

HERE & ELSEWHERE

The Collected Fiction of Kenneth Burke

Introduction by Denis Donoghue



A Black Sparrow Book

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TOWARDS A BETTER LIFE

Being a Series of Epistles, or Declamations

Part One

Nunc serpens, nunc taurus erat, nunc cygnus et arbos.

St. Paulinus: POEMA ADVERSUS PAGANOS

I.

“My converse became a monologue”

General statement of the narrator’s antinomian philosophy. And his corresponding discomforts. Reference to a trip with a friend to whom these “epistles” are addressed. Concern with death (as the narrator meets a man “while traveling south alone”). Foreshadowing: thoughts on destitution. Attack upon friend to whom he is writing, and in whom he sees the lucky antithesis of himself. Close: statement of antinomian ars poetica.

I had become convinced that, by the exercise of the intelligence, life could be made much simpler and art correspondingly complex; that any intensity in living could be subdued beneath the melancholy of letters. And I tried to realize that we should all be saviors of mankind if we could, and would even slay one another for the privilege. I felt that the man who strove for dignity, nobility, and honor should have his task made as difficult and as hazardous as possible, and that in particular he should be forgiven no lapses in style. The day was long since past when I drew moustaches on the pictures of pretty women, though I still warmed to find that a new generation had arisen to continue the tradition, to carry on the torch which we had handed

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down to them. When finding that people held the same views as I, I persuaded myself that I held them differently. And as for bravery: dead upon the fields of glory are millions who would have feared to wear a hat in inappropriate season, so I judged that brave warriors were dirt cheap as compared with untimid civilians. We create new ills, I thought, and call it progress when we find the remedies. Yet I was not without wonder, the nonbeliever finding a legend of miracles itself a miracle.

On looking back upon one's own life, one may sometimes feel that every moment of it was devoted to discomfiture, marked by either pain or uncertainty, and he may worry lest this day be the very one on which he snaps under the burden and, if not talented at suicide, becomes insane. Yet it is possible that by a constant living with torment, we may grow immune to it, and disintegration will fall only upon those whom adversity can overwhelm as a surprise, making little headway against those others who would accept even prosperity with bitterness. For when I have heard much talk of the world's growing worse, I have known that this was indulged in by persons who had thought that it could grow better. And in any case, the belief in human virtue is no cause to neglect the beating of our children.

I finally came to hold that one cannot distinguish between friends and acquaintances—and from then on, my converse became a monologue. I sought those who would listen, when I could not go without them, and did not scruple to avoid them if ever I became self-sufficient, believing that in these unnecessary moments they would be most likely to do me harm. It is obvious that I came by preference to talk most intimately with strangers, and to correspond with my friends on postcards. I discovered that in confessing a reprehensible act, I would sometimes add a still more reprehensible interpretation—and whereas I might forget my own judgments upon myself, those in whom I had confided would carefully store them against me.

Not as by accident, but rather as though some voice had called me, I would awake in the night, and thereafter there was no sleeping. Could vigilance, under these circumstances, be an advance retribution for some yet uncommitted act? Though not by earthquake, people

are driven into the street, pawing at one another, gentle and even courteous when necessary, but in the absolute crude, direct, revolting—and it is this panic, or should I say this glacier movement, that must be considered. Did not we two go on a premature search of an already premature spring—and did we not find the skunk cabbages well thrust up, and brooks temporarily crossing the road from every field, while the same Eumenides still rode upon the shoulders of us both? Who, seeing us munch chocolate, would have thought us dangerous? As a precaution, we carried not pistols, but rum. Feeling our flasks against our moving legs, we were assured, aiming to protect ourselves less against the malignant bite of snakes than from the benign mordancy of the season. Oh, tender psychopaths—if you be young and one of us, and it is spring, you suffer beneath the triple proestrums of climacteric (“if you be young”), personality (“and one of us”), and calendar (that is, “spring”). I the while being condemned as an apologist; as though he who speaks were more goaded than he who must remain silent! We know there has been a major ill in every stage of the world’s history, since we know that in no age were all men sovereigns—but one must sing, though it be but to praise God for his boils. And if I have invited death, calling upon death to take me, I likewise avoided traffic with agility.

Recently, while traveling south alone (and I cite you the episode as evidence of my newly discovered patience), I met a man who attracted me by the obvious disquietude of his movements. As he sat facing me, we were finally able to talk with each other, though the conversation was an unsatisfactory one; for between long pauses, while both of us looked out the window, he would sigh and say, “Death is a strange thing,” or “I should not fear to die,” remarks which seemed to demand an answer as strongly as they precluded it. The real meaning of this, I came to understand in time, was that he was hurrying to a woman who was near death. After he had spoken at length, and in particular had talked with much penetration concerning suicide, at my suggestion we went to the back of the train, where he explained to me that he was religious, and believed firmly in the process of the Eucharist. Then, as we stood swaying with the car, and watching the tracks untwist beneath us, he said that he had prayed,