

*In
Memoriam*



**Guy Mattison Davenport,
Writer and Academic
(November 23, 1927—January 4, 2005)**

by Jon Elek

The writer, poet, translator, essayist and artist Guy Davenport, who died of cancer at seventy-seven, was a leading figure in American intellectual life during the second half of the twentieth century. His output, comprising more than forty books, did not gain him a wide readership, but the imagination and intelligence of his distinctive writing remain much admired.

Davenport's friend and intellectual ally Hugh Kenner concluded his magnum opus, *The Pound Era* (1971), with the aphorism "thought is a labyrinth." This observation was a tacit homage to Davenport, whose important later collection of essays, *The Geography Of The Imagination* (1982), charts a course through an ambitious labyrinth of thought, from the philosophy of Wittgenstein to the aviation of the Wright Brothers, the etymology of JRR Tolkien's Bilbo Baggins to Ezra Pound's monumental epic, *The Cantos*.

As a cartographer of the history of the imagination, which he likened to "a drunk man who has lost his watch, and must get drunk again to find it," Davenport's writing displays a prodigious learning that is surpassed only by the strikingly original critical perspective that he brings to bear on his subjects. In *The Geography of the Imagination*, as in many other books, he returns again and again to Pound's poetry. This is not surprising, since he had visited the incarcerated poet on several occasions at St Elizabeth's, a mental hospital outside Washington, DC, and wrote his Harvard doctoral thesis, later published as *Cities On Hills* (1983), on the early cantos. In the poetry and short stories on which his critical reputation stands, Davenport works in the tradition of the modernist writers, at times with respect to form and technique, but also in the sense that he strove, like Pound, Eliot or Joyce, to forge connections between the modern world and classical culture.

However, whereas those writers were encamped within the cosmopolitan capitals of the Old World, Davenport lived for most of his life in the southern university town of Lexington, Kentucky, and so his work represents, in a sense, a more homespun version of the American cultural identity than we can often pick up on in the older, expatriate modernists.

Davenport, who was born in Anderson, South Carolina, left school early to study

art, and then classics and English literature, at Duke University, North Carolina. In 1948, he was awarded a Rhodes scholarship, and studied, as Eliot had done, at Merton College, Oxford, where he took a class with Tolkien. At Oxford, now a major hub of Joyce scholarship, Davenport wrote the first thesis on the Irish writer to be accepted by the university. He returned to America in 1950 and, after spending two years in the Army 18th Airborne Corps, met Pound for the first time.

Davenport began his academic career at Washington University in St Louis, Missouri, then moved to Haverford College, outside Philadelphia (1961-63), before accepting an attractive offer from the University of Kentucky. He would remain resident in Lexington past his retirement in 1991 until his death, rarely travelling and rarely even leaving his home for reasons other than teaching. He once quipped that living in Kentucky was like “living in the Balkans,” but it nevertheless provided a suitable enough outpost for him as he continued, book by book, to set a literary standard against which contemporary American prose must be judged.

The impressive range of Davenport’s talents is evidenced in his illustrations, critical studies of art, philosophy and culture, as well as his collections of short stories like *Taitlin!* (1974), *The Jules Verne Steam Balloon* (1987) and his best known work of short fiction, *Da Vinci’s Bicycle* (1979). In that book, Davenport perfected his technique of “assemblage,” or of taking historical source material and suffusing it with elements of fiction. In “Au Tombeau De Charles Fourier,” for example, the tomb of the utopian philosopher becomes linked to meditations on Gertude Stein, Da Vinci’s sketch of an ur-bicycle, Picasso and Beckett, all of which is carefully ordered to mirror the model of the universe suggested by the Dogon tribes of West Africa,

These astonishingly original short stories, which earned Davenport a MacArthur Foundation Fellowship (sometimes known as a “genius grant”) in 1990, were composed on one of three working desks in his unassuming home, strategically located within walking distance of the university in order that he need not own a car. However, his largely hermetic, moderate lifestyle—often sustained by peanut butter sandwiches, fast food, chocolate bars and instant coffee—fronted one of the most intellectually well-traveled, original minds of our age. His is survived by his companion of forty years, Bonnie Jean Cox, and his sister Gloria.