Jane Kenyon

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KENNEDY, X. J. (1929– ) Though he is sometimes reviled by critics for being superficial, a writer of "light" verse whose form and treatment of subjects are not complex, the majority of X. J. Kennedy's poems are not superficial but are, instead, "serious" with regard to social commentary. The uncertainty of categorizing Kennedy's poetry may be a result of his use of humor in his social criticism—for some, humor has no place in serious poetry. Perhaps the idea of Kennedy's superficiality is extended further by his adherence to verse forms; his poems are often endrhymed and follow strict meter. Kennedy may be considered an informal member of the NEW FORMALISM movement. Indeed what he said in 1961 acts as the movement's unofficial motto: "Why should a man learn how to write a decent villanelle... when... he can strew lines on a page any cockeyed way... and be hailed with the new American poetry? Poems ought to be harder to write than this" (243).

Kennedy was born Joseph Charles Kennedy in Dover, New Jersey. His first collection of poetry, Nude Descending a Staircase, was published in 1961 and won the Lamont Award. Since then he has garnered many other prizes and fellowships. Formerly a university professor, he has also edited anthologies and written more than a dozen children's books.

Kennedy may be best described as a chronicler and critic of everyday American culture. His wide-ranging observations display an aptitude for recognizing the significant in the ordinary and, often, the destructive as well. He uses meter and verse in an attempt to formalize themes, such as suicide and loneliness, perplexing subjects not easily contained by structure. In his poems one not only gets a sense of seeing something once hidden, as the form illuminates the content, but also one witnesses the control of the uncontrollable and begins to comprehend the incomprehensible.

The frequently anthologized "In a Prominent Bar in Secaucus One Day" (1961) conveys the themes of disappointment and disillusionment, the recognition of both the American dream gone awry and the ravages of time, through the humorous self-portrait of a woman who attempts, with bravado, to assuage the pain of a rough life by bragging about her experiences, dispensing wisdom all the while. The form here acts to solidify the poem's final adage, the rhyme actually making it memorable as adage, as Kennedy describes the consequence of one's attempt to subjugate time: "And [you'll] be left by the roadside for all your good deeds / Two toadstools for tits and a face full of weeds."

As an editor of many textbooks and anthologies used in schools across the country, Kennedy has been a great influence on readers of American poetry. As a poet, his work perpetuates debate on the difference between "serious" and "light" verse.

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KENYON, JANE (1947–1995) The pastoral emphasis and New England setting of Jane Kenyon's poetry has invited comparisons to Robert Frost and Emily Dickinson. The uncluttered spareness of her work and her interrelated themes of faith, guilt, empathy, and pessimism also place her among that collection of people known as New England poets. Kenyon's own love of John Keats—and his haunted experiences of pain and beauty—also informs her work.

Kenyon was raised in Ann Arbor, Michigan, where she attended the University of Michigan, earning her B.A. in 1970 and her M.A. in 1972. There she met her future husband, the poet and editor Donald Hall. In 1975 Hall and Kenyon left Michigan to settle in Hall's ancestral home in New Hampshire. Their quiet life together in this rural setting figures prominently in her work. She died of leukemia, at the height of her powers, at age of 47. Her awards include fellowships from
the National Endowment for the Arts and the Guggenheim Foundation, and a PEN Voelcker Award.

Kenyon's aesthetic creed is most easily summed up in her favorite quote of Ezra Pound's: "The natural object is always the adequate symbol." Her fastidious adherence to this principle usually results in poems of understated elegance, such as her conclusion to "Camp Evergreen" (1986): "Now it is high summer: the solstice: / longed-for, possessed, luxurious, and sad." But her effort to pare away can sometimes hobble the poetry, resulting in a failure of invention and the substitution of mere reportage for cohesively linked images. Kenyon herself acknowledged this fault of at least one of her poems, "Three Songs at the End of Summer" (1993), though it appears elsewhere, particularly in her earlier work.

As her poetic voice matures, what was occasionally ponderous becomes stately. Understatement, or even silence, in Kenyon's work can, paradoxically, achieve complex and rewarding moments of empathy. Like many of her pastoral poems, "Frost Flowers" (1987) begins with a speaker who, after having taught a class earlier, is now outside in the dusk observing squirrels and flowers. Without preparation, the following devastating lines arrive: "My sarcasm wounded a student today. / Afterward I heard him running down the stairs." A similar moment occurs in her long poem "Having it Out with Melancholy" (1993), where she movingly records her struggles with recurring depression. The third section of the poem reports a friend's advice: The speaker could escape from depression if she "really believed in God." The speaker's refusal to explain away, contextualize, or otherwise redeem these moments makes them intensely poignant.

There is a narrow consistency to Kenyon's work: walks with the dog, narratives of chastened spirituality, descriptions of nature, and the myriad faces of grief constitute the bulk of her thematic concerns. But while there are more varied and virtuosic poets, few have won the kind of devoted readership that Kenyon enjoys.

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KEROUAC, JACK (1922–1969) Jack Kerouac is one of the most mythical figures in American literature, his name and the name of his novel On the Road (1957) having the power of invocation even for people who have never read a word he wrote; the names conjure freedom. By comparison, his poetry is obscure, but it is both powerful as poetry and significant as a direct influence on his fellow poets. Kerouac, with Allen Ginsberg, Gregory Corso, and William S. Burroughs, was at the hub of the mid-20th-century shift in American literary consciousness known as the Beat generation. When his first poems later published in Mexico City Blues (1959), arrived from Mexico in 1955, his friends who were involved in what became known as the San Francisco Renaissance, Gary Snyder, Philip Whalen, Philip Lamantia, and Michael McClure, in particular, were moved and inspired. Kerouac, "author-catalyst" of the writerly cataclysm that shook America (Ginsberg vi), had a traceable impact on the writing of many others, such as Robert Creeley, Amiri Baraka, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Lew Welch, and Anne Waldman. Bob Dylan pointed to Kerouac's verse as "the first poetry that spoke his Dylan's own language" (Ginsberg ii). Ginsberg proclaimed Kerouac "a major, perhaps seminal, poet... and mayhap thru his imprint on Dylan and myself among others, a poetic influence over the entire planet" (vi).

Jean-Louis de Kerouac was born in Lowell, Massachusetts, the youngest of three children in a French-Canadian family. His cultural origins are important, because of the role religion and language played in his life and his work; his first language was French, and his first and last religion was Roman Catholicism, interrupted by an earnest exploration of Buddhism. The collective force of mother tongue, mother church, and his own mother, Gabrielle, made him maternally fixated. He moved away from his language, his church, and his mother, physically and philosophically, but he always returned closer. Kerouac married three times, arguably had sex with as many men as he did women,