The Paradox of Thanatos: Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg: From Self-Destruction to Self-Liberation, by Tanguy Harma. New York: Peter Lang, 2022, pp. 180.

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Tanguy Harma's monograph entitled *The Paradox of Thanatos: Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg: From Self-Destruction to Self-Liberation*, with its fascinating cover illustration by Vasil Stanev, "2 Sugar Skulls," presents an in-depth study of the Beat writers Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg as inheritors of the European Existentialist and the American Transcendentalist tradition. It elaborates these two writers' struggle to achieve meaningful life in post-war America under hegemonic capitalism and consumerism, crushed beneath conformity and social control, as they struggle towards a more authentic self-expression and liberation beyond the restraints that curtail transcendence. This book traces the roots of these two writers' use of Ralph Waldo Emerson's pantheistic conception of the individual as an incarnation of the universal mind while also a part of nature, also referencing Henry David Thoreau's Walden pond as a giant, cosmic eye, showing the earth's eye as reflecting the universal mind and nature as godhead. Probing humanity's roots in nature as a site for discovery of the self in its craving for transcendence, Thoreau indicates humanity as caught between their animal and higher nature. Both these counter-culture writers are also grounded in German Idealism and English Romanticism, particularly William Blake, who heard God speaking through the sunflower, in a beatific vision syncretizing Buddhism and Christianity, showing humanity aspiring a visionary, divine nature. Harma's alignment of these writers with Existentialism emphasizes alienation as preventing authentic identity; Martin Heidegger in *Being and Time* suggests the Dasein as embodying the potential of authentic being even while the individual is unable to surpass finitude and death, while Jean-Paul Sartre in *Being and Nothingness* evaluates the fear of nothingness as affording a goad to action and commitment. Albert Camus' *The Myth of Sisyphus* shows humanity's quest to achieve their potential for meaning in the face of nothingness and absurdity, as our worldly situation rebukes and prevents our desire for liberated wholeness.

Harma elaborates the writings of Jack Kerouac in *On the Road* (1957) and *Big Sur* (1962), and Allen Ginsberg in "Howl" (1956), illustrating their attempt to

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understand existence as caught between fear, stasis and nothingness, while aspiring towards transcendence, liberation and ultimate being. This study builds on the central crux of the paradoxical Thanatos as embodying destruction, alienation and a death fascination, suggesting a route through negativity towards possible release into creativity and authenticity. Thanatos, son of Nyx or Night and Erebus or Darkness, agent of fear and death's certainty, pivotally represents the individual's struggle to rise above the inevitability of death and to self-liberate from annihilation in revolt and emancipation, aspiring towards creativity and meaningful expression. Harma states: "the menace of death resonates, equivocally and paradoxically, as both a destructive motif and a creative one" (1); "an agent of death who catalyzes a special mode of consciousness through which the subject strives to counteract the impending menace of annihilation" (7).

The first half of Tanguy's book unfolds under the title: "Lapsing into Alienation: Strategies for Self-Destruction," investigating Kerouac's confessional writing in the footsteps of the American pioneers' search for mythic and prophetic vision. Kerouac's "Golden Eternity," his allegorized, spiritualized landscape, reveals nature within a pantheism based on Emerson's Idealism and Blake's Romanticism, with David Bowers interpreting the Transcendentalists' view of nature as a "veil" or symbol of the divine, enabling one to "penetrate the veil to discover divine truth" (25) and attain an idealized divine status through transformative visions. The second half of the book, "Towards Self-Liberation: Engagement, Movement, Disengagement" suggests a way through the morass of modern problems, in analyzing Ginsberg's poetic, intuitive expression of the divine and transcendental. "Howl" attains a self-celebrative, ecstatic protest against the callous, socio-historical situation that traps humanity within a Urizenic mind dominated by the symbolic Moloch, even while longing for pantheistic and sexual transcendence and experiencing the sight of God, showing Ginsberg's imagination aspiring to visionary, messianic insights into the transcendent, against the Not and the Emersonian NOT ME that prevent authentic existence. Ginsberg's incantatory, Whitmanic, torrential outflow in "Howl" indicates an incarnate divinity embodying a wide spectrum of humanity: "holy the unknown buggered and suffering beggars holy the hideous human angels" (88), outpouring in an alliterative, incandescent and euphoric flow. Ginsberg presents his generation caught in alienation and inauthenticity struggling against the mythical cannibalistic Moloch, the Canaanite sacrificing god, expressive of "the crushing machinery of post-war reality" (62). He presents a world of cultural degeneration and ontological deterioration, surrounded by mechanization and automation, under rampant capitalism and corporations that threaten and dislocate the self, in which, as Davis Dunbar McElroy states: "The world he has built has become his master; the work of his own hands has become a god before whom he bows down" (qtd. 67).

Ginsberg's verse strives towards "a spiritual manifestation of nature within the self, [as] intuition plays a fundamental role in the context of the transcendental ontology" (91), elaborating that "mind is One, and that nature is its correlative" (91). His poetry presents a sexual expression surging with creative energy in manifesting the universal spirit, seeing "existence itself was God," in the "poetical hysteria of … 'Howl'" (96). Ginsberg's voice offers the reader a physical expression of social defiance through revolt and commitment in striving through suffering even while caught between death and the potential for ultimate being and transcendence. In his poetic expression, each line draws a breath, the social body breathing the poem in and out: "with the embodiment of the intuition through breath acting as a driving force for social action" (120).

Kerouac's spontaneous prose of narrative self-discovery in *On the Road* mounts an invective against the commodification, standardization and mechanization of Western civilization, aspiring self-reliant transcendence, existentially suggesting the need to take responsibility for one's own creativity in order to transcend nothingness and achieve one's highest potential. *Big Sur* shows Duluoz in the mirror facing devastating anguish and unable to retrieve IT moments, buried in a pit of negation and hell, reverberating Duluoz's call to the wild in his flight from urban disengagement. In an estrangement that resonates with Camus' absurd, he urges the individual to self-liberate through engagement with life while effecting a revolt against the absurdity of existence, however hopeless such revolt may ultimately be, in what Finkelstein in *Existentialism and Alienation in American Literature* calls "the existentialist death-hauntedness [… that] transcends nothingness and precludes the experience of anguish" (107). Quoting Nietzsche's *The Will to Power*, Harma shows the Dionysian impulse as "the great pantheistic sympathy with pleasure and pain … the eternal will to procreation, to fruitfulness, and to recurrence" (111). These works reverberate with Thoreau's "*being-towards-nature* construed as the optimal ontological modality for existential authenticity—*and* an insurrection against the intrusion of a cultural predicament whose interferences cripple the realization of the transcendental self in the here-and-now" (132). Thoreau understands this as offering a "Life without Principle" where one is "paid for being something less than a man" (qtd. 134), while *Walden*'s rallying cry is "to walk with the Builder of the universe, if I may" (136).

In his romantic writing, Kerouac's introspection and self-absorption bears the stamp of his Thanatos, as he ultimately withdraws from the historic to attain liberation through a sacrificial Christian epiphany and enthrallment with an otherworldly cross. Hence the solipsistic, ruinous impulse of Thanatos emerges as more forceful than any liberatory potential, as he remains trapped in stasis rather than achieving *ekstasis*. In contrast, Ginsberg's intuitive vision establishes a more corporeal expression of authentic being in the face of imminent annihilation against the Moloch enemy within, asserting that "life should be ecstasy" (160). This penetrating analysis of the writings of Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg,

resonating with their Existential and Transcendental influences and roots, will particularly appeal to those engaged in Beat counterculture studies, as well as scholars of European Existentialism, American Transcendentalism and Romanticism as literary influences, together with more general readers of modern American literature. Harma traces a path through the works under study, showing them balanced on the cusp of despair through the deathly Thanatos while reaching towards liberation, even as he indicates the possibility of emerging through engagement towards a transcendent expression of a fuller expression of individual being in these writings.