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The Hollins Critic

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Vol. V, No. 4: Thomas Kinsella's Nightwalker: A Phoenix in the Dark

John Rees Moore

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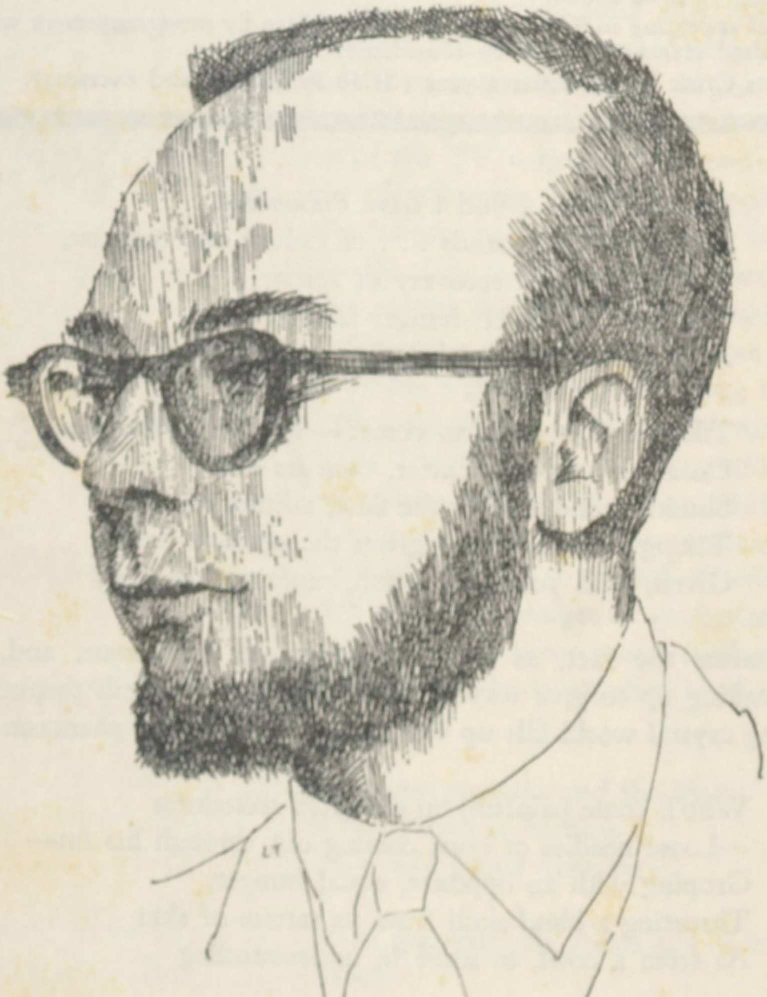
Thomas Kinsella's Nightwalker: A Phoenix in the Dark



I

The poet of *Nightwalker and Other Poems* finds himself at a dividing of the ways: he must come to an accounting with himself to account for anything else. Well acquainted with both inner and outer darkness, he has discovered that loneliness is necessary, inevitable, and intolerable. But how to connect things? The will demands structure, but both mind and body report chaos and contradiction. Is there any center that can hold? The poet is not prepared to say so, though he knows a good deal about centers that once held and will no more. The courage to go on, it seems, can only come from an intense, dangerous, very personal and private love.

The Hollins Critic

Editors—John Rees Moore, George P. Garrett

Contributing Editors—Louis D. Rubin, Jr., Daniel Hoffman, Howard Nemerov, Walter Sullivan, Benedict Kiely, Robert Scholes, R. H. W. Dillard, William Jay Smith

Cover Artist—Lewis O. Thompson

Editorial Assistant—Cornelia Dozier Emerson

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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 to come; — let the crystal crack
On some insoluble matter, then its heart
Shudders and accepts the flaw, adjusts on it
Taking new strength—given the positive dream.
Given, with your permission, undying love . . .

Laws appear, after the fact, as a crystallization of experience, and old order is continually breaking up to give way to new. Phantasms enflesh themselves and pass on; the undying crystal world fills up with light. Till the last phantasm

Who'll come painfully in old lewd nakedness
—Loose needles of bone coming out through his fat—
Groping with an opposite, equal hunger,
Thrusting a blind skull from its tatters of skin
As from a cowl, to smile in understanding

And total longing; aching to plant one kiss
In the live crystal as it aches with fullness,
And accommodate his body with that kiss;
But that forever he will pause, the final
Kiss ungiveable. Giving without tearing
Is not possible; to give totality
Is to be torn totally, a nothingness
Reaching out in stasis a pure nothingness.
—Therefore everlasting life, the unmoving
Stare of full desire. Given undying love . . .

Kinsella knows that this is "mere idea"; not the truths of love as "your body knows them." Yet love is both physical and mental or it is nothing. In his dialectic, fragilities confront each other: ghosts of structure that somehow persist without substance, delicate flesh eaten by time as the helpless lover looks on. There is no steadiness in

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A Thoughtful
Way To
Remember
Your Friends
At Christmas . . .

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Kinsella knows that this is "mere idea"; not the truths of love as "your body knows them." Yet love is both physical and mental or it is nothing. In his dialectic, fragilities confront each other: ghosts of structure that somehow persist without substance, delicate flesh eaten by time as the helpless lover looks on. There is no steadiness in either reason or madness. One takes his chances, offers his vulnerability, descends into the darkness—leaving comforting preconceptions behind.

Kinsella's verse, however, has remarkable solidity. Never rushed, never flimsy, he explores his bitter relativities with the cool poise of a surgeon determined to arrive at a correct diagnosis, even when the body he is dissecting is his own. Not for him the wildnesses of the new schools of experimental poetry. From short, tight lyrics he has gradually moved toward a longer, more meditative form that allows him space to move back and forth between recollection and fantasy, anecdote and commentary. As a nightwalker he regards himself as "a vagabond tethered" to the people on the other side of the windows he observes from outside. His arrogant awareness of the spiritual sickness and grublike existence of the TV watchers is tempered by an equal awareness of his own lack of immunity from human infirmity. Sloppiness of speech or sentiment, however, is not one of his infirmities. He can portray hallucination or nightmare with brutal directness as in the first section of "Nightwalker," and his satire is often harsh and abrasive, but he prefers the stance of impartial observer who takes in everything with steady and unblinking gaze to the role of fool or sage drunk or maddened by the vision he sees. He writes a good deal about love; few poets have made it seem more harrowing. If anything rings false in his work—and he gives the impression of striving for an ever greater honesty—it is the suggestion that he is a virtuoso of agony who has succeeded in carrying the weight of an albatross of sorrow which would have sunk most other poets, not to mention more ordinary mortals. In "Soft Toy," for instance, he imagines himself reduced to a kind of teddy bear by the love-hate demands of his partner (though nothing so vulgar or sentimentally dangerous as any particular toy pet is specified). It is a true horror poem, ending with the poet staring sleepless into the dark. Unlike a soft toy, he is petrified by the cold will that sleeps beside him:

> Between your tyrannous pressure and the black
> Resistance of the void my blankness hardens
> To a blunt probe, a cold pitted grey face.

Kinsella allows us access to the scene, the gestures, the sensations of catastrophe, but he is reticent about personal circumstance.

Rituals can lead to revelation—or to death. Kinsella is haunted by both possibilities. It is human to fall into a mindless daily routine that erodes the soul, that protects the sensibilities by blunting them. And society has contrived many rituals, particularly religious ones, to help people through the crises of life. What interests Kinsella in "Office of the Dead" is the images of pain that refuse to be masticated by the "grief-chewers" who perform the last rites. As long as these images persist the dead woman will be "real," not indecently swallowed up in oblivion. But memory is hard put to compete with the immediacy of present sensation, and even a silver pot, with the thrashing of its chains and the gasping of its smoke, can seem to be possessed of an animation that the dead no longer has. In fact, the borderline between life and death is very uncertain. Even nature is constantly presenting emblems of their interpenetra-

Thomas Kinsella

Born in Dublin in 1928, Thomas Kinsella attended University College, Dublin and entered the civil service in 1946. After publishing some translations from the Irish, he brought out his first book of poems in 1956. His collections *Another September* (1958) and *Downstream* (1962) were both choices of the Poetry Book Society in England, and he has won a Guinness Poetry Award, the Irish Arts Council's Triennial Book Award (for *Poems and Translations* in 1961), and in 1967 Ireland's most important poetry prize, the Denis Devlin Memorial Award. In 1965 he left his position in the Department of Finance in Ireland to become Professor of English at Southern Illinois University. He is married and has two children.

tion. Watching the tide from Ballydavid Pier, the poet sees wavering in the water a "bag of flesh,/Foetus of goat or sheep" and the scene becomes allegorical. One world endlessly renews another, but the interpretation is not clear. Is there structure or mere meaningless process?

> The ghost tissue hangs unresisting
> In allegorical waters,
> Lost in self-search
> —A swollen blind brow
> Humbly crumpled over
> Budding limbs, unshaken
> By the spasms of birth or death.

The Angelus sounds, suggesting simultaneously random coincidence and significant conjunction. And the ambiguity is marvelously caught in the last word of the poem—the misbirth "glistens like quicksilver."

Once born, however, the human is assured of his humanity by the pain that dogs him from birth to death—unless he is twice born? In "Folk Wisdom" the story of the prince and the toad is a fable of the possible transmutation of terror into beauty. Every year at the time of the sowing of seed the toads "clutch in their being" in panic anticipation of the descending harrow. The tale tells how a kiss lifted the curse, leaving a prince standing where the toad had been. Perhaps such a miracle could happen:

> It is possible . . . such a strain,
> Under the kiss of the harrow,
> Could suffice. As when a man
> Clutches his ears, deafened
> By his world, to find a jewel
> Made of pain in his hands.

Whether he shows himself trapped in a painful dilemma with others—family, wife, or fellow countrymen—or alone with his thoughts about an object in nature or a story from legend or history, Kinsella returns and returns again to the old mysteries: is there somewhere a rock that miraculously withstands the onslaughts of wind and tide, a thought that holds steady amid the atomic whirl of ghostly myth and logical paradox, a stay against the disintegration of little deaths and the great Death.

II

Ireland is a wounded land, full of ghosts. It encourages hallucinations in its poets. Close up, Dublin drabness and poverty and ignorance still have much of the quality Joyce fixed forever in *Dubliners*. Kinsella is very aware of the degrading meanness of a pinched daily existence. He has been concerned with the old Gaelic themes of heroism in his translations, but in his own poetry the necessity of heroism in daily life is a more pressing matter. Though a knowledge of Irish history and legend sustains his sense of possibility, Kinsella can no longer identify with the old heroes in a Yeatsian sense; he has a humbler, more sceptical conception of his poetic vocation. He scorns pose and hypocrisy while acknowledging that they are unavoidable. And Irish gaiety is profoundly suspect—it is too close to simple irresponsibility and callousness. The "new" Ireland, where the push to get ahead invites the malice of the ne'er-do-well, irresistibly calls forth this parody of the statue of liberty:

> Robed in spattered iron
> At the harbour mouth she stands, Productive Investment,
> And beckens the nations through our gold half-door:
> Lend me your wealth, your cunning and your drive,
> Your arrogant refuse; . . .

Yet the poet knows that "Clean bricks/ Are made of mud; we need them for our tower." Nevertheless, this knowledge doesn't make the process of brickmaking any easier to bear. The recent long poems, "Nightwalker," "Ritual of Departure," and "Phoenix Park," are all arguments about exile. Kinsella came to the United States in 1965, a self-exiled man, but it is doubtful if his exile will ever end. In "Magnanimity" he says, "I am sure that there are no places for poets,/ Only changing habitations for verse to outlast."

In his first volume to receive attention outside Ireland, *Another September* (1958), Kinsella is already casting a cold eye on the romantic glories of legendary kings and queens. He finds "the heroic agenda" scary. A hero leads "A man's life, magnified with monumental bothers." Yet in these early poems traditional attitudes toward love and time and beauty are on the whole satisfying and often memorably expressed, as in "Soft, to your Places." Here love, though it asks the question, is confident of its powers to set things in its own order, to make nature "Lucky for my love and me." In a propitious moment in "Mid-summer" nature can still make a garden for the passions in a poem of true Marvellian poise. I quote the middle three stanzas.

> Flowers whose names I do not know
> Make happy signals to us. O
>   Did ever bees
> Stumble on such a quiet before!
> The evening is a huge closed door
>   And no one sees
>
> How we, absorbed in our own art,
> Have locked ourselves inside one heart,
>   Grown silent and,

Under beech and sacred larch,
Watched as though it were an arch
That heart expand.

Something that for this long year
Had hid and halted like a deer
Turned marvellous,
Parted the tragic grasses, tame,
Lifted its perfect head and came
To welcome us.

Even when the poet moves indoors in "A Lady of Quality" to grieve for his love, sick in hospital, something of pastoral song remains to soften and distance the experience. The poet is enjoying his virtuosity and his enjoyment is contagious. When he gives us a vision of love's doom ("In the Ringwood"), vivid and hypnotic, the ballad-like effect is very successful. The poem has an Audenesque charm, but the implied comparison of Christ's passion and the agony of the beloved is absorbed a little too easily into the steady forward rhythm.

Many of these beautifully composed and controlled poems have no apparent connection with Ireland, but "King John's Castle" describes the ruin that is and the "epic force" that was in an old castle by the Boyne. It is not a place for the loving, this elevated pile, wind-blown and monumental. Kinsella responds to its cold, dark power but is also repelled by its huge and heavy deadness. The spirits that haunt it, maybe "brave and great," are too bleak a reminder of the death that hangs over all the loving and living. In less rugged mood "Another September" subtly catches the shift in autumn from something familiar and domestic to something mysterious and impersonal. At dawn in a country bedroom "long pitch black breaths" from the garden outside seem to enter the window, to "Exhale rough sweetness against the starry slates," while inside, where the beloved sleeps,

Domestic Autumn, like an animal
Long used to handling by these countrymen,
Rubs her kind hide against the bedroom wall
Sensing a fragrant child come back again

but not the woman who had fallen asleep with him. Something more abstract and primeval seems to have taken her place:

It is as though
The black breathing that billows her sleep, her name,
Drugged under judgment, waned and—bearing daggers
And balances—down the lampless darkness they came,
Moving like women: Justice, Truth, such figures.

Such night thoughts presage the reckoning to come in *Wormwood* (1966), though in that brief collection of purgatorial poems nothing is abstract, and the image of a tree laid bare is emblem for a series of vignettes of tormented love. *Another September*, for all its premonitions, maintains a lyric innocence. Which is not at all to say that

it is naive, only that sweetness and sorrow have not lost their glamor and become mired in bitter complexity. Already Kinsella can imagine the desperations and satisfactions of other lives with fine dramatic effect ("Clarence Mangan," "The Monk," and above all "Thinking of Mr. D."), and he fully recognizes the dangers of a facile sophistication. "Baggot Street Deserta" is the poet's warning to himself.

Versing, like an exile, makes
A virtuoso of the heart,
Interpreting the old mistakes
And discords in a work of Art
For the One, a private masterpiece
Of doctored recollections.

The only safeguard is the "garrison in my own blood" which keeps touch with "mystery, not to be understood." Late at night, while the rest of Dublin lies dreaming, the poet has hammered out his *ars poetica* as he gazes out his attic window at the starry night. A thoroughly modern man, he knows that wooing the muse is a tricky business. He does his best to assess the Real but cannot penetrate the privacy of those "chilly points of light." He returns us to a nearer reality as he flicks the glowing end of his cigarette into the street below.

III

The desert and the garden, reality blank and unreachable and reality close and intimate as the blood. Perhaps Kinsella is so much concerned with reality because unreality is so menacing and powerful. One gets the impression, especially from the later work, of a dreadful sense of isolation. Where thought and feeling can assume an answering thought and feeling, the problem of reality can safely be left to the metaphysicians, but when each day the laborious task of constructing a house of meanings to live in confronts one anew, it is no wonder if the builder sometimes asks himself if he is on a treadmill in hell.

In a recent issue of *Poetry Ireland* (Spring 1968) Kinsella writes on the continuity of tradition. He looks around at his colleagues. "And the word 'colleague' fades on the lips before the reality: a scattering of incoherent lives. It can seem, on a bad day, that there are a few madmen and hermits, and nothing more. They can show me nothing about myself except that I am isolated." He says nothing about the good days, when perhaps the considerable recognition he has received may cast a softer light. His point, however, is essentially impersonal and objective. For the Irish writer who writes in English, practically the only useable poet ("those whose lives in some sense belong to me, and whose force is there for me to use if I can, if I am good enough") is Yeats. Beyond him stretches a century of silence in which, at least in poetry, almost nothing rises above the level of competence in Ireland. And back of that is "a great cultural blur." Irish must replace English in the eighteenth century, but then a poetry "suddenly full of life" is available; unfortunately, it represents "the tragic (almost doggerel) end of Gaelic literature." Aogán O Rathaille, a poet writing at the end of the seventeenth century, is a truly major poet, "the last great poet in Irish, and the last Irish poet, until Yeats, whose life can be seen as a true poetic career." The thousand years before that is rich in poetry of a great variety and skill, a great inheritance but largely a lost one:

Books by Thomas Kinsella

THE BREASTPLATE OF SAINT PATRICK
Dublin: The Dolmen Press, 1954. (pa.) 7/6

33 TRIADS
Dublin: The Dolmen Press, 1955. (pa.) 2/6 Limited signed edition 10/6

THE SONS OF USNECH
Dublin: The Dolmen Press, 1955. 15/

THE DEATH OF A QUEEN
Dublin: The Dolmen Press, 1956 (pa.) 2/6

POEMS
Dublin: The Dolmen Press, 1956. 8/6 Limited signed edition 15/

ANOTHER SEPTEMBER
Dublin: The Dolmen Press, 1958. 10/6 (pa.) 6/ Distributed by Oxford University Press
Philadelphia: Dufour Editions, 1958. $2.95

MORALITIES
Dublin: The Dolmen Press, 1960. 7/6

POEMS AND TRANSLATIONS
New York: Atheneum, 1961. $3.50 (pa.) $1.65

DOWNSTREAM
Dublin: The Dolmen Press, 1962 10/6 Distributed by Oxford University Press. $1.70
Philadelphia: Dufour Editions, 1962. $2.95

WORMWOOD
Dublin: The Dolmen Press, 1966. Limited signed edition 31/6
Philadelphia: Dufour Editions, 1966. One hundred signed copies $5.95

NIGHTWALKER
Dublin: The Dolmen Press, 1967. Limited edition.

NIGHTWALKER AND OTHER POEMS
Dublin: The Dolmen Press, 1967. Distributed by Oxford University Press.
New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1968. $4.00

SIX IRISH POETS
London: Oxford University Press, 1962. 25/ A collection which includes a group of Kinsella's poems. Edited by Robin Skelton.

THE DOLMEN
Dublin: The Dolmen Press, 1962. Distributed by Oxford University Press. A miscellany edited by John Montague and Thomas Kinsella. (pa.) 9/6

POEMS BY THOMAS KINSELLA, DOUGLAS LIVINGSTONE, AND ANNE SEXTON
London: Oxford University Press, 1968. (pa.) 7/6 and $1.75

> The inheritance is mine, but only at two enormous removes—
> across a century's silence, and through an exchange of
> worlds. The greatness of the loss is measured not only
> by the substance of Irish literature itself, but also by
> the intensity with which we know it was shared; it has an
> air of continuity and shared history which is precisely
> what is missing from Irish literature, in English or Irish,
> in the nineteenth century and today.

Perhaps some can make this past their own; for Kinsella the great rift between makes this impossible. The discontinuity he feels "is a matter of people and places as well as writing—of coming, so to speak, from a broken and uprooted family, of being drawn to those who share my origins and finding that we cannot share our lives."

His translations—and they are distinguished by a lovely force and concision—are a kind of sacrificial peace offering to his wish that the case were otherwise. For many years he has been working on the prose epic *Táin Bó Cuailnge*. It promises to be a classic contribution to Irish literature in English. Such efforts, however, and the need for them only confirm the death of an Irish culture. This calamity goes deeper than literature; it means, in Daniel Corkery's words, that every Irishman's education "sets up a dispute between his intellect and his emotions." What he reads has no vital connection with the life of his surroundings. Yeats's career shows one kind of solution to this dilemma—withdrawal into a still greater isolation. He creates an aristocratic Anglo-Irish tradition with Swift and Burke, Berkeley and Goldsmith as its writers and stations himself in the position of rearguard defender of a nobility that is passing. From a "graceful elegiac height above the filthy modern tide" he can distribute his curses and praises with magisterial hand. He too was torn between love and hate of Ireland and his English inheritance, but "Yeats is a great artist, and it is clear that this passionate frustration, though deep, did not take over his soul. Sanity is embodied in his career, in his final rejection of practical politics and its shrieking women, and his rejection of the people as an audience for his work." Joyce's isolation, on the other hand, "is a mask. His relationship with the modern world is direct and intimate. He knew the filthy modern tide, and immersed himself in it. In rejecting Ireland he does so on its own terms." Finally Kinsella comes to the crucial question: is there any particular virtue in the continuity of tradition? He thinks not. Even a broken tradition will do "however painful, humanly speaking, it may be. I am certain that a great part of the significance of my own past, as I try to write my own poetry, is that the past *is* mutilated."

IV

A man steeped in religious tradition and with no lack of philosophical sophistication, Kinsella makes high demands on both life and literature. We feel the tension in his work, where violence and control are equally in evidence. His *Downstream* (1962), however, seems more relaxed than *Another September*. There are fewer memorable poems in the later volume, but one feels, nevertheless, in the relative quiet of these poems a growing mastery of craft. The prologue set a tone of self-mockery that does not really prepare us for what is to come, though its cosmopolitan flavor correctly suggests a new element of humor in the poet's stance.

I wonder whether one expects
Flowing tie or expert sex
Or even absent-mindedness
Of poets any longer. Less
Candour than the average,
Less confidence, a ready rage,
Alertness when it comes to beer,
An affectation that their ear
For music is a little weak,
These are the attributes we seek;
But surely not the morning train,
The office lunch, the look of pain

Down the blotched suburban grass,
Not the weekly trance at Mass . . .
Drawing on my sober dress
These, alas, I must confess.

A distaste for routine, a subdued dandyism, these are about all that remain of the romantic pose. Yet, underneath, many romantic attitudes are intact. A delight in fruitfulness, an instinctive hostility toward the mechanical and abstract, a sympathy for the weak and inarticulate, ready response to fantasies of longing, a strong fellow-feeling for the mute tragedy in ordinary lives, a deep pleasure in looking fondly back to the remembered joys of youth—all these attitudes find eloquent expression. A laundress goes quietly about her work as new life ripens in her womb and on the farm that lies around her in the August heat. Little details build up a genre picture of an unconscious harmony between the pregnant woman and pregnant nature all the more convincing because nothing receives undue stress. The laundress stitches her sheet as naturally as chickens cluck and wheat grows. But in "A Portrait of the Engineer" a different kind of power exerts its force at the expense of the humans who will it into being. With a logic "set to wither mysteries" the engineer is out to deform moor and marsh with brutal indifference to ecological consequence. The poet imagines an encounter:

O should it come
To pass at length that our ghosts met,
We'd match our hatreds in a gaze:
Mine for the flesh his engines ate,
His for the blurred response of a phrase.

As the poet shows in "Carol," a poem of Herbertian simplicity and irony, he has a natural devoutness, though this in no way disables him from entering into the atheist view of things. For instance, here is "An Old Atheist Pauses By The Sea." I give the poem complete.

I choose at random, knowing less and less.
The shambles of the seashore at my feet
Yield a weathered spiral: I confess
—Appalled at how the waves have polished it—
I know that shores are eaten, rocks are split,
Shells ghosted. Something hates unevenness.
The skin turns porcelain, the nerves retreat,
And then the will, and then the consciousness.

The combination of randomness and ignorance with inevitability and merciless knowledge demonstrates with the effect of finality the unavoidability of faith, even though it be a faith in the logic of disintegration.

Two longer poems in which Kinsella returns to the form of personal narrative must be mentioned. "A Country Walk" takes the poet through a countryside wet and drizzling but free of "the piercing company of women." As he walks his ferocity dies to be replaced by a different kind of intensity; he is released into the larger excitements of nature and history. He comes to the ford where Cuchulain fought Ferdiad, the very "day that Christ hung dying" according to the tales. Here too the Normans "massacred my fathers" and Cromwell "Despatched a convent shrieking to their Lover." Still later brother killed brother. He passes ironic reminders of the martyrs of Easter, 1916. As he gazes down on the flooding river with its "endless debris" at the end of his walk, his own turbulence vanishes and he is ready to receive the "green and golden light" of the rising evening star which with mythical beneficence looses his heart and tongue for poetry. It is a powerful enactment of emotion recollected in tranquillity. Less successful, but still an extraordinary *tour de force,* is "Downstream," an account of a journey by rowboat written in *terza rima.* Here more recent and more personal history is recollected. The terror of coming upon a man who "one night fell sick and left his shell/ Collapsed, half-eaten, like a rotted thrush's,/ To frighten stumbling children" brought home to the boy as the more distant horror of the war in Europe could not, the boy grown older recalls, the very taste and feel of death. The alternating sensations of light and dark, of the movements of water and animal life, of the imagination shuttling back and forth between the fantasies of poetry and the realities of nature—and the blending of swan flight and soul flight just before the boat comes to its landing place create a pattern of counterpoint intricate and engrossing. But the exigencies of the form urge the poet to dazzle us at some cost to his power to move us.

V

Poetry is an instrument for the exploration of reality—whether the reality is poetic or not. Like any art, it is also an escape from reality. The trick of learning how to make words glow like burning coals depends on knowing the rules of a game that, like magic, assumes the power of words under certain circumstances to compel nature to do an enchanter's bidding. Praising or cursing, for instance, actually affect what is praised or cursed. Saying, doing, and being are part of an interdependent continuum in which constant action and reaction take place. A poet may report the news he has come across inside or outside himself, but his poem, however tentatively, fiddles with its news to make a charm of its intelligence. It is an act, finally, for or against the universe in which it finds itself, or perhaps both simultaneously. If the poet loses confidence in this (ultimately) magical power of language to alter, however subtly, the conditions of existence, he stops writing poetry. Language as a neutral medium of exchange in which some sort of baggage is guaranteed to be transferred from one station to another intact may fascinate him—he might even write a poem about it—but such language is useless to him as a poet. Reality for the poet is whatever his words are struggling to subdue, outwit, capture, celebrate, exorcize, master, and maybe immortalize.

And so we come by a circuitous route back to *Nightwalker.* I think it is Kinsella's most accomplished book, and that is saying a good deal. Kinsella had to convince himself that he could do what the poets he admired did. He set himself to learn how to handle the metaphysical conceit, how to combine the familiar and exotic, how to use myth while ironically questioning it. He worked at putting the old themes of song into strict patterns of rhyme and meter. Among the masters he schooled himself in are Donne and Herbert and Marvell, Keats and Wordsworth and Arnold, Yeats and Eliot and Auden. And his debt to the old ballads and carols, and to the wisdom and folk poetry of Ireland is obvious. But I am not competent to judge the effect on his work of his Gaelic heritage. At least on the evidence of his own poetry, he has not much interest in the techniques of association or the theories of correspondence developed by the French symbolists or in the free-flowing inclusiveness of Whitman and his latter-day followers. He likes a poem to focus its meanings, even when these are logically inconclusive or emotionally unsettled, with force and lucidity. His quest for form in poetry mirrors, or parallels, his quest for order in life. If his earlier poetry could be said to choose its occasions for their adaptability to styles of traditional lyric, the later poetry, by contrast, may be said to seize its occasions from whatever is most pressing in the poet's life as though confident that, however grim the subject, the words could be relied on to perform their poetic duty.

This diagrammatic contrast is of course false if taken too literally, but it is indicative of what I have in mind in speaking of Kinsella's accomplishment. His art has come to seem unpremeditated, and this at the very time when the life his poetry so frequently describes seems threatened with collapse. One feels more pressure on the poetry to justify itself in human terms, and this perhaps accounts for the special attention given to the theme of art and life, not a new subject for Kinsella but one never so fully developed in his earlier work. We see the poet in "Before Sleep" setting out the tray for his sick beloved and putting the house in order for the night; tomorrow, he reflects, he will be able to express the chaos of "love's detritus" gathering into a "white roar" as it goes over the Falls.

> Yes: in the morning I will put on the cataract,
> Give it veins, clutching hands, the short shriek of thought.

As in "Baggot Street Deserta," the poet, alone with himself, broods on the difficulties and dangers of his poetic task. But this later poem has no time for philosophical musing—the movement of life is too imperative. The image of an irresistible natural force invading the human body with the effect almost of an electrical shock brings the poem to an abrupt climax. The "short shriek of thought" lurks and waits around the corner in many of the poems in *Nightwalker*.

The middle section of the book which "Before Sleep" introduces is specifically about poets and how they work. "Magnanimity" recalls a visit with Austin Clarke, now Ireland's senior statesman of poetry, to the place made famous by Lady Gregory and Yeats, Coole Park. As the two poets gaze at the great tree covered with initials of famous visitors (and now surrounded by chicken-wire to protect it from the depredations of the curious), Clarke had said Coole might again be built as a "place for poets." Yeats had never been friendly to Clarke, but the enmity was forgotten. "Through the forbidden tree magnanimity passed." Poetry is more important than poets. Houses, like bodies, are mere temporary habitations. And so is the world which goes its way regardless of poets. "Helpless commonness encroaches, chews the soil,/ Squats ignobly." Signposts and chicken-wire occupy the vacancy where stately houses once stood. Nevertheless "A tree stands./ Pale cress persists on a shaded stream." Permanence and change, a theme older than poetry but a never-ending challenge to the poet's imagination. The eighteenth century Irish itinerant poet Egan O'Rahilly, wandering homesick and ailing, fights against encroaching death to keep at his immemorial poetic task, and Kinsella hears him saying:

> "Princes overseas, who slipped away
> In your extremity, no matter where I travel
> I find your great houses like stopped hearts.
> Likewise your starving children—though I nourish
> Their spirit, and my own, on the lists of praises
> I make for you still in the cooling den of my craft.
>
> Our enemies multiply. They have recruited the sea:
> Last night, the West's rhythmless waves destroyed my sleep;
> This morning, winkle and dogfish persisting in the stomach . . ."

The poet's enemies are many and unrelenting in Kinsella's book. Change is a movement downward, from past greatness to present defeat, from heroic strife to ignoble malice; the body has constant nudging reminders of its physical decay and the spirit suffers moral disillusionment. But there are moments of peace like the one in "To Autumn," which obliquely recalls Keats. The poet is sitting at the edge of a wheatfield, close to the busy world of harvest spiders among dry roots "in soundless bedlam." What he sees is quite different. As he writes "*while thy hook/ Spares* . . ." a picture of the moment unfolds before us:

> Ripened leagues, a plain of odorous seed,
> Quiet scope, season of mastery,
> The last of peace. Along ethereal summits,
> A gleam of disintegrating materials
> Held a frail instant at unearthly heights.

This is quite different from the sinking into sense of Keats's ode, which is content to create and listen to the slow-dying music of autumn. For Kinsella the sparing hook will be unsparing momentarily, and the fragility of this brief "season of mastery," rescued by the poet's art from an unregarding nature, has all the ironical poignancy of every bloom drooping towards its own dust. But the poem is also a tribute to Keats, who had the ability and the luck to attain the "unearthly heights."

By the end of the first section of "Nightwalker" one can well understand what the poet means in his opening line: "I only know things seem and are not good." Acutely conscious of himself as a brain and body out walking—Kinsella is a very peripatetic poet—he finds himself in a scene lit by a sinister and lunatic moon. It is suspended "like a fat skull" in the sky and presides over memories of sudden death in wartime. It's a "moron voiceless moon" and surely no proper muse for a poet in his right senses. As he walks, the poet works through his griefs and angers and frustrations. He is vouchsafed a vision of horseman and rider emerging out of moonlit Dublin Bay. A fearsome spectacle that immediately becomes grotesque. It is the "Father of Authors!" Accoutred like one of the country gentry—"silk hat" and "stern jodhpurs" —this new "Foxhunter," who is "still awkward in the saddle," is quite ready and willing to carry on in the old style. A horseman compounded from the leavings of both Yeats and Joyce, this ludicrous figure augurs no good. Nor does the seamew, who like a sibyl out of Eliot has seen too much and would like to dash itself against the stones and become "a wave of the sea again, or a sea sound." The "lost soul" turns self-mockingly homeward as "sad music" closes the scene: "Hesitant, cogitating, exit." But finally the poet turns to moon and sea again. The virgin moon is remote, "queenlike, pale with control." The poet prays to it as to a mother: "Incline from your darkness into mine!" And the moon takes him at his word. He finds himself on the

The Hypochondriac

The man sitting in his bed had had his legs broken
By women, by beauty, the ecstatic perfume in the garden—
Even now the women sat around his bed as if he were not sick
but only recently awoken.

In their pastel stockings, miniskirts, they looked like flowers
pressed in the future's album,
Little girls who had loved their father who had forsaken them,
And now he had asked to see them for a last time, and they had come.

It was hard to tell whether the place was clinical or gracious,
hospital or hotel.
This is always the problem of depredations in a sensual place—
Is it better to sicken with what one has truly had, or rally
and get well?

One girl in yellow with green stockings bloomed like a jonquil—
They had been obsessively in love and now she would envase herself
Like a cut flower sucking at the water of his will.

Such quiet, stuffed places as these need never be too much.
Stalled passion is a virile thing forever,
Hides its own tableau of the body swinging down the street
like a knife, each arm upon a crutch.

One rests in memory, adores its illness, faded happiness,
Only to rise and ride the wild horse with two wooden legs
As if it did not know the destination of this freight of glamor
and caress.

—Charles Edward Eaton

moon and can see the earth hanging "in blue splendour in the sky." As he stoops to "take the waters," it is only a "ghost sea" he encounters, with "a human taste, but sterile; odourless." Obviously, he will have to try again; from this allegorical Sea of Disappointment he must return to the living sea of reality. Kinsella persuades us that he will come through his ordeal by the unflagging energy of his journey into the dark.

—John Rees Moore

Tea-Leaves

I will be dead
and you will be dead.
It's a natural fact.
George Garrett

ch like headlines:
e stock exchange—
ttles in a sow's ear

lescope our time
orns are mute;
D. C. gossip
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and weave in amber
s men. I drink.
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ity.
I think
the simplest statements,

nd guts
and balls
on the turn
and counterturn of love. I think the stars
that sang on Plato's page rattle like dice
in our empty cups.
And I do not think it matters.
—Margaret Gibson

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The Hypochondriac

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I will be dead
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It's a natural fact.
George Garrett

Those prophets preach like headlines:
politics, weather, the stock exchange—
their only change rattles in a sow's ear
purse.
I cannot telescope our time
or any other. My corns are mute;
I am not privy to D. C. gossip
nor backed with rockets of algebra,

equations of forces that shake
the stars,
stars that shift
rains
upon us, the crashing mill wheels
of our weather.
I cannot even raise a table.
Sitting here in the rains of morning light,
hair in my face, a rumpled night robe
pulled about my breasts, before the
morning paper after a night
of rock
and roll stars in the womb,
I calculate my chances.

Tea-leaves
constellate and weave in amber
like words of famous men. I drink.
I think of poets who cannot rhyme at all
in quilts of complexity.
I think
true prophets make the simplest statements,

risk their hands
and guts
and balls
on the turn
and counterturn of love. I think the stars
that sang on Plato's page rattle like dice
in our empty cups.
And I do not think it matters.
—Margaret Gibson

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Last year so many of our subscribers took advantage of our offer that we are repeating it this year and with a new urgency.

For only $1.00 ($1.50 in Canada and elsewhere) we will send all five issues of *The Hollins Critic* for 1969 to anyone you designate, together with an attractive gift card. After January 1, 1969, we are going to be forced to raise the price of the *Critic* to $2.00 a year ($3.00 in Canada and elsewhere), not because we want to; but in five years all prices and costs have risen and it is no longer possible to produce and to offer the *Critic* at the same price. If you subscribe now, before January, the old rates will still be in effect.

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We need your help if the *Critic* is to survive and to grow.

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