

THE NEWTON OF MODERNISM

In Memory of Hugh Kenner (1923-2003)

By Newton's time the planets had proved to trace elliptical orbits, not the circular ones we find congenial, and bodies to fall not in proportion to the tug they exercise on our muscles, but solely in proportion to the distance in feet from the point of release to the point of impact. The better to purify the observations by which such knowledge is gained, men learned to follow method, not caprice; to give all facts equal weight rather than stress the facts common sense finds important; to discipline the senses as though they were recording devices, and wherever possible to replace them by recording devices: the thermometer, the yardstick, the pendulum clock. We learned then to cherish the pure detachment which telescope and microscope confer on the eye, and to exercise a comparable detachment when we are using neither telescope nor microscope, but the very eye with which we regard the things we love. Such is the discipline of becoming, for specific purposes, something other than a human being.

—Hugh Kenner, *The Counterfeiters*

My thesis is that Hugh Kenner's intellectual foundations lie in the British Enlightenment of the late 17th and early 18th centuries. In a general way this is true of all of us, because it was there and then that our modern European world was invented, but Kenner's Enlightenment is not just an ideological absorption; it is a conceptual artifact, an intellectual framework that he assembled like an anthropologist; it gives his critical and historical writing its basic concepts and distinctions, its method, its lucidity, and above all its characteristic irony. Kenner's Enlightenment is not a postmodern concept, that is, it is not a terminal or even unfinished project of rationalization and disenchantment; it is an Augustan schema whose rationality is that of the critical observation of particulars rather than the deployment of integrated, self-regulating systems: in other words, not so much the Enlightenment of Descartes and Leibniz, who want self-evident truths, as that of Bacon and the Royal Society, of Defoe, Swift, and Pope, of Locke and Newton—figures whom Kenner consulted repeatedly from one end of his

career to the other. I need to insert the proviso that it was Descartes who initiated Kenner's canonical reading of Samuel Beckett; but of course Beckett's characters are a parody of Cartesian subjectivity. On my reading Kenner's is an empirical rather than strictly rule-governed, rationalist Enlightenment; it is one that thinks that self-evident truths need to be tested and, more often than not, unmasked. Human reason is not all that philosophy claims for it. The documentation of states of affairs, indistinguishable from the stripping away of appearances, trumps totalities of every sort: encyclopedias and dictionaries, essays and inquiries, notes and epistles, lists and enumerations, satires and parodies—these, together with the novel that imitates them, are the basic genres of Kenner's Enlightenment, in which a distrust of general ideas motivates an irrepressibly corrosive wit aimed at the consequences of unchecked reasoning. The purpose of logic and mathematics in this event is practical rather than theoretical: namely the construction of productive machinery, not the formation of abstract structures. Mathematics is a useful science. it can make things work—a Geodesic dome, for example. Automaton are more interesting than ideas. In short Kenner's is a ground-level Enlightenment that knows the importance of small increments and the fraudulence of every idealism. Collect anecdotes, scorn theories. The world after all is made of random particles, each one of which deserves scrutiny. So lower the threshold of description and follow the method of detail. This is the basic motto of Kenner's critical practice.

Let me recall the opening pages of *Dublin's Joyce* in which Dublin is described as “an eighteenth-century time capsule” whose citizens are clichéd or timeworn in thought and speech because they incarnate the ghosts of the Augustans. What is interesting is that Kenner does not see this as an altogether bad thing:

Since the eighteenth century it [Dublin] had been a city of the dead.... Talk flows on with the Liffey; preserved in its own cadence Berkeley's age, wavering and inverted, stands still in that river's flow. The Liffey, churned by tugs and barges, mirrors shakily swans and Augustan domes—the Customs House and the Four Courts of the judicature which an atavistic chivalry carefully restored after first demolishing them in the fighting of 1921. A lazy tide washes squared stones at the sea wall.

Through other countries other rivers flowed, bearing away all the past that floats; submerging the rest to be peered at by men averted from factories on the banks who saw down through the waters a cloud, a skylark, a topsy-turvy world for Alice among the debris. Only Dublin had kept its past above the waters; evading the cataclysmic mutation of the Romantic revolt, it had chosen to preserve its form rather than its life. And a man born into that Dublin, exhorted to admire the image of old buildings in the stream, might seek instead to seize the once-living City. Quickened by bar-room voices and enraged by the drinkers' opacity, aroused

by civic traditions and exasperated by their street-walking ghosts, loving his city's leisure and hating the lethargy of the living who cut him off from life, such a man—James Joyce, over fifty years ago, at the pivot of an age—would find himself simultaneously citizen and exile (*Dublin's Joyce*, 2-3).

Here is Dublin's Joyce, as Kenner imagines him: an Augustan satirist or, more accurately, a parodist who wants to restore the coherence of words and things by documenting in detail their echoes in the talk of his fellow Dubliners. What is interesting about parody is that it is also a genre of redemption. For Kenner Joyce's Dublin is not a world well lost: paralyzed it may be, but the paradox is that its paralysis saved it from becoming a nineteenth-century London debauched by industrial and romantic revolutions, not necessarily in that order—remember that Kenner came of age in an age that sought to define itself critically against the romantic period: that is what Kenner's *modernism* is in its deepest motivation, namely a rejection of subjectivist poetics, if not indeed a rejection of any interest in human subjectivity (such as psychoanalysis, for example, which Kenner never ceased to ridicule).¹ So Joyce's Dublin for Kenner is a kind of utopia: a city of the dead which nevertheless preserves a human order of things that romanticism swept away, leaving Eliot's unreal city behind. Simon Dedalus is a ghost, but the ghost of Swift, not of Tennyson: “his wit [says Kenner] proceeds from a critical alertness, a flexibility of response to social clichés,” words that could just as well describe Joyce himself.

“If we want an English analogue for Joyce,” Kenner writes, “it is Pope; their orientations and procedures are surprisingly similar. Pope is conscious of intellectual traditions running back through St. Augustine to Cicero and Homer; and the universal darkness that he predicted at the end of the *Dunciad* fell exactly as he foretold; the mind of Europe entered the Romantic night-world. Nearly two hundred years later, an analogous alarm was in order for Ireland; Ireland had simply undergone some two centuries' arrest on the very brink of the precipice, and Joyce's generation was hailing a suicidal forward stagger as progress” (DJ23).

Alexander Pope: for Kenner he is the complete poet, the premier definition of poetic tradition, the last great artisan of verse, after whom a Dark Age—the “nightworld”—covered us like a shroud. In an essay from the early 1950s, “In the Wake of the Anarch,” Kenner remarked that fifty years after his death Pope became “all but unintelligible. His editors could not read him; his commentators cannot read him [note the present tense]. Though our dictionaries contain all his words and our handbooks all his allusions, his poems have grown as inaccessible as those of the Etruscans. We are situated, since the Romantic explosion, on another planet; in the

finale to the *Dunciad* we intuit a desperate vatic urgency and we applaud a pomp of sound, but suppose that the same thing is being said over and over. On the contrary, a most precise analysis goes forward, according to premises desperately in need of recovery" [*Gnomon*, p. 172]. One of these premises is that a poem is made of learning, as a novel is made of facts, a thesis that entails, among other things, the rejection of merely private perspectives, the source then and now of intellectual quackery. Kenner sees Ezra Pound struggling to free himself from the nineteenth-century nightworld by rediscovering these premises: "Most of Pound's work is worth reading ...because he doesn't play solitaire with general ideas." His mind works by the incorporation, rumination, and digestion of "facts" (*Gnomon*, p. 133). "The allusiveness of modern poetry needn't be a sign of cultural breakdown, but a manifestation of one of poetry's oldest functions"—which is to be encyclopedic:

Confucius listed among the uses of poetry that it helps you remember the names of many birds, animals, plants, and trees. In the schools of Rome and of the Middle Ages, whole tracts of knowledge now dealt with separately as "subjects" were discussed in the grammar and rhetoric classes as ancillary to the exegesis of Homer and Vergil: botany, strategy, history, geography. "Real knowledge," Pound notes, "goes into natural man in titbits, a scrap here, a scrap there: always pertinent, linked to safety, nutrition, and pleasure. The teacher of modern poetry finds himself discussing the Grail Legend, Heraclitus, Cuchulain, the *Odyssey*, Dante's trimmers, Chinese ideograms, the culture of Provence, usury, spirit writings, the *Noh*. What justifies the use of such materials by the poet is that they are worth learning about anyway (*Gnomon*, pp. 140-41).

And Leopold Bloom? As Kenner says, "when Joyce makes Bloom suddenly ask, 'Do fish ever get seasick?' we are in the presence not of an exercise in nineteenth-century pessimism but of a tribute to the unpredictable creative leaps of the human soul" (p. 20). "Do fish ever get seasick?" is a question that still registers an unbiased Royal Society curiosity about particulars. An experimental imagination is fired by questions unconstrained by received ideas. Bloom is the literal-minded eighteenth-century man whom romanticism blurred into extinction, leaving Stephen Dedalus struggling in his place, trying and failing to transmute the mere facts of everydayness into vibrant images of eternal beauty. As Kenner puts it, "Steven the romantic artist, *thanatos*, is Joyce without Joyce's sense of fact" (DJ24). Or again, more precisely: "Joyce was never the Stephen Dedalus of his 1914 *Portrait*, mirror of nineteenth-century romantic idealism: Byron, Shelley, Axel, Frédéric Moreau. He was for a time however approximately the Stephen of the 1905 *Stephen Hero*, a gayer but by no means less

intransigent being. During those months he was in the greatest danger of his artistic life" (DJ44). What saved Joyce was the writing of *Stephen Hero* itself, a process of depersonalization that parallels Yeats's development of an aesthetics of the anti-self, which defines the character of the later "cubist" portrait of Stephen, whom Joyce's "moving point of view" comes to characterize no longer as just himself (a subject) but also as the (objective) product of the naturalistic forces of environment and heredity that produce Dubliners.² Joyce, turning into someone else, was at the time the *Portrait* was published twenty-three: "His imagination," says Kenner, "had arrived at the point Yeats was to reach at fifty, and passed beyond it while young enough to profit" (DJ47). Hence the "dryness," "the elimination of fat," the Jonsonian irony, of *Chamber Music* (DJ33): mannered as these poems might be, they aren't, as Kenner says, "smeared." "Joyce had at no time allowed 'the lyrical impulse' to blur into an image of satisfaction; he had set down accurately what he felt, and the paradoxes of that scrupulous empiricism remained as data for subsequent exploration" (DJ39). Lyricism subjugated by a scrupulous empiricism. One sees Ezra Pound's hand in this judgment—as Kenner acknowledges in a footnote when he cites Pound's praise of the "clean-cut ivory finish" of Joyce's lyrics (DJ32). (The irony here is that elsewhere Kenner argued that it was Yeats, the resolute anti-naturalist, who initiated Pound into modernism.)

The point is that Kenner's construction of modernism is defined less by formal innovation (which of course is by no means brushed aside) than by an "objectivist" aesthetic attuned to the sheer factuality, the irreducible singularity, the naturalism of things and events, of the here and now. (Recall that Kenner was Louis Zukofsky's first careful reader, at least among academic critics.) His link with the British Enlightenment lies in the rejection of subsumptive thinking, emotive expressionism, deduction from generalities, and appeals to imagination. Categories are occasions of comedy, because on close inspection categories are always empty, like the minds that use them. Kenner's poet will naturally be invisible, a constructivist rather than expressionist, like T. S. Eliot, the invisible poet whose *Waste Land* is an exemplary modernist collage. In *The Pound Era* Kenner wrote: "It was not that Eliot wanted his language to be English instead of American; he wanted it to be neutral, and in this he was very Augustan, equating reason and order with the internal structure of the language itself, which should consequently be purged of incompetences and quirks. He was also in this way post-Symbolist, the *Symboliste* poem being meant to seem as though no one had written it: as though generated by the autonomous language" (PE275). The poem, in short, is an object, a pattern of words the way the novel is a container in which

any number of disarticulated objects can be rearticulated into patterns of facts.

This is why *The Stoic Comedians* has always seemed to me the quintessential Kenner text. I think that I think this partly because Kenner was developing this material in the early sixties when I was his student at the University of Virginia. For me, three interrelated critical themes stand out from this period: (1) the stoicism of the Augustans, which is to say their essential impersonality, their imperviousness to misfortune, their restraint of feeling, their deadpan documentation of human folly (think of Eliot as “Old Possum”); (2) romantic skepticism doubts whether the world can exist independently of the operations of the mind, whereas Augustan skepticism doubts the capacity of reason to surmount the mind’s obstacles to knowledge of what exists; so satire undoes the egotistical sublime; and (3) the concept of the closed field, which unfolds the idea that facts are finite in number and can be arranged, combined, and recombined in multifarious ways—alphabetically, encyclopedically, or, what amounts to the same thing, novelistically: but however we organize them, facts define human finitude: they are the absolute limit that inevitably defeats human dreams, desires, projects, theories, and self-satisfaction. However, comedy, not tragedy, is their fruit. The straight face (Buster Keaton’s face, Pound’s *personae* and Eliot’s possum) defines the decorum of a metaphysics of facts.

To which, however, Kenner gives this double or triple turn of the screw: his interpretation of Swift’s Gulliver, which amounts (in my reading) to Kenner’s self-portrait and also self-critique. I’m referring here to the fourth chapter of *The Counterfeiters* in which Kenner traces the genealogy of his intellectual heroes, Charles Babbage and Alan Turing, the prime movers of the digital age, to Jonathan Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels*. Here I’ll simply confine myself to Kenner’s argument that Alan Turing’s Game—where a detached observer tries to determine objectively (without looking at the subjects in question) the difference between the operations of a machine and that of a human being—is already fully in place in *Gulliver’s Travels*, where the creatures Gulliver encounters have grave difficulty in concluding on the evidence of Gulliver himself what a human being might be. The comedy is that Swift has created in Gulliver the “Compleat Empiricist,” someone who has no capacity for receiving received ideas, someone whose capacity for experience is confined to what he can hear, see, and compute, and who is confounded by the fact that he is, on the one hand, empirically indiscernible from the Houynymns, owing to his exhibition of consecutive discourse, and, on the other, indistinguishable from the Yahoos, owing to his biped physiology, not to mention his appearance as an object of Yahoovian desire. A

classic epistemological crisis. However, as Kenner says:

Swift's great irony amounts to this, that whereas Gulliver fancies himself the accidental emissary of the human race to parts unknown, and hence the perpetual observer and recorder, it is Gulliver himself for the most part who is constantly under observation. Swift was the real inventor of Turing's game, the object of which is to see what we can tell about a man if we have reason to wonder whether he may be an artifact. The three positions in the game are occupied, respectively, by Gulliver; by ourselves, who are presumably human...; and by various other creatures who may or may not be human, or quasi-human, but are as apt in empirical disciplines as Gulliver himself, and a good deal readier to spot an inconsistency. They observe him at least as closely as he them, and more than once he is put to the trouble of formally explaining human values to them, he who has so little notion of what it may mean to be human. This chattering booby, this casually programmed talking machine, he is *our* spokesman, *our* ambassador, the player who must prove that he is human while a giant or a horse occupies the driver's seat. And yes, he is our representative; we have no right to complain, for he represents a modern ultimate, carrier and incarnation of the values we really value: notably accuracy, cleanliness, and the power to adjust. Compared with Swift's, Turing's formulation of the game seems almost trivial (*Counterfeiters*, pp. 120-21).

Gulliver knows nothing but facts: which is why he is the perfect narrator for Swift's novel—Gulliver is what makes Swift's text a novel and not just a diatribe. What Gulliver lacks, as Kenner subsequently points out, is a classical education, meaning that he has no context, history, or tradition in which to place himself. It seems to be a fact that Kenner was one of the last recipients of a classical education.

I remember in particular Kenner's superhuman memory. In the classical age memory served as a library—not a personal memory but a commonplace book, an encyclopedic inventory from which one could draw everything one had to say. This is how Kenner's memory worked. Asked a question about Emerson, Kenner would recite from memory whole paragraphs of an essay by Emerson, who was not someone in whom Kenner maintained much interest but who was nevertheless a text in his vast mental theater. This fabulous memory explains two things about Kenner's method. You will notice that *The Pound Era* is, whatever else it is, a book of anecdotes, citations, and factual glosses (not "readings") held together by recurring figures of "patterned energy"—the Vortex, for example—whose prime model is Buckminster Fuller's analysis of knots, a study of how something works. The concept of "patterned energy" is the closest thing to a general idea in all of Kenner's work. And this is the second point: Kenner had no use for general ideas—hence the gleeful contempt he heaped upon literary theorists and the French philosophers who procreated them. Instead Kenner worked by moving

particulars, like Buster Keaton's face, from their native contexts to different, foreign ones where they served as descriptive models, chiefly of how certain kinds of writing like the novel work. That's the call of Kenner's *mechanic muse* (which was also Newton's muse): How do things work? Kenner was interested in, among things, the impact of new technologies on the writing of literature—the printing press, the typewriter, the railroad, and of course the digital computer. With Charles Hartman he is the author, so to speak, of *Sentences* (Los Angeles: Sun & Moon Press, 1994), a volume of computer-generated poems (recall the objectivist poem that no one seems to have written). The railroad, for example, is a material reason for the emergence of the short story in the 19th century—along with the newspaper or the magazine, the short story can be conveniently read by a commuter traveling a short route to work from the suburbs to city center.

Kenner's modernism is technological in character. In *The Mechanic Muse* he writes:

Technology alters our sense of what the mind does, what are its domains, how characterized and bounded.... Founded on faith in the possibility of insight—the Joycean epiphany, the Poundian image that can flash in an instant of time: on faith, too, that technology need not consign the arts to irrelevance, the Modernist enterprise evolved its verbal technologies, its poem- and novel-machines of intricate interacting discrete pieces. The technology on which it drew for tacit analogies is largely obsolescent now: as much so as, say, Dante's Earth-centered cosmos. The Dublin trams are long gone, and the linotype machine; the typewriter is going: Bloom's watch with hands will some day need a footnote.... That world survives now, like Dante's world, in art. Its assumptions survive in the structures of its art: complex artifacts we even sometimes take apart for maintenance (*The Mechanic Muse*, pp. 110-11).

The reconstruction and maintenance of modernism: that's a neat way of thinking of Kenner's intellectual achievement.

(Endnotes)

¹ In “Tales of Vienna Woods,” a review of the first volume of Ernest Jones’s biography of Freud, Kenner wrote:

Freud’s principal achievement—like that of a chess master who contrives an impregnable opening—was to combine the ambient premises of nineteenth-century continental pessimism into the most impenetrable of orthodoxies. By transforming Schopenhauer’s “will” into “the unconscious” he placed the whole complex of interdependent doctrines beyond discussion. The axioms of psychoanalysis are not statements about things in general, nor about a sort of Lockean working model to be considered with dispassion, but statements about *you*; and when you question one of them the Freudian cocks a caustic eyebrow and inquires into your motives for evading self-knowledge (*Gnomon*, pp. 127-28).

² Kenner, “The Cubist Portrait,” *Approaches to Joyce’s Portrait: Ten Essays*, ed. Thomas F. Staley and Bernard Benstock (Pittsburgh: Pittsburgh University Press, 1976) , p. 181.