



**"AS CLOSE AS POSSIBLE TO THE SITE OF THE OUTRAGE":  
THE POETRY OF THOMAS KINSELLA**

Thomas Kinsella. *Collected Poems 1956-2001*. Winston-Salem, North Carolina: Wake Forest University Press. 2006.

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Thomas Kinsella began his career as a poet more than five decades ago with brief lyrics whose tense, cryptic energy proclaimed his debt to the early W.H. Auden. His "Midsummer" and "A Lady of Quality," for instance, adopted that favorite stanza of Auden's, the romance-six, but sometimes hobbled along because of a blood-bitter austerity present in Kinsella's style reluctant (though not absolutely) to imitate the fleet, ironic balladeering typical of such early Auden as "A Summer Night." Whereas early Auden routinely deployed stanzas as discrete units of syntax, Kinsella frequently enjambed stanza after stanza, driven not by a spirit of excess but of furtive inquiry. "Midsummer" concludes,

We have, dear reason, of this glade  
An endless tabernacle made,  
    An origin.  
Well for whatever lonely one  
Will find this right place to lay down  
    His desert in.

No doubt, one hears Auden's "Out on the lawn I lie in bed, / Vega conspicuous overhead" percolating through these lines of the apprentice Kinsella. But, Auden's poems throughout his career delighted in balancing endless tabernacles and interior deserts within the dualistic play of his larger debates on human ethics in the age of anxiety—and they display a restless experimentation in poetic voice that ranges from the bathic to the telegraphic. Kinsella's more sober sensibility inclined him toward thorough scrutiny of the "desert"—eventually at the expense of his impressive, but narrow, talent for the well-wrought late-modernist lyric. After Auden's emigration to the United States and conversion to Christianity, his style grew unbuttoned and chatty while his poetry as a whole became more explicitly concerned with ethical questions. In the nineteen-sixties, Kinsella's style also underwent a sort of declension, with his incomplete elimination of formal in favor of free verse. Only rarely would his mature work echo the chiseled





tableaux that compose the early *Moralities* (1960). “Sons of the Brave,” a poem from that small volume, serves as a typical specimen of the marmoreal early work:

That great shocked art, the gross great enmity,  
That roamed here once, and swept indoors, embalmed  
Their lesson with themselves. We shade the eye;  
Our mouths have never filled with blood; the shot,  
The sung, entwine their ghosts and fade. The sty  
They rooted in retains its savour but  
Their farrow doze against a Nightmare slammed  
Shut in their faces by the prating damned.

The subsequent change in form did not lead to a looser voice but to one more fragmented and evidently disturbed by the outrages of cultural and natural history, of ancient myth and contemporary Irish politics. Through their uneven and broken structures, the poems also came to wear outwardly the processes of their composition. “Down Survey (1655-1657)” from *Littlebody* (2000) shows Kinsella handling a theme similar to “Sons” in the later style:

The young men chanted beside the public way:

*Is there any sorrow like ours  
who have forfeited our possessions  
and all respect?*

And the virgins of the Parrish of Killmainham  
hung down their heads.

Such lines read like a ragged sheeve torn from the archive of Irish oral history, and properly interpretable only in the context of *Littlebody* as a whole. Indeed, this and other later Kinsella poems open out by allusion and incompleteness to his entire body of work to the point of rendering any one poem dependent on that ever-growing corpus for its meaning.

The poems on either side of this stylistic change in the sixties are less varied and less beautiful to the ear than Auden’s, but demonstrate a persistent and sophisticated search for the nature and meaning of human culture at its points of origin—an authorial ambition unmatched by any of Kinsella’s Anglophone contemporaries. Like Auden and other modernist poets, in other words, Kinsella has built his poetry into a coherent structure for the interrogation of how human beings can live in a world superficially over-



whelmed by disorder or evil. We can now see how systematically Auden's work probes the distinctions between[,] and origins of[,] lust and love to discover how ethics might steer the appetite; how Eliot's poems trace a quest to escape the prisons of selfhood by at last relativizing the human creature through the recovery of his humble origin in the love of the divine Creator; how Pound's *Cantos* map out the exemplary heroism of poets, rulers, and other men of action to explain the political achievements and failures of history in terms of aboriginal or archetypal myths. Kinsella's poetry as a whole touches on all three of these quests for origins but finds its formal principle at that particular originary locus where biological life melds with cultural life. The prose introduction to the poem sequence *Wormwood* (1968) sets forth as explicit a mission statement for his work as we are likely to get:

It is certain that maturity and peace are to be sought through ordeal after ordeal, and it seems that the search continues until we fail. We reach out after each new beginning, penetrating our context to know ourselves, and our knowledge increases until we recognize again (more profoundly each time) our pain, indignity, and triviality...Sensing a wider scope, a more penetrating harmony, we begin again in a higher innocence to grow toward the next ordeal.

Observe how this brief outline of the quest for the properly lived human life insists upon a teleology—we must indeed move in a particular, progressive, direction. But, in an anti-Romantic reformulation of Goethe, each step forward toward knowledge entails a falling back as well; we are advancing, but the *telos* toward which we aim changes and, as it changes, recedes, until our own intellectual and emotional growth comes to substitute for some objective and definable finality at which we had hoped to arrive. The embodiment of thought becomes tentative, immanent heir to the soul's hope of taking wing. Kinsella frequently captures the tragic implications of this endless quest to arrive at ourselves; the grub in his "Leaf-Eater" "gropes / Back on itself and begins / To eat its own leaf." And "Phoenix Park" develops this connection between the reason's desire for knowledge and the purely animal appetite with a confession that there may be no final cause that sets the reason in motion and that alone can, therefore, bring it to rest:

Laws of order I find I have discovered  
Mainly at your hands. Of failure and increase.  
The stagger and recovery of spirit:  
That life is hunger, hunger is for order,  
And hunger satisfied brings on new hunger

Till there's nothing left to come;

Such passages do not express the conclusions Kinsella reaches in his poems. Rather, they describe the methodology ordering them. Within the earlier collections, the different poem sequences offer a succession of approaches to different points of origin, different starting points for human knowledge. *Downstream* (1962) and *Nightwalker and Other Poems* (1968) primarily explore Irish colonial history, modern “types” of Irish character, and above all the recent history that made possible the “modern” Ireland of Seán Lemass. Particularly in “Nightwalker,” Kinsella explores the disparity between the drama of Ireland’s national origin in an inspired revolution and its present as a minor modern state pathetically seeking foreign investment in the European Common Market (Recent Irish poets have proven adept and obsessed with alternately mythicizing and interpolating their national identity, but only in Kinsella’s poetry and a few late poems of Denis Devlin do we find serious scrutiny of the Irish State as it came to exist after the Anglo-Irish war). In *Wormwood*, Kinsella follows Auden in turning from public history to the intimate relations of “Love the limiter.”

With *New Poems* (1973), Kinsella’s archeology of origins takes on greater breadth and a consequently greater obscurity attributable to his increased reliance on intertextual reference. In this volume, Kinsella focuses on images of his grandmother as “ancestor,” that is, as the frightening and elusive biological source of himself. The image of the egg—a chicken egg and the embryonic self—governs the mode of inquiry in these poems, returning always from the cultural terrain of memory to the pre-cognitive conditions of birth. These empirical considerations of Kinsella’s immanent origins prepare for the fragmentary scenes from creation myths in *From the Land of the Dead*. The dark images of his grandmother and a repeated scene of a chicken egg dropping and smashing similarly anticipate the originary violence Kinsella explores through these myths. If “The Route of *The Táin*” is primarily concerned with the local violence found in Ireland’s ur-historical prose epic, “The Dispossessed” paraphrases Ernest Renan’s *Vie de Jésus*—“One morning, in a slow paroxysm of rage, / we found His corpse stretched on the threshold”—to underscore that the whole history of the Christian West, in its most divine aspirations, begins with the murdered body of Christ.

Shortly before publishing *New Poems*, Kinsella began experimenting with the brief chapbook as the medium of his works’ publication, and these Peppercanister Poems have become the standard units in his serialized quest for origins ever since. The early *Butcher’s Dozen* (1972) is an occasional poem protesting British military and judicial abuses in the North. It and the more recent *Open Court* (1991) and *The Pen Shop* (1997) are largely written

in tetrameter doggerel couplets intended to echo the public ballads of the Gaelic poetry Kinsella has translated. In general, however, the Peppercanister Poems continue to explore a wider range of historical experience, with a heavy reliance for their meaning on intertextual references to an intriguing but eccentric archive. They also persist in a fragmentary, prosaic free verse that does not usually impress in quotation, but which provokes and intrigues (much as does Pound's *Cantos*) when read as a single, ever-expanding work.

*One* (1974) returns to specifically Irish origins through elliptical tableaux taken from the late medieval pseudo-historical *Book of Invasions*. A *Technical Supplement* (1976) explores that most obvious yet mysterious origin of human life—the body itself—through a commentary on the anatomical drawings of Diderot's *Encyclopédie*. And *Songs of the Psyche* (1985) makes explicit the Jungian exploration of cultural archetypes that has subtended much of Kinsella's work by facilitating the movement from the merely biological to the cultural through the modern gateway of the psychological. The most successful of the twenty-two Peppercanister chapbooks that constitute almost three-quarters of the *Collected* volume, however, is *Out of Ireland* (1987). The poems in this sequence are set near the grave of the modern Irish traditional musician, Seán Ó Riada, whose vocation partly stirs Kinsella's meditations on the writing and fate of the medieval Irish theologian, John Scotus Eriugena. The subtle theory woven in the poems suggests that the complex counter-point of Irish music, with its apparent chaos of parts ultimately reconciled in a harmonious totality, provided Eriugena with his vision of creation itself as a swarming numerical mess that shall form a beautiful ordered whole in the divine eye of providence. Eriugena's "harmonious certainty" promises

that the world's parts,  
ill-fitted in their stresses and their pains,  
will combine at last in polyphonic sweet-breathing union  
and all created Nature ascend like joined angels,

limbs and bodies departing the touch of Earth  
static in a dance of return, all Mankind  
gathering stunned at the world's edge  
silent in a choir of understanding.

In like fashion, the unpredictable turning-over of diverse originary moments synthesize compellingly in Kinsella's poetry. Although he is quick to remind us that Eriugena died "at his students' hands // They stabbed him with their

pens,” Kinsella’s poems tirelessly search out the redemptive and reconciling powers of love—human and divine—that are founded on and struggle to rise above aboriginal violence. No contemporary Irish poet has taken up the epic ambitions and fragmented, spatial practices of the modernists with the sophistication of Kinsella. Indeed, Kinsella is almost alone among living poets in his use of his art as a means of discovery, critique, and transcendence of the primordial conditions of human life. This uniqueness becomes even more apparent in *Godhead* (1999), where the biological, psychological, and cultural meditations of so many of his poems are deepened through theological reflections on the pattern of human origins and experience. The poems contemplate the Trinity and the hypostatic union—the Incarnation of God as man—as glosses on the compound condition of human beings as flesh and spirit in union.

And yet, for all Kinsella’s architectonic brilliance (a gift that preserves coherence amid eccentric choices of reference and a typically modernist obscurity that only the books of his several superb exegetes can help us overcome), the deliberate laconic plainness of the writing limits his achievement. A Kinsella poem can be counted on to provide a grim naturalistic image of physical appetite, such as that of the predatory owl:

the drop with deadened wing-beats; some creature  
torn and swallowed; her brain, afterward,  
staring among the rafters in the dark  
until hunger returns.

But, such stunning compounds of gorgeousness and terror, suitable though they are to a poet especially concerned with charting the material foundations of art, history, and the psyche, become redundant and are seldom relieved by other voices, tones, or visions. When Kinsella returns to formal verse, he seems deliberately writing at less than full power, insisting that rhyme read as doggerel and satire. For all the immense variety of his subject-matter, in other words, the stiff, austere voice of the poetry does too good a job reconciling all to one bleak vision. Taken together, the poems illuminate but sound redundant—and they lose much of their significance read independently[.] Perhaps an Irish reader—especially a Dubliner—would detect more nuances in Kinsella’s language than can an American ear. Unless this is the case, one must conclude Kinsella is a poet of almost unequalled brilliance who has failed to develop the material of his art—language—into the varied palette one would normally expect to find in such a long career.