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The Comedy of Scholarship

by Katherine Weiss

2007-10-01

Flaubert, Joyce, and Beckett: The Stoic Comedians.

Hugh Kenner

Normal and London: Dalkey Archive Press, 2005.

Katherine Weiss revisits Hugh Kenner's playful work of scholarship *Flaubert, Joyce, and Beckett: The Stoic Comedians*, a book which offers a glance into the more experimental scholarship of 1960s France and provides an analysis that to this day seems original.

I.

When asked to write a review for EBR, I immediately scanned their extensive list of books for the word "Beckett;" Sam, after all, is my favorite author. For several years now I have been researching the Irish Nobel Prize winner. Vaguely remembering the title, but not sure whether I had read the book since the publication date was listed as 2005, I offered to write a piece on Hugh Kenner's *Flaubert, Joyce and Beckett: The Stoic Comedians*. When the book arrived, I was surprised to discover that it was a much older book and that I had read it while undertaking an M.Phil. in Dublin nearly ten years ago. It feels strange to be writing a review on this previously published study, written more than forty years ago by the prominent literary scholar Hugh Kenner whose death in 2003 most likely prompted the republication of this short but rich book. Indeed, Dalkey Archive Press has also newly released a handsome paperback edition of Kenner's 1968 book *The Counterfeiters: An Historical Comedy*. Despite the awkwardness of reviewing this republished book, EBR's invitation has given me the opportunity to revisit this playful work of scholarship, which as a graduate student at Trinity College Dublin, I read rather too hastily as it did not serve the purpose of my thesis topic.

Oulipo: A Primer of Potential Literature, also published by Dalkey Archive Press, may shed light on Kenner's analysis of stoicism in *Flaubert, Joyce and Beckett*. Oulipo, a group of French thinkers who came from fields as varied as mathematics, letters and the arts, joined together for the first time in September of 1960 to discuss the potential for literature. This group had two goals: "Analysis" which consisted of the revival of "older, even ancient (but not necessarily intentional) experiments in literary form" (1). Flaubert and Joyce provided the group with examples of such an experiment; their literary experiments provide "the potential layers of the novelistic onion" for Oulipo (72). The second goal, "synthesis," involved the furthering of new forms which can be seen in *One Hundred Trillion Poems*, a project that exhausted every possible way in which the poetry of this collection could be combined and read (3-4) - a technique that may recall Beckett's sucking stone episode in *Molloy*. After sitting down to write my review, I wondered whether my critique would be of any value to readers of Beckett. After all, most Beckett scholars know the work of Hugh Kenner. However, it will, I hope, be helpful to a younger generation of scholars who perhaps have never read this "ancient" book from 1962. Many instructors, myself included, unwittingly discourage students from digging up older scholarship when requiring them to show their knowledge of current discussions on a given topic, yet Kenner's study of Flaubert, Joyce, and Beckett is refreshingly time-defying. It both offers a glance into the more experimental scholarship of 1960s France and as such provides an analysis that to this day seems original.¹ Moreover, his style of prose captures the playfulness of the authors he investigates. Kenner is

not a dry journalistic literary critic; instead, he allows the content of his argument to shape the style of his writing.

The first evidence of Kenner's playfulness lies at the heart of the inclusion of Guy Davenport's delightful illustrations. It is often the case in literary or historical studies that illustrations merely supplement the words of the texts; however, in this work the "illustrations are intended to keep the reader from dwelling on the paucity of documentation." Kenner's explanation in the "Author's Note" hints at the central theme of the book - that of characters or narrators who dwell on facts, data, and language - and serves as a warning to the literary critic. Kenner asks that we leave the detective work behind and return to "play."

Kenner begins his "Preface" by defining the "stoic" as "one who considers, with neither panic nor indifference, that the field of possibilities available to him is large perhaps, or small perhaps, but closed" (xiii). While all novelists face the task of filling in the empty page, the stoic novelist is calmly aware that he/she is limited to the twenty-six letters of the alphabet and the rules of grammar. His/her creativity depends on the arrangement of the elements available.

Kenner continues to explain that critics of the early 20th century, such as I.A. Richards, have required readers to disregard their own stoicism. According to Kenner, Richards "found it necessary to labor the point that tone ('the attitude of the speaker to the audience') [as] one of the components of meaning" (xiv). So much of modern writing, Kenner explains, has no voice, nor no attitude. Essential to this argument are the invention of the encyclopaedia in which men were employed to gather facts and arrange them alphabetically and the invention of the Gutenberg press in which men were employed to arrange and set ideas, sentences, and letters. Print technology "does not talk, it compresses" (xv). Modern readers, hence, cannot identify the voice because they simply hear none. Kenner explains that we need, instead, to focus on the interpretive possibilities within a closed set.

The history of print technology ends for Kenner with the novel. He claims that the novel fulfills two requirements: verisimilitude and plausibility. Kenner writes that verisimilitude "means that the book shall abound in words which name objects familiar to the reader, and in sentences describing pieces of behavior or imitating pieces of conversation which the reader finds recognizable" (xvii). Plausibility, Kenner goes on, "means that the progression of events which the work purports to chronicle shall at every point satisfy criteria of reason, since it is the reader's belief that his own actions are reasonable, and he will employ his book-reading time on nothing else" (xvii). The novel must be constructed out of recognizable units and reasonable actions and events. While writers, such as Gustave Flaubert, James Joyce, and Samuel Beckett, have been referred to by students and academics alike as "obscure" and "difficult," Kenner shows us that even these writers' seemingly implausible novels are rooted in the recognizable and conceivable. Concluding the "Preface," Kenner asserts that within a closed field these writers produce a record of an intellectual journey. Their legacy is one of "courting a dead end but discovering how not to die" (xiv).

II.

Chapter One, "Gustave Flaubert: Comedian of the Enlightenment" opens with the problem of trying to locate the Enlightenment. Kenner claims that the Enlightenment lacks chronology, locality, and identity. The only "piece of baggage from those far off days" (1) that we continue to carry with us, according to

Kenner, is a book written and read by no one - The Encyclopaedia. This most important, yet unreadable text, which attempts to organize knowledge, ironically is a work of fragmentation.

Yet, as Kenner points out, it is the encyclopaedic efforts of the Enlightenment that are the butt of Flaubert's comedic novels. Flaubert, especially in *Bouvard et Pécuchet*, exposes the comedy of the attempt to discover truth and systematize this knowledge. To alphabetically arranged knowledge is an absurdity, it perpetuates discontinuity and characterizes the work as scientific. Scientific experiments, as Flaubert reveals with the comic encyclopaedic endeavors carried out by his copying clerks, work to prove the exception as true. Throughout this novel, Flaubert's copying-clerk heroes, Bouvard and Pécuchet, take up idiotic scientific experiments and strive to catalogue their findings. The reader cannot help but laugh when, for example, Bouvard and Pécuchet fail to prove that muscular contraction creates heat, but, as Kenner states, what is more ridiculous is that if the bathwater in which Bouvard is submersed would rise, then their efforts "would not seem imbecilic at all" (24). Indeed, there is "nothing more absurd than the very conception of a fact, an isolated datum of experience, something to find out, isolated from all the other things that there are to be found out" (24). Kenner goes on to show that before 1632, "fact was a thing done, factum, part of a continuum of deed and gesture" (25). As such, the emphasis was not on what was discovered but rather how it was discovered.

Although Flaubert pokes fun at Bouvard and Pécuchet's efforts to catalogue scientific knowledge, he himself indulged in creating his own comic encyclopedia. Yet rather than basing his work on scientific facts, Flaubert created a catalogue of clichés - a dictionary of repeated ideas. His *Dictionnaire des Idées Reçues*, which consumed his life for over three decades, is a handbook for novelists. Kenner tells us that clichés found in Flaubert's handbook can be traced in *Madame Bovary*. Art, as Flaubert wrote to George Sand, "is meant to portray things as they always are, in themselves, in their general nature, disengaged from all ephemeral contingency" (19). Kenner explains that for Flaubert, "Art [tended] toward the general and human behavior [tended] toward the cliché" as such "the supreme artist is the cliché expert [who] cannot do better than to imitate, as closely as he can, the procedures of the hack" (19). In other words, Flaubert's genius does not lie in the myth of originality. The very act of trying to write an original novel is an absurdity because novels are modeled on human behavior which clutches onto clichés.

The opening pages of *Bouvard et Pécuchet* reveal this artistic goal, itself, as farcical. Flaubert's "mad precision of farce" (10) discloses the writer's struggle to create "things as they always are" (19). What we imagine when reading the comic opening of how Bouvard and Pécuchet happened to meet on a park bench, and how they both are copying clerks who have their names written inside their hats, Kenner argues, is "a writer racking his brains for a plausible way to get the story started" (11). Although the writer fails to create a plausible meeting between the two men, Flaubert succeeds to convey the sheer difficulty in writing as well as the comedic pleasure in withholding a naturalistic or realistic encounter between two individuals. If literature is not about "real" emotions and dilemmas, as my high school English teachers tried to convince me, and it is not about escaping the "real" as my fellow students believed, then what is the purpose of literature? Kenner believes it is to draw attention to the author writing. In essence, the technology of the modern novel reflects the writer's struggle to create and consequently reflects his process of creation.

Convincingly, Kenner argues that Flaubert's novels depict the task of writing fiction as "endlessly arranging things" (13). The skilled writer differs from Flaubert's copying clerks in that he will use fiction itself to vanquish fiction; he will arrange, and maneuver, and contrive, to such bland effect that no one will ever afterward be quite sure where contrivance began and serendipity left off. He will use with

cunning every device of the merely facile novelist; and the result will be such a compendium of unreality that it will seem real. (13)

III.

While Flaubert is the “comedian of the Enlightenment,” who instead of offering to enlighten his readers merely reveals the idiotic act of arranging things, James Joyce is the “Comedian of the Inventory.” In Chapter Two, Kenner argues that Joyce, like his fellow modernists, plays with words and sentence order. Although Joyce’s word-play is recognizably English, Joyce’s vocabulary and his word order within a sentence, nevertheless, “fall well outside of basic English” (30). To fully appreciate Joyce’s playful techniques such as placing “the adverbial phrase before the object,” “setting the verb between the subject and phrases in apposition to the subject,” and “placing the adverb where it will exert stress against the other members of the sentence” (31), Kenner asks us to imagine the difficulties of the foreign reader. The foreign reader will find no relief in a dictionary, a grammatical handbook, or in the spoken English of Ireland. Indeed, Joyce’s techniques do not reveal a voice speaking; they reveal a writer writing, arranging words, inventing with the fragments available to him.

Continuing to illustrate Joyce’s uniqueness, Kenner contrasts the Irish writer to Charles Dickens and Joseph Conrad, arguing that both use the convention of the storyteller. Dickens’ novels are “scripts to be brought to life in oral delivery” (35) and Conrad’s are studies of a “spoken narrative discharged into a reflexive silence” (34). While *Ulysses* is Joyce’s *Odyssey*, it lacks all evidence of storytelling. Unlike the narrative of Dickens’ novels which require a storyteller, Conrad’s novels which feature narrators whose experiences cause them to reflect in silence, or Homer’s epic which is “organized in memory and unfolded in time,” Joyce’s novel has no speaker and unfolds on the printed page, a “technological space” (35).

Crucial to Joyce is the reader’s ability to travel through the pages of the printed novel. Unlike Homer’s epic tale which required an audience of listeners, Joyce’s *Ulysses*, with the help of Gutenberg technology, makes it possible for a reader to follow an image or reference throughout the text. Kenner explains that this massive novel demands that its reader jump back as he/she reads the phrase “Potato preservative against plague and pestilence, pray for us” on page 488 and then recalls having read earlier on pages 372 and 56 “Poor mamma’s panacea” (32).

Kenner argues that Joyce is indebted to Jonathan Swift. Swift’s *A Tale of a Tub*, written roughly 200 years before *Finnegans Wake*, is “a parody of the book as a book” (37). *A Tale of a Tub* reveals Swift’s “fascinated disquiet” (39) of new print technology. Kenner’s analysis cleverly draws a connection between *Finnegans Wake* and Swift’s responses to Gutenberg technology as changing the writer’s style and intent. For Swift the purpose of writing was to “gain the confidence and understanding of another” (38); however, Swift reveals that with print technology verbal intercourse between individuals is disrupted.

Swift recognized that the voice of the storyteller is eliminated through Introductions, Prefaces, Apologies and Dedications, Headings, Subheadings, Tables, Footnotes, Indices, and Pictures (40) which are all made possible by Gutenberg technology. Focusing on Joyce’s devotion to the footnote in *Finnegans Wake* and paralleling it to Swift’s “Digressions” in *A Tale of a Tub*, Kenner explains that this “device for organizing units of discourse discontinuously in space rather than serially in time” (41) is made possible by the technological space of the page. It is here that Kenner’s playfulness reaches its full

force. Throughout his discussion of the footnote, Kenner plants a series of footnotes to comically demonstrate that the footnote, like the other devices noted above, “defeat all efforts of the speaking voice” (39). Imbedded in his definition of the footnote, for example, is a footnote that reads, “In the middle of the previous paragraph. Please pay attention” (41), which pulls us back to the previous paragraph where we read

... the man who composes a footnote, and sends it to the printer along with his text, has discovered among the devices of printed language something analogous with counterpoint: a way of speaking in two voices at once, or of ballasting or modifying or even bombarding with exceptions⁴ his own discourse without interrupting it. (40)

Kenner is intentionally playing games with us - directing us to a passage that has another footnote, and this footnote too is a joke on literary scholars. It reads: “Some footnotes of course seem totally unrelated to the point in the text at which they are appended. They suggest an art form like the refrains in Yeats’ late poems” (40). It is, in fact, Kenner’s footnotes that, on the one hand, are unrelated to the point. “Please pay attention” tells us nothing about the passage. On the other hand, his seemingly irrelevant footnotes reveal the comedy of organizing information on the printed page.

The scholarly footnote, while breaking into the narrative voice, helps the reader to trace knowledge. Joyce, too, was aware of this use of the footnote. Kenner explains that much of *Ulysses* is about tracing facts and knowledge. Joyce, he tells us, was meticulous about including real factual data into *Ulysses*. The street names and businesses are accurately mapped out, one discovers when cross-referencing *Ulysses* with the 1904 Thom’s Dublin Directory.

Joyce’s enterprise, in effect, parallels the book with the city. Cities include zones, limits, and borders, like books which are limited by their geographic plane. Every list, every form of discourse has a limited set of possibilities (54). Joyce’s checklists, be it of street names, rivers, the epiphany, or styles of writing, are mechanically exhaustive inventories which are “comic precisely because [they are] exhaustive” (55). Whereas the encyclopaedic act contributed to Flaubert’s disapproval of humanity, it gave Joyce a way to re-imagine the city he fled.

It is tempting to read Joyce as an exile who scorned and ridiculed Dublin, yet Kenner reminds us that Joyce attempted to create a “finite list of words” (53) to show his Dublin as a place “he loved for its variety and distrusted for its poverty of resource” (66). The richness of his inventory reveals the richness of the city he left behind; however, an inventory is always made up of the already present. Joyce is not the heroic Irish inventor creating his own words and his own epic journey. His inventory is rooted in the Irish soil and its gutters. Dublin is, as Kenner puts it, “a kind of prison which [Joyce] neither escaped nor not escaped” (64).

IV.

Kenner does two things in the final chapter. He sums up his arguments about Flaubert and Joyce, and examines Beckett’s comedic impasse. Perhaps because so much of the third chapter, “Samuel Beckett: the Comedian of the Impasse,” is spent comparing Beckett to Flaubert and Joyce in a move to conclude, this is Kenner’s weakest chapter. Despite this pitfall, Kenner’s observations remain refreshingly astute and imaginative.

Kenner's opening statement "Let us begin by assuming Samuel Beckett's existence" (67) may at first seem ridiculous, yet the question of existence is at the very heart of Beckett's work. In a Foucaultian move, Kenner convincingly argues:

Nothing confronts our senses but a set of printed words, assembled by we cannot say whom with we cannot tell what authority; and not only is the work of uncertain credit, but it can also entail us in whatever doubts are felt, or allegedly felt, by the man who is writing, or says he is. (67)

Kenner's claim that one way in order to prove Beckett's existence would be to have manuscripts with his name of them is a rare moment that dates this study. Beckett is undoubtedly the author of these works, and his manuscripts, still unavailable at the time Kenner was writing his book, are now open to the public at the Beckett International Foundation housed at the University of Reading in England. Kenner's point, however, is that writing is a solitary act, and because no one sees the author writing, the author resembles Godot who never appears on stage.

Aware of the solitary nature of writing, Beckett repeatedly throws into doubt the act of bearing witness and the reliability of witnesses. Beckett, as Kenner posits, does not provide the readers with painstaking explanations as to how the narrator has gained the information he is reporting. Rather, Beckett's works continually draw attention to the fact that all is made up and that the author, too, is a creation. In *Molloy*, Moran concludes with "Then I went back into the house and wrote, It is midnight. The rain is beating on the windows. It was not midnight. It was not raining" (69). Kenner likens Moran's act to the Cretan liar who says that "all Cretans are liars" (69). Indeed, Beckett plays with the declarative statement rather than the inventory of words as his predecessor Joyce had done. Moran's cyclical declarative statements point to the act of writing as creating lies. The novelist, like the Cretan liar, throws his texts into question.

Kenner argues that "Beckett's first strategy is a strategy of survival" (75). To support this observation Kenner examines Beckett's "Three Dialogues," conversations between Samuel Beckett and the French painter Georges Duthuit which Beckett recorded into print. Beckettians today question whether these dialogues ever took place. The witness to the dialogues is nowhere to be found. Regardless, these conversations establish, according to Kenner, writing as "the perfect not-doing of what cannot be done" (76). While the gathering factual material transformed Joyce's fiction into fact (78), for Beckett "the detached, encyclopaedic style more and more evidently rehearses not facts but possibilities, not evidences but speculations" (81). The detail given to Watt's strange way of walking, for example, is not recorded by an average observer, but rather is a record of "sober curiosity, scientific observation, and minute recording" (80); the recording of Watt's walking opens possibilities within a closed system. Kenner returns to Swift, this time to draw parallels between *Gulliver's Travels* and Beckett's own scientific observations. He shows:

though Beckett more than two centuries after Swift strips down to a bare minimum the inventory of things, he observes with scrupulous care the empiricist definition of a work of fiction, that it is made up of a set of phenomena along with rules for dealing with them. These rules are derived from the mental processes of an observer who is part of the fiction (91).

This and the narrator's ability to tell us everything but that which we count on, as apparent when Moran is unable to explain how he managed to kill a man despite his ability to tell us about the minute details of the mundane is, Kenner argues, how Beckett exploits incompetence.

Kenner explains that in the early novels such as *Murphy* Beckett still worked with an identifiable narrative structure. In his later works, Beckett left narrative conventions and grammar behind. Punctuation in *How it is* has virtually disappeared. Beckett's world moves towards lessness, and writing seems to be more than just an act of incompetence. The works disintegrate before our eyes. What is surprising is that Kenner did not incorporate Beckett's 1956 interview with Israel Shenker in which Beckett draws on Joyce to define his own writing. He told Shenker that Joyce was "tending towards omniscience and omnipotence as an artist. I am working with impotence, ignorance" (Acheson, 1997, 6). Kenner's decision to exclude this very crucial interview, however, may lie in his move to step away from author intentionality.

Beckett's narrators record incompetence in order to end. Despite the reduction of language to mere phrases that lack punctuation or to singular images on stage, Beckett does not reach a dead-end. His "simple objects proliferate" (87). Out of the mud in *How it is* a story, even though it is a tale of trying to narrate a tale, is born. "Indeed Beckett has been the first writer," according to Kenner, "to exploit directly the most general truth about the operations of a Stoic Comedian, that he selects elements from a closed set, and then arranges them inside a closed field" (92,94). Kenner explains that a "field" in Number Theory "contains a collection of elements, and a system for dealing with those elements" (96). In Beckett, each of his immobile characters "fondles the elements of a closed field, or scrutinizes the laws for dealing with them" (98). In *Happy Days*, Winnie, stuck in a mound up to her waist in the first act and then up to her neck in the second, is reduced to contemplating and arranging fragments of text she has memorized. She may be stuck repeating the same lines each day, but the arrangement of those wonderful lines are hers.

Concluding his journey, Kenner writes that the process has been one of "steady interiorization" (102). We have moved from the encyclopaedic investigations of Flaubert, to the inventory of facts and data of Joyce, and finally to Beckett who brings us to the near dissolution of the encyclopaedia. What Flaubert, Joyce, and Beckett ultimately reveal is that literature can encounter one crisis after another "without losing the possibility of continuing an orderly development, and doing something utterly unforeseen tomorrow" (107).

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