A Matter of Distance

Rachel DeWoskin Remembers Kenneth Koch

EDITORS' INTRODUCTION

Poet and teacher Kenneth Koch passed away in his New York apartment on July 6, 2002. Koch was a renowned poet, a pioneer of the poets-in-the-schools movement, and mentor to many generations of Columbia students. Koch's books on teaching and reading poetry remain unsurpassed. His passion for teaching poetry was so strong, in fact, that he organized workshops for fellow patients at the Anderson Cancer Center in Houston this past year.

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In the Spring of 1992, Kenneth Koch was reading to an undergraduate modern poetry class from Rainer Maria Rilke's *Duino Elegies*. Just above and behind his head, a pigeon was flapping its wings in a nest it had created on the chalkboard rim. The class held its breath until one English major finally raised his hand. "I'm sorry to interrupt, Professor Koch," he said, "but there's a pigeon behind your head."

Koch hardly moved at all. He looked up at us without changing his expression; he was a hero at deadpan. "There's a pigeon behind everyone's head," he said, "It's only a matter of distance." He turned his full attention back to Rilke.

This week, after reading his obituary, I unearthed three Koch courses' worth of notebooks from my undergraduate days at Columbia. My primary memories of him were of his caustic workshop style. In his intimate writing workshops, ten of us sat frozen at a table while he read our poems out loud and commented on them for the two-hour class. His comments were often brutally truthful. He said of a story about fishing that a student had been inspired by one of two things: 1) her desire to imitate other bad writers or 2) her fantasy about being a fisherman's wife. We tittered about it after class, secretly agreeing that the "salty lips" should be cut from the poem.

What I hadn't remembered as clearly was the way he taught undergraduates to read poetry. His true genius, magnified if sometimes undercut by his fierce in-class one-liners, was as a reader of poetry. Koch was uniquely aware of his place in a line of New York poets that included his contemporaries Frank O'Hara and John Ashbery. His own

works reflect not only the disillusionment and crisis of modern poetry, but also a brilliant clarity about the works of other poets:

Last evening we went dancing and I broke your leg
Forgive me. I was clumsy, and I wanted you here in
I wanted you here in the wards, where I am the
doctor

Koch believed in imitation as the only form of flattery. He taught a course called Imitation in Poetry, at the heart of which was Koch's fundamental belief that only by reading, understanding, and honoring a tradition, could young poets learn to find their own voices. This belief is pervasive not only in Koch's own body of work, but also in the legacy of his teaching. His poem "One Train May Hide Another" speaks of this:

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 first train is gone. And so when you
read
Wait until you have read the next line—
Then it is safe to go on reading.

He read to us from poets ranging from Rimbaud to Dickinson, Sidney to Moore. He even told us to be Keats. When we asked how to fulfill this tall order and why, Koch replied, "Keats asks questions. This is new. The meaning isn't exciting; it's exciting not to know the meaning." We began to ask questions, not only in and of our own poetry, but also of everyone else's. Koch told us that Dickinson "fit perfectly into a dress, but then felt perfectly free to alter the sleeves." He said, "Everything comes from Whitman." We felt ourselves placed in and borne out of a tradition of poets. We tried to read and write more responsibly. "Poetry should come naturally," Koch said, "and then be revised a lot. When you have a line you want, instead of using it and finding something to come after it, have a line come before it."

His imagination was far-reaching and disciplined. He used his classes to connect the world to poetry, but also to bring poetry back down to a worldly level, so we could grasp it. He summed up Dante's *dolce stil nuovo* (a poetry that attempted to reconcile sacred and profane love) with the following equation: "Here is *dolce*," he said, "If you are in love with a beautiful woman, then you are attracted to God. Think," he said, "of how this would spiritualize the high schools of America." In this way, he encouraged us to understand and make art as a reflection of reality, even if that meant including the mundane. "The tear in the curtain is as important as the curtain," he said.

How does one make poetry both imaginative and reflective of reality? How were we to stay consistent and artistic, while also mixing ingredients in a way that made language taste new? Koch suggested mixing poets, in a way I now believe partially accounts for the collage of his own work. "I put some Keats in Robert Frost," he told us one day in class, "for a lovely holiday salad."

Even while mixing Keats and Frost metaphors into mesclun, Koch was a respectful reader. He warned us of something I now warn my own undergraduate poets of, not to be the "dermatologist at the birthday party." One should go to a

party with an open mind, rather than an eye to the skin of the other guests. Along those same lines, readers should not read Wallace Stevens on a rabid if critical search for Stevens' feminine self, fractured soul, or sexual innuendo. Koch punctuated this belief repeatedly in class. In particular, I remember a student who proposed that D. H. Lawrence's snake was an "angry penis." Professor Koch responded curtly that "there are a limited number of shapes in the world."

But if he wanted us to control our most carrion instincts and resist the urge to swoop down onto poems and pick their bones for meat we desired, that was not to say he excluded us from the process of reading. On the contrary, Koch saw all readers of poetry as characters in the drama of the genre. On allowing sleep to see Stella, he said that dirty jokes in poems are "an attempt at the seduction of the third person." We were the third person, seduced.

What surprises me most from my class notes is that Koch encouraged us to "get to the feeling" in lieu of the intellect, a somewhat unexpected suggestion from a clever New York School poet. When Koch talked about William Carlos Williams, whom he loved, imitated, cultivated, read and re-read, he said, "Williams gets to the feeling and skips the intellect. You, when you see the ocean and think it looks like a scarf, first believe it is your scarf. Then you translate and say, 'Oh, it reminds me.' Williams skips the translation." He meant for us to skip that part as well, not to extract what was real from poetry or what was poetic from our realities. I suspect now that for Professor Koch there was little distinction between poetry and what was real, or the "everything" to which he so often referred in class. I also appreciate what I now understand as his generous inclusion of us in his own poetic battles. He, like the rest of the best teachers I have ever had, taught from the first car of his train of thought.

Koch once said, "Everything in life seems to be an introduction to something one doesn't have time for." His own life set the stage for thousands of young poets to try their hands. Finally, I'm reminded of what he said of Sonnet 138: "A certain kind of truth ends everything."