

Kenneth John Atchity:

## Los Angeles Letters

ONE of the more interesting literary afternoons of the year past was spent with novelists John Rechy and Kate Braverman, discussing their new books.

Kate's *Lithium for Medea* (Harper & Row, 1979) is her first novel, although she has been well known for ten years in and around L. A. for her poetry (including two published volumes, the more recent from Harper & Row, 1980).

*Rushes* (Grove Press, 1979) is his seventh book — his first novel since *The Sexual Outlaw*, a documentary of contemporary sexual cultures (Grove, 1978). His previous five novels include his well-known first, *City of Night*, as well as *Numbers* and *The Fourth Angel*. Both writers teach writing and are active among L. A. literary circles. Reviews of both *Lithium* and *Rushes* throughout the U.S. were strong and favourable; but an undercurrent of condescension in many reviews led me to thinking that an afternoon of talking with them together might prove interesting and provide more than a run-of-the-mill analysis of contemporary commercialised literature.

My expectations were not disappointed. In Rechy's *Rushes*, the main characters are a group of homosexual men at a leather and western bar, as the book jacket proclaims, in a nameless American city and its decaying waterfront. During the night in which the novel takes place — late night and early morning — the ritual gathering of this group turns out to be one of the strongest themes in the book. Both novels demonstrate the contemporary yearning for ritual and the inability of ritual to fully satisfy the solitude and despair in each of the characters.

In Braverman's book the main character and those closest to her — her mother, her father, and her lover and source — are all in search of a communion which only the narrator seems still to believe in. She is a drug addict who continually finds in the darkness of her addiction the hope and determination to begin life again (the hope turned to despair in Hubert Selby's latest, brilliant novel, *Requiem for a Dream*). Both Braverman's and Rechy's novels end on a hopeful note — at least symbolically: Rechy's with the main character watching the sun rise over the city on Sunday morning; Braverman's with the narra-

whatever life might still have in store for her; she is reborn as her father dies of cancer in the clinically cold hospital.

Because of the implied resurrection theme at the end of both novels, our conversation that October afternoon in John's unpretentious Hollywood apartment centred around the issues of hope and despair, death and resurrection, heroism and nobility and risk — and how the characters in both writers' fictional worlds are brought to the brink of chaos, and beyond the brink.

John pointed out that the destructiveness with which his novel ends — vivid scenes of sado-masochism and every sort of sexual violence — has been, as he expected, misunderstood as sensationalism and as immoral — signs of the decadent, liberated society Los Angeles is generally accused of by those in need of quick caricatures. He thinks the confusion is dangerous. Liberation and destruction are not synonymous. 'Increasingly,' he said, 'destructive acts are translated as liberated. They're not. They're rituals to death. They're rituals for pain, for hatred, all the truly negative things. That to me is not liberation. I think we have reached a time where we're trying to erase the necessity for morality rather than striving to redefine it. And certainly in my books I try to redefine morality.'

Kate, who is not as personally optimistic as John, still sees the relationship between personal artistic energy and human purpose. 'I try to present the truth,' she said, 'as fully and as beautifully as I can. John was talking about writing for the future generation that comes after him. I see the reason I keep writing as an affirmation of my humanity, to be a poet — and I suppose there's never been another society in which the poet is treated with the kind of contempt that he is in current American society. And as far as I'm concerned, I really feel that the apocalypse is coming, and that I'm writing at the end of the crossroads.'

She meant the 'apocalypse' metaphorically, the end of the world as the poets have known and envisioned it — and, perhaps, the end of the world of literature. 'Reading about the correlation between college entrance scores,' she said, 'and the amount of fall-out in the area makes me feel like I'm writing for a future in which people will come in

the poets pass from the world, some thing intrinsic to what the definition of what it was to be human will pass from this world.' In the meantime, Kate said the job of the artist, as she sees it, is to make the best art she can, for herself, to reaffirm in herself the humanity she sees slipping away in the apocalyptic world.

'What difference does it make,' asked her, 'if you write if the world's coming to an end — if the reading world is coming to an end?'

'You make it for now,' she said.

'For now — as a way for your own survival.'

'Yeah,' she agreed. 'Like — I won't go down easy, and they're gonna have to take me at gunpoint and I'm gonna scream.'

Both novelists think of themselves as 'outlaws,' though both aim for and have achieved the New York literary medium. Both see art as an affirmation of life and the vehicle by which the species continues to test and redefine its boundaries and limitations by going beyond them. Their characters go beyond the brink in order to show us what the limit are, to warn us, to inspire us by the sheer energy of the forces that impel them whether positive or negative. They tell us that human beings can survive the turn of the millennium. Braverman's *Lithium* — and her conversation that afternoon suggest something even more thought provoking: that human beings will survive, whether they want to or not. Our belief in the approaching apocalypse is not, in itself, a guarantee that it will come. Until it does, we will stay alive making it from here to there with the only method open to us: energy. Both Braverman and Rechy choose to express energy as art. The result, for the readers, is that making it from here to there becomes more interesting and of interest that comes from appreciating their work gradually may turn to hope that, in turn, may keep the species going even beyond the apocalypse.

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