

## “We Imagine that We Die”: Kerouac, Buddhism, and the Elegy

By Doug Vincent

So someone dies. This is the start of an elegy. Or, at least, this is the start of an elegy as we commonly know it. Once I get through talking about Kerouac’s Buddhist take on mortality, we might have to start the elegy somewhere else. But for now, we’ll start here: someone dies.

Peter Sacks’ 1985 study of the English elegy supports my simplistic claim. His basic definition of an elegy is that an elegy traces how a poet responds to loss and mortality (xiii). This definition is broad enough that I think I can safely call Kerouac’s *Mexico City Blues* elegiac, even if I do not want to commit completely to labeling it an elegy. James Jones also noticed this “subtle” mortality theme in Kerouac’s poem, commenting in his *Map of Mexico City Blues* that the poem “is clearly an elegy for [Charley] Parker” (87).

Sacks’ elegists, however, respond to mortality in different ways than Kerouac does. According to Sacks, elegists from Spenser to Yeats follow the same essential schema: a grieved loss gives way to a figurative or symbolic compensation. Sacks’ description of elegiac mourning relies on Freud’s description of compensatory mourning in his 1917 essay “Mourning and Melancholia.” For Freud, the problem in mourning focuses on (what else) the libido. The successful mourner must withdraw his or her affection from the lost object and substitute some other object or image as compensation. Otherwise, the mourner’s libidinal energy will turn inward to the ego through an identification with the deceased, plunging the mourner into a narcissistic melancholia. Sacks’ elegists accomplish the work of substitution through transcendent metaphors. The lost mortal object is troped or turned into a spiritual symbol. For example, in Spenser’s elegy for Sidney (“Astrophel”), the poet finds solace in creating a figure

for Sidney's immortal soul: "Ah no: it is not dead, ne can it die / But lives for aie, in blissful Paradise / Where like a new-borne babe it soft doth lie" (283-85). Here Spenser's poetic vision makes a Neo-Platonic ascent up from the world of shadows and mortality to the world of Paradise, where souls liberated from their bodily emanations live forever. Spenser avoids melancholy by spiritualizing rather than internalizing his love. Thus he mourns, to use Sacks' and Freud's terminology, "successfully."

But when we get to Hardy, the religious doubt that Tennyson overcomes in *In Memoriam* asserts itself over and above transcendent consolations. In "God's Funeral," Hardy mourns the loss of faith in myths of transcendence. God is now seen as a creation of human imagination, a "man-projected Figure" (21), rather than as the Creator:

And, tricked by our own early dream  
And need of solace, we grew self-deceived,  
Our making soon our maker did we deem,  
And what we had imagined we believed. (29-32)

But now that belief in fiction is lost. What Hardy calls "rude reality" shatters the promise of eternal life. The problem is a crucial one for elegy because Hardy is here mourning the very figure that once guaranteed figurative consolation. He depicts this transition from faith to doubt in the final image of the poem: "Thus dazed and puzzled 'twixt the gleam and gloom / Mechanically I followed with the rest" (67-68). Alluding to the conventional image of light as a trope for rebirth and immortality, Hardy places himself between a fading light and a coming darkness, between a belief that death is a passage up to Being and a belief that death is a dissolution into non-being.

It is not within the scope of this paper to theorize what exactly happened between Tennyson and Hardy. Some breezy platitudes about metaphysical and religious skepticism in the face of science and the Higher Criticism and some clichés about the devastating effects of war

will have to suffice. My point here is simply that, after Hardy, canonized elegists do not return to transcendent consolations. For example, Jahan Ramazani observes in his 1994 study of the modern elegy that in Wilfred Owen's war elegies, "Life reverts neither to the mystic One of Shelley nor to the benevolent deity of Milton and Tennyson but to the inert earth" (75). After Hardy and Owen, elegists are grounded. Images of resurrection and immortality that once gave meaning to death become trite and impotent in the face of modern grief. Ramazani further notes that "the modern elegist tends not to achieve but to resist consolation" (xi). Following up on Sacks' Freudian reading of elegies, Ramazani notes that modern elegies do not mourn "successfully"; rather, they tend to fall into melancholic mourning, "mourning that is unresolved, violent, and ambivalent" (4). Poets such as Langston Hughes, W.H. Auden, Robert Lowell, and Sylvia Plath mourn without transcendent consolation.

This does not mean that all modern elegists eschewed consolation. Some, like Wallace Stevens, did their best to stake out new areas of consolation. For Stevens, in the absence of the gods, it is the poet's function to shape life meaningfully against the void. Language and imagination create fictions that one can believe in as fictions in order to make life livable, perhaps even beautiful. But instead of imagination giving the poet access to a transcendent realm, imagination only gives the poet fictions. After Hardy, then, the drama of elegy changes. Someone dies, and that is it. No apotheosis can make sense out of death because the new "rude reality" is that non-being reabsorbs the individual at death.

But has the story of elegy radically changed with modern elegies? I would argue that, despite what I just said, elegies after Hardy still work on the same basic duality as elegies before him, namely, matter and spirit. In pre-Hardy elegies, death has dominion over matter (the body), but death cannot touch spirit (the soul). The elegist grieves only until he can raise his vision out

of the shadowy material world to focus on the spiritual and eternal. Hardy and the elegists after him, however, seem, at first glance, to collapse the dualism of matter and spirit by denying the existence of spirit. But one cannot escape a dualism simply by denying or repressing the existence of one half of it. The two terms mutually define one another. Modern elegists may deny the existence of immortal spirit on one level, but they are haunted by it. Only in relation to spirit is matter so troublesome. Only in relation to eternity and immortality are time and mortality so hard to accept. As in pre-modern elegies, the essential self is still separate from the world, whether or not it is called soul. So modern elegies, with all their irresolution and violent grief are not free of the belief in transcendence. It is just that, where that belief once gave comfort, it now causes suffering.

What I am trying to argue here is that the basic terms of existence have not changed in canonical elegies from Spenser to Heaney. Elegists still think that someone is born into the world, lives a life in time, and then dies. All that has changed is that now elegists think of death as a trip into non-being whereas before it was a trip into Being. The being / non-being duality remains. I will admit that this change makes a very big difference emotionally. But the point I am trying to maneuver my way to here is that Kerouac does not accept these basic terms of existence in *Mexico City Blues* and that he charts a very different response to death than other modern elegists. Rather than succumbing to Owen's despair at non-being or resorting to the heroic imagination projecting a fiction against the void like Stevens, Kerouac seeks a way out of death through an experience of the nonduality of being and non-being as expressed in Mahayana Buddhism.

For elegists, death is a basic fact of life, a given. But for Kerouac, under the influence of Buddhism, what we take as "given" realities are not given *to* us but given *by* us, and what we

take as “facts” (the word is derived from the Latin verb *facere* “to do”) are not done by God or some outside agency but by mind. There is no space between mind and world. Any idea of separate individual realities is falsely imagined. Kerouac tries to demonstrate that there is no separate self that is born into the world; consequently, there is no self that dies out of it. Indeed, there is nowhere to go. Where elegists see death as an ontological fact, Kerouac sees death as part of a mind-projected metaphysics, as an “arbitrary conception.”

In the 1<sup>st</sup> Chorus of *Mexico City Blues*, Kerouac locates the voice of his poem on a ship, the S. S. Excalibur, which he also calls “The Supreme Vehicle,” a translation of the Sanskrit word *Mahayana*. In the 6<sup>th</sup> Chorus, Kerouac identifies the driver of the ship as Buddha, “The Great Ferryman / The Great Vehicle Being” (6). With Buddha at the helm, Kerouac steers his poem through the same channel as Buddha steered his spiritual career. Like Buddha, Kerouac is one “Who has Undertaken / to Comfort Innumerable [sic] Beings” (6) from the suffering death causes. In the context of modern elegy, where any attempt at consolation is viewed as trite, Kerouac’s project is a fairly bold one. But his consolation is new. Like Buddha, he seeks to be “The Destroyer and Exterminator / of Death” (7). And his method is to move beyond mourning into an experience “Free From Arbitrary Conceptions / of Being or Non-Being” (7). In essence, he seeks to comfort innumerable beings by demonstrating that there are no beings at all to comfort, that there are no beings at all who die. This is Kerouac’s path out of the “gloom” and despair of the modern elegy.

All through the poem, Kerouac elaborates what he means by no “arbitrary conceptions,” a term he picked up from Dwight Goddard’s translation of *The Diamond Sutra* in *A Buddhist Bible*. For example, in the 108<sup>th</sup> Chorus, Kerouac writes, “Neither this nor that / means, / no arbitrary conceptions” (108). Here Kerouac links the idea of “no arbitrary conceptions” to the

Hindu method of talking about ultimate reality (*neti neti*, “not this, not that”). The unity of Pure Reality (to use words where I should not) is not available to the conceptual mind, which perceives according to separate categories, and is thus not representable in language. The “this” and “that” of *neti, neti* are the arbitrary conceptions by which we understand our experience of Reality. These categories of perception (trees, rocks, selves) are arbitrary because they do not represent Reality in its totality. Thus one cannot make an “is” statement about “it.” As Kerouac says, “if you say / arbitrarily, the RAMMIS / is the RAMMIS, !” (108) then you are in the realm of arbitrary conceptions. Kerouac uses nonsense words here to foreground the arbitrariness of language’s reference to reality. This kind of semantics resembles the lesson Ginsberg says Kerouac learned from Alfred Korzybski’s *Science and Sanity*, which was to “avoid ‘the *is* of identity’” (Ginsberg 54). Names and abstractions should not limit one’s experience of things: “arbitrary conceptions / have sprung into existence / that didn’t have to be there / in the first place / when your eyes were bright / with seeing emptiness / [...] / and nobody lived” (108). For Kerouac, what is important about arbitrary conceptions is not only that they limit experience, but that they create the idea that *things* live and die. Before these conceptions (and I will return to the pun on birth later), “nobody lived” and all was “emptiness.” So arbitrary conceptions give rise to the conditions lamented in elegies.

But how do these arbitrary conceptions arise? In the 176<sup>th</sup> Chorus, Kerouac observes that “The reason why there are so many things / Is because the mind breaks it up, / The shapes are empty / That sprung into come” (176). Our experience of the world as a collection of independently existing objects is not an experience of the way things actually are; rather, it is an imposition of the mind. As the first “chorus” of the *Tao Te Ching* states: “The nameless was the beginning of heaven and earth; / The named was the mother of the myriad creatures” (5). Before

the discriminating mind breaks reality up with arbitrary conceptions, it is empty of the idea that there are things, like selves, that arise into being and depart into non-being. In the 66<sup>th</sup> Chorus, Kerouac writes, “Dharma law / Say / All things is made / of the same thing / which is a nothing” (66). There is no self distinct from world and no world distinct from self: it is all empty of inherent existence.

Now this idea of emptiness has a danger of sounding a lot like non-being. But one has to remember that “emptiness” is not meant to refer to an ontological concept. It is not just another predicate to describe the way the world is. In fact, it is an idea meant to deconstruct all conceptual experience, and with it, Buddha becomes, as Kerouac describes him in the 179<sup>th</sup> Chorus, “philosophy’s / dreadful murderer” (179). Emptiness clears the mental ground for an experience beyond arbitrary conceptions. In a book by Helena Norberg-Hodge called *Ancient Futures*, she quotes a Ladakhy Buddhist named Tashi Rabgyas, who explains emptiness in a useful way for non-enlightened folks like me:

Take any object, like a tree. When you think of a tree, you tend to think of it as a distinct, clearly defined object, and at a certain level it is. But on a more important level, the tree has no independent existence; rather, it dissolves into a web of relationships. The rain that falls on its leaves, the wind that causes it to sway, the soil that supports it – all form a part of the tree. Ultimately, if you think about it, everything in the universe helps make the tree what it is. It cannot be isolated; its nature changes from moment to moment – it is never the same. This is what we mean when we say that things are “empty,” that they have no independent existence. (73)

The idea that the tree is an isolated object is an arbitrary conception. There is nothing permanent or essential in what we perceive as a tree. That is, it has no separate being. Our perceptual categories organize sensory experience into isolated objects, but a transcendent realm does not guarantee those categories; they are only arbitrary. Here Buddhism offers a non-transcendent consolation to a modern elegist denied transcendence. Like the tree, the self has no independent existence. Thus it has nothing to lose.

This brings me to the Kerouac line that got me into this mess in the first place. At the end of “Orlanda Blues,” much like the 102nd Chorus of *Mexico City Blues*, Kerouac laments, “Ah, it’s a depressing situation: / we imagine that / we live and imagine / that we die, too bad, / too bad” (248). Before Kerouac, the drama and the intense pathos of the elegy were generated from the fact that someone had really died. However, Kerouac radically rewrites the plot of elegy here: the depressing situation is not that we die; rather it’s that we imagine that we die. All we have to do to escape death is to escape our own notion of self’s inherent existence.

I would be happy if I could conclude here by saying that Kerouac forges a radically new consolation in elegy, one that opens up a fissure ‘twixt Hardy’s gleam and gloom and escapes into a new consciousness in American poetry. But is Kerouac’s consolation as new to the elegy as I make it sound? There are two ways, I think, in which one could interpret the lines from “Orlanda Blues.” The first interpretation could follow the Buddhist line of argument I was just pursuing, arguing that we imagine that we die because we have formed an arbitrary conception of our individual inherent existence. The 102<sup>nd</sup> Chorus of *Mexico City Blues* could suggest this Buddhist reading where Kerouac writes, “What the Tathagata of Buddhism / preaches, / The Prophet of Buddhahood / is that / nothing / is really / born nor dies” (102).

But another interpretation could argue that Kerouac is here returning to the pre-Hardy view of death and transcendence. Spenser, for example, proclaimed that Sidney’s soul was not dead and that it would live forever. From the point of view of eternity, earthly death is an illusion, and the grief survivors feel is based on falsely imagining death as a finality. In fact, the mourning process depicted in an elegy like Spenser’s involves a move from viewing death as finality to viewing it as imaginary.

What's at stake between these two interpretations is where you locate the elegiac consolation. In the pre-Hardy elegies, final consolation was always deferred to the future and located after death, outside the mundane world. One could take comfort now in the belief that Christ's victory over death opened up the possibility for eternal life in heaven and that His forgiveness would get you through the gates, but you still had to suffer on earth until then. What the Buddhist elements in Kerouac's poem suggest is that you can achieve an end to suffering now by waking up to the reality that your sense of individual identity is the cause of suffering and the origin of the idea that there is anything at all that dies. This Buddhist consolation is really not a consolation because there is nobody to console and no death to cause suffering. Kerouac's Buddhist elegy would thus be an end to elegy in the traditional sense because it dissolves the terms of traditional elegy.

But it is not so easy to pin down Kerouac as Buddhist or Christian. This ambiguity in interpretation is evident in the often-quoted 211<sup>th</sup> Chorus. Kerouac ends the Chorus urging, "I wish I was free / of that slaving meat wheel / and safe in heaven dead" (211). Does this Chorus represent Kerouac's fear of and disgust with the body, which Philip Whalen argued never left Kerouac after his American Jansenist Catholic schooling (Gifford and Lee 219)? Or does it represent Kerouac's desire to escape *samsara* by realizing that he is already "dead" because never alive? The trouble originates in part from his use of the word "conception" in the Chorus' first lines: "The wheel of the quivering meat / conception / Turns in the void expelling human beings" (211). "Meat conception" could refer to physical conception or refer to the activity of the discriminating mind making arbitrary conceptions that transform emptiness into a world of separate "meat" objects that are subject to birth and death. Kerouac's pun and his constant mixing of Christian and Buddhist imagery frustrates the task of singular interpretation.

But is this frustration of interpretation built into the poem purposefully? In the 24<sup>th</sup> and 25<sup>th</sup> Choruses, Kerouac warns of the danger of allowing the mind to abide in any conceptions, Buddhist or Christian. Truths as revealed through language and art do not have the kind of permanence needed to comfort one in the midst of impermanence: “All great statements ever made / abide in death” (24). All the comforting statements from Buddhas and Christian saints are “Nil, none, a dream” (24). Kerouac emphasizes that there are no images that the mind can grasp to assure itself of immortality. Christian images of Jesus and Jerusalem do not save, and neither do Buddhist ideas of essence and emptiness. Unlike consolatory mourning, which creates a figure or symbol to substitute for the lost object, Kerouac advises that “essence” or “God” or whatever is “Objectless” and that lasting consolation is only “found by Self-Loser” (25), when the sense-of-self with its discriminations and objects dissolves like a dream on waking. Language, which is the primary elegiac consolation or substitution, is a hindrance here. And Kerouac emphasizes that his word “essence” is not an idea of immortality that can be grasped conceptually: “the moment I say essence / I draw that word back / And that remark – essence’s / Unspoken, you cant say a word, / essence is the word for the finger / that shows us bright blankness” (25). Again Kerouac runs into trouble with language and does his best to figure figure-less experience as “bright blankness,” perhaps tempting the mind to form ideas about “essence.” But this too only names the finger pointing at direct experience beyond arbitrary conceptions.

So Kerouac’s ambiguity between Christian and Buddhist readings can be seen as an effort to prevent the mind from abiding in arbitrary conceptions. But both Buddhists and Christian mystics have employed paradox and ambiguity to point the mind toward the ineffable. Perhaps Kerouac is saying that the only difference between Buddhists and Christian mystics lies

in the culturally specific arbitrary conceptions they each use to describe ineffable experience and the path they followed to get there. The difference may be only in how they goof with language. The real point is to leave all conceptions behind, Buddhist and Christian.

I wonder if this frustration of interpretation in ambiguity is the poem's greatest act of compassion? *Mexico City Blues* not only elicits compassion through its vivid depictions of suffering, but it also embodies compassion in its attempt to push the mind beyond Buddhist and Christian imagery. When the self can grasp meaning in a poem, that poem only serves to strengthen the sense-of-self as a meaningful entity. Any concept of being or non-being, of emptiness, Heaven, nirvana, or Jerusalem only serves to help the self locate itself in a conceptual universe. Kerouac's consolation lies in frustrating the self that seeks conceptual havens in the void. Perhaps we won't be "safe in heaven dead" until we can stop trying to fix Kerouac's meaning in a phrase, until we insist on *his* freedom.

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