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On The Road to Somewhere with Jack Kerouac

EAMON MAHER

A friend of mine, a Cistercian monk, recommended that I read Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* (1958).¹ I had never heard of the book or the author and wondered what was in store for me. It struck me as slightly strange initially that a book introducing its readers to the *beat generation*—a group of people who roamed the American continent in a wild and desperate search for identity and purpose—should have appealed so much to this monk.

However, I wasn't long about discovering the relevance of Sal Paradise's chronicle of his trips across America to anyone interested in the quest for the Absolute. For behind the descriptions of long journeys and deep discussions, of encounters with alcohol, sex and drugs, there lies a rich spiritual vein that is at once dated and contemporary. The America of the 1950s was a place where young people were searching for an authentic meaning to existence. They didn't want to settle comfortably into a secure lifestyle full of restraints and responsibilities. They preferred to expose themselves to new experiences, to test their limits, to taste love, to understand the world and other people. The end of the Second World War and the emerging conflict in Korea were displaying a side of the human character that led to bewilderment and despair among thinking, sensitive people. God, it was believed by many, could no longer be found in traditional religious practice but had to be sought in the margins, among the people who dared look into their soul and see themselves as they really were. Thus it was for Sal Paradise and his friend, Dean Moriarty, a young man who had done time in a state penitentiary and whose life was a complete whirlwind of fast cars and constant search. Sal, the narrator, is fascinated by the antics of Dean and his friends, of whom he says:

1. London: Andre Deutch. References will be to the seventh impression, 1970.

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They were like the man with the dungeon stone and the gloom, rising from the underground, the sordid hipsters of America, a new beat generation that I was slowly joining. (p. 54)

A man with a literary vocation, Sal believes that he will find the material for his writing by going 'on the road' with people like Dean. His intuition proves correct. The journey turns out, in fact, to be a voyage of discovery. The people he encounters and with whom he spends time are instrumental in bringing about self-knowledge. If you lead a sedentary life, never moving from the one area – just eating, drinking, working, raising a family – you are only half-alive in the minds of Sal and Dean. 'The road is life' (p. 211), as they put it so succinctly, and the road leads to life. 'Digging' people, attending wild parties, listening to 'hot' music, they never stay too long in the one place. Dean is incapable of loving just one woman (he marries three times and maintains relations with all three wives concurrently) and cannot resist the urge to move on to the next port of call.

The excitement is palpable as the few belongings are thrown into the battered suitcase and the journey begins. References to Proust, poetry, philosophy are commonplace in the novel even if it is not always apparent that the speakers have fully grasped what these writers were attempting to achieve in their books. The solitude and lack of understanding between human beings is also captured very well. After a sexual encounter with a girl in Denver, Sal attempts to tell her of his excitement about life and the things they could do together. But his words fall on deaf ears:

She turned away wearily. We lay on our backs, looking at the ceiling and wondering what God had wrought when he made life so sad.... Boys and girls in America have such a sad time together: sophistication demands that they submit to sex immediately without proper preliminary talk. Not courting talk – real straight talk about souls, for life is holy and every moment is precious. (p. 57)

This is the type of situation that is as relevant today as it was fifty years ago. The sense of disillusionment that comes after an anonymous and meaningless coupling is conveyed strongly in these lines. There is no exaltation, just two human beings who have sought refuge in each other without having any prior knowledge of the other person. Emptiness and despair, the lack

of communication between human beings, these are what come across very strongly.

At a time in Ireland when there is so much talk of anonymous teenage sexual relations, we might do well to dwell on this sort of passage when warning of the dangers to which this kind of sexual activity can lead. Because it no longer means anything to most teenagers to state that sex before marriage and without love is morally wrong – it has also to be put across what despair and anguish it can bring. The pressures on young people to conform have always been intense. But to be sophisticated, it is not necessary to be sexually active. When this experience happened to Sal, he was in his twenties and so capable of rationalising it. How would a thirteen or fourteen year-old handle giving him/herself to another 'without proper preliminary talk'?

God is mentioned in the passage above also for the first time. He recurs intermittently throughout the novel. That said, there is absolutely no reference to Church services or formal prayer, which play no role in the characters' lives. Spirituality is present in poetry, music, nature, fraternity, innocence. God is a minor character in the book, forming a kind of subplot to the main action, in the background and yet somehow always present.

God is present also in the quest on which the characters embark – this is especially true of Dean, the focal point of the novel. The product of a dysfunctional home – he never saw his mother's face and his alcoholic father spent his time riding freights, working as a scullion in railroad kitchens, drinking himself to death – he had problems with the police from an early age. In prison, he promised himself the right to live. The lack of love in the home led him to seek it from any possible source: 'Every new girl, every new wife, every new child was an addition to his bleak impoverishment.' (p. 132) His efforts at finding happiness through his wives and children do not work out, because he is only ever truly happy when he is on the road. Always on the move towards a goal he will never achieve, he knows that the joy is in the search and not in the finding. People are attracted to him in the beginning because of his restless spirit, his light-heartedness, his charm. But there comes a time when he disgusts his former friends. The narrator, Sal, comments:

I suddenly realised that Dean, by virtue of his enormous series of sins, was becoming the Idiot, the Imbecile, the Saint of the lot.... That's what Dean was, the HOLYGOOF. (pp. 194-195)

Sal senses that Dean possesses an interior quality that attracts and repulses people. He incites bitterness, recriminations, morality, sadness in equal measure and yet he is capable of leaving all that behind him to enjoy the ecstatic joy of pure being. When Galatea opines that the sooner he's dead the better, Sal interjects:

'Verywell, then,' I said, 'but now he's alive and I'll bet you want to know what he does next and that's because he's got the secret that we're all busting to find and it's splitting his head wide open and if he goes mad don't worry, it won't be your fault but the fault of God.' (p. 195)

Here we have another reference to God, a God who seems to remain aloof from the destiny of Man, a God whose mystery is never pierced. Dean's secret – what is this enigmatic secret? – puts him on the brink of insanity. We are led to believe that he is some sort of guru, a type of lay priest whose vocation is not to provide answers but to force people to think about their lives. It is all disconcerting, confusing, open to many levels of interpretation. I don't presume to provide solutions to questions that Mr Kerouac left unanswered. In fact, the book takes the reader on a journey through the vast continent that is America, through its countryside, its cities, its beauty and its ugliness. At the end of the journey, we, like the characters, feel different without knowing what has taken place, has brought about change in us.

Passages abound where the narrator undergoes a conversion, a moment of intense revelation, an epiphany of sorts. One day, walking through the streets of San Francisco, Sal feels hungry and disillusioned. Then, unexpectedly, joy takes over:

And for just a moment I had reached the point of ecstasy that I had always wanted to reach, which was the complete step across chronological time into timeless shadows, and wonderment in the bleakness of the mortal realm, and the sensation of death kicking at my heels to move on, with a phantom dogging its own heels, and myself hurrying to a plank where all the angels dove off and flew into the holy void of uncreated emptiness, the potent and inconceivable radiancies shining in bright Mind Essence, innumerable lotus-lands falling open in the magic mothswarm of heaven. (p. 173)

The language in this passage is not for the fainthearted. Certainly, the 'magic mothswarm of heaven' is not a formula that

particularly appeals to me. That said, the lasting impression of rebirth is successfully conveyed, the impression of diving into eternity and re-emerging at the other side, the same and yet changed. The void of uncertainty, the brightness and the bleakness – much is conveyed by a series of contrasts and contradictions. After reading the description a number of times, you begin to be carried along by the music of the style, the power and the sincerity of the emotions conveyed.

Overall, it has to be said that Sal is describing a spiritual rebirth which fuels his literary impulses. He needs to put into words an experience that goes beyond human language. Dean undergoes the same type of experience, but we are not privy to it, as it is not described in the book. We know that he sends 30,000-word letters to Sal but we don't know what's in them. His broken body at the end of the book is a symbol of the suffering he has endured. His slurred speech has become almost incomprehensible. When he speaks, it's enigmatic and disturbing: 'But you see – no need to talk any more – and further.' Has he entered a new dimension in which language is redundant, in which sensations are everything? Who's to say? We are left to make up our own minds on that issue.

Sal and Dean remain friends to the end, but whereas Sal seems satisfied with his writing and his girlfriend, Laura, Dean is still on the move – back to San Francisco to his second wife, Camille, who is capable of loving him in an unconditional manner. Sal has achieved some success with his books and has settled down to a more sedentary lifestyle. There are not too many people who keep moving until they die. Most of us settle for less than what our youthful ambitions desired. Others, like Dean, know that the quest goes on and that to stand still, to stop questioning, means instant death.

The American continent, with its huge bulk and rugged beauty, provides the perfect backdrop for this novel of movement and discovery. I think back to my Cistercian friend and realise that he was correct, as always, in his recommendation. *On the Road* brought me to places within myself that I hadn't known existed. I related to the musings of the characters on existence, to their attempts to find meaning in the midst of chaos.

And through it all I was reminded that things have not changed that much since the middle of the last century. There are still many people trying to come to terms with life in their own

manner and often without much success. Materialism, liberalism, existentialism, atheism, structuralism, post-structuralism have come and gone without providing definitive answers.

The questions remain: What is life about? What comes after we die? Is there a God? Is there a heaven, a hell? No facile answers are possible to questions such as these. What is clear, however, is that as long as human beings continue to inhabit this planet there will always be questions as to what awaits us after death. The prospect of nothingness for eternity is bleak, too bleak for most of us to accept. Likewise, it does not satisfy many people to assume that an all-loving God awaits us in the next life. We have need of prophets to indicate certain possibilities without supplying false hope.

Kerouac is just such a prophet, and *On the Road* is a provocative account of the search of sincere, if flawed, men for meaning in the midst of confusion. The last lines of the book don't provide much hope, but rather set us in motion towards more questioning and perhaps despair – remember that any mystical journey involves suffering. At the same time, poetry has the capacity to lift men above themselves and make them into visionaries:

The evening star must be drooping and shedding her sparkler
dims on the prairie, which is just before the coming of
complete night that blesses the earth, darkens all rivers, cups
the peaks and folds the final shore in, and nobody, nobody
knows what's going to happen to anybody besides the forlorn
rags of growing old. (pp. 309-310)

Old age and wisdom, rebellion and acceptance, darkness and light, these are our constant companions as we journey through life. The only certainty is that we will eventually die. As we don't 'the forlorn rags of growing old', thoughts of eternity come sharply into focus. America is vast; it takes a lot of travel to visit every part of it. When compared to infinity, however, it is but a speck. So it is with our mortal lives, which are but dots in the face of eternity. This is what makes our preparation for whatever awaits us after death absolutely vital.

Is this all a bit pessimistic? Perhaps, but there is more to Kerouac's account than mere pessimism. Joy also permeates the narrative and some of the passages we have encountered give us insights that are useful in our journey to a condition where all will finally be revealed to us.