Hip Sublime

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Published by The Ohio State University Press


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Jack Kerouac’s association with members of the Greek American population of Lowell, Massachusetts, has been, and continues to be, well documented. Most notably, in terms of his aspirations as a writer, his friendship with Sebastian “Sammy” Sampas is credited with introducing Kerouac to their school’s literary club and, later, to the “young Prometheans,” moves which not only exposed Kerouac to a range of new authors but also convinced him that becoming a writer was a realizable ambition for a boy from his background in industrial small-town New England. Much later, Sam’s sister Stella would become Kerouac’s third wife. More widely, the Greek American community to which Sampas belonged in Lowell continued to uphold a traditional Greek appreciation of the arts in ways that were less apparent in the Irish and French sections of the town that Kerouac also frequented, and this interest had a profound impact on the cultural life of a would-be artist such as Kerouac (Nicosia 1983, 82).

Greece, too, played a wider role in the development of the Beat consciousness, in a tripartite manner that embraced ancient Greek mythology and literature, British romanticism’s engagement with this past and with the revolutionary struggle of the early nineteenth century, and a (rather naïve) conception of post–World War II Greece as a space in which to escape the crushing pressures of modern America. Gregory Corso was well versed in the Greek classics from his time in Clinton Prison, and the letters sent during his three-month sojourn in Greece in late-1959 are characterized by allusions
to the Acropolis, Homer, and the “Gods of Greece,” coupled with customary tales of drunkenness and urgent notes to Lawrence Ferlinghetti and others, requesting money (Corso 2003, 210–22).¹

Unsurprisingly, given their affiliations with romanticism and transcendentalism, many Beat writers were drawn both to the literary and philosophical traditions of ancient Greece and also to the relationship between Byron and the Greek war for independence that led to the birth of the modern Greek nation. Significantly, when Jack Duluoz meets Sabby Sayakis (Sebastian Sampas) in Kerouac’s Vanity of Duluoz (1968), he notes how Sabby would “yell Byron at me: ‘So we’ll go no more-a-roving / So late into the night . . . ,’” lines whose introduction chronologically anticipates Duluoz/Kerouac’s own years of “roving” while—at the moment that he is writing—illustrating his retreat to life with Stella and Mémère and the tacit acknowledgement that his roving days are now behind him (Kerouac 1982b, 70). Alan Ansen (On the Road’s Rollo Greb) lived in Athens for around forty years, while many of the major Beats traveled extensively in Greece, celebrating a place of ancient culture, natural beauty, and hospitality, where the status of the artist was very different from their experience of the midcentury United States. Last—but by no means least—the ancient Greeks’ concepts of homosexual love between men and of the homosocial relationships that underpin the generation of art serve as direct precursors of the associations that, for Allen Ginsberg, were a necessary precondition for artistic creativity and that, in later life, saw him adopt a role akin to the ἐραστής (erastês) in the ἐραστής-ἐρώμενος (erastês-erômenos) relationship characterizing an ancient Greek education in military, civic—or, in Ginsberg’s updated version, artistic—aﬀairs.

This summary hints at what can be perceived as the central paradox of the Beat generation. In one respect, it stands as a quintessential American movement, looking back to Whitman and Thoreau, celebrating individualism in language generally drawn from the “American Grain” and highlighting aspects of American life threatened by an encroaching and pervasive modernity. On the other hand, Beat voices are also self-consciously pluralistic, drawing upon the aesthetic traditions of (among others) the East, of Europe (from the classics, through romanticism to modernism) and of Native American mythologies to construct their works. The paradox continues when international responses to Beat writing are considered: a corpus generally seen from within as counterhegemonic in its critiques of the cultural and political constraints of life at American midcentury is often read by non-Americans as the embodiment

¹. See too Gustave Reininger’s 2009 documentary, Corso: The Last Beat, in which the sixty-seven-year-old poet returns to Italy and Greece and muses on their significance in the formulation of his Beat persona.
ment of an American freedom unavailable elsewhere. The reading of Kerouac's relationship to Joyce and Xenophon that follows should be taken within the context of this introduction, since what I hope to illustrate is a significant interconnectivity between the literatures of ancient Greece, early twentieth-century European modernism and the fiction and poetry of Jack Kerouac.

Much of Kerouac's engagement with Greek literature and culture (both ancient and modern) comes, unsurprisingly, in the novels chronicling his Lowell childhood. In *Maggie Cassidy* (1959), Jacky Duluoz (the Kerouac stand-in) describes a newspaper picture in which he sees himself as a “Greek athletic hero with curly black locks, ivory white face . . . noble youth neck,” and recalls G. J. Rigopoulakos's mother, “an old Greek widow the death of whose husband fifteen years ago left her still in blackest mourning, sat in a rocking chair . . . with an old Greek bible on her lap, and grieved, and grieved, and grieved,” in two representations bordering on the stereotypical (Kerouac 1982a, 126, 14). A more significant moment occurs in *Doctor Sax* (1959), in what—at first glance—could pass for a simple duplication of the latter scene:

[G. J.'s] mother who can't understand English . . . is rocking back and forth with her Greek bible, saying “Thalatta! Thalatta!” (Sea! Sea!)—and in the corner of G. J.'s house I smell the dank gloom of Greeks and shudder to be in the enemy camp—of Thebans, Greeks, Jews, Niggers, Wops, Irishmen, Polocks. (Kerouac 1984)

While the incident ends with Duluoz seeing G. J.'s “almond eyes” and pulling back from the notion that Greeks are “raving maniacs,” their inclusion in a list of derogatory racial epithets hardly encourages a sense of identification (Kerouac 1984, 14). Yet such a conclusion conceals a more interesting moment of literary circulation that sheds light on Kerouac's reminiscences: “Thalatta! Thalatta!” is an ancient variant of what in modern Greek would be “Thalassa! Thalassa!” (“The Sea! The Sea!”). It is not, as Kerouac here seems to imply, a quotation from the Bible, but from the account of the retreat of the “Ten Thousand”—an army of Greek mercenary soldiers—from the Plain of Cunaxa to the Black Sea in 401 BCE, which is the subject of Xenophon's seven-book epic, *Anabasis*. It is unlikely, however, that the teenage Duluoz would know this, or uncertain even that Kerouac would have read *Anabasis* by the time that he wrote *Doctor Sax*.2 Indeed, if he had, he would probably not have

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2. This is not to understate the significance of the *Anabasis* which, as Tim Rood has noted, achieved “an extraordinary prominence as the text used for learning Greek in schools” in the United States in the second half of the nineteenth century (Rood 2010, 2). In an immensely useful, detailed history of the place of the *Anabasis* in American culture, Rood
implied that “Thalatta! Thalatta!” was taken from the Bible. It is possible, of course, that “Memory Babe” is offering a precise recollection of what he heard, even if he does not fully comprehend what he records. More likely, however, is that he is adopting the line more circuitously, drawing on the opening scene of James Joyce’s *Ulysses* (1984, 4), where Buck Mulligan—discussing the sea—tells Stephen Dedalus, “Thalatta! Thalatta! She is our own sweet mother.” If this is the case (and, given his unusually close attachment to Mémère, the identification of sea and mother in Kerouac’s representation is a provocative association to which I will return later), then a pattern emerges in which the adult writer draws upon his Greek American inspired knowledge of (Irish) modernism to reconstruct a moment from his teenage years before he had read Joyce and when he is in the early stages of what will become a significant, lifelong engagement with both ancient and modern Greek culture. Such a reading illustrates the complex transmission of ideas and language within which the sense of Kerouac’s Greek Beat aesthetic outlined in what follows should be understood.3

The rather circuitous road to Xenophon should not be taken to suggest that Kerouac’s identification with Ancient Greek literature and mythology is insignificant. It recurs regularly and is perhaps stressed most plainly in *Vanitv of Duluoz*, which places Duluoz’s life within the framework of Homeric epic. Possibly because he has dedicated the book to “Σταυρουλα” (his wife, Stella), he begins by recounting how he read Homer’s *Iliad* “in three days” (Kerouac 1982b, 9) and represents, among other examples, a teenage football game as “Homeric battle” (16). In addition, in a letter to poet Philip Whalen, dated January 16, 1956, Kerouac chides Whalen for “wasting yr time with that idiot Gertrude Stein,” and urges him to “read the great writers, stick to Rabelais, stick to Homer, stick to [Omar] Khayyam” (Kerouac 1995, 542). Likewise, many other works, most notably *Visions of Cody*, are laced with references

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notes that it has “often been received second- or third-hand—except where children have plodded wearily through it at school” (218). While Rood does not mention Kerouac or other Beats, Kerouac’s usage here does appear to fit the pattern he identifies.

3. This circulation is further complicated by the presence of Thomas Wolfe as a significant role model for Kerouac. Wolfe (who Kerouac read shortly before he moved on to Joyce) was heavily and openly indebted to Joyce—calling *Look Homeward, Angel* his “Ulysses book” (Rood 2010, 37)—and may well have influenced Kerouac’s decision to read *Ulysses*. In addition, in *Look Homeward, Angel* (1930), Wolfe had planned to include clear and repeated allusions to Xenophon’s *Anabasis*. These, however, were largely removed from the original 300,000-word manuscript, which was only published in full, as *O Lost: A Story of the Buried Life*, in 2000, and which, as Rood suggests includes, “by far the richest [literary] use of Xenophon in conveying and also interrogating the ideology of American growth” (ibid., 31). Although a passing reference to *Anabasis* remains in *Look Homeward, Angel*, it is improbable that this would have made a significant impression on Kerouac. See ibid., 27–50.
not only to the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, but also more widely to ancient Greek literature. Thalatta/the sea is a key motif throughout Kerouac’s work, from the Thomas Wolfe-esque title of his very early novel, *The Sea Is My Brother* through *On the Road*, *Visions of Cody*, and *Lonesome Traveller* and on to its central place in the prose narrative and accompanying poem of the Pacific (with the title, “Sea”) of *Big Sur.*

While this summary explicitly argues that the reference to *Anabasis* is a trace, filtered through at least one other narrative, that trace is significant as a kind of classical unconscious that highlights important formal continuities across Western literature. The *Anabasis* serves as an ancient precedent for Kerouac’s modern, secular, autobiographical version of the epic journey, with a shared desire to reach the sea that differs from the island-based topography of Homer and Joyce. In this context, it is worth assessing the structure and form of Kerouac’s fiction within the frame laid out by Xenophon. As a starting point, I shall consider *On the Road* (1957), since the fact that it is a work well known to so many readers means that key themes can be identified swiftly. I will not be proposing that it is a direct retelling of *Anabasis* (either on a conscious or subconscious level), but rather suggesting that the terms “anabasis”—a journey inland from the coast—and its opposite, “katabasis” (that is, an expedition from the interior to the sea, but also, more widely, a descent into the underworld, or into madness, or other similarly hellish situations) provide the structural foundations for Kerouac’s novel and that Sal Paradise’s journeys resonate with echoes of Xenophon—albeit echoes that undermine or parody the intensity of Sal’s quest through contrast with the magnitude of the original *Anabasis*.

*On the Road* begins with Sal Paradise’s plan for his own version of anabasis: in a pattern reminiscent of Greek and Roman epics, such as the *Iliad*, the *Odyssey*, and the *Aeneid*, the narrative commences at a moment of despair, with Sal “feeling that everything was dead” after the breakup of his marriage and recent recovery from a serious illness (Kerouac 1972, 7). 4

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4. For another reading of the place of anabasis and katabasis in *Big Sur*, see Stephen Dickey’s “Beats Visiting Hell: Katabasis in Beat Literature” in this volume. Dickey notes that “nowhere in the Beat oeuvre is the katabatic paradigm more intricately and kaleidoscopically applied than in Kerouac’s novel of 1962.” While I share Dickey’s view of the novel’s representation of a katabatic descent into mental turmoil, my argument will locate this fall as part of Kerouac’s “one vast book” (as he calls it in the preface to *Big Sur*), the Duluoz narrative as a whole, while Dickey’s focus links *Big Sur* to Allen Ginsberg’s verse and to the Beat canon more widely.

5. I am grateful to the editors of this volume for their help in identifying this key point.

6. Thus, the *Iliad* commences with the Greek army enduring the plague sent by Apollo and the feud between Achilles and Agamemnon; the *Odyssey* begins a decade after the end of...
spiritual rejuvenation involves a quest for self-discovery through a journey across America to the Pacific Ocean. But this journey needs to be subdivided, beginning with an episode of anabasis, as he heads to Denver, followed by the katabasis (here, essentially, in its most straightforward sense of a journey down to the sea) of the trip to the West Coast and a feeling of spiritual, if not actual, homecoming. Much of the remainder of the novel reenacts these moves in ways that carry traces of Xenophon's narrative, which, it should be remembered, also focuses more on katabasis than anabasis. Thus, attempting a linguistic American Grain vernacular that matches Xenophon's straightforwardly told epic, *On the Road* features similar scenes of struggles with nature in deserts, snowstorms, and mountain ranges; of hunger and other hardships; and, notably, of the need to overcome the hostility of local authority figures, such as the cops who seem keen to apprehend Sal Paradise and Dean Moriarty at every opportunity. The parallels continue with the parodic cameo appearances of the pseudo-Socratic Slim Gaillard and George Shearing, and in the emphasis on spiritual development as explicit rejection of what Sal sees as the pervasive materialism that is increasingly coming to define the postwar United States. Finally, as Sal reaches the coast and climbs the “big side of the canyon that led mysteriously to the Pacific Ocean,” he enacts his own moment of “Thalatta! Thalatta!” akin to that of the Ten Thousand on Mt. Thebes:

It was Sunday. A great heat wave descended: it was a beautiful day, the sun turned red at three. I started up the mountain and got to the top at four. All those lovely California cottonwoods and eucalypti brooded on all sides. . . . There was the Pacific, a few more foothills away, blue and vast and with a great wall of white advancing from the legendary potato patch where Frisco fogs are born. Another hour and it would come streaming through the Golden Gate to shroud the romantic city in white, and a young man would hold his girl by the hand and climb slowly up a long white sidewalk with a bottle of Tokay in his pocket. (76)

While this passage offers a vision of apparent integration for Sal, as the sea sweeps in to envelop the city in a romantic haze that replaces the images of loss and sickness at the start of the book, it is also (again, as with Xenophon’s *Anabasis*), something of a false resolution. Where Xenophon’s Greek soldiers must continue their battles, even when back within the Greek world, Sal also still has far to travel and will ultimately reject the promises of the West the Trojan War, with Odysseus still far from home; and the *Aeneid* with the storm that wrecks the Trojan fleet and with Aeneas’s recounting the tale of the Trojan Horse and fall of Troy.
and return to his aunt’s house in the East. The lure of the Pacific will return through much of Kerouac’s fiction, but it is never again able fully to represent the moment of utopian promise offered as Sal looks down from the California heights.

While I have been suggesting here that Kerouac is working within an epic form (and, of course, the Legend of Duluoz is conceived of by him as an epic in its own right), and while I have noted some similarities in the patterns of the Anabasis and On the Road, I do not wish to push the analogy too far. As I proposed above, “Thalatta! Thalatta!” provides a trace of a text, but it is a trace that seems unaware of the original source. Instead, I argue that the citation is more directly a reference to the opening pages of James Joyce’s Ulysses and that Joyce serves as a mediating presence in Kerouac’s appropriation of the classical epic and, in particular, in his construction of the sea as the central trope of potential liberation from the constraints of modern American life.

There is no doubt that the discovery of Joyce was a pivotal moment in Kerouac’s quest to become a writer. In a letter to Donald Allen, dated October 1, 1959, Kerouac recounts how, as a young man, he “read Joyce and wrote a whole juvenile novel like ‘Ulysses’ called ‘Vanity of Duluoz’” (Kerouac 1999, 248).7 The point is more fully developed in the 1968 novel that bears the same title, when Duluoz (who appears to be practically indistinguishable from Kerouac here) notes that,

I had just [in 1942] discovered James Joyce and I was imitating Ulysses I thought (really imitating “Stephen Hero” I later discovered, a real adolescent but sincere effort . . . ). I had discovered James Joyce, the stream of consciousness, I have that whole novel right in front of me now. It was simply the day-by-day doings of nothing in particular by “Bob” (me), Pater (my Pa), etc., etc., . . . an attempt to delineate all of Lowell as Joyce had done for Dublin. (Kerouac 1982b, 118)

Ulysses, therefore, served as a key component in the emergence of Kerouac’s stylistic and ideological practices. I will turn to the formal significance of Joyce’s text later in this essay, but wish, first, to address the magnitude of Buck Mulligan’s utterance as a signifier of a profound shift in attitudes toward Xenophon’s Anabasis in the early twentieth century. In “The Sea! The Sea!”

7. This “Vanity of Duluoz” is not to be confused with Kerouac’s 1968 novel of the same name.
The Shout of the Ten Thousand in the Modern Imagination (2004), Tim Rood has traced the influence of the Anabasis in European and (to a lesser extent) American literature, noting that, because of its relatively simple language, it became a staple text for the Victorian and Edwardian European and American elites who insisted upon childhood Latin and Greek education. As a result, the theme was extensively used in Western adventure stories set in the East. “The sea! The sea!” would be a cry of triumph for any protagonist who survived the trials of a dangerous journey through the East and a staple of popular literature. Even before this, “Thalatta! Thalatta!” had served as the subject of Benjamin Robert Haydon’s Xenophon, a painting representing the shouting army looking down on the sea from Mt. Thebes, which was probably the preeminent inspiration for the Philhellenic romances of the early 1800s.

While Rood is keen to emphasize the manner in which Anabasis has been rewritten because of its ability to offer a transhistorical narrative of suffering and triumphant homecoming, he also acknowledges (more briefly) the tendency of modernist and postmodernist texts to question the very possibility of finding an authentic home. It is here that Joyce becomes so significant, given, as critics since Adorno have pointed out, that Stephen Dedalus and Leopold Bloom share an understanding of the extent to which alienation defines the human condition. Like Bloom, Kerouac’s alter egos, such as Sal Paradise and Jack Duluoz, refuse to conform to the rules of the masses and—like Joyce and his central characters—believe that language can serve as the pivotal tool in expanding consciousness.

While, beyond Buck Mulligan’s early utterance (and an essential Xenophonic echo of it, to which I will return later in this essay), the “Nausicaa”

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8. Rood 2004, passim. Also see Hanson 2005, passim.
9. Rood 2010 maps the significance of the Anabasis within the political, literary, and philosophical culture of the United States. Among other examples, he notes the ways in which Xenophon was applied to Sherman’s march and by the CIA in their (then secret) “Anabasis project” designed to “undermine Saddam Hussein’s rule in Iraq by sabotage, infiltration, and disinformation, and by working with dissident Kurdish leaders in the north” (1). Rood also records how in a letter of 1763, future President John Adams cited Xenophon as his “favourite author,” while the retreat of the “Ten Thousand” was invoked “as a parallel to Benedict Arnold’s 1775 advance on Quebec . . . and to two of George Washington’s celebrated marches” (54). Rood concludes, having studied numerous examples, that the United States has a long political and cultural tradition through which “imperialist exploitation of antiquity has been accompanied by a highly uncritical presentation of the ancient Greeks in popular history. The creation of the myth of America has been paralleled by the creation of an equally buoyant image of Greek democratic courage and discipline” (213). He does, however, also point to instances of challenge to this paradigm: one section of Cormac McCarthy’s dystopian western, Blood Meridian (1985), is named “The Katabasis,” while Walter Hill’s cult movie, The Warriors (1979) reworks the Anabasis as an account of a New York gang’s battle from the Bronx back to their home in Coney Island (216).
episode, and occasional metaphorical references, the sea’s presence in *Ulysses* is largely implicit in the structured retelling of Homer’s *Odyssey* rather than explicit as a constantly recurring motif, the patterns deployed by Joyce also anticipate Kerouac’s fiction (most notably, *The Subterraneans, Visions of Cody*, and *Big Sur*, but also many other works) in significant ways. Northrop Frye’s seminal *Anatomy of Criticism*, published in 1957, the same year as *On the Road*, describes this connection, in a manner that usefully historicizes Kerouac’s reading of Joyce. For Frye, 

If a reader were asked to set down a list of things that had most impressed him about *Ulysses*, it might reasonably be somewhat as follows. First, the clarity with which the sights and sounds and smells of Dublin come to life, the rotundity of the character-drawing, and the naturalness of the dialogue. Second, the elaborate way that the story and the characters are parodied by being set against archetypal heroic patterns, notably the one provided by the *Odyssey*. Third, the revelation of character and incident through the searching use of the stream-of-consciousness technique. (1990, 313)

The combination of attention to the sensory details of daily life, the parodic appropriation of archetypal patterns and the use of stream-of-consciousness is familiar to anyone who has read Kerouac, while the fact that his own appropriation of these archetypal patterns can only come through the additional mediation of a hypercanonical modernist novel highlights the extent to which alienation has become a pervasive presence in the arts after the Second World War.

To illustrate the point, I would like first, briefly, to consider the “Joan Rawshanks in the Fog” section of *Visions of Cody*, the novel in which Joyce’s formal influence on Kerouac is most pronounced, before concluding with a more detailed look at *Big Sur*. In *Ulysses*, Buck Mulligan calls the sea “our great sweet mother”; in *Doctor Sax*, Kerouac also associates the sea with the mother figure. In *Visions of Cody*, the two are torn apart. Where Sal takes the road to the Pacific with the expectation of revelation, the Duluoz of *Visions of Cody*, about to set off once more for California, claims that he has “nowhere to go except the water, the terrible terrible dark sea water, leaving behind the fields of life and my mother the great and final protector of my life and soul” (Kerouac 1980b, 138–39). The imagery contrasts sharply with parts of the letter that Duluoz writes to Cody (the Dean Moriarty of *On the Road*), prior to his departure, in which the death of June (Joan Vollmer) and other events lead to the fear that he “might have gone under,” but also to the positive assertion that “now I’m a big seacaptain again” (73), but it is the former
impression that creates the tone to be developed once Duluoz reaches San Francisco.

While *On the Road* draws upon (and parodies) the positive archetypes of Xenophon’s *Anabasis*, “Joan Rawshanks in the Fog” can only recount the redundancy of these archetypes in a world obsessed with the two-dimensional banalities of the aging movie star. As such, Duluoz’s return to the Pacific functions in a more complex manner, representing it as katabasis not only as a journey to the coast but also in terms of a fall into an anomie that will come to foreshadow an even bleaker descent into mental breakdown in *Big Sur* (1962). Witnessing take after take of Crawford running up some steps and fumbling with her keys, Duluoz loses any remaining ability to mythologize the West. Following a lengthy stream-of-consciousness recollection of his younger self’s romanticized vision of Hollywood crews at work “in the California night, by moonlight . . . or some dreaming copse [or] . . . best of all . . . in the San Joaquin Valley of California, on a warm night . . . with the ghosts of old outlaws hanging from the cottonwood limb . . . and on the road itself Hopalong Cassidy, in his white hat and on his famed pony, loping along intently with beck and bent . . . all pure California night scenery and landscape,” Duluoz concludes (with another classical allusion), “I had never imagined them going through these great Alexandrian strategies just for the sake of photographing Joan Rawshanks fumbling with her keys at a goggyfoddy door while all traffic halts in real world life only half a block away and everything waits on a whistle blown by a hysterical fool in a uniform” (Kerouac 1980a, 373–74).

Perhaps most significant in this episode is the near total exclusion of the sea from the scene. Whereas, in *On the Road*, the Pacific sends a romantic fog swirling through a city of young lovers, at this moment in *Visions of Cody*, that fog signifies nothing but the universal alienation of a modernity encapsulated by Hollywood’s star system. Where once the sea was central to a vision of the possibilities of the West, here it becomes an invisible, ghostly presence, sending a “shroudy wind . . . smack from the great hidden dark bay” that also now houses “King Alcatraz . . . the sleephouse of two thousand dead criminals” (371).

*Big Sur* opens—like *On the Road*—with an extended period of crisis. In *On the Road*, Sal Paradise famously commences his narrative with the declaration that “everything was dead,” planning to take off for the Pacific Ocean with fifty dollars in his pocket (Kerouac 1972, 7). The crisis at the start of *Big Sur* is brought about by a victory as pyrrhic as that of the army of the Ten Thou-
sand at Cunaxa in Xenophon’s *Anabasis*. After years of poverty and struggle, the success of *On the Road* had turned Kerouac into an overnight sensation, the “King of the Beatniks,” unable to find any time or privacy to write (Kerouac 1980a, 7). Again, the response is to head West and—after a drunken false start in San Francisco—Jack Duluoz awakes in Monterey, “amazed and well again smelling sea air” (11). The events are a more-or-less direct transposition of Kerouac’s own actions, but Duluoz’s return to California suggests that the dystopian transformation of the nation is now complete and that the sea can no longer offer the kind of sublime transcendence it previously promised. On his first morning at Monsanto’s cabin, Duluoz spots the wreck of a car beside the sea “like a terrifying poem about America one could write”:

> The automobile that crashed through the bridge rail a decade ago and fell 1000 feet straight down and landed upside down, is still there now, an upside-down chassis of rust in a strewn skitter of sea-eaten tires, old spokes, old car seats sprung with straw, one sad fuel pump and no more people—. (16)

Ever the quintessential Beat philosopher, Duluoz sees the wreck as a metaphor for the dangerous forces unleashed by technology. The car, rather obviously, symbolizes Kerouac’s vision of the inevitability of the exhaustion of the American Dream and, more widely, the destruction of the human race, with metal rusted and tires eaten by a ravenous, insatiable ocean, itself far removed from the “blue and vast” backdrop to young lovers in *On the Road*. As John Tytell has noted, Duluoz’s return makes him realize that the West of his dreams has now become a “tentacled megapolis” (Tytell 1976, 207), an image that succinctly combines memories of Frank Norris’s California of the late nineteenth century with those of the sea monster that has superseded the sea mother. Where San Francisco had always represented the Frontier for Kerouac, as in *The Dharma Bums* or “October in the Railroad Earth,” in *Big Sur* that Frontier has been overrun and the old heroes “have been hemmed in and surrounded and outnumbered—The circle’s closed on the old heroes of the night” (Kerouac 1980a, 61).

In another way, however, the wrecked automobile suggests something more personal in the collapse of Kerouac’s own dream of Beat generation freedom as realized in the transcontinental ana- and katabasis that shape some of the most joyous passages in *On the Road*. *Big Sur* is the moment when Kerouac finally admits to the hollowness of his own dreams, with the implication that he has been deceived all along and is revealed as the gullible immigrant, the wandering Bloom, who had believed what he had been told about the nation. Whereas in the early volumes of the Duluoz Legend, Kerouac incor-
porated mass cultural devices as a way to shape his own material, in *Big Sur*, he self-consciously rejects them, at one point cutting through a “big designed mankind cartoon of a man standing facing the rising sun with strong shoulders with a plough at his feet” to reveal a “necktied governor” manipulating the illusion. At last (perhaps acknowledging the inescapability of popular cultural referents and drawing upon an echo from another archetypal text, *The Wizard of Oz*), he admits that the America he had once cherished is no more than a pop cultural construction, and that “his” West was merely an internalized retelling of that narrative.

*Big Sur* (and the poem, “Sea,” with which it concludes and to which I shall return below) goes beyond a simple recognition that Duluoz/Kerouac has been duped, suggesting that Kerouac now identifies his own complicity in the culture industry that he has come to despise. Whereas, in an earlier work such as *The Dharma Bums* (1958), the Duluoz character (here named Ray Smith) claims that his period of solitude on Desolation Peak brings rejuvenation and a renewed bond with Nature, Duluoz’s visit to Monsanto’s cabin even marks a rejection by the sea, which is here, for him, the key symbol of the natural world. In anticipation, he imagines that his sojourn will give him “peace” and the chance to “go back to childhood, just eat apples and read [his] Catechism—sit on curbstones, the hell with the hot lights of Hollywood.” Quoting Emerson’s assertion that “life is not an apology,” Duluoz tries to convince himself that, “once again I’m Ti Jean the child.” The early days of his time at the cabin represent a life of simple pleasures, in which he attempts to recreate and celebrate Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman’s vision of America. And yet, by the fourth day, he wonders whether he is “already bored?” and starts to long for cities that he knows will be “sickening.” This yearning for company is equated with a recognition of an unbridgeable gap between Man and Nature, feeling that the sea “didn’t want me there. . . . The sea has its waves, the man has his fireside, period” (Kerouac 1980a, 20, 30, 39 73). Where, in *On the Road*, the katabasis of the first arrival in San Francisco represented symbolic homecoming, here it is equated with absolute estrangement and with a psychological descent into the paranoia that dominates the second half of the novel.

The closing lines of (the prose section of) *Big Sur* appear, superficially, to offer an escape from the katabatic nightmare of the previous pages. Duluoz finally manages to sleep and awakes feeling that “everything has washed away—I’m perfectly normal again. . . . All the dark torture is a memory.” He imagines an anabatic return to his mother, going “back home across autumn America,” in which “it’ll all be like it was in the beginning” (Kerouac 1980a, 180–81). But, while it is tempting to share Duluoz’s optimism, and to recognize its potential as neat formal resolution in which, as Stephen Dickey
puts it (see chapter 1, 28), “anabasis perfects katabasis,” I would suggest that such a reading needs to be treated with caution. First, these closing lines echo the opening pages of the novel, in which Duluoz envisages a joyful six weeks by the Pacific, “alone and undisturbed . . . just chopping wood, drawing water, writing, sleeping, hiking, etc., etc.,” accompanied only by a “hopeful rucksack all neatly packed with everything necessary to live in the woods” (7, 10). Of course, this vision has been shattered before he even reaches the cabin; given both the events of the novel and the patterns of hopeful ambition swiftly replaced by desolate reality that shape so much of the Legend, it seems improbable that such a utopian fantasy will come to fruition. Second, the language of this concluding page, with its images of birds singing, a sleeping child, smiling adults, and religious purity, draws on precisely the kinds of popular cultural, sentimental, clichéd signifiers that Duluoz has earlier exposed (and which I discuss above) when he reveals the “necktied governor” manipulating the “big designed mankind cartoon of a man standing facing the rising sun with strong shoulders with a plough at his feet.” Again, given the impassioned demolition of the culture industry and of his place within it, it is hard not to identify the irony in this ending. Is Duluoz truly envisioning a “golden and eternal” future, or is he surrendering to the logic of a culture he has previously rejected? Either way, the conclusion seems to be packed with self-mockery and a sense of personal complicity with all that he purports to oppose.

In any case, Big Sur ends not with this final passage of prose, but with the long poem, “Sea,” dated August 21, 1960. Conceived as an attempt to capture the sounds of the Pacific, the verse develops—like the novel, itself—from an effort to regain the optimistic harmony between man and nature into the recognition of Kerouac’s absolute separation from what had been a central symbol of his search for freedom. From something “Loved as Mother & fog,” through “Glum sea, silent me” (Kerouac 1980a, 185, 190), the sea becomes yet another example of the modernity for which it once promised some compensation:

Ah Ratatatatatat—
The machinegun sea, rhythmic
balls of you pouring in
with smooth eglantinee
(204)

As such, it is no longer something that can grant Kerouac any kind of solace. The Pacific is a “liar,” that refuses to respond to the imputation, “Sea speak to

10. See Dickey’s essay in this volume for a more optimistic reading of the conclusion to Big Sur than the one I provide here.
me, speak,” and Kerouac asks, “Tiresome old sea, ain’t you sick / & tired of all this merde?” (186, 191). For him, “The sea’ll / only drown me” and “the attempt to “make our way / in self reliance” is thwarted by waves that “scare me” into a fear that “I am going to die / in full despair” (197).

Even his self-styling as a writer whose spontaneous prose marks him out from the calculated standardization of the United States at midcentury and as heir to the modernist tradition of literary experimentation (exemplified by Joyce) is no longer enough to save him from complicity in the appropriation and transformation of nature. Reiterating and developing the theme explored in the prose section of Big Sur, Duluoz writes of how, as best-selling author, his works appear on “gentle tree pulp pages / which’ve nothing to do / with your crash roar.” Whereas Duluoz is able to recall a time when he was “still innocently playing with words,” his literary endeavor now becomes merely another example of fallen, modern humankind’s inability to see nature as anything more than commodity, with the pun on “pulp” summing up Kerouac’s belief that his work is no different from any other kind of hegemonic popular culture (185–86, 177). The poem asserts that Kerouac is not alone in this complicity: bringing us full circle to G. J’s mother’s cry of “Thalatta! Thalatta!” and Buck Mulligan’s “Thalatta! Thalatta! She is our own sweet mother,” “Sea”—a title whose singular reference downplays the poetic and psychological intensity of the repeated “Thalatta! Thalatta!”—puns on the resemblance between the French words for sea, shit, and mother (mer, merde, and mère) in what is once more referred to as “Thalatta” (196). Although the allusion to Xenophon remains undeveloped, or indirect, filtered, once again, through Kerouac’s responses to another narrative, that trace remains important as a marker of Western literary continuity across space and time, and as an example of the classical unconscious that pervades the Legend of Duluoz. As such, it usefully condenses the much more extensive genealogy that I have examined throughout this essay. There seems to be no doubt that Joyce is implicated here as (once more) an indispensable mediating presence. For example, in Ulysses, hearing “his boots crush crackling wrack and shells,” Stephen Dedalus mulls upon the poetic qualities of the sea:

Won’t you come to Sandymare,  
Madeline the mare?  
Rhythm begins, you see. I hear. A catalectic tetrameter of iambics marching.  
No, agallop: deline the mare.”  
(Joyce 1984, 43)

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Joyce’s play on mare’s aural resemblance to “mer” (and, perhaps, too, to mère) anticipates Kerouac’s own punning in “Sea,” while the twinned play on sea/see suggests the process that moves from hearing the sounds of the sea to transforming them into poetry “agallop” with “iambs marching” that anticipates Kerouac’s own methodology in “Sea.”

Likewise, in Ulysses, Joyce included a few lines of prose that offer a close parallel to Kerouac’s own onomatopoeic verse:


In Ulysses, these lines—focalized through Dedalus—come shortly before Leopold Bloom’s moment of nihilistic/katabatic “Desolation” (a word, of course, that would later reside near the heart of the Kerouac lexicon) when he muses on a “dead sea in a dead land,” concluding with his vision of the Holy Land as “the grey sunken cunt of the world” (63). As such, they foreshadow Kerouac’s equally desolate verse, in which America has become the dead land and Joyce is named directly, with his vision of “wavespeech” abandoned: “Joyce—James—Shhish— / Sea—Sssssss—see / —Varash / —mnvash la vache / écriture—the sea don’t say / much actually” (192).

This rejection of the symbolically positive power of the sea and its allusion to Joyce (and Xenophon) resonates even further, although in a somewhat different manner, when Kerouac’s text as a whole—that is, the Legend of Dulouz—is considered alongside Ulysses. Doctor Sax records some of the earliest moments in Dulouz’s life: although, chronologically, it is preceded by Visions of Gerard (1963), Doctor Sax is the novel in which Dulouz is properly initiated into reading literature and, tentatively, into dreams of becoming a writer. Big Sur marks the end point (bar the 1966 novella, Satori in Paris, which is largely devoted to a search for information about French ancestors) of this journey: as I noted above, Kerouac/Dulouz, exhausted by the trappings of his Beat celebrity, seeks solace by the Pacific but, instead, experiences mental disintegration.

This plot of decline, however, in which the nightmarish qualities of katabasis supersede the promises of freedom and enlightenment offered by the Pacific in On the Road, runs counter to the redemptive closing moments of Ulysses, where Molly Bloom’s reference to “the sea the sea” (Joyce 1984, 706) provides formal counterpoint to Buck Mulligan’s “Thalatta! Thalatta!” and a self-imposed exile and tracing the extent to which Kerouac is “carrying forward the Joycean sea project” in “Sea.”
reiteration of Joyce’s acknowledgement of Xenophon. In contrast to her husband’s bleak vision of a/the “dead sea,” Molly recounts how “the smell of the sea excited me of course” and concludes with lines that evoke the lust for life that Bloom and Duluoz have lost:

O and the sea the sea crimson sometimes like fire and the glorious sunsets and the figtrees in the Alameda gardens yes and all the queer little streets and pink and blue and yellow houses and the rosegardens and the jessamine and geraniums and cactuses and Gibralter as a girl where I was a Flower of the mountain yes where I put the rose in my hair like the Andalusian girls used or shall I wear a red yes and how he kissed me under the Moorish wall and I thought well as well him as another and then I asked him with my eyes to ask again yes and then he asked me would I yes to say yes my mountain flower and first I put my arms around him yes and drew him down to me so he could feel my breasts all perfume yes and his heart was going like mad and yes I said yes I will Yes. (Joyce 1984, 704)

The emphasis on physicality and passion, accompanied by the explosion of natural colors at the end of Joyce’s novel, is far from the Duluoz of Big Sur, whose impotence and alienation from those around him represent what he sums up as “lonely inhuman isolation” from the natural world and from other people (Kerouac 1980a, 178). Molly’s memories evoke, up to a point, the desire that prompts Sal Paradise to head west, away from his dry college friends, and his subsequent eulogizing of the American landscape. More closely, they anticipate the role of Neal Cassady/Dean Moriarty/Cody Pomeray in the Duluoz Legend. Cassady’s difference from the friends that Kerouac left behind mirrors the contrast between, on the one hand, Molly and, on the other, Stephen Dedalus and Leopold Bloom, whose narratives have framed all, bar the final section of Ulysses. Like Molly, Dean’s speech is marked by the multiple repetition of “a thousand yeses” and, more importantly, by a form of stream of consciousness that bears little resemblance to formal English (Kerouac 1972, 8). Yet, for the Kerouac of Big Sur, stream of consciousness—or, for him, “spontaneous prose”—has become the means to express not the joy and kicks of On the Road, but, instead, the mental torture of delirium tremens and spiritual alienation.

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12. While this is not the place to develop the significance of the similarity, the parallel seems to go even further: as is well known, Joyce based Molly’s soliloquy on letters written by his wife, Nora Barnacle. Likewise, Kerouac claimed to have been inspired to develop spontaneous prose by the “Joan Anderson” letter he received from Cassady on December 30, 1950, which, for Kerouac, “has all of Joyce at its command” (quoted in Nicosia 1983, 337).
Bibliography


