

REVIEWS

The Collected Poems of Kenneth Koch. New York: Knopf, 2005. 761pp. \$40

Of the three kings most identified with the New York School of Poets, Kenneth Koch is the least heralded. While his status as a celebrity teacher for several generations at Columbia shows the reach of his influence, one feels that O'Hara and Ashbery have marked the fabrics of contemporary American poetry more indelibly, that their influence has bled through more layers. It may be that Koch's new-fangled egotistical sublime is, in the end, more his own, and thus less easily imitated than the porous selflessness of O'Hara and Ashbery. Or that Koch's formal accomplishments cut a path aspirants would need years of personal practice to cut again, while the avenues of O'Hara and Ashbery's cool and shadowed mystery now seem permanently cleared and accessible. Whatever the case may be—and it's a curious one, having as much to do with the vicissitudes and capriciousness of literary and artistic society as it does with aesthetic, formal innovations—a career-spanning view of Koch's oeuvre is now, four years after his death, available in this collection of his shorter poems.

But what does New York School mean in 2006? What was *New York School* but a publicity ploy concocted in 1961 by John Myers, the New York gallery director: the branding already existing for a group of painters, it was simple enough to share it with another coterie product. Modern poetry is rife with such branding, and the invention of literary movements has long suggested the American avant-garde as the backside of a Madison Avenue currency called *What's New*.

What was new about these poets in the early 1950s was their use of accident and play in their spirited disregard for the decorum of refined diction, high-flown syntax, traditional symbology, and elevated abstraction—all the elements that contributed to the serious meatloaf of the mid-century lyric.

Here is "Sun Out," the first poem in Koch's *Collected*, from that period:

Bananas, piers, limericks,
I am postures
Over there, I, are
The lakes of delection
Sea, sea you! Mars and win-
Some buffalo
They thinly raft the plain,
Common do

It ice-floes, hit-and-run drivers,
The mass of wind.
Is that snow
H-ing at the door? And we
Come in the buckle, a
Vanquished distinguished
Secret festival, relieving flights
Of the black brave ocean.

The tassels of poetic convention circa 1955 have come undone here, left in tatters. The short list that opens the poem makes a couple of typical early Kochian moves: the slapstick banana followed by an unrelated “pier” that nonetheless makes the sound of another fruit (pear), thus at once evoking a logic further unsettled by the “limerick” that ends the line. (Is there a form that mocks the metaphysical anxiety of modernism more flamboyantly than the limerick?) “I am postures / Over there, I, are / The lakes of delection / Sea, sea you!”—such a line of scrambled code suggests, perhaps, something about Koch’s previous year in France; the way, he writes in a preface, that the French language was one he “understood and misunderstood at the same time. Words would have several meanings at once. [...] The pleasure—and the sense of new meanings—I got from this happy confusion was something I wanted to recreate in English.”

Confusion, of course, is precisely the condition of meaning that the conventions of mid-century formalism hoped to combat in their struggle against cultural dissolution. Dissolution—and not mere ambiguity—is a condition that Koch hopes to engender. A Koch poem is a slippery semantic field of puns, parodic snippets, homonyms, fractured syntax, and jarring juxtapositions. The martial ambitions of Mars in the poem above, to win all battles, makes the macho word-fragment, “win,” flower as it crosses the line into the sweet, cheerful “winsome,” an absurd adjective for a buffalo. Fragments of grandly ridiculous rhetoric (“they thinly raft the plain”) inflate the comedy further. The poem is not, however, simply a parody of poetic posturing; it’s driven by an essential pleasure principle—to concoct a sequence of word-tastes in the mouth. “Vanquished distinguished / Secret festival, relieving flights / Of the black brave ocean”: leash rhyme (—quished / —guished), the play of long and short vowel sounds, and the pulsing cadence that clusters at the end with alliterative amplification—Koch is not making fun of poetry; he’s making *fun* of poetry. The sun is out, the ice floes of formal and linguistic convention are melting, and the poem makes a new figure, a “secret festival” open to everyone.

“Your Fun Is a Snob,” Koch titles an early poem, a challenge to the whole literary establishment circa 1953. And Koch—New York’s “Doctor Fun” (so dubbed by Ashbery)—wished to inoculate the whole population

against third-hand postures of solemnity. Koch's own prescription couldn't be clearer than the voice of Ingelil, the character of the young Swedish nurse in his early verse play "The Merry Stones": "May the blue star of yesterday pink its liberal summit to that head, this you, like a revolvment, fats the walls with lowing circumvention. Oh, goodbye, normal!"

"The whole idea of writing poetry had a lot to do with escaping," Koch told an audience in 1994. The circumvention of social norms and expectations of Cincinnati, where Koch grew up in the late 1920s and 30s, elided with this later impulse to escape compositional expectations of any kind. The first expectation he thwarted as a poet was that of depth, unlike his contemporary, Allen Ginsberg, whose "Howl" sounded a protest, in part, against fashion and superficiality. In a testy 1978 interview, Ginsberg pressed Koch about the Buddhist wisdom he heard in Koch's play, *The Red Robin*, which ran for three weeks at St. Clement's theater in New York. Koch replied (recalling Andy Warhol's famous assertion): "I think you have a tendency to look for meaning beneath the surface of my work, whereas the meaning is really that surface." That surface, however, is varied, seductive, beguiling. "But even every surface gets hot / In the sun," he writes in a poem from *A Possible World*, his final volume.

Reading through the *Collected Poems*, one is struck by the sheer variety of formal deployments and stylistic mimicry—he can sound like any poet from the canon and can perform any technical effect. But if he can sound like anyone, and *do* anything, what makes him an essential poet, not merely a virtuoso capable of producing pleasurable effects? What does Koch's work tell us about what happened in American culture in the second half of the twentieth century?

Koch worked in two basic modes that appear mutually exclusive, yet come together to form a vigorous polyphonic style of great flexibility and charm. The first mode—of fragmented, joyous confusion—is best exemplified in his early long poem "When the Sun Tries to Go On" (not included in the book under review, but forthcoming in the subsequent volume from Knopf, gathering up the long poems). Koch claims *War and Peace*, which he had recently finished, as an invisible influence, specifically Tolstoy's "way of seemingly including everything imaginable."

"When the Sun Tries to Go On" opens mid-sentence, like Pound's *Cantos*; only the sea on which Koch embarks is of a different heroic motion, the epic of everyday objects swirling amongst literary scrap wood and milkyways of diction, swaths of glowing particles syntactically adrift:

And with a shout, collecting coat hangers
Dour rebus, conch, hip,
Ham, the autumn day, oh how genuine!

Literary frog, catch-all boxer, O
Real! The magistrate, say “group,” bower, undies
Disk, poop, *Timon of Athens*. When
The bugle shimmies, how glove towns!
It’s Merrimac, bends, and pure gymnasium
Impy keels!

“When the Sun Tries to Go On” showcases most dramatically (at 2400 lines) the early Kochian oxymoron of style, a radiant opacity; yet by the early 1960s, Koch’s language was opening, becoming available through the use of a more standard syntax. One hears Koch leaving the entangled fields of radical *parole in libertà* to adopt a mode that actually allows him to convey the happy zaniness of a mind inventing at what appears to be very high speed.

Is the basketball coach a homosexual lemon manufacturer? It is suspected by
O’Ryan in his submarine.
When I was a child we always cried to be driven for a ride in that submarine.
Daddy would say Yes!
Mommy would say No! The maid read *Anna Karenina* and told us secrets.
Some suspected her of a liaison with O’Ryan. Nothing but squirrels
Seemed to be her interest, at the windows, except on holidays, like Easter and
Thanksgiving, when
She would leave the basement and rave among the leaves, shouting, I am the
Spirit of softball! Come to me!

Koch discovers in these poems that he can do more with language and form if he steps back from absolute disruption; that his penchant for whacked-out story-telling, comic meditation, and lyric mania relies on *stretching* the conventions, much as R. Crumb did with his comics. Abstraction is too constraining. The fun is in adopting the principles of representation and reference, and distorting them by playing with expectations. You learn this from Byron, not Marinetti.

By the 1970s Koch’s work developed further by adopting a verbal transparency that delights in rhetorical peregrinations and associational argument.

If you do not have money, you must probably earn some
But do it in a way that is pleasant and does
Not take too much time. Painting ridiculous pictures
Is one good way, and giving lectures about yourself is another.
I once had the idea of importing tropical birds
From Africa to America, but the test cage of birds
All died on the ship, so I was unable to become
Rich that way. Another scheme I had was
To translate some songs from French into English, but

No one wanted to sing them. Living outside Florence
In February, March, and April was an excellent idea
For me, and may be for you, although I recently revisited
The place where I lived, and it is now more “built up”;
Still, a little bit further out, it is not, and the fruit trees
There seem the most beautiful in the world. Every day
A new flower would appear in the garden, or every other day,
And I was able to put all this in what I wrote. I let
The weather and the landscape be narrative in me.

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Be attentive to your dreams. They are usually about sex,
But they deal with other things as well in an indirect fashion
And contain information that you should have.
You should also read poetry. Do not eat too many bananas.

The last thing New York School will ever be accused of is aspiring to the condition of wisdom literature; yet “Some General Instructions” flirts with just such an ambition. This is Koch finding a voice for poetry in his employment as university professor. An unpromising premise: pedantry so quickly invites mockery. But Koch is a self-conscious Polonius here, although of ambiguous intent: Is he making fun of giving advice by making the advice impossible to accept, or does he mean it? Yes and yes. Koch is the great poet of Yes! Our crazy Troubadour from virtual Languedoc. Some of the advice is obvious, some impossible to accept, some worth remembering. “I let the weather and the landscape be narrative in me”—such a sentence is positively grand; it sounds worthy of Cézanne, noble, provocative, an imaginative seed ready to bear great fruit. On the other hand, “You should also read poetry” is a tautology that undoes the entire occasion (we can’t take the advice unless we are *already* reading poetry).

While this uncertainty of tone is also characteristic of Ashbery and O’Hara, Koch’s poems convey a quintessential American openness. Koch does not reside on the underside of his phrasing. Even an ironic-sounding line—“You should also read poetry. Do not eat too many bananas”—achieves its main effect not through irony but from the pure comedy of contrast (between reading poetry and eating bananas) and the quick shift from a positively charged imperative (you should) to a negative one (do not). Koch is not suggesting the opposite or inverse of what he “says”—one really should not eat too many bananas. But who ever does?

Koch’s poems show no ambition to critique by way of irony the obvious and pernicious systems of power that make civilization possible as well as exploitative; his poems seek, rather, to induce in the reader a state of happiness that serves, in the largest sense, as a criticism of life.

Beauty is sometimes personified
As a beautiful woman, and this personification is satisfying
In that, probably, of all the beautiful things one sees
A beautiful person is the most inspiring, because, in looking at her,
One is swept by desires, as the sails are swept in the bay, and when the body
is excited
Beauty is more evident, whether one is awake or asleep.

The argument in “On Beauty” is not at all obvious, yet Koch’s discursive mode is absolutely clear, with a kind of classical balance reinforced by a lineation co-extensive with the grammatical clause: such lines are not simply randomly linedated prose, however; much of their nuanced art lies in the controlled release of information, a kind of control one finds in good prose, yes, but accentuated here by verse movement. Koch’s hand is firm but his touch is light. And there is something particularly pleasing, surprising, humorous, and true in the arrival of the final clause of this sentence, that posits what is most evident to us we often discover in our dreams.

Koch’s mature mode, I think you could call it, combines the first—of fragmented, forcefully juxtaposed phrases and irrational word sequences—with a second, discursive, narrative and didactic mode, the mode of logical development, however many shifts and swerves it makes; the result is one of Koch’s most consistent and endearing qualities, the way he uses parody and pastiche as a form of sincerity, as if Rufus T. Firefly and Whitman had collaborated on a new kind of poem.

One of Koch’s funniest poems is a fake anthology of South American poets that he wrote in the late nineteen-sixties, at a time when Robert Bly and others were introducing the work of South American poets to US readers. The “translations” form a set of stylistic pratfalls, from clunky rhyming abstractions and “deep” images (“Now a drumstick of night, / Two Indians on a highway— / One stricter than a feather, / The other, clasped by might”) to long passive prosaic lines of exploded pomp (“At the Cabana Ailanthus when night breezes are stilled / One old commonwealth teacher remains fastened to his desk. / Through the night come the sounds of the frog / As if someone, or as if an entire people, had learned a Romance language.”) Koch’s own expansiveness, the speed of his appropriations, his inclusiveness and the range of his materials, suggests a willed recklessness. But parody, as a form of light verse, requires absolute precision if it’s to come off with any effect, and Koch’s parodies are funny. They also serve as a source for his best work.

The fake nineteenth-century South American poet, Jorge Guinhieme, for example, writes a poem, “Boiling Water,” that Koch renders in a comically awkward translation; Koch later takes the title for one of his most daring

performances, “The Boiling Water” (from the late 1970s), a meditation that begins with the literal moment rather than the lame allegory of his false forebear:

A serious moment for the water is when it boils
And though one usually regards it merely as a convenience
To have the boiling water available for bath or table
Occasionally there is someone around who understands
The importance of the moment for the water—maybe a saint,
Maybe a poet, maybe a crazy man, or just someone temporarily disturbed
With his mind “floating,” in a sense, away from his deepest
Personal concerns to more “unreal” things. A lot of poetry
Can come from perceptions of this kind, as well as a lot of insane
conversations.

The poem succeeds as the parody does, by taking up an unpromising premise; yet it never shifts into parody. Rather it boldly champions its occasion, a serious moment when something begins to happen, to change—as our feelings change as we fall in love.

One finds an even more dramatic example in how, twenty-five years after he spins the bogus poetics of Argentinean “Hasosismo”—“the art of concealing in one line what has been revealed in the previous line”—Koch uses the same notion to begin one of his most inventive and charming poems, “One Train May Hide Another”:

In a poem, one line may hide another line,
As at a crossing, one train may hide another train.
That is, if you are waiting to cross
The tracks, wait to do it for one moment at
Least after the train is gone. And so when you read
Wait until you have read the next line—
Then it is safe to go on reading.

The poem proceeds to suggest how all the phenomena of the world are concealed behind themselves; it’s not that surfaces are peeled away to reveal further surfaces, but that everything is connected, and that the connections between things constantly come to light, if only one has the patience to keep looking. (Could Ginsberg have been right about the Buddhism?)

In the later books—*Days and Nights* (1982), *One Train* (1994), *Straits* (1998), *New Addresses* (2000), and *A Possible World* (2002)—Koch became a great poet of memory, his strongest memory the feeling of how great it was to be the poet of the earlier books. Yet his elegiac mood is buoyant, never mordant; his later poems draw from the source of energy even as they find the language to acknowledge its setting:

Those were the days
When there was so much energy in and around me
I could take it off and put it back on, like clothes
That one has bought only for a ski trip
But then finds that one is using every day
Because every day is like a ski trip—
I think that's how I was at twenty-three.

My favorite poem in this key is “Bel Canto,” which opens Koch’s final volume, *A Possible World*.

To be in all those places where I tarried
Too little or too late or bright and early,
To love again the first woman I married,
To marvel at such things as melancholy,
Sophistication, drums, a baby carriage,
A John Cage concert heard at Alice Tully—
How my desire, when young to be a poet
Made me attentive and oblivious every moment!

The ease of Koch’s formal skill, his limitless powers of impression (in this case, of Keats), his restless gathering of disparate experiences, directness of treatment and refusal to psychologize—all are on full display here.

If Koch is a wonderful poet, even a masterful one, the question remains, is he an important poet? Does he have a role as an artist in the development of American poetry; or is he more the elaborately talented poetry-writing friend who became an academic, a supporting character in an historical play about some other poets of significance, titled *New York School*? If importance is measured by influence, and influence by discernible imitation, then Koch’s present significance is muted. And yet when I dip into his poems, or plunge, they seem to draw continuously from the freshest coldest source, while Ashbery now seems brackish and O’Hara depleted. Those who keep their distance from Koch’s work complain of its pastiche and loquaciousness, its irrepressible insistence to keep on running. But forty years out it remains remarkably clean of mannerism—no tired moves, no overplayed riffs, no self-invented clichés. The master of parody, pastiche, and formal adaptation remains parody-proof, inimitable, entirely himself: “Fresh paint! / Unpasteurized milk!” Koch embodies with more kinaesthetic joy than any poet of his immediate milieu the paradox of how new art thrives in the refracted light of a tradition. Tennis without a net? He can play the game in outer space as winningly as in a suitcase.

As does the work of other poets associated with the New York School, the influence of which is so prominent, Koch’s poems vividly animate one

of the central aesthetic struggles of twentieth-century poetry in English, the attempt to resolve the tension between closed and open forms. Koch admired the poems of William Carlos Williams for being so “odd and exciting;” they “catch the music of a man alive in his time.” Koch’s poems aspire to do the same, and more often than not they achieve that sound. It’s the sound of a man happy to be alive despite the world’s terrors, and who is awake to that feeling. I don’t think readers of poetry will ever tire of it; I suspect it will continue to convey something real about their own experience. It’s the sound of a man reaching into history without embarrassment or sense of piety, to draw forth whatever elements of poetic form are best suited to his occasions—from tight rhyming stanzas, to heroic couplets, to long and short free verse lines, to experimental serial structures—cheerfully ripping out the lining of yesterday’s attitudes and shaking off the lint of a persistent yet tired idiom. The spirit of poetry lives in Koch’s work, but we return to the work because it is alive with the spirit of Koch himself. If he started to write his first real poems by thwarting the expectations of literary convention in 1952, he continued to write into the twenty-first century by escaping the expectations of New York School poetics, in its tertiary generation.

I discovered Koch’s work late, in the mid-nineties, with the poem “One Train May Hide Another,” and the book from which it takes its name; finding the single volumes that preceded it, many of them out of print, was no small discovery. Whereas O’Hara and Ashbery were ubiquitous as the weather, Koch’s work seemed tough, resistant and alive, like a fish too big for the line. “Did you once ride in Kenneth’s machine?” Koch hears a voice ask beneath the great Atlantic Rainway; I feel as if I’ve never stepped off. “Your sureness is like the sun / While you have it,” he writes in “The Circus”; not that he never doubted (he doubts the worth of that very poem in the poem itself), but he never stopped believing, he said, that the poetry “shows me the life I want to go on having.” Koch had his life, with its great joys and muted sorrows, and made from it an art as interesting as the world we live in. Whatever kind of poetry we want to go on having, that it wouldn’t—or shouldn’t—include this robust and singular body of work is hard to imagine.

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The Collected Poems of Ted Berrigan. Edited by Alice Notley with Anselm Berrigan and Edmund Berrigan. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005. 749pp. \$49.95

This is a story about a man who decided to be a poet. It took him ten years. First he met some other people who had decided to be poets and artists.