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Review of *The View from "On the Road": The  
Rhetorical Vision of Jack Kerouac*

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*The View from "On the Road": The Rhetorical Vision of Jack Kerouac.* By Omar Swartz. Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1999; pp. xi + 130. \$34.95.

In the preface to his new book *The View from "On the Road,"* Omar Swartz writes that Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*, "is a rhetorical document with persuasive significance in helping people to restructure their lives." Therefore, "the study of Kerouac is the study of rhetorical transformations" (xi). A brief chapter summary helps outline the mainstays of his argument.

In Chapter 1, "Rhetorical Transformations," Swartz does an excellent job of defining "rhetoric" and of explicating the nature and function of a "rhetorical vision." Swartz locates *On the Road* as a representative anecdote for the Beat Generation. The author goes to some length to give an untutored reader necessary social and cultural background as a context for interpreting this movement. For example, Swartz explains that Kerouac coined the term "beat" to express a simultaneously raucous combination of the rhythm of experimental jazz, a feeling of marginalization, as in "beaten down," and a surprising touch of the Roman Catholic spirit of the beatitudes, which enables one to truly celebrate one's "blessings." Swartz's discussion of the roots of the term "beat" provides interesting socio-cultural reading.

In Chapter 2, "Kerouac in Context," Swartz provides useful background on Kerouac, who was influenced by other Beat Generation compatriots, including such notables as William Burroughs, Allan Ginsberg, and Lawrence Ferlinghetti, among others. Swartz provides an overview of the cultural milieu of the Beat Generation. He finds its ideological roots to be most conspicuous in *On the Road*. The book was premised on "the cult of high experience," which Swartz defines as "an attitude that

fermented in the Beat Generation . . . involving the belief that experience rather than conformity was the natural condition of the healthy human being" (18). In sacralizing the body and the primacy of personal experience, representatives of this new idealism sought to combine modes of self-expression and independence as modalities for experiencing freedom. Life is transformed into a never-ending quest for "IT!"—a term that can be loosely translated as a Buddhist-inspired state of ecstatic triumph "signif[ying] the indescribable moment of perfect understanding when the sensating individual and the sting of time blend indistinguishably" into an "existential moment," where devotees experience the "oneness and unity of creation" (20).

In Chapter 3, "Kerouac's Rhetorical Situation," Swartz outlines Kerouac's contribution to the culture of the 1960s. Swartz then turns to a critique of Norman Podhoretz and George Will to mine 30 years of cultural warfare attached to Kerouac's writings. Swartz describes an article by Podhoretz on Kerouac that appeared in 1958 as "absurd" and "sensationalist." Podhoretz labels Kerouac "dangerous" because of his untraditional views that subvert authority. Some 30 years later, George Will dismisses Kerouac in a broadside decrying the attempt to honor Kerouac by dedicating a park in his name in Lowell, Massachusetts. Will chides the proponents of such action as an example of America's penchant for mounting useless campaigns in support of "recycled radicalisms." In describing Kerouac's marginalized "rhetorical situation," then, Swartz is concerned with the place of art as ideological warfare. As Swartz suggests, "art, in principle, is never innocuous" (41). The comparisons in this chapter are interesting and effective.

In Chapter 4, "Fantasy, Rhetorical Vision, and the Critical Act," Swartz goes to great lengths to describe and defend his critical methodology. His critical apparatus relies on an application of Bormann's fantasy theme analysis. Swartz reiterates the well-known charges against fantasy theme analysis, discusses its chief critics, and presents a convincing rationale for the development of his critical approach.

Chapters 5, 6, and 7 specify each of the three major "rhetorical visions" that comprise Swartz's reading of formal and substantive elements of *On the Road*. Chapter 5, "The Vision of Social Deviance," explores Kerouac's rejection of the conformity he found in contemporary popular culture. Kerouac's agitative strategies are well documented. Chapter 6, "The Vision of Sexuality," explores Kerouac's uninhibited "celebration of the libido" (76). Swartz argues that while Kerouac's vision in this instance displays "extreme social and moral irresponsibility" (79), it is redeemed by the representation of "an important and artistic social force that helped shock this nation into recognition that it had long denied a powerful human desire that demanded attention" (80). In Chapter 7, "Dean as Vision," Swartz argues that Dean Moriarty, Kerouac's chief protagonist in *On the Road*, signifies a new ideology which, among other things, offers a vision that "symbolically slaps the face of traditional America" (86) and provides a site for "resistance to a Eurocentric corporate consciousness" (87).

In Chapter 8, “Conclusion: Kerouac and Liminality,” Swartz launches an extended discussion of liminality. For Swartz, “liminality” is at the heart of Kerouac’s book and consciousness. Liminality offers us an “in-between” state full of the promise and danger of recreation, and the concept helps us to more fully appreciate the “visions” contained in Kerouac’s book.

Swartz candidly admits he is “empathetic to the world Kerouac constructs” and even “celebrate[s]” his “partiality as a scholar in support of his project” (Chapter 1, footnote 2, 105). While the candor is admirable, it also reveals one of the few weaknesses of the book. While Swartz catalogues the “negatives” associated with Kerouac’s insistence on potentially debilitating personal lifestyle choices, he pays much less attention to what such a model of behavior might mean for a generation trying to respond “to the larger, confusing culture in a strategic manner.” Heady, romantic depictions of alcohol and drug abuse, hedonistic sexual orgies, rampant misogyny, and marital infidelity as destiny, among other instances of lionized behavioral “deviance,” seem to present, at best, a puzzling picture of just what kind of transformational society or revolutionary project Kerouac actually realized here. While Swartz establishes Kerouac’s multigenerational influence, I was less than convinced that the long-term personal and social outcome of Kerouac’s project was as “liberating” as this book implies. While artistic taboos may have been broken—and alternative rhetorical value constructions certainly appealed to those identifying themselves with the Beat Generation and other movements that followed—given Swartz’s method, any empirical evidence for long-term negative personal and social consequences associated with the movement must be shunted aside. I believe it falls to the rhetorical critic to provide a more nuanced and balanced judgment on this score, as well.

Nevertheless, this relatively short book provided an invigorating experience. It resurrected a time and place of great ferment and frenzied resolve. The idealism in Kerouac’s project is clearly displayed—even if detractors judged it misguided. *On the Road* is an excellent vehicle for revealing the power of rhetoric and the importance of rhetorical analysis. There is ample insight regarding the “visions” invoked here, and we can learn much about how generational fissures form in the narrative Swartz provides. This book will be particularly useful to those outside the field of rhetorical studies or to students who are just getting acquainted with Bormannian approaches to rhetorical analysis.

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