

BOOK REVIEWS

A Colder Eye: The Modern Irish Writers. Hugh Kenner. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1983, 301 pages, \$16.95 hard.

Reviewed by Steven E. Connelly, Indiana State University

Scholars invariably cloak their prose in High Seriousness, for theirs has been a tradition of failing to distinguish between solemnity and import. Their discipline's "literature" is revered, no laughing matter. Hugh Kenner's *A Colder Eye: The Modern Irish Writers* boldly dispenses with the indispensable, the straight face, and thus he extends to criticism the literary concept of "appropriate form." Kenner's is a serious and important study, but he abjures scholarship's ritual gravity. W.B. Yeats wrote that scholars "cough in ink," an observation readily confirmed by sampling the major journals of any academic discipline, wherein humankind's grand passions are annotated in tones grave and solemn. It should not be surprising, then, that early reviewers of Kenner's book have implied that he dares too much. The "Celtic" manner he has adopted for *A Colder Eye*, characterized by a pleasant and general whimsy matching his subject matter, has come under attack as "stage Irish," and shades of the True Faith, readers of the *New York Times* were told they "must work hard to dig nuggets of true criticism out of a bog of unrelated fact."

In fact, Kenner's crime is heresy: he has abandoned the pretense that such a thing as "true criticism!" exists. Readers who have learned to trust Kenner—in much the same way readers have learned to trust James Joyce—know there are no unrelated facts in his books. Relationships may be complex and implied, but they are there. In adopting a critical form appropriate to his subject, Kenner has produced a scholarly masterpiece, a book at once learned and accessible, informative and readable, serious and entertaining. *A Colder Eye* concentrates upon the giants of the Irish Literary Revival: Synge, Yeats, Joyce, and O'Casey—with briefer attention to Kavanaugh, Beckett, O'Brien, and Clarke. These writers have received an abundance of critical attention, for the Irish Literary Revival has generated a vast, though generally unsatisfactory, body of criticism. The criticism has paled beside the literature it has sought to explicate.

For one thing, it is a rare critic who attempts to explain how an island with roughly the population of Indiana "commenced to seize control" of English literature "about 1890." Explanations for this astonishing phenomenon have, up to now, been feeble. Kenner, however, contributes much to making an explanation possible. He brings a vast knowledge, garnered from virtually all disciplines, to bear on his subject: he

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explores causes in combination—from language, politics, religion, history, and legend to the personalities of the writers themselves. Kenner's view is so sweeping, he moves from long shot to close up so effortlessly, that logic-choppers are duty bound to strike a pose of proper gravity and make knee-jerk denunciations of Kenner's eclectic method. Yet the subject demands a catholic approach and pleads for the prose equivalent of a zoom lens—which Kenner provides.

The subject also invites the sense of humor Kenner brings to it—an appreciation of the whimsical and absurd, a slightly skewed angle of vision, a sensibility comfortable with the shifting boundary at which comedy and tragedy, fact and fancy, fade into one another. Consider that few novels have inspired more solemn commentary than Joyce's *Ulysses*. Yet it is one of the world's funniest books—serious, yes, but funny. Synge, O'Casey, Behan: comedic geniuses, to be sure, but tragedians at heart. The ambivalence at the heart of things is one of W.B. Yeats's great themes, and it is central to Irish literature, but the Irish have the knack of making even ambivalence assume a rigorous outline. Kenner's book recognizes and explores this ambivalence, and Kenner's exploration is more satisfactory than that of his fellow critics because, for the most part, he eschews "true criticism"—an inflexible critical stance—and instead matches his tone with that of the material he explicates. It is a refreshing and successful approach, though it is doubtless doomed to displease the coughers-in-ink who generally fail to make sense of Irish literature because they have qualms about accepting two opposing viewpoints simultaneously.

Kenner has no such qualms; this makes him an ideal critic of Irish literature. He immediately lays a strong foundation in *A Colder Eye* and frames it up quickly. He begins with the appropriately entitled chapter, "Warning," in which he defines the Irish Fact and points out its implications for Irish literature. The Irish Fact is "anything they will tell you in Ireland, where you get told a great deal and had best assume a demeanor of wary appreciation." He then proceeds to exhibit a series of literature-related Irish Facts. Among them: James Joyce's baptism, as quoted in the standard biography by Richard Ellmann, in the Church of St. Joseph, Terenure; Oliver St. John Gogarty's oft-repeated anecdote, in which the young Joyce tells the elder Yeats, "You are too old for me to help"; Brian O'Nolan's parcel of put-on misinformation *Time* magazine gratefully printed in their 1943 article on him. These are choice Irish Facts: non-facts which, once printed, assumed the authority of print and became fact—until it was pointed out that Joyce could hardly have been baptized in the Church of St. Joseph in 1882, since it was not built until 1904; that Joyce was in Trieste, a thousand miles from Dublin, when he was supposed to have delivered his famous line to Yeats; that Flann O'Brien (Brian O'Nolan) "made misinformation an art form."

The Irish Fact, frequently offered in the guise of personal memory, is often "an inextricable mixture of reminiscence and performance." Indeed, part of the spectacular success of modern Irish writers may be the early recognition of the Irish of the strange relationship between what we call fiction and what we designate reality; *vide* the many people who have complained of incidents in *Ulysses*, "That's not the way it happened at all." Irish literature has a long history of mocking or taking advantage of the air of authority print lends words: witness Swift's "A Modest Proposal" and his "Gulliver." In print, a "fact" often becomes the basis for later facts; indeed, "accuracy" scholarship too often means no more than checking to make certain one has quoted one's sources correctly. But Ireland still holds out against the inflexibility and the authority of print; oral literature dominates, in spite of print's inroads. As Kenner points out, it is more difficult to check a spoken narrative for "accuracy;" three listeners, relying upon memory, will retain three slightly different versions of the

same narrative. The Irish Fact is central to Irish literature; it is at one and the same time a natural product of a culture remaining predominantly oral and a characteristic of people still rebelling against the authority of print.

From the Irish Fact, Kenner proceeds directly to International Modernism: masterpieces of literature which "define a tradition of their own, accessible to whoever will master the English necessary to read them; or if skill with English be native, the detachment. What you must be detached from is the set of expectations you acquire in absorbing a national literature." A handful of scholars may know modern Irish literature better than Kenner, and more may claim to know that nebulous entity, *Eire*, better than Kenner, but it is doubtful that any critic understands the complex causes, traditions, and events underlying modernism any better than he. His brief discussion of International Modernism is in itself a small masterpiece of criticism. It is also central to an understanding of the Irish Literary Revival, for English as spoken and written by the Irish became one of the three primary literary dialects of the English language: American and British being the other two.

In his first fifteen pages, Kenner manages to discuss the peculiar history of Ireland, the Irish attitude toward spoken and written English, Nationalism, International Modernism, idiom, syntax, the intricate sociologies of Northern Ireland, and the unusual psychology of the Irish writer, acquired through his singular national inheritance. Watching Kenner move the world is simply a matter of granting him the spot he has chosen to stand upon, and in these first fifteen pages, he chooses his locality.

Kenner never works from the artificial position of literature isolated from the rest of the world. Above all, he never lets his readers forget that literature does not exist in a vacuum, that it is a product of people and societies. The Kenner fact is like the Irish Fact in its appeal to the imagination and its dramatic "rightness," but differs in that even when it is the point of departure for marvellous speculation, it is rooted in reality. Thus J.M. Synge's method of composition was ideally suited to, and perhaps influenced by, his No. 5 Blickensderfer typewriter—a machine suited to picking out a sentence letter by letter. So, too, his speculation that *Ulysses* may have been influenced by Joyce's Berlitz teaching experience; *Ulysses* is to the novel what Berlitz is to the classroom: self-contained teaching. It is a novel one learns to read by reading it.

Kenner strolls from the reality of the Blickensderfer and the Berlitz classroom through the likely effects of Fenollosa and Noh Plays upon W.B. Yeats to the influence of tales told to Lady Gregory in childhood by her Irish maid; from the small and solid fact, though, he ranges to such vast phenomena as the lore and logic of language, language's political and philosophical implications, and the literary reaction when English is catalyzed by Irish Gaelic (*Gaedhealg*). His discussion of Gaelic spelling is at once entertaining and informative. The etymology of Hamlet, for example ("an improbable name as most will agree for any Dane, let alone a Prince of Denmark"), as Olaf by way of its Irish spelling, *Amhlaibh*, is a gem. And it is comforting to learn that Irish spelling and pronunciation gave W.B. Yeats as much trouble as they have given his American readers.

Kenner's books are always an education, and this one is no exception. Not only does he have a keen mind, but he has a heart of oak—he is a daring scholar, unafraid to risk being wrong, if taking a risk promises a new insight. Kenner pursues his insights relentlessly, tracking each to its lair. Clearly, Kenner is a voracious reader; not only has he read "the literature," but he has read widely outside it. He refers, for example to Nancy Scheper-Hughes's *Saints, Scholars, and Schizophrenics: Mental Illness in Rural Ireland*, Liam Byrne's *History of Aviation in Ireland*, and a number of national histories. And though Kenner has the ability to breathe new life into material he uses from the books and articles of other scholars, his sources are by no means limited to library

materials. *A Colder Eye* is loaded with anecdotes he has collected from conversations and letters—drawing upon scholar and layperson alike—from any direction which seemed to promise a fresh insight into Irish literature.

From the dustcover, with its wonderful Edward Sorel likenesses of the principals of the Irish Renaissance, to the index with its witty classification of most who are mentioned in the book (a sample: "AE, *sage*"; "Ardilaun, Lord, *cautious philanthropist*"; "de Valera, Eamon, *mathematician*"; "Hamlet, *cunctator*"; "Hopkins, Gerard Manley, *Logodaedalist*"; "Wagner, Richard, *downdrawer*"), this work is a joy—very much in the tradition of the work it explores.

Certainly Kenner must, in the best Irish tradition, make a few eccentric and wrongheaded statements, as when he declares that one digs down in England and finds history but in Ireland only limestone or bogs. This, of course, ignores the rich historical treasures the bogs have yielded, and it ignores, too, recent scholarship which indicates that Irish megalithic tombs may predate their supposed prototypes in Europe. Kenner, oddly enough given his thesis, would seem to refer to a particular variety of history: *written history*, and perhaps more specifically, the recorded history of the conqueror. Though he is nearly always a wonder, Kenner can disappoint. His chapter on Austin Clarke, for example, is little more than a rehash of old stuff (good, but old) from Thomas Kinsella—a shame since an artist as perplexing as Clarke should be an ideal subject for Kenner's perceptive imagination.

Finally, though, Kenner's book could serve as a model for all scholars. First, it presents its subject in the context of mankind's many endeavors: literature is seen in relation to medicine, sociology, psychology, history, folklore, linguistics, technology, any pertinent discipline. Second, it is accessible and entertaining, thus capable of being understood and appreciated by much more than a limited circle of scholars and specialists. Third, it is an interesting experiment with the concept of "appropriate form," bringing to literary criticism a tool especially effective in dealing with "that most distressful country," Ireland, which has consistently defied solemn analysis. Kenner may well have demonstrated an effective and productive approach to understanding Irish literature.

The First International Conference on Organizational Symbolism and Corporate Culture

The Standing Conference on Organizational Symbolism (SCOS) is organizing a major European Conference on Organizational Symbolism and Corporate Culture in **Lund, Sweden, June 26-30, 1984**. The organizers would welcome theoretical, methodological and substantive papers concerned with rituals, organizational myths and sagas, corporate culture and sub-cultures or other themes which treat organizations as cultural and symbolic entities. The emphasis is very much upon bold thinking, a creative opening-up of the field of enquiry and a departure from the dominant rational-technical traditions. In view of this, 'alternative' presentations (video, role-playing, etc.) will be considered in addition to the more traditional conference papers. Substantial abstracts or outlines should be sent to:

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