

## Redressing Whitman: Jack Kerouac and the Postwar Anxiety of Queer Influence

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*“Whitman is like a disrobement.”*  
(Kerouac, “Whitman: Prophet of the Sexual Revolution,” np)

For many modernist poets such as George Oppen, T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound or William Carlos Williams, Walt Whitman’s free verse, his lyrical outbursts, and his vernacular language represented an embarrassing legacy. Pound insisted that he was “a Whitman who [had] learnt to wear a collar and a shirt,” a phrase that betrays his rejection of Whitman’s bohemian posture and unorthodox verse. Likewise, William Carlos Williams, while celebrating Whitman’s poetics as written “in the American Grain,” condemned the lyrical sentimentality which made him, he writes, “a remarkable failure”: “It is useless to speak of Whitman’s psychologic physiognomy, his this, his that. All of it is true and of no importance” (Williams 1984, 287)<sup>1</sup>. The nebulous phrasing betrays Williams’ anxiety towards Whitman’s poetic crossings, an instability that also seemed

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<sup>1</sup> The way Williams cannot bring himself to name “the love that dare not speak its name,” using instead the pronouns “this” and “that” whose referents are absent, speaks volume about the embarrassment he felt towards Whitman’s sexual identity. The way he discards it as meaningless while acknowledging at the same time that it is true is reminiscent of the mechanism of the open secret analyzed by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick in *The Epistemology of the Closet*, in particular of what she calls the “dismissive knowingness” of many scholars and academics towards homosexuality: “The author or the author’s important attachment may very well have been homosexual—but it would be provincial to let so insignificant a fact make any difference at all to our understanding of any serious project of life, writing, or thought” (Sedgwick 1990, 53). In other words, Williams’s remark follows the grammar of “don’t ask, don’t tell”: “It [homosexuality] didn’t happen; it doesn’t make any difference; it didn’t mean anything; it doesn’t have interpretative consequences” (53).

to have troubled George Oppen who, in his reply to Williams, wrote that he had always felt that Whitman's "deluge and soup of words [was] a screen for the uncertainty of his own identity" (Oppen 1990, 39). Modernist poets were wary of the hybridity of Whitman's poetic persona and of the fact that "if the dresses were changed, the men might easily pass for women and the women for men" (Whitman 2002, 644), as Whitman himself remarks about *Songs of Myself* in a letter to Emerson.

By contrast, many postwar poets and novelists unambiguously celebrated Whitman's poetics, considering him as a sort of patron saint of poets, an ideal literary persona on whom they tried to model their writing style and whose influence they openly acknowledged and claimed for themselves, so much so that they came to be labeled "Whitman's Wild Children," a phrase coined by Lawrence Ferlinghetti in his "Populist Manifesto" (Ferlinghetti 1976, 64).<sup>2</sup> Yet Whitman's influence on postwar writers has less to do with style, metrics or poetic form than with what Whitman's persona had come to stand for in their eyes—a rejection of poetic formalism and social conformism, and an invigorating alternative to the modernist aesthetics of Ezra Pound and T.S. Elliot—which Kerouac described as "a lot of constipation and ultimately emasculation of the pure masculine urge to freely sing" (Kerouac 1993, 56). In other words, Whitman became a signifier that they quoted over and over in their poems to support a heroic posture that enabled them to distance themselves from what they saw as the sterility of modernist poetry.

In *Guys like Us: Citing Masculinity in Cold War Poetics*, Michael Davidson goes a step further and argues that postwar poets welcomed the gender ambiguity and exploited the identity crossings that characterize the poetic persona in *Songs of Myself*.<sup>3</sup> "Whitman's excesses," he writes, "so embarrassing to an earlier generation, became his virtues for poets who came of literary age in the 1950s and 1960s. [...] [The Modernists]'s concern that Whitman's identity was uncertain now becomes an

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<sup>2</sup> In this poem that takes the form of a call to poets of all schools to come down from their ivory towers and "out of [their] closets" (a metaphor with implications that could not have evaded him though the poem does not deal with self-disclosure), Ferlinghetti invokes Whitman's name to encourage his fellow poets to give up what he terms boring poetry workshops and complex, hermetic language in order to mingle with the people in the street and communicate with/to them. Not surprisingly, Ferlinghetti laments the disappearance of free verse and open speech which Whitman embodies for him: "Where are Whitman's wild children / where the great voices speaking out / with a sense of sweetness and sublimity, / where the great new vision, the great world-view / the high prophetic song / of the immense earth / and all that sings in it [...] / Whitman's wild children still sleeping there, / Awake and walk in the open air" (Ferlinghetti, 1976, 61-64).

<sup>3</sup> Though *Leaves of Grass* often evades dualisms and celebrates unity of opposites, Michael Davidson's insistence on free identity crossings and his contention that gender is fluid in Whitman should not be exaggerated. It is impossible to turn a blind eye on the male bravado, machismo and virile comradeship that also characterize his verse and, though passing is a recurrent strategy in his poems, they often essentialize women as mother figures and confine them to subservient positions.

affirmation of new social identities” (Davidson 2004, 106). Indeed, in the context of the sexual panic that permeated American society in the postwar period (exemplified, for instance, by the persecution of homosexuals during the “Lavender Scare,” in the revelations contained in the Kinsey reports on sexuality, or in the debates surrounding the so-called “crisis of masculinity” and “feminization of society”), poetry represented a site where non-normative expressions of masculine identity and male desire came to be formulated in entirely new ways. Davidson’s account of Whitman’s influence offers great insights into the poetics of Allen Ginsberg, Frank O’Hara, and Robert Duncan, poets who consciously played with the instability of Whitman’s persona to articulate alternative gender identities. Yet, because Davidson’s study mainly focuses on poetry and covers a wide range of schools and authors, it fails to account for the more troubled relationship that many other postwar writers had to Whitman.

Indeed, not everyone rejoiced at the fact that the desire that had not dared speak its name for so long was beginning to be heard out loud in American letters. Certain writers actually distanced themselves from this perception of Whitman as an icon of “uncertain identity,” and the emergence of “new social identities” was not always met with approval in literary circles. Kerouac’s particular relationship to Whitman is quite revealing in this regard and constitutes an interesting case study of the way Whitman’s queer influence was often perceived with an anxiety that betrays the sexual panic that pervaded the postwar years. Though Kerouac celebrates the spontaneous authenticity, rugged individualism, virile comradeship and rebellious freedom of Whitman’s poetry, he cannot embrace the ambiguity and the poetic crossings with as much enthusiasm. In his essays and novels, he struggled with the Good Gray Poet’s embarrassing legacy which, he felt, “disrobed” him, leading him to clear Whitman (and himself) from suspicions of homosexuality. This gendered dialectics of undressing (in the sense of forcing out of the poetic closet, of revealing one’s open secret) and redressing (in the sense of correcting a perception, of hiding the naked truth about one’s identity) reveals the vicissitudes of literary masculinity in the postwar period, a time when the suspicion of homosexuality and effeminacy loomed large over the artistic scene.

### **Kerouac as queer critic and Whitman's embarrassing legacy**

In several essays written when he was still a student and a budding author in the 1940s, Kerouac adopted the role of an interpreter of *Leaves of Grass*, often taking position in the postwar debates around Whitman's identity and sexuality. Beyond their modest contribution to Whitman's critical reception, these essays deserve our attention in so far as they betray the extent to which the Cold War paranoia against homosexuals contaminated the literary sphere and the perception of the American canon. In a short essay written in 1941 while he was a student at Columbia University, Kerouac presents Whitman as a man who was able to express the vigor and energy of the American people in a new tongue:

Here was America, a big rugged country, and no one had as yet come along to tell the people of America just exactly what they were. Whitman's great poetry sang of the greatness of America and of its people, he actually united the picture of this America on his pages: and there, he had created a living philosophy for his fellow countrymen. (Kerouac 1941, np)

In this praise of his predecessor, the young Kerouac reproduces the widespread and consensual depiction of Whitman as the poet of the American Renaissance. In terms that echo Whitman's own take on his poetic project, he praises the author of *Leaves of Grass* as having created a distinctly American verse that expressed the variety and grandeur of the young republic. Yet, in spite of this enthusiastic celebration of Whitman's free verse, democratic ideal and manly posture, Kerouac comes to depict the ambiguous influence that Whitman represents for him. In later essays, he laments the lyrical and sentimental outbursts from "Song of Myself," which in his eyes, betray a troubled and faltering masculine identity:

Whitman terms himself "one of the roughs... manly and free, face sunburnt and bearded, posture strong and erect, a pure American breed, large and lusty, naïve, contemplative, masculine, imperious, sensual" –; yet how sickly he can sometimes be; and probably, most of the time, actually he was sickly in his soul that he had to cry: "Oh I am sick and sorrowful!" – There is in all this a pain-sickened prophecy of greater decadence to come in our time – if only our healthy American giants were illiterate to the words of Baudelaire, Freud, Kafka and the others. (Kerouac 1946a, np)

Whitman is here depicted as an uncanny and distressing legacy, an enigmatic figure that paradoxically unites what Kerouac calls the "Faustian" and the "decadent" souls, terms that are not devoid of gendered connotations. He embodies both a model of heroic masculinity—one that is not weakened by family constraints or marital responsibility ("manly and free," "strong and erect," "large and lusty," "masculine")—and a counter-model—one that displays a regrettable sentimentality and betrays a

form of effeminacy (“sick and sorrowful,” “decadence,” “cry,” “pain-sickened”). What is all the more interesting though is how Kerouac here assembles quotes from two anonymous reviews of the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* which Whitman himself wrote—“One of the roughs, [...] manly and free, face sunburnt and bearded, posture strong and erect” (Whitman, in *Hindus* 34, originally published in 1855 in the *United States Review*), to which he added “a pure American breed, large and lusty, naïve, contemplative, masculine, imperious, sensual” (Whitman, in *Hindus* 47, originally published in the *Brooklyn Daily Times* in 1856), before adding another one entirely of his own making—“Oh I am sick and sorrowful!” Kerouac thus manipulates various intertexts and plays the role of ventriloquist so as to produce a portrait of Whitman that suits his own needs, one that he can both identify with and distinguish himself from.

In 1950, while attending Alfred Kazin’s class at the New School for Social Research (which he called “the Silly New School”), Kerouac wrote another essay in which he extolled the virtues of the American bard. What is particularly interesting in this text is not only the fact that Kerouac adopts the position of an interpreter of Walt Whitman’s texts, but that he explicitly takes position in the postwar debates around Whitman’s identity and sexuality. Kerouac first presents Whitman as “the prophet of a sexual revolution,” then goes on to insist that this revolution has nothing to do with homosexuality. He quite bluntly rejects any queer reading of his poems and refuses to acknowledge any hint of homoeroticism, silencing male-to-male desire and stabilizing Whitman’s gender identity:

In Whitman the assumption that he prophesizes a homosexual revolution could not be stupider. He celebrates the bodies of men and women, and the love they have inherited thereby, and often admits the darkness of his own conflict concerning his homosexuality... His New Orleans experience with a woman has been given great critical attention as the releaser of his maturity. In Whitman it is not so much that men are lovers, but that they are comrades who love, and the women apples on all sides. (Kerouac 1950, np)

Though he acknowledges that Whitman may have been attracted to other men, he describes Whitman’s homosexuality as an obscure impulse, the expression of an identity trouble, the symptom of a moral stain which he can only “admit,” as one would admit a crime. Yet, it is never presented as meaningful or significant. In *Leaves of Grass*, Kerouac points out, there are only men and women, binary gender identities that seem to come straight out from some American version of the Garden of Eden. Kerouac then mixes together a biographical anecdote with literary criticism in order to reterritorialize a heterosexual version of Whitman as he refers to the poet’s romantic

adventure with a Creole woman in New Orleans. Interestingly enough, it turns out that this hypothesis has since been challenged by Whitman scholars (Asselineau 1949; Chase 1955). The analysis of the manuscript of one of the central texts that supported that claim, “Once I Pass’d through a Populous City,” reveals that the object of the poet’s love is male, Whitman having later revised his manuscript and substituted “woman” for “man”: “Yet now of all that city I remember only a [~~w~~e]man I casually met there who detain’d me for love of me [...] who passionately clung to me” (Whitman, quoted in Chase 43). Besides, the distinction that Kerouac makes between homosexuality (“men are lovers”) and friendship (“men are comrades who love”) only seems to reinforce that gender ambiguity (through the absence and indeterminacy of an object of desire) rather than dispel it. As to the metaphor of the apple used to describe relationships with women, it announces the chaste, Adamic quest that drives the narrative in *The Dharma Bums*, a novel in which women are “forbidden fruit,” objects of desire which always threaten homosocial harmony. The hermetic separation between comradeship and homoeroticism must be maintained by all possible means in order to protect the American literary canon from the “influenza” of homosexuality, be it at the cost of keeping the canon in the closet. In that perspective, it is interesting to compare Kerouac’s approach of Whitman’s poetic persona with Francis Otto Matthiessen’s take on Whitman in his influential analysis of the 19<sup>th</sup> literary canon published a few years earlier, *The American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman* (1941). Just like Matthiessen, whose own homosexuality was an open secret about which he kept silent (Grossman 1998; Cadden 1990), Kerouac celebrates Whitman as the embodiment of Emersonian self-reliance and praises his democratic spirit and the libidinal energy of his prose, but for similar reasons, silences the homoeroticism of his texts and the homosexuality of their author.

To understand the importance that Kerouac attached to Whitman’s gender identity, it is necessary to outline the central role the latter played in Kerouac’s literary project, which he outlined in an essay written in 1946 entitled “The Revitalizing of American Letters.” In this text that explicitly echoes Emerson’s “The Poet” and imitates its paratactic style and epic tone, Kerouac announces the coming of a male poet capable of renewing American culture through the epic force of his poems, as Emerson announced the coming of Whitman and of *Songs of Myself*. Kerouac calls for a return to the founding myths of the American nation which also happen to be the founding

myths of American masculinity, with a solemnity and confidence which are meant to be heroic:

I will make my position clear on one issue, and accept full responsibility for the statement: I would like to see American letters revitalized along more authentic and appreciative lines, discarding the interpretive and critical trends because they distort the Everything through the prism of a few minds that are not representative of the American people. The universal American writer would be the successful American type, that is, the American who loves his being an American and living in American culture forms – a lover of dancing, baseball, hay rides, moonlight over the lake, detective mysteries, movies, radio comedians, football, a lover of beer and bars and whiskey, of rodeos and jazz music and railroad hotels, of Hershey Bars, Birdseye lima beans, Phillies cigars, lime Rickeys, hamburgers, corn on the cob and everything and anything else that would go into a catalogue of particular American things. (Kerouac 1946b, np)

This patriotic, if not populist, celebration of normative masculinity does not so much refer to rugged individualism and manly vitality than to consumer capitalism. Yet, it opposes the intellectual intelligentsia to the common people in a paratactic style that is reminiscent of Whitman. Like him, Kerouac chants the virtues of American popular culture as if he wanted to reach out to the ordinary man and to assume the identity of the everyday man. It is accompanied by a portrait of the sterility and apathy which, in his eyes, affect his fellow writers or, as he puts it, “all the lesbians, fags, and intellectuals” who are “the contemporary practitioners of American writing” (Kerouac 1946b, np), a paranoid conflation of intellectuals, poets and homosexuals which seems to announce Senator McCarthy’s attacks against “liberals, communists and queers.”<sup>4</sup> Of course, though he had not yet written a single novel, Kerouac hoped that his writing could give birth to such revitalization and that he could embody a postwar renaissance of sorts. Expressions like “the successful American type” and “the American who loves his being an American” are meant to draw out a projective self-portrait that his cycle of autobiographical narratives, in which Whitman often emerges as an ambivalent presence, tried to materialize.

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<sup>4</sup> As Emerson’s call found in Walt Whitman the “new man” it hoped for, later that year, Kerouac met Neal Cassady in New York, an all-American man on whom he fashioned the protagonist of *On the Road*, Dean Moriarty. Several years later, he came to acknowledge the parallel in a celebration of Cassady’s “muscular prose”: “That trumpet of the morning of America, Emerson. As he announced Whitman, I announce Cassady” (Kerouac 1960, np). By identifying with Emerson, Kerouac puts himself at a safe distance of his supposedly Whitmanian friend, the metaphor of the phallic trumpet being meant to reinforce his status as a resolutely masculine figure.

### **Whitman's queer specter and the dangers of manly attachment**

Like his essays, Kerouac's novels, which chronicle the life of postwar literary bohemia of which he was one of the foremost members, are haunted by Whitman's specter. Kerouac's redressing Whitman, his attempt at unqueering this seminal figure of American poetry, has to be understood in the context of the homosocial ties that connected poets of the Beat Generation and of the San Francisco Renaissance. Whitman's influence here is not understood "vertically" (or diachronically), but "horizontally" (or synchronically), in the way it affected the way postwar writers related to one another, sometimes leading them to contend with each other for literary posterity and for the status of the American bard's true heir.

In *The Dharma Bums* (1958), Whitman is repeatedly summoned up as a tutelary figure of the group of poets whose life is depicted in details in the novel. The narrative opens on a description of the famous Six Gallery reading, a sort of inaugural event which brought together Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, Gary Snyder, Philip Whalen, Philip Lamantia, Michael McClure and Neal Cassady (as well as William Carlos Williams and Lionel Trilling), whom the narrator calls "the whole gang of howling poets" (Kerouac 1958, 9)—a fitting metaphor that reveals the strong homosocial ties that bound this poetic community together. Ray Smith, the novel's narrator and Kerouac's alter ego, then recounts various adventures in the wild forests of the Sierra Nevada. After a long hike, Japhy Ryder, the protagonist of the novel whose character is based on San Francisco poet Gary Snyder, announces the coming of a revolution led by what he terms "guys like us":

East'll meet West anyway. Think what a great world revolution will take place when East meets West finally, and it'll be guys like us that can start the thing. Think of millions of guys all over the world with rucksacks on their back tramping around the back country and hitchhiking and bringing the word down to everybody. (Kerouac 1958, 155)

The collective enunciation Japhy resorts to in order to describe this spiritual avant-garde composed of Buddhist poets and forest vagabonds is not only marked as essentially masculine, but it also establishes a hierarchy between "guys like us" and other men. It founds a literary circle composed of single men, a fraternal order of Zen-influenced poets and young Adams whose affective ties can only be expressed in a platonic way. In that perspective, the orientalist discourse enables the narrator to reject the masculine roles of husband and father and to marginalize women—"Pretty girls make graves was my saying then" (Kerouac 1958, 21), the narrator insists—while

protecting himself from any suspicion of homosexuality. It is therefore particularly interesting that at the very moment when the homosocial nature of the novel is made explicit for the first time, Whitman is called upon to voice out the dream of community of men without women:

I've been reading Whitman, know what he says, *Cheer up slaves, and horrify foreign despots*, he means that's the attitude for the Bard, the Zen Lunacy bard of old desert paths, Dharma Bums refusing to subscribe to the general demand that they consume production and therefore have to work for the privilege of consuming, [...] I see a vision of a great rucksack revolution thousands or even millions of young Americans wandering around with rucksacks, going up to mountains to pray. (Kerouac 1958, 73)

Japhy Ryder, a very Whitmanian character who wanders in the wild forest of California and writes contemplative poems, here celebrates the homosocial bonds of pure and joyous comradeship in the margins of consumer society. He is presented as the heir of Whitman, but a Whitman who is closer to the rugged masculinity of outdoorsmen than to the androgyny sometimes found in *Leaves of Grass*. Reciprocally, Whitman is redressed as a “Dharma Bum,” as if he were the group’s spiritual leader: he is transformed into a critique of postwar consumer culture and his poem “As I Sat Alone By Blue Ontario’s Shore” (1867)—from which the phrase “Cheer up slaves and horrify foreign despots” is taken—into a political pamphlet. In a manner reminiscent of what Kerouac did in his essays, Whitman’s persona and poetry are here again manipulated to produce not only a vision of “a great rucksack revolution,” but a revision of the American bard that borders on revisionism. At the same time, while the novel relates the first reading of “Howl” (named “Wail” in the novel), a literary event that contributed to the emergence of a distinctly queer poetics, Kerouac silences Allen Ginsberg’s homosexuality in the novel. The narrator even encourages Alvah Goldbook, the character based on Ginsberg, to get married and have children, as if to contain potential same-sex desires in the closet: “Alvah, trouble with you is [...] you should get married and have halfbreed babies, manuscripts, homespun blankets and mother’s milk on your happy ragged mat floor” (Kerouac 1958, 77). Though it describes how Alvah Goldbook / Allen Ginsberg took his clothes off during the reading of “Howl” / “Wail,” the narrator refuses to voice out the open secret and naked truth about him.

*Desolation Angels*, a novel Kerouac wrote the following year (though it was published almost a decade later) as a sort of sequel to *The Dharma Bums*, also refers to the Six Gallery reading. Here, instead of silencing Ginsberg’s homosexuality, the narrator forces the author of “Howl” out of the closet, revealing the open secret

everyone by then knew about: “Irwin [Allen] was queer and said so in public, thus precipitating tremors from Philadelphia to Stockholm in polite business suits and football coach pants” (Kerouac 1965, 258). Yet, this outing once again enables Kerouac’s narrator to distance himself from the queer influence of “Whitman’s children,” and of Ginsberg in particular. This passage should thus be read in the context of the struggle for Whitman’s legacy between postwar writers, Kerouac’s Whitman differing markedly from the way Ginsberg staged Whitman in “A Supermarket in California” (1955). In this tribute to *Leaves of Grass* written exactly one hundred years after the first publication of Whitman’s opus, Whitman’s specter is conjured up in the aisles of a supermarket, an incongruous and anachronistic setting for the American bard. Like Kerouac’s Whitman in *The Dharma Bums*, Ginsberg’s Whitman here embodies a manly alternative to consumer culture and family ideology, a childless, unmarried father figure (“dear father,” “graybeard”) that stands in stark contrast with the people around him—“Wholes families shopping at night! Aisles full of husbands! Wives in the avocados, babies in the tomatoes!” (Ginsberg 59). Yet, unlike Kerouac’s Whitman, Ginsberg’s rendition of the poet is markedly homoerotic as he is pictured “eyeing the grocery boys” around him in the company of Federico García Lorca, another homosexual poet. Whitman is not only a road companion and a conversation partner whom the poet addresses, but an imaginary lover with whom the poet dreams of living a marital life in a suburban home, the poem eventually offering a vision of conjugal bliss rich in ironic undertones: “Where are we going, Walt Whitman? [...] Will we stroll dreaming of the lost America of love past, blue automobiles in driveways, home to our silent cottage?” (Ginsberg 59). If one considers the fact this poem was published in *Howl and Other Poems*, dedicated in part to “Jack Kerouac, new Buddha of American prose, who spit forth intelligence in eleven books written in half the number of years (1951-1956),” (Ginsberg 45) no wonder Kerouac tried to distance himself from Ginsberg’s Whitman, especially since the following year, Ginsberg used a notoriously ambiguous line from Whitman’s “Calamus”—“resolved to sing no songs henceforth but those of manly attachment” as an epigraph to “Many Loves” (Ginsberg 65), his erotically-charged declaration of love to Neal Cassady, Kerouac’s male muse and hero.

The fear of queer influence via Whitman takes unparalleled intensity when Kerouac’s alter-ego and narrator ends up outing almost all other male writers, in a

rhetoric of denunciation and listing that is once again reminiscent of McCarthyism, while at the same time clearing himself from suspicions of homosexuality:

the reader should know that as an author I'd got to know many homosexuals – 60% or 70% of our best writers (if not 90%) are queers, for man sex, and you get to meet them all and converse and swap manuscripts, meet them at parties, readings, everywhere – This doesn't prevent the non-homosexual writer from being a writer or from associating with homosexual writers – [...] I could give you a list a mile long of the homosexuals in the arts but there's no point in making a big tzimis about a relatively harmless and cool state of affairs – Each man to his own tastes. (Kerouac 1965, 259)

Yet, Whitman's influence is like the return of the repressed and manly attachment is eventually expressed indirectly through yet another reference to the poet. A few pages further, Kerouac's narrator describes a photograph on which the founding members of the Beat Generation (with the exception of Bull Hubbard / William Burroughs, who is Tangier at that time and whom the narrator joins soon after) stand arm in arm while on trip to Mexico, a photograph which has since become one of the most notorious archival documents recording the lives of that literary circle. The narrator elevates the image to epic proportions by comparing it with photographs of his vigorous ancestors who came from Canada and to photographs of Civil War soldiers by Mathew Brady (who, incidentally, also happened to be one of the author of many portraits of Whitman). Yet, this description of rugged masculine comradeship gives way to a lyrical evocation of manly attachment imbued with nostalgia and sentimentality, which leads him to conjure up Whitman's specter once again:

We all stand there, proud, me and Irwin and Simon standing (today I'm amazed to see I had broad shoulders then), and Raphael and Laz kneeling in front of us, like a team. Ah sad. Like the old photographs all brown now of my mother's father and his gang posing erect in 1890 New Hampshire – Their mustaches, the light on their heads – [...] But our picture really resembles the old Civil War Buddy Photographs of Thomas Brady, the proud captured Confederates glaring at the Yankees but so sweet there's hardly any anger there, just the old Whitman sweetness that made Whitman cry and be a nurse – (Kerouac 1965, 269)

The narrator first describes the members of the Beat Generation as comrades in arms united in (and by) adversity ("Civil War buddies"), teammates bound by some sort of team spirit, blood brothers ("gang"). However, while he first insists on the virile comradeship that the photo conveys ("broad shoulders," "posing erect"), he can't hide the emotion and the elegiac feelings ("ah sad") that contemplating this image of male fraternity stirs in him. The affective content of the photograph is all the stronger since it immortalizes one of the narrator's last trips with his travel companions, the publication of *On the Road* (1957) one year later isolating the narrator from the rest of the group

by placing him in the limelight. Yet he does not cry himself, but through the mask of the other—Walt Whitman’s poetic persona—who sheds tears for him and provides an emotional outlet for the sentimental content of the photograph. Whereas Kerouac condemned Whitman for his mushy sentimentalism, Whitman is here called upon to avoid a public display of tears.

If we were to use Bloom’s terms in the *Anxiety of Influence* (1973), Kerouac struggled with Whitman by swerving away from his predecessor (*clinamen*), by trying to complete him (*tessera*), sometimes breaking from him (*kenosis*) or, by contrast mythifying him (*daemonization*), before finally purging all filial links (*askesis*) and assuming his place (*apophrades*). Yet, Bloom’s terminology reduces literary influence to Oedipal transference by viewing artistic creation as a family romance and a psychological battlefield. In this perspective, influence becomes the narrative of the young author’s vigorous (and narcissistic) struggle for maturity with his literary “father.” What is left out in such an approach of influence is the particular historical context in which writers read their predecessors and the “horizontal” relationship that ties them to their literary peers (rather than the “vertical” relationship with their literary forebears). Instead of considering influence as an Oedipal confrontation for authority (between a literary father and one of his successors or symbolic sons) or as a sort of literary “survival of the fittest” (a Darwinian competition between “two strong poets” for literary posterity), mapping out the stage on which the drama of influence unfolded in the postwar era allows for a renewed understanding of the relationship many poets had to Whitman and other male poets.

Besides, Bloom’s explicitly Freudian framework unavoidably leads to pathologizing and infantilizing authors, a tendency which his own reception of Kerouac’s influence and posterity interestingly illustrates. In the introduction to the volume devoted to *On the Road* in the Bloom’s Modern Critical Interpretations Series published in 2004, Bloom begins by declaring that he “had not reread *On the Road* during the near half-century since its first publication” and that he is “not happy at encountering it again” (Bloom 2004, 1). In the usual disparaging, acerbic tone he resorts to when considering authors and works that do not conform to his vision of the canon and his notion of “strong literature,” he calls it “rubbish,” “a rather drab narrative” and adds that he “can locate no literary value whatsoever in *On the Road*” (Bloom 2004, 1). Bloom then ends this diatribe by drawing a parallel with Ginsberg’s *Howl*, the two works unsurprisingly

striking him as being “Oedipal lament[s]” written by authors “weeping in the wilderness for a mother’s consolation” and as “easy, self-indulgent evasions of the American quest for identity” (Bloom 2004, 2). There is no need to defend Kerouac’s literary achievements, whatever they may be, or to debunk Bloom’s criticism of Kerouac, as problematic as it is. Yet, it seems that Kerouac and Ginsberg themselves have come to represent an embarrassing legacy, their achievement often belittled with much contempt and sometimes in revealingly gendered terms. Bloom’s notion of influence leads him to classify Kerouac as a “weak” author who cannot overcome and resolve the anxiety triggered by his literary forebears (he does not mention Whitman, but Melville, Twain and Fitzgerald), a personal value judgment that fails to account for what is at stake in reading such an influential literary text.

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