

The Role of the Flâneur in Jack Kerouac's Novel *On the Road*

Maria Izabel V. Domingues*

ABSTRACT: This is a critical reading of *On the Road* by the North American writer Jack Kerouac, whose life and work represent the social dissatisfaction and the artistic manifestation of a generation of poets and novelists denominated *The Beat Generation*. The work consists of an investigation to establish relationships among the triad author-narrator-protagonist in the proposed narrative. Supported by the theory of Walter Benjamin, the chosen theme contemplates the reflections of Benjamin about authorship, experience and modernity; but, above all, it privileges his conception of the *flâneur*; once the objective of the work is to show his movement and role in the literary corpus, as well as in the life of the *Beatnik* author. This paper is divided in two parts. The first presents a brief historical comment on the situation of the United States in the postwar period, in order to contextualize and discuss the creation of the *Beat Movement* as an avantgardist manifestation. The second moment analyzes *On the Road* in connection with Walter Benjamin's thoughts and in the extent of the tradition of Travel Literature, emphasizing the relevance of authorship. In the conclusion, I expect to legitimate the role of the *flâneur* in the narrative and socio-historical scope of that generation.

KEYWORDS: American Literature, Beat Generation, *Flâneur*.

FIRST CONSIDERATIONS AND THE *FLÂNEUR*

The Beat Generation translates a new form of seeing society and art. In the forties, they start an innovative way of treating literature, which consisted of mixing spontaneous thoughts and the melody reproduced by jazz instruments. Kerouac is one of the most important names of his generation and his fascination for jazz helped him to create his own writing style. Kerouac and other beat writers are of fundamental importance to the new artistic scenery in the United States of the middle of the century. In Europe, the artistic innovations took place much earlier than in America.

For this work, what really interests is the place the *Beat* Literature takes in the new period of art and literature in the America postwar. The *Beat Generation* was born as a free

* Doutoranda em Literaturas de Língua Inglesa no Programa de Pós-Graduação em Letras da UFRGS.

medium to express one's feelings and beliefs without concentrating on any sort of norm, whatsoever with no concern about rules. The *Beat* movement appears in the middle of the great ideological and political confusion in America having as its original avangardist premise: to take the position against the national order, whatever it was.¹ For the *Beatniks*, improvisation meant the pleasure for the ordinary. Manoel Ricardo Lima says that the *Beat* literature was “condemned by many scholars exactly for defending spontaneity”, and he emphasizes the beat idea that “poetry, life and freedom must be together.”² Ensuring what the spirit of the *Beat Generation* was all about: their literature fought for the right of freedom, they expressed their suspicious to the American Dream through a neo-romantic prose style and different kind of poetry. The *Beat* writing is defined by spontaneity and oral quality, just like the tune produced by a jazz musician when playing his instrument. The writers of this generation enjoy using daring expressions that would describe the reality in a very shocking combination. Following Lima, the great spiritual reference based on the oriental philosophy, the hippie pacifist manifestations, the concrete desire for freedom and for a meaningful way of art and life made the *Beatniks* the American *Avant-Garde*.

One of the important elements for the *Avant-Garde* movements was “chance” (in the sense of luck, risk and fate), proposing the effects of casualism and irrationality as a way of penetrating the unconsciousness. The Dadaists, particularly, enjoyed the usage of “casualty” elements, as we read the “recipe” on how to make a Dadaist poem, for example, we see that the instructions are clear to the “chance” aspect. It suggests that a Dadaist poem can be made, simply, by cutting an article out of a newspaper, putting the words in a bag and shaking it. “[...] Next take out each cutting one after the order. Copy conscientiously in

¹ LIMA, 2002, p. 73. Translation Mine.

² Idem, ibidem.

the order in which they left the bag [...].”³ Fate will compose art because art must not be planned. I believe that “chance” is one of the avangardist characteristics presented in *On the Road*. It is very interesting how the action of traveling is connected with fate. Every possible trip ends up being an unexpected surprise to the participants, in the book and in the lives of the Beats. In the passage, ‘What the cards say?’ ‘The ace of spades is far away from him. The heart cards always surround him – the queen of heart is never far. See this jack of spades? That’s Dean, he’s always around.’ ‘We’re leaving for New York in an hour.’ ‘Someday Dean’s going to go on one of these trips and never come back.’⁴, Sal and Galatea talk about Dean’s chance, which is represented here by the cards.

Throughout Walter Benjamin’s work, several thoughts on modernity and its features were developed (many of them supported by Baudelaire’s poetry and criticism). For Baudelaire, it is important to be as a hero to live modernity, due to all the difficulties and changes it proposes. This “hero condition” is found in the figure of the *flâneur*. In some of his essays⁵, Benjamin exposes the figure and concept of someone who, touched by the transformations of the *fin-du-siècle* and the novelties of a new time, finds himself contemplating the streets of Paris: the *flâneur*. Baudelaire sees him as the “man of the crowd” – the idler; the urban stroller.⁶

Baudelaire’s genius, which is fed on melancholy, is an allegorical genius. In Baudelaire Paris becomes for the first time a subject of lyric poetry. This poetry is not regional art; rather, the gaze of the allegorist that falls on the city is estranged. It is the gaze of the *flâneur*, whose mode of life still surrounds the approaching desolation of city life with a propitiatory luster. The *flâneur* is still on the threshold, of the city as of the bourgeois class. Neither has yet engulfed him; in neither is he at home. He seeks refuge in the crowd.⁷

³ TZARA in TELES, p. 132. Translation Mine

⁴ OR, p. 186.

⁵ *On Some Motifs in Baudelaire; The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire; Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century, The Arcades Project.*

⁶ Cf. CAYGILL, p. 160.

⁷ BENJAMIN, p. 156.

What Benjamin indicates above symbolizes his attempt to address the modern age, with its loads of impressions about fashion and commodities. Paris has become the big window of the modern world. The city is full of life surrounded by the fresh air of technology. In the essay entitled *The Painter of the Modern Life*⁸, Baudelaire praises the work and character of his friend Constantin Guys (1805-1892) and refers to him as the *flâneur*, the man in the crowd. According to Baudelaire, *the crowd is the flâneur's universe, like the air is the birds', like the water is the fish'*. For the perfect *flâneur*, for the passionate observer, it is an immense happiness to take up residence in the numerous, in the waving, in the movement, in the fugitive and in the infinite.⁹ The *flâneur* walks around people in the city – he enjoys doing his *flânerie* in cafés spread throughout the boulevards – observing the industrial civilization and breathing the modern experience. Baudelaire's *flâneur* was Benjamin's inspiration. The streets and the Arcades, where the crowd would transit, were the places for the *flânerie*, and the *flâneur* would not feel bored, because he enjoys trespassing the public routes. "Giving the crowd a soul is the *flâneur's* mission." The Parisian Arcades are something really important for a better understanding of Benjamin's ideas on the *flâneur*. Between 1927 and 1929, Benjamin planned an essay with the title of *Paris Arcades: a dialectical fairytale*, which has become *The Arcades Project*. What first made the writing on arcades interesting was the fact that in the nineteenth century it was very fashionable to build arcades in Europe, especially in Paris, which emerged the new possibilities of iron and glass technology. Hannah Arendt says that,

The arcades which connect the great boulevards and offer protection from inclement weather exerted such an enormous fascination over Benjamin that he referred to his projected major work on the nineteenth century and its capital simply as "The Arcades" (*Passagenarbeit*); and these passageways are indeed

⁸ Article included in the volume *L'Arte Romantique*, published in 1869.

⁹ BAUDELAIRE, 1988, p. 170.

like a symbol of Paris, because they clearly are inside and outside at the same time and thus represent its true nature in quintessential form.¹⁰

What attracts Benjamin about the arcades, according to Caygill, is the simultaneity of being both outside and inside, the Neapolitan experience of ‘porosity’ again, but especially the fashionable rows of shops with their dazzling displays of commodities behind glass façades.¹¹ Along with modernization, the individualist mood seems to interfere, more than ever, in people’s routine. This causes the *flâneur* to travel through phantasmagorias. These phantasmagorias embrace the dreams of modern life, – dreams such as fashion, technique, architecture, urbanism, and the dream of the arcades¹² – where all unreal energies become condensed in the city. Benjamin says that, “in these transitory arcades, even in the fleeting fashions on display in its shops, we find traces of a utopian wish for a completely satisfactory system of social production.”¹³ The arcades are, as a result, like a miniature world in which the *flâneur* is at home. Benjamin elects the figure of the *flâneur* inspired in Baudelaire and in what Baudelaire had written. Both saw in that type of individual a soul that would reflect on the anxieties caused by the process of modernization and the transformations yet to come. In addition, the *flâneur* is the one able to walk down the streets and arcades and think freely about modernity.

In the beginning of the 1990s, Sergio Rouanet wrote a book about the importance of traveling, stating that, “the human condition is still connected to the condition of the traveler.”¹⁴ The author believes that when we travel the fantasy we bring with us travels

¹⁰ ARENDT, 1969, p. 20-21.

¹¹ CAYGILL, p.147.

¹² Paris was Benjamin’s ‘chosen city’, as Martin Jay writes, ‘both as the site of his exile and as the controlling metaphor of his work’. This is evident in his passion for the ‘allegorist’ poet of Paris, Charles Baudelaire. But the idea for an article on the Paris arcades began on a walk with his friend Franz Hessel, then, in 1926, collaborating with Benjamin on the translation of Marcel Proust’s *À la Recherche du Temps Perdu* (CAYGILL, p. 146).

¹³ Cf. CAYGILL, p. 153.

¹⁴ ROUANET, Sergio P. *A Razão Nômada: Walter Benjamin e outros viajantes*. Rio de Janeiro: Editora da UFRJ, 1993, p. 07. Translation Mine.

along; that is, it is our fantasy that really travels, because it is only from there that the pleasure and melancholy of traveling come out. Besides the reflection on traveling, Rouanet contemplates the rich contribution from Walter Benjamin on the theme. Moreover, he invites the reader to follow the steps left by Benjamin's ideas on experience and the significance of the *flâneur* in an enjoyable and clear way. By wandering around this city, the *flâneur* gets the 'profane illumination', which will serve to brighten the very city and reveal it through its allegorical truth.¹⁵ According to Rouanet, when in Paris, the *flâneur* makes himself at home, because he owes his own existence to it. However, the *flâneur* is not only interested in the city space, but also in its history. For him, every street hill leads down to the past – his and the city's.¹⁶ Paris is the place elected and celebrated by the *flâneur*. Rouanet emphasizes that "the *flâneur* is the traveler of modernity." According to him, the modern traveler wanders around the city crossing the left and right margins of the Seine as a pirate in the unknown seas – promoting the *flânerie*. *The Arcades Project*, by Walter Benjamin¹⁷ is divided in topics relevant to the issues of modernity or places in Paris, in which Benjamin shows the *flâneur*'s itinerary. The *flâneur* starts his *flânerie* at the *Passage Vivienne*, gazes over the museum, the subterranean, the station, etc. He ends at the *Passage of Cairo*. During all the observing process, the *flâneur* shows the streets of Paris and some of its particularities inquisitively. The *flâneur*'s itinerary has been constructed in order to illustrate the dialectics of these two levels of reality, objective and dreamlike, in which his perception acts in two stages.¹⁸

The *flâneur* walks on the street, and there is nothing more material than the street. But on the asphalt materialism comes out to the

¹⁵ Idem, p. 10. Translation Mine.

¹⁶ ROUANET, p. 22. Translation Mine

¹⁷ See ROUANET, p. 23.

¹⁸ Apud ROUANET, p. 55. Translation Mine.

dream of labyrinth. The labyrinth contains the desire of arriving, the impulse of achieving a goal, and this is Utopia. It includes therefore the danger to be led astray, the risk of not reaching the end, or getting to an undesired end. In this sense, it is myth.¹⁹

Many places in Paris are the *flâneur*'s target for his thoughts. Benjamin points out the Arcades, the department store, the bridge, the School of Fine Arts, the museum, the station, and some consequences of the human existence.

THE ROLE OF THE *FLÂNEUR* AND FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

On the Road is full of self-image content what makes possible to say that Kerouac's self-image character, Sal Paradise, has the power to determine some of his attitudes and social behavior by living a fictional life in a very similar way as the writer's own life. It is important to mention that, for the purposes of this work, the dimensions of person, author, narrator and character might become a bit jumbled. According to Roland Barthes, "He who speaks (in the narrative) is not he who writes (in real life); and he who writes is not who he thinks he is."²⁰ I apologize and ask permission to subvert Barthes' ideas in order to explore the figure of the *flâneur*.

The *flânerie* here refers to observing and feeling people, places, symbols and life not only through the eyes, but also through one's heart. For Benjamin, the *flâneur* model is also the one who wanders through the streets of Paris, questioning about modernization and its consequences, exactly as he did himself. My point is that, like Benjamin, Kerouac also has his *flâneur*. The context and questions may be different but the inquisitive spirit is, indeed, very similar. Sal Paradise is the *flâneur* in the novel, and his role is to show, as Kerouac's self-image, how he sees society. In *On the Road*, the presence of the *flâneur* is strong and remarkable; he is not only walking around the big city, but he is also around the whole

¹⁹ Idem, *ibidem*.

²⁰ BARTHES, Roland. *Poétique du Récit*. Paris: Seuil, 1977

country and outside the national boundaries. He walks, hitchhikes, and travels by car or by bus. He is free to wander as he pleases. Even though he practices his *flânerie* in Mexico and Europe, the *flâneur* is contextualized in the American postwar II, and his main concern is in/about New York and San Francisco. Jack Kerouac lived in many places: Massachusetts, New York, California, a period in Europe, and in the end of his life, in Florida (with his mother), where he died. His spirit was unquiet, he could not settle in the same place for long. Kerouac's need to move was his way of provoking the American patterns; during his youth he did not want to follow the American way of living by taking up residence in only one place. Nevertheless, as a Beatnik, Kerouac's geographical and spiritual search for freedom is factual.

You embark upon the Voyage, face eager, eyes aflame with the passion of traveling, spirits brimming with gaiety, levity, and a flamboyant carelessness that tries to conceal the wild delight with which this mad venture fills you. [...] You see the old familiar things: streets with time-worn names, houses with barren roofs and upthrusting chimneys, staring tiredly at the same old sky, the same old heavens, the same old ashen emptiness.²¹

The extract above is from Kerouac's *Where the Road Begins*, part of the selection of some early short stories and writings in *Atop an Underwood*, edited by Paul Marion, in 1999. Through fictional characters, Kerouac tells about his impressions when leaving to college in New York. New York City has become the New World's capital of the bohemia, and it was on Times Square that the Beat Generation was born. If Paris was Baudelaire's and Benjamin's ideal place for the *flâneur* in the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth, New York was perfect for the *flânerie* of the members of the neo *avant-garde* in the forties and fifties. New York has accommodated many cultures, costumes and dreams. According to Bill Morgan, New York City has always been a shining magnet for writers, and that is why it attracted the writers of the Beat Generation. Morgan

²¹ KEROUAC, 1999, p. 57.

argues that: “Every major writer of that movement lived in or visited New York. They all had a love-hate relationship with it.”²² Morgan quotes Kerouac,

I roamed the streets, the bridges, Times Square, cafeterias, the waterfront, I looked up all my poet beatnik friends and roamed with them, I had love affairs with girls in the Village, I did everything with that great mad joy you get when you return to New York City.²³

Kerouac practices the *flânerie* in New York for authentic experience. Paris was for Benjamin the capital of the nineteenth century. In the same sense, we can say that New York is, for Kerouac, the capital of the twentieth century.

Suddenly I found myself on Times Square. I had traveled eight thousand miles around the American continent and I was back on Times Square; and right in the middle of a rush hour, too, seeing with my innocent road-eyes the absolute madness and fantastic hoorair of New York with its millions hustling forever for a buck among themselves, the mad dream – grabbing, taking, giving, sighing, dying, just so they could be buried in those awful cemetery cities beyond Long Island City. The high towers of the land – the other end of the land, the place where Paper American is born.²⁴

The *flâneur* is the man of the crowd; he likes to observe the street movement and what experience he can get from that. Caygill says that: “The *flâneur* merges with that undomesticated conspirator, the bohemian artist, of uncertain economic status.”²⁵ Neal Cassady, Kerouac’s friend and hero also is, like Kerouac, a bohemian artist. In fact, Cassady is not an artist in the sense of writing (like Kerouac), but for having a spontaneous and free way of expressing himself what inspires Jack to transform him in the novel’s fundamental character Dean Moriarty. Kerouac and Cassady adventured together in many trips, on the road or under drugs. Hunt sees Cassady as Kerouac’s subject, muse, and alter ego.²⁶ Although he is not the kind of person someone could expect much or count on, Kerouac makes of him his muse and hero. In the novel, Paradise is the *flâneur* who accepts

²² MORGAN, 1997, p. xi.

²³ KEROUAC, in: MORGAN, p. xi.

²⁴ OR, p. 96.

²⁵ CAYGILL, p.160.

²⁶ Hunt, p. xxii.

the role of the detective to the extent that Moriarty is okay to deal with his own condition of the “malefactor” who has been watched by Paradise. It is curious that the name Dean Moriarty – which is given to Neal Cassady in *On the Road* – is the same as the name of the main enemy (Professor Moriarty) of Sherlock Holmes in the stories by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. I cannot affirm what Kerouac’s intention was when choosing his character’s name, but certainly, this is an interesting possibility of analysis under Benjamin’s ideas on the *flâneur* in relation to the “destructive character”. Being up to the *flânerie*, Kerouac’s restless spirit is always ready to broaden his perceptions. San Francisco also is a place to stroll and observe. The fantastic architecture and curious topography of the city fascinate the *flâneur*. Paradise tells about a day with Moriarty, “We were standing on top of a hill on a beautiful sunny day in San Francisco; our shadows fell across the sidewalk.”²⁷ The streets of the big cities are the *flâneur*’s home: Poe’s London, Baudelaire’s and Benjamin’s Paris, and Kerouac’s New York and San Francisco. One of the times Kerouac went to San Francisco, his feeling was “a renewed love for the city and for civilization generally.”²⁸ The *flâneur* wanders contemplating the city’s institutions while he questions about the social, cultural and artistic values of his time in comparison to the past. In San Francisco, Kerouac faces the start of the American “bohemian coffeehouse movement”, when he and some other writers would read their texts in Cafés. Some of that kind of writing written by the “desolation angels” – as Kerouac used to call the San Francisco poets – pictured San Francisco’s North Beach as “the subterranean mecca, with nightclubs [...], coffeehouses, and low rents.”²⁹ San Francisco becomes subject to art. That scenery also intrigued Kerouac

²⁷ *OR*, p. 173.

²⁸ KEROUAC apud AMBURN, p. 253.

²⁹ See AMBURN, p.255.

because “soon he observed dissention and rivalry among the poets.”³⁰ As if art had been transformed in commodity, since poetry readings became the fashionable place to be seen in San Francisco. According to Rouanet, the *flâneur*'s hallucinations come from the city, and on the asphalt where he walks his steps awaken surprising resonances. Kerouac is excited by the city and it would be proper to say that he creates, in his true story novel *On the Road*, a character to whom the “road” awakes significant resonances. In the novel, Sal Paradise's comings and goings through many towns, especially New York and San Francisco, classify him obviously as someone looking for something. Paradise assumes his condition of traveler and decides to tell the readers what he sees on the road. The part below describes how Sal feels about a certain situation. The *flâneur* is always reflecting about what he sees in the streets, and here he questions about how one could live like that,

[...] We wandered around, carrying our bundles of rags in the narrow romantic streets. Everybody looked like a broken-down movie extra, a withered starlet; disenchanted stunt-men, midget auto-racers, poignant California characters with their end-of-the-continent sadness, handsome, decadent, Casanov-ish men, puffy-eyed motel blondes, hustlers, pimps, whores, masseurs, bellhops – a lemon lot, and how's a man going to make a living with a gang like that?³¹

In *On the Road*, the external space differs from that of Benjamin and Baudelaire (Paris), and here the *flâneur* does not cross Arcades, he hitchhikes across big cities and the countryside as he watches people's and places' peculiarities. Benjamin's *flâneur* sees many attractions in the city. In Kerouac's novel, Paradise has, as some of his major attractions, bars, nightclubs, art galleries, cars and the road. According to Benjamin, the prostitute is another attraction for the *flâneur*, especially because he is interested in commodities, and like the waged worker, the prostitute is – at the same time – commodity and seller. The *flâneur* condemns the social causes that produced her, but his compassion does not prevent

³⁰ Idem

³¹ *OR*, p. 154.

him from getting fascinated by the symbolism of prostitution. Based on Benjamin, Rouanet says about the *flâneur*, “Man of the city, he cannot help becoming interested in such a typical big city’s phenomenon.”³² *On the Road* presents some passages in which the characters are having sex with prostitutes, or talking about them. When Sal, Dean and Stan go to Mexico, for example, they spend some hours in a whorehouse. Sal Paradise tells about his impressions,

Through our deliriums we began to discern their varying personalities. They were great girls. Strangely the wildest one was half Indian, half white, and came from Venezuela, and only eighteen. She looked as if she came from a good family. What she was doing whoring in Mexico at that age and with that tender cheek and fair aspect, God knows.³³

In this moment, the *flâneur* questions himself about the girl’s reasons for being in a place like that and imagines the kind of family she comes from as if he needs to justify his desire for purchasing such commodity.

Kerouac creates, in his literary project, a character to describe events that happened in his real life story. Paradise is the authentic *flâneur* seeking to tell and retell his experiences; he is the true storyteller. The *flâneur* sees everything; his curious eye looks attentively at places in the streets of Paris (originally), and then in the streets of America. He feels at home when he transits in the crowd or observes life from the inside of a coffeehouse. He is always in search of authentic experience. The role of the *flâneur* is to tell about his experiences in order to show the new era’s soul; thus, he expresses his thoughts and impressions about socio-cultural and artistic transformations. Kerouac’s pleasure for watching the things that may surprise him, or change his remote knowledge of understanding life is intrinsically pertinent in his work. What Ann Charters states in the

³² ROUANET, p. 46. Translation Mine.

³³ *OR*, p. 262.

introduction of *On the Road*, “writing *On the Road*, Kerouac finally found his own voice and his true subject – the story of his own search for a place as an outsider in America”³⁴, reinforces the initial idea that Kerouac is the *flâneur* who, wandering from street to street, looks for his place. In that condition, Kerouac recreates important events of his life and narrates them in his work. In *On the Road*, Sal Paradise is the character that represents this search for one’s own hidden feelings, while walking down the streets of New York and San Francisco, taking rides with strangers, arriving in a new town, experimenting drugs, sleeping with prostitutes or writing his book. All his actions in the book lead the attentive reader to the reality of a writer who, in the middle of the crowd, tries to find his own self.

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³⁴ CHARTERS In: *OR*, 2000.

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