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“But Cantos Oughta Sing”: Jack Kerouac’s *Mexico City Blues* and the British-American Poetic Tradition

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During the post-war era of the 1950s, American poets searched for a new direction. The Cold War was rapidly reshaping the culture of the United States, including its literature, stimulating a variety of poets to reinterpret the historical lineage of poetic expression in the English language. Allen Grossman, a poet and critic who undertook such a reshaping in the fifties, turns to the figure of Caedmon from the Venerable Bede’s early eighth century *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* to seek out the roots of British-American poets. For Grossman, Caedmon represents an important starting point within the long tradition of English-language poetry: Bede’s visionary layman crafts a non-human narrative—a form of truth witnessed beyond the confines of social institutions, or transcendent truth—and makes it intelligible through the formation of conventional symbols (Grossman 7). The product of this poetic endeavour is the song. The figure of Caedmon also appears in the writings of Robert Duncan as a model of poetic transference:

I cannot make it happen or want it to happen; it wells up in me as if I were a point of break-thru for an “I” that may be any person in the cast of a play, that may like the angel speaking to Caedmon to command “Sing me some thing.” When that “I” is lost, when the voice of the poem is lost, the matter of the poem, the intense information of the content, no longer comes to me, then I know I have to wait until that voice returns. (Duncan 17)

Here, Duncan uses Caedmon to represent the poet’s relation to truth—a representation that mirrors Grossman’s depiction of Caedmon. According to Grossman, the poet receives a vision of the world that transcends the ordered ideas of mainstream society (Grossman 7). Duncan observes this

same idea as he explores how Caedmon is commanded to “Sing” by the non-human agent, thus making him a conduit through which the “intense information of the content” may pass. The recurrence of such a figure in the works of post-war American poets suggests that writers of this period developed a poetics deeply involved with poetic lineage and truths beyond the established human narrative.

Grossman sees Caedmon as the archetypal poet of transcendent *reception*: the act of Caedmon is not to prodigiously spout forth his song, Grossman argues, but to fall victim to the source of his inspiration—thereby introducing a new, non-human system of truth into the established human narrative (Grossman 4). Grossman’s discussion of Caedmon feeds into the former’s belief in the extremely difficult nature of poetic expression and in the epideictic tradition that historically runs alongside this mode of creative thought. The epideictic, as outlined in Aristotle’s *Rhetoric* and maintained by poets throughout the ages, is a branch of rhetoric devoted to the praise or blame of a subject (Burrow 8); this rhetorical approach often involves the process of ‘auxesis,’ or superlative magnification of the praised subject (2). Poetry is the last option available to the individual, states Grossman, and its difficulty makes it extraordinary (3). The articulation of truth through song is the final gesture available to the creative mind in a quest to depart from the established narrative of humanity (9). Historically, this expression of truth stems from the praise of a transcendent figure: Caedmon creates his song at the behest of an ethereal subject within his dream; Homer addressed the figure of Achilles in his *Iliad*; and the scribes of Genesis established their work in praise of the figure of Yahweh (5). The grand narrative of poetic expression, according to Grossman, deals in necessity and in the epideictic mode of rhetoric—a model that reflects some of the central concerns of American poets in the Cold War era.

Jack Kerouac may not come to mind when the above definition of poetic expression is invoked but it is the purpose of this paper to suggest that this should be the case. In 1955, he was deeply involved in an ex-

ploration of different prose forms and in a new technique of spontaneous composition. In *Doctor Sax* (1959), Kerouac expanded his prose beyond linear narrative: the text relies on fantasy and intuitive images to drive a continuation of the Faust story (Nicosia 392–93). *Tristessa* (1960)—written during Kerouac’s second trip to Mexico City in 1955—is the product of similar ventures into nonlinear storytelling. The book is a moral tale established in flux—the metaphors that permeate the novella continually break down commonplace distinctions of light and dark, pain and pleasure (Nicosia 477–78). At the height of his experimentation within the medium of prose, Kerouac wrote a series of poems. *Mexico City Blues*, a cycle of 242 blues “choruses,” resonates with Grossman’s positioning of poetry at the apex of a hierarchy of modes of expression—as the text nominates itself (as verse) as the final avenue of expression for the poet: Kerouac admits in the 94th Chorus that he “Can’t get on with [his] story” (the vast post-war narrative of his own experiences) and must “write it in verse” (17–18). He turns to poetry after he realizes that prose will not suffice to express “transcendental / majesties” (“36th Chorus” 7–8).

This paper will investigate how Kerouac’s cycle of poems is positioned within the long song of British-American literature—a vast heritage of English-language poetry that begins with the praise poem of Caedmon. An examination of poet-critic Allen Ginsberg (a contemporary of Kerouac’s) will initiate this process by presenting a bridge between the Beat Generation—a small group of radical, underground American writers (whose members included Ginsberg and Kerouac) that gained fame in the late 1950s—and the earlier American poetry of Walt Whitman. A close reading of several choruses from *Mexico City Blues* will interrogate the relationship Kerouac creates between his poetry, that of his fellow American writers, and his European predecessors. Further analysis of individual poems within the cycle will elucidate Kerouac’s use of the conventions of praise poetry, and a comparison with select works of Ezra Pound will indicate the modernist strains of thought that inflect the epideictic found within *Mexico City Blues*. This essay will not include a deep analysis of

Kerouac's Buddhist references, as this topic has already been masterfully addressed by Gerald Nicosia in his critical biography *Memory Babe* and by James T. Jones in *A Map of Mexico City Blues*. The chief concern of this paper is to locate Kerouac's poem cycle within the British-American tradition of praise poetry.

In an interview with Yves Le Pellec in August 1972, Ginsberg discusses his generation of poets and writers. While he does not explicitly outline his perspective as such, Ginsberg employs an Althusserian model of ideological structures (and identifies the academic institutions of the United States as part of a repressive state apparatus) to describe the efforts made by his contemporaries. He suggests that his colleagues of the 1950s contributed to the formation of "a new consciousness" (76), a perspective outside the realms of the American mainstream during the era of the Eisenhower administration. This opposition between younger American writers and the rigid ideas of the military and academic arms of the government is, for Ginsberg, the root of his generation's investment in poetry: "We realized there was a difference between the way we talked... and what we heard on the radio" (70, 77). It is the spirit of vitalized talk, states Ginsberg, that impassioned the Beats to write a new world into creation.

In this interview, Ginsberg identifies the poet Kenneth Rexroth as part of the mainstream culture that these younger American writers were attempting to move away from. Rexroth was an early supporter of the new movement in the San Francisco literary scene, but later became disenchanted with their radical perspective (Charters 493–94). In his essay "Disengagement: The Art of the Beat Generation," Rexroth appraises the developing Beat writers within the larger tradition of American literature following the First World War. While a large part of the essay outlines the damaging nature of the gap between the developing avant-garde and the "ready market" (501), Rexroth identifies the Beats as negatively entrenched within "nihilism" (508). He explores the figures of Charlie Parker and Dylan Thomas, claiming their ultimate signification for Beat writers as "two great dead juvenile delinquents—the heroes of the post-war

generation” (495). For Rexroth, the Beats represent a schism between the projected goals of the Modernists and a new, voluntary movement towards ruin (508). Their joy is not the careful craft of the Pound era, Rexroth argues, and he relegates these writers to positions of inferior artistry.

According to Ginsberg, Rexroth’s negative assessment of the Beats is an appropriate representation of the post-war American attitude towards this new generation of writers. In the interview with Le Pellec, Ginsberg argues that the ideas established by members of the Beat Generation are not mere novelty or radical, juvenile rebellion, but a natural progression within the long tradition of poetic discourse. For these writers, Ginsberg argues, the formation of post-war American literature developed out of deep interpretation and recovery of traditional forms (Ginsberg 76). Ginsberg sees the characters of Kerouac’s *On the Road* (1957) as white American ambassadors approaching the indigenous form of rhythm and blues, which had been left relatively untapped by mainstream white writers (Ginsberg 76).

Ginsberg’s comments indicate that the Beats were attempting a recuperative exploration of poetic sources that mirrors the efforts of William Blake—a figure that influenced Kerouac and Ginsberg greatly (Nicosia 400). Blake sought to return to the bardic tradition of ancient Britain, a world of lyrical power completely separated from classical tradition (“Blake the Bricoleur” 574). In his poem of 1783, “To the Muses,” Blake pours forth a long complaint against the classical Muses and allies himself with the force of “antient love” represented by the figures of “bards of old” (13–14). Blake desired a greater heterogeneity of primitive literature and turned to traditions as various as Ossianic bards and North American medicine men to subvert the Bible’s supremacy as ancient discourse (Mee, “Northern” 80–83). The Beat writers identified with this desire for a heterogeneous ancient voice, but they also followed the Modernist path back to Homer and other classical bards (Jones 137). The figures of the Celtic bard, the indigenous shaman, and the classical oral poet were all explored by the poets of 1950s America in their hunger for an aesthetic of vitality

and appropriate poetic reference.

It is of particular importance to this paper that Ginsberg's interview begins with a discussion of *Mexico City Blues* (1956). For Ginsberg, these poems are crucial to the development of the Beat psyche, and he goes so far as to state that "[this book] taught [him] poetics" (Ginsberg 64). While this text diverges radically from mainstream poetry of the United States in the 1950s, Ginsberg argues, it is ultimately a reinterpretation of Western literary forms and themes. *Mexico City Blues*, while highly original in its use of improvisation and the blues form, functions within the great bardic tradition of English poetry. Ginsberg praises Kerouac for his "self-invented poetics," but at the same time he likens the cycle of blues songs to Shakespeare's sonnet sequences (64). Kerouac experimented with blues forms during a time in which traditional black folk musics were entering the white mainstream through the medium of jazz (Baraka 22). Langston Hughes used the blues form during the Harlem Renaissance (such as his poem "Weary Blues" of 1923), but it is Kerouac's position as a white American that is worth stressing here: Kerouac's poetry represents a transformation in the American cultural divide. Therefore, the form of the blues can be seen as both novel and highly classical. The emphasis that Kerouac places on improvisation in his blues poems echoes the classical tradition of oral creation (Ginsberg 67). Connections like these to the long Western song are the variety of poetics Ginsberg refers to when he declares, "We were carrying on a tradition, rather than being rebels" (93).

Ginsberg figured Kerouac as an Americanist, a student of American archetypes and themes (78), but also as someone deeply in touch with the wider, traditional Western song—the community of English language poetry that extends from Caedmon. An understanding of this two-fold American/Anglocentric spirit in Kerouac's poetry can be approached through an examination of their debt to one American poet in particular: Ginsberg proclaims that Kerouac advocated an approach to fraternity and comradeship that finds its American roots in Whitman. Ginsberg takes a phrase from *Democratic Vistas* (1871) to define this brotherly quality, dub-

bing it “adhesiveness”—a force of union that descends through the generations of Western poets (Ginsberg 93):

topping democracy, this most alluring record, that it alone can bind, and ever seeks to bind, all nations, all men, of however various and distant lands, into a brotherhood, a family. It is the old, yet ever modern dream of earth, out of her eldest and her youngest, her fond philosophers and poets. Not that half only, individualism, which isolates. There is another half, which is adhesiveness, or love, that fuses, ties and aggregates, making the races comrades, and fraternizing all. (Whitman 220)

According to Ginsberg, this adhesiveness includes the liberation of male togetherness from a society that endorses the repression of the male homosocial. It is the democratic trait of adhesiveness that Ginsberg identifies as the heart of Kerouac’s two chief characters in *On the Road* (Ginsberg 85). In his critical biography of Kerouac, Nicosia emphasizes the author’s devotion to Whitman. Kerouac began to read his American predecessor’s works—both poetry and prose—at an early age (Nicosia 70) and continued his study of Whitman up to the time that *Mexico City Blues* was composed (353). Both critically and biographically, there is a strong foundation for reading Whitman’s poetics as being adopted by Kerouac and Ginsberg in their own work.

Whitman’s poetry is designed to be elusive to those who would encapsulate it; his sense of union is both domestic and cosmic, interior and exterior. In “The Poetics of Union in Whitman and Lincoln,” Grossman discusses the poet’s imaginative synthesis of supposedly irreconcilable elements of America—north and south, white and black, rich and poor—in the later part of the nineteenth century (Grossman 60). This democratic impulse in Whitman’s poetry is perhaps best observed in stanza 15 of “Song of Myself.” Here, the poet juxtaposes Americans high and low—“contralto” and “carpenter” (257–58), “prostitute” and “President”

(302–05)—creating through association a level plain for the subjects of his nation and his poetry.

But Whitman does not designate this union of subjects as pertaining only to America. In the preface to the 1855 edition of *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman concludes his praise of America and its progression towards liberty by stating, “I know what answers for me an American must answer for any individual or nation that serves for a part of my materials” (26). Whitman sees the song of the American bard as an explosive cry of liberty and union, one that includes the distant subject of Europe just as much as it includes Whitman’s naked self. Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass* works within the Western sphere of influence, as the poem acknowledges its debt to European “materials” and seeks to endow its sources with the fruits of its quest for liberation. Whitman is a poet facilitating the “English Language [as it] befriends the grand American expression” (25), providing both a highly original form of poetry and a link back to the Old World for twentieth-century Americans to follow. The Beat Generation’s movement forward through the recognition of past forms functions within the line of American bards begun by Whitman.

Kerouac’s long poem owes just as great a debt to European materials as it does to the democratic gesture of Whitman’s long line. The Beat poet works within the free verse form established as a national tradition by Whitman—a form created to enable meditations on liberty and slavery, as Grossman notes (68). But this form is figured as one of many, and—like Whitman’s song—Kerouac’s sequence contains multitudes (of other forms). Early in *Mexico City Blues*, the poet announces his strong associations with both Whitman and older, English roots. The 17th Chorus begins with an articulation of Whitman’s explosive movement beyond the limits of national boundaries: “Starspangled Kingdoms,” representative of the United States, are important to the speaker only as a brilliant segment of “OTHER PARTS OF YOUR MIND” (1–2). In this chorus, as in many others, Kerouac develops a Whitmanian sense of unity and submerges the subject of America within the self’s grander scope of “Zigzag” (5), or free, meditation. Kerouac’s work befriends the English language and the

entirety of its history just as wholeheartedly as that of his predecessor, as it carries on the line of recognition and inclusion initiated by Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*.

The adhesive inclusion of the English poetic tradition as a whole is addressed early on in *Mexico City Blues*. Choruses 20 and 21 display the layering of novelty and tradition at work within the poem; here in the opening of 20, for example:

The Art of Kindness A Limping Sonnet
How the art of kindness doth excite,
The ressure and the intervening tear
What horizons have they fled,
What old time's blearest dream!
But atta pressure of the Two Team,
Finding nothing to surfeit the bloated corpse,
Rabbed the Whole She bo be bang
And rounded them a Team.
Beam! Blead! So no one cared.
Except the High Financier.
Ah, but wine was never Made
That sorely tongues have grace & aid.

Because I cant write a sonnet
Does that make me Shakespeare? (1–15)

The poem announces itself as a “Limping Sonnet” and, if the first line is taken as the poem's title, the fourteen lines that follow fit the rough shape of a sonnet—they even possess a concluding, free verse couplet that echoes Shakespeare's use of the sonnet form in a modern style (expressing the impossibility of the sonnet form for modern writers/readers) (1). The prosopoeia of a “limping” sonnet suggests some interesting things about Kerouac's relationship to that same inherited romantic form. The adjective “limping” used here is caught up in what Ginsberg terms the New

Consciousness of the Beats: it is a Beat articulation of movement and is established comfortably within Whitman's call for the adoption of natural language and rhythms by the poet (Grossman 73). A limp conventionally connotes a disability; yet it also indicates an original movement. Kerouac uses this alternative movement to indicate his position relative to the tradition of English language poets: while he may be subject to the evaluations of historically set formal criteria, his rhythm will distance his poems from those of his predecessors. This distance is observed in the poem's descent into scat, nonsense language (linked to the stream of consciousness approach of Joyce and other Modernists). Here, the poet is channeling Whitman by enacting a policy of constant revision towards the materials of the Old World literary tradition.

Kerouac examines his own form from a distance and according to western Romantic criteria, but he also critiques that tradition. The 21st Chorus elucidates Kerouac's devotion to pure lyric, as inherited from eastern traditions:

Not very musical, the Western ear
– No lyres in the pines
compare with the palms

Western Sorcery is Sad Science –
Mechanics go mad
In Nirvanas of hair
and black oil
and rags of dust
and lint of flint

Hard iron fools raging in the gloom (1–10)

The first three lines attack a poverty of musicality within forms of Western poetry, as symbolized by the pine trees and their deficiency of music. These Western trees lack the Eastern counterpoint—such as the Buddhist strains that dominated Kerouac's writing during the composition of

Mexico City Blues—symbolized by the palms. The tenth line represents the harsh, iron-clad limitations of traditional meter: the initial accent on “Hard” and the final two iambs make the line appear overly formal when compared to the free, flowing meter of the next stanza.

But the poet does not abandon his connection to English bardic tradition, even in the midst of a fairly harsh critique:

But here’s East, Cambodian
Saloons of Air
And Clouds Blest.
Blakean Angel Town.
Grove of Beardy Trees
& Bearded Emptily –
Expressing Patriarchal
Authority (11–18)

Blake and Whitman approach readers hand in hand in the fourth stanza—one supplies the angelic architecture, while the latter offers shrubs of human hair—“the beautiful uncut hair of graves” straight out of “Song of Myself” (Whitman 101). The great historical figure of American poetry and the eminent British pre-Romantic constitute the geography in equal parts, indicating Kerouac’s adoption of visionary European and American influences as a unified whole. The poet casts aspects of his literary inheritance aside only to steep himself further in the tradition of poetic synthesis and linguistic vitality.

Yet is not *Mexico City Blues* a poem shaped by Buddhist doctrines? And does not the poem’s setting influence the poet more than distant shores and texts? These two strains of poetic material threaten the location of Kerouac’s text within the traditional realm of English poetry. But, as Glenn Sheldon suggests, these elements of Buddhism and Mexico function more as whimsical tropes than core organizing structures within the choruses. These tropes occur spontaneously throughout the text, but do not guide the form of the poem as a whole (Sheldon 50). This loose assem-

bly of foreign sources is witnessed at the end of Kerouac's limping sonnet. Following the conclusion of the traditional sonnet form, Kerouac attempts to mesh this same structure with the Buddhist image of the lotus flower:

There's a sonnet of the lotus
A rubicund rose
Death in a rose
Is prouder than satin
Esmerald Isles
 Blest
In the Archipelagoan
 Shore –
Ferry's arrived. (16–24)

But the poet fails to create a strong enough lyric out of these two disparate materials, and he resorts to the arrival of the ferry in reality to conclude the structure of this flat stanza.

The failed melding of the sonnet and Buddhist traditions at the end of the 20th Chorus is representative of the poet's problematic inclusion of material from other cultures throughout the poem. Despite the title of the work, Mexico is relatively absent from most of the text (Sheldon 31). When Kerouac does incorporate elements of Mexico, his work falls flat due to the strength of his own position as a first-world writer in a third-world locale (40). The poet places his own interpretation and agency over the people he intends to glorify (Sheldon 37):

Indian songs in Mexico
 (the Folk Chanties of Children
at dusk jumprope –
at Saturday Night power failure –)
are like little French Canuckian
 songs my mother sings –
Indian Roundelays –

Row Canoe –

Ma ta wacka

Johnny Picotee

Wish-tee

Wish-tee (“12th Chorus” 1-12)

The speaker listens to the song of the local children only to impose his history and a narrative of American childhood on these new sounds. As a French-speaking American brought up outside the mainstream culture of his country (Nicosia 21), there is unique potential for Kerouac to relate to the individual experiences of the voices he hears in Mexico. But as a poet, he falls victim to the egotistic sublime—which John Keats defines as a genius imposed upon the matter of poetry—drawn in opposition to the faceless, passive recorder Keats himself identified with: “A Poet is the most unpoetical of any thing in existence; because he has no Identity—he is continually in for—and filling some other Body” (Keats 184). Kerouac cannot, or does not desire to, extract his own beliefs or values from his depiction of a new country and its population. The poet bears traces of the English tradition, including its less desirable aspects, like the egotistic sublime.

This subordination of the other is best witnessed in Kerouac’s devotion to the concept of the “fellaheen.” Oswald Spengler developed the notion of the “fellaheen”—the common folk who survive the decline of civilization by choosing to exist on the margins of society—in his book of 1918 *The Decline of the West* (Skerl 32); for Kerouac, Burroughs, and Ginsberg, the book and its rich interpretative terminology became a looking glass through which they could critique American society as it progressed toward what they perceived as homogeneity and authoritarianism (8). However, in Kerouac’s poem, the term becomes a barrier between the poet and his setting. In the 9th Chorus, the poet refers to Mexico as “Cathedral / Fellaheen Mexico” (12–3). The country is figured as a single entity, completely defined by its presence as a primitive object. For Kerou-

ac, his setting provides him with distanced, vaulted halls to walk through beyond the American world, rather than a country of real people with a history of their own. *Mexico City Blues*, as Sheldon points out, shows Kerouac as an emerging writer developing his voice (32), and the cost of this focus upon his own perspective is the expulsion of other voices from his poetic work. The poem contains instances where the admission of other languages into the text seems possible (Sheldon 37), but these are appropriation at best; this is Kerouac's greatest weakness, as Sheldon properly elucidates.

As Sheldon keenly observes, the movement used most by Kerouac is the return: to home (Lowell, Massachusetts), to Catholicism, and to the figure of his mother (39). The poet examines these subjects at various times throughout the choruses of *Mexico City Blues* and uses his displacement in the foreign locale of Mexico City to examine the culture of America and its literary heritage. There is also a strong recursive gesture toward praise poetry—the epideictic—within the text. The epideictic tradition in poetry stretches back at least as far as the works of Homer, whose efforts to praise the figures of Achilles and Odysseus established the epic genre (Grossman 5). Strategies of praise and blame, the two sides of epideictic rhetoric (Burrow 8), appear throughout *Mexico City Blues*; but its final choruses show Kerouac masterfully executing the established techniques of praise poetry, while also experimenting with the epideictic in intriguing ways.

In his examination of Choruses 239–41, James T. Jones argues that the whole of *Mexico City Blues* is an elegy to the great jazz musician Charley Parker, as—excluding the Buddhist coda of Chorus 242—this climactic section brings the long poem to an end (Jones 87). While this assertion of an elegiac form upon the larger poem may exaggerate the relevance of the final choruses to the work as a whole, the resolution found in the Parker Choruses deserves further probing. They are indeed elegiac, focusing on the recent death of the bop musician and choosing to revalue “the Perfect Musician” as both a bodhisattva—a Buddhist figure who shares his

enlightenment with the common folk—and a Catholic priest (“239th Chorus” 5; Jones 87). Through praise, Kerouac is attempting to aggrandize his fallen musical hero and also sound out the spiritual effect Parker’s music had upon his generation.

The poet employs many established methods of epideictic to discuss Parker’s greatness. Like classical creators of epic, Kerouac uses the form of his work to demonstrate the creative might of his addressed figure. While the choruses lack the grand machinery of epic—there are no catalogues or fleets of deities to be seen—they evoke Parker’s musical innovations through a shifting of meter and syntactical arrangement. The 239th Chorus begins with rigid meter and tidy syntax:

Charley Parker looked like Buddha
Charley Parker, who recently died
Laughing at a juggler on the TV
after weeks of strain and sickness,
was called the Perfect Musician. (1–5)

The trochees that begin Kerouac’s praise poem bolstered by anaphora threaten a regimentation of form; following the arbitrary construction of sentences and associated transitions in language witnessed throughout the earlier choruses, this first phrase appears restrained. The enjambment of the second and third lines provides the only mystery to this section. Kerouac is using the grammar of newspaper obituaries to articulate the sadness and simplicity of Parker’s death. But it is this simplicity of metrical and grammatical arrangement that allows the poem to develop and expand the praise of Parker through an evolution of formal structures during the next choruses.

The poet soon shifts from direct syntactical framing and metrically conservative lines to a different rhythm: he inserts dashes, short lines, and onomatopoeia to indicate Parker’s playful attitude, illustrating the “great / creator of forms” (22–23). His description of Parker at work is a portrait of art as active and transcendent:

(2). Critics contemporary to the composition of Kerouac's poem are not included in the poet's model of musical lineage—they are externalized to determine the community of praise.

Negative critics contemporary to *Mexico City Blues* are not the only subject Kerouac places Parker in opposition to; Kerouac also creates distance between the musician and his own instrument. The 240th Chorus outlines the great saxophonist's superlative abilities: Kerouac describes how Parker captivates an audience, "Whistling them on to the brink of eternity / With his Irish St Patrick / patootle stick" (18–20). The profundity of Parker's music—as an immaterial, creative text—dominates the scene depicted by the poet. Kerouac chooses diminutive terms to describe Parker's instrument: the alto saxophone is depicted as "little" in comparison to the "perfect tune & shining melody" it elicits (11). The tool the musician uses to whistle his audience "to the brink of eternity" is described by a nonsense word—"patootle stick"—connoting childish simplicity.

The miniature status of Parker's instrument only serves to aggrandize the power of the musician as surpassing the limits of his apparatus. Kerouac sets his praise of Parker beyond the fetishistic tendencies of the musician's fans: "After his death, there were a lot of people who wanted an alto he had played. Where was one? It was like the search for the Holy Grail" (Reisner 25). Any incarnation of Parker's genius within the choruses fails to live up to the greatness of its original source; the list of records, sessions, and official performances found in the 241st Chorus are equivalent to "[s]hots in the arm for the wallet" (6), imperfect pleasures of instant gratification. Like the diminutive saxophone, these incarnations are inferior to the sympathetic genius of Parker, the "Nirvanas of... (his) brain" illustrated by Kerouac (17).

Finally, using a technique witnessed in praise poetry at least as far back as the alliterative tradition (Burrow 37), Kerouac admits his own inability to express the grandeur of his subject. During the final stanza of the Parker Choruses, Kerouac distances his own creative abilities from those of the now disembodied figure of praise:

Charley Parker, forgive me –
Forgive me for not answering your eyes –
For not having made an indication
Of that which you can devise –
Charley Parker, pray for me –
Pray for me and everybody
In the Nirvanas of your brain
Where you hide, indulgent and huge
("241st Chorus" 11-18)

In this final stanza dedicated to Parker, Kerouac turns to the speech act of a confession to fully express the spiritual moorings of his poem cycle's final section. The poet's apostrophe endows the jazz musician with saintly authority and denies Kerouac his own imaginative prowess.

Kerouac praises Parker by illustrating him as a disembodied genius beyond the physical realm of mankind; in the eyes of the speaker, Parker is distant from the human narrative. In this penultimate chorus, Parker becomes the transcendent voice explored by Grossman and Duncan: the force of his Poetic Genius filters into Kerouac's ear and alters the world of the speedsters, potentially capable of "lay[ing] the bane / off... every body" (24–25). By placing the musician in such a distant, non-corporeal realm of creation—"Nirvanas of... brain"—Kerouac's illustration becomes a critique of the act of writing. The poet cannot measure the merit of his divine subject within the discriminatory language of the poem—"Not to be measured from here / To up, down, east, or west" (22–23)—and words are depicted as an imperfect system of material forms compared to the aethereal force of Parker's mind. The forgiveness requested by the speaker emerges from a non-material source—in opposition to the very corporeal "every body" of mankind. The poet cannot even approximate the glory of his subject with a mere "indication" of Parker's creative powers. By the 241st Chorus, the figure of Charley Parker is resurrected from an ugly death in front of the television and from the world of the past tense

the speaker desires a metonymic representation—“an indication” or an emblem—of the grand subject of Parker (18, 13). Wordsworth’s subject in turn echoes the figure of Milton’s “brooding” dove (21), a Christian picture of saintliness that hovers over the sublime genesis of the world at the beginning of *Paradise Lost*. Like Kerouac, the poet of *The Prelude* chooses to diminish his agency within the scene of transcendent reception as he claims a place among “three chance human wanderers,” much like Kerouac identifies himself as part of the speedsters.

The Parker figure also alludes to the vast self overseeing the grand vista of history within Whitman’s “Song of Myself.” But most intriguing is the crucially religious connection made by Kerouac’s poem. In the 241st Chorus, the poet’s assertion that Parker retains aspects of “the secret unsayable name” places the musician on the level of the Old Testament deity, Yahweh. To perceive these allusions is to justify Kerouac’s augmentation of the Parker figure beyond the physical and into the ethereal realm. Such a disembodying of subject—a birthing of the addressee beyond the physical—is an established technique of British-American writers of praise poetry, stretching back to the biblical scribes’ praise of the wholly formless Yahweh—a tradition of praise Kerouac would have been familiar with since childhood (Nicosia 30).

Kerouac’s use of praise should not be judged as merely a replication of inherited formulae. Jones states that “[t]he most productive way to treat Kerouac’s poetics is to view him as a great innovator in a long line of eminent writers” (137), and this perspective should be applied to the poet’s use of the epideictic. Kerouac is a product of his most direct ancestors, the Modernists, in his efforts to progress beyond the conventional aspects of praise and create a truly twentieth-century poem. Beginning at the end of the early modern period, Burrow tracks the decay of the epideictic as a symptom of an ever more secularized society (150). Intriguingly, Burrow chooses Pound as the emblem of twentieth-century disenchantment toward the epideictic. *The Poetry of Praise* begins with a selection from *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley*: “What god, man, or hero / Shall I place a tin

wreath upon?” This is, as Burrow notes, an imitation of Pindar’s Second Olympian Ode; but more importantly, Pound’s transformation of the ode exemplifies the modern perspective of praise (Burrow 2). Pound stands at the heart of this ironic phase of English praise poetry—an era in which no god, man, or hero can be found, unless such a totem is made of “tin” (3).

As an American poet looking back at the long western song—“a view of literature as a whole” (Pound qtd. in Bornstein xi)—Pound’s approach to the epideictic varies greatly from that of Whitman. In “Clothing the American Adam: Pound’s Tailoring of Walt Whitman,” Hugh Witemeyer explores the influence of Whitman upon the modernist poet, articulating Pound’s ambivalent attitude toward his predecessor. One aspect of this influence, carefully explored by Witemeyer, is Whitman’s epideictic stance—toward himself. *Leaves of Grass* is an epic lyric cycle of personal praise that broadcasts the greatness of America through an expression of the individual through song (Witemeyer 83). Whitman depicts himself as hero, saint, and god, and then uses this platform of omniscience to reach out to a mass of fellow subjects. This act of projection is what Witemeyer terms as the poet’s praising “embrace” (83).

Pound stands in opposition to this democratic outpouring of praise. His anti-democratic distance is most acutely observed in the poem “A Pact” (1913):

I make a pact with you, Walt Whitman –
I have detested you long enough.
I come to you as a grown child
Who has had a pig-headed father;
I am old enough now to make friends.
It was you who broke the new wood,
Now is a time for carving.
We have one sap and one root –
Let there be commerce between us.

Pound is practicing the dispraise of Whitman—a poet without much praise

in his own country during the earlier part of the twentieth century (Witemeyer 90). While the speaker claims to be bridging a divide in poetic genealogy, the alternating lines of present and past tense verbs indicate a gap between elements of modernity and tradition. The “commerce” that concludes the lyric, when read as a cold, financial term, indicates a separation rather than a union. The traditional connotation of mercantile dealings can also entail sexual intercourse of a degrading nature (“Commerce”). A neutral reading—derived from the “one sap and one root”—is available, but a more negative reading of the poem reveals an empty performance of filial bonds and therefore creates distance and difference between the two American poets more than it promises a positive connection.

“A Pact” demonstrates the decay of conventional praise in Pound’s poetics as well as a shift away from the egotistical sublime of Whitman’s vast song. As the “pig-headed father” of American poetry, the figure of Whitman depicted by Pound is concerned with the self foremost and the exterior world second—producing an epic out of the lyrical celebration of the self. In contrast with this democratic embrace, the modernist poet seeks to illuminate by dissecting through craft and moving from exterior to interior analysis (Witemeyer 84). Pound found the sublimities of Whitman’s persona frustrating and embarrassing (83), and the adhesiveness between self and audience witnessed in Whitman is cast aside by Pound in an effort to produce a modern persona—one that combines only the best of European tradition with American innovation (85).

The choruses of *Mexico City Blues* certainly show the influence of Pound’s ideas. Kerouac read *The Cantos* before leaving for Mexico City in 1955, and—while he was pleased by the freedom of movement within the cycle—he found the aristocratic tone of Pound’s work alienating (Nicosia 475). A level of homophobia may also be present at the heart of Pound’s aversion to Whitman’s nakedness, an outlook that the relatively sexually liberated Kerouac would have balked at (117). Jones goes so far as to state that *Mexico City Blues* portrays the style of *Cantos* more accurately than any other work within the modernist canon (160). This is an overly enthu-

lates the mood elucidated by Parker's music. But rather than celebrate the self as observer (in Whitmanian fashion), the poet chooses to sublimate his presence within the larger subject grouping of "speedsters" (19), witnessed in Kerouac's illumination of Parker's "Slowdown" (21). The pronoun "[y]ou" of the chorus threatens an egotistical sublime, but it is fashioned into a universal position of subjectivity by Kerouac's expansion of the image of the speedsters in the following poem. The post-war audience flocks as a collective "we" (21)—"One after one, in time" ("240th Chorus" 25)—to the contrapuntal wisdom of Parker, replacing the egotistical imposition of memory that initiated the poet's description of the music. This ejection of the poet from a position of authority also appears in Kerouac's use of Bill Garver—the heroin addict Kerouac lived above in Mexico City while composing the choruses (Nicosia 476)—as interlocutor in choruses 33, 34, 72, 73, and 139 (Jones 153). The poet ejects himself from a position of authority to better magnify the art of his subject and instead positions himself within a diminutive community of conversationalists, the "everybody talking" (16) in the 240th Chorus.

In *Mexico City Blues*, Kerouac is both constructing conventional epideictic and framing this praise within a culture of skeptical reception. He not only falls victim to the egotistical sublime but also attempts to escape its boundaries through a repositioning of his own presence within the choruses. Kerouac is certainly a child of the *The Cantos*, engaging with the long Western song that Pound so desired to articulate (Bornstein xi); but he also insists on the conversational nature of the dialogue between poet and audience: something that Kerouac felt modernists like Pound lost through their insistent use of obscure diction and inherited, traditional meter (Nicosia 475). As he proclaims in the 75th Chorus, "Cantos oughta sing" (1). Kerouac is hyper-aware of his form and distinguishes his work from *The Cantos* by expressing the frenetic orality of his choruses. Through this succinct, informal phrase, the poet adamantly states that his blues must remain on the level of music and be a conduit for the vitalized talk of his own generation. The last two lines of the entire poem cycle—"All's well! / I am the Guard"—indicate Kerouac's insistence on

a personal approach to his audience. The colloquial effect of the contraction “All’s” coupled to the lack of any final punctuation in his conclusion demonstrate the poet’s settling into oral experience. Kerouac’s final statement is a declaration of self, a sublimity that promises a welcome, guarding embrace.

The choruses of *Mexico City Blues* are a marriage of Whitman’s democratic spirit and Pound’s modern approach to praise. By bringing these two apparently disparate schools of thought—the Whitmanian embrace and Pound’s irony—together, Kerouac crafts a new form of democratic, literary adhesiveness. Kerouac’s connection to these two poets displays his integral place within the British-American poetic tradition—a fact that still calls for critical elaboration. A close reading of the choruses, considered alongside other literary texts that feature the epideictic, reveals the sophisticated techniques at work within the poetics of *Mexico City Blues* and, ultimately, reveals that Kerouac is not only a passionate prose writer but also a gifted poet.

I just completed my undergraduate degree in English Honours. I focused on poetry throughout my years at UVic and I gravitated towards American literature over time. This paper was the final step in my degree—and not just because it satisfied the graduating essay requirement for my program; it allowed me to bring together a variety of subjects and ideas that I had tested during my undergrad years and to synthesize those interests into something new. My work on Jack Kerouac led me through literary doorways I never dreamed of entering: medieval texts, Buddhist studies, and the bizarre umbra that is Ezra Pound. While I never took a class on any of the works by the so-called King of the Beats, I read his books thoroughly during my degree. I remain surprised at the relatively small amount of critical work on Kerouac’s poetry—lyric gems that stand out in the American poetic tradition. My essay puts Kerouac’s Mexico City Blues under a microscope of influence in order to establish him as a serious and gifted poet in the Western tradition of praise poetry.

-Jack Derricourt

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