
REVIEWS

Barbarians in the Gates: Recent Beat Scholarship

Michael Skau. *"A Clown in a Grave": Complexities and Tensions in the Works of Gregory Corso*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1999. 248p.

Omar Swartz. *The View from On the Road: The Rhetorical Vision of Jack Kerouac*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1999. 142p.

James T. Jones. *Jack Kerouac's Duluoz Legend: The Mythic Form of an Autobiographical Fiction*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1999. 295p.

Ben Giamo. *Jack Kerouac, The Word and the Way: Prose Artist as Spiritual Quester*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2000. 271p.

John Lardas. *The Bop Apocalypse: The Religious Visions of Kerouac, Ginsberg, and Burroughs*. Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2001. 326p.

Kurt Hemmer
Harper College

Literary historians in the future may refer to the beginning of the twenty-first century as the heyday of Beat scholarship. The Beats are not being embraced in all quarters and probably never will be, but the recent appearance of several estimable scholarly texts published by Southern Illinois University Press and the University of Illinois Press should be a harbinger of things to come. Perhaps it is not as big a surprise as it first appears that this burst of academic enthusiasm over the Beats comes from the heartland of America rather than from the coasts. After all, as Michael Davidson wrote over a decade ago, "To some extent [the Beats' accommodation to the canon] is a belated response to the fact that the Beats were *from the outset* part of American culture, not alienated from it" (94). The Beats have never been as popular in colleges and universities and given as much critical respect as they have garnered in the last few years. Considering recent news events,

the present academic attention received by the Beats can be viewed as part of a *Zeitgeist* of nostalgia for the Beat era.

The former *enfant terrible* of the Beats, Gregory Corso, died of cancer in Minneapolis on 17 January 2001. The seventy-year-old poet was the last of the major Beat writers, who included Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, and William S. Burroughs. Though not present at the inception of the Beat movement in the mid-1940s, and several years younger than his fellow Beat “daddies,” Corso was considered one of the most promising if not *the* most promising artist to emerge from the group in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Both popular magazines examining the Beats as a social phenomenon and literary critics analyzing the Beats’ artistic worth focused much of their attention on Corso during this time. Michael Skau reminds us in *“A Clown in a Grave”: Complexities and Tensions in the Works of Gregory Corso*:

Time and *Newsweek* seemed to be especially enamored of Corso. The former published an article on the North Beach and Venice West “beatniks,” in which about one-third of the article consisted of a passage from Corso’s “Bomb,” and a photograph accompanying the article, titled “Bang Bong Bing,” showed just one member of the group—Corso. The *Newsweek* article, “Every Man a Beatnik?” reviewed a 1959 New York symposium on the Beats with responses by Ginsberg, Corso, and Orlovsky and included a photograph of one of the three—Corso again. When *Mademoiselle* featured the Beats in a 1959 article by Michael Grieg on “The Lively Arts in San Francisco,” one literary work accompanied the article: “The Shakedown,” a poem by Corso. In 1960, G. S. Fraser could assert that “Corso’s verse seems to me to show more talent than Ginsberg’s,” and John Fuller too asserted “Corso’s superiority” over Ginsberg. In Thomas Parkinson’s 1961 collection *A Casebook on the Beat*, the full-length essays with titles indicating a primary focus on a single Beat figure focused on just two writers: Kerouac and Corso. In 1963, *Newsweek* devoted more than two columns to Corso’s first marriage as a “symbol of the Beats’ eclipse.” Hayden Carruth, in 1963, called him “an exceedingly talented poet who has written perhaps two dozen really good poems.” Kenneth Rexroth wrote, “In my opinion Gregory Corso is one of the best poets of his generation.” (129)

Though it is generally believed by scholars that Corso did not realize his literary potential because of his problems with substance abuse in the 1960s and 1970s, he may still be the only Beat poet who can seriously challenge Ginsberg for the title of laureate of the movement.

Like all the other texts presently reviewed, Skau’s prose is accessible and interesting to both the aficionado and inchoate Beat scholar. Only one previous volume, Gregory Stephenson’s *Exiled Angel* (1989), has focused exclusively on Corso, and Skau’s book is of particular interest because it attempts to examine all of

Corso's work, including the much neglected novel *The American Express* (1961), to give a holistic evaluation of Corso's contribution to letters. Perhaps one of the reasons Corso has been neglected by scholars is his pervasive use of humor, which makes him unpalatable to more serious-minded critics. As Skau rightly asserts, "One of the most critically overlooked aspects of the literature of the Beat Generation writers has been their use of humor" (88). Corso is arguably the most humorous of the Beats and was one of the most astute practitioners of surrealism this side of the Atlantic. "What makes Corso preeminent among the Beats influenced by surrealism," argues Skau, "is his effective use of humor, ranging from the unusual structures producing gentle smiles of the mind to whole poems that seem to exist only for the radical displacement, or punch line, which brings the work to closure" (9). Though Skau's meticulous examination of some of Corso's verse might seem tedious to those more interested in critiquing Corso from a cultural studies viewpoint, the excellent appendices of works about and by Corso, which Skau has assembled to complement this study, make this text extremely useful to fans and scholars alike. Though Skau can be penetratingly critical of Corso—e.g., "his reckless behavior and literary eclecticism sometimes resemble the precocious teenager's exasperating testing of his family's love" (96)—he also places Corso in the tradition of the Romantics (Corso was a great admirer of Shelley) and claims that he created "a body of visionary poems that possess the qualities of greatness" (101). Skau's assessment certainly helps justify the placement of Corso's ashes in a bronze urn at Rome's Protestant cemetery near his beloved Keats and Shelley on 5 May 2001.

Another remarkable Beat news item appeared later that month. James Irsay, the owner of the Indianapolis Colts, purchased the original manuscript of Kerouac's *On the Road* for a record \$2.43 million when it was auctioned by Christie's on May 22. It was the most money a literary manuscript had ever received at auction. Just as Kerouac's popularity continues to expand, academic interest in him is at an all-time high. Omar Swartz's *The View from On the Road: The Rhetorical Vision of Jack Kerouac* is a full-length study of Kerouac's most famous novel and, through reader-friendly prose and the help of rhetoric theory, highlights what many Kerouac scholars have believed but were never able to articulate persuasively until now.

Using Ernest G. Bormann's theory of fantasy theme analysis from "Fantasy and Rhetorical Vision: The Rhetorical Criticism of Social Reality," published in *Quarterly Journal of Speech* (1972), Schwarts explains, "Fantasy themes are the units of exchange, the negotiated currency that connects alienated people to each other. Fantasy themes help people to bridge their alienation and to build a communal

and thus communicative consciousness" (43). Rather than viewing Kerouac's novel as a work of juvenile solipsism, Schwartz argues that "*On the Road* embodies the most mature expression of [Kerouac's] personal vision and that it played a significant role in reweaving patches of the social fabric of this country's culture" (8). According to Schwartz, "*On the Road* is a rhetorical document with persuasive significance in helping people to restructure their lives" (xi). Schwartz reads Kerouac's rhetorical strategy in *On the Road* as one of the major contributing factors leading to the social unrest of the 1960s. Breaking the bonds of traditional American values, Kerouac's novel promotes a transcendental freedom that helps readers change their lives. Though Schwartz recognizes the possibility for Kerouac's narrative to limit as much as it liberates, he emphasizes that "*On the Road* is a book that is intimately concerned with social agitation; it is a testimony to the will of the human spirit to resist control" (58).

Schwartz tries to address Kerouac's detractors with varying degrees of success. He confronts the traditional Marxist reading of Kerouac, that his work is complicit with capitalism, by defending Kerouac as a writer who questioned the underlying assumptions of capitalism. A recent article by scholar Mark Richardson calls *On the Road* "a conservative novel" because of its naïve discussions of race (227). Schwarz, who champions Kerouac's book as a radical text, attempts to confront the problematic aspects of race in the novel by stressing the appeal for Kerouac of the liminal experience of African Americans, which does not entirely confront the romantic primitivism of Kerouac's views. Nevertheless, Schwartz persuasively argues that the social impact of *On the Road* is of scholarly interest. He concludes:

In another age, Kerouac might have been honored as a rhapsode for his poetic contributions to culture. However, he has been widely criticized as a social anomaly and destructive force in culture. In a sense, he has been condemned as a sophist for corrupting the youth with his promotion of hedonistic nihilism. This study has attempted to refigure that negative image of Kerouac by identifying him as a cultural rhetorician, capable of promoting and sustaining a message deliberately designed to modify social reality. (102)

While Schwartz tries to argue that Kerouac deliberately tried to change the face of America, one of the most ambitious works of Kerouac scholarship, James T. Jones' *Jack Kerouac's Duluoz Legend: The Mythic Form of an Autobiographical Fiction*, argues that Kerouac deliberately manipulated the Oedipus myth in his writings to examine his own life. Jones is no stranger to Kerouac scholarship. He has previously published *A Map of Mexico City Blues: Jack Kerouac as Poet* (1992) and *Use My Name: Jack Kerouac's Forgotten Families* (1999). *Jack Kerouac's Duluoz Legend* is particularly ambitious because it attempts to read all of Kerouac's published

material under a single paradigm. Using an inclusive rather than an exclusive approach, Jones looks at all of Kerouac's books as potentially fitting into the Duluoz Legend, the name Kerouac gave to the grand tale of his life, though which books should be considered as part of the legend proper remains a highly contested area for Kerouac scholars. In *Subterranean Kerouac: The Hidden Life of Jack Kerouac* (1998) biographer Ellis Amburn suggests that Kerouac's writing can yield promising insights if read in light of Kerouac's struggles with his own sexuality.¹ Jones argues that we should rather look at Kerouac's work through the lens of Freudian psychoanalysis, where the work can shed light on the life and the life can shed light on the work.

According to Jones, "Jack Kerouac found in the Oedipus tale a reflection of his own family history, and by reshaping the myth to emphasize the role of the brother-figure he made it into a literary structure capable of giving form to his own fictional autobiography, revitalizing the ancient tragedy in the process" (3). Those resistant to Freud's beliefs will find this analysis of Kerouac's *œuvre* frustrating, but not because of the psychoanalytic jargon. Jones makes his discourse accessible to those with even the faintest understanding of Freud. "The difference between Freud's appropriation of Oedipus for psychoanalysis and Kerouac's use of it in the Duluoz Legend," explains Jones,

is that while Freud chose to freeze the terms of the drama for scientific purposes by locating it in a specific classical text, ignoring both the theme of sibling rivalry implicit in Sophocles and the existence of other versions of the myth, Kerouac took it up as an artist, finding in the ancient tale a framework that could be altered to suit the individual origins of his own unique set of psychic tensions—as Sophocles himself must have done—by creating a vibrant new version appropriate to his own milieu. (11)

Whether or not Jones' argument is convincing will probably have a great deal to do with each reader's faith in Freudian psychology, but Jones insists, "If it is convincing, it may also demonstrate to the many people both inside and outside academia who persist in considering Kerouac sub-literary that he is, on the contrary, a literary writer par excellence" (20).

It is questionable whether Jones' book will be able to convince those who think Kerouac is sub-literary to change their minds. Freudian critics might be happy to see this work, but as Jones acknowledges, "Kerouac dismissed psychoanalysis as a high-priced substitute for Catholic confession and attacked it head on in *The Subterraneans*" (243). Despite this fact, Jones claims that Kerouac was a Freudian writer who consciously used the Oedipus complex as the crux of his art. Jones admits, "some of my interpretation of Kerouac's novels is obviously open to ques-

tion" (125), and adds, "A Freudian reading of the Duluoz Legend is not meant to preempt or preclude other readings. It is neither definitive nor final, but rather provisional and heuristic" (261). Despite what other critics may say about Jones' use of a literary theory presently waning in popularity, Jones does an admirable job of showing his readers that Kerouac's books do lend themselves to Freudian interpretation.

Ben Giamo's *Kerouac, the Word and the Way: Prose Artist as Spiritual Quester*, like Jones' text, also examines the Duluoz Legend—though Giamo sticks only to the novels, with the exception of *Pic* (1971)—but asks its readers to look at Kerouac as primarily a spiritual writer. A similar thesis was previously put forward by Jim Christy in *The Long Slow Death of Jack Kerouac* (1998), but while Christy's book was directed to enthusiasts, Giamo addresses the academic community.² He tells his readers that his primary purpose "is to chronicle and clarify the various spiritual quests undertaken by Kerouac—as revealed by his novelistic writings" (xix). Giamo provides a good introduction to Kerouac for the novice. Though the Kerouac scholar will find little surprises, Giamo does a praiseworthy job of examining each novel in the context of the spiritual trials and revelations Kerouac encountered as he wrote. Giamo views the production of these novels as a way Kerouac maintained spiritual well-being as he grappled with the daunting spiritual questions of his Catholicism and Buddhism. Giamo explains, "In short, [Kerouac] believed; and because he believed in the classic teaching of Catholicism, he found himself lacking and longing for spiritual purification in the midst of certain human folly. If he were, say, a lapsed Unitarian then there would be nothing left to write about. But a lapsed Catholic pre-Vatican II figure with pagan impulses and a medieval load on his conscience, let loose amid the secular strife of the modernist era—now there we have at least a basis for spiritual struggle" (79).

What interests Giamo is not criticizing Kerouac as much as coming to terms with the spiritual struggles behind his writing. The major flaw in his analysis may be his love for his subject matter. Giamo writes, "At its best, and in terms of sheer writing, Kerouac's spontaneous prose achieved a feral beauty, and a sense of fidelity, rhythm, and power that has been unparalleled in American literature" (46). Though easily dismissed as hyperbole, Giamo's analysis of Kerouac reads as if he is desperately trying to resurrect a great spiritual force in times of dire need. For Giamo, reading Kerouac can amount to a religious experience that can enlighten the reader. "If Kerouac taught us anything," Giamo insists, "even in his darkest hour, it was this: the notion of sympathy engenders compassion" (209).

Reading the Beats from a religious perspective is also the *modus operandi* of John Lardas' *The Bop Apocalypse: The Religious Visions of Kerouac, Ginsberg, and*

Burroughs. “In my attempt to take the Beats at face value,” writes Lardas, “religion emerges as the most pressing interpretive category” (14). Lardas’ study is one of the most impressively erudite studies written about the Beats. While Kerouac frequently stated that the Beats were part of a spiritual movement, few critics have taken the spiritual aspirations of the Beats seriously. Lardas not only takes the Beats’ spirituality seriously, but also argues that the various forms of spirituality embraced by the three major Beats can be traced to a common source. Like Michael Davidson, Lardas sees the Beats as part of an American tradition, not outsiders. Lardas explains, “Although the severity of the Beats’ criticism of an American present often overshadowed their affirmations of an American future, these writers were part of a long tradition of American religious dissent. The strains of antinomianism that most closely parallel the Beats are the traditions of Walt Whitman and the Transcendentalists, those who claimed religious authority based not on institutions but on a personal, experiential appeal to reality” (17). This assessment of the Beats will not come as a surprise to Beat scholars. What will cause some attention is the source Lardas argues for the unique form of Beat spirituality.

Lardas “explore[s] how the Beats engaged postwar society through the religious imagination, specifically on the discursive terms of public religion” (179) in Burroughs’ *Naked Lunch* (1959), Kerouac’s road novels—*Visions of Cody* (1972) and *On the Road* (1957)—and Ginsberg’s *Howl and Other Poems* (1956). Though Lardas carefully explains the spiritual differences between these Beat authors, he convincingly argues that their spiritual convictions were inspired by German historian Oswald Spengler’s two-volume *The Decline of the West*. It is interesting to note that Spengler’s text was embraced by fascists in the 1920s and 1930s before the Beats came upon it. It is common knowledge for Beat historians that Burroughs, Kerouac, and Ginsberg read and appreciated Spengler, but Lardas argues that *The Decline of the West* was the seminal text in shaping these writers’ *Weltanschauungen*. “Even as the Beats supplemented Spengler’s ideas with other idioms, his historical schema remained their basis for repossessing the founding myths of America” (26). After reading Lardas’ argument the reader is forced to ask, “Should we thank Spengler for the Beat Generation?” Lardas’ book is sure to stimulate debate in Beat circles, but the quality of Lardas’ argument will, one hopes, inspire intellectuals in other related fields to pay more serious attention to the Beat writers.

There was a time not too long ago when the idea of multiple, high-quality, academic books on the Beats appearing within a few years of each other was absurd. It is now clear that it is only a matter of time before the Beats are fully em-

braced by academia. Beat Generation courses on college campuses around the country are being filled by students eager to be inspired by the Beat mystique. I remember speaking to Beat scholar Ann Charters several years ago about the Beats' presence in the university. She questioned whether or not it would ruin the visceral impact these writers would have on teenagers if the Beats were encountered for the first time in literature survey courses. Whether the visceral impact of these writers will be diminished or not with their appearance in college curriculums, recent scholarship has shown that the Beats are not just for teenagers anymore—they are also for serious scholars of American literature and culture. "If anything," argues Giamo, "Kerouac should not be read (or reread) until one turns forty" (xx).
✱

Notes

¹ For a review of Amburn's biography see "Rucksacks in the Classroom: Teaching Jack Kerouac in the Twenty-First Century" in *The Rocky Mountain Review* 53.1 (1999): 119-27.

² For a review of Christy's biography also see "Rucksacks in the Classroom: Teaching Jack Kerouac in the Twenty-First Century" in *The Rocky Mountain Review* 53.1 (1999): 119-27.

Works Cited

Davidson, Michael. *The San Francisco Renaissance: Poetics and Community at Mid-century*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989.

Richardson, Mark. "Peasant Dreams: Reading *On the Road*." *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 43.2 (Summer 2001): 218-42.