

Jack Kerouac: On the Road -

Structure and Style

1. Introduction

There is not one article on the Beat or SF scene yet that has not been (pro and con) invalidated [...] by the basic fact that the author is just a big windbag not knowing what he's talking about - no technical background, no knowledge of the vast body of experimental work [...] no clear grasp of the various different schools of experiment all converging toward the same or similar end, all at once coming into intercommunication, no knowledge of the letters and conversions in between, not even the basic ability [...] to tell the difference between prosody and diction [...]

Allan Ginsberg

In this quotation by Allan Ginsberg the attitude of the critics on the beat generation comes to the surface. The new style of writing, especially Kerouac's *essentials of spontaneous prose* was not accepted as a true art of writing.

But what is this style of writing? Which elements does it consist of, and what makes it so controversial for the critics? These and more questions have to be answered in the following analysis. At first, the most important *essentials of spontaneous prose* will be described, then *On the Road* by Jack Kerouac will be analysed under different aspects.

For better understanding some remarks on the beat generation:

Beatness is a state of wear and tear and of tiredness. The beatniks opposed against “sterile” literature and well formed language.

The word *beat* allows several illusions to *beatitude*, like in ZEN-Buddhism, beat of music (especially jazz):

- beat = schlagen, Schlag
- beatific = glücklich
- beatification = Seligsprechung

Generally one could describe a beatnik as a person who rejects conventional society. The beat generation is a movement of the 1950's. The members wanted to be “hip and cool”, far-out and “on the road”. So already the title proclaims one of the mottoes of the beat generation, and of course Jack Kerouac did not choose it by chance.

2. Spontaneous Prose

Set-up

The first essential of spontaneous prose refers to the object of presentation as well as its' creation by the author.

The subject presented always has to be concrete. For this kind of presentation Jack Kerouac uses his “art” of *sketching*. The subject to deal with can either be derived directly from “reality”, or be reproduced from memory.

The first method seems to correspond to Kerouacs' aim that there is no reflection between the reception and the production. Nevertheless Kerouac used “sketching from memory”. So he must have developed a method to reduce the gap between the perception of the subject and its' mental or verbal realisation. This method consist of defining the “memory of a definite image object” instead of the object itself as the starting-point for his reproduction.

In this case the real object stays in the background. Spontaneity is derived from the definite image-object and its' verbalisation.

Procedure

The second essential, called *procedure*, is based on the thesis that a thought has to be written down spontaneously and undisturbed. A total synchronisation of these processes is, after Kerouac, not possible and only an ideal. The pursuit of this ideal can be disturbed by several influences. Between the creation of a thought and its' realisation can be *disturbances*. Breaks in reflection must be avoided. So objects must be fixed without being reflected.

Words are more or less associations. Language has to subordinate to them. It has to follow the imaginations and is simply a device to express them. Nearly everything from concrete sentence- structures to fantasy-words seems to be possible.

Another central aspect of *procedure* is Kerouacs' confession to a "purity of speech" in-between a *sketching language*".

Kerouac seems to have realised that every author can give more than one objective picture of a subject. This could explain his request for "unreflected verbalisation" of an object. Reflection is also a kind of *disturbance* which disables the realisation of objective reality. So reflection is not helpful for mental processes, but even a source of interference.

Method

Language is interpreted by Kerouac as *speech*. The structural elements of language loose more and more signification. Every comma, full-stop or question-mark disturbs the character of speech. Oral language consists of rhythms, breaks and sounds. It contrasts to the essentials of language just like letters, graphic symbols and graphic word groups.

Speech is similar to music, especially to jazz.music with staccato and syncopes:

Yes, jazz and bob, in the sense of a, say, e tenor man drawing a breath and blowing a phrase on his saxophone, till he runs out of breath, and when he does, his sentence, his statement's been made [...] that's how I therefore separate my sentences, as breath separations of the mind [...] I formulated the theory of breath as measure, in prose and verse, [...]

For Kerouac commas and stops are simply breath units, which mark breaks. In this context the *space dash* is able to replace and to function as a full-stop. The space dash ends up single or several thoughts:

It took us two days to find Hassel. I got hung-up myself — I gunned shopping women in the afternoon, right here, downtown, supermarkets — we flashed by in the empty night — and found a real gone dumb girl who was out of her mind and just wandering, trying to steel an orange.

Scoping

We have already stated that for the author there is no time left for reflecting thoughts and that there can be no “selectivity of expression”. Scoping seems to be a logical consequence, in regard to the essentials before. After Kerouac, “free deviation (association) of mind into limitless blow-on-subject seas of thought” is all that is left for the author.

The “sea of thought” is in this context to be understood has the sea of language. The author is swimming into this sea. Sometimes he dives under water to catch a fish and to present it to the reader. Perhaps he also fishes very far away to catch very strange and special fish.

The author has not to submit himself under any discipline in choosing his subject. The only limitation is for him the “discipline of rhythms and rhetorical exhalation”.

Deviation and association come into action when the author is reporting in interior monologue.

So selectivity in word formation and expression has to be replaced by free association of the mind. The stories show rhythms and rhetoric of spoken language. The reader can only be satisfied, if the author has fulfilled the essentials of spontaneous prose. The reader must be able to re-enact the process of writing:

[...] satisfy yourself first, then reader cannot fail to receive telepathic shock and meaning-excitement by same laws operating in his own human mind.

This “shock” shall more be the sudden appearance of meaning in the reader evoked by the author than a social criticism or real influence on him.

The reader is brought to the emotional state the author was in, when writing the text.

3. Narrative Perspective

On the Road is predominantly written in past tense. Narrative perspective is the “I”-perspective. This becomes obvious already in the first sentence-“ I first met Dean not long after my wife and I split up”. Through this sentence the reader gets important information about the character, his point of view and situation: The narrator is a male person. The character “Dean” will play an important part in the following story. The first-person narrator will perhaps meet Dean repeatedly in the future (*I first met Dean*).

The protagonist Sal Paradise is centrally involved in the action. He is limited to his thoughts, feelings and perceptions. The story is told in retrospect. Sal has a temporal and physical distance to the events.

The narrator himself judges about what he tells and what is to be withheld from the reader- “ I had just gotten over a serious illness *that I won't bother to talk about [...]*”.

In the third sentence Dean is introduced as Dean Moriarty. The theme of the following story is introduced to the reader (“ life on the road”). We do not get to know the narrator’s name until page 37- “Why, Sal, what are you doing in Denver?”.

The story is told in retrospect by a narrator who is able to report about events from the past. He refers to former feelings and deeds. With a certain kind of distance and gain of experience the narrator can switch freely between time and space to give the reader as much background information as he needs to understand the story.

The reader is directly involved in the story that is told by Sal Paradise. He has the feeling that Sal tells the story especially to him.

This short distance between reader and narrator is created by the fact that the character addresses the reader directly: “Can you picture me walking those last miles through the LincolnTunnel [...]”. Very detailed descriptions and images draw a vivid picture of the events and settings of the novel:

If you drop a rose in the Hudson River at its mysterious source in the Andirondacks, think of all the places it journeys by as it goes out to sea forever - think of that wonderful Hudson Valley.

The imperatives “think” and “imagine” prompt the reader to imagine the Hudson Valley and to create a very personal image in his mind. He gets more interested and involved in the novel. Furthermore the reader receives explanations why the protagonist tells something and why a special fact is important for the reader: “The only reason I’m going into everything that happened in San Fran is because it ties up with everything else all the way down the line”.

The presence of the narrator within the story becomes obvious through insertions which steer and interpret the action. He functions as a kind of chronicler who refers to the action of story-telling itself and who controls the reader by giving him various settings and times. The passages that report or sum up a special action, push the events in order to inform the reader briefly. The names of the places Sal and his friends visit help the reader find his way around the various trips and settings. These hints are a very special element of the structure of *On the Road*. They appear nearly on every page of it. Sometimes the narrator even gives detailed information about the time: “In the month of July 1947, having saved about fifty dollars from old veteran benefits, I was ready to go to the West Coast”. These elements make the reader feel the presence of a personal narrator who has experienced the events by himself. This personal data which seems to be given in passing, in fact gives us the special information that is needed to characterise Sal. Therefore the narrator deliberately interrupts the “action” to give these added information to the reader.

In some paragraphs the protagonist even gives stage directions: “Sal Paradise! (in huge letters printed) If nobody’s home climb in through the window.” These directions give more information than the dialogue can give and it is obvious that Kerouac is aware of adopting dramatic devices.

The Reader has to switch between the things Sal had experienced, the things he explains and the real action of the story. These interactions make the story appear more vivid and “spontaneous”. It seems like Sal is “brainstorming” his ideas and is, at every single point of

the story, totally involved in the action. Kerouac uses this *sketching from the memory* of the main-character to shift away from the narrative line. It has to be considered that the shifts only give very brief information and soon lead back to the main storyline.

4. Structure of Time

In *On the Road* the time can be exactly fixed between July 1947 and end of the year 1950, according to the information given in the text. Based on the data the reader gets a chronological list of the events and the time.

On one hand we have clear statements about time, just like “At Christmas 1948 [...]“, on the other hand time cannot exactly be considered: “the end of the first half of the century”, which refers to the fact that the story ends in the year 1950.

Although the time Sal remembers can be classified, we have no direct hints when exactly the story is told to us in retrospect. There is a certain space between “This is all far back[...]” and today. This fact shows us Sal’s distance to the events he describes. The events are all ‘far back’. Sal can report as well as evaluate, from a different perspective. From this point of view he can even judge about the feelings he had, because now he has greater experience:

Kerouac equips his narrator with a double vision, enabling Sal to comment on the people and events of the novel as he saw them when they happened, and as he views them now that they are over [...]

Although the novel is written in the past there are some passages written in present tense: At the end of the novel Sal sums up the events behind him and tells us his feelings about Dean.

So in America when the sun goes down and I sit on the old broken-down river pier watching the long, long skies over New Jersey and sense all that raw land that rolls in one unbelievable huge balge over to the West Coast, in all that road going, all the people dreaming in the immensity of it, and in Iowa I know by now the children must be crying in the land where they let the children cry, and tonight the stars’ll be out,

and don't you know that God is Pooh Bear? 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, I think of Dean Moriarty, I even think of Old Dean Moriarty the father we never found, I think of Dean Moriarty.

At this point of the story, the time the narrator remembers and the time he tells the story from seem to be related very close together. This paragraph points out the situation he now is in. It can also be regarded as the reason why the story is actually told. It seems like nothing from the story the narrator now finishes to tell has already happened. The paragraph could also be an introduction. This immediacy lets the two time levels (past and present) fuse together.

Kerouac uses several time levels in *On the Road*. We have scenic mode of presentation which gives very detailed information about an event.

Reportorial narration is used to sum up long-lasting events, to skip between several times and settings and to give the minimum detail that is needed to understand the context.

Mainly at the beginning of the parts and also of the chapters, Kerouac condenses time to give a rough idea about events in the past or present: "It was over a year before I saw Dean again. I stayed home all that time, finished my book and began going to school on the GI Bill of Rights."

After this brief introduction the reader knows about the situation. Kerouac does not need to explain in detail: he gives certain facts and the story can go on.

Reflections given by the narrator link the reader to the story. There is a certain "dialogue" between the reader and the narrator. Only

these switches make the story interesting. Information about time and place is needed to link the different settings together for the reader does not get confused.

If the reader puts the puzzle-pieces about the characters and the route together, he gets a very detailed picture about Sal and his Friends: their past, feelings and dreams.

5. Structure of the text

Parts

On the Road is divided into four “trips”. This time on the road for Sal and his friends reflects Jack Kerouac’s life in the period between summer 1947 and November 1950.

The number of parts On the Road is divided in corresponds to Sal’s four trips. The fifth part is not to be analysed at this point, because it does not deal with a voyage.

You can call On the Road more a story than a real plot. Although we get to know about the beat-generation and their philosophy, the action of the story and the linking of the different storylines are more important than character-development or motivations.

Story can be defined as a narrative of events arranged in their time-sequence and chronological order, whereas in *plot* the emphasis falls on causality and causal relationships.

A conflict or a mystery can be the plot of a novel.

The story is created by several details. There is no real conflict. Only different “story-sections” which are interchangeable up to certain degree. Though the plot is missing the story needs a detailed time construction, to create a structure. The “action” of the story is more created in place and time than in the development of a character. The idea of travelling and being on the road is enough productive to create a story.

In the period between 1947 and 1950 we have four different trips:

- First trip-between July and October 1947
- Second trip-between beginning and end of January 1949
- Third trip-July 1949
- Fourth trip-summer 1950

We have six months of “total travel time”, but an overall time-period of 36 months (1947-50).

The events in the months between the voyages stay unknown. Not even in the reportorial parts of the story it is said anything about this time periods.

So On the Road can be regarded as four different and complete stories. Each of it is an autonomous report about a voyage. The four parts are only linked together by the protagonist (he is involved in all four “stories”) and his “configuration” (friends and relatives).

The introduction at the beginning of each part builds up a frame for the story. It bypasses the “black spots” between the different trips, but lets each story stand for its’ own.

The first chapter of part one and part five have a very special function.

Part five has got a construction that is different from the other four parts. It is only four-and-a-half pages long and is not divided into chapters. These formal differences can be borne out by a look at the contents:

There is no break between the fourth and fifth part. They are even connected together:

At the end of part four it is said that Dean has left Sal. The beginning of the following part directly refers to this:

Dean drove from Mexico City and saw Victor again in Georgia and pushed that old car all the way to Lake Charles, Louisiana, before the rear and finally dropped on the road as he had always known it would.

Although part five could be regarded as directly connected to part five, it has got a different function. It is described what happened to Dean and Sal after they got split up:

The part can be classified as an epilogue. It ends with Sals’ vision about Dean and America. It is related more closely to the fourth part than to the other parts.

If we regard the beginning of the story (chapter one) as a prologue it has the following functions:

It creates the setting and the time, introduces Sal and Dean as contrasting characters and the position of the narrator becomes clear. In contrast to the fourth and fifth part there is a certain “black spot” between the first two chapters of part one:

The first chapter ends up with *spring 1947*, whereas the following chapter begins :“In the month of July 1947, having saved about fifty dollars [...] I was ready to go to the West Coast.“ Furthermore the first chapter refers to all four trips. The sentence: “With the coming of Dean Moriarty began the part of my life you could call my life on the road” can be regarded as a motto for the whole story.

Although the story can be divided into four trips, an epilogue and a prologue, there is a central thread for the reader. The story does not appear split or disconnected.

Chapters

The different chapters are not as independent as the parts. Each chapter is integrated in the part. Several chapters build up a part and therefore the whole context.

The introduction of each chapter is dominated by words which give information on time or place: “It was there in the morning when I got up and found Old Bull and Dean in the back yard.” This information introduces into the story the chapter is going to tell or fills the “Black spots” if the chapter stands at the beginning of a new part.

Beginning and end of a chapter build up a frame. Nevertheless, some chapters can stand for their own and tell a complete story. For example the “Terry-story” came out before *On the Road* was published. Sometimes two chapters are linked together very closely: The ninth chapter of part two has got some kind of ending. One could expect a completely different subject at the beginning of the following chapter.

In this case Kerouac connects the two chapters and makes them appear like one:

Chapter nine:

[...] ‘I know,’ I said, and looked back east and sighed. We had no money [...] ‘Where are you going to stay?’ We wondered around, carrying our bundles of rags in the narrow romantic streets. Every body looked like a broken-down movie extra, a withered starlet.[...] poignant California characters with their end-of-the-continent sadness [...] - a lemon lot, and how’s a man going to make a living with a gang like that?

Chapter ten:

Nevertheless Marylou had been around these people - not far from tenderloin - and a grey-faced hotel clerk let us have a room on credit. That was the first step

[...] I looked out the window [...] and said to myself, Where is Dean and why isn't he concerned about our welfare? I lost faith in him that year.

The structure of the chapters does not show anything new or unconventional. There are no innovative ideas which show elements of the *spontaneous prose* like in word formation. Looking at Kerouac statements concerning creativity, one could expect a more creative structure of the chapters. There are no experimental aspects. It would be possible to give each of the chapters a title that characterises the contents. This would not be possible in other works which consist of free associations.

Paragraphs

On the Road consists of a story that is divided into several parts. The chronological order is based on the time of the events and is pushed forward only in one direction: forward. Out of this order the different chapters are formed.

One could say that the story is formed by different episodes which have again effects on the paragraphs.

The listing of stories becomes the important element of structure in On the Road. The overall text consists of stories and sub-stories, the character Sal and the frequent changing of setting. There is a great number of characters appearing in the novel. Every detail seems to be important and is to be told to the reader.

Restless travelling and life as a hobo becomes the sense of life for the beat generation.

Kerouac tried to underline this attitude by choosing the special structure for On the Road.

6. Levels of conversation

As we have already considered On the Road consists more of a story than of a plot. The story seems to be organised and planned. It is dominated by place and time structure. The narrative perspective has to subordinate to this structure.

Kerouac often directly addresses the reader in *On the Road*. He wants to communicate with the reader. It seems like he is telling the story to a good friend.

Within the text there are three different levels of conversation:

- between the first-person narrator who is involved in the story and the reader
- between the first-person narrator and the other characters
- interaction between the other characters while the narrator functions as a chronicler

Therefore “speech ” becomes the only authentic stylistic device for expressions.

In the following, the question has to be, which nuances of speech Kerouac uses to express facts, feelings and thoughts.

This style of writing implies a very fragmentary kind of presentation. Kerouac was aware of this fact. He deliberately used this stylistic device and called it *sketching*. Personal feelings can be expressed in a nearly unlimited way. This corresponds to the relationship of the Beat Generation to their texts and Kerouacs’ ideals of personal prose. The technique of sketching is based on the principals of oral communication and therefore an ideal device for Kerouac to express his beat-mentality.

[...] everything activates in front of you in myriad profusion, you just have to purify your mind and let it pour the words (which effortless angels of the vision fly when you stand in front of reality) and write with 100% personal honesty both physic and social etc. And slap it all down [...] until sometimes I got so inspired I lost consciousness I was writing [...] It’s the only way to write.

So it seems to be clear that the sentence structure has to be dominated by parataxis, because it is based on principals of oral communication.

A text which is therefore dominated by direct speech appears to be a dramatic production.

7.Direct speech

The share of direct speech in *On the Road* is relatively small. But which function has direct speech within the text? Direct speech is related very closely to narrative parts of the text.

Short elements of direct speech occur more often than longer speech sequences. They seem to be just a modification of narrative passages. This close relation of the two speech levels can be explained by Kerouac's aim to communicate with the reader "orally".

I said, 'Hold on just a minute, I'll be right with you as soon as I finish this chapter', and it was one of the best chapters in the book. Then I dressed and off we flew off to York to meet some girls.

The passage "I said" functions as a smooth transition between the I-narrative and direct speech. It is the continuation of the narrating process. The narrative perspective is in both cases the I-narrator Sal. Just another level and other methods of presentation are reached. There is no caesura between direct speech and narrative: "[...] finish this chapter', and it was one of the best [...]"

Direct speech and narrative are two variations of speech which have no basic differences for Kerouac. That is the reason why he puts them together so closely. Direct speech is integrated in the narrative and sometimes not even marked or ended by punctuation.

In some cases Kerouac does not let direct speech come to an end, but simply breaks it up by three dots:

[...] I wrote stories, yelling, 'Yes! That's right! Wow! Man!' And 'Phew!' [...] and all hung-upon like literary inhibitions and grammatical fears...'

Direct speech has an open ending and expressions like "Phew!" could also appear in comic books. Between the parts of direct speech there are short interferences like "and". Direct speech has got no own sovereignty, but is manipulated by the narrator. It represents nothing more than manipulated quotations within Sal's monologue. This degeneration of speech particles seems to correspond to Kerouac's essentials of spontaneous prose". His prose has to be understood as "oral prose".

To sum up one can say that Jack Kerouac is not to be regarded as a theorist. He simply tried to develop a style that made him able to express his ideas. The conventional styles of writing were not productive enough to serve him for telling his story. The *essentials of spontaneous*

prose were the ideal instrument to write down his ideas and to hand it over to the reader in a very special way.

“Kerouac wished to develop his own new prose style, which he called ‘spontaneous prose’. In it he recorded the life of the American ‘traveller’, and the experience of the beat generation of the 1950’s.”

Ann Charters has, in her introduction to *On the Road* , summed up this aim of Jack Kerouac by the following words:

Writing *On the Road*, Kerouac finally found his own voice and his true subject - the true story of his own search for a place as an outsider in America. His books are based on what happened to him and his friends, but they are a brilliant blend of fiction and autobiography, not because Kerouac made up characters or events but because his point of view as the narrator of his life story was so emotionally charged that he made all the characters and events a reflection of his own feelings.