©1988 The Institute of Mind and Behavior, Inc.
The Journal of Mind and Behavior
Spring 1988, Volume 9, Number 2
Pages 207–210
ISSN 0271–0137

The Mechanic Muse. Hugh Kenner. New York: Oxford University Press, 1987, 131 pages, $13.95 hard.

Reviewed by Steven E. Connelly, Indian State University

Hugh Kenner's *The Mechanic Muse* explores the "parallel technologies" that literature evolved in response to "what Richard Cork has called The Second Machine Age: the age, say, 1880 to 1930." The book concentrates upon four authors—T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, James Joyce, and Samuel Beckett—but it ranges far and wide in only 131 pages of text, from Aristotle to Tom Wicker, from John Wilkins' frenzied calculations to justify Scripture's account of Noah's ark to George Boole's progeny: ever-proliferating computer languages.

Oddly, one of the earliest reviews of this book, in the prestigious pages of the *New York Times*, made the wonderfully appropriate but woefully inaccurate observation that the book's chapters "have only the most tangential relationship to one another" and that "its individual sections remain so fragmented and fragmentary in conception that the overall product hardly qualifies as a series of essays, much less a unified book." The charge carries an apt irony, because one of the most consistent charges made against the Modernists, a charge that Kenner has shown was not merely mistaken but antithetical to the truth, was that their work was disjointed, fragmentary, sorely lacking in unity.

In fact, accusations to the contrary, *The Mechanic Muse* is highly unified indeed, and in much the same manner that *Ulysses*, *The Wasteland*, or Pound's *Cantos* are unified—by a vast interlinked, if submerged, machinery that is not surficially apparent. Kenner repeatedly demonstrates that the works of the four authors he examines mirrored the new machines: very often a complex of levers and gears invisible to the observer determined the final product. Who, Kenner asks, thinks of Edison when flipping a light switch? And who considers the complex chain of events, from the local power station to a home's wiring system, that leads to instantaneous light? Reviewers who think that Kenner's explanation of the occasional appearance of Etaoin Shrdlu in newspapers is merely an "interesting observation" that doesn't "add up to anything larger" have missed the point. Just as Etaoin Shrdlu was determined by the construction of the linotype machine and the history converging in that invention (e.g., the small arms technology of the Civil War, as evidenced in the fact that "the first typewriter with a shift-key bore a rifle-maker's name, Remington"), so too is *Ulysses*' form and style determined by mass transit and, above all, by the technology of print.

Kenner makes a number of remarkable inductive leaps for readers (and this includes the majority of all readers) who lack his vast knowledge and his Sherlock Holmesian ability to link the smallest details. He not only demonstrates an inarguable, if unspoken, covenant between the modernist writers and technology, he shows that the forces

---

Requests for reprints should be sent to Steven E. Connelly, Ph.D., Department of English, Indiana State University, Terre Haute, Indiana 47809.

generating technological change engender parallel changes in art and language. Pound's aesthetic is declared one "a tool-and-die maker could underwrite." Kenner demonstrates that Pound's fascination with machinery, and the concentration of energy, doubtless contributed to "energy, efficiency, concentration, accuracy, and impersonality," the foundation of the Vorticist manifesto. Just as energy could be concentrated at the point a coin press struck a blank, it could be concentrated in an energy saving "machine" such as the *Oxford English Dictionary*. Using such labor saving and energy concentrating "machines" as model and resource, Pound the poet could "disclose glimpses of a continuous imaginative current running through the entire story of mankind": weaving "chains of continuity" among the San Ku, "the room in Poitiers where one can stand/casting no shadow," Erigena, and Kuthera *deina*. Similarly, of course, Joyce and Eliot linked various mythologies. Thus Leopold Bloom recalled Odysseus, Parnell, and a host of others, and thus the Rhine-daughters/Thames-daughters in Eliot.

Beckett, much like Pound, reacted to the concentration of energy, efficiency, accuracy, and impersonality but came up with something quite different. Kenner shows that Beckett's prose (the example he gives is from *Watt*) has the characteristics of a computer language. Beckett's background was mathematics, and his sentences so approach mathematical simplicity that Kenner, in a tour de force of what might be labeled modernist literary criticism, maps a passage of *Watt* "in an approximation to the Pascal language of programming."

Kenner, creating his own chain of continuity á la Pound, demonstrates how Beckett is a direct descendant of John Wilkins, who attempted to create a language of mathematical plainness and thus "order and tidy what previously had been random human behavior." Wilkins, Roget, and Bishop Sprat characterize a recurring impulse among those of scientific bent to remedy the ambiguity and "extravagance" of language, to regain the "primitive Purity and Shortness" that must have been the language of Eden.

Ultimately, *The Mechanic Muse* is unified by this attention to language, and Kenner convincingly persuades that the argument for less ambiguous and less connotative language is founded on a false premise: "The belief that there were plain words sponsored the faith, three centuries ago, that science might unite mankind." Clearly, though, scientists themselves not only have difficulty communicating with "word-men," but quite often the language of one branch of science is so specialized that the practitioner of another branch of science has difficulty understanding his brethren's journal articles. Indeed, Kenner declares that the fact that "there are no plain speakers either, no plain readers, only groups of us more or less skilled in a greater or lesser number of overlapping languages" is not "something that has gone wrong with our culture." Rather "it is only the people we call savages who have a simple, a purposive, a unified culture: whose poets are 'technicians of the sacred.'"

The Mechanic Muse is surely a book of literary criticism. But it never examines literature in a vacuum, somehow separate from the culture that produces it. Prose, Kenner points out, "is high artifice." Joyce realized this; he realized that "the real language of men is chameleonlike; words refuse to mean what they ought to, and a culture which does not realize this is a culture in decay." Thus Joyce wrote with an intensity—and an ambiguity—that is often associated with poetry. One of the preeminent lessons learned and taught by the four modernists in this book is that the artifice of language is very much like the artifice of technology. The historical events, the imaginative leaps, that produced Etaoin Shrdlu spawned *Ulysses*, offspring of print technology and language. The modernists were sensitive to the forces at work around them. Thus Eliot is the poet of the telephone and the subway. Beckett and Pound merge thought altered by technology with the perpetuity of human thought—

continuity and discontinuity in a Heglian dialectic.

A great deal of literary criticism—especially with writers such as Eliot, Joyce, and Pound—concentrates upon the literary influences which shaped these writers: study Joyce's library and you'll comprehend Joyce, reconstruct Eliot's reading list and grasp the poet's system, repeat Pound's esoteric studies and fathom Pound. Too often criticism essentially ignores the world that these writers observed, the world in which they lived, not the pages they read. Hugh Kenner does readers a great service in bringing Eliot, Joyce, Pound, and Beckett back to earth; they are products of their times (as well as the times that preceded them, of course), but unlike the general population, the modernists were aware of how technology "tended to engulf people gradually, coercing behavior they were not aware of," and altering their world.

Hugh Kenner's perceptive observations serve to remind us that these writers observed perceptively. They were not merely the products of bookish study, though bookish study was certainly essential to the four of them. The modernists, Kenner notes, modified earlier writing, "but like all live writing" they ingested what was around them. He does a masterful job of reminding the reader what was around them—especially in the world of technology.