

A Reading of Galway Kinnell

Part 2

Continued from TIR Winter Issue

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With "The Supper After the Last" Kinnell has not only arrived at decisive technical changes that will influence many of his later poems, but he has brought a course of thematic exploration to an end. This exploration, concerned with man's spiritual compulsions and aspirations, the forms they take in concrete experience, the illusory convictions they foster, derives its impulse from sources deep within the poet's own psyche, his inner and affective life. By exposing what he believes to be the hopeless falsity of these longings for eternity, and by confronting death as an unconditional fact in a tough, unremitting way, he prepares as the ground for his future writing certain limitations of existence within which his poems must be created. We can surmise, I think, that Kinnell has purged himself in the poems we have discussed of personal anxieties and questionings with regard to death, Christ, the purpose and goal of existence. This is not to say he does not ponder still the elusive, mysterious nature of human life and its stubborn refusal to yield the explanatory meanings for it we seek; but hereafter the realms of transcendence remain a dark void, an inscrutable blackness on which he can cast no illumination, and the person of Christ, as might be expected, no longer occupies him with a few incidental exceptions. He takes a new grasp on the world at hand, on his life here and now in all of its immediacy, or engages himself with the particulars of other lives and surroundings present to him. The poem "Last Spring," from *Flower Herding on Mount Monadnock* (1964), can be read as a statement of his altered interests. The first part describes his dreaming through "a dark winter" and losing his hold on the physical substance of things, accepting their "glitter" as substitute; but this mode of dreaming leads to death, or at least to a loss of contact with actuality. His mind is invaded by "the things/ Whose corpses eclipse them./Shellfishes, ostriches, elephants." But with the movement of seasons into spring and new life the sun's brightness and clarity dissolve the poet's private fancies, his "keepsakes . . . inventions,"

It left me only a life
And time to walk
Head bobbing out front like a pigeon's
Knocking on the instants to let me in.

This attentiveness to being in the world in its full temporal and tangible immediacy is a striking attribute of the long, ambitious poem "The Avenue

Bearing the Initial of Christ into the New World.” Composed freely, without linear or narrative structure, in a series of fourteen sections focusing on a variety of moments and figures in the life of Avenue C in New York with its teeming ghetto population of Jews, Negroes, and Puerto Ricans, the poem evokes, through myriad impressions of the particulars of daily experience interspersed with the poet’s imaginative projection into individual lives and his allusive imagery, provocative ironies, a comprehensive vision of people existing under circumstances of destitution, pain, persecution, and death in a country that supposedly extends promises of refuge, security, equality, and opportunity for those who flee to her shores. Christ does not appear in the poem except in a brief, glancing reference; Kinnell simply uses Him in the title to point up the victimization of persons who had come to America in the hope of achieving a better sort of life. Throughout the poem there is an insistence on the element of betrayal, especially of the Jews—though the application is obviously much wider—first, by God, who is treated with disgust and rejection because He deceived Abraham (doubtless Kinnell means all the Jews as well) and has nothing but cold indifference to human feelings; He is reduced in a simile from omnipotent deity to repellent insect:

A child lay in the flames.
It was not the plan. Abraham
Stood in terror at the duplicity.
Isaac whom he loved lay in the flames.
The Lord turned away washing
His hands without soap and water
Like a common housefly.

Then they are betrayed by America, the new world to which they have voyaged in desperate flight from poverty, pogroms, concentration camps, only to find themselves still imprisoned; in spite of this disappointment and constant hardship they exhibit a sturdiness, a will to endure, which is the inherited strength of ages and draws the poet’s admiration:

The promise was broken too freely
To them and their fathers, for them to care.
They survive like cedars on a cliff, roots
Hooked in any crevice they can find.

Behind Kinnell’s poem stand Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass*, Hart Crane’s *The Bridge*, and Williams’ *Paterson*, along with something of *The Waste Land* and *The Cantos*; like those poets ours immerses himself in the rich welter of life and does so with sympathy and understanding. As a result, the poem abounds in images rendering with vigorousness and exactitude the very feel of this street, the lives thronging it, from “the eastern ranges/Of the wiped-out lives—punks, lushes,/Panhandlers, pushers, rumsoaks” to the old Jew who “rocks along in a black fur shtreimel,/Black robe, black knickers, black knee-stockings,/Black shoes”; or where

The old women peer, blessed damozels
Sitting up there young forever in the cockroached rooms,

Eating fresh-killed chicken, productos tropicales,
 Appetizing herring, canned goods, nuts;
 They puff out smoke from Natural Bloom cigars
 And one day they puff like Blony Bubblegum.
 Across the square skies with faces in them
 Pigeons skid, crashing into the brick.
 From a rooftop a boy fishes at the sky,
 Around him a flock of pigeons fountains,
 Blown down and swirling up again, seeking the sky.

Such a burst of energy and exaltation, the abrupt take-off of the pigeons, wakens thoughts of escape—"To fly from this place"—but these deteriorate rapidly into nightmare images of failure and death: "To run under the rain of pigeon plumes, to be/Tarred, and feathered with birdshit, Icarus,/In Kugler's glass headdown dangling by yellow legs." Indeed, death pervades this poem, making itself felt just the other side of the hard, marginal lives Kinnell portrays on this city street, in the seedy rooms and restaurants, in the market, in the memory of a dead friend, in the figure of the "ancient Negro" who sings "Over Jordan" outside "the Happy Days Bar & Grill," in the frightening persons of "Bunko Certified Embalmer,/Cigar in his mouth, nose to the wind" and the owner of the fish-market who "lops off the heads,/Shakes out the guts as if they did not belong in the first place./And they are flesh for the first time in their lives," in the occasional reminders of the concentration camps and the extermination of Jews. But perhaps most resonant with meaning because they touch a more fundamental symbolic level are the parallel images of the Avenue itself and the East River. Both are implicated with the flux of life, the current that draws everything toward annihilation, in the arterial flow of blood through the body which ends thus: "The lungs put out the light of the world as they/Heave and collapse, the brain turns and rattles/In its own black axlegrease." The final section of the poem begins with suggestions of an absent God and the inexorable passage of life into death, here embodied in the details of the fish:

Behind the Power Station on 14th, the held breath
 Of light, as God is a held breath, withheld,
 Spreads the East River, into which fishes leak:
 The brown sink or dissolve,
 The white float out in shoals and armadas,
 Even the gulls pass them up, pale
 Bloated socks of riverwater and rotted seed,
 That swirl on the tide, punched back
 To the Hell Gate narrows, and on the ebb
 Steam seaward, seeding the sea.

In succeeding stanzas the street reappears with its desolation, violence, and irrationality. Then Kinnell resorts to a highly suggestive interweaving of light and dark, familiar because of earlier applications in "The Descent," "Where the Track Vanishes," "The Supper After the Last," and elsewhere. Momentary lumi-

nescence is always swallowed in darkness. Even more cruelly paradoxical is the glow of a corpse in the night waters of the river, which has now become one with the Avenue and the sea into whose depths life empties:

It is night and raining. You look down
Towards Houston in the rain, the living streets,
Where instants of transcendence
Drift in oceans of loathing and fear, like lanternfishes,
Or phosphorus flashings in the sea, or the feverish light
Skin is said to give off when the swimmer drowns at night.

This identification compels the poet to a stanza of summary proportions that makes explicit the poem's crushing ironies, the human frustration and waste, the sacrifice linking the Avenue's population with the murdered Christ, and the cosmic injustice behind these realities:

From the blind gut Pitt to the East River of Fishes
The Avenue cobbles a swath through the discolored air,
A roadway of refuse from the teeming shores and ghettos
And the Caribbean Paradise, into the new ghetto and new paradise,
This God-forsaken Avenue bearing the initial of Christ
Through the haste and carelessness of the ages,
The sea standing in heaps, which keeps on collapsing,
Where the drowned suffer a C-change,
And remain the common poor.

If there is something strained about "C-change," so that it seems rather gimmicky for so serious a passage, the meanings it generates, both with respect to crucifixion and to the irony of Ariel's song in this context, are anything but slight. Yet for all of its grimness, which continues into the closing stanzas with their renewed emphasis on the fugitive and outcast person, on persecution and death, the poem is completed on a note that combines lamentation, hardiness, and a kind of resignation to life's inequities and miseries which even allows, in the face of oblivion, a corrosive laughter:

In the nighttime
Of the blood they are laughing and saying,
Our little lane, what a kingdom it was!

oi weih, oi weih

A considerable number of the poems from Kinnell's next two volumes, *Flower Herding on Mount Monadnock* and *Body Rags*, adhere closely to the lineaments of a specific experience; rather than enlarging on it as some previous pieces do, they attempt to seize it through a literal concreteness or through the more oblique progression of images referred to in *Poet's Choice*. Quite often the two approaches are joined in the same poem, as, for example, in "Middle of the Way." In any event, the desire to articulate what the poet sees, hears, thinks, and dreams with undeviating accuracy, with as little departure from the quality of the original experience as possible, causes him to tighten his language even further; imagery becomes sharp, spare, precise and is set down with an admir-

able directness that enhances the effect of lyric purity. And the relationship to nature we have observed throughout Kinnell's work increases in importance for him. Like Roethke or Gary Snyder he is attracted to the non-human world, not as a field for intellectual conquest but as the basic context of man's living—the only one he really knows—in which other forms of life manifest their being together with him. This perception comes alive variously in many poems, nowhere with a more moving sense of participation than "In Fields of Summer":

The sun rises,
The goldenrod blooms,
I drift in fields of summer,
My life is adrift in my body,
It shines in my heart and hands, in my teeth,
It shines up at the old crane
Who holds out his drainpipe of a neck
And creaks along in the blue,
And the goldenrod shines with its life, too,
And the grass, look,
The great field wavers and flakes,
The rumble of bumblebees keeps deepening,
A phoebe flutters up,
A lark bursts up all dew.

In such poems as "Tillamook Journal (2nd version)," "On Hardscrabble Mountain," and "Middle of the Way" he carries his own human solitariness far into forest and up mountainside, there to assimilate whatever he can of nature's existence, separate in its magnitude, its awesome age, its unity that excludes man with his unique self-awareness: "I love the earth, and always/In its dark-nesses I am a stranger." "Middle of the Way," from which these lines come, demonstrates, as do other poems, Kinnell's persistent use of the imagery of darkness to connote the unfathomable aspects of the universe and his own temporary being within it. This period of isolation in the wilderness, at night by a dying fire "under the trees/That creak a little in the dark,/The giant trees of the world," elicits the beautiful meditative stanzas concluding the poem. The progression of Kinnell's thought is convincingly set forth in images which realize the total experience:

The coals go out,
The last smoke weaves up
Losing itself in the stars.
This is my first night to lie
In the uncreating dark.
In the heart of a man
There sleeps a green worm
That has spun the heart about itself,
And that shall dream itself black wings
One day to break free into the beautiful black sky.
I leave my eyes open,

I lie here and forget our life,
All I see is we float out
Into the emptiness, among the great stars,
On this little vessel without lights.

I know that I love the day,
The sun on the mountain, the Pacific
Shiny and accomplishing itself in breakers,
But I know I live half alive in the world,
I know half my life belongs to the wild darkness.

Not only do we get the impression of being *there*, of the immediacy of Kinnell's reflections under the circumstances, but we also witness the quite personal flow of his thoughts and feelings. While it is sensitive to external setting—the middle section preceding these stanzas is cast in the abbreviated form of a prose journal recording the day's events in the mountains—the poem moves rapidly into the poet's mind in the first lines above, away from the facts of the dead fire, the final wisp of smoke, toward the center of consciousness where specific elements from the outer world (the stars, the worm, the black-winged butterfly, the sun, the mountain, the Pacific) are charged with hidden implications drawn from the non-rational psyche and the emotions to enter into new combinations. Behind them lies the effort to uncover covert impulses, ties, tendencies of the inner self that pass unnoticed while an individual is occupied with daily affairs; in these stanzas they are released to convey the poet's mind on a kind of dream-journey of associated images which culminates in his realization of the double urge in him toward a world of radiance, clarity, and order, and toward a world of impenetrable darkness, chaos, and oblivion. Of course, what I am claiming for this passage in the way of meaning remains implicit in the images themselves, in accordance with Kinnell's wish for a poem lacking logical structure, "scaffolding or occasion," and such images as he offers are not readily exhausted but prove continuously stimulating to the reader's imagination.

"Middle of the Way," however, is only one of many meditative poems from *Flower Herding on Mount Monadnock* and *Body Rags* in which the poet employs linked groups of images, metaphorical statements, and specific details of observation or recollection to speculate on the self's identity, its relationship to nature, time, and, as always, death. Through most of these pieces runs Kinnell's recurrent alternation of night and day, physical actuality and the possibility of nothingness. Occasionally, accompanying these opposing conditions of being and non-being, we find the waters of flux and change, the river that glides toward death. In "Poems of Night," a sequence of brief lyrics, the poet quietly, gently traces the features of his beloved as she sleeps, moving his "hand over/Slopes, falls, lumps of sight,/Lashes barely able to be touched,/Lips that give way so easily." Finally, in the last two poems, he perceives a portion of his own existence embodied in the contours of her familiar form; her self has been so deeply bound up with his for a time that in holding her body in his arms he feels he is embracing something fundamental to his own nature: "I hold/What I can only think of/As some deepest of memories in my arms,/Not mine, but as if the life in me/

Were slowly remembering what it is." Yet the next poem, which brings morning, fails to provide confidence or hope in these discoveries because the day itself is seen as fragile and doomed, a vessel we float perilously and, at last, in vain upon the darkened flood:

And now the day, raft that breaks up, comes on.
I think of a few bones
Floating on a river at night,
The starlight blowing in place on the water,
The river leaning like a wave towards the emptiness.

Kinnell frequently reflects in recent poems on wreckage, either that of the human body, as above, or the ruins of houses, sea wrack scattered along deserted beaches, fossils, burnt out stretches of timber. For him such sights constitute the residue of lives lived, human or otherwise, and so prove worthy of contemplation. Though they are perceptible reminders of perishability, sometimes of suffering, they can reveal as well an innate dignity and strength that confirm the value of what they have been. It should be noted too that the universe as Kinnell now represents it contains destructiveness as a perpetual native element, no less a part of the underlying design of things than the wind, which he often makes a symbol for it:

The wind starts fluting
In our teeth, in our ears,
It whines down the harmonica
Of the fingerbones, moans at the skull . . .
Blown on by their death
The things of earth whistle and cry out.
Nothing can keep still. Only the wind.
(“Tree from Andalusia”)

At the outset of “Spindrift” the poet’s attention is fixed on what the sea has washed ashore: “old/Horseshoe crabs, broken skates,/Sand dollars, sea horses, as though/Only primeval creatures get destroyed.” Later, in a ritual gesture, Kinnell draws “sacred/Shells from the icy surf,/Fans of gold light, sunbursts”; one of these he is to raise to the sun, source of life and light, and pledge himself to go “to the shrine of the dead.” Performing this natural religious ceremony, with its implicit veneration for the principle of life in the cosmos, he enjoys briefly its sudden manifestation as the sunlight strikes the shell:

And as it blazes
See the lost life within
Alive again in the fate-shine.

But we can only assume the “shrine of the dead” is here, or any place where a man turns his thoughts upon the dead, which Kinnell proceeds to do during the rest of the poem. Section after section, he shifts from one object of reflection to another, apparently at random, yet all the while skilfully accumulating force, particularly through the repetition of key images of wind, light, and shell, as he

aims toward a final comprehensive statement. Kinnell studies the iconography, to borrow a term he suggests, of nature's forms, trying to extract the meanings worked by the world into a seashell, a worn root, the motion and sound of the surf; in the latter he reads a message lying beneath every detail of the poem: "It is the most we know of time,/And it is our undermusic of eternity." The waves' recurrence, the sea in its seemingly contradictory aspect of stable sameness and ceaseless change, reminiscent of Valéry's "La mer, la mer, toujours recommencée!", indicates metaphorically for the poet the rhythm which holds together the life of creation. He is then able to remember the death of a friend or relative in the ambiance of that imagery of light and shell given a sacred significance previously:

I think of how I
Sat by a dying woman,
Her shell of a hand,
Wet and cold in both of mine,
Light, nearly out, existing as smoke,
I sat in the glow of her wan, absorbed smile.

The "lost life," glimpsed earlier as the shell was held to the sun, appears now in this memory of an existence about to be abandoned, a light darkened, revived here as the poet lifts it up to the human warmth of his thought. In the next part we find him "Under the high wind" already mentioned as the sign of flux and destruction "holding this little lamp,/This icy fan of the sun," which is, we recall, his Golden Bough, the token of his permission to visit the dead. The first of the two stanzas shows the fateful wind as it "moans in the grass/And whistles through crabs' claws," and in the second its ominousness grows more immediate to the poet himself: his life is threatened, lies under the same sentence:

Across gull tracks
And wind ripples in the sand
The wind seethes. My footprints
Slogging for the absolute
Already begin vanishing.

Existence is, then, constantly being consumed; it vanishes like the smoke, the gull tracks and footprints, into the surrounding, the hurling, eroding wind. The last section introduces an anonymous old man who might be anyone, including a projection of the poet into old age; his "wrinkled eyes" are "Tortured by smoke," which would seem, as in the instance of the dying woman, to specify the minimal amount of life left in him. Physically crippled by his years, what can this man "really love," the poet wonders. Other creatures not endowed with this self-consciousness or the capacity for this type of affection simply exist to the end by instinct and without advance knowledge of death:

The swan dips her head
And peers at the mystic
In-life of the sea,
The gull drifts up

And eddies towards heaven,
The breeze in his arms . . .

Kinnell's answer to his inquiry amounts to a compassionate declaration of acceptance that asks nothing further but binds man to temporal creation. At the close the image of the shell returns, symbolic of all life, refined and polished by its travels through time, sacred because it is what we know, possess for a while, and value supremely:

Nobody likes to die
But an old man
Can know
A kind of gratefulness
Towards time that kills him,
Everything he loved was made of it.
In the end
What is he but the scallop shell
Shining with time like any pilgrim?

A more detailed version of this acceptance occurs at the finish of "Flower Herding on Mount Monadnock," where the poet locates in the forest a flower corresponding to his desire early in the poem for one "which cannot be touched," that is, which will be permanent and inviolable. But the flower he discovers is quite mortal, its life burns up and disappears much as the lives in "Spindrift," though here Kinnell examines its pretensions to durability—in effect, to immortality of the spirit—but these are discounted when death affirms its reality and life's single appeal is to itself. The end of the poem puts us squarely in front of the observable facts, dismisses the unseen aura with which we are tempted to surround them. "No ideas but in things," insisted William Carlos Williams, and Kinnell surely agrees:

In the forest I discover a flower.
The invisible life of the thing
Goes up in flames that are invisible
Like cellophane burning in the sunlight.
It burns up. Its drift is to be nothing.
In its covertness it has a way
Of uttering itself in place of itself,
Its blossoms claim to float in the Empyrean,
A wrathful presence on the blur of the ground.
The appeal to heaven breaks off.
The petals begin to fall, in self-forgiveness.
It is a flower. On this mountainside it is dying.

The poems of *Body Rags* do not alter the direction Kinnell's work has taken thus far, nor do they exhibit any changed attitude toward an existence whose horizon is ringed by death, though the intensity with which he enters into his experience has never been greater. In the haunting meditations of "Another

Night in the Ruins” he recalls a night flight over the ocean during which his dead brother’s face appeared to him shaped from storm clouds, “looking nostalgically down/on blue,/lightning-flashed moments of the Atlantic.” These “moments” have their counterparts in the other imagery of light and flame remarked before as significant of the vital energy which is life breaking forth and yet consuming itself, finishing at last in smoke, ashes, darkness. Kinnell’s image of his brother catches him brooding on this paradoxical principle and revives the dead man’s words:

He used to tell me,
 “What good is the day?
 On some hill of despair
 the bonfire
 you kindle can light the great sky—
 though it’s true, of course, to make it burn
 you have to throw yourself in . . .

True to the obliquity of his technique, he proceeds away from the demanding implications of this statement and provides a stanza emphasizing harsh, ruinous change and a nearly hallucinatory intuition of ultimate vacuity with “the cow/of nothingness, mooing/down the bones.” But the return to his brother’s idea begins with the unexpected appearance of a rooster who “thrashes in the snow/for a grain”; when he uncovers it, he “Rips/it into/flames,” an act that matches exactly, in meaning and imagery, the gesture of self-sacrifice (so full of echoes of Christ’s death) required by his brother’s reasoning to bestow on an existence an importance beyond itself. The symbolic rooster in this metaphysical barnyard, “Flames/bursting out of his brow,” urges Kinnell to a point of recognition we have watched him arrive at before: namely, that man is no phoenix (“we aren’t, after all, made/from that bird which flies out of its ashes”), there is no rebirth; but he goes further than he has in previous instances by regarding as valid his brother’s words and seeing the necessity for the self to assimilate its destiny and death:

. . . for a man
 as he goes up in flames, his one work
 is
 to open himself, to *be*
 the flames . . .

“Another Night in the Ruins” is the first poem in *Body Rags*, and with good reason, I think, since many of the pieces which follow reflect the terms of recognition given there. So in “Lost Loves” the poet can “lie dreaming” of women he has cared for, moments in the past, while time leads him “deathward.” In spite of these losses and the eventual outcome of his life he finds it possible to take pleasure in perpetual alteration and to identify himself with the many “lives” and selves passed through in the course of one existence:

And yet I can rejoice
 that everything changes, that
 we go from life
 into life,

and enter ourselves
quaking
like the tadpole, his time come, tumbling toward the slime.

Poetry, when it is written, is the product of this existence and consequently will bear the marks of the self's struggles, transformations, failures, escapes. Like the scarred hill of the world in which the layers of time past lie fossilized, it contains whatever its author has done or been:

The poem too
is a palimpsest, streaked
with erasures, smelling
of departure and burnt stone.
(“The Poem”)

The last four poems in the collection, however, to my mind best demonstrate Kinnell's bold and powerful attempt to integrate himself with his experience, and to do it without mediation or protection, exposing himself completely to a direct encounter with his perceivings. The resulting poetry has a stunning force and uncompromising toughness that sometimes leave the reader gasping. Of course, these pieces, which include the long poem “The Last River,” “Testament of the Thief,” “The Porcupine,” and “The Bear,” differ from one another in various ways too, though the latter pair are close in spirit.

“The Last River” shows an evident kinship with “The Avenue Bearing the Initial of Christ into the New World,” not merely because of its length but because both poems are concerned with large, specifically American areas of experience. As he did in the earlier poem, Kinnell here employs juxtaposition and collage to accommodate a wide range of material; now, however, the atmosphere is more fluid and indeterminate. The two poems are held together simply by the focus of the poet's consciousness, but in “The Last River” he makes himself felt more definitely as a presence, a person in the poem to whom everything there is happening, than he does in “The Avenue . . .,” where he prefers occasionally to be anonymous. So it is his consciousness in “The Last River,” shifting and sliding through images and memories, ever-changing, dropping below to the levels of dream and nightmare, following the course of the Mississippi southward and, at the same time, floating down the waters of the Styx into the underworld with his Virgil a boy named Henry David, visiting the damned in their torments, and returning to achieve, through the agency of another version of Thoreau, a prophetic vision of national destiny, that is the locus of the poem.

Kinnell starts off by mingling details from his travels in the South and his work with black people in a voter registration program with impressions of a jail cell at night into which he was locked presumably for this activity among Negroes or something related to it. An air of sombreness, futility, and malevolence dominates the poem but is alleviated by sudden flashes of grace, instances of dignity and love, usually revealed through images of lightning, fire, or sunlight. The effect of

such passages, when they occur, can be startlingly beautiful, implying a kind of revivification, a rebirth into life in its plenitude that comes close to a religious affirmation of living for Kinnell:

A girl and I are lying
on the grass of the levee. Two
birds whirr overhead. We lie close,
as if having waked
in bodies of glory.

And putting on again
its skin of light, the river
bends into view. We watch it, rising
between the levees, flooding for the sky,
and hear it,
a hundred feet down, pressing its long weight
deeper into the world.

The birds have gone,
we wander slowly homeward, lost
in the history of every step . . .

Then too one must remark the achievement of the descriptive portions of the poem, in which Kinnell, writing in a line of descent from Whitman and the Roethke of *North American Sequence*, catches with a richness and precision of language the strange, poignant lyricism of American rivers:

the Ten Mile of Hornpout,
the Drac hissing in its bed of sand,
the Ruknabad crossed by ghosts of nightingales,
the Passumpsic bursting down its length in spring,
the East River of Fishes, the more haunting for not
having had a past either,
and this Mississippi coursing down now through the silt of
all its days,
and the Tangipahoa, snake-cracked, lifting with a little
rush from the hills and going out in thick, under-
nourished greenery.

In the midst of these changing scenes, memories and perceptions sharp with pain, nostalgia, disgust, and intermittent joy, Kinnell centers his imagination on a journey to Hell, hunting some revelation about the life of this country among the condemned dead: "The burning fodder dowses down,/seeking the snagged/bodies of the water buried . . ." A different sort of Aeneas, he takes "a tassel of moss from a limb" and starts on his way, led by the boy Henry David "over the plain of crushed asphodels" to meet a horrendous scarecrow Charon, who ferries them to the inner precincts of the underworld. Subsequent sections, dramatizing the punishments of such offenders against individual and society as Northern and Southern politicians, the Secretaries of Profit and Sanctimony, and even a well-meaning liberal, whose appearance in this place greatly disturbs the poet,

struck me at times as both excessive and too derivative, their immediate ancestor being not Dante but the Ezra Pound of the "Hell" *Cantos* XIV and XV. For all the likely justice done here to those who deserve it, these tortures do not realize the effect Kinnell wants; the reader turns aside finally with no sense of moral triumph or fulfillment but with feelings of revulsion:

On the shore four souls
cry out in pain, one lashed
by red suspenders to an
ever-revolving wheel, one with
red patches on the seat of his pants
shrieking while paunchy vultures
stab and gobble at his bourbon-squirting liver,
one pushing uphill
his own belly puffed up with the blood-money
he extorted on earth, that crashes back
and crushes him, one
standing up to his neck
in the vomit he caused the living to puke . . .

Journeying on, the poet and his guide pass "The Mystic River," where crowds drink Lethean waters that run down "from Calvary's Mountain," and an enigmatic "Camp Ground," whose character is not disclosed for the mists of the underworld close about Kinnell and his mind lapses into unconsciousness. When he awakens, it is to "a tiny cell far within" his brain, a jail cell as well, and there he envisages an anonymous man "of noble face," identifiable as Thoreau, who in anguish and self-torment, "wiping/a pile of knifeblades clean/in the rags of his body," tries to expiate the sins of American history:

"Hard to wash off . . .
buffalo blood . . . Indian blood . . ." he mutters,
at each swipe singing, "*mein herz! mein herz!*"

Confessing that he had sought a love above the human, unencumbered by the flesh, and that he really "only loved [his] purity," Thoreau fades out, leaving Kinnell with "a letter for the blind" which places upon him his own guilt, the burden of his obligations as a man. The poem ends with a vision of "the last river" dividing a black man on one side from a white man on the other; between them, in the middle, stands a symbolic figure whose qualities not only erase the obvious differences of pigmentation in the other two men but radiate, through the now familiar imagery of lightning and flame, suggestions of a nearly divine power, harmony, grace. (One recalls, reading this passage, lines which occur early in the poem: ". . . then lightning flashed,/path strung out a moment across the storm,/bolt of love even made of hellfire/between any strange life and any strange life. . ."):

a man of no color,
body of beryl,
face of lightning,

eyes lamps of wildfire,
arms and feet of polished brass.

The figure speaks, prophesying a national agony, a crisis of relations that will tax citizens extraordinarily; but as he begins his appeal to men's virtues, in a horrifying instant, this visionary idol crumbles and is transformed into the hideous scarecrow Charon, on whose ferry Kinnell previously entered Hell. Ironically, the "last river" has become that of the underworld:

. . . he is
falling to pieces,
no nose left,
no hair,
no teeth,
limbs dangling from prayer-knots and rags,
waiting by the grief-tree
of the last river.

The possible implications of this conclusion are numerous, and Kinnell allows the reader to tease them out for himself. One can say, nonetheless, that this collapse of the ideal into the vicissitudes and mortality of the real, like Thoreau's recognition in the poem of the necessary taint of the physical, the humanly imperfect in existence, conforms with the attitude toward experience Kinnell has developed so forcefully in his work. It is noteworthy that both Thoreau and the "man of no color" finish clothed in "body rags," the tattered evidence of their encounters with the rough actualities of the world; and in as much as Kinnell identifies himself with his vision and can "choke down these last poison wafers" bequeathed him in Thoreau's parting message (*"For Galway alone./I send you my mortality./Which leans out from itself, to spit on itself./Which you would not touch./All you have known."*), the words and images of this poem, lifted from his own deep-felt moments of experience, are "the prayer-knots and rags" of his life. Though there are a few spots where the poem weakens, especially in parts of the Hell episode, as a whole it leaves, like most of its author's writing, a profound impression, as of something lived through.

"Testament of the Thief," "The Porcupine," and "The Bear" create similar indelible effects but do so with, if anything, more raw violence, undisguised, earthy matter-of-factness—in short, whatever means will permit Kinnell to shortcut 'poetical' niceties and cleave to the bare truth of his perceptions. The truth or vision contained in these poems cannot be readily abstracted; it is extremely personal—indeed, the poems seem to me the most personal Kinnell has written—yet it involves no more than a continuation of his quest for the fundamentals of existence. Each poem of the three appears composed at the very frontiers of experience, the imagination working against any restraints in order to achieve the shocking dimensions of its discoveries. So it is that Kinnell identifies in the poems with fierce, hardened, alienated creatures—thief, porcupine, and bear,—shares their mania "for the poison fumes of the real," endures their bodily suffering and death to arrive at a knowledge of himself in them.

“Testament of the Thief” opens with the thief already dead on the gallows. The poem progresses by jumping to two other outcasts—a coolie and a beggar—who sit nearby, undisturbed by the swinging corpse, and then to another pariah, the keeper of an opium den, a specialist in supplying illusions and dreams in which members of society take refuge from reality, and whose attitude involves no moral scruples, only practical business considerations. From section to section stress falls on the elementals of life, on the creative/destructive processes ruling man and beast that have long been a feature of Kinnell’s work:

Under the breeze, in the dusk,
the poor cluster at tiny
pushcarts of fire, eating
boiled beets,
gut,
tongue,
testicle,
cheeks, forehead, little feet.

Life feeds on life to save itself: it is this hard but basic law of earth on which many of the poem’s images concentrate. In the environment of the poor, whose lives are pared to the rudimentary bone, the thief once wandered; the ground where he slept retains the imprint of his body. Kinnell halts the reader here, admonishes him of the basic realities of daily life and hints, with perhaps an indirect rejection of Yeats’ exalted, courtly conception of the poet’s role at the end of “Sailing to Byzantium,” that the true sources of poetry more properly lie in this place:

Stop a moment, on his bones’ dents,
stand without moving, listen
to the ordinary people
as they pass. They do not sing
of what is gone or to come, they sing of
the old testaments of their lives,
the little meals,
the airs,
the streets of our time.

These lines keep to the spirit of Verlaine’s “tout le reste est littérature” or Henry Miller’s declaration at the outset of *Black Spring*: “What is not in the open street is false, derived, that is to say, *literature*.” Surely, Kinnell’s grappling in these three poems with the very blood and bones and guts of creatures, with life and death in their blunt material aspects, demonstrates his imaginative drive to gain utter authenticity in the essentials of his vision. This intention shows up plainly in the actual “testament” the thief leaves, four “items” addressed respectively to the keeper of the opium den, the beggar, the coolie, and “the pewk-worm” of torment and mortality who “lives all his life in our flesh.” To each of them his legacy must come as an education in harsh reality, the dispersal of hope or illusion; only the “pewk-worm” fits into a different category, and this is indicated by

putting the stanza about him in a final, separate section. The “opium master/dying in paradise,” a world of inhaled, manufactured dreams, receives the thief’s nose, in a key statement we have already seen, “in working disorder,/crazed/for the poison fumes of the real.” For the beggar who lies asleep, wallowing in erotic dreams of the “girl friends/of his youth,” he offers “their/iron faithfulness to loss.” And to the coolie, whose life is hard labor and “whose skeleton/shall howl for its dust like any other” in the common fate of death, he gives, in a burst of extravagant language, “this/ultimate ruckus on the groan-meat,” which is to say, the rending chaos of the body. The poem concludes with the thief’s legacy to the “pewk-worm,” inhabiting man’s flesh and slowly boring away at him, consuming him from within, whom “you can drag forth/only by winding him up on a matchstick/a quarter turn a day for the rest of your days,” so inseparable has he become from the person of his victim. This worm is, in fact, the determined principle of corruption bred into man’s nature; therefore the thief’s gift to him, “this map of my innards,” signifies a recognition and acceptance of this inevitable condition, infused with wry, grim humor. Giving final, unquestionable support to this testament of the thief is the remembered brutal concreteness of death, his “thief-shadow lunging by the breeze” at the end of a rope and presiding over the entire poem.

Kinnell moves from description through analogy to conclude finally in identification with the porcupine in the poem of that title. First presented as a voracious creature, the porcupine is afterward linked, in the bold, outspoken manner of these recent poems, with humans:

In character
 he resembles us in seven ways:
 he puts his mark on outhouses,
 he alchemizes by moonlight,
 he shits on the run,
 he uses his tail for climbing,
 he chuckles softly to himself when scared,
 he’s overcrowded if there’s more than one of him per five acres,
 his eyes have their own inner redness.

This extravagance of tone and statement increases and the porcupine emerges as a fantastic, obsessed animal whose single devotion is to “gouge the world/empty of us, hack and crater/it/until it is nothing/if that/could rinse it of all our sweat and pathos.” So he is addicted to everything man’s flesh has touched and soiled, “objects/steepled in the juice of fingertips/. . . surfaces wetted down/with fist grease and elbow oil,” and in an exuberant fashion Kinnell claims him as an “ultra-/Rilkean angel,” one in whom the tarnished things of the world find an honest measure of their value, one

for whom the true
 portion of the sweetness of earth
 is one of those bottom-heavy, glittering, saccadic
 bits

of salt water that splash down
the haunted ravines of a human face.

In contrast to the imagined creature he has built up thus far Kinnell turns suddenly in the fourth part to give a straightforward but quite grisly account of the shooting of a porcupine by a farmer. But it grows clear that in this episode, as in the earlier parts of the poem, we are being treated to a display of persistence, a dogged tenacity towards life which exists to the point of annihilation. In the end the furious efforts of the dying animal seem no less astonishing than the poet's previous depiction of his curious inclinations:

A farmer shot a porcupine three times
as it dozed on a tree limb. On
the way down it tore open its belly
on a broken
branch, hooked its gut,
and went on falling. On the ground
it sprang to its feet, and
paying out gut heaved
and spartled through a hundred feet of goldenrod
before
the abrupt emptiness.

After a brief stanza in which Kinnell announces that the sacred books of the ancient Zoroastrians reserve a place in Hell for those who destroy porcupines, the poem shifts its center to the poet's own life. Lying sleepless and disturbed, he envisages himself as undergoing metamorphosis, "the fatty sheath of the man/melting off," and with the disappearance of his human features the inward torments of self-consciousness also vanish; whatever pained his thoughts and feelings before changes into outward aggression. The transformation complete, he has become the porcupine: "a red-eyed, hard-toothed, arrow-stuck urchin/tossing up mattress feathers,/pricking the/woman beside me until she cries." Having identified himself thoroughly with this animal, he can see the aptness of the alteration in terms of his past experience. Pierced with the arrows of his quills, he has suffered, in the woundings and dyings imposed by existence, like a "Saint Sebastian of the/scared heart," indeed, has felt himself disembowelled like the porcupine shot from

And fallen from high places
I have fled, have
jogged
over fields of goldenrod,
terrified, seeking home,
and among flowers
I have come to myself empty, the rope
strung out behind me
in the fall sun
suddenly glorified with all my blood.

The dramatic horror of such remembrance is matched by the desolate mood with which the last stanza begins. Here Kinnell maintains his altered identity, which should not be interpreted as subhuman but as the human reduced by lacerating acquaintance with life to a level of fierce struggling to keep a hold on it under narrowed, unaccommodating circumstances. In the final sense, his tenacious fight for survival, his determination to forage the world for sustenance in spite of a crippling feeling of personal emptiness, wins respect for this poet-turned-porcupine. And beyond this basic impulse to stay alive, to keep on going, the images of thistled and thorned flowers, so close to the sharp, bristling porcupine quills, imply something more: a rough, wild beauty of bloom and blossom—or translating these into terms of Kinnell's life as the effort to create poems—which the rude contest for existence may yield:

And tonight I think I prowl broken
skulled or vacant as a
sucked egg in the wintry meadow, softly chuckling, blank
template of myself, dragging
a starved belly through lichflowered acres,
where
burdock looses the arks of its seed
and thistle holds up its lost blooms
and rosebushes in the wind scrape their dead limbs
for the forced-fire
of roses.

From this dark condition of the spirit, then, there rises an affirming gesture which, rather characteristically for Kinnell, is glimpsed through analogies with nature. What the private implications of the attitude taken at the end of the poem are for him we cannot say, nor is it a matter of importance for the reader. What does matter is that the severe, at times repellent, poetic myth created in "The Porcupine" incarnates a view of ourselves that, left to our own devices, we should probably not be hardy or unflinching enough to formulate. The same must be said for "Testament of the Thief," and certainly for "The Bear." In the latter the quest for identification with the beast is even more urgent, violent, and terrifyingly absolute; the whole poem possesses the aura of symbolic nightmare in which the meaning may prove elusive but the details are dreadfully realistic. The poet goes off at once on the track of the bear; no hesitations or deliberations are involved, for every step proceeds with a predetermined and frighteningly rigid logic, while, nonetheless, nothing appears reasonable or humane. The manufacture of the fatal bait with its vicious sharpened wolf's rib for the bear to swallow marks the first stage in a hunt of ever more agonizing, distasteful, yet necessary proportions. As he follows the track of blood from its hemorrhage, the poet gradually adopts some of the beast's behavior: the quest is evidently preparing him through initiatory processes for his last transformation, and these can be both repulsive and hardening:

On the third day I begin to starve,
at nightfall I bend down as I knew I would

at a turd sopped in blood,
and hesitate, and pick it up,
and thrust it in my mouth, and gnash it down,
and rise
and go on running.

With the exactitude of ritualized dream the hunter-poet, "living by now on bear blood alone," after seven days sights the dead animal, "a scraggled,/steamy hulk," and soon, with a ruthlessness and a ravenous hunger that would do credit to the bear, he is devouring its flesh, assimilating its strength and nature. At last he opens its hide, merges his identity with the bear's, and falls asleep in its skin. But the process has not been completed. If this poem exhibits the qualities of some awful dream from its beginning, then the sections immediately subsequent to the one in which he enters the bear's body compose a dream-within-a-dream that brings the hunter-poet closer to the goal of his quest. For now, wrapped in the flesh and fur of the animal, sated with its blood and meat, he must dream as he sleeps there that beast's agonizing death journey, of which he is the cause, as if it were his own. Once again, in these fifth and sixth sections, Kinnell engages the most brutal sufferings the self can tolerate:

5

And dream
of lumbering flatfooted
over the tundra,
stabbed twice from within,
splattering a trail behind me,
splattering it out no matter which way I lurch,
no matter which parabola of bear-transcendence,
which dance of solitude I attempt,
which gravity-clutched leap,
which trudge, which groan.

6

Until one day I totter and fall—
fall on this
stomach that has tried so hard to keep up,
to digest the blood as it leaked in,
to break up
and digest the bone itself: and now the breeze
blows over me, blows off
the hideous belches of ill-digested bear blood
and rotted stomach
and the ordinary, wretched odor of bear,
blows across
my sore, loll'd tongue a song
or screech, until I think I must rise up
and dance. And I lie still.

The pain and the persistence resemble what we saw in "The Porcupine." In neither poem can the suffering creature elude its cruel destiny, its torturous death; such are the inexplicable premises of existence which Kinnell's poetry probes relentlessly from the start. But in his recent work he not only takes these realities as they come, he searches them out with the intention of living them through to the finish, reaching toward the extreme, the rock-bottom of existence, so to speak, in order to find some final principle of being, a hard kernel of self that endures, and turn it to poetic account. So, out of the hideous torments he undergoes in dreaming the bear's death as his own, comes the possibility of poetry—though one almost shies from the word "art" under the circumstances—more than the primitive "song or screech" blown from his exhausted mouth, or the sudden desire to perform a dance of death; it is a deeper, more personal sense of the poem and what animates it that emerges in the closing stanza after the hunter-poet awakens. He sees again the known landscape of winter, yet he further realizes that now he is the bear, and has his own journey to make, strangely nourished by the painful myth he has enacted:

And one
hairy-soled trudge stuck out before me,
the next groaned out,
the next,
the next,
the rest of my days I spend
wandering; wondering
what, anyway,
was that sticky infusion, that rank flavor of blood, that
poetry, by which I lived?

This powerful dream-poem of the poet's initiation, which seems to me in spite of its harshness to be ultimately quite strong in its affirmation of existence, completes Galway Kinnell's latest book. It also puts us in mind once more of the indivisibility for this fine poet of "the man who suffers and the mind which creates"—a reversal of Eliot's well-known dictum. This indivisibility is a distinguishing mark of the work of many of the most important and forceful younger American poets during the past fifteen years, poets whose "poems take shape from the shapes of their emotions, the shapes their minds make in thought."⁷ Kinnell's growth as a poet has traced such a pattern in close congruence with the events of his life, his most fundamental perceptions and emotions, the themes and images obsessing his consciousness. As even a cursory reading of his work would indicate, he is one of the most substantial, achieved poets of a very talented generation. His future poems should not be predicted but awaited with anticipation. There is something essential of Kinnell himself and his poetry in these memorable lines he wrote for Robert Frost:

⁷ Foreword to *Naked Poetry*, edited by Stephen Berg and Robert Mezey, Indianapolis and New York, Bobbs-Merrill, 1969, p. xi.

Who dwelt in access to that which other men
Have burnt all their lives to get near, who heard
The high wind, in gusts, seething
From far off, headed through the trees exactly
To this place where it must happen, who spent
Your life on the point of giving away your heart
To the dark trees, the dissolving woods,
Into which you go at last, heart in hand, deep in . . .

Two poems by Yvan Goll, translated by Galway Kinnell

Mannahatta

Ton soleil tombe à la mer
Une rose d'atomes un faisan touché par la balle
Faisan de feu faisan de soufre faisan de la mort liquide

Tombe tombe le dollar d'or
Entre les tours de Birs-Nimrod et de Woolworth
Tombe l'indien au plumage cuivre
Rouge abcès rédempteur
Jeune abcès fixateur de tous les sangs pollués
Crachat de cire verte
Au bas du dernier acte d'injustice

Ah toutes ces tours qui chantent la nuit
Ces Tours Penchées sur le rocher ramolissant
Ces Memnons que l'aurore fait trembler comme des joncs
La mort joue de cette syrinx de ciment
Sur le rythme rageur des Remington

Et Leilah la dactylo danse de ses deux mains
Deux boules de neiges deux chrysanthèmes d'hiver
Deux mains de miel deux crabes qui respirent
Au fond spongieux de la pierre
Leilah l'intouchable danse
Dans les rochers perforés de lumière.