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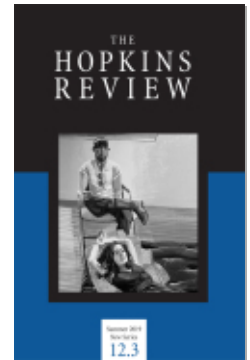
## The Kenner-Davenport Era

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## Denis Donoghue

### THE KENNER-DAVENPORT ERA

It is a delight to see two scholars sharing their scholarship, and now we have the record of a remarkably fruitful correspondence, from 1958 to about 1986 with snippets thereafter till 2000, between Hugh Kenner and Guy Davenport, different minds concentrated on the quandaries of modern literature.

Hugh Kenner (1923–2003) I knew well enough, Guy Davenport (1927–2005) not at all. Kenner came to Dublin fairly often during the years in which I lived there and while my name was not italicized, I feel sure, on his visiting list, our paths crossed easily in that gregarious city. I assumed he came to familiarize himself again with Joyce's streets and on the off chance of meeting someone whose father or grandfather might have seen Joyce "walking into eternity along Sandymount Strand." Kenner brought his camera with him, and snapped the Crampton monument, Thomas Moore's right index finger, and the bust of Demosthenes in Trinity College's library, photographs he was to offer to readers of *Joyce's Voices* (1978). A few of his visits have stayed in my mind; one, when I brought him to dinner at the King Sitric restaurant in Howth, and the head waiter steered him unerringly to the most expensive dishes on the menu. I recall nothing further of that evening, either what Kenner or I said. Ezra Pound's companion Olga Rudge told Guy Davenport that Kenner was "a wonderful raconteur." He did not have that reputation in Dublin or in Howth. I can only suppose that in Italy and at Pound's table in Sant' Ambrogio he raised his game in the hope of enticing the silent poet to speak.

A year or two later, Kenner was again among us. Someone arranged a lunch at Bernardo's, and a round tableful of bookish folk assembled

with Kenner the guest of honor. Donald Davie was there, Seán White, and if my approximate memory holds, Father Roland Burke Savage, the editor of *Studies*. What I mainly remember is that the lunch had hardly begun before Kenner started urging Davie and me to give up our jobs in Dublin and remove ourselves to the University of California at Santa Barbara. Kenner was the most eminent member of the English faculty there. He said he had a plan, that we would join with him, Marvin Mudrick, and other gifted colleagues and exert a “cultural heave from the West,” as he memorably phrased it, to dislodge the rascals who were running the literary show in New York. I didn’t take this notion seriously, but Davie did, at least to the partial extent of arranging a year’s sabbatical leave from Trinity College and spending it, indeed, in Santa Barbara, where, however, he did not remain. Two or three years later, Kenner was yet again in Dublin, and this time he and I conducted, if that is the right verb, a graduate seminar in Trinity on Marianne Moore’s poem “Virginia Britannia.” I recall little of that occasion except that Kenner kept emphasizing that Pound was the first poet who wrote his poems directly to a typewriter and passed that practice on to Marianne Moore and William Carlos Williams. I found the point more persuasive in Kenner’s *The Counterfeiters*, where he shows how swiftly Williams moved, writing “At the Bar” from one draft to the next until he got it right. He could not have made those changes as painlessly with pen or pencil.

The last time I saw Kenner was at a Pound conference in Hailey, Idaho, in, I think, 2002. I gave a lecture called “A Packet for Ezra Pound,” the title and probably much else taken from Yeats. Kenner did me the honor of attending it, staying awake for its 50 minutes and then leaving without saying yea or nay. That was fine by me. Kenner’s knowledge of Pound’s work exceeded mine by a factor of 10 or 20. I could not have delivered to him one iota of news. Some months later I read of his death.

HK and GD came together as scholars of Pound. They met for the first time at a gathering of the English Institute at Columbia University

in September 1953. The letters began with one of March 7, 1958 from Kenner inviting Davenport to think of taking a job at Santa Barbara, Kenner being then Chairman of the English Department. Davenport was a southerner, South Carolina born. He took his undergraduate degree rather unhappily at Duke and went to Harvard and Oxford for graduate work on *Ulysses*. Harry Levin supervised him at Harvard, Hugo Dyson was one of his supervisors at Oxford. Back in America, GD got a temporary job at Haverford. He married Martha Farrow on August 17, 1956: they were divorced in December 1959. In "On Reading" he recalled that the conditions under which he made his way through the *Iliad* in Greek were "the violence and paralyzing misery of a disintegrating marriage, for which abrasion, nevertheless, the meaning of the poem was the more tragic." If that marriage was a mistake, he was willing to try again, but this time the woman, a Roman Catholic, "Mary Ann of the flashing eyes," "refused to marry a divorced man." That was that. In the event, Davenport did not achieve professional stability until August 1963 when he was appointed professor of English in the University of Kentucky at Lexington. On May 11, 1965 he reported to Kenner that a woman named Bonnie Jean Cox—"Straw blonde, green eyes, Episcopalian, Virginia family, set. XX"—had entered his life. She stayed there, lived six blocks away from him, and was available for meals, minor outings, and large travels—Amsterdam, Copenhagen, Paris, and other cities. He claimed that he hated travel, never owned a car or a driving license, but Bonnie Jean Cox persuaded him.

The letters begin, as if randomly, with talk of jobs, the possibility that Kenner might go to Rice—he didn't—talk of Beckett, Kenner about to publish his *Samuel Beckett: A Critical Study* (1961), more talk of books, reviews, Pound, Charles Babbage, and murmurs of Davenport's translation of Archilochos. Kenner had a certain amount of Greek, enough to manage Liddell and Scott. Davenport's Greek was much stronger and in *Seven Greeks* (1995) rose to the challenges of Sappho, Archilochos, Alkman, Anakreon, Herakleitos, Diogenes, and Herondas. Sometimes

a reviewer corrected a phrase. William Arrowsmith rejected a typescript on Meleager because he thought it “no good.” But Davenport persisted and made an extended career for himself with translations from the most esoteric Greek poets. Sometimes, before or after gossip, Kenner inserted a sentence or two worth thinking about, as having referred to Pound’s “hit-and-miss scholarship,” he went on to a lively perception:

The origin, here, of his taste for fragments heavy with unformulated meaning? One feels from time to time in his translations that it is when he *does not know* and *does not think he knows* his original’s full range of meaning that he is driven to crested heights by sheer respect for its mysteriousness.

Crested heights: there we have Kenner’s free-lancing intelligence enjoying itself. In a letter of May 4, 1965, he urged Davenport not to worry about being definitive in his translations of Sappho; instead, he should offer “stereoscopic views” of her poems “by juxtaposing highly finished alternative versions, as many as three at times, of at least some poems.” Then he thought of Eliot, calling him, as usual, Possum:

It would be, among other things, a tacit challenge to the notion that versions are in competition, were you to offer an array of views rather than finalities. Fallacy finality, even on Possum’s view that there is a finality for a given age; by which Possum appears to mean simply that the ultimate Li Po for 1916 is simply the best style of 1916 English poem achievable. Possum was never sufficiently aware of a style as a system of equipoises within which one manoeuvres; he always thinks of an impulse, person or period, exhausting itself; the exhaustion is the finality.

But versions are, I’m afraid, in competition. If Davenport were to lay out two or three versions of a poem by Sappho beside his own, he would be saying, in effect, look at these idiots and then celebrate the best me.

Meanwhile Kenner was developing his own method of criticism, a peculiar one. If he were writing about, say, William Carlos Williams, he would try to find a typical passage of WCW's writing, bring it to memory, and allow this trace to lodge in his own style to the point of silently imitating the original. "My fundamental principle," he said, is that "one writes about them in their own voices." Not surprisingly, this practice of secret quotation did not always work, Kenner's own voice being an insistent instrument, trumpet or bassoon. Some writers, like Wyndham Lewis, could not be assimilated, as Kenner admitted, referring to "infection as usual from L's own style." Frank Kermode, reviewing *Samuel Beckett: A Critical Study*, disapproved of the method:

The truth is that this critic does much more absorbing and converting than explaining. His prose is a twitch with the exertion of wit and intellect and it has a narcissistic glow. "All Beckett's writings bring some sustained formal element to the service of some irreducible situation round which the lucid sentences defile in baffled aplomb." This is useless. Sometimes there is a disastrous self-admiring joke . . .

How "lucudow" "lucid sentences" disclose "baffled aplomb," Kenner did not say. Davenport rarely offered paragraphs of such weight, but he had an ear for them in others. After a lunch with Beckett in Paris, he made a note of the great man's remarking of the Joyce of *Finnegans Wake*: "The fall of Man and the fall of a leaf were the same to him. He saw everything in everything else."

Davenport accepted that Kenner was the major figure. His letters to HK are full of praise for this "great writer, great stylist." Only once have I found GD asserting himself. Kenner wanted to begin *The Pound Era* with a resounding sentence, Jamesian because for some obscure reason he wanted the whole first chapter to be Jamesian. The excuse for this decision was that Pound met James and his niece—brother William's daughter—strolling in Chelsea one evening. Kenner sent the resounding prose to Davenport, expecting nothing but appreciation. The sentence was "to be rolled about on the tongue":

Toward the evening of the gone world, the light of its last summer pouring into a Chelsea street found and suffused the red waistcoat of Henry James, lord of decorum, *en promenade*, exposing his young niece to the tone of things.

Davenport, admittedly in low spirits, replied:

Gone world? What's that mean? I simply would NOT begin that way. A later chapter, perhaps, but not the prow of the book. I admire your writing more than any other of our time, but I think fatigue and pressure have nudged your aim here. *Found* is so far from its subject *light* that the matter between sags like a hammock. . . . All nieces are young. The dying light? One thing that's running static into "gone world" is that that phrase now means (and for how long?) a world hep and with it, "gone scene," "flipped crowd." The light of the last summer of the world . . . build on that: it has transistor power to amply in the head.

GD was wrong about the distance between *Found* and *light*. H said he would think about GD's complaint, and he did, but only to the extent of changing "the gone world" to "a gone world," and "his young niece" to "his Boston niece."

Sometimes HK corrected himself. In *The Poetry of Ezra Pound*, he saw Imagism as the destined context of those poems. Later he came to think that Imagism was only a name for Hilda Doolittle, a parenthesis, a side issue. The real force of literary culture in those years was Vorticism, even though that, too, was swept away by the War. So the letters proceeded. Kenner was far more interested than Davenport in ideological forces at work; most of the ringing generalizations, and the asperities, came from him. Davenport was a remarkably gifted essayist, a master illustrator of Kenner's books; he saw objects, things in the world, more clearly than Kenner did. He was also more learned than Kenner in architecture and film: his reviews of those disciplines had wider implication. But if Kenner wanted to assert, as he did, that the history of modern fiction in English did not need to consider the works of Virginia Woolf, D. H. Lawrence, or Vladimir Nabokov, Davenport was not impelled to object.

So we think of these two remarkable men, each in his own place, Lexington and Santa Barbara, as if neither of them would ever move, but that is not the case. Davenport stayed in Lexington, but Kenner moved from Santa Barbara, even though the move entailed giving up the house he loved and the geodesic dome he had built in his back garden at 4680 La Espada Drive. On November 18, 1982 he wrote to Davenport to say that Johns Hopkins had made him an offer:

Hopkins have come through with their written offer, and we shall spend the weekend reading the fine print. I think chances are now 95% that we will take it, painful though it would be to part with this house. I see long dark years for Calif, under endless pressure to justify the taxpayer's contribution to the inordinate expense by upping teaching hours and playing down research. Also existence of highpriced profs (such as me) is starting to be manipulated into public scandal. The State has discovered the usefulness of quoting random salaries, esp. in the medical school, to make taxpayers feel indignant.

He went to Johns Hopkins early in 1974, stayed there until he made his final move, to the University of Georgia at Athens, Georgia in 1990, where he remained till he retired in 1999. Davenport won a MacArthur Fellowship in July 1990, whereupon he retired from teaching.

*The Pound Era* (1971) made a crucial difference to Kenner's life. Guest lectureships filled his calendar. In April 1974 he turned down an invitation from Columbia to take up the chair of the retiring Lionel Trilling, and a similar one from Yale to take the retiring Cleanth Brooks's chair. Too late: he had committed himself to Johns Hopkins. After the publication of *The Pisan Cantos* in 1948, it was no longer decent to claim that Pound was an ignoramus or, as William Empson put it, that "he actually hadn't do any conscious thinking for fifty years or so." Kenner's study of his poetry (1951) established the scale and seriousness of Pound's enterprise. *The Pound Era* raised and answered a question: what would modern poetry in English look like if you were convinced that Pound was its great enabler? Kenner's answer was that Pound's



work made possible the tradition we call Objectivism: made possible, that is, the poetry of Marianne Moore, William Carlos Williams, George Oppen, Carl Rakosi, Louis Zukofsky, and other poets only less known. The best chapters in *The Pound Era* are "The Invention of Language," "Words Set Free," "The Invention of China," and "The Persistent East."

Years before, Pound advised Kenner to get to know the great men of his time (not mentioning the great women). Kenner nearly followed that advice. The great men, in his estimate, were Joyce, Pound, Eliot, Wyndham Lewis, Marianne Moore (an exceptional woman), Buckminster Fuller, Frank Lloyd Wright, William Carlos Williams, and Beckett. If Joyce had lived 10 or 15 years after 1941, Kenner would have sought him out and cherished him, or most of him. He might have disputed *Finnegans Wake*, having found no cause to change the opinion of that book he was to confide to *The Pound Era*, "the mind of Europe in shock, babbling a long dream, stirring, swooning." Davenport added Charles Ives and Eudora Welty to the list. Eliot was hard to place: not by any stretch of definition an Objectivist. Kenner placed him in the only silly chapter of the book, a description of the great poet giving Kenner lunch in the Garrick Club and fidgeting with the cheeses. Yeats? If he had lived another 10 years after 1939, I don't think Kenner would have sought him out, Yeats was not Poundian enough, despite his having spent those winters with Pound in Stone Cottage. Besides, HK always sold Yeats short and got him wrong. In *The Pound Era* he says that after the War (1918) Yeats wrote "as if nothing had occurred but Irish troubles." Not true: "Leda and the Swan," the two Byzantine poems, and many more of Yeats's best later poems have nothing to do with Ireland's troubles.

Edmund M. Burns, impeccable editor, raises a question: why did this correspondence between HK and GD end, or peter out when it did? GD's letter of December 1, 1977 notes, accurately, "We, you and I, are beginning to drift out of synchronicity." There was a time when a letter received by either man in the morning was answered that

afternoon, even if a trip to the library was necessary, over lunchtime, to check a detail. Professor Burns does not claim to have an answer, but he thinks that HK may have got tired of recognizing—or pretending not to recognize—GD's bisexuality. Maybe, or rather, probably. HK was a family man, father of seven children, a convert to Roman Catholicism; he had heard the rumor, long rampant in Lexington, that Professor Davenport was inordinately fond of good-looking young men. I suggest a further consideration, some of Davenport's fiction.

Davenport wrote three kinds of fiction. In one, he turned an early meeting, often a meeting in the Greek classics, into a modern story. That was fine. A second kind was Cubist, featuring a determination to give his fiction the freedoms the Cubist painters took. This fiction challenged the assumption that the values claimed by common sense and realism are self-evident, they are their own proof. Suppose they were not. Suppose they had "won" only through the force of local resemblance, itself a dubious piece of evidence. Then the appeal to self-evidence could be said to be hypocritical. In an essay on the poetry of Jack Sharpless, Davenport quoted a few of his lines and said: "we can detect a cubist strategy, wherein fractal notations function as complete images (lines across a circle for a guitar, JOUR for LE JOURNAL), but the trouble with this sentence is that it merely postpones the moment in which we decide that we see a guitar. Cubism is more dramatic than that: we are reading a cubist painting badly if we translate certain lines and shapes into a guitar or indeed anything else. But the question of Cubism was common to HK and GD. In 1965 Kenner revised an early essay on Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* mainly to change its title from "The *Portrait* in Perspective" to "The Cubist Portrait." His reason:

The laws of perspective place painter and subject in a fixed geometrical relation to one another, in space and by analogy in time. Here [in the *Portrait*] both of them are moving, one twice as fast as the other. Joyce's *Portrait* may be the first piece of cubism in literary history.

Many—too many—of GD's stories amount to a *Boys' Own* erotic dream. I assume that HK read these quickly, once, and put them aside. I don't believe he spent much time over "Gunnar and Nikolai." The Kenners liked "The Aeroplanes at Brescia," a beautiful piece of cool narrative," as HK wrote GD to say:

Like the Warhol which requires that one know the existence of Brillo boxes in the real world, it exists by virtue of one's faith/knowledge that it is true. Thus an invented encounter between FK [Kafka] and LW [Wittgenstein]—merely an encounter, not an Imaginary Conversation—would be of no interest whatever. "History" and the daily paper also depend on one's trust, but their aim is a soporific fidelity. Yours is like trompe l'oeil, a hallucinatory vividness imparted to the forgotten actual.

Not entirely accurate. The "forgotten actual" refers only to a small piece of "The Aeroplanes at Brescia," the fact that Kafka and two friends went to see the experimental flights there. What they saw there, felt, and said to one another: these are GD's invention. So is the end of the story, which HK doesn't mention:

Franz! Max said before he considered what he was saying, why are there tears in your eyes?  
I don't know, Kafka said. I don't know.

In a more-or-less realistic story, this counts as a suspension of realism. We have no idea what kind of tears these are. Nor has Max. Nor, probably, has Franz. There is no immediate cause. Blériot is piloting the plane up and down over Brescia. There is no crisis. A page or two back we have this sentence: "The man named Wittgenstein was again holding his left wrist, massaging it as if it were in pain." Another suspension of the realist style: no reason is given. It is as if a cubist line were drawn, without explanation or apology. Back to Franz's tears: I vote for tears of joy.

In the later letters Pound is replaced to some extent by Beckett. It was difficult to approach Pound between his wife Dorothy and com-

panion Olga. Even in St. Elizabeth's there were miscellaneous visitors. HK and GD felt, I think, that on Pound they had said their full. New themes were arising, mostly from GD's exertions on Greek literature. One was the fragment. So many Greek poems reached scholars in broken lines. What was a scholar to do, looking at a papyrus? Kenner was immensely interested in these questions, but there are signs that they reduced him to the condition of an amateur. Not a condition he enjoyed. Still, the letters are a treasure.