precedence of existence over essence: 'For if

---

<sup>185</sup> Hrebeniak, p. 176.

<sup>186</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 62.

<sup>187</sup> Kerouac, 'Essentials of Spontaneous Prose', in *The Portable Beat Reader*, ed. by Charters, pp. 57-58 (p. 58).

indeed existence precedes essence, one will never be able to explain one's actions by reference to a given and specific human nature; in other words, there is no determinism – man is free, man is freedom'.<sup>188</sup> Likewise, this inextinguishable flow, which emanates from the writer's innermost perceptions and which is propelled outwards, enables Kerouac to produce a writing that creates its own substance.

Such a form of becoming, which is embedded in the writing, may be conceived as an end in itself. For Hrebaniak: 'Form emerges through inviting every observation, whether fortuitous or not, to enter the work, an unembodied momentum that demands a shape without prior existence, and makes of art, to paraphrase Lorca, a power, not a construction'.<sup>189</sup> Nevertheless, as every phrase that comes into being rushes towards collapse, all shapes become provisional. In fact, the sense of commotion and mobility that radiates from Kerouac's radical aesthetics turns the text into a performance that writes itself into being, a being that simultaneously rushes towards its own demise.<sup>190</sup> As Kerouac writes:

At one point I'm sitting in the sand as Cody walks up my way, I say to him imitating Wallace Beery and scratching my armpits 'Cuss a man for dyin in Death Valley' [...] and Cody says 'That's right, if anybody can imitate old Wallace Beery that's the only way to do it, you had just the

---

<sup>188</sup> Sartre, 'Existentialism & Humanism', pp. 37-38.

<sup>189</sup> Hrebaniak, p. 173.

<sup>190</sup> For Hrebaniak, the polymorphism of Kerouac's prose acts his 'preference for an economy of speculation over the traditional notion of the novel as closed circuit' (ibid., p. 85).

right timber there in the tone of your voice there, *Cuss a man for dyin in Death Valley* hee hee yes' but he rushes off to talk to McLear's wife.<sup>191</sup>

Thus, Kerouac's representation of Cody engenders an aesthetic of immediacy without beginning or end: one that self-destructs as soon as it comes into existence. From this perspective, Kerouac's prosody channels a form of commitment that is strikingly ambivalent: although transitory and highly unstable, it celebrates the manifestation of energy, of forcefulness and of motion on the page. This type of commitment embodies the paradox of a form of Thanatos located *within* the writing itself that is quintessentially performative and fluid, but also potentially self-destructive.

For Cody in *Big Sur*, the compulsion to act out one's self onto the plane of historical reality, bolstered by Kerouac's stylistics, is another way to both stave off and paradoxically embrace death. As Kerouac writes, 'wow that madman you can at least write on his grave someday "He Lived, He Sweated" – No halfway house is Cody's house'.<sup>192</sup> It is this impetus, this movement outwards, that Duluoz, consumed with an acute sense of alienation, critically lacks throughout *Big Sur*. Meanwhile, Cody's engagement in the world is precisely configured as a form of transcendence that is also procreative; in other words, Cody frequently acts as the godhead himself. Billie, Cody's mistress in *Big Sur*, perceives him as 'a big open channel pouring out all his holy gysm on Heaven'.<sup>193</sup> The connotation here is primarily sexual: Cody has become an epitome of potency and vitality.

---

<sup>191</sup> *Big Sur*, p. 112.

<sup>192</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 111.

<sup>193</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 126.

However, the implications of Billie's remark can also be interpreted phenomenologically. As a procreative organic movement, Cody becomes a bridge between inner and outer nature, as well as a channel for a divine energy. This alignment between Cody and a divine principle of creation renders him authentic in a Sartrean context, and potentially in an Emersonian context too; nevertheless in practice, his impetuosity and the nature of his engagement jeopardise his own integrity, as the next paragraphs will show.

In 'The White Negro', as we have briefly seen in a former section as well as in the literature review, Mailer attempts to combine a form of spiritual immanence with the Existentialist paradigm.<sup>194</sup> His version of an American Existentialism in the context of 1950s America largely resonates with Kerouac's representation of Cody. Mailer's Existentialism relies on a radical conception of engagement which, like Cody's, is mainly grounded in physical energy. For Mailer:

Movement is always to be preferred to inaction. In motion a man has a chance, his body is warm, his instincts are quick, and when the crisis comes, whether of love or violence, he can make it, he can win, he can release a little more energy for himself since he hates himself a little less, he can make a little better nervous system, make it a little more possible to

---

<sup>194</sup> See above, pp. 125-26, and the section on 'Norman Mailer's Brand of Existentialism' in the literature review, pp. 45-53.

go again, to go faster next time and so make more and thus find more people with whom he can swing.<sup>195</sup>

While the movement that Mailer describes is essentially procreative, it is also deeply rooted in the senses. It is allegorised in the essay through the term ‘swing’, a concept that typifies an existential form of engagement that is eminently sensual.<sup>196</sup> Unmistakably, Mailer’s ‘swing’ is a reference to the speedy rhythm of the music of the same name. Meanwhile, it also refers to the use of vernacular language in the 1950s, which enabled its speakers to express their most intimate relationship with the conditions of their immediate environment:

Like most primitive vocabularies each word is a prime symbol and serves a dozen or a hundred functions of communication in the instinctive dialectic through which the hipster perceives his experience, that dialectic of the instantaneous differentials of existence in which one is forever moving forward into more or retreating into less.<sup>197</sup>

In other terms, Mailer’s ‘hip’ lingo is both reflective and performative. It may be conceived as an ontology of affects: the series of colloquial terms in Mailer’s essay, such as ‘swinging’ but also ‘be with it’, ‘cool’, ‘with it’, ‘dig’, ‘flip’, ‘creep’, indicate states of consciousness that envision the self as getting closer to,

---

<sup>195</sup> Mailer, ‘The White Negro’, in *The Penguin Book of the Beats*, ed. by Charters, pp. 582-605 (p. 596).

<sup>196</sup> Ibid.

<sup>197</sup> Ibid, p. 599.

or drawing further away from, action and engagement.<sup>198</sup> For Mailer, ‘to swing is to be able to learn, and by learning take a step towards making it, towards creating’.<sup>199</sup> According to him, ‘[t]o swing with the rhythm of another is to enrich oneself’.<sup>200</sup> From this perspective, Mailer’s ‘swing’ may be interpreted as a form of engagement that is physical, expansive and self-creative at the same time; while it partly channels a form of Sartrean authenticity, it also resembles the sexual and procreative nature of Cody’s engagement in *Big Sur*.

Furthermore, ‘swing[ing]’ also alludes to sexual promiscuity, which is largely elicited throughout ‘The White Negro’:<sup>201</sup>

To ‘be with it’ is to have grace, is to be closer to the secrets of that unconscious life which will nourish you if you can hear it, for you are then nearer to that God which every hipster believes is located in the senses of his body, that [...] God who is It, who is energy, life, sex, force, the Yoga’s prana, the Reichian’s orgone, Lawrence’s ‘blood’, Hemingway’s ‘good’, the Shavian life-force; ‘It’; God; not the God of the churches but the unachievable whisper of mystery within the sex, the paradise of limitless energy and perception just beyond the next wave of the next orgasm.<sup>202</sup>

---

<sup>198</sup> Ibid., pp. 596-98.

<sup>199</sup> Ibid., p. 597.

<sup>200</sup> Ibid.

<sup>201</sup> Ibid.

<sup>202</sup> Ibid., pp. 597-98.

In equating the divine with ‘energy, life, sex, force’, Mailer suggests that this engagement is fuelled by a primitive energy originating in the sexual.<sup>203</sup>

According to him: ‘We must trust the authority of the senses because that is the closest contact we have to the creator’.<sup>204</sup> For Mailer, ‘be[ing] with it’, is the end-product of an instinctual and physical engagement with the higher self, not dissimilar to Cody’s in *Big Sur*, and more openly with his representation by Ginsberg as a sexual icon in ‘Howl’.<sup>205</sup>

Therefore, Mailer’s Existentialism can be envisaged as a type of transcendental ontology, albeit one that deviates from an Emersonian model in crucial ways. For one thing, Mailer confounds individualism with egoism. According to Mitchell, Emerson’s version of the ‘I’ is a distinctly articulate one rather than based on primitive instinct:

Emerson himself [...] was usually careful to distinguish his understanding of individualism from any aggressive assertion of the I. In such essays as ‘Self-Reliance’, [...] he exclaims with equal emphasis that we must both live from within and heed the voice of the ‘immense intelligence’ in whose lap we lie; throughout his work images of surrender and obedience to a higher force enclose his advocacy of self-reliant individualism.<sup>206</sup>

---

<sup>203</sup> Ibid. In ‘The White Negro’, Mailer associates this instinctive and sexual force with African Americans. This strategy of essentialisation is highly controversial (see literature review, pp. 45-53).

<sup>204</sup> Mailer, *On God*, p. 65.

<sup>205</sup> Ibid., ‘The White Negro’, in *The Penguin Book of the Beats*, ed. by Charters, pp. 582-605 (p. 597).

<sup>206</sup> Mitchell, p. 132.

Whereas, in 'The White Negro' the individual can potentially access the divine essence of creation through the omnipotence of the self, thus embodying a supreme form of being based on the complete liberation of the senses. Besides, Mailer's model is too radically seditious, unethical and prone to violence to truly match Emersonian authenticity. For Mailer:

Hip, which would return us to ourselves, at no matter what price in individual violence, is the affirmation of the barbarian, for it requires a primitive passion about human nature to believe that individual acts of violence are always to be preferred to the collective violence of the State.<sup>207</sup>

The impulsive energies and cravings of the self are non-negotiable for Mailer, they must be wholly and absolutely embraced and realised at any price. Hence, self-realisation is accomplished at the detriment of the other. This individualistic defiance must be put back into context: as seen earlier, Mailer views the socio-political and economic conditions of post-war America as fundamentally oppressive and tyrannical. As Laura Adams explains: 'For Mailer, the development of the self required radical freedom from the forces of totalitarianism, which he sees as all that separates us from our history, our instincts, the mysteries of our lives and deaths'.<sup>208</sup>

---

<sup>207</sup> Mailer, 'The White Negro', in *The Penguin Book of the Beats*, ed. by Charters, pp. 582-605 (p. 601).

<sup>208</sup> Laura Adams, *Existential Battle: The Growth of Norman Mailer* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1976), p. 31.

This intransigency is turned into a form of egomania that calls forth the figure of the psychopath – an epitome of the social outcast – which in Mailer’s essay is deliberately revered:

At bottom, the drama of the psychopath is that he seeks [...] an orgasm more apocalyptic than the one which preceded it. Orgasm is his therapy [...]. But in this search, [...] the apocalyptic orgasm often remains as remote as the Holy Grail, [...] so the conditions of his life create it anew in him until the drama of his movements bears a sardonic resemblance to the frog who climbed a few feet in the well only to drop back again.<sup>209</sup>

Mailer envisages the psychopath as primarily articulated through his sex drive, and regularly battered by a tremendous wave of destructive force. Here, a correspondence may be established between Cody’s masculine and impulsive expression of his stamina, and Mailer’s provocative description of the psychopath’s indomitable energies. In a practical sense, Cody – despite the prodigious intensity of his sexual and sensual engagement with the world – is consumed all too soon by his own lust for life and can never reach the object of his desire. As Kerouac writes, ‘Cody gives you a sense of dooming boom’.<sup>210</sup> The alliterative ‘dooming boom’ is also a booming doom; the form of being he personifies is as explosive as it is implosive.<sup>211</sup> As Kerouac makes Cody’s energy

---

<sup>209</sup> Mailer, ‘The White Negro’, in *The Penguin Book of the Beats*, ed. by Charters, pp. 582-605 (p. 593).

<sup>210</sup> *Big Sur*, p. 115.

<sup>211</sup> *Ibid.*

blind and senseless, he invokes Mailer's figure of the psychopath: both aim at nothing but release for its own sake, which makes the nature of their engagement primarily sexual but also intrinsically onanistic and sterile.

Consequently, Cody's engagement is, paradoxically, mostly ineffectual and potentially detrimental, not to say fatal: without any definite projective target, the energies released turn back on his own self. For Hrebniak: 'Dean [Cody]'s own behaviour lapses into repetitiousness, being confined to its own mythological system or cycle of conditioned action. [...] The ritual [transcendence] within such a frame reproduces only itself, not freedom'.<sup>212</sup> In this respect, Cody's energy inevitably tends towards solipsism. This is what enables Hrebniak to draw a parallel between Cody's tropism for movement and the conflicting dynamics of the Italian Futurist aesthetics:

Dean [Cody]'s fascination with the epic insurgence of wild transit thus replays the Italian futurist celebration of masculine speed, noise, and death and takes on Marinetti's description of his sharklike poet's car, 'more beautiful than the *Victory of Samothrace*', as it plunges through the electric Italian night [...]. In each case this inevitably ends in a sadomasochistic drive for extinction.<sup>213</sup>

Hrebniak's reference to Futurism is illuminating: it shows how Kerouac renders Cody's engagement concomitant with a dual movement that is both creative and

---

<sup>212</sup> Hrebniak, p. 56.

<sup>213</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 43.

destructive. Crucially, the self-destruction that this engagement induces is spurred by an act of creation that has a Dionysian quality to it, thus exemplifying the paradox of Thanatos.

In *Naked Angels*, Tytell envisages Cody as a ‘prototype of a new Nietzschean, Dionysian irresponsibility, an example of trans-valuations of values [whose] priority is freedom from socially imposed rules or expectations’.<sup>214</sup> This Dionysian character refers to a fundamentally instinctive force within existence, which Nietzsche examined in works such as *The Birth of Tragedy* and *The Will to Power*.<sup>215</sup> For Nietzsche, the Dionysian is:

[...] the great pantheistic sympathy with pleasure and pain, which declares even the most terrible and most questionable qualities of existence good, and sanctifies them; the eternal will to procreation, to fruitfulness, and to recurrence; the feeling of unity in regard to the necessity of creating and annihilating.<sup>216</sup>

Nietzsche’s concept of the Dionysian is a passageway between a continental and amoral type of ontology that is radically atheistic, and an American transcendental ontology that is intrinsically pantheistic.<sup>217</sup> Above all, it is a suitable term for Cody’s being in *Big Sur*: hell-bent on velocity, thrusting his own self forward into

---

<sup>214</sup> Tytell, p. 160.

<sup>215</sup> Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy* [1872], and *The Will to Power* [posthumous, 1906], trans. by Anthony M. Ludovici, ed. by David Taffel, Barnes & Noble Library of Essential Reading (New York: Barnes & Noble, 2006).

<sup>216</sup> *Ibid.*, *The Will to Power*, p. 481.

<sup>217</sup> As Nietzsche hinted in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*: ‘I would only believe in a God who knew how to *dance*’ (*ibid.*, quoted by himself in *The Will to Power*, p. 477).

the unknown, Cody nourishes a tremendous desire for a life whose ultimate apotheosis is self-annihilation, a contradictory movement that is also embedded in the writing, as we have seen. This self-annihilation is at the core of the Dionysian transcendence: in Nietzsche's philosophical system, it epitomises the 'joyful hope that the spell of individuation can be broken'.<sup>218</sup> While the Dionysian process is creative and ultimately transcendental, it is also inherently toxic for the integrity of the self. As Duloz remarks, watching Cody chopping wood: '[...] it was like an example of vast but senseless strength, a picture of poor Cody's life and in a sense my own'.<sup>219</sup> This sense of doom is anticipated by Old Bull Lee in *On the Road* – Kerouac's pseudonym for friend and writer William S. Burroughs – who viewed Cody as 'headed for his ideal fate, which is compulsive psychosis dashed with a jigger of psychopathic irresponsibility and violence'.<sup>220</sup> On a fundamental level, Cody embodies a self-negating quality that renders his engagement inconclusive and ultimately self-destructive and, more importantly, it echoes Mailer's provocative and nihilistic presentation of the psychopath in 'The White Negro'.

Thus, Cody's actions epitomise the paradox of an existential form of Thanatos; one that generates a series of unruly and wayward acts of creation that self-destroy as soon as they come into being. This antithetical movement is heightened by an aesthetic of immediacy and a desire to render textual forms fundamentally transient. Depicting him as a ball of energy, of high intensity, Kerouac celebrates a form of engagement through Cody that associates the

---

<sup>218</sup> Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, p. 52. For more detail on the transcendental process of the Dionysian, see section on Nietzsche in the literature review, pp. 54-61.

<sup>219</sup> *Big Sur*, p. 91

<sup>220</sup> Kerouac, *On the Road*, p. 133.

phenomenological dimension of Sartrean Existentialism with the physical and instinctual character of Mailer's transcendental ontology. Together, they combine the nihilistic essence of the Dionysian. In appearance, this form of engagement in *Big Sur* is diametrically opposed to that of Duluoz: its impetus overpowers stasis and nothingness, its force and velocity transcend the experience of alienation both in the narrative and through the writing. Nevertheless, this type of engagement also generates a form of self-destruction which, although of a different nature, echoes Duluoz's ontological dissolution in the novel. Different, this ontological dissolution is nonetheless typical of the existential form of Thanatos in Kerouac's writing, as we will see in more detail.

#### 1.2.4. An American Variant of Disengagement in *Big Sur*

We have seen so far that Duluoz's experience at Big Sur is one of sweeping anguish and ubiquitous alienation; it renders his engagement weak and sporadic, contrary to Cody's, with Kerouac's writing emphasising the contrast between the two. Yet the very move to the shores of Big Sur may be interpreted as the foundational act of creation in the novel, which can also be viewed as the narrator's primordial act of engagement in *Big Sur* and which translates, primarily, as a commitment to nature. This aspiration – not unlike that of Thoreau – translates as a search for self-fulfilment that is intrinsically spiritual, as I will show in this subsection. According to Kerouac: 'There's universal substance which is divine substance because where else can it be?'<sup>221</sup> As already observed,

---

<sup>221</sup> *Big Sur*, p. 33.

Kerouac's *Big Sur* largely echoes Thoreau's philosophical and aesthetic project in *Walden*: through prolonged contact with nature, Duluoz aims to synchronously monitor his relationship to it in written form. This contact with nature has an ontological value for the narrator: through it, Duluoz may apprehend its spiritual essence and potentially achieve a higher form of being. This feature allowed us to locate an Existentialist interplay in both Thoreau's *Walden* and by extension in Kerouac's *Big Sur*, between a variant of the absurd – as the structural impossibility for the self to blend with nature – and a type of authentic being, defined in this context as the individual's striving to integrate nature *despite* this incapacity.<sup>222</sup> While this interplay is highly paradoxical, the experience of the absurd prompts an engagement with one's immediate environment that inherently generates authentic being for Thoreau as well as for Camus. In theory, this form of engagement funnels the creative act: 'Action, an end in itself, prevents paralysis of the will and allows motion – undirected motion which is life'.<sup>223</sup> In the narrative context of *Big Sur* however, nature has turned into a malicious force that is fundamentally alienating and destructive for the narrator. Nonetheless, Duluoz persists and multiplies his attempts to interact with nature, which establishes the main narrative tension in the novel. Therefore, it is Duluoz's act of relocation in itself – and perseverance in trying to connecting with his natural environment – that I will apprehend as a form of engagement towards nature, even though nature has become a malevolent influence that rejects him in turn.

Crucially, Thoreau's engagement towards nature is also an engagement *against* the cultural moment of historical reality. The natural life that Thoreau

---

<sup>222</sup> See above, pp. 142-45.

<sup>223</sup> Lehan, p. 176.

advocates has an obvious pastoral dimension that counters the post-industrial revolution era.<sup>224</sup> For John D. Barbour: ‘The pastoral tradition idealizes a harmonious relation to nature and sees rural living as conducive to more honest dealings between individuals. Thoreau, too, aspired to these virtues and believed that solitude helped one attain them’.<sup>225</sup> Barbour implies that Thoreau’s type of authenticity is foregrounded in a form of *disengagement* from the rationale of socio-historical reality. For Thoreau, this withdrawal from the temporality of nineteenth-century modernity is primarily ontological, but also political: it aims to bring the self closer to the creative principle of nature, and therefore nearer to a form of authentic being. As Thoreau writes: ‘My purpose in going to Walden Pond was not to live cheaply or to live dearly but to transact some private business with the fewest obstacles’.<sup>226</sup> In similar fashion, through his relocation to Big Sur, Dulouoz tries to carve an ahistorical space out of a reality that is as remote as possible from the material and cultural contingencies of everyday life:

And in the flush of the first few days of joy I confidently tell myself (not expecting what I’ll do in three weeks only) ‘no more dissipation, it’s time for me to quietly watch the world and even enjoy it, first in the woods like these, then just calmly walk and talk people of the world, no booze, no drugs, no binges, no bouts with beatniks and drunks and junkies and everybody, [...] be a loner, travel, talk to waiters only, [...] it’s time to

---

<sup>224</sup> As Thoreau writes in *Walden*: ‘When I think of acquiring for myself one of our luxurious dwellings, I am deterred, for, so to speak, the country is not yet adapted to *human* culture, and we are still forced to cut our *spiritual* bread far thinner than our forefathers did their wheaten’ (Thoreau, *Walden*, p. 37).

<sup>225</sup> John D. Barbour, *The Value of Solitude: The Ethics and Spirituality of Aloneness in Autobiography* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2004), p. 119.

<sup>226</sup> Thoreau, *Walden*, p. 19.

think and watch and keep concentrated on the fact that after all this whole surface of the world as we know it now will be covered with the silt of a billion years in time... Yay, for this, more aloneness'.<sup>227</sup>

The further Duluoz steps away from the conditions of post-war modernity and into a primordial landscape, the closer he stands to the universal value of nature and its spiritual essence. This dialectical articulation is at the core of Thoreau's transcendental ontology: the ways in which it resurfaces in *Big Sur* is crucial for an understanding of an existential form of Thanatos in the novel.

In fact for Thoreau, as he shows in 'Economy', the first chapter of *Walden*, and in the essay 'Life Without Principle', historical power largely contributes to hinder individual self-expression. This is what he illustrates through the description of the 'fool's life' in the first pages of *Walden*.<sup>228</sup>

The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation. What is called resignation is confirmed desperation. From the desperate city you go into the desperate country, and have to console yourself with the bravery of minks and muskrats. A stereotyped but unconscious despair is concealed even under what are called the games and amusements of mankind.<sup>229</sup>

---

<sup>227</sup> *Big Sur*, pp. 18-19.

<sup>228</sup> Thoreau, *Walden*, p. 7.

<sup>229</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9.

For Thoreau, such ‘lives of quiet desperation’ exemplify ways of being that are severed from the natural life.<sup>230</sup> Beyond a stark opposition between the urban and the pastoral, Thoreau seeks a lifestyle that epitomises a wholesome involvement with nature, a situation in which nature can genuinely impact the self and potentially point him/her towards a form of authentic being. Vice versa, as the individual is cut off from the phenomenon of nature, he/she cannot apprehend and capture its spiritual essence; he/she is denied the potentiality of accessing the universal spirit of creation ingrained in nature and therefore cannot actualise his/her own self. It could be said that such a condition – symptomatic of the cultural paradigm of the mid-nineteenth century in America for Thoreau – exemplifies a form of inauthentic being, because the self has no possibility of venturing into nature and assimilating its divine essence. In the words of Thoreau: ‘Most men, even in this comparatively free country, through mere ignorance and mistake, are so occupied with the factitious cares and superfluous coarse labors of life that its finer fruits cannot be plucked by them’.<sup>231</sup> As a result, the self is divorced from the continuum of natural phenomena.

For Thoreau, the principal agent of the self-alienation that stems from this condition manifests itself through a series of mediations that reflect the cultural predicament of a materialistic and productive America. For him, the encroachment of a more industrialised nation thwarts the individual’s capacity for authentic being. As Thoreau puts it: ‘Actually, the laboring man has not leisure for a true integrity day by day [...]. He has no time to be any thing but a

---

<sup>230</sup> Ibid.

<sup>231</sup> Ibid., p. 8.

machine'.<sup>232</sup> This 'machine' is amalgamated into Ginsberg's vision of Moloch in 'Howl': it intrinsically hampers the continuity between the individual and the spiritual essence of nature.<sup>233</sup> For Arthur Schlesinger Jr, 'transcendentalist[s] detested special groups claiming authority to mediate between the common man and the truth. [They] aimed to plant the individual squarely on his instincts, responsible only to himself and to God'.<sup>234</sup> As Schlesinger pinpoints, these mediations are interpreted as constraints to immediate and unconditional self-realisation. For Thoreau:

[...] this points to an important distinction between the civilized man and the savage; and, no doubt, they have designs on us for our benefits, in making the life of a civilized people an *institution*, in which the life of the individual is to a great extent absorbed, in order to preserve and perfect that of the race.<sup>235</sup>

Here, Thoreau establishes a foundational dichotomy between modern and pre-industrial man, as he attacks both the institutional underpinnings and the materialistic ethos of modern civilisation.<sup>236</sup> Crucially, it is against these

---

<sup>232</sup> Ibid.

<sup>233</sup> Ibid.

<sup>234</sup> Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr, 'Transcendentalism and Jacksonian Democracy', in *American Transcendentalism*, ed. by Barbour, pp. 139-46 (p. 139).

<sup>235</sup> Thoreau, *Walden*, p. 30.

<sup>236</sup> In this regard, Thoreau's social critique in *Walden* in particular echoes that of Emerson in 'Self-reliance', where society is regarded as the chief agency of mediations that interpose non-natural phenomena. As Emerson claims: 'Society never advances. It recedes as fast on one side as it gains on the other. It undergoes continual changes; it is barbarous, it is civilized, it is christianized, it is rich, it is scientific; but this change is not amelioration. For every thing that is given something is taken. Society acquires new arts and loses old instincts' (Emerson, 'Self-reliance', p. 199). Here, the collective is

mediations themselves, apprehended as built-in processes of alienation that hinder self-reliance, that Thoreau's rebellion is directed. It takes the form of a double movement that is contradictory in its form, yet convergent in its ontological claims: it epitomises both an extensive engagement towards nature envisioned as a supreme way of life – and thus a way of *being* – as well as an insurrection against the alienation of the industrialised world. For Thoreau, 'we are warped and narrowed by an exclusive devotion to trade and commerce and manufactures and agriculture and the like, which are but means, and not the end'.<sup>237</sup>

Therefore, apprehended from an Existentialist perspective, the twofold movement exemplified by this transcendental type of engagement may be conceived as a variant of the Camusian revolt. This form of the revolt connives against those customs and intercessions inherent in socio-historical reality – be they abstract or physical – that thwart self-fulfilment and keep the individual from achieving authentic being. As Thoreau writes in *Walden*: 'Most of the luxuries, and many of the so called comforts of life, are not only not indispensable, but positive hindrances to the elevation of mankind'.<sup>238</sup> Such a revolt strives against the interferences of cultural commodification in order to provide the individual with the sheer *opportunity* to dwell closer to nature. That is not to say that the individual is unaware of his/her structural incapacity for an absolute and ideal coalescence with nature. Even with this recognition, it is the very principle of

---

objectified, apprehended as a conditioning device that articulates a series of operations and interventions that work in favour of modern civilisation and counter nature; it is devised by Emerson as an oppressive system that is both profane and superfluous, that tends to squash one's sense of selfhood and that deprecates the value of self-reliance, thereby impeding the potentiality for authentic being.

<sup>237</sup> Thoreau, 'Life Without Principle', in *The American Transcendentalists*, ed. by Miller, pp. 308-29 (p. 325).

<sup>238</sup> *Ibid.*, *Walden*, p. 15.

alienation that Thoreau seeks to expressly and forcibly obliterate. As Robinson suggests: ‘The alternative to life based on the hollowness of convention and superficiality is a natural life, which assumes the cultivation of the spiritual resources [of the self]’.<sup>239</sup> It is precisely this engagement – in the form of an unconditional participation in a doomed struggle – that constitutes the essence of revolt for Thoreau as well as for Camus, a revolt that initiates both action and self-definition. As Camus explains in *The Myth of Sisyphus*: ‘If man realized that the universe like him can love and suffer, he would be reconciled. [...] That nostalgia for unity, that appetite for the absolute illustrates the essential impulse for the human drama’.<sup>240</sup> Accordingly, the revolt that sprawls from Thoreau’s transcendental ontology embodies a movement that seeks to overcome the dichotomy of the absurd *while upholding it* at the same time.<sup>241</sup> That is to say, despite the awareness of the inability to commingle with the spiritual essence of nature, the individual still asserts, and maintains, his/her engagement towards it. Meanwhile in so doing, it stages a brutal confrontation of the individual in search of transcendental being against the emasculating intercessions of social and historical reality: arguably, Thoreau’s concept of revolt – intimately connected to his Transcendentalism – has a more explicitly political dimension than that of Camus.

In great measure, such a confrontation accounts for the radicalism of Thoreau’s stance against the profane and temporal world, as well as against the

---

<sup>239</sup> Robinson, p. 164.

<sup>240</sup> Camus, p. 23.

<sup>241</sup> For Camus: ‘Negating one of the terms of the opposition on which [the absurd man] lives amounts to escaping it. To abolish conscious revolt is to elude the problem. The theme of permanent revolution is thus carried into individual experience. Living is keeping the absurd alive’ (ibid., p. 53).

materialistic ethos of an increasingly industrialised America. In effect, this form of revolt epitomises a political commitment directed against the pitfalls of an America that has become recklessly mechanised, overly rationalised and outrageously commodified. As Robinson proclaims, 'Thoreau is a modern cultural hero in part because of his trenchant and courageous critique of the bondage of tedious and deadening work in the modern world'.<sup>242</sup> In like manner, for critics such as Mortenson, the Beats – viewed as a heterogeneous subcultural group immersed in the reality of 1950s America – strove against the oppressive developments of the post-war moment to preserve their individual freedom, a strategy that echoes the Existentialist search for authenticity. According to Mortenson:

The Beats did not just read the existentialists, they agreed with them. Life was being covered up with ready-made schemes, and unless people were willing to admit that they were being tranquilized, the country was destined to remain in a world of make-believe. Thus, existentialism not only forced the same postwar situation as the Beats but also offered the same solution – a direct encounter with the reality of the moment was the only way to counter an increasingly distracted and preoccupied world.<sup>243</sup>

Nevertheless, Beat writers did so in ways that greatly differed from one to the other. As I will show in the next paragraphs, the contradiction of a disengagement from historical reality – that, paradoxically, allows the subject to discover and

---

<sup>242</sup> Robinson, p. 2.

<sup>243</sup> Mortenson, p. 19.

perceive the essence of the world – is paramount for an existential form of Thanatos in *Big Sur*. As Kerouac illustrates, the fundamental conflict between his narrator's private desires and the normative society of post-war America is inescapable.

Duluoz's move to Big Sur is motivated as much by the necessity to run away from his drunken stupor as by his desire to cultivate isolation to retrieve sanity: 'I was surrounded and outnumbered and had to get away to solitude again or die – So Lorenzo Monsanto wrote and said "Come to my cabin"'.<sup>244</sup> This move is also a desire to shun all forms of social communication and avoid 'endless telegrams, phonecalls, requests, mail, visitors, snoopers'.<sup>245</sup> The type of essential simplicity that Duluoz cherishes sets itself in opposition to material and technological progress as well as social interaction. In romantic fashion here, Kerouac refers to the archetype of the hermit to signify Duluoz's desire to withdraw from modern civilisation and dwell in wilderness. This trope is idiosyncratic of Kerouac's writing in its reverence for, and idealisation of, the primitive: it epitomises a search for a transcendental connection with the universal, a possible version of Thoreau's natural life. As Robinson argues, the fantasy of the primitive 'held for Thoreau the promise of a natural life, whose grace, ease, directness, and freedom had been lost to civilization'.<sup>246</sup> In *Big Sur*, this desire for isolation translates as a strategy for disengagement: it articulates a will to reclaim one's own authority over that of society and thereby escape social

---

<sup>244</sup> *Big Sur*, p. 2.

<sup>245</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>246</sup> Robinson, p. 92.

conditioning, a recurrent fixation in both Kerouac's and Ginsberg's writings. As Tytell highlights:

Beats [...] had to find new ways to remind their culture of the dignity of self-reliance and to provide an Emersonian awareness of the tyranny of institutions. Execrating the worldly, dreading the implications of control, they chose to consecrate the whims of the individual.<sup>247</sup>

In *Big Sur*, Kerouac recontextualises the tyranny of the socio-historical environment through a series of ironic depictions of scenes from post-war American life. In the following passage, he focuses on the figure of the tourist, a stereotypical avatar of 1950s and 1960s economic prosperity in North America:

Every time the old man's trousers start to get creased a little in the front he's made to take down a fresh pair of slacks from the back rack and go on, like that, bleakly, tho he might have secretly wished just a good oldtime fishing trip alone or with his buddies for this year's vacation – But the PTA has prevailed over every one of his desires by now, 1960s, it's no time for him to yearn for Big Two Hearted River and the old sloppy pants and string of fish in the tent, or the woodfire with Bourbon at night – it's time for motels, roadside driveins, bringing napkins to the gang in the car,

---

<sup>247</sup> Tytell, p. 259.

having the car washed before the return trip – And if he thinks he wants to explore any of the silent secret roads of America it's no go.<sup>248</sup>

This type of behaviour stems from what Kerouac reads as the inevitable processes of commodification, of cultural standardisation and of social mimicry in the post-war era: for Kerouac, but also for Existentialists and Transcendentalists such as Emerson and Thoreau, it exemplifies a form of being that is deeply inauthentic. While in substance it illustrates a genuine reaction against the project of modernity, the sarcastic tone of this passage typifies a caustic form of self-expression that glosses over the crushing forces of the 1950s.

In other passages, Kerouac's social critique addresses the core foundations of Western civilisation on a wider level. In the following quotation, the narrator laments the pretension and vanity of modernity:

We will pass as quietly through life (passing through, passing through) as the 10th century people of this valley only with a little more noise and a few bridges and dams and bombs that wont even last a million years.<sup>249</sup>

As he engages with historical relativism, Kerouac alludes to the ethos of Buddhism, which advocates an awareness of the transience of life and that aims, ultimately, at a disincarnate form of transcendence. Here, Duluoz's allusion works to distance himself from his own contemporaneous culture. Later, Kerouac writes:

---

<sup>248</sup> *Big Sur*, pp. 38-39.

<sup>249</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 29.

Ah Daddy, [...] you wanta go on a lecture tour to Utah university and Brown university and tell the well scrubbed kids? [...] scrubbed with hopeless perfection of pioneer puritan hope that leaves nothing but dead pigeons to look at?<sup>250</sup>

This attack on the codification of institutional instruction channels Thoreau's transcendental doctrine: 'Read not the Times. Read the Eternities. [...] Knowledge does not come to us by details, but in flashes of light from heaven'.<sup>251</sup> This is the key distinction between secular knowledge and intuitive wisdom for Thoreau, which is immediate and transcendent. As Barbour analyses:

By emphasizing the direct apprehension of reality, [Transcendentalists] freed themselves from traditional learning – which was knowledge gained at second hand – and pushed the democratic principle so far that not merely the common man but the uneducated child symbolized their faith that spiritual truth was immediately available to all.<sup>252</sup>

For Thoreau, knowledge is divine in origin and cannot be mediated by rational thought nor by institutional agents.<sup>253</sup> More generally, episodes such as the critique of institutional learning in *Big Sur* manifest the narrator's discontent with

---

<sup>250</sup> Ibid., p. 149.

<sup>251</sup> Thoreau, 'Life Without Principle', in *The American Transcendentalists*, ed. by Miller, pp. 308-29 (p. 324).

<sup>252</sup> Barbour, 'Introduction', in *American Transcendentalism*, ed. by Barbour, pp. 1-5 (p. 2).

<sup>253</sup> In this regard, Both Thoreau's and Kerouac's critique echo that of Ginsberg through Moloch, 'whose name is the mind!' ('Howl', p. 9).

the conditions of post-war America: this is also what fuels, partly, his desire for evasion.

Duluoz's strategy for disengagement in *Big Sur* thus emphasises a form of revolt in the novel that is fundamentally political and highly romantic, reverberating with that of Thoreau. Meanwhile, the American character of this revolt obviously makes it divergent from that of Camus. For Camus, the ontological impediments of socio-historical reality generate a type of revolt that is necessarily ambivalent in order to maintain individual identities. As Golomb points out, 'Camus too wants one thing – to preserve the tension of the absurd in order to continue to rebel against it and to struggle authentically with its practical implications'.<sup>254</sup> This is how Camus's engagement through a form of revolt differs from Sartrean commitment: while both insist on the self-creative proprieties of engagement, the Camusian revolt encourages the authenticity of the self through an act of sedition against the conditions of the real. For Golomb:

In my own way I can find pride and sublimely express my will to live authentically. To do so I will continue struggling and overcoming everything in me and my surroundings that tries to humiliate me and reduce me to suicide.<sup>255</sup>

Hence, for Camus historical reality is seen, rather, as a contingency, a fabric riddled with constraints. While the ontological reaction of the revolt seeks to rebel against the limitations of socio-historical reality, it also uses them to create the

---

<sup>254</sup> Golomb, p. 179.

<sup>255</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 176-77.

conditions for authentic being. Thus the Camusian revolt needs the constraints of history to materialise. Whereas for Thoreau, '[i]t is not for a man to put himself in such an attitude to society, but to maintain himself in whatever attitude he find himself through obedience to the laws of his being'.<sup>256</sup> Thoreau champions a brand of individualism that militates for an abrogation of the historical and civilisational forces that seek to deny one's access to transcendental being. As he hints it in 'Life without Principle':

Let us consider the way in which we spend our lives. [...] It is nothing but work, work, work. [...] I think that there is nothing, not even crime, more opposed to poetry, to philosophy, ay, to life itself, than this incessant business.<sup>257</sup>

In both Thoreau's and Duluoz's respective acts of disengagement, the need to strive against the hostile conditions of the socio-historical moment is crucial. More so, however, is the desire to access the potentiality for transcendental being by being outside of society. As Hipkiss comments: 'To withdraw from the world, to find a stable sameness of routine, to reduce one's denominator, as Thoreau advised – these might be the means of survival in the contemporary Waste Land'.<sup>258</sup>

---

<sup>256</sup> Thoreau, *Walden*, p. 287.

<sup>257</sup> Ibid., 'Life Without Principle', in *The American Transcendentalists*, ed. by Miller, pp. 308-29 (p. 310). For Robinson, "Life Without Principle" is a fervent and sometimes acerbic version of this argument, a jeremiad against not only materialism but also its insidious incarnation in a pervasive allegiance to a deadening ethic of purposeless work' (Robinson, p. 161).

<sup>258</sup> Hipkiss, *Jack Kerouac, Prophet of the New Romanticism*, p. 55.

This disengagement enables both Thoreau and Kerouac to effectively consume the American myth of self-reliance through their own alternative system of values, for Kerouac's narrator '[t]he infancy of the simplicity of just being happy in the woods, conforming to nobody's idea about what to do, what should be done'.<sup>259</sup> Assuredly, the inclination towards self-reliance is precipitated by an overwhelming sense of disappointment with national ideals – and especially with the hollow promise that each citizen will be provided with the opportunity for happiness and self-fulfilment. As Hipkiss suggests:

The [American] dream has failed economically, politically, and morally because the dream extols the virtues of individual self-realization and power at the expense of self-limitation and social responsibility, because the focus is on the individual free self and not on the establishment of community and corporation.<sup>260</sup>

Therefore, while the revolt that Duluoz typifies in *Big Sur* is primarily ontological, it is also distinctly political: through the will to recover a space in which the individual may express his own self immediately and immoderately, an implicit criticism of an increasingly standardised, mechanised and commodified

---

<sup>259</sup> *Big Sur*, p. 25.

<sup>260</sup> Hipkiss, *The American Absurd: Pynchon, Vonnegut, and Barth*, Modern and Contemporary Literature Series (Port Washington: Associated Faculty Press, 1984), p. 53.

America occurs.<sup>261</sup> From this perspective, Duluoz's retreat may be envisaged as a type of insurrection that typifies a radical form of individual liberty.

As indicated before, Kerouac's illustration of this revolt is also profoundly romantic. As it positions the individual against society and history, it seeks to antagonise the status quo in a fashion not dissimilar to that of Thoreau. As Thoreau concludes in *Walden*:

[E]xplore your own higher latitudes, [...] be a Columbus to whole new continents and worlds within you, opening new channels, not of trade, but of thought. Every man is the lord of a realm beside which the earthly empire of the Czar is but a petty state, a hummock left by the ice.<sup>262</sup>

In this aphoristic passage, which echoes Emerson's rhetorical address in 'Self-reliance', Thoreau relocates the transcendental within the self; as he glorifies the higher, spiritual realm, he simultaneously deprecates the temporal sphere.<sup>263</sup>

Consequently, this type of revolt induces a self-centredness that seeks to abrogate both the social and the temporal to liberate the full potential of the transcendental self. This is what Duluoz alludes to in the following passage:

---

<sup>261</sup> For Mortenson: 'The Beats found themselves in a "vast American hallucination" constructed in the disembodied space of "airwaves and television and newspapers" (Ginsberg, "New Consciousness" 71-72). Their solution was to emphasize direct versus mediated experience. This insistence on the reality of the world intersects with existential attempts to recover an authenticity within the moment' (Mortenson, p. 26).

<sup>262</sup> Thoreau, *Walden*, p. 286.

<sup>263</sup> As Thoreau put it concisely: 'Explore thyself. Herein are demanded the eye and the nerve' (ibid., p. 287).

Marvelous opening moment in fact of the first afternoon I'm left alone in the cabin and I make my first meal, wash my first dishes, nap, and wake up to hear the rapturous ring of solence or Heaven even within and throughout the gurgle of the creek.<sup>264</sup>

This romantic form of individualism, which adds to the confessionalism of Kerouac's narrative project, implies that the self is conceived as an absolute centre of reality. Through it, Kerouac shows that Duluoz may gain momentary access to the divine essence of nature, but at the expense of involvement in the social world. In the narrative context of *Big Sur*, this form of being is ambivalent, because it also inadvertently invigorates Duluoz's anguish.<sup>265</sup>

It is this brand of individualism that is enthusiastically lauded by Mailer throughout 'The White Negro'; it is paramount in the definition of an Americanised form of Existentialism. As Mailer writes:

One could hardly maintain the courage to be individual, to speak with one's own voice, for the years in which one could complacently accept oneself as part of an elite by being a radical were forever gone. [...] A stench of fear has come out of every pore of American life, and we suffer from a collective failure of nerve. The only courage, with rare exceptions,

---

<sup>264</sup> *Big Sur*, p. 15.

<sup>265</sup> See above, pp. 96-98. As Billie tells Duluoz, 'you're so wrapped up in yourself' (ibid., p. 166).

that we have been witness to, has been the isolated courage of isolated people.<sup>266</sup>

What Mailer promotes here is an intentional estrangement of the individual from society. From this perspective, Duluoz's retreat to Monsanto's cabin may be read as a brave act of revolt that manifests the repudiation of the social world and cultural standards of his time. More importantly, it professes 'the liberation of the self from the Super-Ego of society'.<sup>267</sup> Eventually for Mailer,

the nihilism of Hip proposes as its final tendency that every social restraint and category be removed, and the affirmation implicit in the proposal is that man would then prove to be more creative than murderous and so would not destroy himself.<sup>268</sup>

Mailer's radical conception of individual freedom translates into a form of self-experiment in which the legitimacy of the self is the ultimate social and philosophical justification.

Through the disengagement that Duluoz exemplifies, Kerouac erects self-worship as a moral injunction, a form of being that not only engulfs all viable possibilities for social action, it also swallows the self in return. This tendency constitutes the substratum of a literary lineage signalled by Jack London (1876-

---

<sup>266</sup> Mailer, 'The White Negro', in *The Penguin Book of the Beats*, ed. by Charters, pp. 582-605 (p. 584).

<sup>267</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 601.

<sup>268</sup> *Ibid.*

1916), John Dos Passos (1896-1970) and Henry Miller (1891-1980) in particular.

According to Finkelstein:

The form that Miller's 'revolt' took, as one of the 'disillusioned' after the First World War, was much like that of the self-named 'beat generation' after the Second World War. It was as much a way of life as a way of writing, a defiant, vituperative resignation from society with the writing serving as an autobiographical manifesto for his behaviour.<sup>269</sup>

Such a deliberate alienation from society is characteristic of an American form of Existentialism that Kerouac channels through *Big Sur*. It departs from European Existentialism in the neutralisation of the ethical through a zealous contempt for the social field.<sup>270</sup> This American literary tradition is foregrounded in a Nietzschean philosophical heritage that champions, defiantly and cheerfully, the subject's unconditional freedom at the expense of social responsibility.<sup>271</sup> As Finkelstein remarks: 'What is Miller's "triumph"? He reiterates that he has renounced the bondage to a demanding world, and has found freedom'.<sup>272</sup> This freedom, nonetheless, is the nihilistic freedom of the aesthete, because it has no social relevance: it is sustained by a type of revolt that, in its obsession with

---

<sup>269</sup> Finkelstein, p. 203.

<sup>270</sup> For Sartre: 'I am thus responsible for myself and for all men, I am creating a certain image of man as I would have him to be' (Sartre, 'Existentialism & Humanism', pp. 32-33).

<sup>271</sup> According to Lehan: 'Nietzsche yanked God from the heavens, questioned the rational philosophers, and challenged the state in the name of extreme individualism. [...] His call was to the supreme individualist whose radical action would serve as an answer to nihilism [through the] urge to reject established dogmas and to find self-awareness through heightened experience' (Lehan, p. 3).

<sup>272</sup> Finkelstein, p. 205.

immaculate forms of autonomy and individual liberty, cannot realise an alternative cultural project that is sound and stable, and it generates a solipsism which risks being counterproductive for the self.<sup>273</sup>

This lack of ethical responsibility characterises the shift from an Existentialist authenticity to a more Transcendentalist and American ethos. It is an attribute of Duluoz's revolt in *Big Sur*, and *a fortiori* of Mailer's in 'The White Negro'. For Sartre:

When a man commits himself to anything, fully realising that he is not only choosing what he will be, but is thereby at the same time a legislator deciding for the whole of mankind – in such a moment a man cannot escape from the sense of complete and profound responsibility.<sup>274</sup>

In contrast, for Mailer, and for Duluoz in *Big Sur*, in typical American fashion, their act of disengagement suggests that ontological solace cannot be but self-directed. For Cotkin: 'Certainly Mailer fails at this stage to acknowledge an ethics of responsibility because he is so intent on promoting individual catharsis as a means to overcome the deadening effects of postwar American conformity'.<sup>275</sup>

While Cotkin underlines the psychological drives underpinning Mailer's ontology, he overlooks the fundamentally provocative dimension of Mailer's essay. The autarchical individualism that this type of revolt promotes is as

---

<sup>273</sup> As Schlesinger points out: 'The headlong escape into perfection left responsibility far behind for a magic domain where mystic sentiment and gnostic utterances exorcised the rude intrusions of the world' (Schlesinger, 'Transcendentalism and Jacksonian Democracy', in *American Transcendentalism*, ed. by Barbour, pp. 139-46 (p. 141)).

<sup>274</sup> Sartre, 'Existentialism & Humanism', p. 33.

<sup>275</sup> Cotkin, p. 198.

flamboyant as it is contemptuous; nonetheless, it creates the conditions for an extreme form of social alienation that in fact jeopardises the potentiality for self-fulfilment and nullifies the possibility of social change. As Sartre points out: ‘But in truth, one ought always to ask oneself what would happen if everyone did as one is doing; nor can one escape from that disturbing thought except by a kind of self-deception’.<sup>276</sup>

While the ethical dimension of engagement, which tallies with a Sartrean conception of social responsibility, is lost in *Big Sur*, it is retained in Ginsberg’s ‘Howl’. In Part 3 of the poem, the narrator expresses his affection for friend and lover Carl Solomon – the dedicatee of ‘Howl’ – who is interned in ‘Rockland’, a psychiatric institution.<sup>277</sup>

Carl Solomon! I’m with you in Rockland

where you’re madder than I am

[...]

I’m with you in Rockland

where fifty more shocks will never return your soul to its

body again from its pilgrimage to a cross in the void

[...]

I’m with you in Rockland

where there are twenty-five-thousand mad comrades all together

singing the final stanzas of the internationale.<sup>278</sup>

---

<sup>276</sup> Sartre, ‘Existentialism & Humanism’, p. 33.

<sup>277</sup> ‘Howl’, pp. 10-11.

<sup>278</sup> Ibid., p. 10.

As Ginsberg manifests his presence symbolically through the systematic anaphora ‘I’m with you in Rockland’, he conveys a forceful sense of compassion.<sup>279</sup> While Ginsberg’s critique of the psychiatric institution articulates an explicit defiance that strives for political liberation, as the allusion to the communist hymn implies, its emanation is fundamentally one of empathy. It makes for a form of revolt that typifies a liberatory impulse that is not only directed outwards towards Carl Solomon, but towards all the inmates of psychiatric institutions and universally to all the victims of Moloch. As Tytell points out, ‘Ginsberg’s bias is humanistic and international’.<sup>280</sup> In this sense, Ginsberg’s revolt is inclusive in nature, its fundamentally altruistic expression reinforces its social relevance: it channels the Sartrean imperative for ethical responsibility, which conceives engagement as ‘a commitment on behalf of all mankind’.<sup>281</sup>

Whereas in *Big Sur*, the narrator’s revolt is moral, not ethical: Duluoz’s commitment to a radical type of self-reliance does not signify on a social level. This extreme form of individualism signals an inwards engagement; its performance is exclusively private, since it is motivated by the ideal self. For Kenneth Rexroth in ‘Disengagement: The Art of the Beat Generation’, this self-centredness is the trademark of the Beats, a trademark he defines primarily from a sociological angle:<sup>282</sup> ‘The youngest generation is in a state of of revolt so absolute that its elders cannot even recognize it. This disaffiliation, alienation, and

---

<sup>279</sup> Ibid.

<sup>280</sup> Tytell, p. 254.

<sup>281</sup> Sartre, ‘Existentialism & Humanism’, p. 32.

<sup>282</sup> Kenneth Rexroth, ‘Disengagement: the Art of the Beat Generation’ [1957], in *The Penguin Book of the Beats*, ed. by Charters, pp. 323-38.

rejection of the young has [...] moved out of the visible spectrum altogether'.<sup>283</sup>

This type of revolt is expressly envisaged as a response to the post-war environment: 'It is impossible for an artist to remain true to himself as a man, let alone an artist, and work within the context of this society'.<sup>284</sup> While Rexroth's terms are rather generic and imprecise, his essay allows us to distinguish the thin line between a moderate form of disengagement that is potentially self-creative and the slip towards a form of solipsism that is plainly self-destructive:

The disengagement of the creator, who, as a creator, is necessarily judge, is one thing; but the utter nihilism of the emptied-out hipster is another. [...] Between such persons no true enduring interpersonal relationships can be built, and of course, nothing resembling a true 'culture' – an at-homeness of men with each other, their work, their loves, their environment. The end result must be the desperation of shipwreck – the despair, the orgies, ultimately the cannibalism of a lost lifeboat. I believe that most of an entire generation will go to ruin – [...] even enthusiastically.<sup>285</sup>

These comments anticipate Duloz's plight in *Big Sur*, in which the narrator's quixotic relocation translates as a private retreat into the self. Referring to *Big Sur*, Hipkiss comments:

---

<sup>283</sup> Ibid., p. 323.

<sup>284</sup> Ibid., p. 331.

<sup>285</sup> Ibid., pp. 337-38.

Unable to establish lasting human relationships, unable to find a tradition of custom and belief that works in the modern world, the anti-hero is left with no outward direction in his life. [...] the void is everywhere and the only direction to go is inward.<sup>286</sup>

This inwardness, as the dominant narrative and phenomenological motif in the novel, is precisely what hastens Duluoz's fall into solipsism.

The deleterious effects of Duluoz's solipsistic agony become a major narrative pattern in the second part of *Big Sur*: "Can it be that Ron and all these other guys, Dave and Mclear or somebody, the other guys earlier are all a big bunch of witches out to make me go mad?" I seriously consider this'.<sup>287</sup> While Duluoz's fit of paranoia emerges primarily from a very self-reflective consciousness, it is also the collateral effect of having retired from the social world; he now imagines his friends as a menace to his own sanity. This paranoid perception evidences a shift, a move from the outside to the inside. For Hipkiss: 'Like Henry Miller in *Tropic of Cancer*, Kerouac sees his own neurotic feelings as the key to the reality of things'.<sup>288</sup> Thus for Duluoz, reality is incarnate; it becomes exclusively subjective and self-legislating. As Dulk observes: 'The solipsistic regards only himself – that is, his thoughts and perceptions – as real; the outside world and other people "disappear" as independently real and meaningful entities'.<sup>289</sup> This solipsism foregrounds a type of revolt in *Big Sur* that is profoundly nihilistic: not only does it dismiss the world as a whole, it also

---

<sup>286</sup> Hipkiss, *Jack Kerouac, Prophet of the New Romanticism*, p. 51.

<sup>287</sup> *Big Sur*, p. 100.

<sup>288</sup> Hipkiss, *Jack Kerouac, Prophet of the New Romanticism*, p. 51.

<sup>289</sup> Dulk, p. 58.

denies reality by subverting, and subsuming, its empirical status. Eventually Duluoz reckons: '[...] 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'.<sup>290</sup> Duluoz's realisation corresponds to his fragmentary experience in *Big Sur*. His unfailing self-centredness triggers the final dislocation of the self. Ultimately Duluoz is tempted to self-destroy: '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'.<sup>291</sup> Hence, this nihilistic revolt may be viewed, in great measure, as the end-product of a radical practice of disengagement. It is this self-destructive dynamic that greatly contributes to the definition of an Existentialist form of Thanatos in the novel.

Nevertheless, the revolt that Duluoz exemplifies in *Big Sur* is as political and romantic as it is moral in a way that recalls Thoreau's own type of revolt in *Walden*. For Thoreau, authentic being presupposes an uncluttered and immediate channel between the individual and the higher universal mind; one must secure the purest and most direct path to nature so that he/she may *attempt* to merge with it with minimum hindrance. As he concludes in *Walden*: 'Do not trouble yourself much to get new things, whether clothes or friends. [...] Sell your clothes and keep your thoughts. God will see that you do not want society'.<sup>292</sup> His spiritual revolt against the trappings of capitalist society creates a sharp opposition between the materialistic world and the spiritual self, and to some extent between his contemporary socio-historical environment and the transcendental ideal. This

---

<sup>290</sup> *Big Sur*, p. 134.

<sup>291</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 161.

<sup>292</sup> Thoreau, *Walden*, p. 290.

dialectical articulation stems from Romanticism, as well as from the American Puritan tradition. Puritanism meets Thoreau's Transcendentalism in the moral dimension that this binary entails: since the affairs of the world impact the spiritual self, the political becomes moral. As Robinson suggests: 'Thoreau believed that one entered the arena of politics only when "political" questions rose to the stature of "moral" issues'.<sup>293</sup> Such a moral dimension is intrinsic to the struggles of the transcendental self and it manifests a major divergence from the Camusian model. As Baker pinpoints:

[The Camusian revolt] is the [...] dialectical experience of an individual trying to relate to an irrational world; and it is this way of existing, through a passionate choice, a revolt against any moral or metaphysical absolutes, and a total commitment to freedom, that becomes the focal point of existentialist thought.<sup>294</sup>

Whereas for Thoreau, the rejection of all socio-historical agents of mediation enables the self to retrieve the potentiality for transcendence. It eulogises a vision of reality that is ideal and pure, noble and sanctified at every moment, which is also that conceived by Mailer in 'The White Negro'. Most importantly, this moral imperative constitutes a distinct feature of the type of Americanised Existentialism present in Kerouac's *Big Sur* and in Duluoz's act of disengagement.

---

<sup>293</sup> Robinson, p. 166.

<sup>294</sup> Baker, p. 1.

In the last pages of *Big Sur*, Duluoz is wholly consumed and falls victim to an eerie and transcendent vision. As Kerouac opens the second to last chapter of the novel:

I see the Cross, it's silent, it stays a long time, my heart goes out to it, my whole body fades away to it, I hold out my arms to be taken away to it, by God I am being taken away my body starts dying and swooning out to the Cross standing in a luminous area of the darkness, I start to scream because I know I'm dying [...] and just let myself go into death and the Cross: as soon as that happens I slowly sink back to life.<sup>295</sup>

What Duluoz experiences here has all the attributes of a religious epiphany. Through the recurrent motif of the cross, and through the interplay between the tropes of illumination and transportation, between light and darkness and between life and death, Kerouac references the codes of Catholic revelation: “I'm with you, Jesus, for always, thank you” – [...] the Cross is manifested to me – My eyes fill with tears – “We'll all be saved [...]”<sup>296</sup> Here, Duluoz's transfiguration mimics Christ's: this allegorical incarnation is an idiosyncratic feature of Kerouac's writing, as we will see in more detail in Part 2 of the thesis through the analysis of *Tristessa*. This reassertion of faith at the very end of the novel mobilises a special brand of Catholicism, and thus a significant departure from the Transcendentalist tradition of Thoreau. Meanwhile, it has major ontological

---

<sup>295</sup> *Big Sur*, p. 180.

<sup>296</sup> *Ibid.*

consequences for Duluoz, as well as for an Existentialist form of Thanatos in the novel.

From a narrative point of view, Duluoz's enthrallment with the cross in the last two chapters of *Big Sur* constitutes a logical outcome of the nature of his revolt. It allows the reader to re-evaluate the nature of the physical and mental collapse Duluoz has succumbed to and to redefine it as a series of religious hardships on the way to a salvation rendered in Christian terms. As Bierowski suggests: 'The cross is not revealed as a free ride, but rather as a model he must embrace until he gives up the ghost'.<sup>297</sup> For Duluoz, the burden of his existential perils appear to be redeemed by a cross that embodies the divine authority, something positioned distinctly outside the self *and* the world. In effect, Duluoz's spiritual reconversion demands an act of atonement: 'Am I not a human being and have done my best as well as anybody else? never really trying to hurt anybody or halfhearted cursing Heaven?'<sup>298</sup> Hence, the narrator's revelation may be envisaged as a reward handed down by the divine, a godly compensation in recognition of the ordeal he has gone through.

Therefore, Duluoz's engagement with the divine at the end of *Big Sur* suggests that the nature of divinity is no longer envisaged as immanent. As Kerouac writes: 'Everything has washed away – I'm perfectly normal again – [...] Just a golden wash of goodness has spread over all and over all my body and mind – All the dark torture is a memory'.<sup>299</sup> While the divine grace wholly penetrates the narrator's body and mind, the last phrase implies Duluoz's

---

<sup>297</sup> Bierowski, p. 177.

<sup>298</sup> *Big Sur*, p. 186.

<sup>299</sup> *Ibid*, p. 189.

redemption. The manifestation of the transcendent is not immediate and simultaneous with being any longer, in accordance with the pantheistic precepts of American Transcendentalism, but rather chronological and teleological – that is, *subsequent* to his being – in line with the Christic sequence of life, death, and resurrection. As Duluoz confesses: ‘Something good will come out of all things yet – And it will be golden and eternal just like that’.<sup>300</sup> As such, the act of faith presupposes an indefinite postponement of final absolution. This is how Kerouac’s recourse to a Catholic scheme allows him to rehabilitate temporality, by introducing a sacrificial dimension as central to his writing.<sup>301</sup>

Accordingly, Duluoz’s Catholic revelation restores the scriptural schism between matter and spirit, which is replayed in *Big Sur* on the site of the self. As Bierowski underlines, ‘the Catholic focus on the Passion and death of Jesus Christ, via the mortification of the body, embodies a mysticism of sacrifice’.<sup>302</sup> The reactivation of the differential between body and mind underpins Kerouac’s literary experimentation with the Catholic ethos: in *Big Sur*, the sacrificing of Duluoz’s body through the devastating effects of alcohol especially may be envisaged as a contemporary and liminal replication of the life of Christ. It allows Kerouac to both incarnate the ineffable suffering of existence – which arguably becomes a primer in his late writings – and play with the religious codes of Roman Catholicism, which imply that the body must be renounced and crucified

---

<sup>300</sup> Ibid., p. 190.

<sup>301</sup> ‘Spring is the laugh of a maniac, I say. ... What SIN is there, but the sin of birth?’ (Kerouac, *Vanity of Duluoz*, pp. 275-76, quoted by Giamo, p. 204).

<sup>302</sup> Bierowski, p. 170.

in order for the soul's deliverance.<sup>303</sup> In *Big Sur*, this crucifixion is self-inflicted; Duluo's martyrdom encapsulates a truly masochistic impulse in which the urge for self-annihilation is prominent. This clandestine passion for self-destruction and death articulates as a trope of the glorification of suffering, and a resolute belief in an after-life. For Hrebaniak, this is the critical point where 'Kerouac's mysticism morphs into a desire to be overwhelmed by a colossal hermetic structure'.<sup>304</sup>

However, the liminal Catholic model of Kerouac and the spiritual paradigm of Thoreau are not completely hermetic. To a certain degree, suffering is also taken into consideration by Thoreau: it serves to authenticate engagement on a moral plane. As Barbour points out:

Transcendentalist faith in a spiritual realm merges with his ascetic leanings when Thoreau recommends self-denial as the path to spiritual awakening. The 'Higher Laws' or principles to which we should conform our lives will lead us eventually to chastity and vegetarianism, both of which are more easily practiced without the distractions and entertainments of other people.<sup>305</sup>

Conversely, Kerouac's engagement with Catholicism in *Big Sur* is not necessarily exclusive; the preeminence of the motif of salvation, combined with the plasticity of his writing, allows for multiple crossovers between different spiritual and

---

<sup>303</sup> Simultaneously, this change of spiritual frame necessarily entails an abandonment of the autonomy of the self.

<sup>304</sup> Hrebaniak, p. 124.

<sup>305</sup> Barbour, *The Value of Solitude*, p. 120.

religious traditions. While the Catholic and the Transcendentalist frameworks remain clearly different, Kerouac and Thoreau share a similar procedure in their spiritual quest: their acquisition of spiritual wisdom is no less than the final product of a mystic form of self-discovery, a self-discovery that relies on a process of disengagement. This disengagement circumvents – in various ways – the socio-historical conditions of their respective times in order to access first-hand experience. In effect, for both writers, the revelation of the divine is not communicated by means of sacred texts, but realised absolutely in the flesh and processed immediately in the writing as part of their spiritual attainment:

Indeed, it seems as if Thoreau came to regard the writing as itself an integral part of observation, an attitude that blurs the lines of demarcation between cognition and expression and makes writing itself an act of reception or discovery.<sup>306</sup>

This Romantic application in the writing recalls that of Kerouac, who conceived the author as a ‘Writer-Director of Earthly movies Sponsored & Angeled in Heaven’.<sup>307</sup>

This vision of divinity in the last pages of *Big Sur* is also realised in the writing itself through the poem ‘SEA: Sounds of the Pacific Ocean at Big Sur’ that closes the novel.<sup>308</sup> This sound poem may be viewed as Kerouac’s aesthetic

---

<sup>306</sup> Robinson, p. 25.

<sup>307</sup> Kerouac, ‘Belief & Technique for Modern Prose’, in *The Portable Beat Reader*, ed. by Charters, pp. 58-59 (p. 59).

<sup>308</sup> See *Big Sur*, pp. 191-215.

manifestation of the revelation of the divine in a written form, a form of narrative epiphany. As Kerouac writes:

Shoo – Shaw – Shirsh – | Go on die salt light | You billion yeared | Rock  
knocker | Gavroom | Seabird | Gabroobird | Sad as wife & hill | Loved as  
mother & fog | Oh! Oh! Oh! | Sea! Osh!

[...]

No Monarc'h ever Irish be? | Ju see the Irish sea? | Green winds o'n  
tamarack vines – | Joyce – James – Shhish – | Sea – Sssssss – see | –  
Varash | – mnavash la vache | écriture – the sea don't say | muc'h  
actually.<sup>309</sup>

Kerouac plays with the sounds of nature, which he attempts to reproduce by means of alliterations, onomatopoeia, neologisms, and a recourse to multiple dialects. A modernistic experiment, 'SEA' intermingles an aesthetic of contemplation that largely stems from the poetics of Thoreau, with a flux of consciousness that echoes the high modernism of James Joyce (1882-1941).<sup>310</sup> This passage can be read through Melvin Friedman's definition of a stream of consciousness.<sup>311</sup> Using a poetics of immediacy Kerouac translates the very sounds he can hear into words and rhythms on the page, for Hrebeniak a

---

<sup>309</sup> Ibid., pp. 193 and 201.

<sup>310</sup> Ginsberg qualified this idiosyncratic flux of consciousness as a 'Joycean babble flow' (Ginsberg, 'Abstraction in Poetry', in *Deliberate Prose*, pp. 243-45 (p. 244)).

<sup>311</sup> Friedman defines it as 'a state of consciousness wherein the mind remains passive and the identity of the soliloquizer remains concealed behind an elaborated system of poetic artifice; it is the writer's nearest attempt at recording pure sensations and images' (Melvin Friedman, *Stream of Consciousness: A Study in Literary Method* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1955), p. 233).

‘delineation of the nonhuman sound world of *Big Sur*’.<sup>312</sup> Through his attempts at turning sounds into language, Kerouac also emulates a Dadaist aesthetic. For Hrebniak:

What emerges is an American diction receptive to the flow of indomitable involuntary thoughts, flush with the actual movement of things awaiting release: an act of attention to the dynamic ‘self-existence’ of events without impediments of hierarchy, classification, or comparison.<sup>313</sup>

It is this ‘self-existence’ of natural elements – absorbed by Kerouac as he sits by the sea – that is transferred to by means of sounds. These sounds, as they exemplify the presence of nature in sonic form, signify for their own sake.<sup>314</sup> This is what makes the language of the poem both self-referential and radiant: a sonoric physicality in ‘SEA’ designed to present the transcendent in written form.

Such a type of embodied writing channels a form of authenticity both in the context of Camus’s Existentialism, and in that of Thoreau’s Transcendentalism. For Camus, ‘[t]he absurd work requires an artist conscious of [his] limitations and an art in which the concrete signifies nothing more than itself’.<sup>315</sup> In ‘SEA’, this feature is achieved through the ‘concreteness’ of Kerouac’s language, which is both hermetic and transcendent: ‘Performing these two tasks simultaneously, negating on the one hand and magnifying on the other,

---

<sup>312</sup> Hrebniak, p. 66.

<sup>313</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 211-12.

<sup>314</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>315</sup> Camus, p. 90.

is the way open to the absurd creator. He must give the void its colours'.<sup>316</sup>

Meanwhile, in the context of Thoreau's Transcendentalism, the corporeality of the poem is symptomatic of the writer's most successful transactions with nature, as Kerouac synthesises the essence of his surroundings in writing form through the transcription of sounds. The physicality that emanates from this sound poetics adds a sense of authenticity to the writing, as though the very essence of nature has permeated the text itself. It parallels Duluoz's revelation: 'I sit there in the hot sun and close my eyes: and there's the golden swarming peace of Heaven in my eyelids', a moment in which Duluoz's 'eyelids' reverberate with the embodied and transcendent poetics in the poem.<sup>317</sup> By linking the narrator's body with the body of the text, this poetics also highlights the testifying aspect of Kerouac's writing: it suggests that Duluoz's sacrifice in *Big Sur* is also that of Kerouac the prose artist. Thus, Kerouac's way of writing reflects a way of *being* in the narrative.

#### 1.2.5. The Existentialist Figure of Thanatos in *Big Sur* and in 'Howl'

Thanatos is situated at the crossroads of the creative and destructive strategies of Kerouac's *Big Sur* and of Ginsberg's 'Howl'. In *Big Sur*, the trope of alienation constitutes a strategy of ontological destruction; both through the narrator's relocation to the shores of Big Sur, and through a writing strategy that seeks to incorporate the visionary. This move exemplifies an act of revolt that is foundational, one that resonates both in an Existentialist and Transcendentalist

---

<sup>316</sup> Ibid., p. 103.

<sup>317</sup> *Big Sur*, p. 188.

context. Duluoz's retreat allowed us to decipher the nature of the dialectical articulation between the urban and the pastoral and between the historical and the universal as an engagement towards nature that simultaneously appears to allow for a disengagement from the conditions of socio-historical reality. This twofold movement of engagement and disengagement in *Big Sur*, although phenomenologically antithetical, strives towards a convergent ontological goal: it seeks to achieve a higher form of being that either channels or stands as close as possible to the transcendental essence of nature. The narrator's relocation to the beach of Big Sur appears to be a dedicated commitment to natural phenomena – interpreted both in its outer and inner form – and to the romantic project of self-creation. At the same time, this involvement with nature typifies a process of disengagement from the post-war rationale of a standardised and commodified America; a revolt that aims to access the transcendental experience of nature against the alienation of modernity. The duality of Duluoz's revolt defines the paradoxical strategy of engagement in the novel, which is envisaged as creative in principle, and yet distinctly damaging for the narrator's integrity: in other words, it encapsulates an Existentialist form of Thanatos that is detrimental for the self.

In an Existentialist context, this expression of Thanatos forces Duluoz to encounter a reflection of his own self, monitoring each and every state of his own consciousness in order to express them in written form. Crucially, the inwards movement that Thanatos exemplifies catches Duluoz in the early pages of *Big Sur*, in a state of exhaustion and alcoholism. This process, in which consciousness monitors the self and reflects upon it at the same time, is self-objectifying; in *Big Sur* the consciousness of death becomes the focal point of Duluoz's being, which

‘comes over [him] in the form of horror of an eternal condition of sick mortality’, catalyzing a vision of anguish and death that persists throughout the novel.<sup>318</sup>

In a Transcendentalist context, the movement of Thanatos in *Big Sur* epitomises a downwards spiral, an anticipation of the narrator’s final collapse. While Duluo’s engagement towards nature resembles that of Thoreau in *Walden*, it fails to materialise the promise of transcendental being. Here again, this failure can be attributed to the inwards movement that Thanatos operates in the novel: the self-absorption of the narrator’s consciousness mediates his relationship with nature. As Duluo feels estranged from nature, he remains locked out of it. This exclusion from nature, an end-product of the impulse of Thanatos, confines the narrator to the experience of a transcendental form of absurdity, where the opportunity for ontological regeneration and spiritual attainment is perpetually withheld; a withholding that mirrors Duluo’s epic degeneration on the beach of *Big Sur*.

Thus, Duluo’s retreat from the world and into the self encapsulates an inwardness that is typical of Thanatos. Duluo’s romantic urge to dismiss the profane world also typifies a form of revolt against the socio-historical conditions of reality. This revolt is as seditious as it is autarchical: it pitches the deepest and highest self against the external forces of the social and of the temporal, which it conceives as intrinsically alienating. It is this radical practice of self-absorption in *Big Sur* that bears the mark of an Existentialist Thanatos. As Duluo seeks to emancipate himself, he severs the links that connect him to his contemporaneous

---

<sup>318</sup> Ibid., p. 34.

environment; this seclusion dooms him to a profound solitude.<sup>319</sup> In this context, the narrator's disengagement is obstinately antisocial: it proudly negates the ethical imperative of both Camusian and Sartrean authenticity to champion a drastic form of autonomy. This is how the inwardness that Thanatos exemplifies ends up promoting an uncompromising form of individualism that, paradoxically, engenders a way of being that is resolutely self-centred. From this perspective, Duluoz's revolt may be conceived of as supremely individualistic and existentially nihilistic. Positioned against culture and excluded from nature, Duluoz has no projective surface upon which his yearning for the transcendent may materialise, until the very last pages; the self is brought solipsistically back onto itself. Cut off from nature and from the world, Duluoz embodies the figure of Thanatos, an instrument for his own alienation and final disintegration.

Duluoz, however, is not the only character to fall in this trap. Cody, too, falls victim to an excessive form of inwardness which, although expressed differently, precipitates his downfall. Unlike Duluoz's static condition, Cody manifests a frantic and outpouring engagement in *Big Sur*; signalled in the writing by an inexhaustible outflow, that defeats the stability of narrative forms. While this type of writing contrasts harshly with the experience of stasis in the narrative, it also mimics the all-consuming nature of Cody, an incessant flux of desires that are projected from the inside out. Nevertheless, his compulsion to act is grounded in an impetus that is controlled almost exclusively by his instincts, which in Kerouac's work – and *a fortiori* in Mailer's ontological model – are highly

---

<sup>319</sup> As Hipkiss observes: 'What seemed at the time a proper rejection in favor of individual freedom had come to mean to Kerouac in the 1960s a condemnation to everlasting loneliness' (Hipkiss, *Jack Kerouac, Prophet of the New Romanticism*, p. 61).

corporeal, animalistic and sexualised. Cody's prevailing self-centredness tallies with the archetypal movement of Thanatos in the novel; it produces a form of being that is self-celebratory, ecstatic and Dionysian, where every fantasy formulated by the instinctual self requires instant fulfilment.

In 'Howl', Thanatos stems from the encounter of the creative with the destructive. These tendencies have been deciphered respectively in Section 1 and Section 2 through Moloch's alienating and nullifying capacities, and through the combination of both Sartrean and Emersonian forms of engagement. These forms of engagement typify a creative impulse in 'Howl' that works on multiple levels and that seeks to defeat the destructive forces that emanate from Moloch. Moloch, as the mythical epitome of destruction in 'Howl', has been defined as a principle of death that is both internalised in the characters' consciousness, and made incarnate through the post-war predicament of a mechanised, standardised and commodified America; it is a centre of ubiquitous nothingness, a process of ontological and spiritual alienation that makes sense both from a Sartrean and an Emersonian perspective. Crucially, it is through the collision of these two antithetical operations of creation and destruction in 'Howl' that Thanatos unfolds.

This confrontation with the forces of nothingness and stasis of Moloch gives birth to a form of Thanatos in 'Howl' that projects Ginsberg's characters into some form of historical reality. Grounded in Ginsberg's performative poetics, an idea of poetical agency begins to emerge. This form of being in the poem, which is perpetually under fire, may not be sustainable in the long run as it encapsulates the contradiction of a self that defines itself as ahistorical, and

nonetheless inevitably entangled in historical contingency. This is, in substance, what contributes to the dramatic intensity of Part 1 of 'Howl'. This paradox is paramount to the definition of an Existentialist form of Thanatos in the poem, which is fundamentally performative. It is foregrounded in the characters' engagement which, as it attempts to nihilate the constricting conditions of 1950s America, seeks to reconnect the innermost self with nature.

Therefore Thanatos in 'Howl' takes the form of a procreative movement, a movement that seeks to establish the terms of an unmediated and intimate dialogue with the transcendent. This also means that the poetics themselves convey the revelation of the divine in 'Howl': encapsulating a sense of existential and transcendental performativity which reformulates Moloch as a point of departure. Thus redefined as the origin within the context of the poem, Moloch is relegated to an event of the past that gives way to the vortex of the present, which is both centrifugal and centripetal. Likewise, as Ginsberg's characters simultaneously commit historically to their physical reality and ahistorically to the transcendental moment, the self is temporarily liberated of past constraints and future expectations, and may freely and authentically engage with the absolute transcendence of the here and now. Moloch, who encapsulates the characters' consciousness of death, is thereby defeated by permanent and ecstatic self-realisation. For Sartre: 'The freedom which is *my freedom* remains total and infinite. Death is not an obstacle to my projects; it is only a destiny of these projects elsewhere'.<sup>320</sup> This aspect of Sartrean engagement in 'Howl' matches the American impetus towards continuous mobility, a sense of exploration and

---

<sup>320</sup> Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, p. 568.

forwardness that goes back to some of the concepts illuminated via Emerson. While Thanatos in some of the writing by Kerouac moves towards stasis and eventually death, in Ginsberg's 'Howl' it regenerates the self by way of an intuitive commitment to the here and now. Such a manifestation of Thanatos illuminates a typical form of American Existentialism in the poem, in which the spiritual and the existential are not envisaged as contradictory but complementary, since the autonomy of the self is maintained.<sup>321</sup>

This American form of Existentialism in 'Howl' allows a reading of Part 1 as a response to Part 2. It also implies that the creative strategies in the poem not only interrelate the ontological with the spiritual, they also connect the social with the universal. In this sense, the movement that Thanatos exemplifies in 'Howl' expresses itself both politically and culturally. Through Moloch, a form of social consciousness crystallises in 'Howl', one that parallels the strategies of engagement within the poem itself. It allows the agency of the poem to cohere as a social entity and contest the socio-political conditions of post-war America *as community*. This social contestation vindicates a type of being in socio-historical reality that is, by nature, counter-cultural: in this context, the characters' multifarious acts of engagement with the here and now may be conceived as a series of uprisings that strive for ontological emancipation. This paradoxical movement, a struggle against the conditions of historical reality and an

---

<sup>321</sup> 'To Emerson, the doctrine of the divinity of man could mean but one thing, the divinity of every individual and, consequently, the immediate access of every individual to the plenitude of the divine in his own experience' (Caponigri, 'Brownson and Emerson: Nature and History', in *American Transcendentalism*, ed. by Barbour, pp. 239-56 (p. 247)).

engagement with the ahistorical and the transcendent, is not contradictory in 'Howl', since for Ginsberg the social is put at the service of the transcendental:

If the direction of the will can be changed and consciousness widened, then we may be able to [... achieve] clear ecstasy as a social condition. And once that is achieved, people could relax and start looking for the highest, perfect wisdom [... which is the] realization that even visionary ecstasy is unnecessary because the universe was neither born nor will it be annihilated.<sup>322</sup>

Therefore the characters' engagement in 'Howl', a form of Sartrean authenticity that promotes social autonomy, also regenerates the transcendental self. The thrust of Thanatos, therefore, emanates from a cooperative act of commitment in the form of social protest. Vice versa, through transcendental self-expression, the communal self is re-created in counter-cultural terms as a social force in the poem. As such, Thanatos' drive in 'Howl' is moral in essence and political in destination: while it aims at a spiritual and universal form of liberation, it also seeks to rehabilitate the value of collective action against the forces of the military-industrial complex and of the post-war status quo.

Thus, in Part 1 of 'Howl' especially, as Ginsberg's characters relate to the universal through the enactment of their ownmost being, the personal pertains to the social and extends to the political through the clustered expression of these ideas onto the field of historical reality, in line with the Sartrean model. In

---

<sup>322</sup> Ginsberg, Interview with Paul Carroll, in *Spontaneous Mind*, ed. by Carter, pp. 159-96 (p. 196).

‘Howl’, this self-expression may be seen as both the instrument and the residue of strategies of engagement in the poem. More specifically, the intuitive character of Ginsberg’s poetical writing in ‘Howl’, celebrates a spirit of artistic creation through the use of breath patterns. In an attempt to unify form with content, Ginsberg aims to recapture the free-flowing, organic and physical dimension of language that Moloch seeks to nullify. In other words, Ginsberg’s poetical language in ‘Howl’ is conceived as a means to retrieve the functionality of intuitive self-expression, and to ultimately reactivate the potentiality for transcendental being both in, and through, the poem. For Ginsberg in ‘Howl’, ‘the poem is holy the voice is holy the hearers are holy [...]!’<sup>323</sup> In this way, language directly opposes Moloch, acting as a centripetal core that aims to capture a spontaneous and intuitive phraseology. We may say, therefore, that ‘Howl’’s poetical expression fosters a *politics* of intuition that transposes the conflict between transcendental being and alienation onto an aesthetic plane.

Through the confrontation with Moloch’s will to abrogate original and expansive self-expression, Thanatos is exposed in poetical terms through a self-affirmative and exulting voice, a voice that by nature is unconventional, exploratory and deeply idiosyncratic. This voice is as dynamic as it is embodied: it proclaims Ginsberg’s most immediate and intimate vision onto the plane of post-war American reality.<sup>324</sup> On an allegorical level, it seeks to counter the existential threat to artistic creativity in general and to poetry in particular that Moloch poses; it is fundamentally composite and inclusive at the same time. The

---

<sup>323</sup> ‘Howl’, p. 12.

<sup>324</sup> This voice, as we have seen, is ‘putting down here what might be left to say in time | come after death, | [...] with the absolute heart of the poem of life butchered out of | their own bodies good to eat a thousand years’ (ibid.).

heterogeneous nature of that voice is crucial: it allows Ginsberg's poetical language in 'Howl' to crush Moloch's fascistic tendencies towards rationalisation and uniformity. By extension, this voice, as the aesthetic symptom of Thanatos in 'Howl', emulates Ginsberg's own quarrel with institutional poetical practice and conventional language.<sup>325</sup> By nature, such a voice is eminently authentic and prophetic: 'Holy the visions [...]!'<sup>326</sup> In the tradition of Whitman, Ginsberg achieves a form of writing that is quintessentially organic, as it incorporates a radical form of self-expression of both body and mind that works as a strategy for ontological and spiritual liberation. Consequently, and in the light of the paradoxical movements that operate in the poem, we may say that Thanatos' voice in 'Howl' is ultimately self-creative. It epitomises a fleeting motif of ontological and spiritual liberation that momentarily subdues the consciousness of death as much as the stifling socio-historical environment of the post-war moment.

This exemplification of Thanatos as a process of self-creation in 'Howl' provides a sharp contrast with its manifestation in Kerouac's writing. In *Big Sur*, the manifestation of Thanatos emerges from an inwards movement embodied in the main characters who, in their own ways, emancipate themselves from social and historical responsibility in order to channel a transcendental self. The exclusive and idealistic form of this engagement towards the transcendent

---

<sup>325</sup> 'The amount of blather and built-in misunderstanding we've encountered – usually in the name of good taste, moral virtue or (at most presumptuous) civilized value – has been a revelation to me of the absolute bankruptcy of the academy in America today, or that which has set itself up as an academy for the conservation of literature. [...] The only poetic tradition is the voice out of the burning bush. The rest is trash, and will be consumed' (Ginsberg, 'When the Mode of the Music Changes, the Walls of the City Shake' [1961], in *Deliberate Prose*, ed. by Morgan, pp. 247-54 (pp. 248-49)).

<sup>326</sup> 'Howl', p. 13.

generates a self-centredness that translates into an alienating form of solipsism. In Ginsberg's 'Howl', Thanatos exemplifies a symmetrical movement in reverse: through an inclusive form of engagement directed both outwards and sideways, the characters create an ascending vortex that is ultimately beneficial for the self. Crucially, their striving upwards towards the transcendent is built upon realising the necessity of struggling against the alienating matrix of socio-historical reality. This coalescence of historical and ahistorical motives is meant to be virtuous on an ontological plane; meant to generate an ultimate form of authentic being both in an Existentialist and in a Transcendentalist context. Simultaneously, it allows the poem to proclaim an unalterable confidence in the future, as the self rendered both public and transcendental envisages its liberation in ontological and spiritual terms.

In Kerouac's *Big Sur*, such liberation remains illusory; it is erected as an unachievable ideal towards which the narrator can only strive at the expense of his own integrity. This narrative strategy, which engenders an acute melancholia, fosters a sacrificial dimension that is a standard trope in Kerouac's later writing. This does not mean that the narrator's self-alienation is not morally motivated; simply that it illustrates a commitment to Thanatos through self-destruction. This self-destruction owes a great deal to a sacrificial tendency deeply embodied in Kerouac's Catholic past. According to Bierowski:

[T]he Catholic focus on the Passion and death of Jesus Christ, via the mortification of the body, embodies a mysticism of sacrifice. [...] The Catholic penitent tries to perfect suffering in this life and hotshot it to the

hereafter by paying the price of, not a thousand lives, but a single fantastic death.<sup>327</sup>

For Kerouac, this 'single fantastic death' is desirable because it is synonymous with the highest form of liberation.<sup>328</sup> It is this dialectic of sacrifice that equates the degradation of the self with divine salvation. For McElroy: 'That is the divine paradox: in freely choosing to give up [one's] life, [one] immortalize[s] himself; in Christian terms, [one] finds his life in losing it'.<sup>329</sup> It is also this dialectic that enables the paradoxical figure of Thanatos to be recalibrated within a Catholic tradition. Meanwhile, this magnetism for self-suppression brings an end to travel writing as transcendental possibility. More importantly, it signals a crucial movement in *Tristessa* – an experience of sublimation which, although anterior and of a different nature to *Big Sur*, is equally introspective and self-destructive. The tendency towards death *through* being calls for an investigation of how the Sublime plays a role in Thanatos.

---

<sup>327</sup> Bierowski, p. 170.

<sup>328</sup> Ibid.

<sup>329</sup> McElroy, p. 42.

**PART 2.**

**A SUBLIME FORM OF THANATOS: THE FANTASY OF DEATH IN  
KEROUAC'S *TRISTESSA***

This second part is based on an analysis of Kerouac's novella *Tristessa*. It scrutinises the relationship of the novella to the figure of Thanatos by means of – amongst other things – the metaphysical notion of the Sublime as developed specifically by Immanuel Kant in *Critique of Judgement* [1790]. Firstly, I will investigate how Kerouac idealises the heroine in *Tristessa*. I will then examine the ways in which *Tristessa* is debased and in fact crucified; this will allow us to apprehend the fundamental ambivalence that the novella cultivates. I will show that this ambivalence – formulated within a religious syncretic background – is key for apprehending the links between the strategies of idealisation and the processes of destruction that the text accommodates; these links, which are articulated through the narrator's vision of the eponymous heroine, will enable us to evidence the presence of a sublime form of Thanatos in *Tristessa*.

‘She must know that I refused to let her die, and now she’ll be expecting me to show her something better than that – than death’s eternal ecstasy [...] 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’.<sup>1</sup>

*Tristessa* was produced over two separate phases: the first part was penned in the summer of 1955 as Kerouac paid a visit to lifelong friend and writer William S. Burroughs (1914-1997), who was then living in Mexico City; the second part was written one year later in the autumn of 1956. It deals with a story of unrequited love between Jack Duluoz – here again, a figuration of the author himself – and a young Mexican woman named Tristessa, a drug user who spirals into addiction. It is the narrator’s attraction to Tristessa’s beauty and self-destruction – in fact, a beauty *generated* by self-destruction from Duluoz’s perspective – that foregrounds the dramatic impulse of the novella. Through a unique combination of exaltation and magnification of death, I will show that Kerouac’s representation of Tristessa encapsulates the paradox of Thanatos. As this passage from an expository scene shows:

Tristessa, she is so high all the time, and sick, [...] staggering down the city streets yet so beautiful people keep turning and looking at her – her eyes are radiant and shining and her cheek is wet from the mist.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> *Tristessa*, p. 82.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10.

Here, Tristessa embodies a remarkable oxymoron: her depiction serves as a celebration as much for her beauty and soothing qualities as for her threatening nature and her tendency to self-destruct. By intermingling beauty with death, joy with fright and redemption with threat, her representation suggests a form of sublimity. For Edward Halsey Foster, *Tristessa* is a 'mix of extremes and contradictions [that] create a complex emotional narrative'.<sup>3</sup> It is through this atmosphere of *chiaroscuro* that Tristessa appears as an entry to death in both physical and metaphysical terms.

In fact, it seems that Tristessa is death in disguise: through a narrative strategy of personification, Kerouac provides a physical form to his obsessive preoccupation with death, by making it beautiful and enticing: in one word, desirable. Such a representation encapsulates the essential ambivalence of Thanatos, based as it is on a dialectical interplay between death and desire, the creation of forms and their annihilation, and more particularly between the edification of beauty and its subsequent destruction. The ambiguity of Tristessa's representation, then, becomes another formulation of the paradoxical figure of Thanatos. Thus, Kerouac presents the reader with a text that seeks out death in order to glorify it with unprecedented intensity through a writing strategy that, as it glamorises and eroticises Tristessa, is established in sublime terms.

The novella opens *in medias res*: Duluoz, the story's autodiegetic narrator, is on his way to Tristessa's place. As Duluoz steps into the rundown, dirty apartment in the city slums, 'the stinky alleyway of her tenement cell-house, [... t]he inside bedroom [...] littered completely and ransacked as by madmen', he

---

<sup>3</sup> Edward Halsey Foster, *Understanding the Beats*, Understanding Contemporary American Literature Series (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1992), p. 59.

meets the people she lives with: Cruz, Tristessa's older sister and El Indio, a sullen, silent Mexican man who indulges in petty criminality.<sup>4</sup> They are treated as secondary characters. As Duluoz observes, 'Tristessa has a huge ikon in a corner of her bedroom'; 'on my right the devotional candles flame before the clay wall'.<sup>5</sup> Constantly evolving in an environment infused with religious imagery, they come and go, looking for morphine, injecting it on a daily basis. Obviously, all of them become sick when deprived of the drug.<sup>6</sup> Unquestionably, their addiction destroys them with various intensity: '[T]hey'll all [...] go through the rest of their lives sick. Addiction and affliction'.<sup>7</sup> In the first part of the novella, Duluoz sits in a corner of the room, drinking liquor and observing the scenes he is presented with. Such a narrative configuration places Duluoz in a voyeuristic position, which makes the nature of his visions fundamentally contemplative.

The following day, as Tristessa pays a visit to Duluoz, the sexual tension is significant: '[A]ll the racks and tortures of sexual beauty, the breast, the limb of the middle body [...] the warm kiss, the tongue and lips, the tug at the thin waist'.<sup>8</sup> Although Duluoz has 'sworn off lust', as he mentions in the first pages of the novella, the reason for his abstinence is religious:<sup>9</sup> 'I want to enter the Holy Stream and be safe on my way to the other shore'.<sup>10</sup> Duluoz, in Buddhist fashion, tries ascetic removal by denying his physical desire for Tristessa, and seeks to

---

<sup>4</sup> *Tristessa*, p. 9.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 11 and 15.

<sup>6</sup> Morphine belongs to the family of opiates. A derivative of opium, it is conditioned in a way that makes the exhilarating effects of the drug stronger and quicker. 1950s morphine was to be turned into heroin in the following years, a product with comparable levels of addiction.

<sup>7</sup> *Tristessa*, p. 36.

<sup>8</sup> *Tristessa*, p. 52.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 22.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

establish a relationship based on platonic love throughout the first part. The second part of the novella takes place a year later. Duluoz has come back from America to live in Mexico City with Bull Gaines, an American citizen based in the Mexican capital. Tristessa's group, however, has changed for the worst, and Tristessa herself has become seriously ill: "She's going crazy," says Bull, "those goofballs'll do it to everybody".<sup>11</sup> As the action of the second part relies on the search for drugs initiated by Tristessa, Duluoz passively follows the group. Duluoz's sense of disappointment dominates the second part of the novella, as the action revolves around the dull wanderings of the main protagonists from squatts to no man's lands and bars in search of drugs. As we will see, this aimlessness increasingly imitates the self-destructive odyssey of its heroine.

Crucially, *Tristessa* plays a key role in Kerouac's attraction towards Thanatos. This is what this second part will investigate, relying on the paradigm of the Sublime – as explored in the literature review – to decipher the nature of a specific form of beauty in the text, one that is celebrated, paradoxically, through the possibility of imminent dissolution of physical and textual forms.<sup>12</sup>

---

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 66.

<sup>12</sup> See section of literature review on the Sublime, pp. 65-71.

## 2.1. Tristessa's Beauty: Body, Land, Myth

The idea of beauty in *Tristessa* is an aesthetic phenomenon that paves the way for the emergence of the Sublime in the text. As seen earlier, the phenomenon of the Sublime demands more than beauty to fully reveal itself; nonetheless, it is one of the conditions for its emergence. According to Kant:

The beautiful and the sublime agree on the point of pleasing on their own account. [...] Consequently the delight is connected with the mere presentation or faculty of presentation, and is thus taken to express the accord, in a given situation, of the faculty of presentation, or the imagination, with the *faculty of concepts* that belongs to understanding or reason, in the sense of the former assisting the latter.<sup>1</sup>

In *Tristessa*, various forms of beauty accentuate the presence of a sublime form of Thanatos in the novella.

Duluoiz, as a first-person narrator, celebrates Tristessa's beauty throughout the narrative. Tristessa is a 'beautiful girl' with a 'big sad face', whose grace is described at length as soon as the first sentence:<sup>2</sup>

I'M RIDING ALONG with Tristessa in the cab, drunk, with big bottle of Juarez Bourbon whiskey in the till-bag railroad lootbag they'd accused me

---

<sup>1</sup> Kant, *The Critique of Judgement*, p. 90.

<sup>2</sup> *Tristessa*, p. 10.

of holding in railroad 1952 – here I am in Mexico City, rainy Saturday night, mysteries, old dream sidestreets with no names reeling in, the little street where I'd walked through crowds of gloomy Hobo Indians wrapped in tragic shawls enough to make you cry and you thought you saw knives flashing beneath the folds – lugubrious dreams as tragic as the one of Old Railroad Night where my father sits big of thighs in smoking car of night, outside's a brakeman with red light and white light, lumbering in the sad vast mist tracks of life – but now I'm up on that Vegetable plateau Mexico, the moon of Citlapol a few nights earlier I'd stumbled to on the sleepy roof on the way to the ancient dripping stone toilet – Tristessa is high, beautiful as ever, goin home gayly to go to bed and enjoy her morphine.<sup>3</sup>

This opening is not only image-driven; it also conveys an impression of speed through Kerouac's seemingly spontaneous narrative form, a form not dissimilar to the one in the passages involving Cody in *Big Sur*.<sup>4</sup> According to Ginsberg, Kerouac's writing feels like 'the rhythm of the mind at work at high speed in prose'.<sup>5</sup> As seen earlier, this type of writing typifies an aesthetics of immediacy that seeks to convey the writer's instantaneous perceptions: it creates an immersive experience in which the reader permanently attends to the narrator's most intimate insights and fantasies. For Giomo, Kerouac's spontaneous prose is 'best characterized by its stream of consciousness that join[s] with the torrential flow of experience, [and by] its sheer energy and rushing enthusiasm, natural

---

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 7.

<sup>4</sup> See subsection 1.2.3.

<sup>5</sup> Ginsberg, 'The Dharma Bum Review' [1958], in *Deliberate Prose*, ed. by Morgan, pp. 342-48 (p. 342).

rhythm, musical phrasing (when spoken), richly detailed imagery, and sonic jazz improvisation'.<sup>6</sup> Indeed in this passage, from 'I'M RIDING ALONG' to '1952', from 'Here I am' to 'beneath the folds', from 'lugubrious dreams' to 'vast mist tracks of life', from 'but now I'm up on' to 'the ancient dripping stone toilet' and from 'Tristessa is high' to 'enjoy her morphine', this first sentence abides to the rule of breathing and divides itself naturally in five sections, providing the prosody with an organic feel.<sup>7</sup> While this organic rhythm in Kerouac's prose partly echoes that of Ginsberg's poetic long lines, it nonetheless differs in its purpose. In fact, Kerouac does not seek to communicate his own visions directly through rhythmic patterns; rather, this rhythm aids in the formulation of a multitude of phrases that illustrate the narrator's first contact with Tristessa, and bring a sense of doom to Duluoz's Mexican journey. The juxtaposition of these phrasal elements generates a chaotic sense of commotion that captures the essence of liveliness on the page, a form of performativity that seeks to defeat textual forms of stasis and nothingness, by and of itself.

The impression of speed is fundamental in this regard, enhanced by the recourse to ellipses, which serve to quicken the pace of the writer's continuous outflow, whose new phrases cannot be fully developed until the end because the flux of the spoken words – *a fortiori* written – is slower than the flux of perceptions. Thus, ellipses are an essential device of Kerouac's poetics of immediacy, but also an expression of the physical limit of this poetics: for Hrebniak, they materialise 'the gaps between talk, writing, and memory'.<sup>8</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup> Giamo, p. XIV.

<sup>7</sup> *Tristessa*, p. 7.

<sup>8</sup> Hrebniak, p. 82.

Concurrently, these ellipses suffuse the text with a sense of orality. For Bierowski, Kerouac's voice articulates 'a shaman-like secret language that takes the form of neologisms, poetic compounds, glossolalia, linguistic conversions, and unconventional punctuation', reinforcing the oral dimension of his language.<sup>9</sup> In effect, as Ginsberg points out, this specific form encourages Kerouac's readers to 'read aloud and notice how the motion of the sentence corresponds to the notion of actual excited talk'.<sup>10</sup> This sense of orality is combined with the rhythmic pulse of the prosody to create a momentum in the text that enables Kerouac to accommodate a great variety of different themes within the same sentence. As Foster pinpoints, 'the paragraph begins and ends with references to Tristessa and in between brings together a wide range of observations and feelings dealing with Mexico City, Duluoz's father, and other matters into a single emotional thread'.<sup>11</sup> These themes – namely land, displacement, intoxication, but also parentage – interconnect in a kaleidoscopic way with Duluoz, as the internal focaliser, acting as the unifying principle. Such a stylistic articulation suggests that the true hero of *Tristessa* is, in fact, the narrator, and behind it Kerouac's specific use of language.

From the very first page, Kerouac uses a series of antitheses and paradoxes to create a profound sense of ambivalence. The greatest part of this opening sentence features a streak of affects ranging from anguish to melancholy and sadness until Tristessa emerges: 'Tristessa is high, beautiful as ever, goin home gayly to go to bed and enjoy her morphine'.<sup>12</sup> Here, rhythm slows down: through

---

<sup>9</sup> Bierowski, p. 25.

<sup>10</sup> Ginsberg, 'The Dharma Bum Review', in *Deliberate Prose*, ed. by Morgan, pp. 342-48 (p. 346).

<sup>11</sup> Foster, p. 59.

<sup>12</sup> *Tristessa*, p. 7.

the evocation of morphine, Tristessa's beauty mingles with a sense of danger and death. This first description of Tristessa reveals a *chiaroscuro* emblematic of the equivocal tone of the novella. A few pages later, the narrator zooms in on Tristessa's eyes: 'they are dove's eyes, lidded, perfect, dark, pools, mysterious'.<sup>13</sup> A noun has slipped into this adjectival accumulation, a digression that testifies to the pious look of Tristessa. Meanwhile, the allusion to the 'dove', a Christian allegory, suggests innocence and benevolence; a version of the holy ghost.<sup>14</sup>

In addition to Tristessa's physical appearance, it is her geographical and cultural origin that Duluoz fantasises about. In *On the Road*, Sal Paradise (the narrator) and Dean Moriarty (Cody) cross the American continent from east to west and back again; and yet, the most rewarding leg of their journey is the last section of the novel when they head south to Mexico. In the same novel, we learn from the first sentence that the narrator has just gone through a divorce: 'I first met Dean not long after my wife and I split up'.<sup>15</sup> Sal Paradise will later experience an intense emotional connection with Terry, a Mexican girl working in the fields. Tristessa herself may be read as a synecdoche for Mexico, a country that Duluoz fantasises about in equal measure. As he claims on the first page, 'I'm up on that Vegetable plateau Mexico'.<sup>16</sup> Kerouac's first description of Mexico is pastoral; it partakes in the myth of a virgin land, a place unspoilt by civilisation. For Kerouac, Mexico has a universal value. Standing south of the frontier of Western civilisation, it allegorises the mythical South, which takes on the form of an Eden on earth for Kerouac. In this regard, it may be brought together with

---

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 26.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Kerouac, *On the Road*, p. 3.

<sup>16</sup> *Tristessa*, p. 7.

Raton Canyon in *Big Sur*, and with Thoreau's Walden's Pond in a certain measure: all three places afford a space that allows their respective narrators to commune with the spiritual in one way or another; a space mythologised by their authors. In *Tristessa*, the representation of Mexico – and in the works of the *Legend* more generally – partakes in a form of Romantic othering, both in the themes that are conveyed and in its aesthetics. A safehaven for illegitimate behaviour as well as a land for opportunity, it partly stands for a mythologised territory.

In *Tristessa*, it is not just the land that is idealised, it is also its inhabitants. Duluoz refers to Tristessa as part of the Fellaheen community: 'Who might have tried to make a roof for Fellaheena?'<sup>17</sup> For Kerouac, who alludes to the Fellaheen extensively throughout the *Duluoz Legend*, the term is apprehended as a cultural marker that serves to describe, generally, devout natives coming from a modest origin.<sup>18</sup> In this case, it is used by Kerouac as an entry into a primeval form of innocence. For Rachel Ligairi:

Kerouac situates this encounter between Sal [...] and the 'Fellahin' as a meeting of the West with the rest of the undeveloped world [...]. He writes of the Indians coming from remote places to reach civilization [...] not knowing the 'poor broken delusion of it'.<sup>19</sup>

---

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. 24.

<sup>18</sup> As noted in the introduction, Kerouac's use of the term is incorrect. 'Fellaheen' originally refers to peasants and crops labourers in Egypt specifically – and by extension to those of the Middle East – who did not possess any land.

<sup>19</sup> Rachel Ligairi, 'When Mexico Looks Like Mexico: The Hyperrealization of Race and the Pursuit of the Authentic', in *What's your Road Man? Critical Essays on Jack*

Through it, Kerouac positions Tristessa within a highly romanticised background of social deprivation. As Duloz mentions, ‘she is reduced to impoverished Indian Lady gloomclothes’.<sup>20</sup> While this description accounts for Kerouac’s fetishisation of material poverty, it also displays a desire to associate Tristessa with the *lumpenproletariat*. This social relocation is a crucial element in Kerouac’s cultural idealisation: because Fellaheen and *lumpenproletariat* may potentially contest the politics of social organisation, the integration of Tristessa with these social segments suggests a cipher for potential revolt.

More generally, Mexican natives are depicted in benevolent terms, as Kerouac suffuses *Tristessa* with a consistent compassion, at times turned into a form of adulation, for the local people: ‘You see the Indian ladies in the inscrutable dark of doorways [...] and see the brave, the noble *mujer*, the mother, the woman, the Virgin Mary of Mexico.’<sup>21</sup> Crucially, and even though Mexico does not belong to the geographical east, Kerouac’s prototypical description relies on certain codes of Orientalism. According to Edward W. Said in *Orientalism* [1978]:

[T]he imaginative examination of things Oriental was based more or less exclusively upon a sovereign Western consciousness out of whose unchallenged centrality an Oriental world emerged, first according to

---

*Kerouac’s On the Road*, ed. by Hilary Holladay & Robert Holton (Carbondale: Southern Illinois Press, 2009), pp. 139-153 (p. 152).

<sup>20</sup> *Tristessa*, p. 11.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 10-11.

general ideas about who or what was an Oriental, then according to a detailed logic governed not simply by empirical reality but by a battery of desires, repressions, investments, and projections.<sup>22</sup>

Kerouac's representation of Mexicans as Fellaheen in particular is symptomatic of this romantic projection, a projection that is often reductive: as Said underlines, 'in brief, because of Orientalism the Orient was not (and is not) a free subject of thought or action'.<sup>23</sup> While it reveals Kerouac's Western bias, this representation corresponds, first and foremost, to a distinctive narrative strategy in *Tristessa*: it allows Kerouac to freely remodel the Mexican culture and render its natives *deliberately* exotic. According to Ligairi:

But in the same breath that Kerouac shows the Fellaheen to be absolutely free of all Western constructions, he also describes them in terms that the Catholic Kerouac himself projects [...]. A fetishized timelessness has given way to what was always behind the search for authenticity – spiritual blessedness.<sup>24</sup>

In other words, for Kerouac the prototypical figure of the 'Fellah' is devised *a priori* as intrinsically related to the spiritual essence of creation.<sup>25</sup> Again, this channels the ethos of nineteenth-century American Transcendentalism: not only

---

<sup>22</sup> Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* [1978], 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary edn (London: Penguin Classics, 2003), p. 8.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

<sup>24</sup> Ligairi, p. 152.

<sup>25</sup> 'Fellah' is the singular form of 'Fellaheen'.

does it convey the nature of his vision; it funnels the myth of the primitive into a landscape deliberately designed to facilitate the author's reawakening. It implies that Kerouac has little interest in economic inconsistencies regarding social organisation; rather, he is using the idea of the primitive as scaffolding for his own spiritual ascent.

We can also read into this an attempt by Kerouac to adopt a Spenglerian articulation for ethical and aesthetic purposes, as non-Westerner is opposed to Westerner, innocence to knowledge and intuition to intellect. As Ginsberg remarks, Kerouac's writings testify to an 'immediate recognition of Biblical Patriarch Type in Mexic Fellaheen fathers: [...] the only immediate American mind-entry to primeval earth-consciousness non-machine populace'.<sup>26</sup> While the 'primeval earth-consciousness' Ginsberg refers to bears similarities to the type of macrocosmic environment previously read in Emersonian terms, it also alludes to Spengler's archetype of primitive cultures, which relies, in great part, on a mythology of the primeval.<sup>27</sup> Through it, Ginsberg underlines Kerouac's tropism for the myth of the primitive in his writing, and portends his cultural idealisation of an environment read allegorically as primordial and scriptural in *Tristessa*.

This fantasy for the primitive in the novella reveals Kerouac's ethics. For Hipkiss, Kerouac romanticises hobos, black people, primitives – in fact all those dwelling in the margins of America's modern civilisation – because they can keep 'emotional responses to life free and instinctive, always remaining in touch with

---

<sup>26</sup> Ginsberg, 'The Visions of the Great Rememberer' [1974], Preface to Jack Kerouac's *Visions of Cody* [posthumous, 1972], Penguin Modern Classics (London: Penguin Books, 2012), pp. 1-10 (p. 8).

<sup>27</sup> Ibid. See section of literature review on Spengler, pp. 62-65.

the innocent primal vision of God's saving beneficence at the core of things'.<sup>28</sup>

This systematic idealisation of the archetypal primitive through the mystification of its instinctive impulse recalls Mailer's rhetoric in 'The White Negro':

Knowing in the cells of his existence that life was war, nothing but war, the Negro (all exceptions admitted) could rarely afford the sophisticated inhibitions of civilization, and so kept for his survival the art of the primitive, he lived in the enormous present.<sup>29</sup>

Here again, Mailer defines the experience of African Americans in opposition to the conditions of Western civilisation, an antagonism apprehended in terms that are Existentialist and spiritual: for Mailer, it is through instinctual response in particular that African Americans may '[stand] nearer to that God [...] located in the senses of [their] body'.<sup>30</sup> This confluence between the primitive, the instinctual and the divine – a derogatory variant of a transcendental ontology that is typically American, as seen earlier – plays a central role in Kerouac's idealisation of Tristessa. As Dulouz indicates: 'She says: "I know it, a man and women iss dead," – "when they want to be dead" – She nods, confirms within herself some dark Aztecan instinctual belief'.<sup>31</sup> Later: 'I geev every-things I have to my friend, and if he doan pay me back [...] my Lord pay me back [...] More'.<sup>32</sup>

While this description reflects a naive disposition that reveals a darker, more

---

<sup>28</sup> Hipkiss, *Jack Kerouac, Prophet of the New Romanticism*, p. 13.

<sup>29</sup> Mailer, 'The White Negro', in *The Penguin Book of the Beats*, ed. by Charters, pp. 582-605 (p. 586).

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 597.

<sup>31</sup> *Tristessa*, p. 22.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 57.

misogynist bent, it also shows that Tristessa is more than a religious devout: she has access to divinity through intuition. In so doing, Kerouac renders her eminently attractive and desirable in Spenglerian terms, but also potentially transcendental in an Emersonian context: the experience of the divine becomes immanent, it may be channelled and revealed immediately through her own being.<sup>33</sup>

Thus, Kerouac's tendency to cultural idealisation is not only highly ambiguous but also deeply problematic. As it seeks to articulate beauty on a cultural level, it also engenders a form of Otherness in the text. The laudatory descriptions of Tristessa, as seen above, meet their limits precisely for the same reasons that they are meant to elevate her. For Hipkiss:

The reason for the adulation [of Mexican culture] is, as Sal Paradise says in *On the Road*, 'the best the white world had offered was not enough ecstasy for me, not enough life, joy, kicks, darkness, music, not enough night... I wished I was a Denver Mexican, or even a poor overworked Jap, anything but what I was so drearily, a white man disillusioned'.<sup>34</sup>

This racial dichotomy is replayed in *Tristessa* between Duluoz and Tristessa herself, who is also referred to as an 'Azteca'.<sup>35</sup> While this term aims to emphasise her primitiveness, it objectifies Tristessa by rendering her exotic and foreign.

Nonetheless in Kerouac's writing project, such a depiction is meant, primarily, to

---

<sup>33</sup> See subsection 1.1.1. on the role of intuition in Emersonian Transcendentalism in particular (especially p. 101).

<sup>34</sup> Hipkiss, *Jack Kerouac, Prophet of the New Romanticism*, p. 7.

<sup>35</sup> *Tristessa*, p. 8.

dissociate her from the narrator's cultural background. For Giamo: 'Jack's strong sense of compassion for "holy Tristessa" also turns her into an archetype, a saintly Meso-American Indian Madonna with "long sad eyelids, and Virgin Mary resignation"' .<sup>36</sup> It is this sense of religious devotion which, fused into the figure of the primitive, provides Tristessa with an obvious spiritual and erotic dimension. To a certain extent, Tristessa stands for Duluoz's escape from the reality of post-war America: she is a refuge from the secular and the material values that Kerouac – through Duluoz – disagrees with. In this sense, she is Kerouac's ideological projection of an alternative and ideal civilisational model, despite her drug addiction.

Tristessa, however, is not completely estranged: in narrative terms, she also stands for Duluoz's double in terms of her submission to suffering. The expression of suffering and the attempt to redeem it is a central theme in Kerouac's writings, as we have seen in Part 1 through Duluoz's experience at Big Sur. For Ginsberg, Kerouac was 'conceiving of himself as being crucified. He was undergoing crucifixion in the mortification of his body as he drank'.<sup>37</sup> In *Tristessa*, the narrator and the heroine happen to suffer in ways that seem to transfer from one to the other:

The drinks dont help much, it's getting late, towards dawn, the chill of the high plateau gets into my little sleeveless shirt and loose sports coat and

---

<sup>36</sup> Giamo, pp. 103-04.

<sup>37</sup> Ginsberg, 'Kerouac's Ethic', in *Deliberate Prose*, ed. by Morgan, pp. 358-73 (p. 370).

shino pants and I start shivering uncontrollably – Nothing helps, drink after drink, nothing helps.<sup>38</sup>

Here, it is as if the narrator himself were in the position of Tristessa, suffering from drug deprivation; a clue to the narrator's latent yearning for self-annihilation. As Duluoz reminisces: “‘Morphine is for pain,’ I keep thinking’.<sup>39</sup> Nevertheless, through this sense of compassion, their respective suffering turns into a more abstract and universal expression of grief that encapsulates, at the same time, the potential for its transcendence.

Another argument would be that the writing itself takes its impetus from the impossibility of genuinely turning Tristessa into something vastly different from Duluoz himself – into an Other. Tristessa is made to speak in a very specific way; her very short sentences are, in fact, phonetic transcriptions of her Latin accent: ‘I haff mind, mine, and Jack has hees life’ or ‘it got soch prurdy eyes you look you see the prurdy eyes’.<sup>40</sup> These simplistic transcriptions of the English language constitute a form of vernacular speech as much as they do a derogatory form of pidgin English, as they show traces of a primary language which is different to the narrator's *lingua franca*. This reference to the vernacular stems from the very nature of Kerouac's aesthetic project. On the one hand, it fits in the set of syntactical digressions in Kerouac's writing: the use of the vernacular, Leo

---

<sup>38</sup> *Tristessa*, p. 75.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 14.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 22 and 26.

Marx argues, is grounded in the 'rejection of inherited forms and theories'.<sup>41</sup> On the other hand, the recourse to the vernacular may be viewed as a suitable means to establish a pact between the implied author and the reader, a pact based on a semblance of transparency rather than difference. According to Hipkiss: '[Kerouac] looked upon confession as a means to understanding and as a means of communicating more truly than any artist could do through formal exposition'.<sup>42</sup> In other terms, to transcribe the world as it is, so to speak, it must be rendered as the ear hears it. Consequently, Kerouac's imitation of Tristessa's language may be viewed as an aesthetic strategy that seeks to provide the illusion of true experience, a strategy that contributes to the fabrication of a confessional narrative. Although Tristessa is stigmatised culturally by her accent, she is not othered aesthetically: through the use of the vernacular, she becomes fully integrated into Kerouac's writing project.

As a consequence, Kerouac's representation of Mexicans in general, and of Tristessa in particular, can be read from an aesthetic and an ethical perspective. As Dulouoz reports: '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'.<sup>43</sup> For Hipkiss in Kerouac's novels, 'the adulation of the so-called primitive is the obverse of the civilized lament'.<sup>44</sup> This remark implies that Tristessa's origin is, in itself, synonymous with a form of cultural euphoria: her fantasised purity serves to

---

<sup>41</sup> Leo Marx, 'The Vernacular Tradition in American Literature', in *Studies in American Culture: Dominant Ideas and Images*, ed. by Joseph J. Kwiat and Mary C. Turpie (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1960), pp. 109-122 (p. 121).

<sup>42</sup> Hipkiss, *Jack Kerouac, Prophet of the New Romanticism*, p. 91.

<sup>43</sup> *Tristessa*, p. 29.

<sup>44</sup> Hipkiss, *Jack Kerouac, Prophet of the New Romanticism*, p. 7.

celebrate a higher form of beauty in Kerouac's novella. It is of no consequence that it is tainted with the collateral sexism and racism that Kerouac's one-sided presentation of Duluo's fantasy involves. This is how Tristessa is praised as much for her grace as for what she stands for in counter-cultural terms, through a narrative strategy that seeks to idealise not only her looks but also her socio-cultural background and geographical locale. This process of idealisation is crucial within the text in the context of the Sublime: the dramatisation of beauty in terms that are both physical and mythical enables a form of sublimity to materialise. The next subsection will decipher the ways in which Kerouac brings a form of eroticised tremor to the text, another essential condition for the realisation of the Sublime and for the manifestation of Thanatos.

## 2.2. The Cultivation of Death: Variants of Crucifixion

Tristessa's beauty, however idealised, is not completely unidimensional:

[T]he strangeness of her love-cheek, [...] long sad eyelids, and Virgin Mary resignation and peachy coffee complexion and eyes of astonishing mystery with nothing-but-earth-depth expressionless half disdain and half mournful lamentation of pain. 'I am seek,' she's always saying to me.<sup>45</sup>

In this passage, the narrator is bewitched by Tristessa's demenaour. This mystifying effect is achieved through a writing strategy that intermingles the

---

<sup>45</sup> *Tristessa*, p. 8.

natural and the spiritual with the artificial and the chemical, the '[f]usion of sexual and theological discourses [...] by the drugged condition of the [...] heroine'.<sup>46</sup> As I will explore in the next paragraphs, Tristessa's Catholicism and her drug use – two distinct means for transcendence in Kerouac's writing – are articulated in a complementary way in the novella, in a manner conducive to a form of sublimity in the text through the appeal for destruction and death that they formulate both separately and together.

The recourse to the drugs in *Tristessa* is highly instrumental for the dramatisation of the narrative, but also, more sensibly, for the qualification of beauty in the novella. While Tristessa's presence and manners are largely idealised and fantasised, she keeps searching for drugs to feed her habit: '[S]he is so high all the time, and sick, shooting ten grams of morphine per month'.<sup>47</sup> As the tongue slips on 'gramos', the text mimics the vicious circle of drug addiction and sickness in which Tristessa is trapped.<sup>48</sup> Morphine is a substance that creates a high level of physical dependency, tricking the body into a habit that turns out to be self-destructive. As Dulouz claims, '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'.<sup>49</sup> Later in the text, Dulouz talks of 'that German Civilization morphine she (an Indian) is forced to subdue and die to, in her native land'.<sup>50</sup> By implicitly equating the drug with fascism and the destructive forces of civilisation, Kerouac underlines its colonising aspect and emphasises its power of corruption.

---

<sup>46</sup> Hrebeniak, p. 115.

<sup>47</sup> *Tristessa*, p. 10.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 22.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 28.

While drug use may be romanticised in certain passages of *Tristessa*, it stands, primarily, for a distinct principle of destruction in the text, one that is both internal and territorial in terms of its colonial context.

As the novella proceeds, Tristessa's condition deteriorates: '[T]he fragile and holy countenance of poor Tristessa, the tremulous bravery of her little junk-racked body that a man could throw up in the air ten feet'.<sup>51</sup> Kerouac makes Tristessa appear weak and unsubstantial, as the drug ravages her body:

'Goofballs – I told her not to take too many – You know it takes an old junky with many years of experience to know how to handle sleeping pills, – she wont listen, she dont know how to use em, three, four, sometimes five, once twelve, it's not the same Tristessa [...]'.<sup>52</sup>

As Kerouac sets Tristessa en route to death, in the short run her physical appearance oscillates between destruction and recovery, disintegration and regeneration. Her body constantly morphs in relation to the presence of morphine in her veins, developing and regressing alternately: 'All last month she was paralyzed down one whole leg and her arms where covered with cysts, O she was an awful sick girl last month'.<sup>53</sup> And then, a few pages later it is as if Tristessa had cheated death, everything becomes normal again: in the eyes of Duluoz, she now is 'pale and beautiful, no more an Aztec witch', a phrase that serves to describe

---

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., p. 52

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., p. 64.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., p. 65.

Tristessa when sick.<sup>54</sup> This reference to the witches – whose powers are feared, yet unknown – conveys a sense of threat; it suggests a type of maleficence that is occult in nature, the obverse of the celestial form of beauty she embodies in the first part of the novella. It connotes a kind of beauty that partakes, fundamentally, in a form of Otherness, an Otherness of the same nature than that which Duluoz perceives in his natural environment during his descent on Raton Canyon in *Big Sur* – demiurgic and threatening, yet unfathomable – articulated, this time, through the Orientalist trope of a latent primitivism.

Hence, although Tristessa becomes an easy pray for death, she nonetheless does not lose her auratic power. Her behaviour may have become unsteady and erratic, but her overall grace, according to Duluoz, is saved: ‘She would look awful if she wasn't holy Tristessa’.<sup>55</sup> Further on:

[H]ere comes a strange woman up the steps, unearthly and pale, slow, majestic, neither young nor old, I can't help staring at her and even when I realize it's Tristessa I keep staring and wondering at this strange woman.<sup>56</sup>

It is a degraded, fragmented beauty, but still a form of beauty. Here, Kerouac renders her eerie and mystical, timeless and surreal, as if she had come back from the dead. Her beauty is recomposed: ‘[M]eanwhile she changes completely with her shot, feels better, combs her hair to a beautiful black sheen [...] a charming

---

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., p. 68.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., p. 86.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., pp. 72-73.

Spanish beauty [...] “beautiful little thing”<sup>57</sup> From this perspective, the representation of Tristessa as a morphine user is highly ambivalent as Kerouac seeks to merge beauty with death. Through this paradox, two poles emerge: on the one hand there is the subsistence of Tristessa’s everlasting grace; on the other hand the impetus of self-annihilation, a stigma of the desire for death. This polarity enables Kerouac to present the essence of deathliness through a beauty that is mesmerising. In this sense, morphine plays a fundamental role with regards to the emergence of a form of terror in the text, a terror that emanates from the potentiality of death and the Sublime simultaneously.

Thus, death becomes an essential component of Tristessa’s own being. Through her addiction to morphine, forms are set in motion in and through the text, as Tristessa both merges with and separates from death. Here, *Tristessa* epitomises an ambivalent relationship with death that is articulated, paradoxically, through a beauty expressed in terms that are physical, cultural and mythical, but also religious and mystical.

In concomitance with her degradation on a physical level, Duluoz regularly refers to Tristessa as the ‘Virgin Mary’ in the first pages of the novella.<sup>58</sup> As Hrebeniak observes, Kerouac’s writing typifies a ‘tendency to designate liturgical status to the female, investing the whore and the alienated in general with the iconography of catholic ritual’.<sup>59</sup> In fact, Tristessa is gradually turned into a religious icon as the narrative unfolds: Duluoz views her as ‘a wise woman, who would have [...] made a divine additional nun. With her lidded eyes and clasped

---

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., pp. 90-91.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., pp. 8 and 11.

<sup>59</sup> Hrebeniak, p. 115.

hands, a Madonna'.<sup>60</sup> On a fundamental level, *Tristessa* is devised as a holy mother, an allegorical reference that brings to mind the protective figure of the *pietà*, the mother willing to sacrifice herself for her child. This reading implies that Duluoz – in the role of the Christ – has died, at least symbolically, with *Tristessa* mourning over him. It also reactivates the testimonial function of Kerouac's writing. According to Giamo:

[I]t could also be an embellishment of Revelation [...] to subject oneself to the terrific nothingness of experience, put oneself in jeopardy with the abysmal world, to humbly take upon oneself the burden of Christ's cross, and 'die hence.' But don't stop there: cry out, make utterance, for a complete, honest, and sincere accounting is required.<sup>61</sup>

For Giamo, Kerouac's novels re-enact a fundamentally Christian sacrificial dimension. The narrator's role, therefore, is to testify to the experience of suffering, but also to the possibility for redemption, a crucial dialectical articulation in both *Tristessa* and in *Big Sur*.<sup>62</sup> As Duluoz confesses: 'I am sad because all la vida es dolorosa'.<sup>63</sup> Later: 'I become depressed [...]. Everyone of us, born to die'.<sup>64</sup> These lamentations have a universal value in Kerouac's writings. In *Tristessa*, they find their ultimate purpose in a textual strategy best defined as a confessional. As Duluoz appeals to *Tristessa* – *as a pietà* – for

---

<sup>60</sup> *Tristessa*, p. 22.

<sup>61</sup> Giamo, pp. XV-XVI.

<sup>62</sup> As we have seen earlier through the analysis of the episode of the cross and of the 'SEA' poem at the end of *Big Sur*.

<sup>63</sup> *Tristessa*, p. 18.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 34.

commiseration in the narrative, it is also the author himself who is asking for universal compassion from his readers. As Kerouac writes:

Angels in hell, our wings huge in the dark, the three of us start off, and from the Golden Eternal Heavens bends God blessing us with his face which I can only describe as being infinitely sorry (compassionate), that is, infinite with understanding of suffering, the sight of that Face would make you cry.<sup>65</sup>

Despite this sense of yearning and compassion, *Tristessa* metaphorises the passion of the Christ in an ambivalent way. In the second part of the novella, Tristessa collapses from an overdose: '[S]he gets more shivery and convulsive and suddenly [...] she starts to fall [...] and to my pain and crash Tristessa just bonks her skull and falls headlong on it right on the harsh stone and collapses'.<sup>66</sup> This passage echoes the Biblical episode of the crucifixion: it is now Tristessa herself who embodies the Christic figure. For Giamo: 'Tristessa falls three times, reflecting the impression that this bleeding icon (donning a purple shawl) is indeed fashioned in the image of Jesus and his passion'.<sup>67</sup> Meanwhile, as Tristessa's body decays, Kerouac writes: 'I think of the inexpressible tenderness of receiving [...] the sacrificial sick body of Tristessa and I almost feel like crying'.<sup>68</sup> Here, Duluoz – in the role of the Creator – experiences the sublime nature of Tristessa's body through the toxic action of her drug abuse. It implies

---

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., p. 74.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., p. 80.

<sup>67</sup> Giamo, p. 111.

<sup>68</sup> *Tristessa*, p. 53.

that, for Kerouac's narrator, who 'know[s] [that] death is best', the body must be abjected for the soul to be saved.<sup>69</sup> In other words, Kerouac seeks to nullify Tristessa's physical form in order to free her divine essence. This religious motif in *Tristessa* suggests that redemption may be achieved through a process of disincarnation that operates through suffering, a paradigm modelled on the life of the Christ.

Notwithstanding, as Kerouac brings the heroine close to martyrdom, she remains emblematic of the sublime nature of suffering: 'Bull and Tristessa are both bags of bones – But O the grace of some bones, that milt a little flesh hang-on'.<sup>70</sup> This 'little flesh hang-on', a physical stigma of Tristessa's debasement through morphine, is precisely where Tristessa's sublime nature resides for Duluoz, which he envisions as one of the highest manifestations of grace.<sup>71</sup> The drugs in *Tristessa*, conceived as a narrative strategy of destruction, serve a very distinct purpose within the Catholic context of the novella: it is the instrument through which a transient body elevates the soul and a source of the Sublime.

This paradox, which in substance is that of the ecstatic and religious beauty of disincarnation, finds one of its most revealing illustrations in the following quotation, as Duluoz tells the story of Tristessa's mentor Dave:

[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

---

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., p. 81.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., p. 96.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

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.<sup>72</sup>

In other words, the harder the ascension to Chalmers, the greater the salvation. Through the fetishisation of physical pain, it is suffering more generally that Kerouac alludes to and celebrates in *Tristessa*, which, as a means for self-negation, functions as a conduit for transcendence. This articulation in itself may be conceived as symptomatic of a mystical form of sublimity, one in which the religious vision is realised through self-flagellation, an impulse that defies rationality. For Kant:

[T]he feeling of the sublime may appear, indeed, in point of form to contravene the ends of our power of judgement, to be ill-adapted to our faculty of presentation, and to be, as it were, an outrage on the imagination, and yet it is judged all the more sublime on that account.<sup>73</sup>

This challenge to reason in *Tristessa* – which is achieved by Kerouac, primarily, through an interplay with the codes of Catholicism – constitutes a gateway for a contemplative form of transcendence, a sublime form of Thanatos. Conversely, *Tristessa*, as the object of transcendence, embodies a form of sublimity foregrounded in the Catholic model of crucifixion through the drugs: she

---

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., p. 12.

<sup>73</sup> Kant, *The Critique of Judgement*, p. 91.

epitomises a Christic condition of suffering that typifies the coalescence of death and beauty.

### 2.3. Beyond All Measure: Buddhism and Religious Syncretism

If Tristessa's beauty is based on her transcendence and final liquidation, Kerouac's destruction of it is achieved through a narrative strategy that is modelled on the Christian paradigm of crucifixion. This double movement of creation and destruction in *Tristessa*, crucially, is completed by a transcendent and mystical dimension paramount for the narrator's formulation of a sublime vision.

While Tristessa's depictions are foregrounded in a variant of Catholicism in the novella, they are also entangled in a multiplicity of other spiritual traditions and discourses, such as Buddhism. As Kerouac writes:

I know all of a sudden all of us will go to heaven straight up from where we are, like golden phantoms of Angels in Gold Strap we go hitch hiking the Deus Ex Machina to heights Apocalyptic, Eucalyptic, Aristophaneac and Divine – I suppose.<sup>74</sup>

In this passage, the narrator uses a proleptic device and becomes omniscient, transported by the expression of his faith in divine salvation. The realisation of this salvation takes the form of a Christian epiphany akin to a form of Buddhist enlightenment: in the same phrase, Christian 'Angels' are juxtaposed to 'golden

---

<sup>74</sup> *Tristessa*, p. 30.

phantoms', alluding to a Buddhist form of spirits liberated from flesh.<sup>75</sup> This passage typifies an incentive for spiritual pilgrimage that makes sense both from a Christian perspective and a Buddhist one: while the 'heights' that Kerouac evokes allegorise the Christian paradise, they also allude to the Buddhist notion of the Void, the spiritual essence of the universe in Buddhism.<sup>76</sup> Similarly, 'Apocalyptic' echoes 'Eucalyptic' in its rhyming as well as in its reference to the divine: the former relates directly to the episode of the Apocalypse in the Bible, the latter is a common Buddhist term that refers to the microcosmic community.<sup>77</sup> This spiritual ambivalence also applies to Tristessa herself: 'I see [...] innumerable hands that have come [...] to bless her and pronounce her Bodhisat [...]. Her Enlightenment is perfect [...]. "She's an Angel"'.<sup>78</sup> Tristessa is explicitly compared to both a 'Bodhisat[tva]' and an Angel, two sacred figures emanating from each religious system that symbolise deliverance not only from the body, but also from earthly suffering.<sup>79</sup> As Giomo pinpoints:

Given the sordid realities of addiction and affliction amid the dismal atmosphere of the relentless Pan-American rain, the novel appears to embody the First Noble Truth – all life is sorrowful. In fact, sorrow and suffering form that precise point upon which both the Catholic culture of Mexico and Kerouac's transported Buddhism pivot.<sup>80</sup>

---

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid. 'Eucalyptic' refers to the word eucalyptus, one of the tallest trees on earth. In Buddhism, trees are used as symbols for the living (Bodhi-trees); they also allude to the Buddha's episode of his enlightenment.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., p. 57.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> Giomo, pp. 101-02.

In *Tristessa*, the fusing of Catholicism and Buddhism generates a form of religious syncretism instrumental for the representation of sublimity in the text, a sublimity that is fostered through each religious system as well as through their combination.

In some measure, Kerouac's use of Buddhist symbolism parallels his recourse to Catholicism in the novella: it enables him to play with the motif of suppression of physical forms. According to Theado, 'Duluoz sees beauty in [the] cessation [of forms] because they were never there to begin with'.<sup>81</sup> The beauty that Theado refers to is spiritual, but also conceptual: it is a function of the realisation of the transience of all life forms, envisaged as intrinsically fluid in Buddhism. In *Tristessa*, this sense of beauty materialises through the combination of the heroine's grace with the revocation of her own corporeality: 'All the time I feel like taking her in my arms and squeezing her, squeezing that little frail unobtainable not-there body'.<sup>82</sup> That is to say, the more Tristessa's body disappears, the closer to the void she stands, and the more desirable she appears in the eyes of Duluoz. This relation between the destruction of physical forms and the articulation of desire is grounded in a type of beauty defined, primarily, by its ethereal quality, a characteristic also found in the Catholic paradigm, as seen earlier.<sup>83</sup> This feature is crucial: it renders beauty indecipherable, ungraspable and in fact potentially sublime. According to Kant: 'In the immeasurableness of nature

---

<sup>81</sup> Theado, p. 130.

<sup>82</sup> *Tristessa*, p. 87.

<sup>83</sup> See above, pp. 305-10.

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'.<sup>84</sup>

That is not to say that Kerouac equates the ethics of Buddhism with the moral code of Catholicism in *Tristessa*. For Duluoz:

I wish I could communicate to all their combined fears of death the Teaching that I have heard from Ages of Old, that recompenses all that pain with soft reward of perfect silent love abiding up and down and in and out everywhere past, present, and future in the Void unknown where nothing happens and all simply is what it is.<sup>85</sup>

Here, the 'Teaching' referred to is the one of the Dharma Law.<sup>86</sup> It can be defined, as Anne Waldman suggests in her introduction to Kerouac's *The Scripture of the Golden Eternity* [1960], as 'the clear-witted awareness that the whole of reality is without origination or first cause. This wisdom sees through any reified notion of existence as well as through any nihilistic interpretation of life'.<sup>87</sup> In this sense, Duluoz perceives that the fear of death is but a trick of the mind: formal existence and non-existence, incarnation and disembodiment tie in together; they are the two sides of the same coin. According to Alan Watts:

---

<sup>84</sup> Kant, *The Critique of Judgement*, p. 111.

<sup>85</sup> *Tristessa*, p. 33.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>87</sup> Anne Waldman, 'Introduction to the City Lights Edition', in Jack Kerouac, *The Scripture of the Golden Eternity* [1960], City Lights Pocket Poets Series, 51 (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1994), pp. 1-5 (p. 3).

[W]e say in Buddhism that the Un-born is also the Un-dying. Life is a position of time. Death is a position of time. They are like winter and spring, and in Buddhism we do not consider that winter becomes spring, or that spring becomes summer.<sup>88</sup>

This phenomenological conception of existence is at the core of the Buddhist ethics: it suggests that living forms are conceived as transcendent *per se*. It contrasts with the Catholic view, where incarnate existence partakes in the original sin and is thus regarded as profane: consequently, the body – which bears the stigma of ungodliness – must be eliminated to purify the soul. From this perspective, the redemptive dimension that Kerouac conveys in the novella through the allegory of Tristessa's crucifixion supercedes the Buddhist ethos. Tristessa's role is precisely to reinvigorate the chasm between spirit and matter, between divine essence and forms in existence.

This ethos is also circumscribed in terms of Kerouac's own writing project, whose stylistics to a large extent clash with the Buddhist aspiration for selflessness. Throughout the works of the *Duluoz Legend*, the autodiegetic narration endorses an intrinsic form of self-discovery that is foundational for the project itself. It is implemented by means of an unbroken flux of consciousness that is eminently personal and idiosyncratic, an outflow that is entirely dependent upon the writer's channelling of his ownmost and innermost perceptions and impressions. As Kerouac writes in 'Essentials of Spontaneous Prose': '[T]ap from

---

<sup>88</sup> Alan Watts, *The Way of Zen* [1957], Vintage Spiritual Classics (New York: Vintage Books, Random House, 1999), p. 123.

yourself the song of yourself, *blow! – now! – your way is your only way*'.<sup>89</sup> While Kerouac's prose exemplifies a transcending movement towards the universal, it is nonetheless rooted in an 'I' through which the author's own self, regardless its mobility and malleability, acts as the exclusive centre of perception. Such a type of writing, as it records the interactions between the writer and his/her environment, proclaims not the truth of the world, but that of the self. The modernistic prose that it exemplifies, while it allows the author to problematise identity within the narrative, also eulogises selfhood on an implicit level as it becomes embodied in the very stylistics of the text.

Rather than channelling accurately the Buddhist doxa in the text, the symbolism that emanates from the multiple references to fragments of Buddhist syntax in *Tristessa* is thus used for aesthetic purposes. As the following passage shows: '[A]nd Tristessa's ribs too, beautiful ribs, her with her aunts in Chihuahua also born to die, beautiful to be ugly, quick to be dead, glad to be sad, mad to be had'.<sup>90</sup> Kerouac uses a series of antitheses to both underline and undermine the phenomenological interplay between being and non-being in Buddhism. In this passage, movement and sexual tension – which surfaces through the double entendre of 'had' – oppose stasis and death, but also merge with them, creating an accumulation of contradictions whose rhythmic effect is spectacular.<sup>91</sup> In this way, the recourse to the symbolism and syntactical structures of Buddhism enables Kerouac to elaborate on the trope of transience and formlessness. This interplay

---

<sup>89</sup> Kerouac, 'Essentials of Spontaneous Prose', in *The Portable Beat Reader*, ed. by Charters, pp. 57-58 (p. 57).

<sup>90</sup> *Tristessa*, p. 32.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*

impacts Tristessa's body, but also the body of the text, through its sense of fluctuation and mutability. For Giomo:

[In *Tristessa*], the form of the novel itself, given to descriptions of the phenomenal, and Kerouac's own penchant for concrete expressionism created special challenges for a writing bhikku whose real genius rested in his ability to relate the multifaceted reality of individual experience and the legitimacy of day-to-day relationships of individuals to one another. As an experimental novelist, Kerouac was primarily concerned with those very concrete, aesthetically immediate, emotional, and fleeting sense-perceptions that attach us to the discriminating mind-world of the novel.<sup>92</sup>

Giomo envisages Kerouac's Buddhistic convolutions as an aesthetic device primarily, one that serves to funnel the amalgamation of the writer's most intimate and subjective perceptions in written form. In this sense, Kerouac's writing in *Tristessa*, unlike in *Big Sur*, does not seek to constantly enhance the narrator's introspective consciousness; rather, it allows the possibilities for formal experimentation to render as well as regenerate the writer's own vision.

In this sense, the use of Buddhist tropes is there primarily to enhance the writing stylistically. As the following passage shows:

I realize all the uncountable manifestations the thinking-mind invents to place a wall of horror before its pure perfect realization that there is no

---

<sup>92</sup> Giomo, p. 97.

wall no horror just Transcendental Empty Kissable Milk Light of  
Everlasting Eternity's true and perfectly empty nature.<sup>93</sup>

In this passage, Kerouac seeks to express one of the fundamental axioms of the Buddhist doctrine – that all mental conceptions are deceptive – within the space of one single breath. It epitomises a form of enlightenment, referred to by Kerouac as the 'pure perfect realization [of] Transcendental Empty Kissable Milk Light of Everlasting Eternity's true and perfectly empty nature',<sup>94</sup> a realisation that Hipkiss reads as 'a mystical vision of nirvana beyond the absurdities of maya'.<sup>95</sup> Most importantly, Kerouac's playful rhythmic phrasing features a high number of semantic incongruities symptomatic of his aesthetics of immediacy, the modality of spontaneity within Zen Buddhism.<sup>96</sup> According to Hrebeniak: 'Buddhist practice is vigorously assimilated by Kerouac into narratives that accommodate its teaching vehicles of orality, improvisation, and contradiction'.<sup>97</sup>

Hence, the incursion of Buddhist motifs in *Tristessa* allows Kerouac to explore the endless possibilities of literary communication as much as its limits. The void in particular, the metaphysical substance of the universe conceived phenomenologically as the irreducible essence of reality, becomes for Kerouac a means to flood the text with a series of lyrical images and antithetical statements: '[A]nd the void is not the void because there's nothing to be empty of'.<sup>98</sup> This reference to the void, devised simultaneously as everything and nothing, container

---

<sup>93</sup> *Tristessa*, p. 16.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>95</sup> Hipkiss, *Jack Kerouac, Prophet of the New Romanticism*, p. 109. 'Maya' is a Buddhist term that refers to the deceptive apprehension of formal reality through the senses.

<sup>96</sup> See Watts, p. 37.

<sup>97</sup> Hrebeniak, p. 104.

<sup>98</sup> *Tristessa*, p. 59.

and contained, substance and essence, conveys a sense of the limits of representation. According to Ginsberg:

[Kerouac] had the sense of the reality of existence and at the same time the unreality of existence. To Western minds this is a contradiction and an impossibility. But actually, it is not impossible because it is true; this universe is real, and is at the same time unreal. This is known in Buddhism as co-emergent wisdom, the fact that form and emptiness are identical.<sup>99</sup>

For Ginsberg, the quasi-impossibility to re-present the main Buddhist notions and concepts demands a transcending of reason: it remains a major literary challenge, albeit one that opens up the field of poetical imagination. This phraseology of intricate contradictions and paradoxes heralds back to a long tradition of poetry, amongst them the haiku. Originating from Japan, the haiku is a very short poem traditionally made of three lines and seventeen syllables; it conveys an essential contradiction between the second and the third line generally, a chasm that both clashes with the rest of the poem and restores its harmony.<sup>100</sup> It is a paradox of the same nature that *Tristessa* mobilises through the recourse to the Buddhist trope: while it aims to circumscribe the delusive tension of fallacious opposites, it also contributes to the emergence of Thanatos by crafting a synthetic language that expands as well as reconciles contrasts.

---

<sup>99</sup> Ginsberg, 'Kerouac's Ethic', in *Deliberate Prose*, ed. by Morgan, pp. 358-73 (p. 362).

<sup>100</sup> For Kerouac's own poetical experiments with haiku, see *Some of the Dharma* [posthumous, 1997] (New York: Penguin Books, 1999).

While the Buddhist motifs pre-empt the paradoxical articulation of Thanatos in the writing, their superimposition onto the Catholic foundations of the text is instrumental for the formulation of a very particular type of sublimity in *Tristessa*. Crucially, this intermingling creates a form of religious syncretism that enables Kerouac to multiply the effects of each spiritual system from a narrative perspective, but also from an aesthetic point of view through the increased stylistic possibilities that this combination allows. Such a religious form of syncretism in the writing is foregrounded in a literary tradition of pantheism. According to Hipkiss:

In Kerouac's work the key to love is complete acceptance of everything as Divine, 'For when you realize that God is Everything, you know that you've got to love everything no matter how bad it is'.<sup>101</sup>

Here, Kerouac echoes Ginsberg's message of ubiquitous divinity in the 'Footnote to "Howl"'. These pantheistic formulations, as seen in Part 1, are a legacy from nineteenth-century American Transcendentalism and from the eighteenth-century Romantic tradition; they allow Kerouac to transgress as well as reinforce the spiritual import of both text and self. As Emerson writes in 'The Transcendentalist' [1842]:

Everything real is self-existent. Everything divine shares the self-existence of Deity. All that you call the world is the shadow of that substance which

---

<sup>101</sup> Hipkiss, *Jack Kerouac, Prophet of the New Romanticism*, p. 70.

you are, the perpetual creation of the powers of thought, of those that are dependent and those that are independent of your will.<sup>102</sup>

For Emerson, divinity is implemented through the self primarily; it is as transcendent as it is immanent. In *Tristessa*, Kerouac's elaboration of a syncretic form introduces an open spiritual system with multiple entries which, according to Lardas, 'did not so much secularize the sacred as sacralize the secular, turning everyday existence into a drama of ultimate consequences'.<sup>103</sup> This idiosyncratic feature in Kerouac's writing, which is Transcendentalist and Romantic in origin, is paramount in *Tristessa*: it allows Kerouac to connect the higher with the base and sacralise the heroine in particular, even though she is a morphine user.

Meanwhile, this syncretic framework in the novella contributes to undermine doctrinal unity in the text, an effect achieved, arguably, by Coleridge's own use of syncretism in his poems. According to Paul Hamilton:

[Coleridge] argued a spirit of toleration and love in which theological difference could be acknowledged without reviving the violent oppositions which bloodied the history of Christianity. It also implied a trust in the ultimate convergence of apparently different knowledges: competing views reveal only different aspects of a universe activated by a single mind

---

<sup>102</sup> Emerson, 'The Transcendentalist' [1842], in *Nature and Selected Essays*, ed. by Ziff, pp. 239-58 (p. 242).

<sup>103</sup> Lardas, p. 6.

in whose larger, comprehensive principle their differences would be reconciled.<sup>104</sup>

For Hamilton, Coleridge's poetry has the capacity to synthesise a great variety of religious traditions into one comprehensive multifaceted spiritual thread, a convergence in which the religious discourses are remodelled through their interconnection with one another and pertain to a form of universalism, one that tallies with the pantheistic frame. Here again, this syncretic use of religious discourses echoes that of Ginsberg in 'Howl', in which elements of all three monotheisms both coexist, and are transcended by a pantheistic impetus that seeks to ultimately reveal the divinity of the world and of the self: 'The world is holy! The soul is holy!'<sup>105</sup>

In *Tristessa* however, this syncretic quality follows on from the Orientalist discourse. Orientalism tends to amalgamate religious frameworks of reference into a mystical aggregate; it subverts the various theological doctrines it is made of through a mythification of their systems of belief. It implies that the aesthetic value of Kerouac's multifaceted religious references in *Tristessa* surpasses their respective ethics: in drawing inspiration from them, Kerouac disseminates a multiplicity of spiritual motifs in order to create a system of his own, rather than cancel one another out. In this sense, the religious syncretism of the novella re-mystifies traditional religious discourses: by intermingling elements of both Catholicism and Buddhism, Kerouac partly neutralises their individual ethos,

---

<sup>104</sup> Paul Hamilton, 'Coleridge', in *The Romantic Period*, ed. by David B. Pirie, Penguin History of Literature, 5 (London: Penguin Books, 1994), pp. 185-220 (pp. 187-188).

<sup>105</sup> 'Howl', p. 12.

stressing their sacred essence beyond the formalities of their individual practices. For Lardas, this mystification conveys a notion of ‘liminality, that is, the capacity to transcend received cultural input and step outside the normal structures of life’ in Kerouac’s works.<sup>106</sup> From this perspective, Kerouac does not simply render *Tristessa* as trans-religious: he makes her truly mystical through the transcendent impulse implied by her syncretic qualification, a mysticism that emanates from the integration of a multiplicity of religious systems into an all-encompassing and universal spiritual dimension. Simultaneously, the recourse to this pantheistic frame reinforces the stylistic and creative possibilities of the text through the trope of formlessness. It implies that it is the text itself that remodels its syntactical borders in order to accommodate the digressive constructions of the divine, as we have seen through Kerouac’s aesthetic use of Buddhist syntax and symbolism. In *Tristessa* this syncretism also signposts a way to come to terms with the dualism of the text through its resilience to any fixed representation.

Crucially, this transcending feature at the core of Kerouac’s syncretic formulation of divinity in the novella is instrumental for the elaboration of a form of sublimity in *Tristessa*: a narrative strategy that renders the spiritual fundamentally indecipherable. For Alexander Regier, ‘the double nature of the sublime [...] relies on the destructive power of what is best termed fragmentation. Ultimately, fragmentation emerges as the shattering yet foundational force connected to the sublime’.<sup>107</sup> That is to say, *Tristessa*’s fragmented references to the divine produce a form of mysticism, whose contours cannot be precisely

---

<sup>106</sup> Lardas, p. 29.

<sup>107</sup> Alexander Regier, ‘Foundational Ruins’, in *Ruins of Modernity*, ed. by Julia Hell and Andreas Schönle, Politics, History, and Culture Series (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), pp. 357-74 (p. 359).

defined nor recognised. For Bjørn Myskja: ‘The cognitive failure is not of the kind where something is experienced as merely meaningless, but rather one where the existence of something that is inaccessible to ordinary cognition is indicated’.<sup>108</sup> Consequently, the syncretic dimension of *Tristessa* contributes to the staging of the Sublime in the novella, defined by Kant as ‘an object [of nature] the representation of which determines the mind to regard the elevation of nature beyond our reach as equivalent to a presentation of ideas’.<sup>109</sup> By turning Tristessa herself into an epitome of sublimity, the beautiful and the deathly collapse into one: she becomes a ‘bundle of death and beauty’.<sup>110</sup>

#### 2.4. The Sublime Vision of Death in *Tristessa*

*Tristessa* is established on the tension between Kerouac’s meticulous and intricate depictions of the heroine and the sense of indecipherability with which he endows her; a tension that is paramount for the expression of a form of sublimity in the novella. Crucially for Kant, the Sublime is strictly located within the receiver’s mind:

If however, we call anything [...] sublime, we soon perceive that for this it is not permissible to seek an appropriate standard outside itself, but merely in itself. It is a greatness comparable to itself alone. Hence it comes that the sublime is not to be looked for in the things of nature, but only in our

---

<sup>108</sup> Bjørn K. Myskja, *The Sublime in Kant and Beckett: Aesthetic Judgement, Ethics and Literature* (Berlin: W. de Gruyter, 2001), p. 1.

<sup>109</sup> Kant, *The Critique of Judgement*, p. 119.

<sup>110</sup> *Tristessa*, p. 52.

own ideas. [...] it is the disposition of soul evoked by a particular representation engaging the attention of the reflective judgement, and not the Object, that is to be called sublime.<sup>111</sup>

In other words, the Sublime is entirely engineered by the beholder of the phenomenon. It indicates that Duluoz, as the subject of desire in the novella, is also the producer of the vision of sublimity, a position that reverberates the foundations of the Kantian Sublime. Therefore, an inspection of the ways in which Tristessa's sublimity impacts Duluoz's own self will enable us to illuminate the paradox of Thanatos at play in the novella.

Throughout *Tristessa*, Duluoz is characterised by his passivity, remaining in the background as a witness:

We meet a woman and go into a room and I figure we'll finally sleep in here but the two beds are loaded with sleepers and wakers, we just stand there talking, leave and go down the alley past waking-up doors – Everybody curious to see the two ragged girls and the raggedy man, stumbling like a slow team in the dawn – [...] now I'm too gone to realize anything or understand, all I wanta do is sleep, next to Tristessa.<sup>112</sup>

Using a form of parataxis here, Kerouac appears to channel all the phrasal elements into one emotional thread of estrangement. Nonetheless, it is a different form of apathy from that in *Big Sur*: as the narrator drifts from one place to

---

<sup>111</sup> Kant, *The Critique of Judgement*, pp. 97-98.

<sup>112</sup> *Tristessa*, p. 77.

another, his engagement, albeit directionless, is extant and projected outwards as he scrutinises his environment. As Theado points out, ‘the core of Duluoz’s experience here is observation and reflection, not action. [...] He observes the scenes around him without interfering’.<sup>113</sup>

Contemplation is, in fact, one of Duluoz’s primary functions in *Tristessa*. As Duluoz’s description of his tenement evidences:

I [...] rush up the two flights to my room, [...] I get on the hard adobe floor of the roof, the Tejado, and walk on slippery little puddles around the air of the courtyard rail only two feet high so you can just easily fall down three flights and crack your skull on tile Espaniala floors.<sup>114</sup>

This description conveys images of a lookout post; a lookout from where Duluoz can meticulously *observe* scenes and people around him, especially Tristessa: ‘I drink her in’.<sup>115</sup> Crucially, this colonising gaze problematises the experience of sublimity. Through contemplation, Duluoz strives for visual information. Nevertheless, the processing of this information is compromised by the very nature of his vision. As Suzanne Guerlac argues, ‘the sublime involves a demonstration (as negative presentation) of precisely the nondemonstrability of the ideas of reason [...] through the imagination as receptive faculty of intuition’.<sup>116</sup> Thus, there is an essential contradiction within the function of the

---

<sup>113</sup> Theado, p. 129.

<sup>114</sup> *Tristessa*, p. 50.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 87.

<sup>116</sup> Suzanne Guerlac, *The Impersonal Sublime: Hugo, Baudelaire, Lautréamont* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), p. 106.

gaze in the Sublime: it always fails in its primary intent – to order and decipher – but cannot let go of its object of contemplation because of the fascination that this very object provokes. This process illustrates the self-negation that characterises Duluoz at the level of his own faculty of perception and rational interpretation, but also of his engagement: “‘What we waiting for? Where we goin?’ I’d kept asking’, ‘Where we goin?’”.<sup>117</sup> As Duluoz exemplifies his own self-negation, he is rendered child-like, unknowing, as if taken aback by a phenomenon that surpasses his own understanding. According to Schopenhauer:

[The Sublime objects] may have a hostile relationship to the human will in general [...]. They may be opposed to it; they may threaten it by their might that eliminates all resistance, or their immeasurable greatness may reduce it to nought.<sup>118</sup>

The suggestion is that Duluoz’s exposure to Tristessa’s sublimity threatens his own integrity, as well as that of the text. It is this menace, addressed to both self and text, that is paramount for the formulation of the paradox of Thanatos in *Tristessa*, as the next paragraphs will show in more detail.

Crucially, this form of sublimity in the text, which articulates Duluoz’s vision, is expressed through a syntactical liberation in *Tristessa*. As Kerouac writes:

---

<sup>117</sup> *Tristessa*, pp. 76 and 79.

<sup>118</sup> Schopenhauer, p. 202.

I've seen it a million times, in Mexico the young men want the young girls  
 – 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.<sup>119</sup>

The lyrical texture of this passage confuses the reader. Its unconventional syntax spirals into loose association of ideas ('birthrate' and 'birthcrib', 'Mexico' and 'Tokyo'); it materialises the interference of the unconscious in the prose.<sup>120</sup> As he writes in his 'Essentials of Spontaneous Prose': 'If possible write "without consciousness" in semitrance (as Yeats' later "trance writing") allowing subconscious to admit in own uninhibited interesting necessary so "modern" language what conscious art would censor'.<sup>121</sup> Most importantly, it also indicates a floating moment during which the writer's consciousness is disconnected from his own self, letting the flow of words pile up until reason is finally recovered: 'I lost track of my thought here'.<sup>122</sup> Such a syntactical combination suggests that the prose itself is reflective of the disjunction of reason that the phenomenon of the Sublime implies. According to Kant:

[T]he sublime [...] cannot be contained in any sensuous form, but rather concerns ideas of reason, which, although no adequate presentation of

---

<sup>119</sup> *Tristessa*, pp. 55-56.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>121</sup> Kerouac, 'Essentials of Spontaneous Prose', in *The Portable Beat Reader*, ed. by Charters, pp. 57-58 (p. 58).

<sup>122</sup> *Tristessa*, p. 56.

them is possible, may be excited and called into the mind by that very inadequacy itself which does admit of sensuous presentation.<sup>123</sup>

In this sense, such a type of writing, which both emerges from, and eludes, consciousness, is instrumental for the elaboration of sublimity into the text itself.

The following passage illustrates Kerouac's use of an unrestrained stream of consciousness in *Tristessa*:

[S]he comes over and cleans up the headboard with her thighs practically in my face and I study them and old Bull is watching out of the top of his glasses to the side – Min n Bill Mamie n Ike n Maroney Maroney Izzy and Bizzy and Dizzy and Bessy Fall-me-my-closer Martarky and Bee, O god their names, their names, I want their names, Amie n Bill, not Amos n Andy, open the mayor (my father did love them) open the crocus the mokus in the closet (this Freudian sloop of the mind) (O slip slop) (slap) this old guy that's always – Molly! – Fibber M'Gee be Jesus and Molly.<sup>124</sup>

The sense of syntactical chaos in this passage is typified by means of a formal experimentalism and through multiple levels of allusion. This type of prosody is resolutely modernist in its intent as well as in its form: the numerous iterations, neologisms and interjections evoke the writing of James Joyce as well as that of D. H. Lawrence, especially with regards to the articulation of the sexually

---

<sup>123</sup> Kant, *The Critique of Judgement*, p. 92.

<sup>124</sup> *Tristessa*, p. 92.

repressed, from the reference to Tristessa's thighs to the hint at Freudian slips and the exclamatory 'Molly!'.<sup>125</sup> According to Jean-François Lyotard:

Joyce allows the unrepresentable to become perceptible in his writing itself, in the signifier. The whole range of available narrative and even stylistic operators is put into play without concern for the unity of the whole, and new operators are tried. The grammar and vocabulary of literary language are no longer accepted as given; rather, they appear as academic forms [...] which prevent the unrepresentable from being put forward. Here, then, lies the difference: modern aesthetics is an aesthetic of the sublime.<sup>126</sup>

For Lyotard, modernistic forms are intrinsically linked to the formulation of a form of sublimity.<sup>127</sup> While the syntactical digressions of the writer's stream of consciousness tend in appearance to blur meanings in the text, they offer an opportunity to experience an approximate *idea* of its signification, one that eludes rational comprehension. For Kant: 'The sublime is that, the mere capacity of

---

<sup>125</sup> Ibid. Here, Kerouac hints at Joyce's *Ulysses* [1922] by drawing a parallel between Tristessa and Molly, two women intensely fantasised by an autodiegetic narrator.

<sup>126</sup> Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* [1979], trans. by Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi, Theory and History of Literature Series, 10 (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), p. 81.

<sup>127</sup> Nevertheless for Lyotard, the postmodern and the modern overlap: 'the postmodern [...] is undoubtedly a part of the modern' (ibid., p. 79). As David Johnson comments: '[For Lyotard,] postmodernism does not come after the end of modernism but is that aspect within modernism that is always suspicious of what has come before, or what has been firmly established – even what has been firmly established by modernism itself. Thus, far from constituting the end or the successor of modernism, postmodernism is modernism "in the nascent state, and this state is constant" [...]. In other words, postmodernism is the engine of permanent revolution within the modern; it is the modern impulse that harnesses the full power of the sublime in its attempt to break with reality' (David B. Johnson, 'The Postmodern Sublime: Presentation and its Limits', in *The Sublime: From Antiquity to the Present*, ed. by Timothy M. Costelloe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp. 118-31 (pp. 122-23)).

thinking which evidences a faculty of mind transcending every standard of sense'.<sup>128</sup> Thus, through the experimental devices of a high modernist aesthetics, the text suggests a presence that cannot be grasped: 'We can conceive the infinitely great, the infinitely powerful, but every presentation of an object destined to "make visible" this absolute greatness or power appears to us painfully inadequate. Those are Ideas of which no presentation is possible'.<sup>129</sup> It is as such that Kerouac's digressive stream of consciousness may be interpreted in the context of the Sublime: the tendency towards formal experimentation in *Tristessa*, while it enriches the creative potentialities of the text, also serves to disrupt the rational. As one of the representational strategies of the Sublime, this type of writing epitomises a syntactical collapse as the text itself reflects the annihilation of *Tristessa* as well as her sublime qualities.

While the writing pre-empts the occurrence of a form of sublimity in the text, it also enables the articulation of a paradoxical desire, one that typifies the figure of Thanatos in the novella. *Tristessa* epitomises a sublime condition in the eyes of Duluoz. Her beauty, largely idealised and fantasised, is rendered highly ambivalent through her drug use and Christ-like nature. Furthermore, by relocating *Tristessa* within several religious contexts, Kerouac renders her mystical and unfathomable. This vision generates a form of rapture for Duluoz, an exaltation that is fuelled, crucially, by an attraction to her degraded body, the crux of sublimity in the novella. According to Hrebeniak: 'Provoked by erotic rapture, the narrator [is] permitted a glimpse of transcendental forces, with love and death

---

<sup>128</sup> Kant, *The Critique of Judgement*, p. 98.

<sup>129</sup> Lyotard, p. 78.

placed in close proximity through the fact of [his] lover's addiction'.<sup>130</sup> While Duluoz's visions of Tristessa are truly transcendental, their nature differs from those of his early road novels. In *Tristessa*, such visions emerge, primarily, from the narrator's visual perceptions of his environment, rather than from an introspective exploration of the self. It enables an experience of transcendence that is articulated through the *jouissance* that emanates from the contemplation of the spectacle of beauty, death and suffering. At the same time, this vision is also frightening because it threatens the narrator's rationality: as Tristessa faces devastation, Duluoz runs the risk of being consumed along with her. As Tristessa hints: "[Y]ou and me [...] we are nothing. Tomorrar we may be die, and so we are nothing".<sup>131</sup>

Therefore, for Duluoz the vision of sublimity is also the vision of death: '[A]ll of us trembling in our mortal boots, born to die, BORN TO DIE'.<sup>132</sup> The equivocal nature of Duluoz's vision in the novella, which is both transcendental and mortiferous, epitomises the paradox of Thanatos. This is what Ginsberg interprets in Kerouac's writing as '[h]oly recollected visions of mortal existence with panoramic scope of suffering and transitoriness': visions of carnal death that are gradually revealed through the narrator's polarised apprehension of the heroine.<sup>133</sup> While they stress the transient nature of human existence, they also render death ultimately desirable: "*This* is what you give me instead of death?" –

---

<sup>130</sup> Hrebniak, p. 115.

<sup>131</sup> *Tristessa*, p. 57.

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 31-32.

<sup>133</sup> Ginsberg, 'To America: Kerouac's *Pomes All Sizes*' [1992], in *Deliberate Prose*, ed. by Morgan, pp. 373-78 (p. 376).

I try to know what to give her instead – No such thing better than death'.<sup>134</sup> This ambivalent celebration of death is both teleological and redemptive. From a theological perspective, these two interpretations are one and the same: they both end with a form of religious absolution. As Kerouac writes:

Angels in hell, our wings huge in the dark, the three of us start off, and from the Golden Eternal Heaven bends God blessing us with his face [...] the sight of that Face would make you cry – I've seen it, in a vision, it will cancel all in the end.<sup>135</sup>

Through this promise for absolution, the divine will manifest itself and re-balance the subject. According to Mortenson:

[T]he destruction of self is tolerable because an image of some afterlife stands behind it. This is Kerouac's grand narrative enacted on the level of personal history. Either heaven awaits, in which case loss of self is actually a blessing, or Buddhist rebirth prevails, and [...] there is no call for worry since self is never truly lost.<sup>136</sup>

In the end, Dulouoz's vision of Tristessa shares a great deal with that of the cross at the end of *Big Sur*: both take the Christian paradigm of rebirth as an implicit model, establishing incarnate existence as an existential horizon that must be

---

<sup>134</sup> *Tristessa*, p. 82.

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 74.

<sup>136</sup> Mortenson, p. 61.

transcended through the sacrifice of the self. The difference with *Big Sur*, however, is that this sacrifice is externalised and projected onto Tristessa's body. This is what enables the narrator to experience a vision of death that, instead of generating anguish by turning back upon itself, depends upon a surrogate for its elaboration. The vision thus becomes the fantasy of death, where death is turned into a conceptual vehicle for creativity in the text, an epitome of Thanatos in the writing.

Nevertheless, for Thanatos to be preserved in *Tristessa*, the desire for death must be maintained throughout the text. Just as *Tristessa* cannot give in to annihilation straight away, as the narrative would self-destruct; it must cultivate death throughout. This is where the paradox of Thanatos is exemplified at the level of the text itself: *Tristessa* hosts strategies of destruction and annihilation that are located within the very forms that the novella relies on. In other words, the text embodies the paradox of its presentation by continuously enabling its own destruction. The last page of the novella is the place where annihilation eventually surpasses even Duluoz's vision: '[T]hat's enough, hear no more, [...] I'd leave them be and go my own way'.<sup>137</sup> In deciding to run away and leave Tristessa and the rest of the group, Duluoz attempts to nullify his desire for her. As the tension between the construction of narrative forms and their revocation is cancelled, the process of destruction is eventually enabled; it illustrates the final dissolution of the text, but also that of Thanatos itself.

---

<sup>137</sup> *Tristessa*, p. 96.

## Conclusion

As seen, the diverse manifestations of Thanatos present in both Kerouac's and Ginsberg's work, allow us to scrutinise the ways in which the selected texts interrelate destruction with creation, on a multitude of levels. In Part 1 of the thesis, an Existentialist expression of Thanatos in Kerouac's *Big Sur* and in Ginsberg's 'Howl', could be seen through the concepts of Sartrean nothingness and engagement, as well as the Camusian notions of the absurd and revolt. Reading these terms through some of the main Transcendentalist precepts of Emerson and of Thoreau allowed us to rethink how Thanatos might operate in an American context – one informed by European Existentialism and yet distinct in a variety of ways. In Part 2, a sublime form of Thanatos was traced in *Tristessa* through the formulation of a fantasy of death, a fantasy articulated in a variety of symbolic and textual forms.

For the majority of *Big Sur*, the narrator's constant monitoring of his own afflictions fosters a reflexivity indistinguishable at times from a form of anguish. This anguish, as the affective symptom of a Sartrean form of nothingness, becomes a way for Duloz to show an awareness of his own demise throughout the narrative. For Kerouac the permanence of death is both an internal and external issue, one that is paradoxically necessary for the narrator's identity as a subject within the wider narrative and for himself as an author. Simultaneously, Duloz's disengagement from the post-war rationale of 1950s America through

his relocation to Big Sur, stimulates an inwardness or – one might say – a form of Thanatos in the novel. This inwardness contributes to the incapacity to genuinely understand the transcendental aspect of nature, which is reflected in Duluoz's inability to cohere with his natural environment. Consequently, an experience of stasis occurs in the novel, intimately related to the loss of the visionary. Yet, it does not signify that the novel revokes the picaresque dimension in Kerouac's work; instead, it reverses its creative possibilities for the self.

This form of Thanatos produces a sense of loss that is palpable in *Big Sur*, and that is also symptomatic of an evolution in Kerouac's writing. It epitomises a transition from the experience of visions in mythical and transcendental terms, as exemplified in his early travel writing, to something more contemplative and introspective but equally ecstatic, particularly in *Tristessa* through the experience of sublimity. That is not to say that movement – and through it an ontology of becoming – is non-existent in *Big Sur*. Rather, the novel crystallises a liminal point between the poles of stasis and ex-stasis. This tension is expressed thematically through the fundamental inconsistency and instability of the types of engagement witnessed in *Big Sur*, which are key for the staging of the dissolution of the self and the remodelling of identities. More significantly perhaps, this tension is also articulated in aesthetic terms through a writing that constantly oscillates between a tendency to return to fixed and stable forms, and the traces of motion and velocity, embodied by Cody in *Big Sur*.

Again in *Big Sur*, Cody is characterised as a centre of an energy that becomes a form of radical movement in the writing, a momentum that relies on the transience of prosodic forms as much as on his actual actions. This form of

writing is the trademark of Kerouac's œuvre; through the flux of consciousness the writer's most intimate and immediate perceptions are arranged intuitively; providing the prose with a sense of spontaneity and liveliness, a 'burning consciousness of the present'.<sup>1</sup> This type of writing in *Big Sur* is what momentarily subdues the forces of apathy, of paralysis and of nothingness, that otherwise submerge the narrative. Nevertheless, this form of writing is, by nature, impermanent and transitory and therefore tends, paradoxically, to self-destruct: in a sense, it creates its own vortex within which all syntactical and narrative forms collapse. This paradoxical relation in the novel between self-creation and self-destruction, but also between movement and stasis, is that of Thanatos. It reveals the desire to portray a schismatic experience of the self – and that of Kerouac's in the first place – as both Duluoz and Cody can be viewed as Kerouac's alter ego, the former announcing Kerouac's doomed vision of futurity, the latter expressing a melancholy for an ecstatic past that is now irremediably lost.

'Howl' portrays a more Existentialist form of Thanatos that is at heart self-celebratory. In 'Howl', in line with the Prophetic tradition, Ginsberg attempts to convey the transcendental experience through a performativity – both in and through the poem. This unfailing impetus is fundamentally composite: it is made of a conglomeration of intuitive and potentially transcendental acts – as exemplified by Ginsberg's characters in Part 1 of 'Howl' – that emanate from an ahistorical impulse. This desire to engage with the world and write oneself into history is fundamentally different from that of Kerouac. In 'Howl', the dynamic reification of the characters' selves in historical reality typifies a commitment to

---

<sup>1</sup> Mailer, 'The White Negro', in *The Penguin Book of the Beats*, ed. by Charters, pp. 582-605 (p. 588).

the conditions of the here and now. For Ginsberg, 'Howl' contains its own salvation, since in the pantheistic tradition of the poem, all intuitive experiences have an instantaneous redemptive value.<sup>2</sup> This strategy in 'Howl', unlike in Kerouac's writing, is *in itself* transcendental and self-affirmative by nature: rather than pinpointing the deficiencies of the self, it aims to reveal its divine essence through a sense of continuity between the personal and the universal and between the historical and the mythical.

Paradoxically, it is Moloch – the adversary of the characters in 'Howl' – who elicits this creative movement: as engagement responds to nothingness, Ginsberg's characters struggle to break free from its maleficent and nullifying influence. In an attempt to retrieve the powers of intuition and of mystical imagination, a condition *sine qua non* of ontological actualisation in a Transcendentalist context, Ginsberg's poetics channels a more Emersonian conception of the transcendental than is found in Kerouac's late writing. As I have shown, the performativity of 'Howl' gives way to a profoundly intuitive *act* of creation that is as immediate as it is immanent. Through it, Ginsberg's writing – in Part 1 of 'Howl' especially – generates a voice that catalyses the elements of historical reality into a vision of transcendence, both in and through the poem.<sup>3</sup> This prophetic voice, indicative of an Existentialist form of Thanatos in 'Howl', is primarily energetic; it eschews stasis both through its form and content. At the same time, this expression of Thanatos in Ginsberg's poetry, as it aims at tying

---

<sup>2</sup> For Ginsberg, 'existence itself was God' (Ginsberg, 'The Art of Poetry', Interview with Tom Clark, in *Spontaneous Mind*, ed. by Carter, pp. 17-53 (p. 38)).

<sup>3</sup> In the words of Ginsberg: '[Y]ou realise you were already in eternity while you were living on earth' (Paul Geneson, 'A Conversation with Allen Ginsberg', *Chicago Review*, 27 (1975), 27-35 (28)).

imminent experience with the immanence of the divine, attempts no less than to reconcile the poet and the readers of the poem with their own mortality.

In Kerouac's *Tristessa*, the momentum of the novella is located in the fragile balance between the narrator's vision of sublimity and the nullification of forms through which this vision is established. *Tristessa* is magnified by and for the narrator: as Kerouac glamorises her own being, he idealises her in socio-cultural terms albeit mythical ones. Thus, *Tristessa* is partially othered, both relocated and dislocated into Duluoz's fantasy. The representation of her beauty, although multilayered, is based on a *chiaroscuro* that is highly ambivalent: the more *Tristessa*'s body is degraded through her drug use, the more alluring she is to Duluoz. The debasement of *Tristessa* enables Kerouac to explore the motif of suffering in the text, which reverberates with that of his narrator; this suffering, recontextualised within several religious discourses, suggests the possibility for salvation and redemption. Simultaneously, the amalgamation of various theological systems in the text creates a form of religious syncretism increasing *Tristessa*'s mystical and indecipherable nature. Thus rendered inscrutable, *Tristessa* threatens Duluoz's own rationality. As the narrator-observer is subject to the sublime nature of *Tristessa*, both text and self are destabilised. This disruption, syntactical as much as emotional, reflects the nature of the Sublime, articulating a blurring between reason and imagination, and between form and formlessness. This potential erasure of the self, combined with the contemplative pleasure of *Tristessa*'s self-immolation, constitutes Duluoz's vision of sublimity. It is this vision that typifies the paradox of Thanatos in *Tristessa*, a vision that convokes the forces of the Sublime in order to revoke them. This form of Thanatos is both

sensual and irrational, threatening and transcendental, and as destructive as it is creative: it arises from a contradictory desire for death, where death is turned into the ultimate fantasy of rebirth.



Throughout this thesis, various forms of engagement with the transcendent have been traced which, although radically different, aim at redefining both self and text in turn. As we have seen, Thanatos is foregrounded in the paradoxical articulation of these visions. In *Big Sur*, Duluoz craves emancipation from social responsibility and historical reality in order to channel a potentially transcendental self; in *Tristessa*, Kerouac articulates a vision of death that is as transcendental as it is morbid. This transcendental elevation, which relies on an exclusive, idealistic and sacrificial form of engagement, generates a downwards spiral that irremediably brings the narrator towards disintegration. Whereas in ‘Howl’, Ginsberg’s vision epitomises an engagement with both the historical moment and what is conceived as the transcendental essence of the world – a commitment to the holiness of the here and now that is fundamentally self-creative and regenerative.

The use of Thanatos in the texts also illustrates a desire to overcome the bodily. For Kerouac this is achieved through the degradation of corporeal forms, as he convokes a vision of suffering and death that is either projected onto an ideal Other, or experienced on the site of both self and text. For Mortenson:

Beat writing attempts to capture the state achieved at the abyss and bring it back for the reader to witness. Yet, this seems a tragic solution; it sets up a situation in which the writer must sacrifice his body so that art may live. The artist thus becomes the proverbial addict, and the romantic notion of suffering for art becomes needlessly invoked.<sup>4</sup>

Mortenson underlines the intimate relationship between suffering and art in Beat writings, which is pivotal with regards to Kerouac's work. Nevertheless, Mortenson also downplays its articulation *through* the writing itself: in *Big Sur* as well as in *Tristessa*, the writing both mimics and counters this tendency towards nullification through an interplay with prosodic forms. It takes the form of a strategy that reinforces the cultivation of deathliness in the text, but also, oftentimes, offers a counterpoint through a sense of lyrical and syntactical vitality. In Ginsberg's poetry this overcoming of physicality is realised through the conquest of corporeality. While the poetical narrative sequences of 'Howl' illustrate a form of intuitive being that is occasionally instinctual and even explicitly sexual, the arrangement of breath patterns – a quintessentially organic poetical device – is, as shown, what truly sustains the vision in the poem.<sup>5</sup>

At the same time, the formulation of Ginsberg's vision in 'Howl' and that of Kerouac in *Big Sur*, also respond in their own ways to the perils of the 1950s in

---

<sup>4</sup> Mortenson, p. 112.

<sup>5</sup> Ginsberg's 'psychedelic poems', such as 'Laughing Gas' [1958], 'Mescaline' [1959] and 'Lysergic Acid' [1960] (in *Howl, Kaddish and Other Poems*, pp. 90-103, 104-06 and 107-11 respectively) must be repositioned within this context: as vehicles for the visionary that combine the organic with the artificial, they illustrate a variant of the Prophetic tradition that they contribute to actualise by crafting a kaleidoscopic vision of the self expanded and transcended.

political and historical terms. These visions are thus also symptomatic of the artistic production of the post-war era, where a countercultural discourse sought to thwart the illusion of a stable environment, or rather a form of existential ennui that concealed the anguish of post-war conformity. In 'Howl', Moloch's attempt to disrupt the characters' access to a form of authentic being – a being that is both ontological and transcendental through the realisation of their ownmost and innermost self – is eventually defeated. Likewise in *Big Sur*, the post-war American predicament functions as a fabric of social conventions and cultural mediations that are inauthentic, both in an Existentialist context and in a Transcendentalist one.

In this sense, a preoccupation with the socio-historical environment stimulates the writing process; it endows the vision with a political dimension, an expression of radical individualism in *Big Sur*, and a collective one in 'Howl'. It suggests that for Kerouac as well as for Ginsberg, but also for the Beats more generally, the contemporary conditions of reality – the Cold War, heteronormativity, domestic comfort, social conformism, and by extension, artistic and literary conventions – are an existential menace for the creative self. In 'Howl' a socio-political form of commitment is directed against Moloch – and yet Moloch is needed to accommodate the feelings of fear and alienation that prompted that commitment in the first place. In an Existentialist fashion, the threat that the historical environment typifies acts as an incentive towards the outer world *and* towards the transcendence of the self. It is the twofold nature of this engagement in 'Howl' that predicates the figure of Thanatos as it manifests an experiential plurality capable of defeating the alienation of modern life. It also

implies that Thanatos is dependent, in great measure, on the fundamental dualism of the poem, and especially on the dialectics between Moloch and the liberated self.

In *Big Sur*, this engagement becomes disengagement: while the socio-historical conditions of post-war America prompt the narrator's relocation to Bixby Canyon, they also assist his eventual nullification on an implicit level. This tendency to self-centredness, the backlash of an American form of Existentialism in the text, precipitates his self-destruction. Here, Thanatos takes the form of an archetypal movement of inwardness, an inwardness that is as private and self-sustained as it is exclusive and oblivious to the world. As seen, the narrator's solipsistic experience at Big Sur becomes after-effect of his disengagement from the conditions of the post-war moment as well as part of a wider existential crisis. Duluoz's solipsistic condition in the novel is quasi-psychiatric: it typifies 'the endpoint of the trajectory consciousness follows when it separates from the body and the passions, and from the social and practical world, and turns in upon itself; it is what might be called the mind's perverse self-apotheosis'.<sup>6</sup> This self-apotheosis constitutes the end-point of Kerouac's search for the highest form of transcendence: it is the schizoid reflection of the experience of corporeal death itself, anticipated through the narrator's vision of the cross in the last pages of *Big Sur*, and retrospectively through the sublime vision of Tristessa crucified. This climax combines the effects of autodiegesis with a series of modernistic devices and with an actualised Romantic impetus: a fatal combination for the continuity

---

<sup>6</sup> Louis A. Sass, 'Self and World in Schizophrenia: Three Classic Approaches', *Philosophy, Psychiatry, & Psychology*, 8.4 (2001), 251-270 (263)  
<doi:10.1353/ppp.2002.0026>

and sustainability of the self in written form. As Golomb argues, ‘the phenomenological studies make it clear that we cannot create our selves by looking inward into our seemingly given selves [...]. Only by action, by changing the world, can the self be created’.<sup>7</sup> Thus interpreted in the light of Thanatos, Kerouac’s *Big Sur* may tentatively be envisaged as contributing to the shift in post-war American literature from a modernist attempt to know the self, to a postmodernist admission of the formal impossibility of recognising it and building on it.

Nonetheless, throughout *Big Sur* Kerouac does not completely renounce the possibility of the transcendent. Rather, the novel enables a new vision of self that departs from the distinct influence of American Transcendentalism in order to move towards a more Catholic tradition, in which the transcendent is conceived as external and strictly indecipherable. It is primarily this switch – which operates gradually in *Big Sur* through multiple overlaps – that allows a remodelling of the narrator’s identity. As Kerouac writes on the last page:

I’ll get my ticket and say goodbye on a flower day and leave all San Francisco behind and go back home across autumn America and it’ll all be like it was in the beginning [...] – My mother’ll be waiting for me glad [...] – There’s no need to say another word.<sup>8</sup>

Duluoz’s last utterance at *Big Sur*, the furthest point of Kerouac’s exploration of the American road, announces that he is bouncing back east to return to the

---

<sup>7</sup> Golomb, p. 140.

<sup>8</sup> *Big Sur*, pp. 189-90.

domestic and the familial. As Duluoz returns to Golgotha, Kerouac turns back to the womb; not only to Mémère (Kerouac's mother), but also to his origins through an exploration into his French ancestry. Works such as *Satori in Paris* [1966] and *Vanity of Duluoz* [1968], as the vast majority of critics have pointed out, portend Kerouac's retreat in the 1960s into a form of conservatism that some have interpreted as reactionary.

While Kerouac himself claimed that he was 'actually not "beat" but strange solitary crazy Catholic mystic', it does not mean that the figure of the Beat visionary died for Kerouac; rather, that it matured into a more radical form capable of accommodating the resolution and liminality of his Catholic vision.<sup>9</sup> In *Big Sur*, the narrator's self-immolation exemplifies an uncompromising form of religious practice that repudiates the world incarnate; a personal and idealistic quest for divinity, a quest that is obsessional and quasi-fanatical for Kerouac. It gives way to an experimentation with forms of transcendence located, *a priori*, outside the self, as glimpsed in *Tristessa*. Such visions become fundamentally contemplative and utterly voyeuristic; as the body is sloughed off, they typify a transition from an ecstatic form of being that is potentially transcendental to a more static one fuelled, mainly, by the idolatry of a transcendent Other. Likewise, the poetics migrates from the embodiment of the transcendental moment – that of the 'IT' passages of *On the Road*, as D'Orso argues – to the disembodied and autotelic vision of the transcendent, as exemplified through the sound poem 'SEA', for instance;<sup>10</sup> as Kerouac writes, '[f]or after all the sea must be like

---

<sup>9</sup> Kerouac, *Lonesome Traveller* [1958] (London: André Deutsch, 1962), p. vi.

<sup>10</sup> See D'Orso, p. 28.

God'.<sup>11</sup> While this new form of the visionary in Kerouac's writing – which *Tristessa* pre-empts – closes off one horizon, it elucidates Kerouac's reinvention of the Beat aesthetic through Thanatos.

For Ginsberg, the writing is used to both present and disseminate the visionary: it is performative in its destination. While sounds and breath assist the capture and transmission of the transcendental, they also serve to catalyse a vision of social defiance. As Mortenson pinpoints:

Beat thinking about the moment does not end with the individual but continues to address the dynamics of intersubjectivity that are necessarily created when multiple individuals convene in a particular location for a specific time. The Beats' utopianism lies in their belief that such moments, when properly constructed, can provide a social space that both enlivens its participants and poses challenges to the rigid social structures that they oppose.<sup>12</sup>

This is particularly true for Ginsberg, who sought to devise a political form of poetry through the performative embodiment of poetics, a major preoccupation of his poetical practice in the 1960s and the 1970s, and of his public interventions, for instance with his involvement in the events around the 1968 Chicago Democratic National Convention. Ginsberg participated in a protest by chanting mantras, which were picked up by the mob. According to observers, the collective chanting of 'Om' – the sacred sound of Buddhism and Hinduism – had an

---

<sup>11</sup> *Big Sur*, p. 35.

<sup>12</sup> Mortenson, p. 156.

appeasing effect on both participants and authorities: it reduced violence and confrontation at the event.<sup>13</sup> As Ginsberg reports: ‘When the arms of the police were filled with flowers and their mouths filled with AUM there was civic order’.<sup>14</sup> For Ginsberg the poetical does impact the political to a certain extent. Crucially, this poetical form of engagement, deeply rooted in a transcendental American tradition, typifies the historical continuity of Thanatos. Both Ginsberg and Kerouac tried to rise beyond post-war socio-historical factors of alienation, with Ginsberg seeking to establish a form of social transcendence – influencing the Civil Rights and pacifist movements of the 1960s in the process – but they did so through vastly different sensibilities; sensibilities that in varying ways opened up new routes for a political exploration of the poetical.

---

<sup>13</sup> See *ibid.*, pp. 183-87.

<sup>14</sup> Ginsberg, ‘All is Poetry: Statement on 1968 Chicago Democratic National Convention’ [1968], in *Deliberate Prose*, ed. by Morgan, p. 50.

## Bibliography

### Primary sources

- Ginsberg, Allen, 'Howl', in *Howl, Kaddish and Other Poems* [1956], Penguin Modern Classics (London: Penguin Books, 2009), pp. 1-13
- Kerouac, Jack, *Big Sur* [1962], Flamingo Sixties Classic edn (London: Flamingo, 2001)
- , *Tristessa* [1960] (London: Penguin Books, 1992)

### Secondary sources

#### Beat references:

- Ball, Gordon, ed., *Allen Verbatim: Lectures on Poetry, Politics, Consciousness* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1974)
- Bierowski, Thomas, *Kerouac in Ecstasy: Shamanic Expression in the Writings* (Jefferson: McFarland, 2011)
- Bowering, George, 'How I Hear "Howl"', in *On the Poetry of Allen Ginsberg*, ed. by Hyde, pp. 370-78
- Campbell, James, *This is the Beat Generation: New York – San Francisco – Paris* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1999)
- Carter, David, ed., *Allen Ginsberg: Spontaneous Mind: Selected Interview, 1958-1996*, Penguin Modern Classics (London: Penguin Books, 2001)
- Charters, Ann, *Kerouac: A Biography* (San Francisco: Straight Arrow Books, 1973)
- , ed., *The Penguin Book of the Beats* (London: Penguin Books, 1993)
- , ed., *The Portable Beat Reader* (London: Penguin Classics, 1992)
- D'Orso, Michael, 'Man Out of Time: Kerouac, Spengler, and the "Faustian Soul"', *Studies in American Fiction*, 11 (1983), 19-30
- Eberhart, Richard, 'West Coast Rhythms', in *On the Poetry of Allen Ginsberg*, ed. by Hyde, pp. 24-25
- Feldman, Gene, and Max Gartenberg, eds., *The Beat Generation and the Angry Young Men* (New York: Citadel Press, 1984)
- , 'Introduction', in *The Beat Generation and the Angry Young Men*, ed. by Feldman and Gartenberg, pp. 1-11

- Ferlinghetti, Lawrence, 'Horn on *Howl*', in *On the Poetry of Allen Ginsberg*, ed. by Hyde, pp. 42-53
- Foster, Edward Halsey, *Understanding the Beats*, Understanding Contemporary American Literature Series (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1992)
- Geneson, Paul, 'A Conversation with Allen Ginsberg', *Chicago Review*, 27 (1975), 27-35
- Giamo, Benedict, *Kerouac, the Word and the Way: Prose Artist as Spiritual Quester* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2000)
- Ginsberg, Allen, 'Advice to Youth' [1971], Interview with Robert Duncan, in *Allen Verbatim*, ed. by Ball, pp. 103-30
- , 'All is Poetry: Statement on 1968 Chicago Democratic National Convention' [1968], in *Deliberate Prose*, ed. by Morgan, p. 50
- , 'The Art of Poetry' [1966], Interview with Tom Clark, in *Spontaneous Mind*, ed. by Carter, pp. 17-53
- , 'A Blake Experience' [1966], in *On the Poetry of Allen Ginsberg*, ed. by Hyde, pp. 120-30
- , 'Craft Interview with Allen Ginsberg' [1971], Interview with Mary Jane Fortunato, Lucille Medwick, and Susan Rowe, in *Spontaneous Mind*, ed. by Carter, pp. 245-58
- , 'The Dharma Bum Review' [1958], in *Deliberate Prose*, ed. by Morgan, pp. 342-48
- , 'Early Poetic Community' [1971], Interview with Robert Duncan, in *Allen Verbatim*, ed. by Ball, pp. 131-50
- , 'Identity Gossip' [1971], in *Allen Verbatim*, ed. by Ball, pp. 3-13
- , 'Improvised Poetics' [1980], Interview with Michael Aldrich, Edward Kissam, and Nancy Blecker, in *Spontaneous Mind*, ed. by Carter, pp. 124-58
- , Interview with Paul Carroll [1969], in *Spontaneous Mind*, ed. by Carter, pp. 159-96
- , 'Introduction to "Smoking Typewriters"' [1981], in *Deliberate Prose*, ed. by Morgan, pp. 28-32
- , 'Kerouac's Ethic' [1990], in *Deliberate Prose*, ed. by Morgan, pp. 358-73
- , 'Laughing Gas' [1958], in *Howl, Kaddish and Other Poems*, pp. 90-103
- , 'Lysergic Acid' [1960], in *Howl, Kaddish and Other Poems*, pp. 107-11
- , 'Mescaline' [1959], in *Howl, Kaddish and Other Poems*, pp. 104-06
- , 'Notes Written on Finally Recording "Howl"' [1959], in *On the Poetry of Allen Ginsberg*, ed. by Hyde, pp. 80-83
- , 'Poetry, Violence, and the Trembling Lambs or Independence Day Manifesto' [1959], in *Deliberate Prose*, ed. by Morgan, pp. 3-5
- , 'To America: Kerouac's *Pomes All Sizes*' [1992], in *Deliberate Prose*, ed. by

- Morgan, pp. 373-78
- , 'The Visions of the Great Rememberer' [1974], Preface to Kerouac's *Visions of Cody*, ed. by Penguin Books, pp. 1-10
- , 'What Way I Write' [1960], in *Deliberate Prose*, ed. by Morgan, pp. 255-57
- , 'When the Mode of the Music Changes, the Walls of the City Shake' [1961], in *Deliberate Prose*, ed. by Morgan, pp. 247-54
- , 'Words and Consciousness' [1971], in *Allen Verbatim*, ed. by Ball, pp. 25-34
- Hipkiss, Robert, *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)
- Holladay, Hilary & Robert Holton, eds., *What's your Road Man? Critical Essays on Jack Kerouac's On the Road* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois Press, 2009)
- Holmes, John Clellon, 'The Great Rememberer', in *Selected Essays*, vol. 2: *Representative Men: The Biographical Essays*, ed. by Holmes, pp. 113-35
- , ed., *Selected Essays*, 3 vols (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1987)
- Hrebeniak, Michael, *Action Writing: Jack Kerouac's Wild Form* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2006)
- Hungerford, Amy, 'Postmodern Supernaturalism: Ginsberg and the Search for a Supernatural Language', *The Yale Journal of Criticism*, 18:2 (2005), 269-98
- Hyde, Lewis, ed., *On the Poetry of Allen Ginsberg (Under Discussion)* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1984)
- Katz, Eliot, 'Radical Eye: Political Poetics and "Howl"', in *The Poem that Changed America*, ed. by Shinder, pp. 183-211
- Kerouac, Jack, 'Belief & Technique for Modern Prose' [1959], in *The Portable Beat Reader*, ed. by Charters, pp. 58-59
- , 'Essentials of Spontaneous Prose' [1959], in *The Portable Beat Reader*, ed. by Charters, pp. 57-58
- , *Lonesome Traveller* [1958] (London: André Deutsch, 1962)
- , *On the Road* [1957], Penguin Modern Classics (London: Penguin Books, 2000)
- , *The Scripture of the Golden Eternity* [1960], City Lights Pocket Poets Series, 51 (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1994)
- , *Some of the Dharma* [posthumous, 1997] (New York: Penguin Books, 1999)
- , *Visions of Cody* [posthumous, 1972], Penguin Modern Classics (London: Penguin Books, 2012)
- Lardas, John, *The Bop Apocalypse: The Religious Visions of Kerouac, Ginsberg, and Burroughs* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001)

- Ligairi, Rachel, 'When Mexico Looks Like Mexico: The Hyperrealization of Race and the Pursuit of the Authentic', in *What's your Road Man?* ed. by Holladay & Holton, pp. 139-153
- Miles, Barry, *Ginsberg: A Biography* (London: Viking, 1989)
- Morgan, Bill, ed., *Allen Ginsberg: Deliberate Prose: Selected Essays: 1952-1995* (London: Penguin Classics, 2001)
- Mortenson, Erik, *Capturing the Beat Moment: Cultural Politics and the Poetics of Presence* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2011)
- Nicosia, Gerald, *Memory Babe: A Critical Biography of Jack Kerouac* (New York: Grove Press, 1983)
- Pacini, Peggy, 'Roots Always Precede Routes: *On the Road*, through a Glass Darkly', *E-rea*, 8.2 (2011) <doi:10.4000/erea.1629>
- Portugés, Paul, 'The Poetics of Vision', in *On the Poetry of Allen Ginsberg*, ed. by Hyde, pp. 131-40
- , *The Visionary Poetics of Allen Ginsberg* (Santa Barbara: Ross-Erikson, 1978)
- Raskin, Jonah, 'Allen Ginsberg's "Howl" and the 6 Gallery Poetry Performance', In *Performing Poetry*, ed. by Gräbner & Casas, pp. 24-32
- Rexroth, Kenneth, 'Disengagement: the Art of the Beat Generation' [1957], in *The Penguin Book of the Beats*, ed. by Charters, pp. 323-38
- Shinder, Jason, 'Introduction', in *The Poem that Changed America*, ed. by Shinder, pp. xv-xxvi
- , ed., *The Poem that Changed America: 'Howl' Fifty Years Later* (New York: Farrar, 2006)
- Theado, Matt, *Understanding Jack Kerouac*, Understanding Contemporary American Literature Series (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2000)
- Trigilio, Tony, *Strange Prophecies Anew: Rereading Apocalypse in Blake, H.D., and Ginsberg* (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2000)
- Tytell, John, *Naked Angels: The Lives & Literature of the Beat Generation* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1976)
- Waldman, Anne, 'Introduction to the City Lights Edition' [1960], in Kerouac, *The Scripture of the Golden Eternity*, ed. by City Lights, pp. 1-5
- Walsh, Joy, ed., *Jack Kerouac: Statements in Brown: Collected Essays*, The Esprit Critique Series (Clarence Center: Textile Bridge Press, 1984)
- Watson, Steven, *The Birth of the Beat Generation: Visionaries, Rebels, and Hipsters, 1944-1960*, Circles of the Twentieth Century, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (New York: Pantheon Books, 1998)
- Whaley, Preston Jr, *Blows Like a Horn: Beat Writing, Jazz, Style, and Markets in the Transformation of U.S. Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004)

### References on Existentialism:

- Aboulafia, Mitchell, *The Mediating Self: Mead, Sartre and Self-determination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986)
- Adams, Laura, *Existential Battle: The Growth of Norman Mailer* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1976)
- Baker, Richard E., *The Dynamics of the Absurd in the Existentialist Novel*, American University Studies 19: General Literature, 31 (New York: P. Lang, 1993)
- Boschetti, Anna, *The Intellectual Enterprise: Sartre and Les Temps Modernes* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1988)
- Camus, Albert, *The Myth of Sisyphus* [1942], trans. by Justin O'Brien (London: Penguin Books, 1975)
- Chatterji, Ruby, ed., *Existentialism in American Literature* (New Delhi: Arnold-Heinemann, 1983)
- , 'Existentialist Approach to Modern American Drama', in *Existentialism in American Literature*, ed. by Chatterji, pp. 80-98
- , 'Preface', in *Existentialism in American Literature*, ed. by Chatterji, pp. 9-15
- Cotkin, George, *Existential America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003)
- Dulk, Allard Den, *Existentialist Engagement in Wallace, Egger & Foer: A Philosophical Analysis of Contemporary American Literature* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2015)
- Finkelstein, Sidney Walter, *Existentialism and Alienation in American Literature* (New York: International Publishers, 1965)
- Foley, John, *Albert Camus: From the Absurd to Revolt* (Stocksfield: Acumen, 2008)
- Fulton, Ann, *Apostles of Sartre: Existentialism in America, 1945-1963* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1999)
- Golomb, Jacob, *In Search of Authenticity: From Kierkegaard to Camus* (London: Routledge, 1995)
- Gordon, Lewis R., ed., *Existence in Black: An Anthology of Black Existential Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 1997)
- , 'Introduction: Black Existential Philosophy', in *Existence in Black*, ed. by Gordon, pp. 1-9
- Heidegger, Martin, *Being and Time* [1927], trans. by John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson, ed. by Taylor Carman, Modern Thought Series (New York: Harper Perennial, 2008)
- Howells, Christina, *Sartre: The Necessity of Freedom* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988)

- Intrater, Roseline, *An Eye for an 'I': Attrition of the Self in the Existential Novel*, American University Studies 3: Comparative Literature, 16 (New York: P. Lang, 1988)
- Kaufmann, Walter, 'Existentialism & Death', in *Existentialism, Religion, and Death*, ed. by Kaufmann, pp. 193-21
- , ed., *Existentialism, Religion, and Death: Thirteen Essays* (New York: New American Library, 1976)
- , 'Nietzsche & Existentialism', in *Existentialism, Religion, and Death*, ed. by Kaufmann, pp. 28-38
- , 'The Reception of Existentialism in the United States', in *Existentialism, Religion, and Death*, ed. by Kaufmann, pp. 90-119
- Lehan, Richard, *A Dangerous Crossing: French Literary Existentialism and the Modern American Novel*, Crosscurrents / Modern Critiques Series (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1973)
- Mailer, Norman, 'The White Negro' [1957], in *The Penguin Book of the Beats*, ed. by Charters, pp. 582-605
- McElroy, Davis Dunbar, *Existentialism and Modern Literature: An Essay in Existential Criticism* [1963], 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1968)
- Roston, Murray, *The Search for Selfhood in Modern Literature* (Houndmills: Palgrave, 2001)
- Ruotolo, Lucio P., *Six Existential Heroes: The Politics of Faith* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1973)
- Sartre, Jean-Paul, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology* [1943], trans. by Hazel E. Barnes, rev. by Arlette Elkaim-Sartre (Oxon: Routledge Classics, repr. 2007)
- , 'Existentialism & Humanism' [1946], trans. by Philip Mairet, 3<sup>rd</sup> edn (London: Methuen, 2007)
- Solomon, Robert C., *Introducing the Existentialists: Imaginary Interviews with Sartre, Heidegger and Camus* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1981)
- Srigley, Ronald D., *Albert Camus' Critique of Modernity* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2011)
- Zack, Naomi, 'Race, Life, Death, Identity, Tragedy, and Good Faith', in *Existence in Black*, ed. by Gordon, pp. 99-109

### References on Transcendentalism:

- Barbour, Brian M., ed., *American Transcendentalism: An Anthology of Criticism* (London: University of Notre Dame Press, 1973)
- , 'Introduction', in *American Transcendentalism*, ed. by Barbour, pp. 1-5

- Bowers, David, 'Democratic Vistas', in *American Transcendentalism*, ed. by Barbour, pp. 9-21
- Caponigri, Robert, 'Brownson and Emerson: Nature and History', in *American Transcendentalism*, ed. by Barbour, pp. 239-56
- Crowe, Charles, 'This Unnatural Union of Phalansteries and Transcendentalists', in *American Transcendentalism*, ed. by Barbour, pp. 147-55
- Ellis, Charles Mayo, 'An Essay on Transcendentalism' [1842], in *The American Transcendentalists*, ed. by Miller, pp. 21-36
- Emerson, Ralph Waldo, 'History' [1836], in *Nature and Selected Essays*, ed. by Ziff, pp. 149-73
- , 'Nature' [1836], in *Nature and Selected Essays*, ed. by Ziff, pp. 35-82
- , 'The Poet' [1844], in *Nature and Selected Essays*, ed. by Ziff, pp. 259-84
- , 'Self-reliance' [1841], in *Nature and Selected Essays*, ed. by Ziff, pp. 175-203
- , 'The Transcendentalist' [1842], in *Nature and Selected Essays*, ed. by Ziff, pp. 239-58
- Hansen, Olaf, *Aesthetic Individualism and Practical Intellect: American Allegory in Emerson, Thoreau, Adams, and James* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990)
- Hildebidle, John, *Thoreau: A Naturalist's Liberty* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983)
- McIntosh, James, *Thoreau as Romantic Naturalist: His Shifting Stance toward Nature* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1974)
- Miller, Perry, ed., *The American Transcendentalists: Their Prose and Poetry* (New York: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1957)
- Mitchell, Charles E., 'From Edwards to Emerson', in *American Transcendentalism*, ed. by Barbour, pp. 63-81
- , *Individualism and its Discontents: Appropriations of Emerson, 1880-1950* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1997)
- Robinson, David M., *Natural Life: Thoreau's Worldly Transcendentalism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004)
- Schlesinger, Arthur M. Jr., 'Transcendentalism and Jacksonian Democracy', in *American Transcendentalism*, ed. by Barbour, pp. 139-46
- Smyth, Richard A., *Forms of Intuition: An Historical Introduction to the Transcendental Aesthetic* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1978)
- Thoreau, Henry David, 'Life Without Principle' [1863], in *The American Transcendentalists*, ed. by Miller, pp. 308-29
- , *Walden; or, Life in the Woods* [1854], ed. by Stephen Fender, Oxford World's Classics, 3<sup>rd</sup> edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008)
- Ziff, Larzer, 'Introduction', in *Nature and Selected Essays*, ed. by Ziff, pp. 7-27

—, ed., *Ralph Waldo Emerson: Nature and Selected Essays*, Penguin Classics, 3<sup>rd</sup> edn (London: Penguin Books, 2003)

**Other references:**

Barbour, John D., *The Value of Solitude: The Ethics and Spirituality of Aloneness in Autobiography* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2004)

Bates, Catherine, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to the Epic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010)

Beckett, Samuel, *Waiting for Godot: A Tragicomedy in Two Acts* [1952], 4<sup>th</sup> edn (London: Faber and Faber, 2010)

Bennett, Andrew and Nicholas Royle, 'The Uncanny', in *The Gothic*, ed. by Punter and Byron, pp. 283-87

Blake, William, 'The Flight of Moloch' [c. 1810], an illustration of Milton's poem 'On the Morning of Christ's Nativity' [1645], in *John Milton: On the Morning of Christ's Nativity: With Illustrations by William Blake and a Note on the Illustrations by Martin Butlin*, [ed. by Butlin], p. 15

Bloom, Harold, ed., *Walt Whitman's Leaves of Grass: The First (1855) Edition*, 150<sup>th</sup> Anniversary edn (London: Penguin Books, 2005)

Boon, Marcus, *The Road of Excess: A History of Writers on Drugs* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002)

Breitwieser, Mitchell R., *National Melancholy: Mourning and Opportunity in Classic American Literature* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007)

Burke, Edmund, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Sublime and the Beautiful* [1756], ed. by James T. Boulton, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (London: Routledge, 2008)

Butlin, Martin, [ed.], *John Milton: On the Morning of Christ's Nativity: With Illustrations by William Blake and a Note on the Illustrations by Martin Butlin*, limited edn (Andoversford: Whittington Press & Angscot Productions, 1981)

Costelloe, Timothy M., ed., *The Sublime: From Antiquity to the Present* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012)

Eliot, T.S., 'The Waste Land' [1922], ed. by Stephen Coote, Penguin Critical Studies, revised edn (London: Penguin Books, 1988)

Fischer, Klaus P., *History and Prophecy: Oswald Spengler and the Decline of the West*, American University Studies 9: History, 59 (New York: P. Lang, 1989)

Freud, Sigmund, 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle' [1920], trans. by C.J.M. Hubback, ed. by General Books, International Psycho-Analytical Library Series, 4 (Memphis: The International Psycho-Analytical Library, repr. 2010)

- Friedman, Melvin, *Stream of Consciousness: A Study in Literary Method* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1955)
- Frye, Herman Northrop, *Fearful Symmetry: A Study of William Blake* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, repr. 1969)
- Géfin, Laszlo K., *Ideogram: Modern American Poetry* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1982)
- Goldthwait, John T., 'Translator's Introduction', in Kant, *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime*, ed. by California Library Reprint, pp. 1-38
- Gräbner, Cornelia & Arturo Casas, eds., *Performing Poetry: Body, Place and Rhythm in the Poetry Performance*, *Thamyris Intersecting: Place, Sex, and Race*, 24 (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2011)
- Gray, Richard, *American Poetry of the Twentieth Century* [1976], Longman Literature in English Series (London: Longman, 1990)
- Guerlac, Suzanne, *The Impersonal Sublime: Hugo, Baudelaire, Lautréamont* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990)
- Hamallan, Linda, 'Regionalism Made Good: The San Francisco Renaissance', in *Reading the West*, ed. by Kowalewski, pp. 213-30
- Hamilton, Paul, 'Coleridge', in *The Romantic Period*, ed. by Pirie, pp. 185-220
- Heffernan, James A., 'Politics and Freedom: Refractions of Blake', in *On the Poetry of Allen Ginsberg*, ed. by Hyde, pp. 256-59
- Hell, Julia and Andreas Schönle, eds., *Ruins of Modernity, Politics, History, and Culture Series* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010)
- Hesiod, *Theogony – Works and Days – Shield* [c. eighth century BC], trans. and rev. by Apostolos N. Athanassakis (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2004)
- Hipkiss, Robert, *The American Absurd: Pynchon, Vonnegut, and Barth*, Modern and Contemporary Literature Series (Port Washington: Associated Faculty Press, 1984)
- Homer, *The Iliad* [c. ninth century BC], trans. and rev. by Martin Hammond (London: Penguin Classics, 1987)
- Huxley, Aldous, *The Doors of Perception; and, Heaven and Hell* [1954], Vintage Classics, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (London: Vintage Books, Random House, 2004)
- Johnson, David B., 'The Postmodern Sublime: Presentation and its Limits', in *The Sublime*, ed. by Costelloe, pp. 118-31
- Kant, Immanuel, *Critique of Judgement* [1790], trans. by James Creed Meredith, rev. and ed. by Nicholas Walker, Oxford World's Classics (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007)
- , *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime* [1799], trans. by John Goldthwait, ed. by California Library Reprint, 5<sup>th</sup> edn (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003)

- Karschay, Stephan, *Degeneration, Normativity and the Gothic at the Fin-de-Siècle*, ed. by Joseph Bristow, Palgrave Studies in Nineteenth-Century Writing and Culture (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015)
- Kowalewski, Michael, ed., *Reading the West: New Essays on the Literature of the American West* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996)
- Kwiat, Joseph J. and Mary C. Turpie, eds., *Studies in American Culture: Dominant Ideas and Images* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1960)
- Liotard, Jean-François, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* [1979], trans. by Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi, Theory and History of Literature Series, 10 (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997)
- Mailer, Norman, *Advertisements for Myself* [1959] (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992)
- , *On God: An Uncommon Conversation* [2007], ed. by Michael Lennon (London: Continuum, 2008)
- Mancing, Howard, 'The Protean Picaresque', in *College Literature*, 6:3 (1979), 182-204
- Marx, Leo, 'The Vernacular Tradition in American Literature', in *Studies in American Culture*, ed. by Kwiat and Turpie, pp. 109-122
- McWilliams, John P. Jr, *The American Epic: Transforming a Genre: 1770-1860*, Cambridge Studies in American Literature and Culture (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009)
- Miller, Henry, *The Wisdom of the Heart* [1941] (London: Edition Poetry, 1947)
- Molesworth, Charles, *The Fierce Embrace: A Study of Contemporary American Poetry* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1979)
- Myskja, Bjørn K., *The Sublime in Kant and Beckett: Aesthetic Judgement, Ethics and Literature* (Berlin: W. de Gruyter, 2001)
- Nietzsche, Friedrich Wilhelm, *The Birth of Tragedy out of the Spirit of Music* [1872], trans. by Shaun Whiteside, ed. by Michael Tanner, Penguin Classics (London: Penguin Books, 1993)
- , *The Gay Science: With a Prelude in Rhymes and an Appendix of Songs* [1882], trans. and rev. by Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, Random House, 1974)
- , *The Will to Power* [posthumous, 1906], trans. by Anthony M. Ludovici, ed. by David Taffel, Barnes & Noble Library of Essential Reading (New York: Barnes & Noble, 2006)
- Orpheus, *The Orphic Hymns* [c. sixth century BC], trans. and rev. by Apostolos N. Athanassakis and Benjamin M. Wolkow (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013)
- Pirie, David B., ed., *The Romantic Period*, Penguin History of Literature, 5 (London: Penguin Books, 1994)
- Porter, James I., *The Invention of Dionysus* (Stanford: Stanford University Press,

- 2000)
- Punter, David and Glennis Byron, eds., *The Gothic* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004)
- Ray, Gene, *Terror and the Sublime in Art and Critical Theory: From Auschwitz to Hiroshima to September 11* [2005], *Studies in European Culture and History*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010)
- Regier, Alexander, 'Foundational Ruins', in *Ruins of Modernity*, ed. by Hell and Schönle, pp. 357-74
- Said, Edward W., *Orientalism* [1978], 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary edn (London: Penguin Classics, 2003)
- Sass, Louis A., 'Self and World in Schizophrenia: Three Classic Approaches', *Philosophy, Psychiatry, & Psychology*, 8.4 (2001), 251-270  
<doi:10.1353/ppp.2002.0026>
- Schopenhauer, Arthur, *The World as Will and Representation* [1818], trans. by Edward F.J. Payne, ed. by The Falcon's Wing Press, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn, 2 vols (New York: Dover Publications, 1969)
- Spengler, Oswald, *The Decline of the West* [1918], trans. by Charles Francis Stkinson, ed. by Helmut Werner, rev. by Arthur Helps, abridged edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991)
- Stoker, Bram, *Dracula* [1897], Deluxe edn (London: Penguin Classics, 2011)
- Sultanik, Aaron, *Inventing Orders: An Essay and Critique in 20th Century American Literature (1950-2000)* (Lanham: University Press of America, 2003)
- Tanner, Michael, 'Introduction', in Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, ed. by Tanner, pp. I-XXXIV
- , *Nietzsche: A Very Short Introduction*, Very Short Introductions Series (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000)
- Watts, Alan, *The Way of Zen* [1957], Vintage Spiritual Classics (New York: Vintage Books, Random House, 1999)
- Whitman, Walt, 'Song of Myself' [1855], in *Leaves of Grass: The First (1855) Edition*, ed. by Bloom, pp. 28-96
- Whittier-Ferguson, John, 'Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot, and the Modern Epic', in *The Cambridge Companion to the Epic*, ed. by Bates, pp. 211-33
- Williams, William Carlos, 'Paterson' [1946-1958], ed. by Christopher MacGowan, rev. edn (New York: New Directions, 1995)

