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(ATTENTION EDITORS This column ends with the words “it is, evidently, actively clarifying.” If the column you have received ends another way, you have an incomplete version. Please contact media@poetryfoundation.org for the correct version.)

THE IMPETUOUS POET

Richard Kenney’s first poetry collection in fifteen years is worth the wait.

by D. H. Tracy

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The One-Strand River, by Richard Kenney. Alfred A. Knopf. \$26.95.

Fifteen years have passed since Kenney’s last book, and *The One-Strand River* finds the author having deviated some from his last known trajectory. After *The Invention of the Zero* (1993), I would have guessed Kenney’s poems would spiral farther out into the dismal reaches of the Thomas Pynchon / boy genius nebula of literature. Time had other plans, and although one must factor out certain quirks, losing every third poem or so to a gimmick of some kind (“This poem is no fun,” etc.), Kenney has developed a capacity to be at least intermittently restrained, and the result is not only the entry of affection and wonder into his poetry but their coexistence with mordancy and mischief. Real feeling and satirical bite result.

The texture of the writing is defined by verbal impetuosity, a lunge for the aptest comparison at any cost in baroque—on the highway he watches “a lone deinonychid biker” whose shadow “writhes like a count’s cape / Caught in a belt sander.” The mood is defined, contrarily, by wariness and moderation amid midlife shoals where “Churlish / Thoughts bedevil me, often,” although he has to admit “ambrosias / Yet decant.” Kenney’s fascination with data certainly still exists, and he cannot resist mentioning hurricanes on Jupiter and saying “the Middle Holocene” instead of “now.” The data are not purely for show-off, but are pressed to serve as metaphors for experience and inner life, where they have the pitifully inadequate quality of a precocious child trying to insulate itself from uncertainty. They are no different ontologically from the stuff of religion or indeed fairy tales: “All linchpins shear.” The problem is worse than that, since the things which affect him most—a glint in the eye of a laughing child, the scent of soap

on a passing woman—are irreconcilable with a certain empirical idiom of public speech. With knowledge and meaning no longer overlapping, questions of right conduct become absurdly underdetermined (“the poled pirogue // Of Humanism slips the everglade / Of endocrine function, doing / Its very best”), and there are no grounds for deciding in what ratio one ought to be a creature of instinct and of reason:

Oh to live ignobly!
Not pig-
Like, quite, nor bleating,

Braying, mewling, really;
Neither, though, thoroughly
Morally:

Not for a life of pure sensation
Per se.

—From “To Circe”

The overall impression is of a slightly louche, roué, self-hating polymath, a role he plays much less consistently than Frederick Seidel but perhaps with more vulnerability. Kenney’s touch is not always light enough for *vers de société* or deft political incisions (it is in cases very crude) but when he can bring himself to leave something unsaid, the results are *aqua vitae*. This happens in “Critical,” “Security Council,” the academy sendup “Challenges & Opportunities” (“Sousa’s // To be replaced, we learn, by !Kung plainsong”) and in “Alaric Intelligence Memo #36,” where the fiction is a sleeper terrorist filing a report to his superiors. Through this exercise Kenney is trying to decide what he has invested in his latter-day Rome: “Their warrior class, insufficiently manned, / Is mad, responsive, and under command”:

Their poetry barks. Their faith, a ruins,
Ghost-infested, affords no womb
Of future. In sum: however skilled,
They are overripe. My Lord, strike soon.

Addendum: proud to have served your will,
I have lived too long among them. I am ill.
I am infected with dreams. At the first moon
Of conquest, I respectfully request to be killed.

That “Addendum” falls on a page break—until then, the poem seems truly out of control. But the ending exposes the internal struggle that has been taking place, charity fighting disgust to a draw. The poem is not about uncertainty or vacillation, but agonized and clear ambivalence, and in imparting such ambivalence to a public voice Kenney has made me rethink my suspicion that the art is ill-suited to the interestingness of the times. Not only is it not playing catch-up, it is, evidently, actively clarifying.

D.H. Tracy's poetry and criticism appear widely. He lives in Illinois. This review originally appeared in the September 2008 issue of *Poetry* magazine. Distributed by the Poetry Foundation. Read more about Richard Kenney, and his poetry, at www.poetryfoundation.org.

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