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Douglas Archibald

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Edwin J. Kenney, Jr.: Telling Stories

by DOUGLAS ARCHIBALD

ONE OF THE last books Ed Kenney read was Norman Maclean's *Young Men and Fire*; one of his favorite books was *A River Runs Through It*. The figure of Maclean was both inspiring and admonitory for him: a resourceful and successful teacher—winner of awards, holder of a Chair, admired mentor—whose scholarly writings were solid, useful, and few; a man who found his true subject and his own voice late in life and during a bad time, from life confronted as literature rather than the other way around. Kenney's writings, which it is my purpose to consider here, grew out of his teaching and his life and fall into three broad categories: nineteenth- and twentieth-century British fiction; the social and political world; the experience of and writing about illness and dying, which was, for him as for other religious and literary sensibilities facing hard facts, an aspect of spiritual autobiography.

There are half a dozen reviews of British fiction, two important essays, and a fine short book. *Elizabeth Bowen* was published in 1975, two years after her death and three and a half after Kenney's visit with her in Kent, where she spent her final years. It demonstrates one of his special talents, one of the skills that made him such a successful teacher of fiction. Accounting for plot and character, indispensable in a book or a course where the audience is inexpert and encountering the text for the first time, becomes analysis and understanding of the particular shape and feel of the novel, not just summary and observation. He is particularly acute about the burden of the Anglo-Irish situation, "living on both sides of the hyphen and the water simultaneously" which "means really to be neither more than both . . . always struggling from childhood to become an adult." The Anglo-Irish are "not just only children but adolescent only children," and this is one of the lessons of the novels and of the author's life:

. . . one cannot avoid danger by pretending it is not there, one cannot avoid love by refusing a sexual identity, one cannot avoid commitment by attempting to be uncommitted, one cannot avoid death by refusing to grow up. Elizabeth Bowen the novelist knows, and her knowledge is what makes her the grown-up in her books about children and adolescents.

Bowen's people are deeply insecure, as she wrote, "never being certain that they are not crooks, never certain their passports are quite in order" or that they have anything to declare at customs. So their need and their virtue is to carry on, muddle through, make do; to discover and survive the "slippery fish" that *is* identity; to attempt to transform experience, history and memory into "pure

image, pure art.” Kenney returns to these thoughts in his brief review of *Pictures and Conversations* which was posthumously published so the review is also a personal recollection and an act of bereavement: “We hear her voice again, only to have it broken off, to hear it no more. We are reminded of what we have lost in her death, rather than consoled for that loss.” It too shows Kenney’s sympathy for the lonely child and the wish he shared with Elizabeth Bowen, to believe in the transforming power of art:

There is no wonder that she felt her life to be a career of withstood emotion; the wonder is how she survived and transcended these experiences, transforming them into the art of her novels.

. . . the mysterious power of illusion, of memory, of faith, of hallucination, of magic, of art allowed life to go on, to be built up over the vault of horror. She had the vision to see that when these apparently safe “artifices” are broken, as she knew they always are—whether by cultural dislocation, betrayal by those we trust, suffering and death of those we love, destruction of places that make the world for us—they must be re-created by will and imagination. For Elizabeth Bowen, as for Henry James, another hyphenated alien, “It is by art that we live, if we do.”

“The Moment, 1910: Virginia Woolf, Arnold Bennett, and Turn of the Century Consciousness” is an extraordinary essay, a *tour de force* which takes the famous line—“on or about December, 1910, human character changed”—in the famous dispute of 1923-24 between Arnold Bennett and Virginia Woolf about the function of the novel and the nature of social reality, and unpacks it more fully than any criticism I know. Kenney does not dismiss Bennett as simply out-of-date, “Edwardian,” and shows real sympathy for both middle-class strenuousness and the conventional novel of character. Neither does he accept the easy oversimplifications that Woolf’s repeated, intense attacks are mostly driven by class bias or uneasy self-justification. He will not accept any oversimplification in this intensely loaded moment of consciousness. He helps us attend to and understand Virginia Woolf’s tangled domestic and familial relationships, her acute anxieties (especially about sexual identity) and psychic instability, her vulnerability and her personal and political awakenings, her writer’s insecurity and achievement.

He also brings to bear on this moment very large political and cultural issues: Post-Impressionism in the visual arts and aesthetic theory; the women’s suffrage movement; battles over the location of Parliamentary power; murderous Anglo-Irish conflict; reform bills and the distribution of wealth: “The arguments about the Post-Impressionists, the fights between the poor and the rich, the Commons and the Lords, the Irish and the English, Ulster and the South of Ireland, the workers and the masters, men and women, expressed in large, public and violent terms the changes in feeling that were also being expressed in private life.”

The focus of the argument, however, as in most of Kenney’s literary criticism, is on the more or less isolated, struggling, human consciousness trying to make sense, and art, out of experience:

It is because she wrote these [early] novels, rather than because the Edwardians wrote theirs, that Virginia Woolf set out in her essay “Modern Fiction” (1919) what *she* ought rather to be doing in the form of an attack on Bennett, Wells and Galsworthy. In this essay we can see her sense that social categories were breaking down becoming transformed into a belief that social reality was not real at

all, that only personal states of consciousness constituted "reality." Here life is redefined to be not socially observable facts, but the sensations of perception on consciousness, the feel of life as it is experienced by an ordinary mind on an ordinary day. Within this articulation of subjective impressionism (to be distinguished from the objective and scientific goals of the earlier impressionist movement in painting), there is the distinct tone of personal encouragement and even admonition. Woolf, after the general break-up of the Great War, is struggling to make a virtue of what was for her a necessity, to make the weakness of her life into the strength of her art.

That is finely balanced, close argued and, like the conclusion, generous and just:

Coming out of her experiences of 1910, her ambivalence toward radical social change and irrational passion kept Virginia Woolf on the more manageable stream of consciousness, where the isolated and uncertain ego transforms inner and outer forces into personally coherent and meaningful moments of creative vision. Rather than public "character," she sought "personality," that discrete and shapely version of a self, conscious from moment to moment of its differences from nature and others. In this way Woolf embodied all the insecurity and anxiety of her time which found no relief in faith and action, and this is the extent and the limit of her achievement. To Virginia Woolf looking back in 1923 a unified communal life no longer seemed possible after December 1910; the issue was the survival of the self. She sought sanctuary in sensibility because she felt the history of her life and times pressing on her with tremendous force, and because the most available and personally suitable ideology was, from her beginnings, that of the cultivated self.

In "George Eliot: Through the Looking Glass" the detailed attentiveness is focused on voice, George Eliot's and Dorothea's, and the complex and moving ways they interpenetrate, the ways in which Dorothea becomes George Eliot as George Eliot imagines her best self. The essay demonstrates Kenney's instincts, training and talent as a reader of fiction. The particular attention to suffering, brief redemptions and common humanity seem pointed now because 1977, the year of publication, was the year of his first operation for cancer:

George Eliot saw human life as struggling and erring, and this view is the basis for her moral desire to understand, share, and ameliorate human suffering through the expression of her sympathy. . . . The intense suffering of the ego is the quality of emotion that George Eliot consistently sees as tragic in nature and as revealing a potentially destructive situation. But she did not and could not see all human life as finally, necessarily, leading to actual tragic ends She seems to desire the presence of tragic emotion without the consequences of tragic action because one can respond to the human sufferer of that emotion; he remains alive, suffering and struggling, painfully "adjusted" to his lot. By manifesting her sympathy for such suffering in her own conduct as narrator, George Eliot encourages equivalent feelings in her readers and thus rouses their noblest emotions. Such sympathy, she desperately hoped, is what ultimately can prevent social chaos and irreparable, tragic collision. This was her faith and her moral action. In her novels, sympathy and understanding are what "redeem" tragedy; they "save" tragic situations from being irreparably destructive and laming to the soul, and give meaning and grandeur to ordinary—unheroic and frequent—human suffering.

In 1990, teaching part time because of the cancer, Ed gave the only classroom lecture that has left me unable to speak. It was on *The Death of Ivan Illych* and it was unflinching, understated, without self-pity, and it looked at the suffering of that novel—"Ivan Illych's life had been most simple and most ordinary and therefore most terrible"—with a clarity I found and still find inspiring and frightening. I wanted to tell our shared students, who know little of their teachers' lives, just what they had experienced—but I could not.

Since the course paid some attention to theory, Ed remarked that he was a "reconstructive" critic; he believed that with work, luck, and determination we

can understand texts and the moments of a lived life that have created them. In this as in other ways he was old-fashioned. Never “Eliot” or “Bowen” but “George Eliot” or “Elizabeth Bowen” or “Miss Bowen” or (for childhood) “Elizabeth.” All of his teaching and writing included the underlying, usually unstated, conviction that acts of the sympathetic imagination can make people better and life more full. In Virginia Woolf’s last letters he saw ordinariness as a moral and psychic achievement, an act of will against despair, madness, and suicide. He is old-fashioned, too, in his apologetical instincts, his attempts to get inside another human consciousness and to make the best case he can, as in the review of a bad book on D. H. Lawrence where Kenney patiently understands and explains the sources of Lawrence’s authoritarian impulses and outbursts and their basis in his radical democratic social outlook. He is not, however, a sentimental or uncritical apologist as the sharp—aware and unforgiving—reviews of Iris Murdoch and James Gould Cozzens make clear.

Ed liked to share teacherly jokes. One of ours, exercised more or less annually, came from similar struggles to convince students to understand (adoption was too much to ask) our admiration for Dr. Johnson. At comically grim moments—often towards the end of an endless meeting—we would catch each other’s eye and recall our favorite gloom from *Rasselas*: “Human life is everywhere a state in which much is to be endured, and little to be enjoyed.” It was not after all a joke and starting about 1982 the line had a cruel resonance. I was chairman of the Committee on Promotion and Tenure which, by the perverse logic of academic scheduling, met all Friday afternoon for most of the fall. Ed was undergoing a brutal round of chemotherapy and his weekly appointments were at noon on Fridays. He arrived for the meetings drawn and gray and glassy-eyed but soon worked himself into his usual role as the most thoughtful person in the room. I think I was the only one there who knew of the prior appointment and I could not stand it. I urged Ed to resign, insisting on the ease of getting a replacement. “No,” he said quietly and with difficulty, “I have been elected and I am going to be a teacher and a citizen, not an invalid.” Another Johnson moment: the great man, stoic and Christian moralist, at the end, his huge body being bled, to the knife-wielding doctor, “Deeper. Deeper. I want life.”

Kenney was interested in the big questions we subsume under “Culture” or “Politics” and individual acts of accommodation or survival or (rarely) transcendence we call “Psychology” or “Religion” or “Art.” He taught courses on Darwin, Marx, and Freud; he helped design and then taught a freshman seminar in Spiritual Autobiography; he incorporated his detailed understanding of Jung into that course and into courses on Faulkner and on Doris Lessing. He read all of Raymond Williams, including the *Border Trilogy*, interviewed him in 1978, and wanted to write more about Williams and what he taught us. I think the intellectual and spiritual reflex in his encounters with all these important writers and large issues is to return to the single human consciousness getting on, making do. That is what he admires about John Holloway’s portrait of lower, middle-class life near London just after World War II. Leonard Woolf’s heroism is to carry on in the midst of and in spite of the collapse of his public and private worlds:

Woolf's title, *The Journey Not the Arrival Matters*, from Montaigne, expresses Woolf's final attitude toward his failure to reach his goals. This volume describes "the most terrible and agonizing days" of Woolf's life; the restraint of his prose, which also recalls Montaigne, barely suggests the anguish of recounting them. "To drag the memory of them out of one's memory, as I must do now if I am to continue publicly to remember, is difficult and painful." But with common-sense toughness, his typical response to adversity and pain, Leonard Woolf continued "publicly to remember," a phrase that aptly characterizes the peculiar reticence of the entire autobiography. His controlled tone is the stylistic manifestation of the enduring self-control of the man.

The most compelling aspect of the stories of Jean Stafford and Barbara Rees is "the fly in amber," Pope's metaphor of attack and dismissal which Kenney transforms into a sympathetic image of "human loneliness. . . the twentieth century's bewildered obsession with feelings of isolation and imprisonment, of claustrophobic desperation in which the self can turn about only far enough to feel the confinement of another harsh surface."

Mortal illness is the last amber. Between 1978 and 1993 Kenney wrote two essays and a short review about the literature of illness and two about his own. The review of Susan Sontag's influential *Illness as Metaphor* is built around a quarrel. He admires Sontag's intelligence and intransigence, her understanding of the significance of her own experience, her determination to demystify illness so that it cannot be seen as the fault of the patient. Though Kenney characteristically leaves the facts of his own situation unstated, he is clear and firm about the significance of *his* experience. Demystification can only go so far. Cancer is more than an abusive metaphor. It is a ravaging fact and radical Other, invasive and transforming. The review of Jill Krementz—his last—adds that the battle "in all cases of debilitating, dangerous and terminal illness and injury is to make a life against the disease and the demands of its treatment."

"Death's Other Kingdom" is a review essay in 1982 of various narratives of disease and dying as "topics in contemporary life": film, television, popular magazines, and eight books since Elisabeth Kubler-Ross's *On Death and Dying* (1969). John Gunther's *Death Be Not Proud* is "the touchstone for all these accounts of illness because of its profound, tragic power to proclaim the value and meaning of human life from within the experience of terrible suffering and loss." Kenney defines representative reactions to the experience. The simplest are "uncritical denial or acceptance of mortal illness" which "occur in the most dramatically transformed autobiographical accounts." The most immediate response is anger—at the disease and at the medical profession. Anger is a form of therapy, and liberation from the myth of doctorly omniscience is a kind of freedom. The most complex, at times sacred, function of such accounts is a new and whole understanding of "how the unbearable may be borne, has been borne by others. . . . With death and dying there is life and living; that sense of completion, of balanced tension, of full involvement and heightened consciousness is what these books convey. People come to these books because they sanctify life. This is not false piety or sentimentality; rather it is what many healthy, prosperous, and busy people lose or forget and then mourn without knowing it."

"Death's Other Kingdom" is a philosophical essay as well as a review, a

meditation that achieves the power and resonance of spiritual autobiography, the genre Kenney most admired during his last decade. He asserts a very hard truth and tells a story of great pain: "People are not radically transformed by serious illness; their characters are not changed; instead, they become what they truly are":

To be seriously ill is truly to enter another country; it is death's other kingdom, the world of "darkness," into which one descends and in which one confronts the repressed, negative self.

The daylight world of living becomes the hospital, a place of omnipresent fluorescent light, stainless steel, and ceramic tile; rigid schedules, rules, and diets; alien instruments and machines; painful procedures and mind-altering drugs. The ordinary dreams of the future, of infinite time, become the nightmare of the finite moment of this test, this operation, this treatment. The self that sought to be loved and respected, strong and superior, good and loving, becomes the other: inadequate, unworthy, powerless, hateful. Hopes are replaced by fears; the fears of disease-spread or recurrence, of pain and death are compounded by fears of abandonment—of unacceptability, rejection, and isolation. The isolation is claustrophobic; one feels, finally, contracted into a body whose smallest, hitherto simplest function is monstrously threatening. The mind is forced obsessively back to that body, its cycles of pain and alleviation.

That is the world of "Voyages," the first of the two chapters of Ed Kenney's spiritual autobiography, published the following year and centered on his experiences in hospitals being treated for the very rare form of cancer finally named malignant pheochromocytoma, and on sailboats, between 1979 and 1982. Sailing provides "moments of perfection" and a good boat is a "perfectible world. . . . To me the sailboat was for life and living, not death and dying; it was for expansion and movement and harmony and joy, not for the constricted, confined, degrading, and painful suffering of the cancer ward." He begins with a ten-foot tender on loan, which does not really sail but provides a crash course on sailing, and then buys and trades and buys three larger boats, an O'Day Widgeon, a Rhodes 19, and a Pearson fiberglass oceangoing sloop which he named *Metaphor*. The naming does not occur in this essay, but its significance is discovered:

I have been deliberately seeking, working, to realize a metaphor that not only parallels or illuminates but also contains and embodies all my recent experience and any future I might have. This moment of vision, apprehended in the movement of the boat in the wind and the water, of darkness and light reflected in the sky and the sails and the sea, so clear and unified and luminous, so unlike anything I have ever experienced in my life, seems like a benediction. It allows me to hope, for the first time in five years, that I might be both cured and healed.

The most compelling voyages, however, are interior and harrowing, into the dark night of the soul and the ravaged body. He circumnavigates the nurses' station in the ICU at the Dana Farber Cancer Institute, "steering myself with my blanket and leading my way with the IV pole before me like a mast." It is a way not to quit and die. The hospital bed or the body is the boat and the dark, mutinous sea, in nightmare and hallucination, is punishing life, and the shimmering light on the other side of the sea is the seductive release into death. The images that burn themselves into consciousness have little to do with perfectible worlds. A sudden, violent puff of wind "catapults the whisker pole across the deck into the now black sea. . . . disappearing from the light, forever, it is a recognition."

Another patient in Intensive Care is Dorothy, in shock from radical chemotherapy, deaf, overhydrated, and incoherent: “. . . she was big, bloated, marked by tumors, bald from chemotherapy, and to me worst of all, she was literally drowning within herself. Her deafness and inarticulateness increased her isolation. I knew that inside she was alone in a sea of destructive chemicals and her own body fluids. She was the embodiment of what I had been and of what I feared becoming again.”

Of course it is an obsessive narrative, like Maclean’s passionate and driven tale of identification with the dead boys in *Young Men and Fire*. “Voyages” seeks equipoise and moments of transcendence, but we remain, when we have finished, with poor, shivering humanity. Neither sailing nor moral heroism can be enough, enough of the time. Looking into the abyss is compulsive as well as courageous, the will doing the work of the imagination.

There is a second and final chapter: “In the restricted and difficult circumstances of this other world,” Kenney had written in “Death’s Other Kingdom,”

locked in direct confrontation with the shadow self, there still remains some room for people to make what life they can, to exercise choice, even to grow beyond the crisis by examining themselves and their ways of living and to find or create a personal meaning within the suffering. Such action fulfills what Jung described as “the sole purpose of human existence”; to be able to recount it for others is “to kindle a light in the darkness of mere being”—to create more consciousness. To see this great purpose achieved under such mean circumstances is what people seek in these books and find inspiring.

They show us people under extreme duress who have fully lived the lives they had, who became fully what they were to be, and who fully realized and could express what it meant to them. And that, as Jung knew, “makes a great many things endurable—perhaps everything.”

“There still remains some room.” It is a representative, terse and clear, understatement. In his last essay, “Waves,” completed a little over a year before he went into the hospital for the last time and first published posthumously, Kenney achieves Jung’s great purpose. He meets the figure of his dying self in the face of his mother, already on “the other side,” but he will not allow her to become Dorothy and he will not remain the distraught and diminished consciousness of the cancer ward. He finds the pattern of his experience in the waves of women—mother, wife, daughter, the iconographic welcomer of the last paragraphs—merged with wind and waves, light and fog of Penobscot Bay. Or, like Romantic and post-Romantic poets, he half discovers and half creates that pattern, just as he creates a tableau and then animates it into a moment of luminous clarity. The extraordinary equipoise of “Waves” is carried by its sure shifts of tone: flat and reportorial; tight-lipped; apologetic in both the social or domestic and the religious sense; resolute and resolved, accepting his life as part of a larger pattern; a serene and lyrical life at the end, like the final paragraphs of Joyce.

We have moved, as the great moments do, beyond technique and into vision. The conclusion of “Waves” contains the same acceptance and spiritual generosity as Ed did during the final days of his life when, slipping back and forth between our world and his own other side, he kindled a light for family and friends. It was a week after his death before I realized that my last hours with Ed

had finally resolved—made speakable—my pain and uncertainty about my mother’s death from cancer almost twenty years ago. Ed Kenney knew, and so did we, that he could not be Maclean, that he would not live long enough to write an old man’s book about young men. But we do have “Waves” and it concludes with the same accent and assurance as *A River Runs Through It*, and it is chastening, sustaining, and permanent.

Edwin J. Kenney, Jr.
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