

*Action Writing: Jack Kerouac's Wild Form*

By Michael Hrebeniak. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2006.

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In Michael Hrebeniak's *Action Writing: Jack Kerouac's Wild Form*, we at last have a full-length study of Kerouac that does justice to the depth of his intellect and the significance of his formal innovations. Hrebeniak performs an almost Geertzian "thick description" of the post-World War II era, situating Kerouac in the midst of a dense intersection of politics, art, and social trends, and in doing so provides a much more nuanced cultural history of the period than Beat scholarship has hitherto offered. In the process, Hrebeniak also performs an impressive genealogy of artistic innovation in the twentieth-century, definitively establishing Kerouac's place in a tradition that includes Gertrude Stein, André Breton, Virginia Woolf, James Joyce, Charles Ives, Jackson Pollock, Charles Olsen, and Ornette Coleman. As Hrebeniak states in his Introduction, Kerouac's work is "born of transdisciplinary poetics" (2); hence a wide-ranging and eclectic series of connections is necessary to do justice to his vision. Hrebeniak succeeds admirably at this task. The book's agenda, briefly stated, is to demonstrate the "vigorously performative" nature of Kerouac's writing by tracing both the attainment and loss of his rhetorical mastery of form (4). For Hrebeniak, this mastery begins with *On the Road* and ends with *Big Sur*.

After a short but useful contextualizing chapter on the emergence of the Beat ethos and Kerouac's writerly identity, Hrebeniak plunges into a Dionysian reading of *On the Road*, emphasizing the significance of "IT" as an intellectual catalyst for Kerouac's performative poetics. Although somewhat overstating Dean's similarity to Mailer's psychopathic hipster (32), this chapter nonetheless grounds the study in two crucial oppositions: "vertical dynamic ecstasy" versus "the mythology of the State" (54). Hrebeniak's interest in Kerouac is very much oriented towards the liberatory function of his spontaneous prose within the context of Cold War imperialism, and hence his reading of *On the Road* prepares the reader for his extensive consideration of *Visions of Cody*, in which Kerouac shifts from simply describing "vertical dynamic ecstasy" to actually enacting it in his prose.

Indeed, Hrebeniak focuses on *Visions of Cody* almost to the exclusion of other key texts such as *Doctor Sax* or *The Subterraneans*. However, given the lack of scholarly attention paid to *Visions of Cody* thus far, this preoccupation should be considered a strength rather than weakness. As the book progresses, Hrebeniak keeps in motion two trajectories: Kerouac's evolution as a radical prose stylist and his sudden decline, and the relevance of his innovations alongside abstract expressionism, Black Mountain poetics, and bebop jazz. He is most compelling when tracing the connections between Kerouac's spontaneous prose and bebop, particularly in his close readings of individual passages (although less emphasis on the pre-spontaneous-prose of *On the Road* would have been welcome).

The strength of Hrebeniak's study is that it really embeds Kerouac in the multifarious avant-garde explosion after World War II, and in turn grounds that explosion in the threatening politics of the Cold War era. His text ranges far and wide, deep and low, jamming George Kennan alongside Kenneth Rexroth (8-9), referencing Bakhtin and quoting Deleuze in order to introduce a passage from Proust (96); and lining up Mallarmé, Joyce, McLuhan, Derrida, Rauschenberg, Lévi-Strauss, Picasso, Braque, Schwitters, and Harold Bloom before ending with a quote from critic Eric Mottram (92). The reader who is patient enough to go with the sometimes unpredictable leaps in direction is richly rewarded by the subtle layering of the analysis.

However, at times this cross-referencing appears compulsive and counterproductive—the reader doesn't gain much, for instance, when Hrebeniak digresses into Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49* while discussing *On the Road* (56). On the other hand, his meticulous use of Kerouac's published letters is always illuminating, for then we see with real clarity and force the extent to which Kerouac's own aesthetic views correlate with the more respected giants of the avant-garde, whether Gertrude Stein (154), Virginia Woolf (166), André Breton (209), or Lee Konitz (222). Such interweaving of voices and perspectives makes a compelling case for the depth of Kerouac's own thinking.

Yet despite the seriousness of Hrebeniak's mission and the sophistication of his analysis, the book contains some surprising errors. Hrebeniak confuses quotations and plot details several times (*On the Road* [57, 212] and *The Subterraneans* [115]) and occasionally misrepresents chronological facts, for instance claiming that Kerouac was writing *Visions of Cody* while helping William Burroughs edit *Naked Lunch* (something that took place five years later). But most disturbing to me was Hrebeniak's bizarre claim that "several biographers have pointed out that *Visions of Gerard* was essentially composed by Kerouac's mother" (91). Hrebeniak does not actually identify any of these biographers; in fact, the only one who has made such a claim is Barry Miles, whose 1998 biography *Jack Kerouac: King of the Beats* hardly set the standard for reliability and insight. In fact, overall Hrebeniak seems too quick to dismiss those novels that do not satisfy his own ideological vision. His claim that "The freedom asserted through wild acts documented in *Road*, *Cody*, and *Dharma Bums* [...] disintegrates into dependency and nostalgia for the hegemonies of Church and State" (127) is much too sweeping a condemnation, and certainly not an adequate representation of the multiple forms, ironies, and insights that are contained in *Visions of Gerard*, *Big Sur*, *Vanity of Duluoz*, and *Satori in Paris*. In fact, it seems odd that Hrebeniak should view *The Dharma Bums* as more authentic than those texts considering that it is the least inventive stylistically, especially when, after all, "wild form" is the concern of the study.

There is no doubt, however, that *Action Writing: Kerouac's Wild Form* is a formidable work of scholarship and a major contribution to Beat studies. Hrebeniak's scope is broad, not only transdisciplinary but also transcultural, yet he still maintains an acute grasp of what makes Kerouac particularly American in his voice and vision. He also articulates better than any critic thus far the sociopolitical significance of Kerouac's beautiful, ragged, unpredictable prose:

“Kerouac’s position in his hypertext undermines any claim to mediate the past with impartiality, tacitly negating the authoritarian mania for historical absolutes, ends, and beginnings bound within guarantees of the unchanging nature of power” (94).