

Mazes. Hugh Kenner. Berkeley, California: North Point Press, 1989, 336 pages, \$22.95.

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"Our posterity will know us in ways we do not," writes Hugh Kenner. If our posterity is wise and we are lucky, it will know us through Hugh Kenner, for *Mazes* demonstrates how very thoroughly, in an age of fragmentation and narrowing specialties, Hugh Kenner knows the twentieth century. Students of literature know Kenner as the foremost authority on the Modernists, an accurate but narrow perception, for Kenner is probably the best general literary critic at work today, and yet he is and has long been much more than a literary critic: no one interested in the mind of the twentieth century can ignore him. A collection of fifty book reviews, essays, radio pieces, and obituaries—the longest a mere eleven pages—*Mazes* confirms the wide range of Kenner's expertise.

Consider the second essay in *Mazes*, "Fractals," a small masterpiece of the Kenner method which appeared originally in *Art and Antiques*. In it he connects Benoit Mandelbrot's vision of "the superposition of eddies of many diverse sizes" to Hokusai's *Great Wave* and Leonardo's *Deluge*: the mirrored visions of artists and scientist. From painting he moves easily to make the connection to poetry: "The twig he reminds us has the shape of a limb; the limb of a tree. (And the tree? Of the human circulatory system. Nature rhymes as resourcefully as Pope.)" And explaining Mandelbrot's concept, scaling, "his adjective for objects, natural or man-made, in which subsystems of detail echo larger systems ad infinitum," Kenner points out how Van Gogh made "scaling pictures; come close and find detail, clear down to the brush stroke, whose dynamics are like the whole," while Picasso tended to be "scale-bound," a fact which explains why the famous Chicago Picasso sculpture "looks strained and empty." And, to poetry again, Pound's *Cantos* are "made of episodes made of details made of word constellations, the unique identity patent in the closest close-up."

Disciplines intertwine in ways that hide-bound authorities never admit. Kenner shows again and again that most boundaries are artificial, temporary impositions indicating not the neat categories into which thought can be classified, but rather indications that fluid imagination has set up in some cognitive equivalent of cement. Kenner implies that Mandelbrot has joined mathematics and art: his fractal geometry, in the hands of brilliant computer programmers, made possible the landscapes of space, "pictures" of planets and planet surfaces created by Mandelbrot's math. "The art is what persuades. Thanks to IBM, you can turn through his pages comprehending not an x nor y and perceive a universe reclaimed for mind." When we marvel at such wonders as Voyager's pictures of Saturn and the rings, it is Mandelbrot's math—made art—which awes us. And Mandelbrot's mathematical vision of the universe is very like Van Gogh's artistic vision—or Leonardo's, Hokusai's, Pope's, Pound's, and Nature's.

Beyond the theory is the human being; Kenner invariably provides the reader with humanizing facts. Of Mandelbrot he notes "War made his education so irregular he still

isn't sure of the order of the alphabet, an uncertainty shared, oddly, with Picasso." In "Light, Our One Absolute," he observes that Einstein "took years to gather his wits. At nine he did not even speak with fluency." This developmental delay may have contributed to his great breakthroughs: "Normal people, he reflected later, never think about space and time because as children they found such mysteries insoluble. 'But my intellectual development was retarded, so I began to wonder about space and time only when I had grown up. Naturally I could go deeper into the problem than a child with normal abilities.'"

One wonders if Kenner whimsy, an editor's brilliant insight, or "scaling" made "Light, Our One Absolute" first in this collection of essays. It is the ideal beginning, reprising in its placement Kenner's observations on Einstein, Light, and Genesis, where God's first creation was light. And after light comes the creation of the cosmos: Kenner's second essay, detailing the cosmos generated from Mandelbrot's math. Form, in book after book of Kenner's, mirrors content. If any writer can manage the trick, even in a collection of occasional pieces, it is Kenner.

He manages, after all, in a few paragraphs to explain and discount the distended Post-Structuralist phenomenon. Readers who feel guilty because they instinctively recoil from Barthes and Derrida will find both enlightenment and comfort in the review of Guy Davenport's *A Geographer of the Imagination*. Kenner writes: "Young cites Roland Barthes: 'Reading is a form of work.' Certainly, reading Post-Structuralist prose is a form of work, like jogging with a nail in your shoe." And "... I'm tempted by Paul de Man's whimsy that makes Archie Bunker an arch debunker (of the Greek *arche* or 'origin'), whose impatient 'What's the difference?' doesn't ask for a difference but says, 'I don't give a damn what the difference is.' Thus 'the literal meaning asks for the concept (difference) whose existence is denied by the figurative meaning,' and Archie is Deconstructionist *malgré lui*, as you'll grant if you know what a pother Jacques Derrida, the arch-Deconstructionist, makes with 'difference' and his own coinage, 'différance.'"

This is vintage Kenner: consistently serious, never solemn, ranging from Greek etymology, through an icon of popular culture—Archie Bunker—to an icon of academe, Jacques Derrida, to make a number of telling points. One point is that if recent theorists are correct and that as Kenner says in his Davenport review "literature is not the text, does not contain its meanings, is merely what happens in some mind in the presence of text," then "the choice of another mind to spend time with is crucial to your well being." Clearly, Kenner believes one's well being is safer reading Guy Davenport than reading the Deconstructionists.

"How to write readable Post-Structuralist critical prose is a problem so far unsolved," observes Kenner. Davenport, by contrast, writes appealing, readable prose and performs a venerable and noble critical task—one that Post-Structuralists, obsessed with their minds wrestling with other minds too often ignore—conveying essential information. Kenner quotes Davenport *in re* Whitman: "Things vivid to him and his readers, such as transcendentalism, the philosophy of Fourier and Owen, the discovery of dinosaurs in the west by Cope and Marsh, phrenology, photography, telegraphy, railroads, have fused into a blur." This, Kenner notes, has rendered "a great deal of his poetry meaningless. For this state of things the only remedy is information."

Perhaps Kenner's greatest virtue is that he provides this remedy, essential information, to his readers, and he has an uncanny talent for making meaningful connections. Kenner's account of the life of the mind reminds repeatedly that breakthroughs in literature, art, and science are responses to the "real world." Often he provides the information essential to a reader linking the mind and the real world. "Everything innovative in our century was a response to something outside of literature," he notes, a fact that critics and professors of literature too often forget. It is a lesson, not just for literature, but for all disciplines. "The

Dead-Letter Office," for example, is a brilliant account of the "death struggle" of twentieth century art with the museum, and how that struggle came about. Kenner gives the reader the information which makes the struggle apparent and intelligible. Suddenly those seemingly eccentric artists who create temporary art by pouring colored dyes into streams, or who construct enormous earthwork sculptures are seen within a tradition, part of a continuing struggle between artist and museum: "Having goaded the museum mind into a frenzy of blind acquisitiveness, the artist's new ploy is to taunt it with the non-acquirable." Cristo, of course, leaps to mind. Drape the landscape and create sculptures too huge to be contained within walls. The reader is treated, in the course of the argument, to a dialogue between Duchamp's inverted urinal and the museum curator which, in spite of its surface humor, proves to be a dialogue as convincing as any of Plato's. The museum mind set is, of course, extended to other disciplines. T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* is a product of the same battle.

Mazes abounds with memorable utterance, often bordering on epigram. Consider the lightning analysis of the American electorate when Kenner writes that Nixon's words "speak to and for the thwarted Tamburlaine that lurks in the psyche of urban America." Or the perceptive and intriguing declaration as he evaluates Winslow Homer who, twinned with Mark Twain, defined nineteenth century America: "The nineteenth century lasted about seventy-five years." Insightful affirmation that taunts as it pleases: "Yes, we're governed by caricatures because we perceive by them." Here is an implied essay in a sentence, speaking volumes on the popular imagination, classic literature, and religion: "King Kong (1933) was the last of many remakes in many media of *Paradise Lost* (1667)." He captures the unexpressed misgivings apt to be provoked by a new Elvis/Belushi/Sinatra/Eliot/Joyce tome: "Biography, it's to be feared, is not a science but a modest sub-genre of fiction." And relish the astute response to language purists: "In the origins of every language, we may discern a horribly mangled way of speaking some previous one." Kenner delights as he instructs; again and again the reader is entertained by a master epigrammatist, and invariably the epigram points the way to a hard edge of truth.

To summarize *Mazes* in a few pages, or by quoting from a few essays is next to impossible. Kenner's strength is that he covers so much ground, and in so doing maps it for us concisely and reliably [*five-star, worth seeing, here be monsters, come prepared*]. Learn how Irish elections, with their continual redistribution of second and third and fourth and etc. place votes work, gain insight into increasingly faulty proof reading, gain rare insight into canon formation, the world of reference books, the history and components of How-to, "the folklore of kinetic man," and insights into a host of great minds: Marshall McLuhan, Georgia O'Keefe, Buster Keaton, George Oppen, Louis Zukofsky, Ezra Pound, James Joyce, Hugh Kenner. Certainly *Mazes* is an apt title. It is taken from an essay on mazes he was commissioned to do for *Discover*: an essay whose origin and subject both illustrate the intersections of causation at the heart of this book.

Kenner begins the Preface to *Mazes* "One morning back in 1969 I ended a long, long book called *The Pound Era* by typing 'Thought is a labyrinth,' a sentence I lifted from a speculation of Guy Davenport's on how the death of William Carlos Williams might have been linked to the fate of the sick elm he'd said he'd not outlive. If life abounds more in coincidence than in causation, we can't always be sure of telling them apart, and coincidence is an economy that unclutters mental life." *Post Hoc Ergo Propter Hoc* is unquestionably a fact of life as often as it is an error in logic, and Kenner is adept not only at pointing out the difference between the two but also at pointing out how often there is no difference.

The mazes through which Kenner expertly guides the fortunate reader are filled with "intersections of causation" that fashion not only individual works of art and theories of science, but the mind of the culture these works underlie. Hugh Kenner — demonstrably the best guide through the mind of western man in the twentieth century — shows how we

have made the journey through a myriad of mazes, but more fundamentally, he demonstrates how utterly fascinating the trip has been.