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Selecting Figs

The Fetishization of Choices as a Cause of 'Bad Faith' in Sylvia Plath's Bell Jar

by Peter Klapes

Contrary to how she would probably describe herself, Esther Greenwood, of Sylvia Plath's Bell Jar, is a conformist. Nauseated by the freedom that she, a liberated, educated woman, has secured for herself, Esther struggles to make free, uninhibited choices. In attempting to negate the social mores and customs that she has inherited from her faith, community, and historical time period, Esther ends up basing every decision that she makes (or contemplates making) on those exact mores and customs that she dislikes so much.

Esther's behavior, though, occurs through no fault of her own. The young adult has merely realized a philosophical truth: that one can never fully purge herself of the life that they bear—that they have been living—in order to start anew.

One's sense of self—the 'me' in the locution "I am me"—is constructed through negation, not predication. That is, if we accept that the nature of the linguistic sign as arbitrary, and that signifier and signified are bound merely by superficial social contract, then it must be the case that our own being—existence—is always realized through negation, not predication. In fact, the lack of predicate in the mere statement of "I am" defines best the human person, replete with her essential nothingness. Though Esther realizes this fact in the wake of the death of friend, Joan, Plath's narrator expresses feelings of imprisonment and paralysis in decision-making. She feels she's trapped in a bell-jar. During these moments, Esther experiences intense nausea, as the French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre identifies it. As a result of such feeling, Esther lives a life of "bad faith", whereby she disowns her innate freedom and limits her ability to make free, uninhibited choices. Esther applies seemingly innate meaning—signification—to her experience of the world (perhaps, even, it can be said that she fetishizes the objective experiences that she has of the world), and becomes incapable of experiencing, with pleasure, the freedom that lies at the omphalos of the human lived-experience.

Esther's self-described "wanting two mutually exclusive things at one and the same time" (94) reveals her first instance of 'bad faith.' Recounting an exchange with her (unfaithful) boyfriend, Buddy Willard, Esther recalls Buddy's past inquiry of her preferred place of living: city vs. country. After denying Buddy's marriage proposal, Esther reports that Buddy felt that her desire—to live in both city and country simultaneously—was the "perfect set up

of a true neurotic" (93). Esther, in response, corroborates Buddy's findings: "If neurotic is wanting two mutually exclusive things at one and the same time, then I'm neurotic as hell. I'll be flying back and forth between one mutually exclusive thing and another for the rest of my days" (94). Needless to say, Esther struggles with commitment. Her ability to make decisions seems impaired. Her response to Buddy's proposal ("I'm never going to get married" [93]) can be read as a rejection of commitment altogether—a hallmark sign of living in bad faith—whereby "marriage" seems to signify, on a broader level, commitment.

Such a fear of commitment, I would argue, emanates from Esther's application of a seemingly transcendental cover—a bell-jar—to her life. Esther first employs the metaphor of the bell-jar is when her scholarship's benefactress, Philomena Guinea, drives her through town, taking her to the private asylum: "… wherever I sat—on the deck of a ship or at a street café in Paris or Bangkok—I would be sitting under the same glass bell jar, stewing in my own sour air" (185). Esther, nonetheless, sees herself as existing under a sort of transcendental "glass bell jar", transparent, though inescapable. Through the metaphor of the bell-jar, Esther demonstrates that she fails to view herself as radically free. Rather than accepting her essential nothingness, Esther imaginarily experiences her own existence as a closed, finite system, to which her every decision—so as not to break the bell-jar's glass—must conform. In the sentence that follows her initial mention of the bell-jar, Esther demonstrates her experience of nature itself, as well, has been tainted by the imaginary bell-jar: "Blue sky opened its dome above the river…" (185).

Like many a psychotic, Esther makes symbols out of natJEWural phenomena, which are, foundationally, devoid of meaning or signification. In this instance, Esther gives agency to the inanimate sky and describes the sky's appearance as a dome, enclosing, from 'above', the river. Seemingly unable to deal with the nothingness that underlies human life itself, Esther gives meaning and agency to natural (neutral and passive) phenomena, so as to deflect responsibility for her life and for her choices. She is not free, because she lives within a bell-jar, and because the sky's dome encloses her—whatever decision she makes will be made with the premise that she is not free, but rather enclosed and finite.

This application of symbolic meaning to the physical, tangible choices that make up one's life can be seen through Esther's conceit of the fig tree and through her likening of life choices to figs. Flipping through a magazine, Esther comes across a story of a

> Jewish man and a beautiful dark nun who kept meeting at [a fig] tree to pick the ripe figs, until one day they saw an egg hatching in a bird's nest on a branch of the tree, and as they watched the little bird peck its way out of an egg, they touched the backs of their hands together, and then the nun didn't come out to pick figs with the Jewish man but a mean-faced Catholic kitchen maid came to pick them instead. (55)

The story Esther offers serves as an allegory for the experience of the desire for desire, the experience of which allows for the delay of authentic decision-making, or commitment. In this case, the impossibility of the romantic, or sexual, union of the Jewish man and the nun kept the experience of the daily fig-picking desirable—the nun is 'beautiful' because she is nun, and out of reach of the Jewish man.

and the nun kept the experience of the daily fig-picking desirable—the nun is 'beautiful' because she is nun, and out of reach of the Jewish man. The delay of decision-making regarding their seemingly natural entrance into an intimate relationship makes the situation seem dreamy—until a decision regarding the matter is made (i.e., when the backs of the hands of the two touch).

In the aforementioned anecdote, Plath appears to invoke the fig-tree deliberately as a direct reference to the fig tree's biblical role. In the Book of Genesis, the leaves of the fig tree serve to fetishize the genitals. The genitals—as a bodily organ, devoid of any transcendental significance—become symbolic when Adam and Eve cover them with the leaves of the fig tree. For Adam and Eve, their genitals take on new meaning the minute they're covered: they become mysterious and out-of-reach. In the story, the man and woman cease to be free human beings; rather, they take on divine, transcendental distinctions—being Jewish and being a nun—that cover, and make mysterious their (potential) intimacy. They neglect their ontological freedom, which would allow them to enter into an intimate relationship, and (rather) live in 'bad faith', casting away decisions that can be made: decisions (in this case, the decision to enter into an intimate relationship) that would stand in their way (as decisions to be made). By applying labels or other structures to their lived experience, people (like the Jewish man and the nun, and Esther, with her perception of an enclosing bell-jar) delay decision-making. When they finally make a decision, they feel regret and live in bad faith. In the case of the nun, she never comes back to the fig tree. They live neurotically, as Esther would say, espous-

ing two desires at once (in our case, a desire both to be a nun or to be a Jewish man and to engage in intimate relations).

Esther's likening of decisions to figs reveals the impossibility and mysteriousness of life choices:

> I saw my life branching out before me like the green fig tree in the story. From the tip of every branch, like a fat purple fig, a wonderful future beckoned and winked. One fig was a husband and a happy home and children, and another fig was a famous poet and another fig was a brilliant professor, and another fig was Ee Gee, the amazing editor, and another fig was Europe and Africa and South America […] and beyond and above these figs were many more figs I couldn't quite make out. I saw myself sitting in the crotch of this fig tree, starving to death, just because I couldn't make up my mind which of the figs I would choose. I wanted each and every one of them, but choosing one meant losing all the rest, and, as I sat there, unable to decide, the figs began to wrinkle and go black, and, one by one, they plopped to the ground at my feet. (77)

Again, the fig (and the fig tree) represents fetishization—the morphing of some physical, material thing into a sort of transcendental, spiritual experience. For Esther, nonetheless, each fig—representing a decision—is fetishized. Each fig represents an idea of a particular life that Esther feels she must exhibit, whether it be a life with "a husband and a happy home and children", a life as a "brilliant professor", or a life in "Europe and African and South America". By concealing her choices under the guise of the fetishizing fig, Esther creates a false dichotomy: she sees the ideals of having children, for instance, and being an 'amazing editor' as being unsynthesizable. In their most essential state, however, these concrete choices are not innately mutually exclusive. Esther, unfortunately, fails to recognize this. As a result, she

finds herself sitting there "unable to decide [as] the figs began to wrinkle and go black…". Each decision, for Esther, becomes symbolic of some larger ideology, or some larger ideal (represented by the fig). Esther cannot choose because in creating ideals she negates her ontological freedom, and thus lives in 'bad faith' (or, perhaps even better, 'neurotically', and in self-contradiction, underneath the top of the glass bell-jar, or the dome of the sky).

Such indecision is also seen in Esther's suicidal ideation. Throughout the course of the novel, Esther contemplates various forms of suicide—eventually attempting and failing to kill herself. As soon as she contemplates "open[ing her] veins in a warm bath", Esther cannot follow through: "when it came down to it, the skin of my wrist looked so white and defenseless that I couldn't do it. It was as if what I wanted to kill wasn't in that skin or the thin blue pulse that jumped under my thumb, but somewhere else, deeper, more secret, and a whole lot harder to get at" (147). Esther remains caught at the precipice of life and death: she desires death, but never actually follows through on her suicidal ideations. She appears to desire to live, or at least to experience pain and emotion and some sort of feeling of liberty, or freedom. The problem emanates from the fact that her freedom necessitates life (and not death, which would foreclose any possibility of experiencing freedom as we know it). Esther realizes very well that the death she wants to experience is not "in that skin or the thin blue pulse that jumped under my thumb". Rather, Esther understands that her desire is to locate and to 'kill' the 'deep, more secret' aspect of herself, which, to me, seems to refer to that same "mysterious", "secretive" place where fetishizations

and such—which always precipitate one's living in bad faith—reside.

Finally, however, in the wake of the death of her friend Joan Gilling, Esther realizes the lack of predicate (transcendental, mysterious fetishizations) in—and the essential nothingness of—her own free lived experience: "I took a deep breath and listened to the old brag of my heart. / I am, I am, I am" (243 ['/'] added to show essential nothingness of—her own free lived experience: "I took a deep breath and listened to the old brag of my heart. / I am, I am, I am" (243 ['/'] added to show author's seemingly significant line break). Here, we see Esther come to terms with her own freedom, whereby she comes to terms with her lack of predicate, if you will. Rather than specifying, qualifying, or limiting her own being (the 'I am') in any way, she leaves her possibilities open. She doesn't say that she is a woman, or a writer, or a student, or a young adult who hates her mother. She just is. At this penultimate scene of the novel, Esther realizes that she is free. Though in order to be free, she must (still) exist. She cannot commit suicide. Cherishing her own free existence, Esther finally inches towards breaking out of the institution, and becomes even closer to her separation from a life of bad faith.

Until the conclusion of Sylvia Plath's *Bell Jar*, Esther Greenwood, is a conformist. Nauseated, as Jean-Paul Sartre would say, by the innate freedom of human life, Esther finds herself creating boundaries and limitations for herself and for her life. Unfortunately, Esther's choices become laden with meaning and transcendental significance—they become

fetishized. A choice to live in one place over the other, for instance, becomes a symbolic gesture, whereby Esther feels she has 'bought into' one standard of living over another. Her choice to get married—or not—speaks to her ability to achieve success, and her choice of suicide method speaks to how masculine, feminine, or courageous she is. When her choices take on such meaning—which otherwise doesn't exist—our narrator begins living in bad faith. In order to deal with the existential nausea she experiences, Esther adopts particular values thus disowning her innate freedom. She forecloses certain options for reasons that she has merely invented. Finally, however, when faced intimately with death, Esther becomes free, and lives according to no imaginary standards, ideologies, or values. She excitedly realizes "I am, I am, I am". She seems to break out of her own life of bad faith, ready to bite into the sweet figs, to conquer them, and to annihilate them, so as to reach the core of life: (free) choice. One would hope that Sylvia Plath herself felt that she had done the same. and to annihilate them, so as to reach the core of life: (free) choice. One would hope that Sylvia Plath herself felt that she had done the same.