

Parallel Destinies in *The Bell Jar* and *On the Road*

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There is no evidence that Jack Kerouac and Sylvia Plath, those two archetypes of the confessional urge, ever met. But if they had been introduced in the fall of 1957, when Kerouac had just published *On the Road* and Plath was at Smith College (her alma mater) teaching freshman English, they would have had plenty to talk about. They might have discussed Joyce, Lawrence, and Dostoyevski, authors they both greatly admired. They might have talked about what it was like growing up in Massachusetts, Kerouac in working-class Lowell and Plath in Wellesley, an idyllic college town. As the high-achieving offspring of immigrants—Plath’s heritage was German and Austrian; Kerouac’s, French Canadian—they could have compared the ways their ethnic origins shaped their identities and ambitions.

Other commonalities would have also beckoned. Plath was so strongly affected by the death of her father, Otto, when she was eight years old, that she would have been curious about Kerouac’s relationship with his father, Leo, who died in 1946 when Jack was 24. Since she was at the time deeply in love with Ted Hughes, the English poet whom she had married in 1956, she would not have been romantically interested in Kerouac, but the sensualist in her would have appreciated his blue eyes and brooding intensity. And if she had heard him read his own work aloud, she would have surely admired the musical rhythms of his voice as well as his innate feel for language.

For his part, though he was not in the habit of treating women as equals, Kerouac would not have been able to look down on Plath, literally or intellectually. At 5 feet, 9 inches, she was as tall as he was, and she had an intensity of her own, which Hughes later uncharitably called her “particular death-ray quality” (Hughes qtd in Ennis and Kukil 50). Kerouac’s aborted stint at Columbia College would have paled in comparison to her degrees from Smith College and Cambridge University, which she had attended on a Fulbright scholarship after graduating from Smith. And though she had not yet taken cross-country road trips the way he had, she had lived in England and traveled in

Europe.¹ Ten years his junior and in the late 1950s not yet producing her most celebrated work, Plath was nevertheless more worldly in many ways than Kerouac was. Alternately bumptious and shy, he might have seen a flicker of disdain cross Plath's animated face if they had met not long after the publication of *On the Road*.

That such a meeting never took place does not mean, of course, that these two were oblivious to one another's existence. Although Kerouac may have overlooked the author of the definitive Confessional poems "Daddy" and "Lady Lazarus," since she was just becoming posthumously famous in the U.S. during the last, difficult years of his life,² Plath could not escape some knowledge of Kerouac and the Beat Generation. Ted Hughes's personal library, now owned by Emory University, contains a copy of *On the Road*, a 1961 Pan Books paperback edition printed in London. It has no marks indicating that Plath read it, and Hughes may have acquired it after he and Plath separated in 1962, but Plath likely knew of the novel and had possibly read her husband's copy of it.³

We can say with much greater certainty that she knew of Kerouac several years before he published *On the Road*, because one of her early publications indicates that was the case. In 1953, the year after John Clellon Holmes had published his essay, "This Is the Beat Generation" in *The New York Times Magazine*, Plath was chosen for *Mademoiselle* magazine's college board. As guest managing editor, she wrote in an introduction to the August 1953 issue, "Focusing our telescope on college news around the globe, we debate and deliberate. Issues illuminated: academic freedom, the sorority controversy, our much labeled (and libeled) generation" (Plath, "Mlle's Last Word" 235). The last item refers to "The Labeled Generation," a lighthearted essay by Joel Raphaelson, identified in his biographical note as a 24-year-old Harvard graduate. Writing for *Mademoiselle*'s audience of young women in their teens and early twenties, Raphaelson tries to determine the most accurate moniker for their generation. He

¹ In the summer of 1959 Plath and Hughes made a cross-country trip to visit Plath's aunt and uncle in Pasadena, California. Their drive took them through parts of Canada as well as across the U.S.

² Harper and Row published the American edition of Plath's *Ariel* in June 1966; Faber and Faber published a new edition of *The Bell Jar*, listing Plath as author (instead of her pseudonym Victoria Lucas), in England in September 1966. The first American edition of *The Bell Jar* appeared in April 1971, nearly two years after Kerouac's death in October of 1969 (Middlebrook 227, 239).

³ According to David Faulds, Rare Book Librarian at Emory University's Robert W. Woodruff Library, *On the Road* is the only book by Kerouac catalogued to date in the Hughes library. Faulds noted, however, that the cataloguing of the Hughes library is not yet complete (Faulds email to author, Oct. 11, 2006).

describes Holmes as “the talented young author of a book with the spirited title of *Go* [who] said moodily that we’re the Beat Generation. Right away I remembered that we had been called the Silent Generation by *Time*” (Raphaelson 264). The word “beat” inevitably leads him to Kerouac: “Beat wasn’t even Mr. Clellon Holmes’s own word. A few years ago Mr. John Kerouac, still another talented young novelist, had made a significant remark to Mr. Clellon Holmes. “You know,” he said, “this is really a *beat* generation.” So I tried to get in touch with Mr. John Kerouac, but his publisher said he was out of town” (355).⁴

The notion of a Beat Generation, though not yet a Beat Movement, had entered the national consciousness in the early 1950’s and was of particular interest to young writers like Raphaelson and Plath who did not want to be typecast before they had their own say. But Plath already had a beat sensibility that was edging into public view; her villanelle “Mad Girl’s Love Song” appeared in the same issue of *Mademoiselle* that she helped edit (Plath, “Mad Girl” 358). Like Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg, she was open to the possibility that madness (with all of its visionary associations) was a precondition for revelation. With lines like “I shut my eyes and all the world drops dead,” the poem could well be titled “Beat Girl’s Love Song.” There is evidence in her journals, moreover, that she was fully capable of writing “with a bebop sense of fifties hip we normally associate with Kerouac and company” (McManamy).⁵ But it is *The Bell Jar* (1963), Plath’s only published novel, that is especially compatible with *On the Road*.

⁴ Kerouac was on the move for much of 1953. He began the year at his mother’s home in Richmond Hill, N.Y.; in February visited with his sister and her family in Rocky Mount, N.C.; in the spring moved to California to work for the Southern Pacific railroad; and then in the summer got a job aboard the *S. S. William Carruth*. He ended the year back home with his mother in Richmond Hill (*Selected Letters, 1940-1956*, 395-404).

⁵ As an example of her Beat sensibility, McManamy cites Plath’s description of a student party in Cambridge, England. It was at this memorable party that Plath first met Ted Hughes, whom she would marry less than four months later. Dated February 26, 1956, the entry reads, in part,

Falcon’s Yard, and the syncopated strut of a piano upstairs, and oh it was very Bohemian, with boys in turtle-neck sweaters and girls being blue-eye-lidded or elegant in black. Derrek was there, with guitar, and Bert was looking shining and proud as if he had just delivered five babies, said something obvious about having drunk a lot, and began talking about how Luke was satanic after we had run through the poetry in St. Botolph’s and yelled about it By this time I had spilled one drink, partly into my mouth, partly over my hands and the floor, and the jazz was beginning to get under my skin, and I started dancing with Luke and knew I was very bad, having crossed the river and banged into the trees, yelling about the poems, and he only smiling with that far-off look of a cretin satan. (*Unabridged Journals* 210-11)

Because Plath did not associate with the Beat writers and did not take an active interest in them or their writings, she could not know that the novel she would base on her first psychological breakdown and suicide attempt would prove to be so consistent with the emerging ethos of the Beat Generation—an ethos that combined profound disaffection with a yearning for spiritual consolation. Yet both Plath and her autobiographically inspired narrator, Esther Greenwood, can be seen in Holmes's 1952 essay:

The origins of the word "beat" are obscure, but the meaning is only too clear to most Americans. More than mere weariness, it implies the feeling of having been used, of being raw. It involves a sort of nakedness of mind, and, ultimately, of soul; a feeling of being reduced to the bedrock of consciousness. In short, it means being undramatically pushed up against the wall of oneself.

...

[F]or today's young people there is not as yet a single external pivot around which they can, as a generation, group their observations and their aspirations. There is no single philosophy, no single party, no single attitude. The failure of most orthodox moral and social concepts to reflect fully the life they have known is probably the reason for this, but because of it each person becomes a walking, self-contained unit, compelled to meet, or at least endure, the problem of being young in a seemingly helpless world in his own way. (Holmes 223, 227)

Although the twenty-year-old Plath, who would try to kill herself not long after her summer job at *Mademoiselle* ended, may not have given much credence to the "Beat Generation" label, the thirty-year-old who published *The Bell Jar* in England just a few weeks before ending her life had helped document its existence. It is not much of a stretch, after all, to include Plath among the brilliant minds Ginsberg commemorates in "Howl."⁶ And Plath, sorting through ideas for a novel (though not necessarily for *The Bell Jar*) in July of 1957, was prescient enough to realize—just as Kerouac had—that she could draw on her life experience to create a protagonist who would speak to and for her peers: "Make her enigmatic: who is that blond girl: she is a bitch: she is the white

⁶ Note the way that Plath's Esther Greenwood describes her visit to her father's grave: "I laid my face to the smooth face of the marble and howled my loss into the cold salt rain" (167).

goddess. Make her a statement of the generation. Which is you" (*Unabridged Journals* 289).

Yet it is precisely because *The Bell Jar* pays no notice to the Beat Generation or the coterie of male Beat writers that it is able to meet *On the Road*, the Beat Generation's defining prose work, on equal terms. By comparing the two novels, we can see that Esther Greenwood has much in common with Kerouac's Sal Paradise. Both of these protagonists are preoccupied with death and dying; both yearn for understanding and connection while remaining at odds with the world in which they live. But while Sal Paradise feels some fleeting kinship with "a new beat generation that I was slowly joining" (*On the Road* 54)—Esther portrays herself as an anomaly without any group to call her own. Though Plath had wanted to create a female character who would be "a statement of the generation," Esther is a starkly isolate figure. That is the distinguishing truth and tragedy of her story.

The Bell Jar begins in New York City in the summer of 1953, with the 19-year-old Esther Greenwood, a student at a prestigious women's college, working as a guest editor for a fashion magazine. Ambitious and status conscious, she is worried because this glamorous summer job is not making her feel the way she imagines other people think that she should. Rather than enjoying her puff literary assignments and the parties that go with the turf, she obsesses over Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, the Jewish couple who will soon be electrocuted for Communist spying. Much to her own discomfiture, she finds herself identifying with these doomed outsiders: "I couldn't help wondering what it would be like, being burned alive all along your nerves" (1). Her preoccupation with the Rosenbergs not only foreshadows her traumatic experience with electroshock therapy but also allies her with Kerouac's Sal Paradise, who likewise identifies with the marginalized and dispossessed.

Like Paradise, moreover, she is never able to reconcile this identification with an innate sense of upwardly mobile entitlement—what Kerouac's narrator calls "white ambitions" (*On the Road* 180). A walking embodiment of the Cold War conflict, Esther hears so much about the Rosenbergs that "I couldn't get them out of my mind" (1), while simultaneously tormenting herself with the knowledge that she is "supposed to be the envy of thousands of other college girls just like me all over America who wanted

nothing more than to be tripping about in those same size-seven patent leather shoes I'd bought in Bloomingdale's one lunch hour" (2). Beside herself with frustration, she continues to spin out the fantasy she imagines other people have for her: "Look what can happen in this country, they'd say. A girl lives in some out-of-the-way town for nineteen years, so poor she can't afford a magazine, and then she gets a scholarship to college and wins a prize here and prize there and ends up steering New York like her own private car" (2). This is, of course, *her* fantasy, a fantasy rooted in the "white ambitions" that caused her to pursue the New York job in the first place.

Her automotive metaphor calls to mind Dean Moriarty, the recreational car thief and socially marginalized hero of *On the Road* who spends all of his (and his wife's) money on a 1949 Hudson. For both Dean and Esther, the car is the ultimate American status symbol, a capitalist means to an escapist end. Ironically and tellingly, Dean destroys the Hudson with his rough handling of it and ends up on the last pages of *On the Road* begging Sal for a ride to Penn Station. As a true outsider, he has not been able to buy or steal his way into mainstream society; he must depend on private charity or public transportation to get from one point to the next on his circular, never ascending path.

Something similar is true for Esther. As she prepares to leave the mental institution where she has endured electroshock therapy, insulin treatments, and unpleasant company, she has this to say: "There ought, I thought, to be a ritual for being born twice—patched, retreaded and approved for the road" (244). Still clinging to the car metaphor, she imagines herself as a retread—a significant comedown from "steering New York like her own private car." Though she may look as good as new to the doctors whose approval she needs in order to reenter society, she knows, just as they do, that she will be more vulnerable than most to the hazards of the road ahead.

The groundwork for her imperilment is laid early in the novel. While maintaining the arch tone of someone seeking to amuse the dominant class, Esther reveals that her depression is rooted in her slightly threadbare, middle-class home life. When she returns home from New York, her mother picks her up at a suburban Boston train station. A widow with two college-aged children, Mrs. Greenwood supports the family by teaching secretarial classes at a university in Boston. A bit of a martyr figure, she seems intent on responding to Esther's every need. From Esther's perspective, however, her mother only

makes things worse. The book is filled with examples of Mrs. Greenwood's well-meaning but obtuse reactions to her daughter's woes. After Esther's suicide attempt, for instance, Mrs. Greenwood tells Esther that she "should be grateful" that Philomena Guinea, the romance writer turned philanthropist providing her college scholarship, will pay for her care at a private hospital (185). And later, when Esther seems to have recovered from her suicidal depression, Mrs. Greenwood declares that they can look back on everything that has happened in recent months as if it were "'a bad dream'" (237). Such comments infuriate Esther, who at one point blurts out to her psychiatrist that she hates her mother (203).

It is not that Mrs. Greenwood says or does anything that is truly terrible. It is just that mother and daughter do not live in the same reality. Her attempts to shield her daughter from sorrow and suffering—most prominently a long-ago decision not to take the nine-year-old Esther to her father's funeral—have backfired. Now, as a young woman, Esther courts trauma as a way to make up for her perceived deficit of experience: "If there was a road accident or a street fight or a baby pickled in a laboratory jar for me to look at, I'd stop and look so hard I never forgot it. I certainly learned a lot of things I never would have learned otherwise this way, and even when they surprised me or made me sick I never let on, but pretended that's the way I knew things were all the time" (13). Sheltered and naïve, she treats human suffering like another college course that requires hard studying. She is not so much educating herself, however, as she is doing violence to herself. By pretending that the morbid and the macabre do not faze her, she denies her own feelings, her core humanity. That she does this to herself is not her mother's fault. Instead, it is evidence of Esther's essentially beat condition. Opting not to disclose her private suffering, she is, to return to John Clellon Holmes's description, "a walking, self-contained unit, compelled to meet, or at least endure, the problem of being young in a seemingly helpless world in [her] own way."

By suppressing her honest reactions to the scenes and situations that shock her, she imperils the very self she is trying to protect. The more she relies on masks to hide her feelings, the more unrecognizable she becomes to herself. We see the impact of this virulent form of self-denial when she repeatedly likens herself to inanimate objects or alienated minorities. Describing the early days of her depression in New York, she writes,

“I felt very still and very empty, the way the eye of a tornado must feel, moving dully along in the middle of the surrounding hullabaloo” (3). She reports that her faded suntan makes her look “yellow as a Chinaman” (8), and whenever she is on a date with a man inconveniently shorter than she is, she feels “gawky and morbid as somebody in a sideshow” (9). Standing beside her self-confident friend and fellow guest editor Doreen at a bar, she melts “into the shadows like the negative of a person I’d never seen before in my life” (10). Watching Doreen and the disc jockey Lenny Shepherd dance at Lenny’s apartment, she feels as if she is “shrinking to a small black dot against all those red and white rugs and that pine paneling. I felt like a hole in the ground” (16). Back at the Amazon hotel where she and all the other guest editors are staying, she boards the elevator and glimpses “a big, smudgy-eyed Chinese woman staring idiotically into my face. It was only me, of course” (18). On her way home from New York, “*The face in the mirror looked like a sick Indian*” (112).

Again and again, Esther sees herself as a repellant other. As the eye of a tornado, a photographic negative, a black dot, or a hole in the ground, she registers herself as a dark abstraction, an absence without independent meaning or value. Her racial shorthand builds on this notion, revealing that she has become her own state enemy. As a sick Indian (no gender specified), yellow Chinaman, or smudgy-eyed Chinese woman, she imagines herself as alien, repellant, weird—a far cry from the smart, successful, and alluring young white woman that she thinks she is supposed to be. In all of these instances, which build on her preoccupation with the Rosenbergs, we can see Edward Said’s concept of a pejoratively defined orientalism at work. Esther simultaneously identifies with and rejects the very groups that a politically and socially defensive white U.S. society cannot countenance—the disenfranchised Indians, the Communist Chinese, the Jewish Communists. Although she neither satirizes herself for taking this untenable stance nor does she satirize the national climate, we can still glimpse something of Ginsberg’s “America” (1956) in her. Like Ginsberg’s narrator, who says he “used to be a communist when I was a kid I’m not sorry,” only to declare later, “Asia is rising against me” (Ginsberg 40, 41), Plath’s protagonist seems to personify the major political clashes of her era.

One might say, after Whitman, that she contains multitudes, but there is no Whitmanian joy or Ginsbergian laughter for Esther in her own multiplicity of identity. Because the society she lives in does not like or trust women who stray from the conventional script, she sees no obvious way to reconcile the competing desires—the competing selves—struggling to cohere within her. Her tiresome boyfriend Buddy Willard has often quoted his mother’s fake pearl of wisdom: “What a man is is an arrow into the future and what a woman is is the place the arrow shoots off from” (72). Esther knows in her heart that “The last thing I wanted was infinite security and to be the place an arrow shoots off from. I wanted change and excitement and to shoot off in all directions myself, like the colored arrows from a Fourth of July rocket” (83).⁷ Like Sal Paradise, she wants to make a gaudy mark on the world. Her vividly expressed passion for a life fully lived irresistibly calls to mind those “mad ones” who captivate Sal—“desirous of everything at the same time, the ones who never yawn or say a commonplace thing, but burn, burn, burn, like fabulous yellow roman candles exploding like spiders across the stars” (6). That is just the sort of person Esther wants to be, and be with, but she never encounters anyone remotely like Dean or Sal. Unable to “shoot off in all directions” and ultimately afraid of what might happen if she did, Esther remains alarmed by the alien entities that seem poised to take over her very soul. She is the walking embodiment of a very dangerous Cold War that is simultaneously personal and political.⁸

Her sense of profound dissociation does not end with her suicide attempt. She wakes up in a hospital, bruised and battered as a result of a sleeping-pill overdose in a basement crawl space, and discovers that she is not blind, as she is erroneously informed. Even though she can see, she is nonetheless unrecognizable to herself. Handed a mirror, she mistakes it for “a picture”:

⁷ Plath returned to the image of the arrow in “Ariel,” in which she writes, “And I / Am the arrow, / / The dew that flies / Suicidal, at one with the drive / Into the red // Eye, the cauldron of morning” (*Collected Poems* 239-40).

⁸ In regard to the Cold War context in which Plath was writing, Robin Peel observes, “The change in title, from the original ‘Diary of a Suicide’ to *The Bell Jar* is indicative of a shift in perception and focus. The first title suggest that the subject is the self: the second the influence of something beyond the individual on that self. A bell jar is a vessel used in a physics and chemistry lab for experiments in which the enclosed material is denied oxygen and condemned to extinction. That definition provides echoes of the effect on the atmosphere of surface nuclear tests, which scientists and governments made possible” (Peel 66-67).

You couldn't tell whether the person in the picture was a man or a woman, because their hair was shaved off and sprouted in bristly, chicken-feather tufts all over their head. One side of the person's face was purple, and bulged out in a shapeless way, shading to green along the edges, and then to a sallow yellow. The person's mouth was pale brown, with a rose-colored sore at either corner. (174)

She has now become the sideshow freak that she felt like earlier in her story. Upon smiling at the "picture" and seeing her wounded, sexless image smile back, Esther throws down the mirror, smashing it to bits. For once she does not try to tamp down her horror. It is both sad and extremely revealing that the image that finally provokes a spontaneously visceral response from her is not "a road accident or a street fight or a baby pickled in a laboratory jar" but her own ravaged face. Her transformation into a monstrous other is complete—and she is both the cause and the most horrified witness of the spectacle.

Esther's dual roles—as victim and perpetrator, object and subject, colored suspect and white woman of the world—make her a hard character to pin down. She is simultaneously fragile and thick-skinned, naïve and perceptive, purposeless and driven. Given all of these contradictions, it should come as no surprise that her story resists definitive interpretation. So much of what happens to her can be taken in more than one way. As Ted Hughes has observed, "[I]n each episode of the novel [a] deeper pattern contradicts the ritual on the upper level; everything on the upper level, every step of the ritual dance that is trying to compel 'the good things to happen,' acquires a tragic shadow" (Hughes 10). In keeping with this formulation, we can see Esther's destruction of the mirror as either the first step in her painstaking reconstruction of a viable identity for herself or one in a long line of symbolic acts of self-denial manifested as self-violation.

The unsettling pattern that Hughes discerns is especially noticeable in the last two chapters of the novel. Although formulaic convention dictates that Esther should be on the mend, spiritually and physically, she nearly dies from hemorrhaging upon losing her virginity to an unattractive young math professor. Shortly thereafter, her lesbian admirer and doppelganger Joan Gilling, who had taken her to the emergency room the night of her hemorrhaging, hangs herself in the woods near the mental institution where they have

both been patients. Although Joan's suicide may seem like a necessary sacrifice so that Esther can emerge as the sole survivor, the episode can also be read as a ghastly commentary on Esther's sexual initiation and as an indication that her own prognosis is far from optimistic. Buddy Willard underscores both possibilities when he implies, at the end of the novel, that Esther may never marry. Although the recuperating Buddy still resides at a sanatorium for tuberculosis patients, he does not seem worried about his own prospects. No, it is Esther, who has endured a punishing one-night stand (unbeknownst to Buddy) and logged time at a mental institution, who risks the perception of damaged goods. As she prepares to return to the seeming normalcy of college and society at large, she is reminded that her inner resources are her only real defense against a world full of passive-aggressive "Buddys."

Though his story follows a different arc from Esther's, Sal Paradise is caught in a bind similar to hers. In his mid-twenties, at loose ends, and with a failed marriage behind him, he, too, is looking for ways to shake off a depression. The arrival in New York of the "young jailkid" Dean Moriarty presents him with a much-needed diversion (*On the Road* 3). When he decides to take a trip West, it is out of a desire not only to catch up with Dean, who has returned to his hometown of Denver, but also to see the country Dean has seen. Knowing that Dean is out there somewhere, excitedly observing everything around him and making the most of his ragtag life, inspires Sal no end. With Dean as both catalyst and destination, Sal is able to imagine and then embark on a new phase in his own life.

But first he has to get out of his aunt's house. Her maternal presence suggests that Sal still needs looking after. Like Esther's mother, she is endlessly accommodating, even as her opinion subtly infantilizes the would-be adult: "My aunt was all in accord with my trip to the West; she said it would do me good, I'd been working so hard all winter and staying in too much; she even didn't complain when I told her I'd have to hitchhike some. All she wanted was for me to come back in one piece" (9). One gets the feeling that she worries about Sal, just as Mrs. Greenwood worries about Esther. And there is reason to worry, since Sal confesses to a "feeling that everything was dead" in the book's

opening paragraph (1). As the novel progresses, we see that he never entirely escapes this melancholy feeling.

Like Esther, Sal is an ambiguous character on an ambiguous journey. We can't say precisely how, or even if, he has changed by the end of his story, though we know that he has gotten the material he needed for the book we are reading. He has in this respect accomplished an important goal, just as Esther has. But in other respects—such as knowing himself and being comfortable inside his own skin—Sal is very much a work in progress. Like Esther, he relies on comparisons to limn his identity or lack thereof. Sometimes he imagines himself as a ghost; other times, he wishes he were a black man or a Mexican. His comparisons are not inherently self-degrading, however, the way Esther's are. They express, instead, feelings of yearning and penitence that grow out of a preoccupation with death. In these instances, we see that Sal is far from having conquered the sorrows troubling him before his narrative begins.

From the outset, he wrestles with an identity crisis. After stopping at an inexpensive hotel in Des Moines, Iowa, on his first trip West, he awakens in the afternoon after a long sleep: "I woke up as the sun was reddening; and that was the one distinct time in my life, the strangest moment of all, when I didn't know who I was—I was far away from home, haunted and tired with travel . . . I wasn't scared; I was just somebody else, some stranger, and my whole life was a haunted life, the life of a ghost" (15). If he were merely at a symbolic crossroads, "halfway across America, at the dividing line between the East of my youth and the West of my future" (15), as he seems to hope, then he could expect to evolve into a happier, more mature version of his old self. But the ghost metaphor is a tenacious one, and Sal repeatedly imagines himself as a shade of the living.

Being alone in a strange location always heightens his anxieties. Arriving in San Francisco for the first time, he writes, "I was rudely jolted in the bus station at Market and Fourth into the memory of the fact that I was three thousand two hundred miles from my aunt's house in Paterson, New Jersey. I wandered out like a haggard ghost, and there she was, Frisco—long, bleak streets with trolley wires all shrouded in fog and whiteness" (60). Later, when he fears that his new girlfriend Terry is setting him up for a robbery, he repeats his earlier description of himself: "I was like a haggard ghost, suspicioning every

move she made, thinking she was stalling for time” (83). A ghost has known both life and death and carries the burden of that duality when revisiting the world of the living. The trouble for the “haggard ghost” is not that the sorrows and suspicions of the world are foreign to him; it is that they are all too familiar. As much as Sal had wanted a fresh start once he hit the road, his initial “feeling that everything was dead” has consigned him to a post mortem perspective on his every move.

Sal is not the only ghost in the book. He dwells at some length on “the Ghost of the Susquehanna,” a “poor little madman” he meets along the river near Harrisburg, Pennsylvania (104, 105). After he escapes the company of the directionally challenged hobo, he muses, “I thought all the wilderness of America was in the West till the Ghost of the Susquehanna showed me different” (105). Despite all of his years roaming the country, the Ghost of the Susquehanna has no idea which road leads where. It is therefore not just the wilderness of the East that he shows to Sal; it is the willful confusion of a perpetually lost old man. Given his own problems getting from place to place and figuring out where he is headed, Sal can’t help but take the old man’s plight personally. After leaving the Ghost of the Susquehanna behind, he sinks into another apparitional depression: “Isn’t it true that you start your life a sweet child believing in everything under your father’s roof? Then comes the day of the Laodiceans, when you know you are wretched and miserable and poor and blind and naked, and with the visage of a gruesome grieving ghost you go shuddering through nightmare life. I stumbled haggardly out of the station; I had no more control” (106). Comparing himself to a “gruesome grieving ghost,” Sal is much worse off than the Ghost of the Susquehanna. He is lost not in the Pennsylvania woods but in the forest of his “nightmare life.”

Ironically, it is this self-damning logic that keeps Sal among the living. He is caught in an endlessly repeating death cycle much like Plath’s “Lady Lazarus,” for whom “Dying / Is an art” (*Collected Poems* 245). Instead of one climactic scene in which Paradise tries to annihilate himself and thus end his own suffering, there will be several unbidden death scenes (starting with his identity crisis in Des Moines). We see him metaphorically dying when he is alone in San Francisco, broke, and nearly starving after Dean has abandoned him and Marylou has lost interest in him. In the midst of a vision triggered by the sight of a restaurant proprietress he imagines to be his “mother of about

two hundred years ago in England” (172), he experiences a moment of ecstasy in which he feels “the sensation of death kicking at my heels to move on” (173). Reflecting Kerouac’s emergent interest in Buddhism and reincarnation in the early 1950s, Sal continues, “I realized that I had died and been reborn numberless times but just didn’t remember especially because the transitions from life to death and back to life are so ghostly easy, a magical action for naught, like falling asleep and waking up again a million times, the utter casualness and deep ignorance of it” (173). In this state of “sweet, swinging bliss” (173), he fully expects that he will die any minute, but he says that he does not. Returning to the earthly moment at hand, he scrounges cigarette butts from the street and returns to Marylou’s room to fill his pipe with discarded tobacco. Because this is just the sort of thing a skid row bum would do, it seems possible that Sal *has* been reborn—as a bum—and simply hasn’t realized it yet. After all, he himself admits, “I was too young to know what had happened” (173).

Another metaphorical death scene occurs once Sal has settled down in Denver. Alone, and lonely for Dean and Marylou, he wanders the city at night “wishing I were a Negro, feeling that 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 were a Denver Mexican, or even a poor overworked Jap, anything but what I was so drearily, a ‘white man’ disillusioned. All my life I’d had white ambitions; that was why I’d abandoned a good woman like Terry in the San Joaquin Valley” (179-80). Unlike Esther Greenwood, who shrinks away in horror from the reflections of herself that conjure ethnic minorities, Sal yearns to walk in the shoes of an Other. To be reborn into the life of an ethnic minority would enable him, he thinks, to escape the sorrows and difficulties of his white man’s existence.

Significantly, he puts “white man” in quotes, as if he were a man passing as white rather than an actual white man, and this raises questions about his true racial identification. As an ostensibly Italian American character standing in for an author of French Canadian ancestry, Sal Paradise is not a member of the ruling class of WASP Americans. His “white ambitions” can be read as his desire to *be* white rather than as a set of racially inscribed choices he has already made. Given his haphazard adventures in *On the Road*, these ambitions seem no more or less likely to be fulfilled than his naïve

and patronizing desire to “exchange worlds with the happy, true-hearted, ecstatic Negroes of America” (180). Interpreted this way, Sal seems racially confused rather than merely racist. The case for this is strengthened by his earlier description of himself as “[s]ighing like an old Negro cotton-picker” after a day at work in the California cotton fields and his conviction that the “Okies” in his migrant camp think he is a Mexican, “and in a way I am” (97, 98). Like a chameleon, he assumes one ethnicity after another, never identifying for long with any one of them. Put another way, whiteness is not the base station to which he inevitably returns but rather one of several platforms (each with its own advantages and disadvantages) that he considers mounting.

Without any fixed ethnicity to call his own, and momentarily mistaken for someone else by a dark-skinned woman who calls him “Joe,” Sal continues on his ghostly walk in Denver. In his description of “strange young heroes of all kinds, white, colored, Mexican, pure Indian” playing softball (180), the athletes of different ethnicities are all at an equal remove from him in his state of panicky yearning. Once again, the grieving, haggard ghost of Sal Paradise speaks to us from the void: “It was the Denver night; all I did was die” (180). “How I died! I walked away from there” (181).

Sal’s mortal sorrows shadow him all across the country, even during episodes that bring him pleasure. At the beginning of his brief but relatively idyllic love affair with the young Mexican woman named Terry, for instance, he feels miserable as he contemplates the slums of Los Angeles: “I never felt sadder in my life. LA is the loneliest and most brutal of American cities” (86). After Galatea Dunkel quite rightly tells off Dean in San Francisco, Sal observes, “It was the saddest night. I felt as if I was with strange brothers and sisters in a pitiful dream” (195). His tumultuous trip back to New York with Dean provides excitement and distraction but does not assuage his pain in any lasting way. Preparing to say goodbye to Dean in New York, he looks at photos their mutual friend Ed Dunkel took of Dean’s young family: “I realized these were all the snapshots which our children would look at someday with wonder, thinking their parents had lived smooth, well-ordered, stabilized-within-the-photo lives and got up in the morning to walk proudly on the sidewalks of life, never dreaming the raggedy madness and riot of our actual lives, or actual night, the hell of it, the senseless nightmare road” (253-54).

These bleak meditations, which are just as real as Sal's exclamations of joy, contribute to the novel's complex emotional texture. As Ben Giamo has pointed out, [T]he road of life entails certain sadness paired with exuberant joy. . . . The oscillation between ecstasy and suffering—elation and dejection—appears to be the maxim of the novel. It simply goes with the territory, as if a physical law of motion—"our one and noble function of the time." This oscillation, in which characters and events both expand and contract, results in an uncanny state of equilibrium whereby the states of creation and annihilation balance out. (Giamo 20)

It is hard to say, however, whether sadness and joy truly balance out in *On the Road* as Giamo suggests. The verdict seems to depend, to an unusual degree, on one's individual willingness to acknowledge and accept the novel's duality of vision—a duality that is also present in *The Bell Jar*. Paradise's interludes of happiness have come to define the novel for many readers who prefer not to dwell on the suffering strewn all along his road. For them, Sal's story seems to have become part of the self-affirming myth of their own youth and boundless potential. On a visit to Kerouac's hometown of Lowell, for instance, the Italian journalist Massimo Pacifico summed up the novel's primary appeal: "Kerouac represents the sense of freedom all the young men have. It is the myth of travel without a target, without a goal. It has a big sense of liberation that still attracts young people to this. Every young man wants this" (Perry 14). It is a testament to the novel's almost insidious charm—as well as its lack of resolution—that it continues to accommodate such a blithely subjective response.

Sal is admittedly very appealing when he is caught up in the moment, without time or inclination to dwell on either the past or the future. In these rare instances, he is able to connect with the people around him and the landscape he inhabits. We see him in this flattering light when he joins a motley fraternity of hobos and teenaged boys riding west on a flatbed truck. To his great satisfaction, he is finally making good time as he speeds toward Denver and Dean Moriarty: "How that truck disposed of the Nebraska nub—the nub that sticks out over Colorado, though not officially in it, but looking southwest toward Denver itself a few hundred miles away. I yelled for joy. We passed the bottle. The great blazing stars came out, the far-receding sand hills got dim. I felt like an

arrow that could shoot out all the way” (25). With his whole life ahead of him, Sal is the “arrow” Esther Greenwood longs to be. The young writer traveling west in pursuit of adventure is not just a free spirit; he is a *freed* one, and his explosive release in this scene helps account for the novel’s transformative impact on readers. Who wouldn’t want to be in Sal Paradise’s huaraches—which he cheerfully calls “the silliest shoes in America” (27)—as he launches himself into the starry Western night?

On this occasion Sal seems to know “IT” (127)—as Dean calls the experience of completely surrendering to the joy of life—all by himself. But even this early scene hints at the shaded depths, the beatness, of Paradise’s soul. Kerouac himself believed that “self-realization or highest perfect wisdom . . . can only be achieved in solitude, poverty, and contemplation—and in a gathering of homeless brothers” (*Selected Letters* 447). Seen from this perspective, Sal’s transcendent joy alongside his fellow hitchhikers—his “homeless brothers”—is all of a piece with his solitary death visions in San Francisco and Denver. As they pass around that bottle of cheap booze, the home they have made out of homelessness is what illuminates the sky above them.

Whereas Sal experiences occasional moments of supreme self-awareness that stem from his beat condition, Dean is his consciously crafted vision of the truly beaten down yet spiritually transcendent—what we might call Beat with a capital B. As such, he is Sal’s one enduring love interest, his “HOLY GOOF” (194). Approaching but never quite becoming a gay romance, their intense relationship occupies a gray area somewhere between platonic friendship and explicit homosexual desire. After Sal has returned to New York and fallen in love with “the girl with the pure and innocent dear eyes that I had always searched for and for so long” (304), he writes to Dean in San Francisco. He has decided that he and his new love interest should live near Dean. Despite Dean’s callous desertion of him in Mexico City, Sal clings to the relationship. It is only when Dean shows up unexpectedly in New York, before Sal and Laura are ready to move out West, that Sal is finally able to let him go. When Remi Boncoeur declines to give Dean a ride to the train station, Sal does not try to overrule the decision. He yields to convention and rides off with Laura and Remi even though his heart aches for Moriarty.

In our last sighting of him, Dean is a lonely, seemingly helpless figure. In the book’s final pages, he has made only one truly lucid pronouncement: ““I wanted to see

your sweet girl and you—glad of you—love you as ever” (305). Sal does not reveal his response to this declaration of love, the first of its kind between them. But he knows that Moriarty will never be free of “his wives and woes” (302), and they cannot easily run off together this time. A novel that begins in longing for an attractive but elusive new friend thus ends in essentially the same place, with Sal declaiming, “I think of Dean Moriarty, I even think of Old Dean Moriarty the father we never found, I think of Dean Moriarty” (307). Significantly, the first part of the Irish name Moriarty is very close to the Latin “moriator”—“to die.”⁹ Paradise’s last words, then, are not only a sort of elegiac prayer for his beloved friend and his friend’s father but also a punning acknowledgement of his continuing preoccupation with death.¹⁰ Seen through the religious lens that Kerouac’s narrators always insist on, the two main characters—let’s call them Death and Paradise—are truly codependent, the meaning of the one inseparable from the meaning of the other.

Both Sal Paradise and Esther Greenwood go through a great deal but ultimately change very little. They are solipsistic dreamers whose forays into relationships only lead them back to themselves. Though he has the benefit of many friends, most notably Dean Moriarty, and an amicable relationship with his aunt, Sal is no less a loner than Esther. His tortured spirituality grows out of an unquenched, and perhaps unquenchable, desire to know himself, that ghostly specter that is equally “mad to live” and mad to die (5). As for Esther, her story ends with her on the brink of a future that is virtually indistinguishable from her recent past:

Pausing, for a brief breath, on the threshold, I saw the silver-haired doctor who had told me about the rivers and the Pilgrims on my first day, and the pocked, cadaverous face of Miss Huey, and eyes I thought I recognized over white masks.

The eyes and the faces all turned themselves toward me, and guiding myself by them, as by a magical thread, I stepped into the room. (244)

Like Joyce’s *Finnegans Wake*, the novel Esther had planned to analyze in her college thesis, *The Bell Jar* has an elliptical quality to it. The uncertain ending leads us back to

⁹ I am grateful to Christian Singer, a student in my Literature of the Beat Movement course at the University of Massachusetts, Lowell, during the fall of 2006, for pointing out the Latin root embedded in the name Moriarty.

¹⁰ As another of Kerouac’s autobiographically based narrators declares, “Death is the only decent subject, since it marks the end of illusion and delusion” (*Visions of Gerard* 103).

the uncertain beginning when Esther confesses to her preoccupation with the Rosenbergs. Since Esther herself has asked, “How did I know that someday—at college, in Europe, somewhere, anywhere—the bell jar, with its stifling distortions, wouldn’t descend again?” (241), we are not fully convinced that our more mature narrator, who briefly alludes to her baby in the novel’s opening pages (3), is truly cured. Esther’s internal Cold War seems far from over, and of course it is hard to ignore the extra-textual evidence of Sylvia Plath’s own suicide.

It is safe to say that neither Plath nor her fictional protagonist would have been saved by a Beat Generation, had either one cared to acknowledge that such a thing existed. But in turning a blind eye in her life and her art to a cultural phenomenon that actually spoke to her condition, Plath helps us see that the Beat Generation, as Holmes and Kerouac conceived of it, really did exist. For Plath in her last, terrible days can surely be seen as one of Kerouac’s “solitary Bartlebies staring out the dead wall window of our civilization” (Kerouac, “Aftermath” 47). Both she and Esther Greenwood personify Holmes’s notion of “a feeling of being reduced to the bedrock of consciousness” and the concomitant feeling that one has been “pushed up against the wall of oneself.” Such exigencies do not afflict groups or generations but only isolated individuals. That is what Plath was—and what her Esther Greenwood chooses to be. The irony is that both Plath and Kerouac, Esther and Sal, have spoken to the experiences of so many. Nearly everyone has an inner Bartleby or an inner Beat, it seems. Though maybe the Beat Generation “was really just an idea in our minds,” as Kerouac candidly admitted (“Aftermath,” 47), it is an idea that gives viable definition to Esther Greenwood’s plight and helps us see Sylvia Plath in a revealing new context. Though their paths on earth apparently never crossed, both Plath and Kerouac were arrows into a future world that they seemed to know in their hearts would look back on them with astonishment and gratitude.

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