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From Kerouac back to Thoreau: The Pull towards Nature, a Revolt against Culture?

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Abstract

Many of Jack Kerouac's road novels stage a retreat into the wild that typifies an irrepressible urge towards natural phenomena, an urge which closely resonates with the works of Henry David Thoreau a century earlier. In Kerouac's *Big Sur* (1962) and in Thoreau's *Walden* (1854), nature is envisaged as a safe haven from the sociohistorical forces of oppression that shape modern existence, but also – more romantically – as a gateway to spiritual insights that affords the possibility for transcendence. Highlighting a series of analogies on the narrative, aesthetic and ontological planes between the two novels, the article goes on to show that this tropism towards nature simultaneously involves a process of disengagement from the cultural predicament of modern America; for Thoreau this meant the industrial revolution, for Kerouac the post-war quagmire. Reinterpreted as a romantic form of the revolt, this paper argues that this disengagement promotes a deliberate alienation from the social world that blurs the line between the quest for transcendence and the solipsistic condition.

Keywords: Beat Literature, American Transcendentalism, American Romanticism, Disengagement, Alienation

Kerouac'dan Thoreau'ya: Doğaya Karşı Çekim Kültüre Bir İsyan mı?

Öz

Jack Kerouac'ın pek çok yol romanı, bir asır önce yazılmış Henry David Thoreau'nun eserlerini andıran doğa olaylarına karşı bastırılamayan dürtünün tipik bir örneği olan yabani doğada inzivaya çekilmeyi betimler. Kerouac'ın *Big Sur* (1962) ve Thoreau'nun *Walden* (1854) adlı eserlerinde doğa, modern varoluşu şekillendiren toplumsal ve tarihsel baskı güçlerine karşı sığınacak bir liman ve aynı zamanda -daha romantik bir biçimde- ruhani aşkınlığı olası kılan içgörülere açılan bir kapı olarak tasavvur edilmiştir. Bu makale, iki roman arasında anlatı, estetik ve ontolojik düzlemde bir seri analojinin altını çizerken doğaya karşı bu yönelimin aynı zamanda, Thoreau için endüstri devrimi, Kerouac için savaş sonrası çıkmazı olan, modern Amerika'nın kültürel açmazından uzaklaşan bir süreci de içerdiğini gösterir. Başkaldırının romantik bir biçimi olarak yeniden yorumlanan bu uzaklaşmanın ruhani aşkınlık ve tekbencilik arayışı arasındaki çizgiyi bulandırarak sosyal dünyadan kasıtlı bir yabancılaşmayı teşvik ettiği savunulacaktır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Beat Kuşağı Edebiyatı, Amerikan Transandantalizmi, Amerikan Romantizmi, Uzaklaşma, Yabacılaşma

The connection between Kerouac and Thoreau has rarely been made; yet, despite obvious differences of period, of movement and of style, both writers share a preoccupation with nature and its transcendental powers on the self – a preoccupation, largely Romantic, which also signifies on a number of levels, philosophical, aesthetic and ontological. Simultaneously, both authors tend to position their respective narrators in defiance of the sociohistorical environment in which they are immersed, and whose encroachments are viewed, often, as an impediment to the quest for transcendence. In the 1962 novel *Big Sur*, Kerouac relocates his narrator Jack Duluoz to a Californian beach by Bixby Canyon, a place devised as a secluded haven surrounded by luxuriant nature. For Duluoz, the point of this retreat is to take him away from the ceaseless hassle of the last few years: "It's the first trip I've

taken away from home (my mother's house) since the publication of 'Road' the book that made me famous and in fact so much so I've been driven mad for three years" (2). 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" (1). This eagerness to return to the wild – devised in the novel as a version of the American pastoral – and to lead a simple life, albeit copiously idealized, typifies a departure from the world of commercial transactions and domesticity for the pristine world of a more primitive America, a change of scenery envisaged as a means to palliate the disarray of urban life and liberate him from the sense of meaninglessness and growing confusion that besieges him. The narrator's relocation to Big Sur signals a desire to rediscover a primeval space – both outside and within, a space through which he may reconnect with the forces of the transcendent and access an experience that is fully regenerative. Apprehended in the greater context of Kerouac's works, the move to Bixby Canyon not only restores the scenario of the quest, but it also reactivates its ontological function. Injecting vitality into the toxic immobility of the narrative, it carries the promise of an impending encounter with an immaculate nature in search of the transcendental impulse that would defeat the raging anguish that creeps into the text.

While this type of immersion in nature is characteristic of the novels of the *Duluoz Legend* – the name given by Kerouac to his oeuvre, covering a dozen of individual works that cohere into a greater corpus – it is also unmistakably reminiscent of the writings of nineteenth-century American Transcendentalist Henry David Thoreau, whose influence on Kerouac has been too rarely investigated. Thoreau's *Walden; or, Life in the Woods* (1854) is an experiment in self-reliance which is motivated by a desire to withdraw from society and interact with nature – defined as outer as well as inner phenomena – in the most direct way possible. To that end, its narrator vows to spend two years in the wilderness of New England with minimum social interaction. It opens, "[w]hen 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" (5). Depicting a genuine retreat into the wild, *Walden* features a narrative arc which is not dissimilar to that of *Big Sur*. In *Walden*, the aspiration for a radical form of self-

sufficiency is precisely what enables the possibility to transact with nature in its purest form: the narrator seeks, in his own words, "[t]o anticipate, not the sunrise and the dawn merely, but, if possible, Nature herself!" (17).

Crucially for Thoreau – and more generally for the American Transcendentalists – nature has a capital function. Transcendentalism posited the existence of a universal principle of creation, divine in essence, that is incarnate in nature, and which transcends the sensible world. This axiom suggests that the divine is not devised as a singular and external entity; rather, it is conceived as a pantheist form of godliness that directly penetrates the here and now; a divine essence envisaged as universal and imbedded, primarily, in natural phenomena. Thus grasped through its romantic and allegorical dimension, this appeal for nature typifies a drive towards natural phenomena that carries the hope for a restored harmony with the transcendental powers within and around the self, and along with it the prospect for regeneration. Rooted in a form of self-reliance, Kerouac's literary project may be perceived through this Romantic legacy: typically, in his road novels, Kerouac immerses his narrator into nature, creating an opportunity to interact with its essence which is envisaged as mystical – an interaction that vouches for the recovery of the transcendental through prolonged contact with nature.

Thoreau, Kerouac: The Pull of Nature

In order to get closer to nature, both writers position their respective narrators in a cabin whose function is conspicuously similar. Located off the beaten track, both Duluoz's and Thoreau's cabins operate as bona fide sanctuaries from which to reflect upon, and write about, their confrontation with the elements, allowing the vision to infuse into the self and resurface in written form. As Thoreau declares in *Walden*, "When I first took my abode in the woods, ... my house was not finished for winter, but was merely a defense 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" (78). The lyricism of this passage relies heavily on a brand of the pastoral which is highly allegorical. As David Bowers points out, the

American Transcendentalists "interpreted material nature mystically as a 'veil' or symbol of the divine; [they] maintained that every individual can penetrate the veil to discover divine truth for himself without the aid of traditional authority or even logic" (11). In this sense, Thoreau's cabin in *Walden*, by inviting nature to flow into its profane space, concomitantly allows for the circulation of the godhead. Similarly, for Duluoz in his Big Sur cabin: "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" (15). As modest as it may be, the cabin becomes a tool for capturing the ethereality of the spiritual essence of nature; a receptacle for divinity which becomes part of the quest for the transcendental, fully integrated into the Romantic fabric of the text.

In addition, while Thoreau's cabin faces Walden Pond, that of Duluoz faces the Pacific Ocean – stretches of water that signify not only the ubiquity of natural elements, but also the availability of their transcendental essence. For Thoreau, the surface of the pond acts as a giant, cosmic eye: "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" (168). Not only does it trap the essence of the transcendent into its depths, but it also sends its reflection back up to the surface and to the viewer. In *Big Sur* however, Kerouac subverts Thoreau's image of the placid lake and turns it into a monster ocean which is too unruly and threatening to send back a reflection at all: "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" (26). It would not be inaccurate to recognize in these giant waves a symbol for the anguish that submerges the narrator from the onset of the novel. Above all, this turmoil shatters the continuum that Thoreau seeks to cultivate by Walden Pond between self, nature and the transcendent through the device of reflection; a reminder that, as Duluoz aims to retrieve the faculty of the visionary, he must first reconcile with the demiurgic forces of nature.

Despite crucial differences in the imagery, both works share a certain kinship in their aesthetics. Thoreau's writing exemplifies a trajectory from the local to the universal and from the common to the sacred which is not unlike that of Kerouac's, and which is implemented, often, at the level of the sentence unit itself. For both writers, this

impetus in the writing is derived from a tendency to romanticize nature: it foregrounds a movement from the particulars of natural phenomena to the apprehension of its universal oneness, a movement rooted in the very physicality of the elements that extends towards the metaphysical and the spiritual. This movement also implies that natural phenomena themselves must be transcended on the site of the self; or, as Thoreau puts it in *Walden*, "[n]ature is hard to be overcome, but she must be overcome" (198). The body plays a major role in this operation: it is viewed as a sensorial interface whose function is to filter the essence of nature which permeates the sensible world and to transfer it to the deeper self. For Thoreau, "[a]ll 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" (198). Emanating from the corporeality of nature which it seeks to sublimate into a singular, universal essence, this process of idealization also works as a unifying principle. As David Robinson pinpoints in *Thoreau's Worldly Transcendentalism*, "[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" (118). Inherently transcendental, this process interrelates the self with the godhead and the mundane with the holy – transactions operated through incessant and concomitant upwards and downwards movements in the writing structure in terms that are spiritual, and which provide a mystical basis for the naturalistic poetics of both writers.

Used extensively by both Thoreau in *Walden* and by Kerouac in his road novels, this aesthetic feature reveals the contiguity of their ontological foundations. For Thoreau, the perception and synthesizing of natural phenomena via the body and its senses has the capacity to induce a type of consciousness that reveals the ubiquity and wholeness of the universal mind – a consciousness that may be interpreted, in fact, as visionary. Under such conditions, nature is equated with the godhead: conceived as the physical expression of the metaphysical principle of creation, universal and atemporal. Ultimately, as James McIntosh remarks, "nature with all its incoherency is one for Thoreau, one subject and one source for his being" (18). More than a way of living, Thoreau's naturalism foregrounds a way of *being* which strives for the transcendent.

Similarly, for Duluoz in *Big Sur*, and more generally in Kerouac's novels of the *Legend*, the respective narrators have the

power to achieve a higher form of being; a being, ultimate and ecstatic, that materializes through the ability to find a passageway towards the transcendental through prolonged contact with nature and its spiritual essence. Crucially, it is through the mystical concordance between nature and the self that the subject may comprehend, and eventually *embody*, the transcendental essence of nature – an achievement that vouches for the circulation of the flux of the universal mind within the individual, and which realizes the transcendental potential of his or her own being; an ontological proposition synonymous with an existential form of authenticity in Kerouac's writing.

A Revolt against Culture?

Notwithstanding, while Duluoz's relocation to Bixby Canyon offers him a chance to transcend his doomed condition and reconnect with self, nature and spirit, the motive behind his retreat remains largely ambivalent. The pressing call to the wild is also sparked by a recognition of the vital necessity to run away from his drunken stupor and cultivate isolation in order to retrieve his 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'" (2). In this sense, Duluoz's relocation is also a flight from his urban existence; an escape that allows him to shun all forms of social communication and avoid "endless telegrams, phonecalls, requests, mail, visitors, snoopers" (2). The type of simplicity that Duluoz cherishes here sets itself in opposition to both technological progress and social interaction. In romantic fashion, Kerouac refers to the archetype of the hermit to signify Duluoz's yearning to withdraw from modern civilization and dwell in wilderness, a yearning that foregrounds the search for a transcendental connection with the universal through seclusion and material detachment – a possible version of Thoreau's natural life, whose grace has been sacrificed to the modern age. Crucially, Duluoz's monastic allegiance to solitude and isolation in *Big Sur* can be conceived as a strategy for *disengagement*: one that articulates the clear will to escape social conditioning and reclaim one's own authority over that of society, a recurrent fixation that Kerouac shared with other Beat writers, but also with the main representatives of the American pastoral tradition. Accordingly, as John Tytell contends in *Naked Angels*, "[t]he 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" (259). While most Beat writers did not so much execrate the worldly than seek to subvert its profanity, this rebellious impulse against the institutions and the conventions of daily reality – viewed as mediocre, vitiated and self-repressing – has its roots, partly, in the American Transcendentalist tradition, as Tytell indicates. It is reflected by Emerson through essays such as "History" or "Self-Reliance" (1841), for instance, but also through the works of Thoreau, from "Resistance to Civil Government" (1849) to *Walden* (1854) and to "Life without Principle" (1863).

Throughout *Walden*, the natural life that Thoreau champions features a distinct pastoral dimension that runs counter to the developments of the industrial revolution and to the processes of mechanization and of rationalization that it entailed. In the opening chapter, "Economy", Thoreau suggests that the latest historical transformations shaking America copiously infringe upon the integrity and the liberty of the self. A life in compliance with the civilizational project of modernity, whose race towards technological progress propagates a reckless materialistic ethos in every corner of the country, is similar to the "fool's life" for Thoreau:

> 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. There is no play in them, for this comes after work. (9)

Behind the injunction to follow his example, Thoreau intends to show how such "lives of quiet desperation", conceived as fundamentally self-alienating, are shaped by ways of being that are viewed as meaningless and soulless, inasmuch as they are severed from nature. This predicament, symptomatic of the conditions of social reality in North America in the midst of the nineteenth century, epitomizes a form of existential inauthenticity, both in a transcendental and in an ontological environment: one in which the individual cannot perceive the mystical essence of nature because he or she has no possibility of venturing into it in the first place, and therefore fails to fulfil the

innermost and higher self. For Thoreau in *Walden*, "this points to an important distinction between the civilized man and the savage; and, no doubt, they have designs on us for our benefit, 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" (30). The foundational dichotomy that Thoreau establishes between modern and pre-industrial man is the difference between two types of being: one which is institutionalized and moderated – and therefore controlled – and another envisaged more romantically as self-reliant and radically free. The mode of being that Thoreau vindicates, beyond the stark opposition between the "civilized" and the untamed and between the urban and the pastoral, is more intuitive and instinctive rather than rational and reflexive, more organic and sensual rather than mechanical, fundamentally idiosyncratic and self-affirmative rather than standardized and self-objectifying. It is an ontological mode that channels a wholesome involvement with nature in the plurality of its forms and manifestations, and through which nature itself has the capacity to induce an experience in the individual which is genuinely transformative. As Thoreau marvels, "[t]he 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?" (126). While Thoreau's objections to the parameters of nineteenth-century modernity are, in origin, ontological, they are also politically charged: Thoreau's *being-towards-nature* is, also, a being *against* the cultural rationale of the historical moment in which he is immersed.

A century later, the cultural predicament of nineteenth-century industrial America that Thoreau vituperated transmuted into its post-war variant; more constricted, more commodified and more objectifying than ever, and against which Kerouac rails. In *Big Sur*, the tyranny of the sociohistorical environment is frequently illustrated through a series of scenes from daily American life in the early 1960s which have been satirized. In the following passage, Kerouac targets the stereotypical figure of the tourist – an avatar of post-war 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, 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. (38-39)

Kerouac's recourse to a satirical tone enables him to comment ironically upon the cultural climate of his times and denounce the mechanisms of mass consumption, of cultural uniformity and of social mimicry which, for him, characterized the post-war moment.

Concomitantly, this is what also fuels his desire for evasion – an articulation that tallies with an American expression of the pastoral tradition of the nineteenth century. By deserting the historical field of an America whose normative discourse tends to subdue the innermost self and prevail upon the most intimate desires of the individual, Kerouac channels the political implications of novelists such as James Fenimore Cooper with *The Pioneers* (1823) for instance, or Mark Twain with *Huckleberry Finn* (1884), whose characters – portrayed as highly self-reliant – may be viewed as alter egos of Thoreau's and of Kerouac's narrators. Through the retreat into the wild that they advocate, they press for a radical form of disengagement from sociohistorical reality through which they may create a space – in terms both physical and metaphysical – for the self to thrive. Nevertheless, for Thoreau and *a fortiori* for Kerouac, this disengagement is carried out for the sake of a more private sense of transcendental communion with the elements. As Kerouac writes, "[s]o 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" (18). Carved out in immaculate nature, this space is envisioned as ideal, pure and virtuous, and as remote as possible from the social and material contingencies of everyday life:

> [N]o 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 among 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 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. (18-19)

The further Duluoz steps away from the conditions of post-war modernity and into a primitive landscape, the closer he gets to recovering a sense of self-abandonment through which he may perceive the *intuition* of the preeminence of natural phenomena over all things; suggesting a correspondence, made by Thoreau a century earlier, between a strategy for disengagement, radical and wide-ranging, and the possibility for mystical insight. As Thoreau declares, "[m]y 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" (19). Ironically framed in a language that taps into economics, this declaration entails that the menace of self-alienation for Thoreau resides, first and foremost, in the series of mediations that the cultural predicament of an increasingly materialist and productivist America articulates in day-to-day reality. As he sharply puts it in "Life without Principle", "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" (325). Ultimately for Thoreau, it is the manifold encroachments of an ever more industrialized nation that dismantle the continuum between self, nature and spirit and hinder access to an experience of the transcendental.

Crucially, Thoreau's rebellion against such mediations takes the form of a double movement which is contradictory in its form, yet convergent in its ontological claims: it epitomizes both an engagement towards natural life – a *being-towards-nature* construed as the optimal ontological modality for authenticity in Existentialist theory – *and* an insurrection against the intrusion of a cultural predicament whose interferences cripple the realization of the transcendental self in the here-and-now. Through this revolt, it is the historical principle of alienation that Thoreau seeks to bypass in order to cultivate the spiritual resources of the self. Such a form of the revolt connives against the infringements of an increasingly industrialized America, seen as overly rationalized and outrageously materialist, in order to provide the individual with the sheer *opportunity* to dwell closer to nature, devised as ahistorical and universal. For Thoreau in *Walden*, "[m]ost of the luxuries, and many of the so called comforts of life, are not only not indispensable, but

positive hinderances to the elevation of mankind" (15). In so doing, the revolt encapsulates the brutal confrontation of the individual in search of transcendental being against the disruptive interposition of the cultural predicament of his or her concomitant historical and social reality – a revolt framed in ontological terms by the European Existentialists a century later. For Albert Camus, "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" (32). While Camus's revolt seeks to rebel against the limitations contingent to sociohistorical reality, it also makes use of these limitations, which it seeks to subvert to create the conditions for authentic being. For this purpose, the Camusian revolt needs the constraints of history to materialize.

In Thoreau however, a more radical stance crystallizes against the temporal world – viewed as profane – and more particularly against the productivist ethos and social conditions of mid-nineteenth-century modernity. As he writes in *Walden*,

> [a] saner man would have found himself often enough "in formal opposition" to what are deemed "the most sacred laws of society", through obedience to yet other sacred laws . . . it 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. (287)

The brand of individualism that Thoreau champions militates for the abrogation, pure and simple, of the historical and civilizational forces that deny access to the transcendence of being. For him, "[m]ost men, even in this comparatively free country, through mere ignorance and mistake, are so occupied with the facticious cares and superfluous coarse labors of life that its finer fruits cannot be plucked by them" (8). Unaware of nature and its transcendental powers – presumably the "finer fruits" of existence for Thoreau – the individual remains ignorant of this phenomenon, which in turn precludes the achievement of a higher form of being. In this sense, Thoreau's revolt foregrounds the contradiction of a disengagement from historical reality which paradoxically allows the individual to discover and perceive the essence of the world.

In a similar manner, the Beats also strove vehemently against the dominant cultural predicament in which they were immersed, which they viewed as viscerally oppressive and self-negating, in order to protect the nucleus of their individual freedom – a freedom intimately linked to the possibility of transcendence. In Kerouac's *Big Sur*, the capacity to retrieve the visionary is conditioned to the pressing necessity to reclaim a space which is in principle preserved from the most alienating aspects of the latest historical developments of the post-war moment; envisioned as an enclave in which the self may intuitively move as close as possible to nature and attend to its phenomena in order to sample its essence, envisioned as regenerative and salutary. This strategy of disengagement may be conceived in the vicinity of a Western regionalism that taps into the main tenets of the pastoral tradition, where rebellion is established as a central theme: a revolt framed in terms that are deeply romantic but also implicitly political. This revolt enables both authors to effectively consume the American myth of self-reliance via their own alternative system of values: values of radical autonomy, of self-sufficiency and of anticonformism in Kerouac – "[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" (25) – which all channel Thoreau's notion of *extra-vagance*. As he writes in the conclusion to *Walden*, "I fear chiefly lest my expression may not be *extra-vagant* enough, may not wander far enough beyond the narrow limits of my daily experience, so as to be adequate to the truth of which I have been convinced. *Extra vagance!* It depends on how you are yarded" (289). Solidly anchored in the American Transcendentalist tradition, this dedication to the singularity of individual character, whose eccentricity is the measure by which being aims to bridge the distance from the truth of the deepest self, largely resonates with the concept of authenticity coined by the Existentialists: a concept that champions the most complete fulfilment of the innermost and ownmost self, right here and right now, in defiance of sociohistorical contingencies. As Sartre proclaims in "Existentialism & Humanism", "man is nothing 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" (47).

In the Beat literary output, this impulse is invigorated by a sense of disappointment, repeatedly reaffirmed, with the national ideals of liberty and of the pursuit of happiness, reconfigured in the Beat

imaginary as a quest for transcendence. What the Beats, but also the Transcendentalists before them, identified as the moral failure of these ideals, stems in great measure from the regulations and restrictions forced upon the individual by the modern predicament. Seen as thoroughly alienating, it is thought to mediate experience in the world and with nature, taming the intuitive energies of the self and hampering action – be it individual or collective; constrictions encouraging a status quo that thwarts the very promises that America vowed to deliver in the first place – an articulation of the ontological with the political that defines the terms of their existential struggle.

In this context, Duluoz's relocation to the shores of Big Sur may be envisaged as an attempt to eschew the matrix of post-war modernity – an insurrection against the temporal through which access to a more spiritual experience of transcendental oneness with the elements may be reestablished. This existential revolt is fundamentally romantic in its expression: it proclaims the imperious need to rescue the truth of the self by pitting the individual against both history and society, in a fashion largely reminiscent of that of Thoreau a century earlier. For Thoreau, the possibility of reaching authentic being presupposes securing the purest, most unmitigated path to nature, so that the individual may *attempt* to interact with its spiritual essence with minimum hindrance. As per *Walden*'s rallying cry, "I delight to come to my bearings, – not walk in procession with pomp and parade, in a conspicuous place, but to walk even with the Builder of the universe, if I may" (293). This contention foregrounds the moral dimension of his revolt: since the affairs of the world impact the transcendental self, the political becomes moral – a correspondence that can be traced all the way back to the American Puritan tradition. In this context, self-worship is elevated as a moral injunction. As Thoreau advocates at the end of *Walden*, "explore 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" (286). It is this emphasis on the singularity of individual character and on the unlimited resources of the self which Kerouac obstinately carries into *Big Sur*. While the prevalence of the self over the social and the historical adds to the confessional nature of the writing, it also implies that the self is conceived as an absolute center of reality, encouraging the emergence of a solipsistic condition that plays a crucial role in his self-alienation.

Such a type of individualism, which borders on self-centeredness, risks becoming counterproductive for the self by compromising its integrity, but also jeopardizes the collective, because the radical freedom that it champions is transacted at the expense of social responsibility. This brand of individualism constitutes a tendency in American literature that spans across a wide range of traditions, from Romanticism to naturalism and modernism; forming the substratum of a literary lineage signalled by writers such as Jack London and Henry Miller – a writer often referred to as the godfather of the Beat movement. In his work *Existentialism and Alienation in American Literature*, Sidney Finkelstein argues that

> [t]he 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. (203)

Through his exploration of a range of literary works and traditions in the US that channel a distinctly Existentialist sensibility – whether it is derivative from European influences or consubstantial to American cultural history – Finkelstein connects the existential with the literary by interrelating a *being*-in-revolt with a specific *writing* of the revolt. In doing so, Finkelstein draws attention to the sweeping divorce from society that such a revolt entails, an estrangement that contaminates the field of the representational. Grasped in its American dimension, this revolt promotes a deliberate alienation from the social sphere, a disengagement that constitutes the foundational event in Kerouac's *Big Sur*. This revolt is as seditious as it is incendiary; it departs from its European formulation in its neutralization of the ethical through a zealous contempt for social responsibility. For Sartre, "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" (33). While this lack of ethical responsibility characterizes the shift from an Existentialist form of authenticity to a more American ethos, it also suggests that ontological solace can only be self-directed. "What is Miller's 'triumph'?" Finkelstein asks. "He reiterates that he has renounced the bondage to a demanding world, and has found freedom" (205). Nonetheless, this freedom is the nihilistic freedom of the anarchist, because it has no social relevance: it is the

by-product of a revolt which, in its obsession with immaculate forms of liberty and of autonomy, precipitates a form of being that subdues all practical possibilities for social action, and which risks engulfing the self in return.

Failing the realization of an alternative political project that is socially viable, this revolt is fueled by a reckless individualism that verges on solipsism; a brand of individualism which is fiercely obstinate and as intransigent as it is idealistic, which is meant to provide the individual with the opportunity to achieve a higher form of being: suggesting that ontological solace can only be self-directed. The autarchical individualism that fuels this revolt is as flamboyant as it is contemptuous; nonetheless, it creates the conditions for an extreme form of alienation that nullifies the possibility of social change and in turn hinders access to transcendence in the circumstances of the real. In this sense, the revolt that Kerouac's narrator operates through his disengagement is by moral, not ethical: primarily motivated by the desire to transact privately with the mystical essence of nature, Duluoz's commitment to a radical type of self-reliance does not signify on the social plane. Motivated solely by the pressing demands of the ideal self, Duluoz's quixotic relocation translates as a private retreat into the self – a retreat dangerously demobilizing and alienating by its own will, as illustrated through the series of crises that plague the second part of the novel. Duluoz becomes increasingly disoriented and paranoid:

> "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 – . . . now at the point of adulthood disaster of the soul, through excessive drinking, all this was easily converted into a fantasy that everybody in the world was witching me to madness. (100)

Such phobic bouts evidence a shift in the narrator's vision, which becomes strictly incarnate and self-legislating, harnessed to the whims of an hysterical self – a deflection characteristic of the condition of the solipsist, in which the individual is inclined to dismiss the factuality of the world by subverting its empirical status. As Duluoz finally reckons, "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"

(134). This realization suggests that Duluoz's experience at Big Sur is fragmentary at heart – an outcome of the highest degree of self-alienation that his strategy for disengagement fostered. Ultimately, he 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, I can just see the big transformations and plans jellying down there to curse us up in some other wretched suffering from eternities of it" (161). At this point, Duluoz has come full circle to his original limit-situation as recognized in the first chapters, "one fast move or I'm gone" (4). Taking the form of a flight from socio-historical reality that epitomizes a private retreat into the self, Duluoz's response fosters an inwardness which, in turn, breeds a solipsistic agony.

Thus for Kerouac, the obstinate commitment to natural phenomena – envisioned as a gateway to transcendence – and the insurrection against the temporal conditions of the here-and-now may be viewed as two sides of the same coin. This revolt of a twofold nature, which has roots in the American pastoral tradition, is conceived in the lineage of a Romantic brand of naturalism that simultaneously militates for a deliberate estrangement from sociohistorical reality. While such a type of revolt carries the promise of renewed transcendence, it is also tragically counterproductive: by draining the forces of creation and vitality, it creates, paradoxically, the conditions for self-alienation. This is the road that Kerouac takes in *Big Sur* – operating a retreat from the world that fails to rescue him from self-destruction.

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