In the spring of 1959, the Wagner College literary magazine known as *Nimbus* renamed itself more concretely the *Wagner Literary Magazine* and announced a special issue. Its editors had sought commentary on the Beat movement from major modernists like E. E. Cummings, Robert Lowell, Marianne Moore, and William Carlos Williams. Responses were mixed—many negative, a few evasive—and some critics simply declined the offer. On a form letter of his own devising, Edmund Wilson checked the box labeled, improbably, “Edmund Wilson regrets that it is impossible for him to supply opinions on literary or other subjects” (1959, 29). The scholar who took the charge most seriously was Dorothy Van Ghent, whose specialty was the English novel of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. She began her three-paragraph contribution thus:

The distinguishing characteristic of the Beat Generation is . . . the fact that they have a myth. The myth follows authentic archaic lines, and goes something like this. The hero is the “angelheaded hipster.” He comes of anonymous parentage, parents whom he denies in correct mythological fashion. He has received a mysterious call—to the road, the freights, the jazz-dens, the “negro streets.” This is the night journey or journey underground. . . . Where he goes is hell, the realm of death, ruled by the H- or Hades-Bomb.
The hero is differentiated from the mass of the population of hell by his angelic awareness: he knows where he is. He knows that in hell it is silly to act as if you were in heaven, so he acts like a damned soul. His tortures—the heroic “ordeals” of myth—send him into ecstasy and he bursts into song, song filled with metaphors of destruction. . . . The Beats say they are a religious movement, and the Beat literature constantly indicates the far and visionary goal of the hero’s quest—the return to the Kingdom, the transcendent kingdom of love and brotherhood and life. (1959, 27)

The following essay pays homage to Van Ghent by seeking to refine and apply some of her claims about the mythic Beat journey as a katabasis. Literally “a down-going,” the term can mean any descent—as an army to the sea, or a wind down a mountain—though more specifically it is used of a journey to the land of the dead as iterated through ancient epic—Gilgamesh, The Odyssey, The Aeneid—then Christianized in literary treatments of the Harrowing of Hell and, in its most sustained elaboration, Dante’s Inferno. Although in Van Ghent’s formulation, the Beat quester is distinguished spiritually “by his angelic awareness,” in the most basic sense, a katabasis requires the traveler to be a living physical presence—corporeal, weighty, and warm—in vivid distinction to his or her spectral surroundings. From a narrative standpoint, in turn, the defining feature of the journey is that it is round trip: katabasis requires anabasis to render it something other than death. Thereafter, the traveler can report the experience to the living—as when Odysseus recounts his adventures to the Phaeacians, or tells Penelope of “the day that I went down to the House of Death” (ἤματι τῷ ὅτε δὴ κατέβην δόμον Ἄϊδος εἴσω, Od. 23.252).2 The katabant must subsequently, in some fashion, carry back into life the knowledge or burden gained from the dead, some permanent—or at least permanently fading—alteration of the traveler’s sense of both world and self.

The underworld as an image of earthly existence may have attached readily to the Beats in their time not just because so many of their works mention the atomic bomb—in Van Ghent’s formulation, the newest god of hell—but because the Beats themselves found it so useful a topos. John Clellon Holmes, whose Go (1952) has a good claim to being the first Beat novel, originally conceived of it “as the first volume of a trilogy that would be structured on Dante’s

1. The examples used in the OED to illustrate its definitions of the word: the first is derived, of course, from Xenophon, the latter from meteorology. The OED nowhere cites “katabasis” as a term designating a literary episode.

2. Translation by Fagles. The term is used in the Odyssey in other contexts to describe, e.g., a god’s descent to earth (6.281, 20.31) or sliding down a gangplank to escape a boat, as when the disguised Odysseus invents for Eumaeus the story of his arrival at Ithaca (14.350).
Divine Comedy. Go was to be my Inferno, describing the circles of disbelief, descending from the upper world of young urban professionals, through the Bohemians, through the Beats, down into the outright underworld of criminality” (Holmes 1988, xxii).3 Other Beat works—Naked Lunch most memorably—satirize social conventions through far more outlandishly diabolical caricatures than Holmes used in Go, making plausible the idea of the Beats as katabants who go underground—socially at least—for their inspiration, and who replicate the journey in their works. Such is one implication of William Carlos Williams’s introduction to the first edition of Allen Ginsberg’s Howl and Other Poems, ending, “Hold back the edges of your gowns, Ladies, we are going through hell” (Ginsberg 1956, 8), or of Norman Mailer’s testimony during the censorship trial of William Burroughs’s Naked Lunch: “To me this is a simple portrayal of Hell. It is Hell precisely” (Burroughs 1966, xvi). Comparing the author to Hieronymus Bosch, Mailer argues that Burroughs provides us “with an intimate, detailed vision of what Hell might be like, a Hell which may be waiting as the culmination, the final product, of the scientific revolution.”4 As if echoing Van Ghent, Mailer then winds up his testimony by proposing that Naked Lunch has a positive or “redeeming” social function for the court to consider because it is Burroughs himself who has made the journey underground: “A Great Society can look into the chasm of its own potential Hell and recognize that it is stronger as a nation for possessing an artist who can come back from Hell with a portrait of its dimensions” (Burroughs 1993, xvii).

Mailer’s comments shift the focus from the work of art to the artist himself and, in so doing, from the merely emblematic hell of any dystopian vision to the writer as katabant. This essay will argue that not only did the major Beat writers share this general view of themselves but their works demonstrate a close familiarity with the traditional features of literary katabasis. Examples

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3. In his retrospective introduction, Holmes added crucially, “As I wrote, I saw that the same hungers activated us all, and the thesis evaporated;” although his original scheme survives in the title of the third and final section of Go: “Hell” (1988, 223).

4. Mailer’s depiction of Naked Lunch is close to Burroughs’s own early vision of the work, as set forth in a letter to Allen Ginsberg in February of 1955: “The novel is taking shape. Something even more evil than atomic destruction is the theme—namely an anti-dream drug which destroys the symbolizing, myth-making, intuitive, empathizing, telepathic faculty in man, so that his behavior can be controlled and predicted by the scientific methods that have proved so useful in the physical sciences” (Burroughs 1993, 268). Closer still to Van Ghent’s concept of the Beats as nuclear age writers was Burroughs’s initial summary of Naked Lunch. In a mock blurb he imagined for the cover of his yet unpublished manuscript, Burroughs wrote, “Suppose you knew the power to start an atomic war lay in the hands of a few scientists who were bent on destroying the world? That is the terrifying question posed by this searching novel” (ibid., 255).
treated here include Allen Ginsberg’s “A Supermarket in California,” which directly alludes to the geography of the classical underworld, and “Howl,” which takes us on an emphatically vertical journey down, up, and through the Beat cosmos. Jack Kerouac’s titles *Orpheus Emerged* and *The Subterraneans* also imply a katabatic vision, especially as the latter novel tells its “history of the hip or beat . . . or subterranean generation” whose members leave their apartments on Heavenly Lane to see films like Kurosawa’s *The Lower Depths* before they go out drinking at Dante’s Bar (Kerouac [1958] 1974, 133). Yet *The Subterraneans* takes place entirely within the hipster underworld—a space also metafictionally defined as the narrator’s room where he writes the novel—and thus lacks the requisite physical movement of the katabatic traveler from life to death and back. With the publication of *Big Sur* in 1962, however, Kerouac most fully descends into, and most thoroughly exploits, the katabasis of classical epic. Rewriting this crucial episode for the purposes of what Van Ghent calls their “authentic archaic” myth, the Beats must inevitably respond to post-classical treatments, yet it is striking how frequently, and how specifically, Beat literature burns for the ancient underworldly connection.

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*The Whells of Subways*
— **ALLEN GINSBERG, “HOWL,” PART 2, FIRST DRAFT**

Allen Ginsberg’s “A Supermarket in California” is a modern *nekyia*—an episode distinct from, but often subsumed under, the term katabasis—in which, after the performance of certain prescribed rituals, the hero converses with a prophetic or ancestral figure among the ghostly dead. The *locus classicus* of this event is in *Odyssey* 11, where the hero speaks with numerous shades—former comrades, noble women, warriors, his own mother—but only after receiving instructions about his homeward journey from the seer Tiresias. In Ginsberg’s poem, these dead interlocutors are all combined into a single figure: Walt Whitman, who, in 1856, included a new poem in the second edition of *Leaves of Grass* that would become better known, after some revisions,
as “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry.” With the audacious intimacy characteristic of his poetic voice, Whitman assures future generations of his transcendent and enduring presence:

Closer yet I approach you,  
What thought you have of me now, I had as much of you—I laid in my stores  
in advance,  
I considered long and seriously of you before you were born.  
(7.1–3)7

One century later, a conversation between the dead and the living is joined through the camaraderie of allusion in Ginsberg’s “A Supermarket in California” (1956):

What thoughts I have of you tonight, Walt Whitman, for I walked down  
the sidestreets under the trees with a headache self-conscious looking at the  
full moon. (1)

The link is formed not just by Ginsberg’s verbal inversion of Whitman’s line, but by his ironic extension of Whitman’s imagery to establish the precise setting of their encounter: a supermarket.8 Yet if Whitman’s stores were full, Ginsberg’s are not, and for much of the poem the living speaker is more of a phantom than the dead but still vital Whitman whom he haunts:

In my hungry fatigue, and shopping for images, I went into the neon  
fruit supermarket, dreaming of your enumerations!  
What peaches and what penumbras! Whole families shopping at night!  
Aisles full of husbands! Wives in the avocados, babies in the tomatoes!—and  
you, Garcia Lorca, what were you doing down by the watermelons?

I saw you, Walt Whitman, childless, lonely old grubber, poking among  
the meats in the refrigerator and eyeing the grocery boys.  
I heard you asking questions of each: Who killed the pork chops? What  
price bananas? Are you my Angel?  
I wandered in and out of the brilliant stacks of cans following you, and  
followed in my imagination by the store detective.

7. All citations from Walt Whitman are from Whitman 1982.  
8. Whitman’s phrase, “I laid in my stores in advance,” plays off the idiom “lay in store” and thus implies that he will enjoy yet more abundance, even after life, through the future generations he has already contemplated—a major implication of “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry.”
We strode down the open corridors together in our solitary fancy tasting
artichokes, possessing every frozen delicacy, and never passing the cashier.
(2–7)

Whitman’s original title for “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry” was “Sun-Down
Poem,” imparting the elegiac nuances of endings and approaching death to
the commuters’ ordinary ferryboat ride that Ginsberg’s conceit will extend
backwards, as it were, into the classical afterlife in the equally mundane set-
ting of the supermarket. In this light, Whitman’s poem can be understood as a
kind of inverted nekyia whereby the now physically dead poet sends his spirit
forward to address the living reader across the existential divide:

It avails not, neither time or place—distance avails not;
I am with you, you men and women of a generation, or ever so many gen-
erations hence;
I project myself—also I return—I am with you, and know how it is.
(3.1–3)⁹

What is it, then, between us?
What is the count of the scores or hundreds of years between us?

Whatever it is, it avails not—distance avails not, and place avails not.
(5.1–3)

“Supermarket” reverses the encounter and restores it to that of a classical
nekyia, wherein the living seek out the dead, hungry for guidance.

Where are we going, Walt Whitman? The doors close in an hour. Which
way does your beard point tonight?
(I touch your book and dream of our odyssey in the supermarket and
feel absurd.)
Will we walk all night through solitary streets? The trees add shade to
shade, lights out in the houses, we’ll both be lonely.
(8–10)

Thus at the poem’s melancholy close, each figure returns to his proper
realm as the dream-vision poet, belated with respect to both the classical

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⁹ The wording of the first line and the entire third line in this passage are from “Sun-
Down Poem” and the earlier versions of “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry,” and do not derive from the
edition of Leaves of Grass (1891–92) used in the Library of America text, otherwise quoted here.
and romantic traditions as well as to “the lost America of love,” now feels “absurd” while reflecting on his “odyssey.” Clearly there is a kind of antic humor throughout Ginsberg’s poem absent from the descents or underworld conversations of ancient epic, but “Supermarket” nonetheless captures something of the subdued grief in such scenes, a pathos increased by the encounter with a dead parent. Just as Odysseus longs to embrace his mother Anticleia, and Aeneas his father Anchises, and just as both heroes fail thrice in their attempts, so Ginsberg transforms the “childless, lonely old grubber” Whitman into a paradoxical “dear father” whom he too must lose:

Will we stroll dreaming of the lost America of love past blue automobiles in driveways, home to our silent cottage?

Ah, dear father, graybeard, lonely old courage-teacher, what America did you have when Charon quit poling his ferry and you got out on a smoking bank and stood watching the boat disappear on the black waters of Lethe?

(11–12)

The imagery of the classical underworld remains powerful here, but Ginsberg has altered the landscape to serve his own topical purposes. Charon, the ferryman of the dead, traditionally (and almost unanimously) navigates the river or lake of Acheron, or secondarily the Styx, neither of which pertains to the faculty of memory.10 Here, though, Whitman’s shade has been made to cross Lethe. Following the Aeneid,11 this could mean that his spirit is not yet able to return to a new corporeal existence—to be “struck from the float” (5.9) anew, in one sense of the famous image of Whitman’s poem—though here it seems more suggestive of a mutual obliviousness between America and her bard despite all those brave assurances in “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry”:

Who was to know what should come home to me?
Who knows but I am enjoying this?
Who knows but I am as good as looking at you now, for all you cannot see me?

(7.4–6)

10. One minority report comes from Propertius 4.7.91–92, where the shade of Cynthia describes the return, at dawn, of spirits to the underworld: luce iubent leges Lethaea ad stagna reuerti: / nos uehimur, uectum nauta recenset onus. (At the light of dawn the laws order them to return to the Lethean pools: we are carried across, and the boatman surveys the cargo he’s carried). Statius, Thebaid 12. 557, also refers to Charon as Lethaei portitor amnis, or “the toll collector of Lethe’s rivers.”

11. See Aeneid 6.703 ff., where Lethe is associated with the oblivion that must precede rebirth.
Whitman’s ferryboat may subtly evoke Charon’s vessel—everyone, after all, “shall cross from shore to shore years hence” (1.5)—yet the poem reassures us of the continuing relationship between the dead and the living in “the similitudes of the past and those of the future” (2.3), and celebrates the sheer materiality of life with exuberance but without resentment for the fact of personal mortality. (Indeed, in projecting himself toward the future reader, the speaker of “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry” sounds as if he is already speaking from the dead.) Ginsberg’s last lines, however, make the underworld reference explicit, uncomfortably so, and far less positive. While Whitman’s poem concedes that the future “cannot see” him, he nonetheless implies his continuing presence there and thereafter, but Ginsberg transfers that blindness to the dead poet who, in the final verb of the poem, can only watch the ferry “dis-appear.” And though the living Whitman crossed the East River asserting his love for those “others who look back on me because I look’d forward to them” (4.4), Ginsberg makes the westernmost Lethe the last word in his revisionist vision, leaving the dead Whitman of “Supermarket” with a question about what, if anything, remains of his America and how much, if any, of his wisdom or guidance is now remembered. Time passes—the century, say, from 1856 to 1956—and Whitman’s “Sun-Down Poem” has declined below the horizon into Ginsberg’s underworld poem, set not when the sun is “half an hour high” (1.2) but at night, the journey done, adding shade to shade.

Compared to the necessarily fleeting nekyia of “Supermarket,” “Howl” sets forth on a more exhaustive and exhausting journey to and from the underworld, traveling not only underground but throughout the cosmos meeting ghosts, demons, angels, and an entire subculture of living human beings, many in torment, some in ecstasy, a few in both (as Van Ghent describes the archetypal Beat). This is Ginsberg’s Dantean journey of death and rebirth, navigated by a Blakean compass of innocence and experience. Read as a katabatic narrative, the work has a clear structure, with a linear trajectory surprisingly in so notoriously unruly a poem. Each of the four parts of “Howl” has its own structural mandate, its own rhetoric, its own sound arranged around a single word, but together they accumulate to a modern, miniature Divine Comedy.

The first, and longest, part of the poem is a single sentence running to seventy-eight often very long lines. It contains the core assertion of the poem as a visionary and metaphysical statement—“I saw . . . minds” (1.1)—before detailing a number of episodes in the lives of Ginsberg and his camarados through a series of increasingly independent clauses beginning with “who.” It takes place on earth, mainly in Manhattan, though an earth that blends features of other Dantian afterworlds as the “angelheaded hipsters” (1.3) “pur-gatoried their torsos” (1.10). Yet while the population of the poem endures
much physical torment, even the nightmarish sufferings of the hipsters—“who chained themselves to subways for the endless ride” (1.14), or “disappeared into . . . volcanoes” (1.29), or “walked all night with their shoes full of blood” (1.45), or “were burned alive in their innocent flannel suits” (1.56)—are prelude always to reappearance (1.30) or ecstasy (1.41) or resurrection whereby “the madman bum and angel beat in Time, unknown, yet putting down here what might be left to say in time come after death / . . . rose reincarnate in the ghostly clothes of jazz” (1.76–77).

The absence of an underworld in the first section of “Howl” is partly explained by the itinerary of the poem as a whole, since it will be part 2 that takes us to hell. This section begins with one question followed by a series of exclamations, many of which have to do with “Moloch,” whose name acts as an incantatory refrain. Moloch is the fire idol who demands that parents place their eldest born children, living, into the oven of his mouth. The Book of Leviticus forbids his worship (18:21, 20:2), and in Paradise Lost Moloch is “the strongest and the fiercest” of the fallen angels, “now fiercer by despair” (2.44–45), who counsels immediate and all-out war with heaven as Milton reshapes him around the deadly sin of wrath: a “horrid king, besmear’ d with blood / Of human sacrifice, and parents’ tears” (1.391–92). In “Howl” Moloch is reimagined as an embodiment of the most destructive, dystopian aspects of the modern world. Not just the “electricity and banks” (2.7) of capitalism, not just the withering of joy by commerce and conformity, Moloch is also, plainly, the atomic bomb, the old-new fire god to which all parents, now, have to imagine someday sacrificing their children. This, then, is the katabatic section of the poem, taking place in hell, or on the earth that we have turned into a precinct of hell while self-destructively idolizing death: “They broke their backs lifting Moloch to Heaven” (2.11).

Ginsberg began the first of eighteen drafts of part 2 with a fragment of handwriting at the bottom of a typewritten draft of part 1. It does not begin, as do later drafts, with a question, but with an answer followed by a question: “Moloch, Moloch! Whose hand ripped out their brains and scattered their minds on the the whells of subways?” (Ginsberg 1986a, 58). Though when he typed up the second draft, Ginsberg immediately corrected “whells” to “wheels” (also retracting his initial miscorrection of “on the” to “the the”), and though the entire phrase vanishes by the third draft, the word “hell” is visible at the start of part 2, a Dantean slip of the pencil pushing its way forward in

12. There is a pun on “hell” in the phrase “who bared their brains to Heaven under the El” (1.5), and an indirect reference (1.15) to Judgment Day via allusion to “the crack of doom” (Macbeth 4.1.116), but the emphasis in part 1 is on the purgatorial sufferings of life on earth.
the misspelling of “wheels” as an early warning of the poet’s conception. First thought, best thought.

Part 3 of “Howl” is an assertion of solidarity and love between the poet and his dedicatee, Carl Solomon.14 Factually speaking, the two men had met and formed their friendship in 1949 at the New York State Psychiatric Institute of Columbia Presbyterian Hospital, but having revised the underworld riverways in “A Supermarket in California,” Ginsberg now alters earthly geography by relocating their meeting to a different, nearby institution known simply as Rockland. I suggest that this is an artistic choice made so that “Howl” can bring us back to earth through the reassuringly sturdy (and much briefer) choric phrase “I’m with you in Rockland” (3, passim), thus supporting the poem’s anabatic trajectory of a return from the military–industrial hell of Moloch to earth, to the rock, the bedrock land. (As the great absurdist himself, Carl Solomon, noted with mock outrage some years later, “I was never in Rockland. . . . Neither of us has ever been in Rockland. Ginsberg never even on a tour” [Ginsberg 1986a, 143].)

Part 4 of the poem has its own title, “Footnote to Howl,” but despite that marginalizing gesture, this section was, until a later stage of composition, placed between what thereafter became parts 2 and 3.15 The key word that it deploys, puns on anatomically, and harps on angelically, is “Holy.” “Footnote” begins with fifteen “Holies” in a row, as if providing one to balance each verse in the Moloch section.16 Completing the structural logic of the poem, part 4 takes place in heaven, or on earth at its most heavenly—the earth of beat friendships, loves, bodies, and souls—and thus “Howl” concludes by beatifying the beaten down and returning, as Van Ghent puts it, to “the transcendent kingdom of love and brotherhood and life.”

Howl. Who. Moloch. Rockland. Holy. Howl. Not merely an echo of “Hell,” the title of the poem indexes the interconnected sounds of the poem, and those key terms, those beat words, summarize the poem’s movement from earth to hell, returning to earth, thence to heaven. It is a travelogue not just of Manhattan and its Charonesque subways, not just of the narcotic underground, not just of the now unlocked closet of Ginsberg’s sexual identity, but of the moral universe.

14. Usefully for Ginsberg’s purposes, Carl Solomon’s last name brings to mind the biblical Solomon who, for all his wisdom, was for a time apostate in the worship of Moloch. See 1 Kings 11:7.

15. Ginsberg 1986a, 88–95, shows that not until the fourth draft (of five) did Ginsberg label the “Rockland” section as part 3, and “Footnote” became part 4.

16. “I set it as Footnote to Howl because it was an extra variation of the form of part 2” (Ginsberg 2000, 230).
III

Helling Headbent
—JACK KEROUAC, BIG SUR

Q: “Will you tell us which writers have had an influence on you, if any, on your writings I mean? Did any writers have an influence . . . ?”

A: “Not Dante!”
—JACK KEROUAC, INTERVIEWED ON ITALIAN TELEVISION BY FERNANDA PIVANO, 1966

William Carlos Williams’s foreword to Ginsberg’s “Howl,” though square, was true: hell is a likely place for howling, and Dorothy Van Ghent in 1959 was correct to quote the poem as the touchstone of her mythic reading of the Beats. Perhaps the only reason she did not quote Jack Kerouac’s Big Sur instead was that it had not yet been written, for nowhere in the Beat oeuvre is the katabatic paradigm more intricately and kaleidoscopically applied than in Kerouac’s novel of 1962. Van Ghent’s insight into the deepest narrative structure of Beat literature—its archaic myth, now seen anew in the blinding light of the atomic age—reaches its own prophetic fulfillment with this novel, for if the Beats collectively recorded their generational quest through the new Hades of postwar America, Big Sur depicts an individual journey wherein the hero performs sacrificial rites to enter a more private realm where he encounters the ghosts of his past, reckons his own mortality, and at last undergoes a melancholy renewal of his life’s purpose. He must “accept loss forever”—Rule #19 of Kerouac’s “List of Essentials” for writers of “Modern Prose” (Kerouac 1959, 57)—before returning transformed to the upper world, marked by death.

17. The disingenuousness of Kerouac’s claim is audible in the humorous tones of the 1966 interview, wherein the denial of influence slyly advertises it. See http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kOMyzs/lp-o. Note too, that Kerouac quotes Dante’s Paradiso (17.128–9)—Tutta tua vision fa manifesta, e lascia pur grattar (make plain all thy vision—and then let them scratch [trans., Sinclair 1974])—in an episode in Visions of Cody he also recycled for his final column in Escapade (April 1960), three months before traveling to Big Sur. (See “The Last Word,” reprinted in Kerouac 1993, 188.)

18. Gregory Stephenson notes that “Big Sur records Duluoz’s descent into hell” and ably analyzes the novel as a sequel to Desolation Angels that thus completes an essentially Christian journey culminating in “grace and vision, the ultimate boons of the hero-quest” via “a sort of downward ascent” (1990, 42–43). My discussion will undertake a complementary reading by focusing on the katabatic and other more classical elements of the novel.
Along the way, Kerouac signals his debts to classical literature with a number of details drawn from both ancient epic and Dante’s *Divine Comedy*.

Triadic in plot and structure, *Big Sur* is a fictionalized account of the author’s trip to the West Coast in late July 1960, punctuated by three visits to a small cabin owned by Lawrence Ferlinghetti. The invitation was initially a lifeline to Kerouac, who had been enduring what one biographer calls “a season of shame and disgrace” (Clark 1984, 184). But what began as the promise of refuge to allow a productive period of writing ended in the disaster of a personal breakdown. A year later, Kerouac shaped those events into a work of fiction, using the katabasis model, which served him not merely for the occasional allusive glance, but as the novel’s most deeply embedded structural principle. From the start, *Big Sur* immerses us in a flood of underworld tokens and scenarios as its protagonist, Jack Duluoz, makes his first, solitary visit to the cabin below the Bixby Canyon bridge. This first descent functions as something of an overture, establishing the underworld motif for the rest of the novel: “What in the hell is this?” (10), “What the hell’s going on!” (11). Duluoz’s epithets, initially inaudible as casual slang, gradually disclose their more literal, ominous nuances as he enters a place “even darker down there than anywhere,” where “ferns of horror” grow and “humid mists rise coldly like the breath of death” (12). Completing the preliminary journey with its necessary anabasis, he crosses the bridge and discovers “a dreamy meadowland” beyond a fence: “Then I crawl thru the barbed wire and find myself trudging a sweet little sand road winding right thru fragrant dry heathers as tho I’d just popped thru from hell into familiar old Heaven on Earth, yair and Thank God” (13). Descriptive details from the following chapter, when Duluoz takes stock of his surroundings in the daylight, support the infernal ambiance with words like “doom,” “death,” and “evil”; bats “flying silently around” (18)

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19. See Clark 1984, 176–84. A series of satires (most notably John Updike’s *New Yorker* piece “On the Sidewalk” (Feb. 1959) and hostile reviews extending well beyond the reliably antagonistic *Time* magazine had aggravated Kerouac’s paranoia. The premiere of the quintessential Beat movie *Pull My Daisy* was poorly received at a film festival even in San Francisco. Having agreed to visit Neal Cassady, then serving time in San Quentin, and to address an inmates’ study group, Kerouac went on a three-day bender beforehand, remained passed out through the appointed time, and never responded to rescheduling efforts. In June 1960, Hollywood’s travesty of his novel *The Subterraneans* was released, an event that so mortified Kerouac that he withdrew even further from his dwindling circle of friends.

20. The narrator’s eventual breakdown is signaled by an apt *memento mori* from (and for) the author of *On the Road* when Duluoz sees that an “automobile that crashed thru 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” (Kerouac 1992, 15).

as he reads *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* with “those damned silent black wings flapping and throwing shadows” (19); and related imagery of vampires and ghosts, not to mention the sound of the creek that will later become “the babble and rave of evil angels in my head” (20).

The second section of the novel contains sporadic, though more than incidental, references to death, hell, infernal punishments, and descents both literal and figurative, but it is in the last third of the novel that such details again grow more frequent and intense. Here, the narrator charts his final descent to Big Sur, along with his lover Willamine, or Billie, to a penultimate encounter with death. Her presence in the novel combines Circean traits of guile and guidance with underworld torment. Various described as “an ancient Salem housewife or Salem witch” (185), “an unconscious witch . . . she’s witching me” (187), part of “a great witching force” and one of the “evil forces gathering down all around” (191), as well as “a member of the expert poisoning society” (199) whose young son, Elliott, is “a warlock disguised as a little boy” (206), Billie is the focal point—both target and source—of Duluoz’s paranoia. He begins to suspect her of not just predatory matrimonial designs but even, at the emotional climax of the novel, a sacrificial or downright murderous intent toward her own son. After days of various threats to kill herself, or Elliott and herself together, and disturbing alternations of maternal punishment and embrace, Billie digs a garbage pit as they are packing up to leave the cabin. To Duluoz, it resembles “a neat tiny coffinshaped grave” (213) and as he hurriedly fills it with garbage the child grabs the shovel and begins to scream as if he himself is being buried alive. Billie fills the rest of the pit before she turns ominously to Duluoz:

“Do you want to finish the job yourself? — “What do you mean?” — “Cover the earth on, do the honors?” “Why did you make it look like a grave?” I finally yell—But Billie is only smiling quietly and steadily at me, over the

22. The reference to Stevenson’s novel ([1886] 2008) is both factual and conveniently symbolic, much like Kerouac’s inclusion of the detail that Ferlinghetti’s dog was named “Homer” (53). *The Strange Case* was—“of all things” (18)—the book in Ferlinghetti’s cabin when Kerouac stayed there, and its “last elegant sentences” read “at dawn” (20) by Duluoz depict Jekyll’s awareness of the death of his identity within Stevenson’s story and, now placed within Kerouac’s, a metanarrative moment signaling the fragility, indeed the fracturing, of both narrators’ personalities as they “seal up [their] confession[s].” As Hyde’s powers have grown to supersede Jekyll’s, the latter claims that “this is my true hour of death, and what is to follow concerns another than myself” (Stevenson [1886] 2008, 66). By alluding to Stevenson’s ending early in his own novel, Kerouac implies that *Big Sur* will not just parallel but continue the story of a dead or disintegrating narrator in an act of posthumous autobiography. Like Jekyll, Duluoz is another “down-going”—literally katabatic—man (ibid., 5).
grave, shovel in hand, the kid weeping tugging the shovel, rushing up to block my way, trying to shove me back with his little hands.” (214)23

Admittedly, there is no mention of sheep’s blood, and Duluz—more Elpenor than Odysseus—seems already to have drunk the libations himself, but the polluted ritual of this bizarre, incomplete burial ceremony recalls the underworld precedents and promises of ancient epic24, while signaling the nearly simultaneous beginning and end of Duluz’s last journey to the underworld. “The hell with all this madness!” he says, before passing out. “Just one short minute later” he awakens in “blessed relief . . . everything has washed away.” He sees “fields and flowers,” sits “smiling in the sun,” hears “the birds sing again,” and feels a “golden wash of goodness spread over all and over all my body and mind—All the dark torture is a memory—I know now I can get out of there” (215–16). Reversing the moment early in the novel when he first tried to find his way down to the cabin, liminal between land and sea, life and death, the protagonist has now come back to the region of life: anabasis perfects katabasis.

Duluz’s other and more constant companion throughout the novel is alcohol, which performs its own predictably bestializing sorcery, functioning at different times as entrance to, and punishment within, his personal hell. At the end of chapter 1, Duluz wakes up in a cheap hotel named The Mars, “drunk, sick, disgusted, frightened, in fact terrified” by the sound of church bells through which rise the words of a sermon “Satan is the cause of your alcoholism” (5–6). Aptly framed by references to the classical pantheon and the Bible, Duluz at this point is a character poised between two worlds or modes, corresponding to the liminal phase of the katabatic initiate: the upper and under worlds, liveliness and ghostliness, sobriety and drink, prophecy and nostalgia, or separation and reintegration, to use Van Gennep’s formula.25 Recalling Dante’s lost path from the start of The Inferno, Duluz has “gone the way of the last three years of drunken hopelessness which is a physical and spiritual and metaphysical hopelessness” (7), and he experiences in delirium tremens a mundane compendium of Dante’s underworld punishments updating those of the Gluttons of the third circle, sloshing in putrid water and mud; the Avaricious of the fourth pushing weights around uselessly; the Wrathful

23. Having achieved some distance from these events a year and a half later, Kerouac described the novel, then being considered for publication, in a letter to Carolyn Cassady. About the character of Billie, who had been based on Carolyn’s then-husband Neal’s then-mistress, Kerouac wrote demurely, “The book outlines the possibility that she’s a witch” (1999b, 322).

24. As Odysseus’s to Elpenor, Aeneas’s to Misenus and Palinurus.

of the fifth sunk in perpetual muddy combat; and the Violent-to-others in the boiling blood of the seventh circle. In this exemplary passage, Duluoz describes his flogging by the Demon Rum:

The feeling of being a bentback mudman monster groaning underground in hot steaming mud pulling a long hot burden nowhere, the feeling of standing ankledeep in hot boiled port blood, ugh, of being up to your waist in a giant pan of greasy brown dishwater not a trace of suds left in it—The face of yourself you see in the mirror with its expression of unbearable anguish so hagged and awful with sorrow you can’t even cry for a thing so ugly, so lost. (8)

Other classical and specifically underworld allusions crowd the early portions of the narrative: a Cerberean ocean, “barking . . . like a dog” when the lost Duluoz tries to figure “how can the sea be underground” (10); another body of water, a nearby creek with “so many voices . . . sudden choruses of other singers and voices . . . the voices of the creek amusing me so much at first” (19–20), pointing the way to the explicit Aristophanic allusion in the concluding poem, “Sea: Sounds of the Pacific Ocean at Big Sur,” where “Pluto eats the sea” and the Ocean says “Kek kek kek!” (231–32). There is also reference to “Vulcan’s forge” (22), “a huge knot in a redwood tree looking like Zeus’ face” (25), and even a “ghostly” (31) and “immortal” (26) donkey that might recall Ocnus’s underworld ass, perpetually eating rope (though Duluoz names this “ancient sacred myth character. . . . Alf the sacred burro” [16] in tributary tribute to another fabled underground river, that of Coleridge’s “Kubla Khan”).

26. See in particular Inferno Cantos 6.34 ff., 7.25ff., 7.100ff., and 12.46ff., respectively.
27. “Kek, kek, kek!” alludes to the sound made by the chorus of frogs that Dionysus encounters as he enters the Underworld with his slave Xanthias in Aristophanes’ Frogs (209–67). Aristophanes transcribes the sound as “brekekekekoaxkoax!” (220).
28. The appended poem may make one final allusive gesture to the classical tradition by referring—rather obscurely, it must be admitted—to Tennyson’s “Enoch Arden” ([1864] 1958), an Odysseyan variant wherein the hero returns home ten years after his presumed death at sea, but with different domestic results. Arden returns to discover that his wife has “with slow consent” (704) remarried his childhood friend and one-time rival for her love, and with him produced another child to join Arden’s two surviving children. Living for another year as “a dead man come to life,” (754) Arden does not disclose his presence or identity except by posthumous report. In Big Sur, Kerouac had referred to Tennyson twice earlier in “Sea” (1992, 233), and the last lines of that poem, and hence of the novel, are “be deep I see you / Enoc’h / soon anarf / in Old Brittany” (241). Kerouac himself had become increasingly interested in his own Breton ancestry, and Tennyson’s manuscript notes to “Enoch Arden” mention that “something like the same story is told in Brittany and elsewhere” (H. Tennyson 1897, 2.7). Perhaps the convergence of these details led Kerouac to associate Duluoz with Enoch Arden, another figurative katabant.
Big Sur is, plainly, a highly allusive novel, yet the allusions are not mechanically dropped in but rather emerge plausibly from the protagonist’s specific situation: his soul sickness; his fears of walking alone through strange, steep terrain in pitch blackness; the intensifying paranoia of the alcoholic. For both ancient heroes and this modern protagonist, the way out is the way through; or, in katabatic terms, the way up is the way down. This cycle of descent and return, quasi-death and recovery, occurs three times in the novel, conveyed not just by the physical locations of the protagonist but by scattered images combining diverse motifs of the underworld and the afterlife. These include a vignette of a Persephone-like young girl “jongling and jiggling through the fields to look for flowers” in what appears to her as a “Garden of Eden” but to the narrator as “this tortured human canyon” (122), and numerous descriptions of leaves violently blown into the surf that mingle Vergilian and Dantine nuances of lost souls awaiting burial, transport, or judgment:

Besides I suddenly notice as if for the first time the awful way the leaves of the canyon that have managed to be blown to the surf are all hesitantly advancing in gusts of wind then finally plunging into the surf, to be dispersed and belted and melted and taken off to sea—I turn around and notice how the wind is just harrying them off trees and into the sea, just hurrying them as it were to death—In my condition they look human trembling to that brink—Hastening, hastening—In that awful huge roar blast of autumn Sur wind. (181–82)²⁹

The novel even offers something like an updated show of heroes, as apparitions from Dulouz’s past—chiefly Cody (known formerly as Dean Moriarty)—return to visit: “Suddenly, boom, the door of the cabin is flung open with a loud crash and a burst of sunlight illuminates the room and I see an Angel standing arm outstretched in the door!” (124). Dulouz’s subsequent recollection of “the time in Mexico” when his companion “drove an old car over a rutted road very slowly as we were all high on tea and I saw golden Heaven” (125) presents Cody’s appearance in Big Sur as an incursion from the heroic past of On the Road.³⁰ Dulouz, though, is beating a different path now, with a less paradisal angle of vision, and turns explicitly to Vergil to reflect upon “lacrimae rerum, the tears of things, all the years behind me and Cody” (136)

²⁹. See also passages in Big Sur on pages 36, 188–89, 204. The relevant predecessor texts are Aeneid 6.305 ff. and Inferno 3.112 ff.

³⁰. See On the Road part 4, chapter 5.
before describing himself as now “helling headbent” (141) to his final descent. This anthimeria revises the more standard expression *heading hellbent* by constructing *helling* as an active verb to imply that Dulouoz’s existence even now is an unfolding, ongoing experience of damnation as he makes his Dantesque journey through “an insane revolving automatic directionless circle of anxiety, back and forth, around and around” (199). Moreover, *headbent* suggests not just that Dulouoz is being beaten down and driven under but that he is actively heading, as the epic hero must, toward a fate chosen as much as assigned. And though Dulouoz is granted a vision of the Cross—a fairly common epiphany in Kerouac’s fictions—it does not save him from the Boschian nightmare of “the underground Hell” (210) to come. Not surprisingly, these last portions of *Big Sur* read somewhat like *Naked Lunch*, though predicated on the use of and withdrawal from alcohol, not junk: an A-bomb, not an H-bomb, to recall Van Ghent’s characterization of Beat mythography in the nuclear age. It is as close as the book gets to a sustained description, rather than a fragmentary glimpse, of hell as a lived experience:

Instead of being really dead we’ll be taken to the Underground Slimes to walk neck deep in steaming mucks pulling huge groaning wheels (among small forked snakes) so the devil with the long ears can mine his Purple Magenta Square Stone that is the secret of all this Kingdom—You end up down there groaning and pulling thru dead bodies of other people even your own family floating in the ooze. (209–10)

Fittingly, this last section ends with one more salute to the classical traditions of katabasis and nekyia. When Odysseus meets the shade of Achilles in the underworld, the great warrior rejects his fame in death:

> By god, I’d rather slave on earth for another man—
> some dirt-poor tenant farmer who scrapes to keep alive—
> than rule down here over all the breathless dead.
> (Fagles 11.556–8)

The Beat version of this pronouncement, belated and hungover, is Dulouoz’s vow: “This sickness has got me wishing if I can ever get out of this I’ll gladly become a millworker and shut my big mouth” (211). In substituting “millworker” for “slave” in this formula, Jack Kerouac, native son of Lowell, Massachusetts, knows whereof he speaks.

31. See *Aeneid* 1.462.
I dwelled in Hell on earth to write this rhyme.
—ALLEN GINSBERG, “AFTER READING KEROUAC’S MANUSCRIPT THE TOWN AND THE CITY”

In 1959 Dorothy Van Ghent understandably situated the Beat underground in the Atomic Age as humanity’s latest version of hell, but Beat katabasis is a matter of literary fusion as well as nuclear fission. The Beats were not heirs to romanticism exclusively—certainly Burroughs was not—but much more proximately to the Modernists for whom, as T. S. Eliot wrote in his review of Joyce’s *Ulysses*, the “mythical method” provided “a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history” (Eliot 1923, 483). To those Modernists, in the words of a recent study, “the single most important myth [is] the descent to the underworld” (Smith 1990, 1).

By now, moreover, it should no longer be necessary to address Allen Ginsberg’s observation that the most common misconception about the Beats was that they were illiterate, by which he meant not literally but literarily illiterate.32 Burroughs in the mid-1930s at Harvard, home of Charles W. Eliot’s “five foot shelf” of Harvard Classics, and Ginsberg and Kerouac in the early ’40s at Columbia, were exposed to curricula in which classical literature was prominent and foundational. The “Literature Humanities” syllabus at Columbia in the years 1940–42, Kerouac’s only years of attendance, included the *Iliad*, the *Frogs*, the *Aeneid*, and the *Inferno.*33 Though the *Odyssey* was not listed, Kerouac (again through his Duluoz persona) refers to reading both Homeric epics in college (Kerouac [1968] 1994, 66), a claim that does not contradict his disavowal of schoolwork elsewhere: “Read and studied alone all my life.—Set a record at Columbia College cutting classes in order to stay in dormitory room to write a daily play and read, say, Louis Ferdinand Céline, instead of ‘classics’ of the course” (Kerouac [1960] 1970, viii). In fact, Kerouac’s studious habits went back to Lowell High School, where he took off one day a week in his senior year to work his way through, among other volumes, the Harvard Classics (Johnson 2012, 61). Completing the innermost Beat circle was Gregory Corso whose extraordinarily hard childhood of parental abandonment, foster homes, homelessness, and prisons, made him (along with Neal Cassady) even more authentically an autodidact. Despite these circumstances,

Corso nonetheless absorbed many classical authors and made frequent, not merely miscellaneous, allusion to them in his poetry. Indeed, when teaching at the Naropa Institute in 1977, Corso’s syllabus included *Gilgamesh*, a katabatic text he applied to his fellow Beats by “constantly referring to Gilgamesh and Enkidu as proto-Kerouac and proto-Cassady, two friends in search of the mystery of everlasting life” (Olson 2002, 75). (In a later poem, “Ancestry,” Corso would return to this analogy, alluding to Kerouac’s most famous novel while depicting the epic Sumerian proto-Beats as “both on the unpaved road of antiquity” [1981, 20].) Thus, on the basis of their journals, interviews, and allusions, it would seem that even if all the Beats cut all their classes, we must credit them with wide and canonical reading beginning in what Kerouac called the happiest time of his life, his “book-devouring boyhood.”

One work written not long after that boyhood, Kerouac’s *Orpheus Emerged* (1945, published posthumously in 2002), reminds us by its title that there are figures who make the katabatic journey outside of the epic tradition and that, while all of them return, not all of them return successfully. The legend of Orpheus is, of course, an extremely flexible allegory of the artist as a figure both inspired and destroyed, and at least some version of this myth was present in the minds of Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg early in their careers, later proving useful to William Burroughs, as well. (Though Ginsberg referred to Corso as “great Orpheus of these States,” Corso himself invested much more of his poetic identity in the god Hermes who, as psychopompos, made the katabatic journey a regular commute.) While such analogies always risk tendentiousness, they may offer some suggestive, if disturbing, insights into the way the Beats—artists at once self-conscious and self-destructive—viewed their own works and lives, and found artistic opportunity and purpose in their personal underground sojourns.

In one of his earliest works—the third in his *Collected Poems*—Ginsberg goes underground for explicitly aesthetic reasons. In two occasional sonnets entitled “After Reading Kerouac’s Manuscript *The Town and the City*” (1948), the first line of the first poem, responding to the first novel of his new friend,
begins: “I dwelled in Hell on earth to write this rhyme” (Ginsberg 2006, 13).

In fact, Ginsberg might be said to have visited there throughout his career. Among his other works that conjure with the katabatic tradition are “Siesta in Xbalba” (1954–55), a poem set where the Mayan gods of the underworld preside, and “Plutonian Ode” (1978) which mines this tradition further by aligning the classical underworld with the nuclear age while, in Ginsberg’s words, “accounting Homeric formula for appeasing underground millionaire Pluto Lord of Death”38. Addressed in part, like “A Supermarket in California,” to “Father Whitman” (18), the poem summons details from classical myth to depict:

. . . this magma-teared Lord of Hades, Sire of avenging Furies, billionaire
Hell-King worshipped once
with black sheep throats cut, priest’s face averted from underground myster-
ies in a single temple at Eleusis,
Spring-green Persephone nuptialed to his inevitable Shade.
(4–6)39

A later work that functions as a comic sequel to “Kaddish,” “White Shroud” (1983) provides a further instance of Ginsberg’s use of the nekyia as he journeys “To the Great City of the Dead” (2) and converses with his mother before returning “from the Land of the Dead to living Poesy” to write “this tale of long lost joy, to have seen my mother again!” (126–27).40 More intimately, “Dream Record: June 8, 1955” inverts the nekyia pattern by having the dead question the living. This brief, powerful lyric details a ghostly visit from Joan Burroughs in which the dreamer updates the murdered woman on those still living, but when he questions her of what the dead might know or remember, she fades away into cryptic silence: “The next instant / I saw her rain-stained tombstone / rear an illegible epitaph” (31–33).41

Joan Vollmer Burroughs had received what "Dream Record" calls “the bullet in her brow” (11) from her husband, William Burroughs. In his introduction to an early work, Queer, not published until 1985, Burroughs writes, “I am forced to the appalling conclusion that I would never have become a writer but for Joan’s death, and to a realization of the extent to which this event has motivated and formulated my writing” (xxii). By mythologizing his own career thus, Burroughs implicitly presents his art as an attempt to rescue Joan

if not from death, at least from meaningless death, thereby making that infamous “William Tell” game of 1951 not “just an absolute piece of insanity”\(^{42}\) but something more akin to a sacrifice that enabled his own work. This retrospective analysis of *Queer* continues in terms that suggest an analogy to the artist’s Orphic descent and return: “I live with the constant threat of possession, and a constant need to escape from possession, from Control. So the death of Joan brought me in contact with the invader, the Ugly Spirit, and maneuvered me into a lifelong struggle, in which I have had no choice except to write my way out.” The introduction then closes with an italicized section. It begins: “*I have constrained myself to escape death*” (xxii).\(^{43}\)

By endorsing Joan as a Eurydicean figure, never quite able to return from the dead herself but inspiring him to do so, and to pursue his own art thereafter, Burroughs could be said to have appropriated the Orphic legend for autobiographical purposes. One might object that Orpheus himself did not shoot his wife in the head, though in Ovid’s account it was Eurydice’s wedding that in some sense led to her death, a death rendered permanent when Orpheus turns around: the one violation of his contract with the underworld that he knew would prevent Eurydice’s return.\(^{44}\) The artist emerges alive and alone then, without a wife, but also as a katabant with new elegiac material for his art.

If William Burroughs functions in this modernized myth as both the serpent, whose bite fatally stings Eurydice, and Orpheus, the bereaved husband who attempts to redeem her death through his work, perhaps Jack Kerouac combines a different pair of roles from later in the story: the ecstatically destructive Maenads, whose wine-darkened senses cannot hear or heed the divine art of Orpheus whom they will tear apart, and the singer Orpheus himself, now newly emerged, isolated and gynophobic, but granted the theme of his own self-destruction. After all, when Kerouac sends Duluoz on his downward and inward quest in *Big Sur*, at least one of its goals is to furnish him with a song: the long lyric poem “Sea” (composed “mostly with eyes closed,

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43. See also James Grauerholz, “The Death of Joan Vollmer Burroughs: What Really Happened?” (2002) at http://www.artifacting.com/blog/wp-content/uploads/2003/11/deathofjoan -full.pdf: “Other commentators have taken Burroughs’ statements in the *Queer* introduction as a sort of ‘key’ to the writer’s oeuvre, again taking his words at face value: to redeem himself of the sin of murder, William Burroughs dedicated his life to writing. But this apologia may be just a bit disingenuous, because Burroughs had already written a nearly complete draft of *Junkie* by December 1950, eight months before Joan’s death” (61).

as if blind Homer”⁴⁵) that he retrieves from his experience and appends to the
text of the novel. Thus again, from what Van Ghent calls “his tortures—the
heroic ‘ordeal’ of myth” that “send him into ecstasy,” the Beat protagonist
“bursts into song, song filled with metaphors of destruction,” as if the ancient
Orphic urge keeps him singing of the “Sea” even after the novel ends, like the
mythic lyrist’s head as it floats away downstream.⁴⁶

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