

have happened. Put it this way: If the Scotch tape at Watergate had stuck, maybe there wouldn't have been any boat people.' How true—but who else would have the courage to say so? And who else among the friends of John Kenneth Galbraith and the *Boston Globe's* Tom Winship would dare criticize Yale President A. Bartlett Giamatti and television producer Norman Lear for their silly and humorless attacks on the Moral Majority? And when it comes to that noble but virtually abandoned cause of supply-side economics and the paralyzing fear of "the great looming deficit," Buckley cheerfully seems to ignore the formidable phalanx of the most respectable in the land and their open letter to the President by insist-

ing that lowering taxes is more important than reducing the federal deficit.

Buckley's opposition to taxing, and particularly to taxing the rich more than those who are just struggling along, must touch the most sensitive nerve of his egalitarian critics, rich and poor alike. Apparently he believes that inherited wealth is a good thing, endorsing F.A. Hayek's insistence "that if one came upon a society in which no one was wealthy, that society would be better off endowing one hundred people at random with a million dollars each than being without citizens with surplus funds." Then, too, he rightly reminds us that the philosophical premises of the progressive income tax remain largely unexamined.

Indeed, Buckley's daily life, as described in the eight days covered by his "Personal Documentary," demonstrates how socially useful inherited wealth can be. Buckley seems almost maniacal in his efficient use of time. Lesser men may fear that when faced with a blank page they may have nothing to say before an hour or more have passed; but Buckley knows that after rising at Stamford in the morning he can breakfast, write his column, and have it ready for *National Review's* edito-

rial conference in Manhattan at 9:45 a.m.—having dictated correspondence in his car on the way. But even he could not do so if he had to drive himself, instead of being driven by Jerry, the most admirable factotum I have encountered since Lord Peter Whimsey's man, Bunter. We are constantly made aware that servants are a necessary element of his days: the book begins with the line "Gloria brought in my lunch on a tray"; the country house in Stamford and the apartment in Manhattan function because the "infinitely good-natured" maids Rebeca and Olga, "respectively a solicitous and fussy Guatemalan and an otherworldly and gay-spirited Ecuadorian," are shuttled between town and country by Jerry.

The time saved him by these helpful domestic spirits is not all consumed by affairs. The most appealing aspect of Buckley's personality is the time he gives to his family and his friends, including the servants who are friends and family both. In Mexico, Buckley visits his old retired nurse, Felipa, who was with the Buckleys 35 years, and puts in a call to his nonagenarian mother so that Felipa, 93, can talk to her "about events in the year 1910!" Buckley takes time to be aware of all

of them, to worry about them when they are sick, to take them sailing, to call them on the telephone. At the same time he is sensitive about not interfering. And at the risk of offending Bella Abzug, he confesses to think a housewife's role creative: coming home after midnight he is shown by his wife the table set for a lunch with Vice President Bush. "The flowers, the china, the wine-glasses, place settings. . . . I reproach myself that men tend not to focus on the amount of time these things take."

Buckley has never been afraid to confess his faith in God, and in the sophisticated intellectual circles of some of his friends that may take even more courage than his other deviations from the expected. For better or for worse "prayer breakfasts" have become a Washington institution, but that does not make it easy to write that "[I] remember to count on my fingers the five decades of the rosary, a lifelong habit acquired in childhood, and remembered about half the time. That half of my life, I like to think, I behave less offensively to my Maker than the other half," or "I must remember to pray more often. . . ."

We need Bill Buckley. I wish there were more of him. □

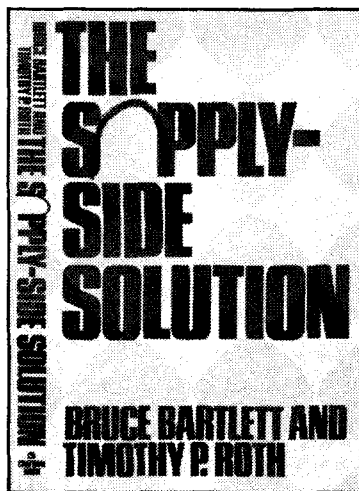
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A COLDER EYE: THE MODERN IRISH WRITERS

Hugh Kenner / Alfred A. Knopf / \$16.95

Roger Lewis

There is a touch of the artist about Hugh Kenner. His discovery is that criticism need not be a meek and waspish craft but that it ought to rival literature itself in its audaciousness. Kenner isn't a handmaiden to the writers he talks about, he is one of their company. Reading him is to watch a great imagination let loose in print. He always embodies Skelton's phrase, "friskajolly younkerkins": an infectious enthusiasm, like Falstaff's. We can seldom guess where his arguments will lead: they unfurl like shreds of cumuli or else shoot and spark like storms. His tempo and tone vary to suit the mood. He is a conductor both in the orchestral sense (organizing a din into order) and in the electrical sense (betaking

power from Modernism's gods and channeling it into us). He has now eschewed ink and paper, traditional impedimenta of the scribe, in favor of the computer console. *A Colder Eye* was pecked out at the keyboard. Kenner, like Vladimir Ashkenazy, plays and directs these days simultaneously.

By using a technological marvel to compose his latest book, however, Kenner is in danger of becoming like the writer in Gore Vidal's *Deluth*. With all of literature in the memory bank of the machine, the critic at the controls will be able to feign omniscience. It will give him a bogus sense of power. No longer like Falstaff, living off his wits, the critic will have only the fake potency of Prospero, living off his spells. And Kenner entranced begins to sound like the Shakespearean magus: "For

Roger Lewis is fiction critic for the *New Statesman* (London).

who is this that comes treading on my dreams?" he muses as Flann O'Brien merges into the text. In his previous books, especially *Dublin's Joyce* or *The Pound Era*, the impression is of omnivorous reading converted by inspired concentration into exegetical genius. In *A Colder Eye* electronics and amanuenses have brought the information about Ireland into Kenner's Baltimore aerie. His preface nods obeisances to his host of helpers: John V. Kelleher, whose letters have been "pillaged shamelessly, without quotation marks," Walt Bilofsky, Jim and Marrietta Gillogly, who manned the computer software which eased the book into existence. There are many other such consultants. *A Colder Eye*, like the pyramids, is a communal project, with Kenner the overseeing Pharaoh cramming it with treasures. Named after Yeats's epitaph ("Cast a cold eye/On life, on death"), perhaps it will become Kenner's.

The book's subject is Irishry. Ireland the country merely serves as a repository for a nation of vociferous eccentrics whose manners are now explored. The provenance of Yeats, Joyce, and Beckett, these authors have in common careers in which they tried to slough off their heritage by writing about little else. *Ulysses* makes Dublin the center of the world: a universal city in which not only history but the whole of literature convenes on June 16, 1904. Yeats is an Irish wizard through whom played the country's wild legends about banshees and giants on the one hand and the Augustan literature of England on the other. Beckett's tramps are the raconteurs of a Dublin bar, talkers whose conversation is endless because conclusions are not allowed to be reached. His crones are the old women from the impecunious farms, girls from the plays of Synge. Weaving about this triumvirate is a throng of other artists, leaving the impression of Ireland as a chaos of competing egos. Andy Warhol once said that everyone will be famous for fifteen minutes. In Dublin, everyone wants to be famous all the time.

To illustrate this notion, Kenner takes a cruel and unnecessary swipe at Richard Ellmann's biography of James Joyce. Kenner reckons that in interviewing Dubliners, Ellmann was too prone to take his contacts at their word. An Irish Fact is something your interlocutor will tell you because he thinks you want to hear it. From this *A Colder Eye* builds the thesis that Irishry means a congenital mistrust of the written word. Writing affixes words, disallowing the happy metamorphosis of speech which can otherwise alter and change to suit

each context and each telling. Ireland is still a nation of the oral epic, great conversational confections which if written down would be libelous. Indeed, to print as opposed to speaking an opinion will be to land in court. As the English love lords, says Kenner, the Irish love lawyers. The most famous plaintiff was Oliver St. John Gogarty, forever aggrieved at being immortalized as stately, plump

Buck Mulligan. The forename was acceptable, with its tinge of an Elizabethan rake. But the cognomen was redolent of a proletarian stew. All this served to make Joyce's self-imposed exile less the artistic gesture of Stephen Dedalus and more the prudent avoidance of litigation. "Lawsuits sleep like serpents in *Ulysses*. . . . If you insist on putting identifiable people in books you do

well to stay out of town when the town is Dublin."

Ireland is a land of intrigue where drama usurps truth, which in any case, as Wilde knew, is rarely true and never simple. The set-piece in *A Colder Eye* that forms the focus of Kenner's ideas is the chapter about the riots during the opening nights of

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Synge's *The Playboy of the Western World*. The fracas at the Abbey Theatre symbolizes both Irishry and the birth of Irish literature. Synge embodied both Shakespeare and the half-forgotten myths from the country's bogs. His play also brought Lady Gregory and W.B. Yeats into the action: the former as patron of the arts and translator of Gaelic, the latter as impresario and listener to the rhythms of Synge's words. Kenner's account of all the real facts and Irish Facts present in the myriad reports of this event is a cabaret act in addition to being a skilled critical disquisition. He adopts the idiom of those he talks about: here he is a virtuosic table-talker. His sentences (as Henry James would say) have a brogue in them as they break. Listen to this: "It was the rioting had launched John Synge into seminar immortality, like, as the man said of someone else altogether, a shot off a shovel."

The disturbances at the Abbey and the disturbing variegation in the reports made what Kenner calls "a bag of cats" whose mewling reverberated forever. He charts the melange of reprisals and accusations and out of an instance of Dublin scandal divines the origins of Yeats, Joyce, Beckett, and O'Casey. *A Colder Eye* proceeds to give us sections on each of these major figures, as well as giving space to less-well-circulated names. All is related back to the convoluted common inheritance of the Irish language

and sensibility. The life and works of Yeats also modulate through all the chapters. He is an artist who discovers "now what oft was thought, to which the poet brings new adequacy of expression; no: what ne'er was thought save by him, to which we bring our somewhat bedazzled assent."

Kenner began his career with a book about G.K. Chesterton's use of paradox and all his subsequent work has sought to locate the ingenious twists and conundrums that lurk in other artists. Kenner himself is a man of paradox: a critic who has earned the title of artist, a commentator frequently cleverer than the people he is conscripted to explain. *A Colder Eye* is the best work of literary criticism to have been published in many years, but it does mark a troubling trend in its author. He is becoming too clever. A meditation about Irishry is an attempt at the impossible, like trying to arrange into its individual conversations the bab-

ble filtered through a telephone exchange. The result is a cold eye: a glazed, almost unearthly stare like that from a corpse. To say this is to invoke his notion that *Finnegans Wake* is a cadaver shivering with insectile local life. This is the feeling left by the book Kenner has written. Brilliant, yes, but is it plausible? Perhaps the eye is that of the lens rather than of Yeats's tombstone. Kenner, like Isherwood, edited nothing from his gaze. The result is disconcerting, it is too perfect. Reading *A Colder Eye*, I felt like Chesterton playing croquet: "It is logically possible to play too well to enjoy it at all . . . The moment the game is perfect the game disappears." It is almost as though devils and fairies and ghosts, the supernatural shades of the Irish imagination, are making fun of you: "They are sending you the Perfect Game, which is no game . . . I heard the dull click of the balls touching, and ran into the house like one pursued." □

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It is always difficult to write with taste about distasteful subjects. Greed, fanaticism, vulgarity, and narcissism can be made interesting, even entertaining, but they leave an unpleasant aftertaste—one of the main problems with much of our contemporary fiction and social commentary. Still, there are some writers with enough humor and insight to give us an enjoyable cartoon view of grotesque milieus, past and present. Anyone who has read Benjamin J. Stein's *Dreemz*, an inspired send-up of present-day Hollywood and Los Angeles that the *New York Times* called "a witty, scary book full of bizarre epiphanies," will know what I mean.

But Ben Stein is more than the F. Scott Fitzgerald of Tinsel Town. A

Aram Bakshian, Jr., Director of Speechwriting for President Reagan, will launch a thrice-weekly column this fall based at the Washington Times. His essays and reviews on politics, history, and the arts appear frequently in American and overseas periodicals.

frequent contributor to these pages and—to put my cards on the table at the outset—an old and cherished friend of mine, he is a writer who wears many hats. Even more to his credit is the fact that most of them fit exceedingly well. Novelist, columnist, economic analyst, scenarist, social commentator, and comic artist, Ben has entertained and occasionally edified a large public on subjects as diverse as gilt-edged securities and guilt-edged insecurities, Valley Girls and vivisectionists, Watergate and Weimaraners. He also continues to amaze with his prolific output; besides a regular column in the *Los Angeles Herald-Examiner*, frequent pieces in the *Washington Post* and *Wall Street Journal*, and the occasional screen treatment, he is a seemingly endless fount of new fiction and nonfiction titles.

This summer alone, Doubleday has come out with his latest novel, *The Manhattan Gambit*, and Bantam has released a new paperback edition of his best-selling *Ludes*, a wrenching chronicle of drugs and self-delusion that George Will—a man seldom

given to positive overstatement—has hailed as "... reporting raised to the level of literature. It conveys a moral truth about the terrible price paid by persons who use chemicals to treat the pain of spiritual emptiness."

Both books are worth reading, but on the principle that light matter floats to the top, and since *The Manhattan Gambit* is more of an entertainment and less of a think piece, I will attend to it first.

Imagine, if you will, a few weeks in 1943 during which Albert Einstein is putting the finishing theoretical touches on the Atom Bomb, Adolph Hitler is chewing the rug and pressuring Heinrich Himmler to come up with a counterpart, and FDR is cynically ignoring the slaughter taking place in Reich concentration camps. Add to the equation a crazed Teutonic Bonnie and Clyde duo—an escaped German POW and a brainless Valley Girl throwback who won't eat meat but enjoys butchering people—and you have the makings of a tongue-in-cheek thriller that provides good poolside reading and could be turned into a fair adventure film. Indeed, if I had to make one criticism of *The Manhattan Gambit*, it would be that the book reads a little too much like the first draft of a screenplay, with its constant mention of period props, its meticulously drawn shootouts and car chases, and its zany love scenes. I particularly enjoyed the first tryst of the Nazi Bonnie and Clyde, a neat balancing of the old Adam and Aryan sensibilities climaxing with "ten minutes later, Trattner's face was buried between Maxine Lewis' perfect breasts as she lay on his bunk staring at a portrait of Adolph Hitler." Nowadays she would probably stare at a poster of Robert Redford, but one knows the feeling.

J. Edgar Hoover (rendered with a heartfelt nastiness), Allen Dulles, Enrico Fermi, Harry Hopkins, Robert Trout, and Admiral Canaris all figure prominently in the ample supporting cast, but the bulk of the heroic action is carried out by a sturdy, world-weary Irish cop and a rather piquant Jewish lady lawyer, with a proper assist from Albert Einstein who, after much provocation, emits a primal scream and dispatches the Nazi villain with a concealed kitchen knife—truly a man for all seasons. All in all *The Manhattan Gambit* is good, occasionally dirty fun with an underlying commitment to the forces of decency and an ironic last minute twist on history.

So much for poolside reading. Ben Stein's *Ludes* is considerably deeper