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The words I put in your mouth: the sexual politics of rambling, direct and indirect style in Kerouac's *Tristessa*

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Abstract

This article explores how Kerouac's instrumental use of rambling, direct and indirect styles in *Tristessa* (1960) impacts its sexual politics. After having deciphered the attributes of the narrative voice that integrates Kerouac's aesthetics of spontaneous prose, we will turn to the character of Tristessa and analyze the features of her speech. As a discrepancy appears between the male-subject (Duluoz) and the female-object (Tristessa), we will examine the effects that such stylistic choices entail in Kerouac's narrative project, especially at the level of its economy of desire and its translation in terms of sexual politics in the novella.

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1. Introduction

Jack Kerouac wrote *Tristessa* (1960) in the summers of 1955 and 1956 in Mexico, as he paid a visit to friend and writer William Burroughs who was then living in the Mexican capital. It is a novella that deals with a story

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of unrequited love between Jack Duluoz, a figuration of the author himself, and a young Mexican woman named Tristessa, a drug user who spirals into addiction. It is the narrator's attraction to Tristessa's beauty and self-destruction – in fact, a beauty generated by self-destruction – that constitutes the basis of the novella, narrated in the first person. This article aims to decipher how, through stylistic choices, Kerouac constructs a narrative that exemplifies a strategy of domination between the two protagonists, namely his own representation as Jack Duluoz, and Tristessa, the female heroine of the novella. I will analyze how this relationship of power between the male narrator and the female object of the book is played out in terms of desire (both sexual and cultural) through the use of styles in particular.

2. Kerouac's narrative voice in *Tristessa*

Tristessa, in more than one way, is typical of Kerouac's writing in regards of its stylistics. In *Tristessa*, Kerouac's voice is expressed by means of an I-narrative, a form of rambling style: the author himself is both the narrator, and a character of the story. The focalization, most of the time, is internal. The following paragraphs will scrutinize how Kerouac, by means of a rambling style that is about to be defined, lends his voice to Jack Duluoz throughout the novella.

2.1. *Kerouac's spontaneous prose: Speed, flux of consciousness, organic rhythm*

In *Tristessa*, Kerouac speaks and breathes through Jack Duluoz. Let's consider the opening sentence of the novella: "I'M RIDING ALONG with Tristessa in the cab, drunk, with big bottle of Juarez Bourbon whiskey in the till-bag railroad lootbag they'd accused me of holding in railroad 1952 – here I am in Mexico City, rainy Saturday night, mysteries, old dream sidestreets with no names reeling in, the little street where I'd walked through crowds of gloomy Hobo Indians wrapped in tragic shawls enough to make you cry and you thought you saw knives flashing beneath the folds – lugubrious dreams as tragic as the one of Old Railroad Night where my father sits big of thighs in smoking car of night, outside's a brakeman with red light and white light, lumbering in the sad vast mist tracks of life – but now I'm up on that Vegetable plateau Mexico, the moon of Citlapol a few nights earlier I'd stumbled to on the sleepy roof on the way to the ancient dripping stone toilet – Tristessa is high, beautiful as ever, goin home gayly to go to bed and enjoy her morphine" (Kerouac 1960, p. 7). This passage, in its illustration of Kerouac's technique of spontaneous prose, is compelling. According to scholar Benedict Giomo (2000), Kerouac's spontaneous prose is "best characterized by its stream of consciousness that join[s] with the torrential flow of experience, [and by] its sheer energy and rushing enthusiasm, natural rhythm, musical phrasing (when spoken), richly detailed imagery, and sonic jazz improvisation" (p. XIV). Indeed, the energy of Kerouac's prose, conveyed by means of an impression of speed, is particularly striking here. As friend and fellow writer Allen Ginsberg (2000) remarked, Kerouac's style feels like "the rhythm of the mind at work at high speed in prose" (p.342). Ginsberg's remark translates the frank urgency in *Tristessa's* opening scene; it is suggested by the many ellipses that plague the text – mostly through the removal of grammatical connectives – as in the phrase "here I am in Mexico City, rainy Saturday night" (Kerouac 1960, p. 7) for instance. Images and ideas, sometimes with no obvious relationship between themselves, are juxtaposed by dashes and interconnected; they create the illusion that the reader is privy to the very complex network of thoughts in the narrator's mind. In fact, as Giomo (2000) suggests, it is as if the autodiegetic narration of *Tristessa* is rendered through the improvisational form of 1950s modern jazz (bebop), which suggests both speed and dexterity. As literary historian and critic Richard Gray (1990) points out: "It is as jazz musicians [...] when improvising, [...] drawing in a breath and blowing a phrase [...] till he runs out of breath, and when he does, his sentence, his statement's been made" (p.301). Indeed, as we can see, the first sentence abides to the rule of breathing and divides itself naturally in five sections, providing the prosody with an organic feel and

defining Kerouac's rambling style in the novella.[†]

2.2. *Syntactical digressions, orality and the will to transparency*

A striking feature of Kerouac's prosody in *Tristessa* is that its syntactical structures are digressive. In the following sequence, "now I'm up on that Vegetable plateau Mexico, the moon of Citlapol a few nights earlier I'd stumbled to on the sleepy roof on the way to the ancient dripping stone toilet—" (Kerouac 1960, p. 7), the syntax is loose: punctuation is lacking, there is no comma or connective between "plateau" and "Mexico", rendering a sensation of speed. It provides the passage with a texture of orality, generated by the impression of an endless accumulation of phrases and new ideas which are formulated in the mouth of the narrator but which cannot be fully developed until the end, because the flux of the spoken words is slower than the flux of ideas and images in the mind. The oral quality of Kerouac's prose has been analyzed by Beat scholar Thomas Bierowski (2011): the latter saw Kerouac's voice as a literary technique which articulates "a shaman-like secret language that takes the form of neologisms, poetic compounds, glossolalia, linguistic conversions, and unconventional punctuation" (p. 25), all of which mimic the flow of orality. For Ginsberg (2000), this encourages Kerouac's readers to "read aloud and notice how the motion of the sentence corresponds to the notion of actual excited talk" (p. 346), which is characteristic of Kerouac's writing.

Kerouac partakes in a tradition of writers who rejected syntactical conventions for the sake of literary experimentation. Scholar Robert Hipkiss (1976) reflects on Kerouac's literary technique in these terms: "When [...] Kerouac experimented with Spontaneous Prose, it was as a means of breaking with the "literary" writing which he felt straight-jacketed his expression. Henry Miller made his break with literary tradition in writing *Tropic of Cancer*, and James Joyce did it before him with *Ulysses*. Like those earlier iconoclasts, Kerouac was seeking a way of communicating the depths of his frustration with the modern world. He, like Miller and Joyce, felt he had to get beyond the bonds of conventional narrative to do it" (p. 85). This move away from formalism, inherited from Modernism and from a few influential literary figures from the nineteenth and twentieth century (Walt Whitman, Henry Miller for instance) is integrated into prose by Kerouac. Its main quality is to allow the writer to get to grips with the reality of his own experience in a more transparent, less mediated way, in accord with what the eye witnesses and what the mind directly feels regardless of syntactical relevance.

2.3. *Duluoz's rambling style: A voice for a hero*

Thus, this opening passage epitomizes Duluoz's stream of consciousness, where the reader has the impression that he/she has direct access to the most intimate thoughts, impressions and sensations of the narrator – in one word, his own consciousness. In fact, the kaleidoscopic quality of Duluoz's stream of consciousness makes it clear, from the beginning, that although it is a story about a young Mexican woman, the main hero is Duluoz, as autodiegetic narrator, internal focalizer, and character of the story. These essentials, in line with the picaresque tradition, define Duluoz's narrative voice in *Tristessa*. The set of stylistics that we have outlined reveals what may be termed the narrator's rambling style; it is necessarily subjective, as it is centred on Duluoz's own perception of things. It corresponds, ultimately, to Duluoz's stream of consciousness, as an aesthetic representation of Kerouac himself.

3. The objectification of *Tristessa*

3.1. *Tristessa's indirect style: Duluoz's puppet*

The character of Tristessa, however, is treated differently. Most of the time, her appearances in the text are mediated by Duluoz by means of indirect speech. For instance: “Tristessa is trying [...] to explain that”, “Tristessa says” or “Tristessa keeps saying [...]” (Kerouac 1960, pp. 8, 13 and 16). In other words, Tristessa exists only through Duluoz since the novella is an autodiegetic narrative with, most of the time, internal focalization. Therefore, there is no synchronicity of points of view in the narrative. Duluoz, as the creator of Tristessa's narrative identity, is the only agent in charge: the reader never enters Tristessa's mind, which can, therefore, be instrumentalized at will.

3.2. *Tristessa's direct style: The objectifying power of the vernacular*

When Tristessa expresses herself directly in the novella, she is made to speak in a very specific way. Let's consider the following set of quotations: “Here ees the cab – hey hees hey who – I breeng you back the m o a – n y. [...] My friend ees seek, I geev them shot [...] Eees when, cuando, my friend does not pays me back, don I dont care. Because [...] my Lord pay me – and he pay me more – M-o-r-e. [...] Bot – I weeling to haff jonk – morfina – and be no-seek any more. [...] Jew – Jew – [...] and me [...] We are nothing. Tomorrar we may be die, and so we are nothing” (Kerouac 1960, pp. 10, 21, 23 and 57). Tristessa's occurrences are very short and grammatically incorrect. In fact, they are phonetic transcriptions of her Latin accent, and sometimes integrate elements of the Spanish language. These simplistic transcriptions of the English language correspond to a form of pidgin English, as they show traces of a primary language which is different to the narrator's *lingua franca*.

As we consider Tristessa's pidgin English, it is crucial to notice that these transcriptions are, in themselves, part of Kerouac's aesthetic project: they are fully integrated into the aesthetics of the novella by means of the literary strategy of the vernacular. As the novella takes on the form of a confessional narrative, it aims to reproduce faithfully the content of the experiences that the narrator – Duluoz – is submitted to in the most transparent fashion. In other terms, to transcribe the world as it is, it must be rendered as the ear hears it. Therefore, in order to represent Tristessa's direct speech, Kerouac uses pidgin English and Spanish – that is, a form of the vernacular – not to let Tristessa speak freely, as we might think, but to transcribe his own perception of her; that is, to translate aesthetically his own impression of Tristessa. The effect on Tristessa is that, although she is stigmatized culturally by her accent, she is not othered aesthetically but wholly assimilated into Duluoz's narrative. Thus, as Tristessa's voice is mediated by Duluoz through both direct and indirect style, Tristessa's consciousness is rendered exclusively through Duluoz's own appreciation of it. In other words, she becomes a means to the expression of the narrator's voice, and not a subject of her own. We can say, in fact, that Tristessa does not belong to herself, but to the narrator's vision.

4. **Tristessa as Duluoz's sexual and exotic fantasy**

It is this dichotomy between the narrator's rambling style, on the one hand, and Tristessa's occurrences on the other, that grounds the sexual politics of the novella. Decisively, Duluoz's representation of Tristessa betrays an emotional interest in her. As Duluoz confesses: “I love her, I fall in love with her” (Kerouac 1960, p. 22). Thus Duluoz may offer, consciously or not, a biased representation of the woman he is impassioned with.

4.1. *Duluoz's glamorization of Tristessa*

This aesthetic bias concerns, in the first place, her physical appearance: as Duluoz reports, “she is such a beautiful girl” (Kerouac 1960, p. 10). In fact, the reader has only access to Duluoz’s subjective judgement of Tristessa’s physical appearance; it results in a phenomenon of magnification of the woman that the narrator desires. Moreover, a certain number of other parameters interfere in Tristessa’s depiction and complete this process of idealization, as Duluoz’s romantic interest in Tristessa manifests itself through a strong affect for what she stands for in socio-cultural terms. Hence, beyond her physical appearance, it is her geographical, social and cultural origin that is emphasized and idealized throughout the novella.

4.2. *Celebrating the land: Kerouac’s ode to Mexico*

In *Tristessa*, the evocation of Mexico is pastoral; it partakes in the myth of a virgin land, a place unspoiled by the action of civilization. In fact, Kerouac’s representation of Mexico participates in a form of Romantic othering. Mexico stands south of the frontier of Western civilization: it is the mythical South, which takes on the form of an Eden on earth to Kerouac. A safehaven for illegitimate behaviour as well as a land for opportunity, it lures post-war pioneers in search of a new frontier. It might very well stand for what the West had been to nineteenth-century America: namely, a land which, as formulated and fantasized in the collective unconscious, is beautiful and untouched by the industrious action of men, a fertile land that offered visitors the illusion of the possibility to retrieve lost innocence. At a time when the American Dream disappointed many nationals, and especially the Beats, Mexico encapsulates the belief that, as Gray (1990) suggests, “things can be perfect again” (p. 6). It is this promise that, essentially, Kerouac heard in the land of Mexico.

4.3. *Socio-cultural idealization: Kerouac’s contention with the West*

Beyond the idealization of the land, Kerouac suffuses *Tristessa* with a consistent compassion, at times turned into a form of adulation, for Mexican people. Kerouac’s textual strategy of representation of Mexicans can be read as ideological: as Duluoz reports: “Everything is so poor in Mexico, people are poor, and yet everything they do is happy and carefree [...] Tristessa is a junkey and she goes about it skinny and carefree, where an American would be gloomy” (Kerouac 1960, p. 29). It seems that Tristessa’s origin is, in itself, synonymous with a form of cultural euphoria from the narrator’s perspective. Kerouac scholar Robert Hipkiss (1976) commented on Kerouac’s tendency to cultural idealization in these terms: “The reason for the adulation [of Mexican culture] is, as Sal Paradise says in *On the Road*, “the best the white world had offered was not enough ecstasy for me, not enough life, joy, kicks, darkness, music, not enough night... I wished I was a Denver Mexican, or even a poor overworked Jap, anything but what I was so drearily, a white man disilluisioned”” (p. 7). Thus Kerouac provides the cultural environment of Tristessa with excitement and exoticism. In fact, it is as if Kerouac deliberately stressed the cultural gap between Tristessa’s world and what is referred to as “the white world” (Hipkiss 1976, p. 7) of Duluoz, that is, the postwar socio-cultural context which Kerouac was immersed in. We may say, then, that Tristessa represents a refuge from the cultural values that Kerouac – through Duluoz – disagrees with. In this sense, she is Kerouac’s ideological projection of a desired civilizational model.

4.4. *The monologue of Tristessa: Kerouac as an Orientalist*

In a determinant way, and even though Mexico does not belong to the geographical East, Kerouac’s idealized representation of Tristessa and her socio-cultural origin partakes in the trope of Orientalism as defined by Edward Said in his eponymous work. As Said (1978) argues: “[...] the imaginative examination of things

Oriental was based more or less exclusively upon a sovereign Western consciousness out of whose unchallenged centrality an Oriental world emerged, first according to general ideas about who or what was an Oriental, then according to a detailed logic governed not simply by empirical reality but by a battery of desires, repressions, investments, and projections” (p. 3). In effect, Kerouac’s representation of Mexico is necessarily biased, as it is devised and remodelled from the perspective of a young Western man desiring a non-Western, “Oriental” woman. As a consequence, the passages that deal with Mexico correspond more to the depiction of a subjective, private phantasm rather than an attempt to pertain to any representation of socio-historical and cultural reality. As Said (1978) explains, “in brief, because of Orientalism the Orient was not (and is not) a free subject of thought or action” (p. 3). In literary terms, this makes the object of Orientalism in the novella – that is, Tristessa – nothing else but a vehicle for the writer’s own vision. In the end, this triple process of idealization – physical, geographical and socio-cultural – turns Tristessa into a strategy that supports Dulouoz’s subjective account of his own experience. In fact, Kerouac constructs a narrative in which he devises an ideal woman from his own perspective; therefore, he does not tell a realistic story that allows a dialogic modality to surface, but creates a monologue that projects his inner fantasy through the elaboration of his own vision.

5. Conclusion

Throughout the novella, Dulouoz’s perspective is the one of a Western observer of what he considers the exotic, which, as Said (1978) argued, involves a process of objectification. In effect, instead of a dialogue that acknowledges the subjectivities of the two protagonists, the text of *Tristessa* turns the eponymous heroine into an accessory to the narrator’s private fantasy, as her identity dissolves through the stylistic features of her speech. Therefore, Tristessa, a woman of native origin, is culturally translated into the codes of the West through a white, American subjective viewpoint with no presentation of a simultaneous movement from her own cultural and ethnic perspective. As Dulouoz is the only agent in charge, Tristessa is thus turned, unreservedly, into an object of sexual and cultural desire. She corresponds, ultimately, not to a character, but to one of Kerouac’s narrative strategies, whose ultimate goal is to offer the reader a self-contained re-presentation of the visions and fantasies of his own consciousness.

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