Dislocation Thomas Kinsella’s exploration in his poetry of his sense of alienation from woman.

Carol Ann. Tattersall

University of Windsor

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholar.uwindsor.ca/etd

Recommended Citation


https://scholar.uwindsor.ca/etd/1760

This online database contains the full-text of PhD dissertations and Masters’ theses of University of Windsor students from 1954 forward. These documents are made available for personal study and research purposes only, in accordance with the Canadian Copyright Act and the Creative Commons license—CC BY-NC-ND (Attribution, Non-Commercial, No Derivative Works). Under this license, works must always be attributed to the copyright holder (original author), cannot be used for any commercial purposes, and may not be altered. Any other use would require the permission of the copyright holder. Students may inquire about withdrawing their dissertation and/or thesis from this database. For additional inquiries, please contact the repository administrator via email (scholarship@uwindsor.ca) or by telephone at 519-253-3000ext. 3208.
NOTICE

The quality of this microfiche is heavily dependent upon the quality of the original thesis submitted for microfilming. Every effort has been made to ensure the highest quality of reproduction possible.

If pages are missing, contact the university which granted the degree.

Some pages may have indistinct print especially if the original pages were typed with a poor typewriter ribbon or if the university sent us an inferior photocopy.

Previously copyrighted materials (journal articles, published tests, etc.) are not filmed.

Reproduction in full or in part of this film is governed by the Canadian Copyright Act, R.S.C. 1970, c. C-30. Please read the authorization forms which accompany this thesis.

THIS DISSERTATION HAS BEEN MICROFILMED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED

AVIS

La qualité de cette microfiche dépend grandement de la qualité de la thèse soumise au microfilmage. Nous avons tout fait pour assurer une qualité supérieure de reproduction.

S'il manque des pages, veuillez communiquer avec l'université qui a conféré le grade.

La qualité d'impression de certaines pages peut laisser à désirer, surtout si les pages originales ont été dactylographiées à l'aide d'un ruban usé ou si l'université nous a fait parvenir une photocopie de qualité inférieure.

Les documents qui font déjà l'objet d'un droit d'auteur (articles de revue, examens publiés, etc.) ne sont pas microfilmés.

La reproduction, même partielle, de ce microfilm est soumise à la Loi canadienne sur le droit d'auteur, SRC 1970, c. C-30. Veuillez prendre connaissance des formules d'autorisation qui accompagnent cette thèse.

LA THÈSE A ÉTÉ MICROFILMÉE TELLE QUE NOUS L'AVONS REÇUE
DISLOCATION: THOMAS KINSELLA'S EXPLORATION IN HIS POETRY OF HIS SENSE OF ALIENATION FROM WOMAN.

by

Carol Ann Tattersall

A Thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research through the Department of English in Partial Fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts at the University of Windsor

Windsor, Ontario, Canada

© 1984
# Table of Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>iv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dedication</td>
<td>vi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Chapter</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I. Denial: The Early Poems</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II. Recognition: Wormwood and Nightwalker and Other Poems</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III. Confrontation: Notes From The Land Of The Dead</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bibliography</td>
<td>102</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vita Auctoris</td>
<td>106</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
ABSTRACT

DISLOCATION: THOMAS KINSELLA'S EXPLORATION IN HIS POETRY OF HIS SENSE OF ALIENATION FROM WOMAN

by
Carol Ann Tattersall

Very little critical attention has been given to the theme of Woman in Thomas Kinsella's work, even though it occupies about one-half of all his poetry written between 1956 and 1973. Kinsella is not merely preoccupied with the subject of Woman in general, but is, in fact, often quite obsessed by his painful sense of alienation from all of her sex. Through his poetry he explores that complicated sense of alienation to which I refer by his own term "dislocation", to distinguish the poet's very personal feeling of separateness from the Romantic sense of social isolation and the modern consciousness of cultural alienation.

Kinsella's treatment of his subject is at first tentative and oblique, but gradually becomes both determined and direct as he realizes the complexity of the problem of his relationship with women. Also, in his endeavour to resolve his personal difficulties regarding his perception of Woman the poet develops a unique style and approach to his writing -- a sort of objective introspection -- suited to the stringent self-analysis which he undergoes through his poetry.
The poems are divided for discussion into three chapters which trace the movement in Kinsella's writing towards a resolution of his dislocation from Woman. Chapter I deals with Poems (1956), Another September and Downstream, Chapter II with Wormwood and Nightwalker and Other Poems and Chapter III with Notes From the Land of the Dead. The grouping of the poems reflects the three distinct phases in Kinsella's style and approach to his work and also corresponds to his changing attitude towards his conflict with Woman. The three phases are: "denial", "recognition" and "confrontation".

We shall see that, while the poet's attempt to examine his personal difficulties through his poetry is, indeed, effective both as a source of creative energy and as a salve for psychological pain, it does not bring him to the ultimate solution which he seeks. He remains, even after the final confrontation, to some extent, dislocated from Woman.
To the memory of my mother.
INTRODUCTION

About one-half of all Kinsella's poetry, written between 1956 and 1973, has as its theme, Woman, in her various guises. Three collections of poetry—Poems (1956), Wormwood (1966), and New Poems (1973)—deal almost exclusively with the subject of Woman and the poet's relationship to her. Also, each of these collections represents a distinct stage in the development of Kinsella's style and approach to his writing. Curiously, although the "Woman poems" constitute such a large and significant part of Kinsella's work, they have received very little direct attention from his critics.

Indeed, only Peggy Broder has given the theme of Woman in Kinsella's poetry full and separate analysis. References by other critics to feminine motifs in his work are almost always incidental to the main focus of the discussion. While they do not ignore the poet's frequent references to the female, his critics appear to be unaware of the depth of his interest in feminine themes, and of the distinct pattern that emerges through the numerous poems on the subject of Woman.

Technically, the poems are interesting because, more than any other specific group, they show the gradual evolution of Kinsella's early, tentative, uneasy style into a confident, controlled technique. Thematically, the poems are even more interesting because they deal with the
subject which has, for Kinsella, been the focus of his most intense feelings of alienation.

"Alienation", however, is not a wholly adequate word to describe that painful sense of unease, otherness, inappropriateness in relation to the rest of humanity, which Thomas Kinsella expresses through his writing. I have chosen, therefore, to use his own word "dislocation" to refer to this element in his work, and before proceeding with the analysis of the poet's sense of dislocation from Woman, I shall briefly define exactly what I intend by the word.

"Dislocation" is apt to be understood as somewhat like modernist "alienation" or romantic "isolation", and, indeed, it is somewhat like both of these; but it is, on the other hand, also quite different in its precise implications. At first Kinsella was himself unsure about how to characterize his feelings of discomfort and insecurity, although he was, apparently, aware that they paralleled, to some extent, both modern alienation and romantic isolation.

He began to write in the late forties and was, therefore, still chronologically a part of the modernist tradition. But his inability to reconcile the fierce intensity of his feelings with modernist objectivity, coupled with a need to be independent from fashionable influences, led him, originally, to reject the Moderns in favour of a more direct and fervent style of poetry. Consequently, he turned, for
a model, to the past and it seems that, for a while at least, he believed he had found the fervour of expression which he sought in Romantic poetry.

This phase of Kinsella's writing was, however, short-lived. He soon discovered his distaste for what he perceived as emotional and intellectual dishonesty in romantic poetry, and in "Baggot Street Deserta" he articulates his dissatisfaction with the various romantic notions of the poet as set apart from other people by his acute sensitivity and unique perceptiveness.

Kinsella feels himself not as set apart, but rather as dislocated, exactly as a limb might be from the rest of the body: attached, but unable to function because the working contact is broken. Like the limb, Kinsella receives all the impulses transmitted from the main body of human society, but is separated, and made incapable of response by his feeling of dislocation. This feeling of being joined yet separated is experienced most intensely by Kinsella in his relationships to Woman, and it is his desire somehow to heal the dislocation and establish a working contact which is the focus of almost all his poetry about women.

It was not long before Kinsella discovered that, far from seeking a cure for their sense of isolation, the romantic poets actually enjoyed what they believed to be their superior status, and that the affectation of the romantic style was singularly inappropriate to his own
desire to write poetry

...with obsessed honesty,
A tugging scruple that can keep
Clear eyes staring down the mile

The poet realized that, so long as he continued to write in the romantic mode, instead of exploring his sense of dislocation from women, he was, in fact, denying it, by idealising the very source of his discomfort.

Kinsella became aware, then, through his early writing that his sense of dislocation was much more intense and personal than the rather affected feelings of social isolation expressed by the romantic poets. He turned, therefore, once more, to the modernist writers although, even then, he was certainly aware that their sense of cultural alienation has as little to do with his individual feeling of dislocation as has the social isolation of the Romantics.

It would seem that the poet's disillusionment with what he perceived as the emotional and intellectual dishonesty of the Romantics engendered in him a determination to reject all affectation in his own poetry. But in his determination, Kinsella failed to realize that the cool objectivity of the Modernists is, for him, as much an affectation as the heated subjectivity of the Romantics.

The unique style which gradually emerges through his poetry is a peculiar combination of objectivity and
introspection, an almost scientific approach to the analysis of the interaction of his own thoughts and emotions. But, although he is unable to achieve objectivity in the modernist sense of maintaining ironic distance from one's subject and is equally unable to truly identify with the modernist sense of cultural alienation, Kinsella has found that he does share some attitudes and concerns expressed by modern writers.

Two of these directly affect his attempts in his poetry to solve his sense of dislocation from woman: the desire to repossess the past, and the need to impose order upon existence. But, even in his perception of these lesser elements of alienation, Kinsella differs from other modern poets. His need for order, being a part of his whole sense of dislocation, is intensely personal. Kinsella goes further than Yeats, Pound or Eliot, who all reacted against the idea of static perceived order:

\[\text{[that]}\text{ instantaneous apprehension of a total configuration, a unified field [which is] characteristic of the modern electric age.}\]

He interprets order as almost synonymous with purpose, but he believes that it cannot be achieved by ordinary cautious means. Order, for Kinsella, can only be created by the increase of individual wisdom gained through personal experience and related to a more universal consciousness. He explains:
Unless a poet is totally eccentric, he is likely to undergo in his own experience (if it is important enough) the basic experiences that are enshrined in myth. Responding as an individual, to a specific event, he does so in a way that is characteristic of our human origins and the course of evolution. Relating certain references together in pursuit of a private order...

...he causes the primary, mythical process to take place again, for the nth time. And so a kind of foundation is provided both for communication and for understanding of reality, of what his own life, his ordeal, is about.

Kinsella made this comment four years after the publication of Notes From the Land of the Dead, speaking confidently about the functions of order, myth and the past for the poet and for the ordinary individual. But, had he been asked to articulate the same ideas before the completion of Notes, it is doubtful whether he would then have so clearly understood those complicated mental and emotional processes.

The convincing clarity of Kinsella's thought in this comment is the result of the agonised search for meaning through his poetry, and most of the insight into the individual experience which the poet expresses here is, in fact, gained gradually in those poems which explore his difficult relationships with women.

It can be seen here too that Kinsella has realized that the quest for order and the need for communion with the past are, indeed, part of a single human need. In his earlier work he treated the two needs separately, at
first, it would seem, believing that his wish to make contact with the past paralleled that of the other modern writers:

His need for a close sense of communion between past and present, however, goes very much deeper than that of Eliot, who wanted primarily to use the past to define the present or vice-versa. And his need goes deeper, too, than that of Pound or Yeats, for although they, like Kinsella, seek a sort of communion with the past, they lack the almost mystical sense of contact with another era through the language of its people. Although aware of the paradox of writing as an Irishman in English, Yeats never felt an affinity with the ancient Irish writers. As he himself said, his literary inheritance was from Shakespeare, Spencer and Blake. Kinsella is, on the contrary, driven by an obsessive urge to recapture the mythic richness of the ancient Irish culture, and, typically, it is his need to confront his sense of dislocation from Woman that impels him finally to resurrect his Celtic past in Notes From the Land of the Dead.

When I use the term dislocation, then, I refer to a sense of isolation, but not that feeling of superiority expressed by the romantic writers; I include a sense of discontinuity of time, but one that is more personal and complex than that of most modern poets; and I recognize that obsessive quest for order common to most of the modern
poets, but differentiate Kinsella's perception of order as something to be achieved through his own effort and experience.

As Kinsella's mistaken association of his own sense of dislocation with the romantic alienation influences his earliest poetry, the two concerns which he shares with the modernists influence his more recent writing. The desire to impose order on existence and the need to repossess the past have each played a key role in Kinsella's pursuit of a solution for his sense of dislocation from Woman. Each approach has, in fact, had a measure of success. In *Wormwood*, Kinsella demonstrates that the determined pursuit of order "through ordeal after ordeal" (p.66) can impose meaning on the otherwise insupportable relationships of man and wife. He believes that without the constant quest for harmony "we are like pigs in a slaughteryard that turn and savage each other in a common desperation and disorder" (p.66).

As the need for order dominates *Wormwood* so the desire to recapture the past, both personal and cultural, pervades the whole sequence of *Notes From the Land of the Dead*. By delving into his childhood and relating his actual memories to his mythic consciousness, through his poetry, Kinsella is finally able to confront, understand and, to some extent, accept his present sense of dislocation from Woman. We can see, then, that the three main stages of development in Kinsella's approach to his art—the adoption of a romantic perspective, the imposition of order on his poetry and
thought, and the return to the past in search of meaning—dictate his approach to his personal problem of dislocation from Woman. The poet’s treatment of this theme progresses through three distinct phases: denial, recognition and confrontation. The first phase, in which the poet denies his problem, corresponds with the romantic beginnings of his writing; in this phase, Kinsella produces pretty but thoroughly dishonest poetry. In the second phase, he begins, through his desire to impose order on his life and work, to recognize his very complex problem with his relationship to women; in this stage, Kinsella writes tense, earnest verse and strives, unsuccessfully, to be completely straightforward. Not until he gains an intense personal insight into his perception of women, in the two poems "Our Mother" and "Westland Row" is he able, through the exploration of his past in his poetry, finally, to confront the most powerful sources of his sense of dislocation from the female.

We have seen that when he began to write, Kinsella was indeed young, fervent and disinclined to be objective in his poetry, but he was, in fact, in his adoption of the simple lyrical mode, denying a fundamental part of his own complicated perception. By the time he published his second volume of poems, Another September, he had already rejected this early, affected style.

His first collection Poems (1956) cannot, however, be lightly dismissed, for although it has many shortcomings,
it contains the first signs of the original style which Kinsella was gradually to develop, especially the beginnings of his ability to match form to content. It also reveals much about his early attitudes toward women. Even in this collection, little murmurs of discontent about his relationships with woman can be heard through the carefully lyrical love poems, composed by an apparently carefree young man.

After "Baggot Street", however, Kinsella's poetry takes a new approach to the theme of Woman, which involves a radical change in point of view. In fact he completely abandons the subject of Woman for a time. His next collection deals with a more abstract theme, Moralities. When the female re-enters in Downstream, she is not in the company of a lover. Interaction has ceased. The male is present only as distant observer contemplating various images of the female: in pregnancy, in death, in marriage, in childhood. (Although, he is, in fact, in contact with the child in "Girl on a Swing", it is significant that he is, reluctantly, pushing her away with her gleeful compliance). It is not until later in his work that Kinsella is able to unite all of these figures in a single, powerfully complex, image of Woman. The sense of fragmentation and total dislocation from the female, in the Downstream poems, reflects the poet's general sense of frustration, loss and disorientation at having to reject what he believed to be the dishonesty of the Romantic stance of isolation. He continued, however, to seek a poetic expression of his personal sense of
dislocation from Woman. The sequence which follows is an intensely painful exploration of male/female commitment.

In *Wormwood*, Kinsella analyzes and seeks order in the state of marriage, and tries to accept his sense of dislocation as both unavoidable and worthwhile. He argues that out of pain comes knowledge and the ability to progress. The philosophy underlying this stage in his writing is, as was pointed out by Kersnowski, typically Irish Catholic and even Jansenist in its stoicism.

Kinsella reverts to his unique tone of objective introversion in the *Wormwood* poems. His tentative response to his sense of dislocation is the imposition of order on existence, and on individual relationships. The conclusion of this phase is not resolution but compromise and dogged acceptance of the status quo. Technically, these poems are an excellent example of Kinsella’s instinct for matching form to content. They are short, taut and controlled, emphasizing the intensity of the emotion, and the whole sequence is united by recurring imagery which complements the general theme of emotional conflict and angry physical desire. In *Wormwood*, Kinsella has reached the furthest limits of dislocation from the female, but he has not yet recognised the real reasons for his sense of alienation.

The recognition occurs soon after the *Wormwood* sequence, beginning in "Cur Mother" and reaching articulation in "Westland Row". These two poems together provide the
revealed which causes a crucial change in Kinsella's approach to the theme of Woman.

In the course of these two poems the writer recognises that his attempts to characterize Woman have been, until this point, both inaccurate and inadequate. He at last recognises the complexity of the female, seeing her not as a single entity but as a sort of trinity of Womanhood, combining all the attributes of the Celtic triple goddess: the virgin, the nurturer of life and the watcher over the dead.

The distrust and resentment of the female which, until this point in Kinsella's work, was only an ominous mutter in the background is, mainly as a result of this insight, given full expression in Notes From the Land of the Dead. We shall see, however, that a combination of other circumstances causes Kinsella finally to explore the more threatening aspects of Woman, recognised in "Our Mother" and "Westland Row".

Although Kinsella's images of women gradually develop through his poetry, becoming more complex, they remain consistent in one respect, their negativity. Nowhere in his work do we find the tender, comfortable feminine stereotype. When Kinsella shows the reader the apparently frail, vulnerable woman, she ultimately frustrates the male protective urge by her independence, resilience and self-assurance. The poet is aware that even for the tiny "Girl on a Swing" his "touch has little force" (p.51).
He knows that she will, without his help,

fly up to kiss
The year's brimming glass;
To drink; to sag sweetly
When [he drops] from sight (p.51).

Even Kinsella's picture of "home and beauty / Her
dear shadow on the blind" (p.112) lacks a real sense of the
woman as nurturer. The symbol of bread, the source of life
and comfort is used with a subtle irony. "The Nightwalker's"
wife isn't baking bread; she is slicing it with a breadknife—
the conventional image is cooled.

Nor is Kinsella's concept of Woman as source of life
and watcher over the dead a reassuring one. It has less to
do with the Holy Mother of God than with the pagan Mother
Earth, whose total comprehension and acceptance of the
mystery of regeneration results in a seeming indifference
to the individual life. The "Hen Woman", unable to save a
single egg from breaking, is angry for only an instant.
Then she laughs, saying, "It's all the one / There's plenty
more where that came from" (p.137).

The ancient crone in "Hen Woman" and the later poems
bears little relationship to the fresh girl in the earliest
poems, and neither seems connected to the sagacious wife of
the middle group. But, in fact, together they form a
pattern of images which progresses through three distinct
stages, each concentrating on one aspect of the trinity
which is recognised in "Westland Row".
It is with the recognition of that trinity that Kinsella begins to move towards confrontation of the source of his dislocation from the female, but, first, with his new insight, he reassesses his relationship with his wife, in "Phoenix Park". In thought and imagery "Phoenix Park" is, in fact, a prelude to the ultimate sequence of poems on the theme of Woman: Notes From the Land of the Dead.

It is significant that these poems were written a few years after Kinsella's move to the United States. There are two contrary sociological effects on the individual resulting from a move from one country to another: a refocusing of and, usually, a reawakening of interest in one's own culture, and an adjustment to and absorption of some of the elements of the new culture. Both of these effects can be observed in Kinsella's Notes From the Land of the Dead.

The first -- the rekindling of interest in one's original culture -- is hardly surprising in Kinsella's case, because even in Ireland he had steeped himself in Celtic culture, becoming completely fluent in Irish and studying and translating ancient Irish manuscripts. Paradoxically, however, he had, he believed, until leaving Ireland, strenuously resisted the encroachment of specifically Irish elements in his poetry, except when dealing directly with Irish subject matter. In spite of his vigilance, however, both his imagery and his philosophy, even in the earlier poems, are unavoidably shaped by his unconsciously Irish
perspective.

In *Notes*, Kinsella's resolution is entirely reversed. Romanticism had long ago been rejected in favour of his own peculiar type of objectivity, and the quest for order as a cure for dislocation had dominated his more recent poetry. But in the *Notes* sequence, objectivity and order give way to apparent subjectivity and chaos of form, theme and imagery. The chaos is, in fact, quite calculated and controlled. Theme, form and imagery are perfectly unified not only in each poem, but throughout the long sequence. The unifying factor is the use of Irish, or at least Celtic, mythology. The image of Woman here has evolved into the archetypal witch figure, with peculiarly Celtic connotations.

The final release of all Kinsella's pagan/Catholic cultural and mythological resources has been made possible because of the second sociological effect of his move to the United States of America: the absorption of new cultural attitudes. Kinsella has, in fact, become more "laid back", more consciously and fashionably interested in the psychological processes. No longer is his interest in the interaction of thought and emotion a strange aberration excusable in Ireland only in consideration of his status as a poet. In North America, mild psychological fixations are perfectly respectable. But, instead of entering psychotherapy to find a way to confront his continuing sense of dislocation from Woman, Kinsella turns with a new openness
and determination to his poetry and to his past.

Notes From the Land of the Dead is, then, Kinsella believes, his final confrontation with Woman and dislocation, and in this sequence he does, indeed, exhume and perform psychological autopsies on the embodiments of some of his own worst fears and fixations, most notably the demon grandmother of his childhood. But we shall see that to complete the confrontation, Kinsella still needs to write a sequel to Notes, entirely on the theme of Woman. But first we shall turn our attention to the young man of the first phase, who wrote the romantic Poems of 1956 in an initial attempt to express his intense but as yet rather confused feelings about women.
NOTES: INTRODUCTION


2. Thomas Kinsella, *Poems 1956–1973* (Dublin: The Dolmen Press, 1980), p.28. All other references to the poems are to this volume and will be given parenthetically in the text.


Chapter I

DENIAL: THE EARLY POEMS

Had it not been for his early resolution, in "Baggot Street Deserta", to keep clear eyes staring down the mile, Kinsella might never have progressed beyond his early romantic efforts.¹ Driven inwards by "obsessed honesty" (p.29) and his need to create order, and drawn further into his own unconscious by his metaphysical (in the poetic sense) fascination with the interplay of thought and emotion, Kinsella works doggedly downwards to the very core of his dislocation from woman.

Although flawed, those early poems are nevertheless important, because they contain the seeds of the ideas, emotions and techniques which are gradually to gestate and develop into Kinsella's mature style of writing. The analysis of the poet's early work must, necessarily, be organised chronologically, dealing separately with each poem as it appears in the collection, for there is, at first, no unity of style or approach in his writing.

When he began to write, Kinsella was a young man, infatuated by one woman; but he was interested more in the novelty and intensity of the experience itself than in deep intellectual or emotional involvement with the woman. Like most infatuated young men, he merely wanted an audience to whom he could recount, in glowing terms, his ecstasy.
Consequently, the first person narrative voice, using gentle images from nature and speaking in a lyrical rhyming verse seemed ideally suited to his purpose. The warmth and directness of that form also appealed to the young writer reacting against cool modern objectivity.

At this stage in his work, Kinsella almost certainly believed, as Peggy Broder also believes, that he was representing Woman as he honestly perceived her: "the benign muse figure." Yet, even in his earliest work, phrases and images creep in to contradict that positive perception.

In "Night Songs", the "woman with the golden skin" (p.13) who comes to calm the restless male, emerges through a tangle of lusciously sensuous images. However attractive the description of the golden female may be, it carries unavoidably negative associations with the first seduction, by which sin entered the world. The darkness is "apple-tasting" (p.13), and sleep, the state of rest and peace, is not only "weakened with appetite" (p.13) aroused by the woman, but is actually shattered by it. So that "benign muse figure" is not to be trusted, nor is the "Lady of Quality". All the gentle love and admiration, expressed by the husband visiting the hospital, is marred by the comparison of the ill wife to

...country ladies who could wind
A nation's love-affair with mind
Around their little fingers,  
(p.18).

Peggy Broder quotes this stanza as an example of the "easeful
cadences and rhymes", used by Kinsella in his early poems to produce a positive image of the calm wise woman. But, however easyful the versification, the picture of Woman winding others around her little finger is, in my experience, seldom used to convey sincere approval. The admiration expressed is tinged with the suggestion of feminine connivance and manipulation.

In fact, the only poem in which Kinsella succeeds in producing an image of woman unmarred by little nagging negatives is "Midsummer". The success, however, is dearly bought. The poem is embarassingly awkward; the dishonesty of the sentiment, and the strain of maintaining it, leads to failures in rhythm and imagery. The plan to write six line stanzas in iambic metres, rhyming aabccb, with the third and sixth lines of four syllables and all others of eight, trips on the first iam. It slips again in line three, picks up half a foot on four and, finally, collapses in the last line under the strain of yet another extra syllable. After a false start, the verse finds its pace and loses it again, only for a moment, in lines four and five of the third stanza and the opening line of the fourth. Unfortunately, the excuse of calculated manipulation of metre for emphasis does not seem to apply to any of these lines; the breaks in metre serve only to disturb the measured pace, and act as an irritant to the reader.

The irritation increases as the awkward verse is
supplemented by even more awkward imagery. The attempt of
the speaker to emphasize the lovers' communion with nature
produces some excruciatingly awkward images. Little flowers,
whose names the lover doesn't even know, "Make happy signals
to us" (p.14). But the couple, oblivious,

Have locked [themselves] inside one heart,
Grown silent and,
Under beech and sacred larch,
Watched as though it were an arch
That heart expand. (p.14)

I am not at all convinced that the comparison with an
arch makes it any easier to picture the heart expanding.
Arches are architecturally sound and stable supporting
structures, not usually expected suddenly, or even gradually,
to expand. No more familiar than swelling arches are
"stumbling bees", evenings like "huge closed doors" or
"tragic grasses" (p.14).

Certainly, the poet's determination just once to write
something lyrical, loving and affirmative is understandable,
but it is nevertheless a relief to Kinsella's readers that
the experiment has not been repeated.

Probably it was with a similar urge to express his love
in satisfied and unconditional terms that Kinsella started
to write "Soft to Your Places", but fortunately his cynical
self intrudes. The setting has an Edenic orderliness suited
to the theme of idyllic love, and the tidy form of the poem
keeps the decorum, without observing quite such rigid
bounds as "Midsummer". "Soft to Your Places", in its form,
theme and imagery is reminiscent of metaphysical poetry, especially that of Marvell and Herrick, and the final philosophical decision to accept present pleasure strengthens the association. Although he has chosen a demanding structure, Kinsella is more comfortable here because he is using that structure to carry the argument of the poem, and is not trying to state positively what he does not really feel. He is, in fact, beginning to do what he will continue to do throughout his poetry; he is examining his thoughts through his writing. In each stanza, the first four lines are broken effectively to resemble normal speech, by a short third line. The first quatrains states a hypothesis, or poses a question, to which the last couplet responds. It is important to note that this is indeed merely a response, not a direct answer or a definite conclusion. The reader and the writer are left without firm answers.

The movement of the whole poem is from affirmation to uncertainty. Using images from nature to reinforce his argument, the lover sets out to assert the simplicity and appropriateness of his feelings. He realizes that, like the primrose, his love, though fragile and beautiful, has tough, hardy roots. But that thought raises other negative connotations. The speaker remembers uneasily, in what structurally should be the last couplet, that Beauty is invariably a victim of Time. Yet the poem does not end on a negative note. Kinsella demonstrates his growing technical skill and originality. Echoing the poem's first
line, he adds a couplet which, while it is not aggressively positive about the rightness and naturalness of his love is, nevertheless, a statement by the persona that he is willing to accept the present love, simply "because it is" (p.16). Although the woman in both of these poems is almost an incidental figure, the primary theme being "love", the reader is offered an insight into the speaker's attitude towards the female. In "Midsummer", Kinsella's attempt to represent an idyllic relationship with a gentle feminine creature fails because his affected stance produces affected poetry. On the other hand, the more reserved "Soft to Your Places" succeeds, although it is still somewhat flawed, because the poet allows his ambivalent feelings about the woman to dictate structure and imagery. When he pursues his own, often unconventional ideas Kinsella is, paradoxically, more in control of his material. Then he cannot pursue romantic ideals at the expense of sound reason. His greatest asset is, in fact, his obsessive honesty, for it is that which makes his poetry immediate and convincing.

Kinsella's period of denial of his ambivalent view of woman was very short-lived. The last poem in which the image of wise and gentle womankind is given even lip service is "A Lady of Quality". There is no question that the love and admiration expressed here are entirely sincere. Kinsella makes no attempt to disguise himself. The male quite openly represents the poet, and the "Lady of Quality" his beloved. Some awkward images are still present: "air like a laundered
sheet" (p.17), "transcendental birds" (p.17), "soft plumage aghast" (p.18), but they are more than redeemed by the effectiveness of the whole. Contrasting images are juxtaposed throughout the poem to heighten the tension in the sick-room between affected cheerfulness and fear. The "leaping season out-of-door / Light lively as a ferret" (p.17), crocuses, and soaring birds form a backdrop which throws into relief the image of the sick woman lying in repressed dread, under a "hygienic ceiling" (p.17). The claustrophobic sterility of the hospital is intensified by the images of spring and wakening life beyond the windows. The atmosphere of mutual deception and evasion between the lovers, and their reluctance to communicate for fear of accidentally touching upon the subject of mortality, are conveyed by the concentration, in the last few stanzas, upon images of the trivial: "sweets and grapes", "books and flowers", "pillow chat", "nonsense said" (p.17). But the trivial gradually gives way, and the fear grows from "present dread" (p.17) and "tiny terrors" (p.17) to "Grief, the hunters fatal tread" (p.18), until even nature abandons its celebration. Outside the

window's turning dark
And ragged rocks across the Park
Mix with the branches

(p.19).

Inside, the seemingly insignificant flowers drop two petals, symbols of mourning (or impending death), and even the usually unfeeling mechanical world reacts to the sorrow as, in the distance, "a train lifts up a lonely cry" (p.19).
Yet, while everything around expresses grief, the lovers are mute: their "fingertips together lie / Upon the counterpane" (p.19). The final image of strained, tenuous contact between the male and the female is poignantly effective. No longer is Kinsella playing with the image of soft, seductive Woman. For him, this woman represents the reality of physical vulnerability mixed with emotional resilience. The male is reluctantly impressed but, as was earlier discussed, resents the distance that the woman's reserve and self-reliance creates between them. The distance is emphasized by repeated images of severance: "The ever present crack in time / Forever sundering the lime- / Paths"; "Our trophies love must now divide / Into its separate parts" and, finally, the barely touching fingertips (p.18).

It befits the poet's scrupulous integrity that, even in such emotionally strained circumstances, his persona expresses no false sentiment. Kinsella masterfully uses measured verse and rigid form to elicit the hushed and regulated hospital atmosphere, and, by use of restrained but powerful imagery, creates an overwhelming tension between the male and female. The tension has just begun. Very occasionally it will be released in an outburst of male self-pity and resentment against the woman he believes to be the source of his affliction. It is not until his confrontation with the real source of his problem, in "Westland Row", that this tension will finally be allowed to break and dissipate in the subsequent poems.
Until that time the intensity and sense of dislocation increase; so also does the skill of the poet driven by the need to understand and alleviate the pain of his relationship with Woman.

Having reached a stage where he recognises that his view of Woman seems at variance with the conventional one of nurturing gentle supporter of Man, Kinsella, perhaps to postpone the anguish of scrutinising his problem, begins to explore other themes. But those poems on Woman, which he has included in the Another September and Downstream collections, are essential to the development of his style of writing and his growing sense of dislocation from Woman. "In the Ringwood", "Another September", and "The Laundress", each with a very distinct structure, together demonstrate Kinsella's instinct and versatility in matching form to content.

"In the Ringwood" unites past and present horror in a nightmare vision of male/female love, blighted by an ancient and malignant genius loci. Kinsella emphasizes the sense of supernatural forces at work by using traditional ballad form in which fate is accepted, horror is expected, and magic is commonplace. By choosing this form, Kinsella prepares the mind of the reader to expect and accept the extraordinary.

To complement the verse form, Kinsella also uses the conventional archaic diction of the ballad: the lover
"roves out", feels "fell dismay" and experiences "woe" (p.23-24). The imagery conforms closely to that of the traditional ballad. The female has Raven hair, red lips and white cheeks.

But having effectively established the first person narrative form, archaic language, and conventional imagery of the ballad in the first five stanzas, without losing step Kinsella switches to a contemplative tone, and begins to interpret and expand his own images, a technique that he will continue to use repeatedly throughout his work. The second half of the poem presents man as a helpless victim of a conspiracy between ghosts of the past and the powers of nature which threaten not only his love but his whole being.

Whether or not the woman is similarly threatened is left uncertain. The vague suspicion, already expressed in earlier poems, that she is in fact in league with nature against Man, the outsider, is further developed here. The transformation of the female into "sorrow's daughter" (p.23) is ambiguous. The speaker himself is unsure whether she has become an accomplice of the dark forces or is another victim, for her looks "Both woe and fury speak" (p.23).

Despite or perhaps because of the ambiguity, this wild woman has a vibrant life that the gentle positive woman figure of "Midsummer" lacks. She certainly brings no comfort or promise of fulfillment for the man. She
personifies Kinsella's intense feelings of dislocation from the female, and she takes on the pagan characteristics that, for Kinsella, emphasise the impossibility of contact between intuitive, erratic woman and logical, reasonable man.

The imagery and symbolism used in relation to Woman in this poem will become very familiar to Kinsella's readers. Associations with nature, fertility, darkness, death and regeneration, thirst and appetite recur with increasing frequency until, in Notes From the Land of the Dead, they become the essential element which unites that entire sequence. As in the ancient fertility rituals, Man seems almost inevitably to face destruction as a result of loving Woman: "Dread, a grey devourer / Stalks in the shade of love" (p.24). Paradoxically, although it is usually the male who suffers from surfeit of appetite, it is almost always the woman who is the potential devourer. Although she represents a negative force, however, Kinsella's woman is not, in herself, evil. She is not Morgan le Fay, Delilah or Lady Macbeth, actively using her feminine wiles to lure a great man to destruction. This woman's malignancy is powerful, but seemingly guileless; she is Danu, Macha, Deirdre, 'a distinctly Irish Celtic conception of the female, uniting mysticism and pragmatism, femininity and ferocity. Her destructive power is simply a function of her womanhood. However unwillingly, men are the destroyers of themselves merely by association with Woman. Knowing his fate, in love, the man is powerless to resist:
I kissed three times her shivery lips.  
I drank their naked chill.  
I watched the river shining  
Where the heron wiped his bill.  
I took my love in my icy arms  
In the Spring on Ringwood Hill.  

(p.24)

The image of the passively malignant woman is repeated, in less fanciful terms, in "Another September", and in "The Laundress". But, although the image of Woman is consistent in each of these poems, the form is changed by Kinsella to match tone and content. The sustained intensity of "In the Ringwood" contrasts with the gradually mounting tension of "Another September" and the deceptively relaxed simplicity of "The Laundress."

"Another September" is set at evening in a country bedroom. The stanzas have eight lines; the rhyme scheme is simple and the lines are at first long and lazy made longer by long vowels and lazier by the broken metre, matching the cadences of normal speech. As the speaker becomes more wakeful and more irritated by his own perceptions, the lines become less uniform, shortened, or broken by a period or a dash and further punctuated by harsh consonants.

The speaker, waking from a dream, experiences with all his senses an Autumn scene rank with ripeness, just at that point when fruitfulness finishes and the decay begins in preparation for another cycle of fertility. Autumn is femal and seemingly benign, tolerating, like a gentle old cow, the "handling by those countrymen" (p.25). She comes to
the bedroom wall "Sensing a fragrant child come back again" (p. 25), and, suddenly, the tone of the poem changes to one of resentment, as the speaker realizes that he is, once more, to be shut out of the cult of females. It is her "unspeaking daughter" (p. 25) that Autumn seeks, and the daughter, his wife, in keeping with the man's sense of isolation, is "growing less familiar" although they "fell asleep as one" (p. 25).

The final image of the poem is both female and threatening. "Moving like women: Justice and Truth" (p. 25) emerge from the darkness -- positive figures? But they carry daggers and balances. The man not only feels distanced from the woman, who is now allied both with natural forces and with abstract forces of judgement, but he senses again, with deep resentment, that terrible female power which seems to challenge, or even negate, mere male reason.

One might wonder, then, what the image of the simple laundress has in common with these mysteriously malignant female figures. Even the form is designed to represent domestic contentment. The poem is written in short, six syllable lines, but the risk of becoming staccato is avoided by the carrying of the sense from line to line. Each stanza consists of only one or, occasionally, two sentences. There are no disjointed images or complicated thoughts. The diction and rhyme scheme are also elementary. Such simplicity of form reflects the simplicity of the woman
and of her existence.

For all its simplicity, however, the poem expresses some very complicated sentiments; this pregnant farm woman is, in fact, no less threatening than the female lover of "In the Ringwood". The subtle ambiguity of the imagery has, unfortunately, been overlooked by some of Kinsella's critics. Maurice Harmon states:

"The Laundress", an ideal portrait of domestic peace, celebrates individual fulfillment in a life so lived that the woman and her work are happily integrated. Seated in the sunlit doorway, she is unconsciously joined with the fundamental rhythms of the natural world.

Robin Skelton also sees the poem as "a simple description of a pregnant woman at the house door in Flanders", but he recognises that the rhythms of the natural world are not necessarily benign. He points out that

the last verse hints at metaphysical ambiguities with reference to the 'winds of Heaven' and their winnowing, but it does no more than hint.

Peggy Broder, however, believes that the laundress, because

she stitches a linen sheet represents the destructive aspects of the world that Kinsella contrasts to her: the Earth-Mother is also the Death-Goddess.

In analysing the images associated with the pregnant woman, Broder presents a very convincing case. Her interpretation is also in keeping with the mythical imagery which Kinsella is now beginning to use more frequently. I would further point out that a simple image of Woman in domestic
peace would conflict directly with the increasing ambivalence towards women which Kinsella is expressing in his work at this time. His feeling of resentment and anger towards the female is epitomised by the opening sentence of "A Country Walk":

Sick of the piercing company of women
I swung the gate shut with a furious sigh,
Rammed trembling hands in pockets and drew in
A breath of river air. (p.53)

Kinsella might have made that his last word on women in *Downstream* but, as he says himself, "love is half persistence" (p.112). Instead he adds "Chrysalides", in which he indulges in a nostalgic reminiscence on past happiness. Yet, even this reverie begins and ends with negative associations. The speaker suggests present bondage when he recalls "our last free summer" (p.62) and he also ends on an ominous note with "a wedding flight of ants / Spawning to its death" (p.12). In contrast to the images of lazy non-commitment, marriage is associated not only with bondage but, with death. Finishing on such an inauspicious note "Chrysalides" is suitably followed by *Wormwood*, a painfully honest exploration of the relationship between husband and wife. Kinsella, while he is still trying desperately to express his honest feelings about the male/female conflict, has not yet accurately identified the source of his sense of dislocation. Therefore, in the next stage of his quest for resolution of his sense of alienation from woman, he directs his resentment against himself, against his female partner and against the institution of marriage.
NOTES: Chapter I

1. Thomas Kinsella, Poems 1956-1973 (Mountrath: The Dolmen Press, 1980), p.29. All other references to Thomas Kinsella's poems are to this volume and will be given parenthetically in the text.


3. Ibid., p.88.


6. Ibid., p.98.

Chapter II

RECOGNITION: WORMWOOD and NIGHTWALKER
and OTHER POEMS

The Wormwood sequence starts very tentatively, with an introductory quotation from the apocalypse, presumably intended as a clarification of the choice of title. The implication is depressing: that water, source of life, has been corrupted by the star, Wormwood -- "and many men died of the waters / because they were made bitter". Whether marriage and Wormwood are synonymous is unclear, but certainly the image in the poem of that name represents marriage. Following the quotation, Kinsella provides a prologue in the form of a letter to his beloved. The letter, while depressing in its view of life, does not end in hopelessness. It is in this letter that Kinsella discovers a possible approach to the problem of dislocation; but it is not a solution, merely a rationalization:

if we drink the bitterness [of human existence] and can transmute it and continue, we resume, in candour and doubt, the only individual joy--the restored necessity to learn.  
(p.66)

After this encouragement the sequence opens with a short poem, a single image of self-torture: the nearly naked tree which "...cannot rest till it is bare / Though branches crack and fibres tear".(p.67). The speaker then continues through an agonising sequence of poems which purports to
examine marriage but, in fact, really examines only his own attitude to marriage and to his wife. It is significant that all of the poems have that peculiar tone of objective introspection which was discussed earlier. The tone emphasizes the sense of dislocation because, although the theme of the sequence is marriage, there is no communication with the partner. Kinsella uses the first person throughout the collection, making no attempt to distance himself from the speaker in the poems. When he does direct some questions they are not to a person but to a mask, increasing rather than decreasing the sense of the isolation of the speaker.

The tension in these poems is also increased by Kinsella's new departure in form, used only once before in "Chrysalides". In this sequence, he consistently avoids the use of rhyme, except in one poem and we shall see that there it is introduced for a specific effect. Kinsella has written in freer verse form before, but, with the exception of "Chrysalides", only in the longer poems. His instinct is correct, for the softening effect of regular rhymes would detract from the harshness of the personal discipline to which Kinsella subjects himself and the technical discipline to which he subjects his poetry.

The title poem is concentrated around a single powerful image obviously of marriage, "A black tree with a double trunk - two trees / Grown into one" (p.68). The image occurs in the middle of the middle stanza, the structural
focus, as usual, matching the thematic focus of the poem. The metre abandons the cadences of speech, imitating instead the thought processes of the interior monologist. The poem is a series of images rather than a coherent set of ideas. Each stanza represents an abrupt change in the direction of the thinker's consciousness, and the stanzas are broken into short phrases by a liberal use of commas, periods, elipses and dashes. Yet Kinsella maintains a firm control creating, in spite of the structural fragmentation, a sense of order and a gradual movement towards the moment of revelation in stanza four. Here, there is an interval of absolute lucidity:

The two trunks in their infinitesimal dance of growth
Have turned completely about one another, their join
A slowly twisted scar, that I recognize... (p.65).

The poem breaks off abruptly, yet it does not end, for Kinsella adds one disconnected line, "I will dream it again" (p.65), to emphasize the inexorable progress of the ordeal of marriage. This manipulation of form is repeated in each of the poems in this sequence, structure always complementing imagery in an internal order which emphasizes the speaker's attempt to impose order on his marriage, in an effort to rationalize and alleviate the pain of the relationship.

"Mask of Love", in imitation of the act of love, gradually moves towards a climax, adding one line with each new stanza until it sinks abruptly into a three line image of fuming frustration. "First Light" starts in ominous
stillness and, here, Kinsella uses rhyme to increase the false sense of peace and order. The rhyme disappears when the uneasy calm and superficial harmony are disrupted by

... an ugly wail
-- A child enduring a dream
That grows, at the first touch of day
Unendurable.  

(p.71)

It is not only the child's dream which becomes unendurable with the first light, but also the adult's reality -- the inescapably painful marriage. By ending on the single emotive word, Kinsella underlines the feeling of the whole poem.

In contrast to the shrill discordant tone of mutual torture which ends "First Light", "Remembering Old Wars" strikes a low flat note of apathy and resignation, emphasized by the long slow beat of the lines. Once again, each stanza represents a change in the direction of the poet's thought.

Kinsella's control of form, in each of these poems, is complemented by a carefully calculated set of images and symbols recurring throughout the sequence. In keeping with the sense of ordeal, even symbols which normally have positive associations become negative. Instead of signifying fertility, the rain and damp call up images of decay and death. In "Wormwood", "A mossy floor, almost colourless, disappears / In depths of rain" (p.68); in "First Light", the sea mist, far from being refreshing, is "like a pale gas" (p.71); and in "Remembering Old Wars", the leaking
moisture of the bodies after lovemaking loses its connotations of new life because it "smells of decay" (p.72).

The pervasive sense of death and decay is further emphasized by the grey colourlessness of the light in the poems. Light is also negative. The only light in "Wormwood" flashes from the blade which mutilates the tree. The dawn in "First Light" only serves to accentuate the deadness of the house and garden "Blank with marriage" (p.71), and the light in "Old Wars" forces the couple "once more to face the hells of circumstance" (p.72).

Only "Mask of Love" is dry and bright, but the illumination is fiery and hectic, calling up images of hell. The lovers' passion becomes a tense, frantic suicidal dance, as they face one another across the gaping emotional emptiness:

[their] very bodies lack peace:  
In tiny darknesses  
The skin angrily flames.  
Nerve gropes for muscle  
Across the silent abyss.  

(p.69)

There is no sense of consumation; the climax breaks and sinks in limp impotence, as the verse declines into smouldering resentful silence:

Dumb vapours pour  
Where the mask of Love appears,  
Reddening, and disappears.  

(p.69)

Images of pain and darkness pervade the whole sequence. The strain of trying to make contact through a false show
of physical love in "Mask of Love" is echoed in the shrillness of the lovers' angry attempt to communicate in "First Light". But images of contact are equally agonising. The joining of the two halves of the tree in "Wormwood" has left "a slowly twisted scar" (p.68), the lovers in "Remembering Old Wars" are clamped together, painfully, by some intangible outside force. Yet, from all the agonized groping, straining, prodding, in darkness or in damp grey light, the lovers emerge, and

Sighing in one another's
Iron arms, propped above nothing,
... praise Love the limiter. (p.73)

In the Wormwood sequence, through an examination of his relationship with one woman, Kinsella reaches the furthest boundaries of his sense of dislocation from the female. Rather than seeking a resolution of his feelings of tension and alienation, he decides that, as he stated in the letter which introduces the sequence, "drinking the bitterness" is unavoidable, and must be regarded as a means of working towards a "higher innocence", and somehow achieving order in the midst of apparent chaos.

Despite the painful setting, however, the image of Woman in, to some extent, rehabilitated in Wormwood. Kinsella, prodded by his Irish conscience, knows that he must take equal responsibility with the woman for the pain of their relationship. Woman, here, is not malevolent or even passively malignant. She is no longer superior or
supernatural. She has become the equal of the man, a fellow sufferer, and, at the end of his excruciating self-examination, the poet can still assert "Je t'adore" (p.73).

It would seem that Kinsella has reached a point of reasonable acceptance of womankind. But this conclusion is premature. What he has really done is dealt with his present and ongoing relationship with one specific woman, by setting aside his deeper feelings against women in general.

Very soon afterward, Kinsella arrives at the point at which he finally recognizes the connection between his troubled relationship with his wife and his greater sense of dislocation from the sex to which she belongs. The first stirrings of recognition occur in "Our Mother". The male visitor in the hospital room is overwhelmed by a terrifying feeling of paralysis in the presence of three women in various stages between life and death.

All three women, two in my care,  
The third beyond all care, in tears.  
Living, dying, I meet their stare  
Everywhere, and cannot move. (p.78)

Kinsella creates a disturbing picture of a man, whose sense of protective duty is made impotent by an even stronger sense of isolation from these women whom he considers "in [his] care". The title of the poem is itself ambiguous. The actual mother in the poem is mother only to the girl in the bed, who dreams of "the tender offals of her core / Worming around in steel kidney dish" (p.77). In the next
bed an archetypal witch "dying of age, / The carrier of all our harm" (p.77) stares emptily. The women are united in a terrible communion in which the man has no part.

The whole poem is focused by the symbol of the blood of the woman. Whether menstrual blood, the blood of childbirth, or the blood of aborted life, blood has always been accepted by women, both as a symbol of life and as a part of living. By men, on the other hand, the woman's blood has always been regarded as a symbol of her unacceptability in society. Many cultures still regard the menstruating woman, or the woman after childbirth, as unclean. Kinsella calls up these associations in "Our Mother" through one nauseatingly graphic symbol: the woman's gory entrails in a sterile dish. For the first time, he considers the possibility that his sense of isolation from his female partner may have much deeper significance than a straightforward conflict between lovers.

In "Westland Row", Kinsella is touched again, by an intuition about his strange relationship to Woman, and this time he carries it to the point of articulation in the concluding line, "Daughterwife look upon me" (p.85). In this phrase, the poet expresses the painful complexity of his view of Woman, and the intensity of his feeling of dislocation from her mystic cult. Until this point, the poet has tried to cast his female figures in a single clearly defined role. Although her roles change and develop
through the poems, it is not until "Westland Row" that she is perceived as a sort of feminine trinity, reminiscent of the Celtic triple goddess.

The invocation at the end of "Westland Row" recognizes a hierarchy of females, incarnate in a single figure. The woman is addressed on three levels at once: as subordinate, as superior and as equal (that is if we accept the role of wife as equal to the husband, and certainly, there is never a hint of the submissive female in Kinsella's picture of the wife). The union of daughter and wife in one word suggests feelings of tenderness and protectiveness on the part of the speaker, but the final three words, with their liturgical connotations, are in direct conflict with these sentiments. Not only does the phrase "look upon me" imitate the language of prayer, but it imitates a specific type of prayer: the petition of the lowly offender for grace. In the space of one line the speaker moves from protector to penitent. But the penitent's plea is not to a gentle, compassionate female figure; it is to a woman who stands, "seeing nothing / Thick lipped in grim composure" (p.85), apparently indifferent to the man's pain.

This grimly indifferent woman is to reappear many times in Kinsella's later poems, but, at this point, he has simply had an involuntary and deeply disturbing insight into his own perception of Woman. Not until several years later does the poet begin to explore the threatening aspects
of Woman which he has allowed to emerge for a moment through these two poems. These poems together represent the culmination of Kinsella's research, through his writing, into his feelings of discomfort regarding Woman, and we shall later see that it was the insight gained in "Our Mother" and "Westland Row" which engendered the sequence Notes From the Land of the Dead in which Kinsella finally confronts the real source of his painful sense of dislocation from Woman.

Confrontation, however, would not take place until the poet had experienced a change of environment, which, as we shall see, led to a change in his whole approach to writing; he was soon to move, with his family, to the United States. In "Phoenix Park", he takes his leave of Ireland. The poem, however, does not recount a journey to record images for later recollection as nostalgic souvenirs of "home". It is, rather, a tour of landmarks which will remain as monuments to the couple's love. Each monument provides a memory which, though painful, serves to reaffirm the validity of their relationship.

"Phoenix Park" expands the conclusion of the Wormwood poems, but this time Kinsella says "Je t'adore" aloud, directly to his wife. The whole poem is a justification of the speaker's persistence in the ordeal of love, and a further significant step by Kinsella towards closing the gap between himself and the female. The earnestness of the
attempt is emphasized by the voice used in the poem. Although
the tone is still introspective, the results of the intró-
spection are revealed to the wife.

Prompted by the "tearing" of his own roots from the
land of his birth, the man turns again to the "iron arms"
of love for support. In a claustrophobic atmosphere of
darkness, chaos and death, the speaker gradually realizes
that, for him, this woman represents, and has always
represented knowledge, order and continuity, those things
for which he has persistently striven. Seemingly without
effort, the woman already has a "thoughtless delicate
completeness" (p.125). The speaker also knows his "past
is alive" (p.125) in the woman, and that he can only be
made whole by union with her. But Kinsella, in his persona,
knows too that, for him, union can be achieved only in
surrender of himself. Paradoxically, to achieve that
wholeness, the individual must face total destruction:

...the final
Kiss [is] ungivable...giving without tearing
Is not possible; to give totality
Is to be torn totally. (p.121)

Yet, before the poem ends, he is ready to give and receive
totality:

I consign my designing will stonily
To your flames. Wrapped in that rosy fleece,
two lives
Burn down around one love...

...the ways are one, sweet choise,
Ourselves become our own best sacrifice.
Continue, so. We'll perish in each other.

(p.123)
The woman does not actively respond, but the implication is that she is ready to become part of the sacrifice. She is already burning. Throughout the poem's forty-five stanzas, the female speaks only once, and then indirectly, as reported by the man. The question "I write you nothing, no love songs any more?" (p.117), is the challenge that triggers the whole meditation.

The imagery of that final surrender is of the Phoenix of the title, male and female in one, reproducing itself from its own ashes. Yet the diction is reminiscent, like that of the petition in "Westland Row", of the liturgy of the Christian Church. As the petitions come at the beginning of the Mass, when the sinner recognizes his unworthiness, so with the completion of the communion peace descends and the communicant prays that the body and blood which he has received will "cleave to my innermost being and...that no sin may remain in me". By his reference to "bitterness" and "the cup" followed in the next stanza by his description of being "--folded in peace, / And undergoing with ghostly gaiety / Inner immolation" (p.123), Kinsella recalls this prayer. In "Phoenix Park", after much self-examination and agonised reluctance, Kinsella finally completes the act of communion with the woman which was first contemplated in "Westland Row". But, while the language here is that of Christian liturgy, the ritual is definitely pagan. The man has joined with the woman in a consumption of fire and ordeal which will only bring renewal when both male and female, together, are reduced to ashes.
The "final kiss", it would seem has at last been given; but we shall see that the kiss was, in fact, only interim. Although Kinsella certainly believes that he has now faced and resolved his difficulties in relation to Woman, he will not, in fact, be able to "really kiss" (p.147) until he has confronted many more complex aspects of his sense of dislocation from the female. This he will not finally do until Notes From the Land of the Dead.

Before leaving Ireland, however, Kinsella had, at last, started to solve his sense of dislocation from one woman, his wife. But it is very doubtful whether the state of union, or perhaps detente is any less painful than the former state of complete alienation. Distanced from his Irish environment Kinsella changes his approach to the subject of Woman immediately and completely. Suddenly his poetry about the female abandons themes of love and marriage, and concentrates almost wholly on the third aspect of the female trinity, Woman the origin of life and protector of the dead. Woman, who until now, was consistently young, physically attractive and only passively malignant, appears subsequently, almost exclusively as ancient, crone-like and actively malevolent.

Kinsella has, at this point in his work, already progressed through two stages of dislocation: the short period of unconvincing denial, and the longer, very painful period of gradual recognition. In "Phoenix Park", he
has successfully begun the process of confrontation, appropriately with his wife, and as we have seen, reached what was for him at that time the only possible resolution.

Yet much is left unresolved in "Phoenix Park". Woman, even the wife/partner, still represents a powerful, almost pagan force, and while he was willing to confront the necessity of sacrifice to achieve a viable relationship with his wife, Kinsella had not yet begun to confront or explore the reasons behind the conflicts in his broader perception of Woman. The confrontation begins in Notes From the Land of the Dead.
NOTES: Chapter II

1. Thomas Kinsella, Poems 1956 – 1973 (Mountrath: The Dolmen Press, 1980), p.65. All other references to the poetry of Thomas Kinsella are to this volume, and will be given parenthetically in the text.
Chapter III

CONFRONTATION: NOTES FROM THE LAND OF THE DEAD

Any analysis of Notes From the Land of the Dead must be incomplete. The calculated juxtaposition of individual poems, the interplay of images, the repetition of symbols, even the transposition of whole lines or phrases from one poem to another, make the isolation of one specific element of the whole almost impossible. Each critic who has approached the sequence has encountered this problem. Maurice Harmon remarks:

"One of the risks involved in separating... basic images, objects and incidents is that at the deepest level they coalesce into one complex meaning. Indeed, the difficulty in dealing with Notes From the Land of the Dead is that the necessary simplification that goes with interpretation and comment denies the poems their freight of interfusion and endless complication."

To accommodate this discussion, however, the complications must be made finite. We must, as the pictorial artist does, impose perspective by creating a vanishing point, which organises the rest of the composition. That point will be Thomas Kinsella's confrontation with his sense of dislocation from Woman.

As we have seen in the preceding chapters, the movement in earlier poems towards this confrontation has been reluctant but inexorable. The sense of reluctance stems from the poet's intuition, finally articulated in "Phoenix Park", that confrontation and the resulting resolution can
occur, paradoxically, only when the individual is willing to surrender himself. The process of surrender, confrontation and resolution in the relationship of the poet to his wife was, as we have seen in the preceding chapter, already completed in "Phoenix Park", but his sense of dislocation from the rest of Womankind is yet to be faced. Before confronting his problem, Kinsella had taken two very significant steps in his life: he had, finally, finished his fifteen-year long project, the translation of the Táin Bo Cúailnge and he had moved, with his wife and children, from Ireland to America.

In spite of the emphasis in the United States on the integration of ethnic groups into a unified society, there are few people so interested in finding their "roots" as are the Americans. Through his interest in the translation of Irish manuscripts, especially the Táin, Thomas Kinsella had more intense and immediate contact with his roots than most, and in this environment he felt free to explore his heritage in his poetry without the stigma of parochialism that would have been attached to such writing in Ireland.

Also, he arrived in North America at the end of the sixties, just when political activism was narrowing into what was to become the narcissism of the seventies. "Self-discovery", "self-actualization", "consciousness raising" were becoming society's catch phrases. I do not suggest, however, that Thomas Kinsella was merely following
a fashionable trend in his approach to his writing in Notes From the Land of the Dead; I believe, rather, that the social atmosphere in which he found himself, was, to a large extent responsible for his ability to release, through his poetry, certain feelings and attitudes that he had long denied because of the more emotionally restrained atmosphere in Ireland. While collective emotion among the Irish evidently often runs to excess, public expression of personal emotion is looked upon as embarrassing self-indulgence, and, for the Irish, "self-indulgence" unites in itself all of the seven deadly sins.

America, then, provided an environment which not only made possible for Kinsella a new departure in style and approach in his poetry, but also precipitated the confrontation in that poetry of the source of the malaise which had plagued him for the rest of his life: dislocation from Woman.

We have seen that before writing Notes, Kinsella had already been through two phases in his attempt to deal with his sense of dislocation. At first, he hoped that by ignoring or denying the problem, he would cause it simply to go away, but even in the early romantic poems there are intimations of ambivalence towards Woman. The next phase led to a gradual realization that his sense of alienation from the female involved not only his wife but the whole of womankind, and to the recognition of a complex Trinity of Womanhood.
In this final phase, Kinsella finds the courage to confront the most daunting part of that trinity: Woman the wielder of power over life and death. For his task he consolidates all the resources which he has been gradually developing throughout his writing. In *Notes From the Land of the Dead*, then, Kinsella confidently displays his ability to match form to content in his poetry, using unstructured verse to express unstructured thoughts. He also, gives free rein to his desire to delve into his Celtic Irish past, creating through the dense yet vivid imagery a mysteriously threatening setting for his exploration. Finally, he employs a rich symbolism that is Celtic in origin; and he uses that symbolism, imagery and structure consistently in all of the poems to unify the sequence. Unity is also achieved by the poet's adherence to a single theme throughout *Notes*, the theme of female power, which he explores under three headings, "an egg of being", "a single drop" and "noughtnothing". It will later be seen that the symbolic connotations of these titles are, in fact, more ambiguous than they might at first appear.

It is because of the ambiguity and the complex overlapping of meaning and association in *Notes*, that the sequence so obstinately resists close analysis, and Kinsella's surrender of form means that the reader can no longer rely on the verse structure as an indicator of the poet's intent. Often the line breaks before the sense is complete, leaving the reader suspended, awaiting a resolution which does not
come. Often a line consists of only one word, but a word laden with association, frequently with more than one apparent referrent, and more than one meaning, as in

Falling. Mind darkening.
   Toward a ring of mouths.
Flushed.
   Time, distance,
   meaning nothing.
   No matter.²

"No matter" -- it doesn't matter? -- there is no substance?
-- both? And "Flushed" -- washed away? -- turning pink?
Does it refer to the mouths, or the mind, or to the faller, or to all three? Tension in these poems, then, in direct contrast to that in the terse _Wormwood_ sequence is created by the clever control of the loose verse form to create a dense and often self-contradictory set of associations.

Evidence of Kinsella's less structured approach to his writing in _Notes_ is immediately apparent in the very pattern of the words on the page. He has finally released his stranglehold on structure. That is not to say that earlier poems were in any way debilitated by that hold; in fact the restriction, particularly in _Wormwood_, effectively reproduces in poetry exactly that sense of claustrophobia and emotional asphyxiation that Kinsella was experiencing in his own relationships to humanity, and especially to Woman. It also reflects the self-imposed intellectual tensions of the writer. In _Notes_, for the first time, Kinsella presents intensely personal themes in a form that he has used previously only in much longer poems on more universal
themes, poems such as "A Country Walk" or "Nightwalker". But, as always, with this poet there is a perfectly logical underlying reason for his actions. Just as these two poems recount a journey: one through country landscape and one through city streets, so the whole sequence of Notes also recounts a journey; but this time the speaker is in a setting where there are no paths, no pavements, no landmarks, or buildings; he has, in fact, ventured finally into the netherland of his own unconscious. And, as always, the form is adjusted to theme and setting; consequently these poems do not follow a rigid preconceived verse structure or even the natural pauses of speech, but imitate the often disjointed thoughts and associations of the speaker. But while there is a speaker who for the most part uses the first person, the implied audience is only himself, so that the movement of the whole sequence is inward.

The radical change in style and approach in Notes From the Land of the Dead, and especially that inward movement, the sense of self-exploration, has been remarked by almost all of Kinsella's critics, and many have pointed to the stylistic similarities between these poems and "Nightwalker". Maurice Harmon, discussing the use of the concluding lines of "Phoenix Park" as an epigraph to the Notes sequence states:

as a radical exploration of areas of the self below the conscious levels of thought
the poem, or sequence of poems is closer in method and direction to "Nightwalker" than to "Phoenix Park". 3

Peggy Broder, however, points out that in spite of its similarity in method to "Nightwalker", Notes From the Land of the Dead begins where "Phoenix Park" ended, repeating images and ideas from that poem. "But", she adds, "new images also appear, to express an important new dimension of the theme." 4

Insofar as Kinsella is indeed expressing in Notes, a new dimension of the theme of "Phoenix Park", I agree with Broder, but that the images which are used are new, I would contest. Broder believes in the essential benevolence of the women in the poems preceding Notes From the Land of the Dead and sees this sequence as a sudden change in Kinsella's view of Woman:

The female figures encountered in this journey are not the gentle Sophia but are terrifying hags.... 5

Broder recognizes some ambivalence in Kinsella's early images of women when she discusses the "ambiguity of the fecund feminine" in "The Laundress", but she does not trace it any further. 6 She does not acknowledge the continuity of a single image of woman which expands and develops from the earliest poems until, in "Westland Row", the complexity is rationalized by Kinsella's admission of the trinity of Womanhood existing in a single female figure: his wife, and by extension, in every female.
Notes, therefore, is neither merely a further experiment in the method used in "Nightwalker" nor the discovery by the poet of a new dimension of Womanhood locked in his own "abyssal deeps". Kinsella has not suddenly discovered the "Hag" of the Land of the Dead. He has always been aware she exists. She creeps regularly into his earlier poems. The poet senses her when his embrace turns to ice in "In the Ringwood"; he dreams of her bearing daggers and disguised as Justice and Truth in "Another September"; he knows it is really she and not his wife who wears the "Mask of Love"; and finally, with horror, in "Our Mother" he realizes she is there undisguised in the hospital with his wife. "In the next bed, dying of age / The carrier of all our harm" (p. 77).

These figures each embody all aspects of womanhood simultaneously, although they concentrate one particular characteristic. The most succinct explanation of this female trinity was given to me by a Sligo butcher/woodcarver describing his sculpture of St. Patrick:

He has the triple spiral, symbol of the
Trinity on his mitre. He used it for
Father, Son and Holy Ghost. For the
Celts, from time out of mind, it stood
for the female trinity: Virgin, Mother,
Hag. 8

Judging from his poetry, Kinsella has always been as sure as that Irish butcher that the female trinity exists still, even if he did not articulate it until "Westland Row". And even if he did not set out to order his poems about women around that Trinity, he was certainly aware that a sequel
was still to be written when he placed the comma at the end of "Phoenix Park".

Just as the image of Woman in Notes is not new, but an expansion of images which were introduced much earlier in Kinsella's work, so also the imagery with which she is surrounded is an extension of imagery which has already been used in other poems. In one respect, however, it has undergone a rapid process of evolution; the pagan Celtic implications are no longer veiled. They now dictate the atmosphere of the whole sequence. The imagery of Notes From the Land of the Dead is, in fact, worthy of a full and separate discussion, but, I shall deal with it briefly here only as it is integral to the development of Kinsella's attitude towards Women in this sequence.

Inevitably, understanding of the poet's meaning in Notes comes only gradually and must remain incomplete, since the sequence is in many respects inconclusive. The first response to these poems is, at best, uneasy confusion and, at worst, nightmarish revulsion. Certainly it is very difficult for the reader to remain unmoved, analytical and objective, and such is the poet's intent. As he himself is involved in his text, so the reader must also be drawn in to begin to sense the intensity of the conflict of intellect and emotion which is in progress throughout.

Kinsella emphasises this conflict by his use of
images and symbols in the sequence. The non-symbolic imagery is consistent and static, creating the atmosphere of the Land of the Dead and reflecting the poet's emotional reactions to his theme which is primarily Woman. The symbolism, on the other hand, carries the intellectual argument and moves towards a final resolution. Both imagery and symbolism, are however similar in origin; both are firmly based in the Celtic past.

That the images are Celtic in origin is immediately apparent to anyone who has seen ancient Irish illuminated manuscripts. The most familiar of these are probably the Book of Kells and the Book of Durrow. Both contain Christian writings illustrated and decorated with pagan Celtic motifs. Kinsella, in Notes From the Land of the Dead, uses the same combination. While his arguments endeavour to be both moral and Christian the imagery with which they are surrounded is disturbingly pagan.

The sequence is, throughout, dominated by two main groups of images, which emphasize its main themes: the power of woman and, the secondary theme, humanity's search for meaning in existence. The Woman's power is associated always with images of predatory birds, animals and reptiles which, of course, also have symbolic connotations of evil. The search for meaning is emphasized by images of hunger or appetite. The predatory nature of Woman as seen by Kinsella is also often conveyed by images of gape-mouthe.
The overall effect vividly recalls the typical illuminations of the Book of Kells:

initial letters ingeniously formed from animals wrestling, contorted human figures fishes and lizard-like creatures

or

interlacings (which) represent water snakes, earth birds.9

What this description does not mention is that the creatures in these designs are invariably, apparently, eating, swallowing or biting one another. Those who seem to have nothing to sink their teeth into are, like the women in the poems, gape-mouthed in vicious anticipation.

But the image of the Woman as bird of prey is not necessarily negative for

marsh birds often appear in Celtic iconography in connection with solar deities in their role as gods of healing and occasionally as war-gods.10

In "Ancestor", the grandmother is depicted:

...Her profile against the curtains
...old and dark like a hunting bird's

...perched on the high stool, staring into herself, with one fist gripping the side of the barrier. (p.144)

The image is not only of a menacing bird-like figure but also of a deity which combines both benign and malignant power. The ambiguity of the Celtic imagery is then ideally suited to convey the ambiguity of the poet's feelings towards Woman.
The primary images and symbols, then, create simultaneously both cohesion and conflict between thought and emotion. Combined with the bird/animal and appetite/eating imagery are images of decay and fertility. The reader has the disquieting impression of mentally crunching through "drying mud", (p.146), "minute dust falls" (p.155), the occasional "dusty piece of man's dung" (p.142), or alternately squelching through "the musk of glands" (p.155), "disused/organs and sour kidney" (p.145) or soil and rocks and uneasy waves. Ceilings drip, the air stinks, and the reader shrinks in horror as he/she stumbles upon

A dog's body zipped open and stiff in the grass. (p.159)

The whole atmosphere reeks of decay, but among the rotting or drying vegetation, corpses and excrement, there are secreted, always, signs of new life ready to emerge: an egg among reeds, rivers of clear water,

Out of the glassy rock, like tentacles moving on each other near their soft roots, human thighs are growing; if you look closely you can see the tender undermost muscle actually forming from the rock. (p.172)

We have, in fact, descended with the poet to the Land of the Dead; but, paradoxically it is the land of new life. The Christian cosmology of Hell below and Heaven above is inadequate to encompass Kinsella's vision. We are in fact
somewhere among the labyrinth of Irish underground and undersea otherworlds. Sometimes we are in a side where "a whole supernatural world could be encompassed" or in the more pleasant country of Tir na n'Oc, and often we stumble into the dreadful kingdom of Scáthach the warrior goddess from whom Ću Chúlain learned his trade. Significantly, all of these according to Irish myth are ruled over or, at least, dominated by powerful and wily women.

The Land of the Dead which Kinsella creates through his vivid use of mainly Celtic imagery is, then, a place of origins and of endings, of decay and of renewal, of death and of regeneration, of terror and of refuge -- in short a place of endless contradictions; and the place is overseen by a complex, mostly malevolent but occasionally benevolent Woman figure, who for Kinsella represents all these aspects of womanhood to which he fervently seeks to be reconciled.

Kinsella has now realized that his sense of dislocation from women is somehow related to the ancient Celtic concept of a female triple goddess, perpetuated in Christian cultures in the Virgin Mother, Queen of Heaven, who is revered in Ireland, with innocent heresy, above Christ himself. As Queen of Heaven, Mary has acquired a less threatening aspect than the Celtic goddess, the guardian of both fertility and death, but the sense of ultimate power remains. It is that female power and especially the personal sense of wariness which it engenders for him,
that Kinsella explores in *Notes From the Land of the Dead*. It is not, however, only an abstract combination of the ancient goddess and the Holy Mother which plagues Thomas Kinsella's relationships to woman. His female potentate has a much more tangible form that that. She existed in flesh and blood, during his most impressionable years, in the form of his grandmother. And it is with his grandmother that Kinsella begins his confrontation.

Grandmother dominates the whole of the first section of *Notes*, symbolizing the Celtic Triple Goddess of death and fertility. It is the power over life and death which Woman, as perceived by Kinsella, seems to hold which is the main focus of this whole sequence. Appropriately, then, the collection is introduced by a poem which recounts the writer's journey to and return from the Land of the Dead. It is not a journey in the ordinary sense, but rather, a fall reminiscent of Alice's descent into Wonderland: slow enough for contemplation, yet fast enough that the falling man is shattered by his impact with a grating at the bottom of the pit. He returns, however, unscathed "Carrying his prize" (p.132). The prize, attained by uncertain means, is; it seems, in the possession of "naked ancient woman / Nothingness silted under their thighs" (p.132) and the prize apparently (nothing in these poems is definite) is the key which the returned traveller now holds. It is by possession of this key that revelation is to be obtained

---what shall we not begin to have, on the count of

0 (p.132)
This drawn symbol unifies the sequence, but, before exploring its rich connotations, let us look at the symbolic key which is to reveal the meaning of 0.

The key is, of course, phallic and has also an archetypal significance so strong that it has been accepted in its symbolic sense as part of ordinary conversation: the key to a code, to a computer programme, to a problem. It holds the power to enter forbidden places, or to gain access to otherwise restricted knowledge and the persona of Notes From the Land of the Dead now holds that power. We shall later see how he uses it.

The former owners were the ancient women at the bottom of the pit; and, appropriately, the other ancient woman of these poems, the grandmother, also has a key. The boy in "A Hand of Solo", unwillingly embracing his granny feels it, "eyes squeezed shut against the key / in the pocket of her apron. Her stale abyss..." (p.140). He is not yet ready to acknowledge that key or the stale womb upon which it is cradled; he keeps his eyes obstinately closed. But he notices it again when he visits her in the same setting, the dark shop full of shadowy things smelling "musky and queer". This time the grandmother actively uses her key to closet her secrets from the boy (she) shut down the lid of the desk and turned the key" (p.144). But perhaps granny was right; in a disturbing incident the key makes its final appearance, in the possession of the male in "Ely Place", who perceives:
(A flustered perfumy dress -- a mothering shocked smile -- live muscle startling in skin).

then

A blood vision started out of the brick: the box of keys in my pocket -- I am opening it tongue-tied. I unpick the little penknife and dig it in her throat,

and interpretation is further complicated by the obvious phallic connotations of the symbolism. The poem ends in dull disappointment

Memoirs, maggots. After lunch
a quarter of an hour at most
of empty understanding (p.167)

Perhaps the key with the power and understanding it bestows does not belong in the hands of a man, especially not secreted with the lethal little phallic penknife. It would seem that the ancient women are the only trustworthy guardians of the secret to which that key gives access, the mysterious ◯

But what, in this sequence, is that mysterious ◯? It is all that any reader wants to make it, the circle is one of the most ancient of archetypal symbols signifying the very sources of life. According to Jungian theories of the "Collective Unconscious", it has represented, since humanities beginnings, the cycle of life, but this cycle is broken. As it turns out in the remainder of the sequence the break has a special significance, the
female aspects of the life cycle, because it is in fact the break in the woman's menstrual cycle which signals conception and potential new life. The fertility cycle of earth too experiences a break: the apparent winter-death which engenders rebirth. Freud would associate the symbol even more closely with woman. In his opinion, it signifies the female reproductive organs, the opening of the vagina, the ovaries, the womb and the ovum itself.

Both sets of associations are obviously significant to the theme of the sequence: the poet's confrontation, exploration and final acceptance of the female power over life and death, over origins and endings. Even beginnings and endings are signified in that single symbol . The poet introduces it by the words "the count of ", causing the reader to articulate it as "zero", and even for the smallest child in our society the response to the count of zero is "Blast-off!" -- the beginning of an adventure in space -- the space in this case the poet's unconscious. Ending too is in that symbol, our Western adaptation of omega, the last letter of the Greek alphabet. And that association has also theistic connotations: "I am the and the beginning and the end". The deity of these poems, however, is female.

But Kinsella pinpoints for his readers, among all the possible inferences, the three most pertinent associations that the symbol has for this sequence: "an egg of being" (p.133), "a single drop" (p.151), and "nightnothing" (p.163),
the titles of the sections. As was earlier indicated, these titles are not straightforward, for the content of each section does not, at first, seem to correspond with the connotations of its title. Let us deal, at first, only with the titles and return, afterwards, to examine the complex symbolism of each section separately. "An egg of being", with its suggestions of female fertility, seems hardly applicable to a set of poems dealing mainly with a boy and his grandmother. But, this egg with its break symbolizing fertilization has broader and deeper connotations; it is not an egg which will produce a single life. It is the ovum from which all life springs, the life source jealously guarded by the ancient women, symbolically embodied in this single ancient woman.

"A single drop," the title of the next section, might logically be thought, especially in its juxtaposition to the "egg of being" poems, to connote the single drop of semen containing the sperm which apparently has already broached the fractured ovum. By association, then, this section seems as though it will be about male fertility. But it is not; quite to the contrary, it deals with female power, reversing or perhaps perverting the image of the male penetrating the female. When a male in these poems joins with the female, he surrenders to her and the single drop of semen contains not the active invader but the passive captive of a devouring ovum. The drop can also have the Freudian connotation which echoes the
introductory poem of the sequence "...hesitate": the drop into a tunnel symbolizing again the male entering female but also with the connotation of male helplessness.

Then, there is "nightnothing", perhaps the most confusing of the trio of titles with its connotations of darkness and emptiness, since most of the poems in this section seem to involve some sort of process of gestation. The speaker is found wandering, squirming, casting around in various womb-like settings, but for Kinsella

The sterile:...is a whole matter in itself.
Fantastic millions of fragile
in every single drop. (p.165)

For him, it seems, sterility or nightnothingness is the environment where life originates. I approach his theory with acceptance rather than understanding.

Each title, then, does in fact represent the content of the section which it introduces but it is the content as perceived and presented by Kinsella. Thus, when we read the section called "an egg of being" we do not read of female sexuality, but rather, of the much more abstract concept of the female as controller of the origins of life and death.
The egg symbol is repeated and developed in relation to the old "Hen Woman" of the first poem in the sequence. The egg in this poem has a fate similar to that of the falling man in "...hesitate", who

...fell foul at the last and broke in a distress of gilt and silver scattered in a million droplets of fright and loneliness...

(p.131)

Even the "splayed fingers" (p.135) of the old woman recall the grating of the earlier poem. And as the "limp taloned... naked ancient women" (p.132) were indifferent to the fate of the speaker in the first poem, so is the Hen Woman, after showing only a brief shadow of annoyance, indifferent to the shattered egg: "There's plenty more where that came from!" (p.137).

The old bags are the guardians of the secrets of life and death, but their knowledge and power makes them, in the eyes of the male observer, careless. The watcher in "Hen Woman" expresses his disapproval of her apparent carelessness in his final comment "Hen to pan! / . It was a simple world" (p.137), the implication being, "simple for those with the power to treat it that way". Kinsella finally expresses in these poems the full extent of his sense of dislocation from Woman, and his
feelings of distrust and helplessness in regard to the female, who, it seems, can blithely disregard a potential life on the strength of the philosophy that it is worth no more than the many other lives that will come and go.

If, however, we examine the symbol of the egg in the light of Celtic superstition, which would almost certainly have been familiar to the poet, the woman becomes even more threatening. There are many versions of the Celtic tale of the soul residing outside of the body, in an egg hidden in another creature. Sir James Frazer recounts one such tale:

In a Celtic tale a giant says, 'There is a great flagstone under the threshold. There is a wether under the flag. There is a duck in the wether's belly, and an egg in the belly of the duck, and it is in the egg that my soul is'. The egg is crushed, and the giant falls down dead.\[12\

The old women of these poems seem, then, to have power over man's very soul, and they wield that power with a callous disregard. Such is the depth of Kinsella's resentment of the archetypal role of the woman and more especially of her irresponsible attitude towards her special charge, symbolized in the egg.
The egg appears twice more in the sequence, once in each of the two other sections, and each time it harbours life. In these instances, however, the egg is safely hidden from the women. In "a single drop", the "survivor", the only one of the Fir Bolg who escaped when the Tuatha de Dannan invaded Ireland, is hidden in a cavern which is "a perfect shell of force" (p.155). Significantly, Fir Bolg means the men of Bolg while Tuatha de Dannan means the people of the Goddess Danu. This is a chronicle of the overthrow of a male society by a new female-dominated one:

By twilight everything was destroyed, the only survivors, a shoal of women, spilled onto the shingle, and one man that soon -- even as they lifted themselves up and looked about them in the dusk-- they silently surrounded Paradise. (p.157)

Again, it is ambiguous whether the male envisions paradise in the shoal of women or vice versa, but what is clear is that he has somehow, voluntarily, decided to leave the safety of the shell to submit himself to the will of the woman. As in one of the earliest poems "In the Ringwood" the man, despite the obvious dangers, cannot deny himself contact with the woman.

In the final section, the egg symbol appears for the last time in "Touching the River", but this time only the male speaker knows its whereabouts. The implication is that he will guard his secret,
the reeds are shivering (one clump of them
nestling a lark's eggs, I know, in a hoof
print)  (p.168)

There is, however, a sinister echo in the last words that
suggests that the male is no more to be trusted with the
"egg" than with the "key". Who's is the hoof-print; is
the man, perhaps, sharing his secret with a devil? The
uneasiness is increased by the fact that this poem directly
follows "Ely Place", where the male holder of the key
misused its power willfully to destroy life.

The constant conflict between reason and emotion
in this sequence is, then, epitomised in Kinsella's use of
the egg symbol. While the male speaker resents the female's
power over the life source and her seeming indifference to
its fragility he, nevertheless, reluctantly implies that the
same power in the possession of the male might be turned to evil ends.
The man's confusion about the mysterious communion of Woman
and nature in "In the Ringwood", his feeling of hurt
alienation in "Another September" and his recognition of
her timeless wisdom and knowledge in "Phoenix Park" merge
in "an egg of being" into a resentful admiration of female
power and a grudging admission that to maintain order,
continuity and, ultimately, life itself that power must
remain firmly in the grasp of Woman. But, while Kinsella
has through these poems, begun to confront, rationalize
and accept, albeit unwillingly, the archetypal role of
the female in the cycle of life, he continues to be plagued
by a more immediate and personal aspect of female power.
The sophisticated philosopher poet and the superstitious
Celtic bard in Kinsella join in acceptance of the mysteriously
potent feminine, but the Jansenist Catholic in him still
intones, in the background of the poems, a monotonous
reminder that Woman, however ancient and physically
repulsive, is not only the origin of life but also the
origin of sin, the seductress of unsuspecting Man.

The reminder, though subtly unobtrusive is, nonetheless
firm and effective, relying on the two symbols which are
universally associated with "Woman the Seductress": the
snake and the apple. The apple has been used by Kinsella
in the same connection in his early poems. In "an egg of
being", apples are directly associated with the grand-
mother, closeted in her dark secret retreat, which, to the
boy, smells "mousy and queer" (p.144). Normally, a shop
would be a source of delighted fascination for a child.
In "Ancestor", the granny perches "among sweet- and
fruit-boxes" (p.144), a strange Celtic Demeter figure.
We already learned in "A Hand of Solo" that the boxes
contain pomegranates, but the boy knows them
as Indian apples -- a particularly exotic and, as he
is to discover, erotic sort of apple. We, of course,
also know that they are associated with Persephone and the
Land of the Dead.

In this poem, by symbolic inference, the grandmother
becomes the indifferent overseer of her grandson's initiation
into sensual physical awareness. She is, however, guilty only through omission, for it is not she who hands him the fruit; she merely fails to intervene. So that the reader does not overlook the sexual connotations of the incident, Kinsella begins the poem with a description of actual physical orgasm:

Lips and tongue
wrestle the delicious
life out of you

A last drop
Wonderful.
A moment rest, (p.138)

In the hiatus, the speaker recalls his experience of the Indian apple.

...tasting the first traces of the blood.

When it was half peeled,
with the glassy pulp exposed like cells,
I sank my teeth
loosening the packed mass of dryish beads
from their indigo darkness
I drove my tongue among them

and took a mouthful. (p.140)

Inextricably linked with the sensual, obviously sexual, pleasure is, as always in Kinsella's poems, the suggestion of evil and corruption. As a result of his unrestrained self-indulgence, the boy's throat is "filled / with a rank Arab bloodstrain" (p.140). The watching spectre of the old woman "on her high stool chewing nothing" (p.140) seems somehow to bear the responsibility of failing to protect the child's innocence. Kinsella's insinuation that the grandmother is the instigator of his own fall from grace
is further emphasized by her association with another archetypal symbol of satanic power, the snake.

Unlike the apples, there are no snakes in Kinsella's earlier poems, but then there are no snakes in modern Ireland -- St. Patrick drove them out. The association of Granny with snakes therefore, creates not only a link with ancient Christian myth but with myth that reaches far back beyond Christianity to a dark and pagan setting. In "A Hand of Solo", the child is lured to that pagan setting, away from the safe, warm, all male company, by the wheedling tones of the ancient woman:

Shut the kitchen door, child of grace.
Come here to me.
Come here to your old grandmother

Strings of jet beads wreathed her neck
and hissed on the black taffeta
and crept on my hair. (p.139)

This is no benevolent old lady, but a threatening Celtic female deity and soon the boy will no longer be a "child of grace". In his grandmother's sanctuary he steps from innocence to experience when he bites the Indian apple. The old woman henceforth is viewed by the child, transparently the young Kinsella, not only with caution but with real fear and dislike. So strong is this fear that he is almost unable to visit her as she lies dying. The very drapes through which he must enter her room become a menacing curtain of snakes.
I was sent in to see her
A fringe of jet drops
chattered at my ear
as I went in through the hangings.
I was swallowed in chambery dusk.  (p.145)

In the presence of her impending death the boy finally
articulates his terror.

I couldn't stir at first, nor wished to,
for fear she might turn and tempt me
(my own father's mother)
with open mouth.

...[to] bury my
self in her drying mud.  (p.146)

Woman, even one's own father's mother remains the temptress,
the seductress, but she does not offer ecstasy or
fulfillment, only a living death; buried in her own "drying
mud". The association is not new. Throughout his poetry,
Kinsella has presented only two alternatives which can
result from close male/female contact: chilling paralysis
or scorching passion -- neither a comfortable prospect.

Horrified by his own perception, the boy breaks free

promising [himself]
when she was really dead
[he] would really kiss.  (p.147)

Ever since, in his real life, the boy, now Kinsella
the poet, has sought unsuccessfully to "really kiss".
In Notes from the Land of the Dead, he confronts the
reason for his inability "to kiss", to make contact with
Woman -- the grandmother is not yet dead. She lives
still, in all her archetypal female power, in the poet's
unconscious and is projected into every woman in his poetry.
The negative aspects of Woman as Temptress symbolized by the association of snakes and apples with the grandmother is yet to be resolved. In "an egg of being", Kinsella has not yet retreated far enough into his past.

In "a single drop", the poet extends his exploration further into the past. Like the archeologist, he is ready to open up another level, to dig deeper in search of even more primitive manifestations which might help to clarify the present. In "an egg of being", Kinsella took us back through his own past, into childhood and into the recesses of his own frightening memories and imaginings. In "a single drop", he takes the reader far beyond the immediate past -- beyond history and fact into myth and superstition -- into the distant Celtic past.

The female emerging in this section has a power which far transcends that of the ancient woman who guards the 'egg of being'. By delving still further, in his search to find a full understanding of the female and, through understanding, find a means of contact, Kinsella has reconstructed an image of a goddess whose power seems almost to equal that of God himself.

As he did in "an egg of being", Kinsella again uses recurring symbols to unify the section, but, contrary to the implication of the title, the unifying symbol is not the "single drop" signifying male potency; that minute drop of male fertility has little significance
among the great volumes of symbolically life-giving water which the female of these poems controls. The drop, in fact, is mentioned specifically only twice, in "Endymion" and in "Survivor". Each poem is about a male, peculiarly vulnerable to female power. Poor Endymion must sleep away his immortality entirely at the mercy of Selene who visits and caresses him at will as a moonbeam as a huge predatory owl. The survivor, a lone male finds himself among a "shoal of women" (p.157) who silently surround him. In each of the poems, the male part in fertility is only a distant memory. In "Endymion", "a single drop echoes in the depths" as Selene leaves, and in "Survivor", the drop is heard as the male cowers in hiding "Far back, a lost echoing" (p.155).

In contrast to the dark dripping underground caves in which man curls, asleep or terrified, the woman's environment is free and open: in fertile gardens or on wild seas. Once again, woman is symbolically depicted as controlling the forces of both life and death, but now her power is not only over multitudes of individual lives as in "an egg of being"; now she is mistress of the source and sustenance of all existence: water.

We see the extent of her power as the sequence opens with the poem entitled "Nuchal": according to the Lebor Gabala Erren the Celtic equivalent of Edën. Kinsella's account of the creation of the four rivers which flow out
of Nuchal (or Eden) parallels that in Genesis II.

A river flowed out of Eden to water the garden and there it divided and became four rivers... the first is the one which flows around the land of Havilah... and the gold of that land is good; bdellium and onyx stone are there...

...And the name of the third river is Tigris (Gen II: 10-14)

In "Nuchal":

Eastwards, a quiet river feeds the soil...

...a crop of gold, with many a precious thing --bdellium...
the flower figured onyx...

A third runs Westward in its deeper bed, tigrish... (p.153)

But Kinsella provides detail which is not given in Genesis. This is especially interesting in the light of the biblical version of creation, for there it was after the dividing of the great river of Eden that Woman was created out of Man's rib, and it was also after the division of the waters that God placed Man in Eden. The inescapable implication of Kinsella's account, since the woman divided the waters, is that she co-existed with God in the beginning or that she simply is God.

The female trinity is, in this section, seemingly a pagan version of the Christian triple deity; she is manifested in this sequence as omnipotent mother, and omnipresent spirit. The first two poems represent mother creator, giver of life and the comforting spirit; the
next two, the hag destroyer, taker of life and the threatening spirit. But we shall see that by the end of the section, in "Sacrifice", Kinsella reaches a new and significant view of Woman's power, which parallels the third aspect of the Christian Trinity.

Let us, however, look first at the creator/destroyer role. Life, as was already indicated, is symbolized here by water. When the woman in Nuchal unconsciously commands the stream "her fingers trailing ladylike / in the water" (p.152), she symbolically takes complete control of the process of fertilization and procreation.

The rivulet simply wanders up to her, making to go past out of the garden meets her fingers...

...the stream divides and subdivides into four, moistening and softening the first downward curve of the hill. (p.152)

The water still has the power to fertilize, but where and what it will fertilize is dictated by the woman's trailing fingertips.

The power of Woman as depicted in this poem is creative and benign. She caused the stream to irrigate the thirsty earth creating and nourishing life. But in "Survivor", the woman turns her power over the water to destructive ends. The explorers just reaching land:
...saw the crystal sea gather in savage currents and dash itself against the cliffs. By twilight everything was destroyed. (p.157)

When he regains consciousness, the one male survivor realizes

There was a great rock in the sea, where we went down
--The Hag: squatting on the water, her muzzle staring up at nothing. (p.157)

This Hag -- who, in spite of her obvious solidity as a rock, sits on the water rather than in it -- seems to be the instigator of the water's destructive force. The male element is the aggressor but it is the female who is in control.

Just as the mother figure can be both gentle and harsh, so she can in her spiritual manifestation be both comforting and threatening. The spiritual aspect of the female trinity is symbolised by Kinsella in a quite traditional way, by light rays or by a bird, but while the spirit of God descends as fire or as a dove, the spirit of the goddess descends in less comforting forms, as a moonbeam or as an owl.

In the Greek version of the legend, Selene visits "Endymion" as a moonbeam or as an owl. In Kinsella's poem, she begins as the former and ends as the latter but while the owl appears threatening, she is content to leave having "kissed [the sleeping Endymion's] eyelids" (p.154). The spirit in "At The Crossroads" is, however, less
benevolent. She "swims with evil through the trees" (p.159) as the speaker recalls ancient executions. Then she seems to come closer making ready to devour the man.

A white face
stared from the
void, tilted over
her mouth at the ready.  

(p.160)

And looming closer still she takes on the form of an owl:

a white ghost flickered into being
and disappeared near the tree tops.
An owl in silent scrutiny
With blackness in her heart.  

(p.160)

This time she leaves but the speaker recalls her many other sallies when creatures were "torn and swallowed" (p.160).

The female creator/spirit, it seems, can use her power, especially over male aspects of creation, equally for benevolent and malevolent ends. But the poet's greatest unease is still the one which has haunted him from the earliest poems: the seeming indifference with which the woman views her power. The "Laundress" staring bluntly, the wife in "Westland Row" seeing nothing, the ancient crone in "Our Mother" gazing into emptiness, the grandmother in "Ancestor" staring into herself are all re-echoed in these poems. The woman in "Nuchal" "lies smiling in her sleep" (p.152); the spirit of Endymion becomes "a huge owlet-stare" (p.154); the Hag in Survivor "stare[s] up at nothing" (p.157) and the owl, after devouring her prey in "At the Crossroads," sits "staring among the
rafters" (p.160). The cumulative effect is of a terrifyingly wanton indifference of the female to her power and its potential victims, whom Kinsella depicts as almost always male.

Were the section to end on so fearful and pessimistic a note, we should have to conclude that Kinsella's attempt to use his writing as a therapy to resolve his sense of dislocation had, rather than alleviating the tension and resentment, actually intensified it. But, in fact, his exploration of the parallels between the pagan triple goddess and the Christian Trinity of the Godhead reveals for the poet an aspect of Woman which until now he had only sensed briefly and then rejected: her infinite compassion. We have seen that the first four poems in "a single drop" deal with the awesome female equivalents of the Father and the Holy Ghost. The final poem "Sacrifice", celebrates the benevolent redemptive female power of surrender, of self, the power which in the Christian Trinity is represented by the Son.

Kinsella has glimpsed that power twice before, but each time he has been too preoccupied with his own reactions fully to realize and accept its significance. In "Phoenix Park", after his long struggle with himself he is finally able to "consign (his) designing will stonily / To [his wife's] flames" (p.123). But even while he imagines "two lives / Burn[ing] down around one love" (p.123) the speaker
is so impressed by his own courageous surrender that he completely takes for granted the wife's part in the sacrifice.

Again in "Tear", the child has a moment of insight into female suffering and compassion as he visits his dying grandmother, elicited, appropriately, by the echo in his own memory of "a single drop":

...I found what I was looking for
--not heat nor fire,
not any comfort,

but her voice, soft, talking to someone about my father: "God help him, he cried big tears over there by the machine for the poor little thing" (p.147)

For an instant the boy experiences the love that flows from the old woman in spite of the "sad dullness and tedious pain" (p.167) of her life, but the knowledge is not enough to bring reconciliation. Still repelled by her physical appearance, he must break free.

In both poems compassion is offered unselfishly by the woman to the man, but it is not until "Sacrifice" that Kinsella is ready to realize the extent of the surrender and the intensity of suffering that woman can willingly undergo for those she loves. Arthur McGuinness has already recognised "the power of that surrender", but he interprets it only as "an aspect of female sexuality."14 Certainly, the imagery is, as so often in Kinsella's poetry, laden with sexual innuendo, but the blood of the female spilled in this sacrifice has more symbolic significance than
mere sexual power.

Kinsella takes the parallel with the Christian Trinity to its ultimate conclusion. Just as Christ's sacrifice provides a means by which contact between God and Man can be re-established, so the Woman's sacrifice makes contact between Man and Woman possible. And the paradox of the increase in the power of Christ achieved by his willing surrender of power is signified also. As humanity receives rebirth and a new being through Christ's spilled blood, so also the man in the poem is transfigured by the spilled blood of the woman. With the completion of the sacrifice, he gains not only knowledge, peace and love but also a new dignity and power. The woman asserts:

We are each other's knowledge. It is peace that counts;
Peace. Love dying down, as love ascends.
I love your tender triumph, straightening up,
lifting your reddened sleeves. The stain spreads downwards
through your flushed pinions
You are a real angel. (p.162)

Yet, even in her total surrender to the man, the woman retains control. As the male completes the sacrifice, the woman asks tenderly

Are you stuck?
Let me arch back.
I love how you keep muttering
'You know now... -- and your concern...
but you must finish it. (p.162)

The situation has been reversed. It appears to be the woman who has gained, through sacrifice, some dark
secret knowledge from, or about, the man. Also, it is she
who must encourage him to complete the act. The connotations
are, of course, sexual, emphasizing the intimate totality
of the union in the sacrifice. In the end, the sacrifice
has become mutual; male resentment has been dissipated in
the act of union, and he realizes that when he is willing
to participate in that union, the woman will volunteer her
whole being to his keeping.

The poem, and the section end with the ultimate
expression of female love and surrender: "My heart is in
your hands: mind it well" (p.162). Unfortunately, much
as his readers might be pleased if the sequence also were
to end on that happy note, Thomas Kinsella can never
"leave well enough alone". And there are, indeed, several
well-established reasons to write another section, the
most trivial perhaps being the poet's need for balance and
structure. The man who translated Thirty-Three Triads
and who seems to share the Irish Celtic need to have
everything in triplicate, even goddesses, could not leave
his sequence so obviously truncated; the third section
demands to be written. But there are other more personal
and intense reasons why the poet needs the last Section.
We have, in fact, experienced a parallel situation in an
earlier poem: "Phoenix Park". The parallel is quite
exact because it was in that poem that Kinsella confronted
and as far as possible, resolved his sense of dislocation
from his wife, and here he has just resolved -- as far as
possible -- his sense of dislocation from Woman.

In "a single drop", Kinsella does not, in fact, reach a complete resolution of his sense of dislocation from Woman, for he still cannot perceive her as wholly compassionate. As the compassionate, surrendering Christ is only one part of the Holy Trinity so the sympathetic submissive woman of "Sacrifice" is only one part of the Trinity of Woman. The poet knows that Woman still retains, for him, her awesome power and fearsome indifference, but, through the paradox of her total surrender in her third aspect, she has become, as God is through Christ, accessible to Man. As in "Phoenix Park" the conflicts with the wife must continue, although contact has been established, so the tensions between Man and Woman will remain, in spite of the apparent reconciliation. The significance of the last poem, "Sacrifice" is not, then, that Kinsella has at last totally resolved his sense of dislocation from Woman, and now sees her as a wholly positive figure. Rather, because of his new perception of the willingness of Woman, in the third aspect of her trinity, to surrender her power, he can begin to accept what he perceives as her negative aspects.

In "Phoenix Park", the couple return from their journey, the man having finally decided that "the ways are one, sweet choice, / Our selves become our own best sacrifice" (p.123).
In "Sacrifice", after Man has found union and peace with Woman and she pronounces, "We are each other's knowledge. It is peace that counts" (p.162), the man, who is on a journey through his own consciousness, must still make his way back. In "Phoenix Park", on the road home, the man lapses into an introverted reverie as the "Pale light hangs over the city." Despite the ecstatic resolution he has just experienced his mind fills with negative, doubting images: "a murmur of soft, wicked laughter" (p.124), "hunger / Came with gaping kiss over terrible wastes" (p.125), "A child with eaten features eating something--" (p.125). The poem ends, nevertheless, with the tentatively hopeful words which introduce Notes From the Land of the Dead.

A snake out of the void moves in my mouth, sucks
At triple darkness. A few ancient faces
Detach and begin to circle. Deeper still,
Delicate distinct tissue begins to form,

In "nightnothing", the poet takes the same route as he did in section III of "Phoenix Park". This section of Notes is deliberately fragmented and has therefore, unlike the other sections, no unifying symbolism. But, in keeping with the rest of the sequence, it is dominated by the same brooding Celtic imagery. Although the general tone of this group of poems seems to contradict, and even at times to negate the optimistic conclusion of "a single drop", it is,
in fact, faithful to the "obsessed honesty" and "tugging scruples" which the poet promised to observe in "Baggot Street Deserta". After the euphoria induced by the final discovery of an approach to the problem of his dislocation from Woman, which is both emotionally and intellectually satisfying, Kinsella returns to his more normal state of questioning and self-doubt. He is not deceived into believing that his world can be immediately transformed, nor is he able to deny those parts of him which still cling to resentment and distrust of the female and might even still, occasionally swell in active aggression.

In spite of his progress toward resolution of his sense of dislocation, the poet remains disoriented. The poem which opens "nightnothing", remarks dispassionately in its title, "All Is Emptiness and I Must Spin". But it moves towards the strangely unintelligible, but encouraging conclusion

The sterile: it is a whole matter in itself.
Fantastic millions of fragile
in every single.  (p.165)

The poems which follow have already been discussed, because they echo, a little petulantly, poems from the other sections on the theme of female power, and reluctantly
admit the impossibility of transferring even part of that power to the male. "Ely Place" re-enacts the "Sacrifice" of the Woman, but here it has been reduced to petty male aggression and results in nothing more than "Memoirs, maggots", and "a quarter of an hour at most / of empty understanding" (p.167). "Touching the River" provides an inanimate version of the woman in "Nuchal" dividing the waters, mixed with a cold picture of the male jealously guarding a single egg among the reeds. The effect of the whole short poem is of deadness and futility, the hope in the egg reduced only to a glimmer and imbued with sinister connotations, as we noted before, because of the association with the hoof-print.

Although the conclusions of these poems are certainly negative, by their juxtaposition to "Sacrifice" they serve to reinforce the rightness of the conclusion reached in that poem. By trivialising the tone in each of these poems, Kinsella undermines the sentiments which they express.

The final two poems of the section move the sequence back through a series of mixed images similar to that which concludes "Phoenix Park". "The Liffey Hill" oscillates between negative and positive feelings:

Snow powder pure
on the wool glove, detailed and soft
The day lengthened, and the wool got dark
and wet
and smelled of cold
Flatsour? Raw...notsour. (p.169)
But even here there is a subtle movement towards the positive. "Flatsour?" is a question while "notsour" is a statement, and it is quickly reinforced...

...there is still the pleasure of going home and dusk closing in, and a good fire. (p.170)

The euphoria of "Sacrifice" has worked its way in "nightnothing" through anticlimax, doubt, and tentative rebuttal, to a gentle reassertion that human company is good. It is never stated that the "we" of this poem is male/female, and perhaps that in itself is significant; perhaps the poet is, at least for the present, comfortable enough in the company of male or female no longer to emphasise sex. The same is true of "Goodnight" where the reader is left to guess the sex of the listener in the poem.

While "Good Night" does not rise to the ecstatic triumph of "Sacrifice", it emanates a warm aura of calm contentment more convincing than in earlier poems which tried to affect the same feeling. While he still admits to the presence of falseness or hollowness in human relations and the continuation of intangible threatening influences in human existence, Kinsella is nevertheless ready now to try to cleareightedly accept what is good. "Relax", he advises, "and these things / shall be..." (p.171). And, he later inquires, "...Would you agree, then, we won't / find truths or any certainties..." (p.172). In the same thought he remembers, however, that the
monsters left soft
self-conscious voices, and feed us
and feed in us, and coil
and uncoil in our substance.

...we are the monsters of our night,
and somewhere the monsters of our night are...
here...in daylight that our night
nothing feeds in and feeds, wandering
out of the cavern, a low cry
echoing --gamacamacamacamac...

that we need as we don't need truth...

and engulf a Good Night smiling. (p.173)

The final words of Notes From the Land of the Dead are as
positive as Thomas Kinsella is able to be, and probably as
positive as he ever will be, for he is, and will always
remain, entirely honest. He hopes that he has resolved
most of his conflicts but he knows that he will never
dismiss all of his uncertainties.

Woman is only briefly present in definite form in
this section, and this is in keeping with the pattern of
Kinsella's quest to resolve his sense of dislocation from
her. After each of the three stages in his exploration:
denial, recognition and now confrontation, Kinsella allows
himself a hiatus, and turns to other themes. He obviously
hopes and believes that in Notes he has really exposed and
begun to cure all his deepest fears and resentments of the
female, and certainly the pain and unrestrained candour of
the sequence would tend to make the reader believe with
the poet that the problem can now be completely solved.

If we look, however, at the later poems, although Woman
hardly ever enters, when she does, she still plays a negative and even a threatening role, as in "Finistère", or in the untitled poem beginning "The great cell of a nightmare...". The images of snakes and malevolent power are back as vividly as ever. What happened to the infinitely compassionate woman of "Sacrifice"? How can she have reverted again to the threatening Hag?

I fear that although he has certainly made every effort Kinsella may not yet have exorcised the last of his unease about Woman. We have encountered all sorts and conditions of stereotypal and archetypal women in his poetry, and we have also met most of the really important women in his life: early girlfriends, his wife, his daughters, and, in his last courageous quest for peace, his grandmother and his little dead sister. But where, among all these, is that most important of all women in man's psychological development -- his mother? I suspect that until Thomas Kinsella is ready to confront Mother in his poetry, as he has every other female in his life, he will continue to be plagued by his unease and his sense of dislocation from woman.
NOTES: Chapter III


2. Thomas Kinsella, *Poems 1956-1973* (Dublin: The Dolmen Press, 1980), p. 130. All other references to the poems are to this volume and are given parenthetically in the text.


5. Ibid., p. 91.

6. Ibid., p. 93.

7. Ibid., p. 91.

8. Personal correspondence from Michael Quirke, Wine Street, Sligo.


11. Ibid., p. 235.


13. *Lebor Gabala Erren* is the Book of Conquests which chronicles the successive pre-Christian invasions of Ireland, but with modifications to suit the convictions of its Christian authors.
14. Arthur McGuinness, "'Bright Quincunx Newly Risen': Thomas Kinsella's Inward 'I', Eire, XIV. ii, p.120.

CONCLUSION

Throughout his work Kinsella has been faithful to the commitment which he first made in "Baggot Street Deserta" to be always entirely honest with his readers and, more importantly, with himself. His moral and literary integrity has, as we have seen, led him inwards through an intellectually strenuous and emotionally painful exploration of his sense of dislocation from Woman. He has emerged with a deeper, if still incomplete, understanding of his sense of alienation from the female and has rediscovered the gentle, surrendering female who makes possible the contact between man and woman. Yet, the sympathetic lover figure is only one part of the Celtic Trinity of Woman which the poet has painstakingly recreated in these poems through his dogged pursuit of ancient Celtic memory and distant personal recollection. The other aspects of the triple Goddess, the wise chastising mother and the evil threatening hag, remain in Kinsella's imagination always in the ascendancy.

Much is still to be resolved in the poet's attitude to Woman, but I have little doubt that Thomas Kinsella's obsessed honesty will, in the future, lead him to confront the only spectre from his past whom he has not yet called up: his mother.

Typically, after the personal psychological probing of Notes Kinsella turns outward once again, but evidently his interest in psychological exploration remains intense. All the poems in Fifteen Dead concentrate upon the inner
workings of the minds of his subjects: Sean O'Riada, Jackie Kennedy and Lee Harvey Oswald. Even the title poem questions the political psyche which produced the "Widgery Report".

Inevitably, however, Kinsella's fascination with the interplay of thought and emotion leads him back to confront society, origins and, ultimately, himself, in poems such as: "Finistère", "His Father's Hands", "A Technical Supplement", "C. G. Jung's 'First Years'" and "Artist's Letters".

It is his need to unearth and explore the deepest implications of every human situation which distinguishes Kinsella's work from that of his contemporaries and those recent predecessors with whom he has so often been associated. The problem of dislocation, which is discussed in this thesis only in respect to Woman, extends into every aspect of the poet's life and work. The sense of alienation which he feels is, as we have already seen, very much more complex than that of the Neo-Romantics or of the Moderns. His approach and point of view in his writing, which have also been discussed here only in the context of his poetry about Woman, are themselves worthy of separate and close study.

In Kinsella's mind, and in his work, skeptical uncertainty co-exists with religious conviction, and intellectual objectivity is balanced always against
emotional involvement. In "Baggot Street Deserta", for the first time, Kinsella begins to realize the strength of the conflict between his conscious and unconscious reactions. His real interest, he discovers, is not in telling what he feels but, rather, in analysing how and why he feels it. So, he makes his first venture into a more analytical mode and departure from purely descriptive poetry. He halts the tide of his own emotions so that he can examine the source of the flow and its potential usefulness, if any.

It is at this point in his work that Kinsella appears to be leaning toward a more Eliot-esque approach to writing. But, as we have seen, he is, actually taking another step in his search for a totally honest and individual expression through his poetry. To differentiate between Kinsella's style and that of the other modern writers, especially Eliot, I find it helpful to refer to a poet who has been admired and, to some extent emulated by all of the above: the metaphysical poet, John Donne. The affinities between the metaphysical and the Modern poets have been exhaustively explored since Eliot first rekindled interest in John Donne, but the parallels in Kinsella's work run more closely to Donne's than is generally observed in other modern writing, even in Eliot's.

Eliot and Kinsella each demonstrate, like Donne, what Matthiessen describes as

a probing analytic mind...
keenly aware of the actual complexity of
his feelings, their rapid alterations and sharp antitheses. 1

But Donne...

unable to find any final truth in which his mind could rest, became fascinated with the process of thought itself. 2

Consequently, Eliot, "in view of his own growing desire for order and coherence", 3 gradually became less enthusiastic about this element in Donne's poetry, not so Thomas Kinsella, whose sometimes obsessive interest in the interaction of thought and emotion might surpass even that of the Renaissance philosophers. Often he becomes so absorbed with the complexity of his own ideas that he feels compelled to step into his own poem to examine them. Occasionally this leads Kinsella into over-extension and intellectualization of already very effective imagery - a sort of narcissism deplored by several of his critics, sometimes with good reason.

But it is this urge to explore his own cognitive processes which allows his readers to become thoroughly involved in Thomas Kinsella's poetry. The reader is led, like Becky Thatcher was by another Tom, into a dark labyrinth, in this case the poet's mind, and like Becky, tantalised by curiosity, the reader should be willing to risk the setting aside of rules in the pursuit of adventure.

Kinsella must expose the chaos under the dead, calm surface of civilisation; Eliot is careful, always, only
to suggest it. Eliot depicts the damp grey fogginess of London's "Waste Land" but Kinsella uncovers the seething "faintly luminous" grub life behind the urban facade of modern Dublin. He does this by allowing his images to extend into his own, obviously real, experience of life, calling up his childhood, the political past and all of the present unrest, public and personal. The "Nightwalker" even drops in on Finnegans Wake while apparently drifting on his own "Stream of consciousness". But the sense of drifting is only an illusion, purposely created by Kinsella through an intricate system of images used to evoke an Ireland painfully bound in a tradition of myth, scholarship, religion and politics.

Paradoxically, then, it is often when he seems at his most erratic that Kinsella is actually at his most deliberate. Thoughts and ideas, which seem merely to run amok among a maze of images, come together, under his firm control to create exactly that powerful atmosphere of strained disorder which he intends to produce.

For Kinsella, then, objectivity is no more than a convenient position from which to begin any analysis. Unlike Eliot he is unwilling to maintain ironic distance when he represents in his poetry the painful conflicts in human relationships. Instead
like John Donne, he actively seeks resolution. For Thomas Kinsella cool objectivity must always give way to heated involvement. The tension in his poetry is the tension of angry confrontation rather than the tension of tactful avoidance.

We have already traced the effects of that tension upon Kinsella's poems about Woman. It would be equally interesting and rewarding to examine its effects upon those poems which deal with Kinsella's own specific relationship to Ireland and those which deal with the broader theme of the relationship of the artist to society.

That part of Kinsella's work which concentrates on more universal themes demonstrates a more consistent technical control, but it lacks much of the mythical richness and passionate intensity of the "Woman poems." While he is certainly not arrogant in his approach to social or political concerns, Kinsella is more self-assured than in his approach to male/female themes. Consequently, he is less introspective when dealing with broader subjects, and, as it is through unrelenting self-questioning that development of personality occurs, so it is through the constant questioning in the "Woman poems" that development occurs in Kinsella's writing.

The socio-political poems, apart from the emotionally rending lurch in "Butcher's Dozen" are, on the whole, fairly
static in attitude and approach. Technical and stylistic advances in the main body of Kinsella's work occur almost exclusively as the result of his efforts to find more honest and more effective poetic methods to confront his sense of dislocation from Woman, and his inability, like that of John Donne, to "find any final truth in which his mind can rest".

The "woman poems" are not, then, an isolated section of Kinsella's work, interesting only for the light which they shed on the poet's psychological development. They are, rather, the essential life source which has nourished the growth of his writing towards its present mature and unique style.
NOTES: CONCLUSION


2. Ibid., p.12.

3. Ibid., p.12.
BIBLIOGRAPHY

Primary Sources


Secondary Sources


VITA AUCTORIS

Carol Ann Tattersall (nee McCullough)

Born 24th August, 1947, Belfast, Northern Ireland
Resident of Northern Ireland 1947-1970,
England 1970-1972, West Germany 1972-1976,
Canada (landed immigrant) 1976-present.

Married, two children

Interests include camping, swimming, cycling,
skiing, travel, drawing, clay sculpture, dressmaking.

Academic and Work History

1984 Awarded University of Toronto Graduate Fellowship
(subject to completion of M.A.).

1981- University of Windsor - M.A. course (in progress)

1983 Sessional Instructor - English Department, University
of Windsor.

1981- Teaching Assistant - English Department, University
1983 of Windsor.

1981- Director - Haitus House, Windsor.
1983

1979- Director/Counsellor - House of Shalom Youth Centre,
1982 Amherstburg.

1972- Childbearing and full time motherhood.
1979

1972 (3 months) - Berlitz Institute, Mannheim, West
Germany - German Language course.

1970- English Teacher - Newton Secondary School, West

1969- English Teacher - Kelvin Secondary School, Belfast,
1970 Northern Ireland.

1969 (Summer) - Advertising Assistant - Emerald Publishing,
Beaverton, Oregon, U.S.A.

1968- Stranmillis College of Education, Belfast, Northern
1969 Ireland - Diploma of Education, honours in English
and Religious Education.
1965- Queen's University, Belfast, Northern Ireland - B.A.  1968  (English)

1958- Belfast High School, Northern Ireland - Ordinary
1965  level certificates in ten subjects, Advanced level certificates in Art, English and French. Held Further Education Scholarship.