

JAN GORAK

On the Kenner Trilogy

Hugh Kenner, who died at the end of 2003, now returns to us, courtesy of the Dalkey Archive Press, which has reissued three of his most concentrated, energetic works: *The Stoic Comedians* (1962), *The Counterfeiters* (1967), *Joyce's Voices* (1978). Anyone interested in modernism, modernization, epistemology, the Enlightenment, mime, cinema, computer science, skepticism, comedy, cities, mechanical ducks, or outdoor plumbing at the turn of the 20th century will want to have all three.

Ostensibly, these are three books of sustained high spirits: Kenner began as a student of Chesterton, with a brief, pithy book sponsored by Marshall McLuhan called *Paradox in Chesterton* published in 1947. He apparently grew away from a McLuhan who "could be awfully controlling" as his own intellectual independence began to assert itself, even though there are still many signs of McLuhan's influence here. He remained Chesterton's protégé to the end, though, and in rereading these books, I was amazed at how far paradox shapes them, so that modernism's pioneer chronicler doubles continuously as one of its most mordant critics, acutely aware of the deep social fault lines that run beneath the stylistic virtuosity of modern as "period style." Where McLuhan began as a sternly Leavisian inquisitor in *The Mechanical Bride* before embracing the modern world with a convert's rapture, Kenner's itinerary moved in an opposite direction, so that if *The Stoic Comedians* maintains a poker-faced impassivity about the unprecedented idiocy Gutenberg's invention inflicted on the world, *Joyce's Voices* is all alone in the silence of print, eager to impress on us that Leopold Bloom is no more alive than his much-missed son Rudy, since no one sees either "except ourselves who are not there, but seated in front of a book of English words."

This Beckettian ending underlines the extent to which Kenner's nostalgia for the world before the novel, for a world where you could see the speaker and watch his gestures, controls all these books. Kenner insists that "Narrative implies that someone is talking. It is an art that upholds its effects in time, like music. It holds us under the spell of a voice, or something analogous to a voice, and (again like music) it slowly gathers into a simplified whole in the memory." This kind of

nostalgia can be very moving—as in the passage on Leopold and Rudy—but it can also verge on the misanthropic: Kenner can see little but print and anonymity behind the Enlightenment, an intellectual movement that many people in the 21st century, including the present writer, can only view with their own nostalgia. In *The Stoic Comedians*, which lays the foundations for all these works, Kenner argues that the impossible demands of the realistic novel and an empirical culture for plausibility, verisimilitude, and transparency set us on course for the universe of imposture, simulation, and interchangeability explored in *The Counterfeiters*. Kenner categorizes this most freewheeling of studies as “an historical comedy.” With amazing brevity he constructs a world of high-technological nullity that no one writing in the week of Sadaam Hussein’s execution, relayed by video to the world as an instance of justice, could think we have escaped in 2007. Last comes *Joyce’s Voices*, initially delivered as the T. S. Eliot Memorial Lectures in Canterbury, England, and still at odds with a world in which the unrelenting “discipline” of an empirical culture—Kenner is as well-tuned to the brutalities of that culture as Foucault—makes counterfeiters of us all.

Throughout the three works, Lemuel Gulliver looms as Kenner’s representative man: Gulliver, whose career is, for Swift, “the hallmark of the new barbarism, this subjection of the mind to sequences of physical evidence, since it undid the revolution Socrates had effected when he turned its attention to wholly moral questions.” After Gulliver, gullible: in the form of Emma Bovary, who Kenner sees as “the programmed woman . . . knowingly simulating the popular novelist’s gestures” and who “is to those novels what Roy Lichtenstein is to our comic books.” Then to simple incompetence and Beckett’s narrators, who Kenner sees as limed in “utter incapacity producing an art which is ‘bereft of occasion in every shape and form, ideal as well as material’” and whose creator is himself “the non-maestro, the anti-virtuoso, habitué of non-form and anti-matter, Euclid of the dark zone where all signs are negative, the comedian of utter disaster.” This is how it is for Kenner, who, himself a stoic comedian, “considers, with neither panic nor indifference, that the field of possibilities to him is large perhaps, or small perhaps, but closed.”

Readers who go to these books in search of evidence of how Joyce “marketed” himself for the world of print, or the “invention” of “Beckett” for the London theatrical establishment will be disappointed. However, the books always do show a firm, if oblique grip on postwar intellectual history, and if you wanted to know what impact Noam Chomsky’s generative grammar had on literary history circa 1968, or the depth of

the inroads “the structuralist controversy” mounted in 1966 by Richard Macksey and his fellow symposiasts on “The Languages of Criticism and the Science of Man” made on the Johns Hopkins University by 1978, then Kenner—bewilderingly omitted from my copy of *The Johns Hopkins Guide to Literary Theory and Criticism*—would supply important evidence for seasoned code crackers. Yet what Kenner has to say about these issues is always subordinate to what he has to say about his major authors and figures: Swift, Dickens, Joyce, Keaton, Chaplin, Beckett, Warhol. Kenner is irrepressibly individualistic, even anarchic, in his view of the world, in the same way that Chesterton was. In yet another paradox, Kenner is energetically committed to individual talent even as he gathers more evidence of the individual’s demise, like Foucault’s “face drawn in sand at the edge of the sea” in *Les Mots et Les Choses*. These are marvelous books, reasonably priced and beautifully produced: *buy them*.