Passing the Test of Time: The Essays of Thomas E. Kennedy

by Robert Stewart

We need a good term for the kind of writing you encounter in the essays of Thomas E. Kennedy, particularly for a remarkable trio of them that have appeared in my magazine, *New Letters*, which, clearly, fit together as a whole.[1] Back in 1989, *New Letters* began publishing Kennedy's short stories, starting with "What Does God Care About Your Dignity, Victor Travesti?," proceeding to the O.Henry Prize winner "Landing Zone X-Ray," and continuing beyond. Most of these stories have been gathered in his three short-story collections.

In 2003, Kennedy began sending us writing that most people would call *non*fiction—a term that equivocates, however, because it would define this writing by what it is not. The narrative skill of a great fiction writer drives the writing here, and also fact, recollection, and journalistic fidelity. Let's not call them memoirs either, because their purpose transcends the mere recalling of events. These are essays; they aspire to a conceptual complexity while leaping over anything that resembles the dull, trapped tapestries of academic prose. These essays embrace a tradition that includes George Orwell and Joan Didion; even today, anthologists can't decide if Orwell's "Shooting an Elephant" or his "Marrakech" should be called fictions or essays. I say essays.

As with Orwell, Dickens, Gellhorn, and many others, Thomas E. Kennedy has pushed the essay form to its brightest moments, wherein fact can have its poetry, its narrative, its characters, its emotion, and its intellectual integrity. "To speak well is part of living well," the critic Gaston Bachelard has written. This is Kennedy's gift: language used not as an instrument of explanation but as reality itself—the vitality of fiction translated to fact. Matthew Arnold noticed early versions of a similar style in journalism back in the 1880s, calling it vivid, highly personal, and, occasionally, feather-brained. Kennedy, I am sure, would welcome all those terms.

How feather-brained can one be to cozy up to folks, suspiciously eyeing you, with whom you have virtually no common background, while on a cross-country Greyhound bus ride, and then, to try to write about them with authenticity? The essay, as Kennedy writes it, stands apart from fiction and poetry by requiring his full participation in the experience —first-hand and faithful—promoting a different kind of author-reader pact. We read his essays expecting to learn less about how we might think than how we might live.

In "Riding the Dog," a nearly illiterate man asks the author, "What 'choo do?" and Kennedy thinks a moment: "I considered telling him I was on my way to read a story at a public college in Chicago where there has been a recent uproar over a Picasso sculpture on display there." The contrast illustrated here between the speaker and the man actually

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heightens the stature of the author's bus mate and of all the other people on the bus who never would have the time or the energy to get into an uproar over a sculpture of a woman whose breast was larger than her head. Kennedy's trick—a great trick, delivered with no small bit of humor—is to reverse his own relative privilege and to halo the sanctity of people around him who, at first, seem lost or even dim.

In "In the Dark," the author stops to help a woman, Chanel, and her three-year-old daughter, Kyla, who are huddled, exhausted and thirsty, in a doorway. Of course, the author's idea is to bring them to the Plaza Hotel, which, to him, is "a haven of civilization." Of course, they are blocked by the doorman. And, of course, Chanel understands the situation perfectly, while at that moment, the author can't quite comprehend the lesson he is being shown about rank and status here in America.

In some perfect way, each of these three works—especially the exuberant and melancholy essay "The Bridge Back to Queens"—shows Thomas Kennedy coming home from his adopted Denmark, still carrying the intractable naivete of his youth. His affection for and irrevocable connection to his home country carry a kind of furious need to get cozy all over again with the places and people for whom he holds such feeling. In the process, he recovers an ideal land.

Another great essayist, William H. Gass, has asked in his own writing, "What must a work do to pass the Test of Time?" Gass advises, in part, "Don't take the test at all." Essays such as Kennedy's, Gass would say, are not so much events as they are realities, in themselves, invested with value. So I would reject the term *personal* essay, as well, in Kennedy's case. These essays will pass the test of time, I believe, because they ultimately are not personal at all, but spiritual.

They came in the mail to me at *New Letters* one by one, each answering the question I, as editor, ask myself every day: how can I give meaning and importance to the work of my magazine? In each case, I embraced this writing. In each case, I saw the life of one man, certainly, but also my own life, and the life of the essay itself that can hardly be contained.

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The Revelation of Character Inside Out: Stream Of Consciousness Techniques in the Work of Thomas E. Kennedy

by Walter Cummins

My first encounter with Thomas E. Kennedy's work came about twenty years ago, when he submitted a short story, entitled "Years in Kaldar," to *The Literary Review*.[1] We were very excited by its quality and published it in our Summer 1988 issue, giving it an Angoff Award for the two best works we published during that volume year. The story became the basis of Kennedy's first novel, *Crossing Borders* (1990).

The qualities I discovered in that story relate to those of that first novel as well as to his most recent novel, *A Passion in the Desert*—most recently published though not the most recently written.

All three works are about a man in the midst of personal and psychological traumas that reveal themselves most directly in marital crisis—not that other pressures don't exist. All three penetrate to the heart of the central male character, revealing the deepest secrets of his consciousness—his fears, guilts, and shames.

Kennedy has the ability to totally expose a character in a way that convinces the reader that nothing is held back, that we know the character better than we know ourselves—a point Duff Brenna made independently in his review of, and which is also stressed in my cover blurb for, *A Passion in the Desert*:

> By the time readers finish *A Passion in the Desert,* they will know its central character, Fred Twomey, more intimately than they know the people around them, quite possibly even themselves. That's one of the powers of great fiction, and Thomas E. Kennedy possesses a special ability to explore the landscape of a man's inner world, exposing emotions and secrets he can barely admit to himself. Although Twomey's life is unique, caught up its own particular drama, he is clearly one of us, and in discovering him, we discover ourselves.

Brenna wrote: "Kennedy's writing is spellbinding. Step by step, plot and character slowly unfolding as we go deeper and deeper into a man's tormented psyche, until by the end we know Twomey possibly as well as we know ourselves. Maybe better." The similarity of our words says more about the novel than our ESP communication. I'm sure others will have the same reaction.

Beyond stripping bare his characters, Kennedy has a special talent for presenting the working of the inner mind, the stream of thoughts—a version of what we call stream-of-consciousness technique. We wouldn't know his characters so thoroughly without those revelations.

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Although the newly published novel is entitled *A Passion in the Desert*, that Balzac story plays a central thematic role in *Crossing Borders*, and, I believe, much of Kennedy's fiction. Sugrue, the protagonist of *Crossing Borders*, summarizes the story for Cindy, his lover:

> A man gets lost in the desert and wanders into a cave to sleep. He wakes during the night, and there's a panther sleeping beside him. He has a sword, but he's too afraid to move to try to kill it. In the morning, the panther goes out, but comes back dragging food for the man, meat, like a cat will, you know? They become friends. They play, wrestle, the implication is that they become lovers. One day while they're playing, she puts her teeth on his leg. Doesn't bite, but just hard enough to scare him, and he buries his sword in her throat. She dies quietly, her eyes full of sadness.

Men like Lynch in the Kaldar story, Sugrue, and Twomey do destructive things in moments of panic.

Though Kennedy's methods are distinctly his own, I believe I can demonstrate the direct influence of James Joyce, who perfected stream-of-consciousness technique. Kennedy knows Joyce's work well, has even traveled to Dublin for Bloomsday. In an interview in *The South Carolina Review* (see above in this issue), he observed: "James Joyce's writings have had an enormous influence on my development, and I have visited Ireland dozens of times and made a pilgrimage to Joyce's gave in Zurich."

Kennedy reveals stories from the inside out. That is, everything is seen from the perspective of a central character—through the eyes looking out at the immediate moment, merged with memories of that character's past and projections of that character's future—what he thinks will happen and what he wants to happen. His characters dwell in a complex tangle—the now always complicated by the presence of the then and the maybe. In a sense, the story is less important than who is experiencing it. Who it is happening to matters more than what is happening. Events take on meaning by how they are experienced.

But I see a difference in Kennedy's methods from the earlier works to the later, in which the stream is given directly rather than filtered through an authorial voice. I see three stages—a close third-person metaphoric reporting, a more direct report of what is happening in the character's mind, and finally a rendering of a genuine stream of consciousness that is really Joycean.

Let me make the following illustration:

"Years in Kaldar" doesn't use stream of consciousness in this way. Though the story reveals Lynch and his innermost emotions, it does it more familiarly, the way many writers do who use close third-person:

> During the night, he woke to the sound of a slow rain striking the roof gutter, sizzling in the dead leaves across the lawn. Not because he missed her so much as in a lonely panic to deny that this had happened to them, that their life together had grown so strange, he got off the sofa and climbed the stairs to the bedroom, lay beside her in the dark, listening to the whisper of her breathing while he stared at the knotty pine ceiling and contemplated the burnt, strange landscape of their ten years together, the children they had made, the transformation of

> their feeling for each other from what they had once called love to a relationship stranger than any he had ever known or could have imagined–the intimate hostility of people too closely connected ever to be free of one another, whether or not they parted. No, not connected. Disconnected, like a limb torn loose of its socket, bone grating on bone. He could remember saying to her, "I love you." The words he had held back until he felt sure he meant them. And, "I *do* love you," the extra verb emphasizing the doubt it tried to annul. The word seemed so cheap, the mandatory lie of surrender. The sound of it was like a trap with all its springs of pledge and vow and unspecified future commitment. It seemed a word for people weak with loneliness, desperate to deny that they were sealed within their flesh, alone for all time; he wondered whether this was due to a deficiency in himself.

This technique gives us information and a complex revelation as he parses the implications of adding the word "do" to "I love you." And the relationship of the marriage is analyzed metaphorically—"Like a limb torn from its socket," "bone grating on bone," "like a trap," "weak with loneliness," "sealed within their flesh," These analogies are as much the author's as they are the character's.

Crossing Borders expands the basic situation of "Years in Kaldar" to the length of a novel, but here Kennedy goes beyond his central male character, Sugrue, to include briefly the POV of the wife and mistress. We see this use of multiple POV much more fully in *The Copenhagen Quartet*, especially in the third, *Greene's Summer*, and in the final novel of the four—*Danish Fall*—where a number of characters have their innermost thoughts revealed on the page. But for my purposes here, let me stick with the male protagonist, Sugrue:

> What would happen to Robert and Angela if he left them? What would happen to Evelyn? Himself? See the kids perplexed for life. *Why did he go? Did he hate me? Was I bad? Unworthy? Am I still bad?* See their hurt turn to hate and hate to indifference. Meet them twenty years from now, and they re strangers. See Evelyn surrender to the strain, curse you, first under her breath, finally audibly, give in to the vilest of temptations (nurtured by his own vile act of desertion) and tell Robert. 'You! You're just like him. Weak! A sentimental fool.'
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> Maybe he was. Maybe his mind was hurt, programmed for destruction. Cause them all that pain for what? Freedom? For what? To write? Or to drink? To end yourself in an alley, dreaming of their faces in a cloud of muscatel, muttering how you were once almost a poet.

This passage differs from that taken from "Years in Kaldar," the authorial voice almost absent, the contents of Sugrue's thoughts presented almost directly, in some cases word for word, or at least many of the specific words he would use to talk to himself. But the passage is a kind of talking to himself, the content of what he is thinking, without metaphors, all focused on the central concern of his wanting to be out of the marriage. Still it's not really stream of consciousness in the Joycean sense. That comes in *A Passion in the Desert*.

Here's a passage from *A Passion in the Desert*:

> His left foot, he realizes, is numb from cold. His face is, too. It is cold enough for frost bite. He will have to examine his face in the mirror when he gets back inside—look for white spots. Or is it black spots? You could die here if you fell, hit your head, freeze to death. He thinks again of the bearded face in the dark cab of the truck, sees black eyes glittering at him. Did he, in fact, *see* black eyes glittering or is that a detail added for effect? How could he ever be a witness? Imagination accustomed to fill in, fashion symmetry, find the right word. But the right word conveys truth—the wind *seeps* through the leaves, yes, but what does that add to human knowledge other than a tool of communication? What use is it?
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> Think how your words walk across a vaguely imagined room, a kind of place with no walls to speak of, little or no furniture and what there is only ill-defined, in a mist, perhaps a scrap of vague carpet. What is it *for*?
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> The reason you can't live from your writing is because you're a bad writer, he thinks suddenly, uninvited words marching into his consciousness. No, not bad, worse than that: just not very good. In truth, more than a tad boring, certainly less than exciting. You have your few moments of glitter but…
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> So why not die then? Why not die here? Right here. Sit down there on that frozen sofa on that deserted-looking porch over there. Dilapidated grey clapboard house. Sit down there. Huddle in the cold and go the way Ms Dickinson described it, not trying to build a fire, but letting the cold in, first the chill, then the stupor, then the letting go. They say that was the source of the title for Philip Roth's novel. He recites rapidly through freezing lips, *This is the hour of lead/Remembered if outlived/As freezing persons recollect the snow/First the chill, then the stupor…*
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> *Recollect the snow*, he thinks, and suddenly realizes he is standing still on the sidewalk, gazing across a frozen lawn at the porch of an abandoned house, dilapidated, at a frozen half sunken sofa there. Both his feet are numb and his nose and cheeks and fingers, too.…

Note the multiple sources of what is going through Twomey's mind—the immediate cold and snow, the possibility of frostbite, freezing to death, what or who he saw in the truck, his accuracy as a witness, the right word to describe the wind, human language and communication, how it would feel to freeze to death, the title of an early Philip Roth novel, lines from a poem, the abandoned house he is looking at, and then back to the cold. This is the way human minds work—the cues and connections, the combinations of what emerges from our perceptions, our memories, our fantasies, and our speculations.

To compare, let's look at a sample from Leopold Bloom in episode 4 of *Ulysses*:

> He looked at the cattle, blurred in silver heat. Silvered powdered olive trees. Quiet long days: pruning ripening. Olives are packed in jars, eh? I have a few left from Andrews. Molly spitting them out. Knows the taste of them now. Oranges in tissue paper packed in crates. Citrons too. Wonder is poor Citron still alive in Saint Kevin's parade. And Mastiansky with the old cither. Pleasant evenings we had then. Molly in Citron's basketchair. Nice to hold, cool waxen fruit, hold in the hand, lift it to the nostrils and smell the perfume. Like that, heavy, sweet, wild perfume. Always the same, year after year. They fetched high prices too

> Moisel told me. Arbutus place: Pleasant street: pleasant old times. Must be without a flaw, he said. Coming all that way: Spain, Gibraltar, Mediterranean, the Levant. Crates lined up on the quayside at Jaffa, chap ticking them off in a book, navvies handling them in soiled dungarees. There's whatdoyoucallhim out of. How do you? Doesn't see. Chap you know just to salute bit of a bore. His back is like that Norwegian captain's. Wonder if I'll meet him today. Watering cart. To provoke the rain. On earth as it is in heaven.
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> A cloud began to cover the sun wholly slowly wholly. Grey. Far.

Although the language and the rhythms are distinctly Joyce's, Kennedy's *Passion* passage has much in common for the techniques used—a mixture of what the character is seeing at the moment, of what he thinks, references to the past keyed off one by the other, the literal ping pong of what is taking place in the character's mind.

To write this way, you have to know your characters completely—everything that has happened to them in their lives, all that they wish for, all that they regret, all that they fear, all that shames them, all that they are reluctant to admit to themselves in their deepest thoughts. And the writer has to convince the reader that he or she knows all—even more than the character does about himself. That takes special talent. Even more than talent. The presentation of stream of consciousness requires a mastery of technique. That in itself is impressive. Much more so is the ability to penetrate to the depths of a human being and to lay that person bare for all to see.

Let me add that *A Passion in the Desert* also offers a more complex plot than *Crossing Borders* with a central mystery anchored in an action from Twomey's past that literally comes back to haunt him. The novel also contains an interpolated story that enters in segments throughout, a story that reveals another of Kennedy's talents—to push past the edges of realism. An achievement of *A Passion in the Desert* is its ability to make the reader complicit with Twomey's guilt because it makes his self-revelations ours. Even though we may never have committed an act as rotten as Twomey had, the novel makes us know and understand.

Kennedy has been good at this from his earliest work. But I hope I've shown here that he's gotten even better throughout his writing career.

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