

A Reading of Galway Kinnell

Ralph J. Mills, Jr.

“The little light existing in the mystery
that surrounds us comes from ourselves: it
is a false light. The mystery has never shown
its own.”

Jules Renard

“ . . . le Rien qui est la vérité”

Mallarmé

“All things are one thing to the earth . . .”

Kenneth Patchen

Galway Kinnell's first collection, *What a Kingdom It Was* (1960), can be viewed in retrospect now as one of those volumes signalling decisive changes in the mood and character of American poetry as it departed from the witty, pseudo-mythic verse, apparently written to critical prescription, of the 1950's to arrive at the more authentic, liberated work of the 1960's.¹ Our recent poetry shows how closely and vulnerably aware of the palpable life of contemporary society poets have become, for, increasingly during the past decade or so, they have opened themselves as persons to the complex, frequently incongruous, violence-ridden ethos of the age in an effort to ground the poetic imagination in a shared, perceptive reality. This kind of openness—a sensitive receptivity in which the poet, to borrow a phrase of Heidegger's about Hölderlin, “is exposed to the divine lightnings” that can easily exact their toll on nerves and emotional balance—extends, in many instances, beyond matters of social and political experience to naked metaphysical confrontation: with the universe, the identity of the self, the possibilities of an absent or

¹ These changes were, of course, gradual but visible at widely varying points of the American literary map from the mid-1950's on. Roethke, Patchen, Kunitz, Eberhart, W. C. Williams, Weldon Kees, and others can be taken as forerunners.

present God, or the prospect of a vast, overwhelming nothingness. In such poets as Theodore Roethke, Kenneth Patchen, John Berryman, Robert Lowell, James Wright, Anne Sexton, James Dickey, W. S. Merwin, and the late Sylvia Plath, for example, with all differences aside, the pursuit of personal vision often leads toward a precipitous, dizzying boundary where the self stands alone, unaided but for its own resources, before the seemingly tangible earth at hand with its bewildering multiplicity of life, the remoteness of space, the endless rhythms of nature, the turns of night and day, and within, the elusive images of memory and dream, the irrationality and uncertainty of human behavior, the griefs and ecstasies that living accumulates. Here the poet—and Galway Kinnell is certainly of this company—is thrown back upon his own perceptions; his art must be the authoritative testimony to a man's own experience, or it is meaningless; its basic validity rests upon that premise.

"Perhaps to a degree more than is true of other poets, Kinnell's development will depend on the actual events of his life," James Dickey remarked prophetically in a review of *What a Kingdom It Was*;² for what we encounter as an essential ingredient in his work as it grows is not only the presence of the poet as man and speaker but his identification, through thematic recurrences, repeated images revelatory of his deepest concerns and most urgent feelings, with the experiences his poems dramatize. In what follows we shall try to see how Kinnell, using the considerable imaginative and linguistic powers at his command from the beginning, explores relentlessly the actualities of his existence to wrest from them what significance for life he can. Through the compelling force of his art, we find ourselves engaged on this arduous search with him.

■

With the advantages of hindsight we should not be surprised when we notice that the initial poem of *What a Kingdom It Was*, aptly entitled "First Song," is located out of doors—in Illinois corn fields with frog ponds nearby—and that in the course of its three stanzas there is a movement from "dusk" into night. A large proportion of Kinnell's poetry is involved with the natural world, for he is drawn to it in profound ways, has been since childhood, and it provides him with an inexhaustible store for his imaginative meditation, if that phrase will do to distinguish a kind of thinking through images and particulars that is integral to the poetic act. But Kinnell's images from nature will become increasingly stark and rudimentary, their bonds with the ordinary range of human sympathies ever more tenuous, as he matures; for indeed his poems about killing a bird for Christmas dinner, shooting buffalo with a murderer for companion, mountain climbing, camping out alone in the mountains during winter, examining fossils in the cliff above a frog pond, seeking to define himself by identifying with porcupine and bear, bring him finally to the contemplation of what it is to be human in an extreme, one might say primitive situation. Under such fundamental circumstances

² *Babel to Byzantium*. (Noonday Press: New York, 1968), p. 135.

he faces himself and the conditions of the world simultaneously, without mediation or disguise. It should be said, however, that Kinnell employs other means than nature for cutting to the bone of existence, though intimate acquaintance with other living creatures and with the earth is of primary importance to his work.

Likewise, the imagery of darkness or blackness, mentioned above, plays a prominent part in many poems. The night with its infinite interstellar spaces reminiscent of those in Pascal or Mallarmé haunts Kinnell, heightening his sensitive awareness of immense emptiness and void in the universe. In "First Song," though, these stringent realities are softened, almost sentimentalized, by pleasant details of smoky, twilight cornfields, croaking frogs, and a small group of boys making "cornstalk violins" and "scraping of their joy" as night falls. Pleasurable nostalgia fills the poem, yet the final lines perhaps disclose something more, an indication of life's mixed blessings, a prediction of pain as well as exultation:

A boy's hunched body loved out of a stalk
The first song of his happiness, and the song woke
His heart to the darkness and into the sadness of joy.

However muted this passage, however conventional its emotion, it does reflect, in the poet's backward look across time, a recognized moment of anticipation of those paradoxes of living which the years afterwards must inevitably make manifest.

A number of the poems that follow enter more precipitously on the confusions and conflicts only hinted at in "First Song." At the risk of emphasizing the obvious, one should note how these poems dramatize through crucial incidents in the author's youth the passage from a state of ignorance and innocence into a state of experience which derives from a first-hand knowledge of guilt, violence, hypocrisy, and death.

Unavoidably, in treating this difficult awakening to experience, Kinnell comes up against the disturbing incongruities a boy senses between the spiritual or religious training he has received and the harsh facts of the world he begins to meet. "First Communion" and "To Christ Our Lord" explore this area but do not exhaust it for Kinnell; it is a major concern of his first book. The former poem focuses on the boy's estrangement from church religion. His remoteness from the formal pieties is evident in the opening lines, which start by defining the physical distance from home to church "way over in the next county" and move immediately to a completely secular recollection of having made "the same trip" the preceding year "carrying a sackful of ears to collect/The nickel-an-ear porcupine bounty." The contrast between the spiritual realities supposedly represented by the church and the tough-minded, earthy attitude of the porcupine hunters who slice off the ears of their prey to collect a reward hardly needs remarking, though it prepares for the manner in which the interior of the church and the sacrament of communion are conceived in the next lines—a totally material manner:

Pictured on the wall over dark Jerusalem
Jesus is shining—in the dark he is a lamp.
On the tray he is a pasty wafer.

The perception here doesn't seem to get beyond the tangibility of the objects: all is what it appears to be and nothing more. But the picture of Jesus is described with an ambiguity and use of detail linking the lines with many later ones in Kinnell's poems. At first, the portrait has merely a material resplendence, the quality of the painting; then that resplendence plays upon the light/darkness imagery we associate with the prologue to St. John's gospel. Yet in terms of the kind of symbolic weight with which Kinnell continues to endow his images of light and lamps and flames, and his contrary images of darkness and night, the figure of Jesus is fundamentally implicated with human hopes and desires to escape the "dark Jerusalem" of the world. But these implications are cut short with the terse line reducing the communion wafer to a lump of perishable pastry. Kinnell next recounts the journey home from communion: the adults exchange pleasantries about the preaching but soon resort to local gossip of a slightly salacious kind. Once more the boy recalls the porcupine bounty and compares the worth of the two trips; his choice, never made explicit, seems indisputably the more verifiable value of the money: "The last time over/The same trail we brought two dollars homeward./Now we carry the aftertaste of the Lord."

The last stanza shifts to external nature and renders it, in part at least, in sacramental terms. The season is autumn; life flares forth in a final display of vitality; sunlight appears to lend the prairie grass intimations of "parable" to the observer, but one which refers to nature's inalterable cyclical pattern. Decline and death are sure to follow:

The sunlight streams through the afternoon
Another parable over the sloughs
And yellowing grass of the prairies.
Cold wind stirs, and the last green
Climbs to all the tips of the season, like
The last flame brightening on a wick.
Embers drop and break in sparks. Across the earth
Sleep is the overlapping of enough shadows.

The last line above functions obliquely, implying seasonal transition, the sinking toward winter, and at the same time serves to bring us away from external nature to the boy in his bed preparing for sleep and turning his final waking thoughts to the communion day just past. Addressed to Jesus, these thoughts constitute a rejection of the "disappointing shed" where "they"—doubtless the adults, minister included, whose professed beliefs and practices stir no feeling of the sacred in the boy—"hang your picture/And drink juice, and conjure/Your person into inferior bread." Christ is, then, both something less and something more than these parishioners believe. The poem ends with his resolution "not [to] go again into that place . . ."

If Christ is not to be found in any truly apprehensible form in churches, His spirit and example still persist in the boy's mind, influencing the view he takes of his experiences and actions. The sharp discrepancy between what Jesus represents for the boy and the very different acts which existence seems to force upon him

creates the inner tension of the beautiful poem "To Christ Our Lord." In the loveliness and terror of Kinnell's presentation of the winter landscape on which the poem opens there is evident at once the hard, puzzling contrarities that compose life at any moment. Wolves hunt elk at Christmastime, tracking them over the frozen land, thus demonstrating an iron natural law of survival. Kinnell sketches the scene in swift strokes for the first three lines; then without finishing his sentence, he offers a view of the Christmas dinner preparations. No comment is necessary for the reader to see that both man and wolf maintain themselves by adherence to the same law: "Inside snow melted in a basin, and a woman basted/ A bird spread over coals by its wings and head."

The allusion to a crucified figure in the shape of the outspread bird is not accidental but is a particular instance of the cosmic image that brings the poem to its moving climax. The boy, listening to the grace said before this Christmas meal, wonders at the contradictions between his Christian and his human positions, for it is he who has been responsible for killing the bird. He remembers vividly how, as he hunted this creature, there alternated within him the dictates of conscience and the animal instinct of hunger which drives the wolves after elk. Hunger and the sense of necessity triumphed, causing him perplexity. Kinnell captures the feeling of pursuit, the winter dawn, the agonized choice and its result as they are recalled with the swiftness of the events themselves:

He had killed it himself, climbing out
Alone on snowshoes in the Christmas dawn,
The fallen snow swirling and the snowfall gone,
Heard its throat scream as the rifle shouted,
Watched it drop, and fished from the snow the dead.

He had not wanted to shoot. The sound
Of wings beating into the hushed air
Had stirred his love, and his fingers
Froze in his gloves, and he wondered,
Famishing, could he fire? Then he fired.

Though he repudiates the deed and wishes to love rather than kill, he has learned that, strangely, he harbors both impulses. But he is further disillusioned by the conventional prayer of thanksgiving which "praised his wicked act," an act that, in his mind, is opposed to everything Christ stands for. Finally, recognizing that there is "nothing to do but surrender" to the contradictions of the world and "kill and eat" as others do, he submits, though "with wonder." This "wonder" is an awe and puzzlement at the tragic mixture of love and death inherent in creation and brings on the expansive vision with which the poem concludes. In the closing stanza the boy again wanders "the drifting field" of snow (whose constantly changing shapes suggest the elusive, unstable character of reality) at night still searching for a meaningful reply to his questions. His querying of the black reaches of space, scattered as in Mallarmé's memorable phrase, with "la neige éternelle des astres," at first wins only silence, vacuity; but suddenly he sees the

distant constellation of the Swan which, like the bird roasting outspread upon the coals, mimes the figure of the crucified Christ:

At night on snowshoes on the drifting field
He wondered again, for whom had love stirred?
The stars glittered on the snow and nothing answered.
Then the Swan spread her wings, cross of the cold north,
The pattern and mirror of the acts of earth.

There can be little consolation or resolution in this image with its indications of death, but there is a certain understanding, possibly the beginnings of acceptance. A darkened universe returns to the watcher an enlarged symbol of the actuality he has so painfully met; the crucified figure, Christ or bird, is the proper image for the world's conditions.

I have discussed these poems in some detail not merely because they merit it for their obvious high qualities of language, imagery, and rhythm but because the experiences central to them are unquestionably of importance to Kinnell in his progressive stripping off of innocence, illusion, and his achievement of a hardened, stoical attitude. We catch an early glimpse of this attitude, or the need for it, in "Westport," a poem which ostensibly deals with a rugged westward journey, undertaken through some unavoidable compulsion. Not so oddly, if we consider what Kinnell has been saying in these other early poems, the speaker admits to the taxing and unpleasant aspects of the trip yet also confesses that these are its peculiar rewards as well:

"Yes," I said, "it will be a hard journey . . ."
And the shining grasses were bowed towards the west
As if one craving had killed them. "But at last,"
I added, "the hardness is the one thing you thank."

The travelers go their way, and in three brief lines finishing the poem they find darkness descending, listen to the desolate sounds of the landscape and wind. Their fate appears mysteriously implicated with the harsh but durable existence of nature:

Now out of evening we discovered night
And heard the cries of the prairie and the moan
Of wind through the roots of its clinging flowers.

Obliquity is Kinnell's method here, a sign of even freer, more allusive writing to come. Like the travelers, the reader confronts the rich opacity of "night," the startling, potentially frightening "cries of the prairie" and wailing of the wind that readily remind him of pain; set against these dark or negative qualities there is that last phrase describing the tenacious hold on life of the "clinging flowers." These details are meant to remain suggestive but ambiguous, just as they would be in their actual setting, for the very possibilities in them to stir the imagination. Kinnell wishes such elements of experience to approximate the external circumstances of the world they mirror because he knows they cannot provide any mean-

ing but what we read in them for ourselves. Or as Whitman says, "All truths wait in all things."

The chief poems in this first book, and those most relevant to Kinnell's development and more recent inclinations, are "Easter," "The Schoolhouse," "Seven Streams of Nevis," "The Descent," "Where the Track Vanishes," "Freedom, New Hampshire," "The Supper After the Last" (all of these but "Easter" appear in the third section of the volume), and the long poem "The Avenue Bearing the Initial of Christ into the New World." I do not intend to slight the other poems, but those named are clearly the most notable, for range and vision, and in several instances, manner and technique. Also apparent in these poems is Kinnell's preoccupation with the larger metaphysical themes previously in evidence and now increasingly at the forefront of his interests. Death, suffering, the will to elude the body's mortality, and the brute facts of the actual world: Kinnell's imagination turns these themes over and over, dwelling on the insoluble enigmas of life's significance or lack of it as these emerge in the process of his own living.

"Easter,"³ the most conventional in form with its rather neat quatrains, rhymes and off-rhymes, again, as in "First Communion" and "To Christ Our Lord," separates what the poet takes for the shallowness of official Christianity from what he perceives as the true meaning of Christ—that He is symbolic of the ubiquitous pain, victimization, and death of man and all other living things. Just as the hunted bird of "To Christ Our Lord" was transformed into an emblem of the sacrificed Jesus, so in the present poem the "virgin nurse," who has been "Raped, robbed, weighted, drowned" in the river, exemplifies His death yet another time. The poem is crowded with subtle ambiguities, resonances, and ironies, for Kinnell elicits effects from the particulars he uses on both literal and metaphorical levels at once. The second stanza, for example, begins in a matter of fact way: "To get to church you have to cross the river,/First breadwinner for the town . . ." And for the banal, unspiritual townspeople, satisfied with the comforts of thoughtless, routine belief, the statement has merely literal application. But in terms of the victim whose body rides in its depths the river is reminiscent of the Jordan and likely the Styx too; and throughout the poem it symbolizes a dimension of death beyond the reach of the living. The myopic sight of the townspeople, who view these waters only with the eyes of commerce and gain, fails to comprehend them, as the poet's vision does, as the means of redemption, though a natural rather than a supernatural one: "its wide/Mud-colored currents cleansing forever/The swill-making villages at its side."

In contrast to the muddy river which purifies the towns along its banks and the lives within them there is heard the "disinfected voice of the minister" preaching his Easter sermon; but his remarks are irrelevant: he speaks to his parishioners neither of their deaths nor of the nurse's murder, "he is talking of nothing but

³ A good discussion of this poem appears in Glauco Cambon's *Recent American Poetry* (University of Minnesota Press: Minneapolis, 1961), pp. 33-36. Necessarily, I echo some of his observations.

Easter,/Dying so on the wood, He rose.” The story is too familiar, so the congregation, inattentive, put their minds to something more immediate, a ‘gospel’ from the headlines which at least quickens their pulses—“Some of us daydream of the morning news.” Others, more distracted or uncomfortable in hard pews, are rendered by Kinnell wittily, though a bit pretentiously, in parody of Easter’s original significance:

Some of us lament we rose at all,
A child beside me comforts her doll,
We are dying on the hard wood of the pews.

After a stanza commenting on death’s omnipresence, the poem returns to the river where, with the ironic reminder that many of Christ’s disciples were fishermen, “with wire hooks the little boats are fishing” to recover, in a spurious attempt at resurrection, the body of the nurse. The last five stanzas are addressed by the poet to the dead woman and convey his own notion of her redemption. If her corpse is not hauled up from the river she must find her true communion in the sacrament of its muddy currents (“ . . . drink well of the breadwinner”) and be carried by them in what seems a movement toward liberation that is also an identification with water as an element of both death and purification. Surprisingly, Kinnell urges her not to regret “That the dream has ended,” to reflect on her life and see it for what it was, what she dimly, when alive, thought it actually might be—a kind of hell. Only in death is there the hope of serenity or repose:

Turn
On the dream you lived through the unwavering gaze.
It is as you thought. The living burn.
In the floating days may you discover grace.

In “Easter” and the poems following it Kinnell contemplates human experience against the silent, puzzling background of earth, universe, and death, particularly as it can be witnessed in the character and fate of others: in “The Schoolhouse,” a learned but isolated country schoolmaster who once taught the poet and who wrestled with problems of knowledge and belief; in “Seven Streams of Nevis,” the seedy, outcast lives of seven individuals through whom the poet seeks the seven virtues and the purpose of human affliction; in the death of a friend while mountain-climbing in “The Descent”; in the implications of the path to a deserted Alpine cemetery in “Where the Track Vanishes”; in the death of his brother in “Freedom, New Hampshire”; in the tragic, desperate but resilient lives of the poor, Jews and Negroes, in the New York ghetto in “The Avenue Bearing the Initial of Christ into the New World.” A single exception is “The Supper After the Last,” a complex poem of a fierce, apocalyptic sort which assumes the aspect of hallucinated vision.

By comparison with most of these poems “Easter,” in spite of its subject, appears cool, detached, objective, for Kinnell’s approach to his material grows more personal and intense as he continues to write. In a stanza such as the following from “Seven Streams of Nevis” the formal structure strains outward under the tre-

mendous emotional force generated from within, so that, as in certain poems by Baudelaire, Yeats, Lowell, or Kunitz, for example, the language seems barely able to contain its pressure:

O Connolly! O Jack! O Peaches!
When you fall down foaming in fits
Remember with your scrawny wits
And knee up laughing like leeches:
You are just flesh but you will be
—One rainy day—faith, hope, and charity.

The second section of this poem departs somewhat from the strictness of the first to develop one long stanza rising to its own powerful climactic lines but more suited to the meditative nature of Kinnell's vision as he nears a symbolic source from which the uncontrollable energies of life spill forth. Leaving behind the horror and suffering of the seven lives he has examined in the opening part, the poet, alone, climbs Ben Nevis in western Scotland, the highest peak in England, which takes on in the poem the features of a sacred mountain, soaring into the heavens, fixing a metaphysical center point in the universe with access to the divine world and to the infernal regions.⁴ At this locus some knowledge of the ultimate origin and design of existence should be obtainable; that is the motive behind the poet's climb. But the knowledge that is forthcoming can only be called somber and chilling awareness; there is no mystical revelation or illumination. The entire stanza abounds in the imagery of darkness and blackness, only occasionally contradicted by images of light. The poet starts the ascent of Ben Nevis "in darkness" reflective of his own ignorance of final answers, as well as indicative of the literal time of day. Climbing, he comes upon the seven streams, "well fore-known," that in their separate courses and movements suggest the terrible head-long rush toward disaster of the seven persons already portrayed:

One sang like strings, one crashed
Through gated rocks, one vibrated, others
Went skipping like unbucketed grease across
Hot stones, or clattered like bones, or like milk
Spilled and billowed in streamers of bright silk,
Iris glimmering a visionary course—
Me grimping the dark, sniffing for the source . . .

The "source," discovered in the next lines, turns out to be a still, "dark" pool "Whose shined waters on the blackened mountain/Mirrored the black skies." And stressing again the darkness that seems less a temporary absence of light than the very negation of it distilled from mountain, water, and sky, the poet

⁴ For a discussion of sacred mountains see Mircea Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion* (Sheed and Ward: New York, 1958).

carries his search forward to the middle of the pool, the calm eye of the world's hurricane, the heart's chaos:

. . . I rode out on
Dark water under the darkness of the skies
And the waves ringing through the dark were the rings
Around the eye itself of the world, which,
Drawing down heaven like its black lid, was there
Where merely to be still was temperate,
Where to move was brave, where justice was a glide,
Knowledge the dissolving of the head-hung eyes;
And there my faith lay burning, there my hope
Lay burning on the water, there charity
Burned like a sun.

The primary revelation as the poem moves toward its climax and conclusion is that the cosmos, and thus men's lives, is dominated by darkness. The poet arrives at a midpoint, a place of recognitions which is his version of Eliot's "still point of the turning world," but what he recognizes is the sheer human strength and virtue that the acts of living demand. He discovers no divine source as Eliot does. Darkness surrounds men, the pool and the empty black heavens above; it is Kinnell himself who bestows the light there is in his "faith," "hope," and "charity" with regard to the human situation. A person apparently must create his own virtue by traveling to the center of himself, accepting himself, and realizing his isolation in the world. We are close, I think, to Yeats' recommendation at the finish of "A Dialogue of Self and Soul" when he proclaims himself rightful judge of his own acts:

I am content to follow to its source
Every event in action or in thought;
Measure the lot; forgive myself the lot!

Kinnell ends with a request that approaches prayer, asking the "pool of heaven" to give "the locus of grace"—which I presume to be a condition of awareness similar to the one the poet has achieved—to

seven who have
Bit on your hearts, and spat the gravels of
Tooth and heart, and bit again; who have wiped
The thumb-burst jellies of sight on a sleeve
(The visions we could have wrung from that cloth)
And sprouted sight like mushrooms—O seven
Streams of nothing backgazing after heaven,
In the heart's hell you have it; call it God's Love.

The seven in their agonized lives, so powerfully and graphically asserted throughout the poem, are allied here to such great tragic figures as Oedipus and Lear, whose suffering and blindness result in another kind of penetrating vision of reality. They are brought to knowledge of their nothingness which still thirsts

for meaning, solace, transcendental resolution (“backgazing after heaven”). The “locus of grace” offers, in the last line, a shocking disclosure that echoes in part the conclusion of “Easter,” where life is referred to as infernal: “In the heart’s hell you have it; call it God’s Love.” These words can be interpreted variously. One might say Kinnell implies that God wills the suffering of individuals out of the paradox of a divine love whose goal is their purification and salvation. If we isolated the line and elicited from it a Christian meaning we could indeed say something of that sort. But I cannot locate anything else in the poem, or in the rest of Kinnell’s work for that matter, which would sustain this reading. It appears more likely that, severe though it may be, Kinnell extends to us “the heart’s hell” as the fundamental human reality we have to live with, and from which we must summon our own virtue. Heaven is an illusion, looked on with nostalgia, which worsens our state by measuring it against an impossible ideal. Poetry, Kinnell tells us later, in the second of his “Last Songs” from *Body Rags* (1968), should incorporate the specifically human faults, the things that make man part of this world, not an eternal or paradisiacal one (there are some resemblances in this, of course, to Rilke and Wallace Stevens):

Silence. Ashes
In the grate. Whatever it is
that keeps us from heaven,
sloth, wrath, greed, fear, could we only
reinvent it on earth
as song.

Obviously, neither in “Seven Streams of Nevis” nor “Last Songs” is Kinnell praising man’s fallibility, but he continues to insist on realizing it as integral to what man is. If we return to the phrase “God’s Love,” the final words of the poem, I think we find it suggests first of all the poet’s bitterly ironic criticism of the idea of a benevolent Creator who could will misery and death for His largely helpless creatures; further, it emphasizes his conviction that the love and value to be found in the tumult of earthly existence are in man’s ravaged breast: God’s love is simply what man makes it.

In “The Descent” and “Where the Track Vanishes” Kinnell gets nearer the looser structures of more recent poems. The two pieces juxtapose or alternate various scenes and incidents as the means for tracing out the theme of death and the pattern of ascent and decline which he perceives in all the particulars of nature and in man. More and more, in line with European poets such as Rilke or Yves Bonnefoy (whose poems he has so beautifully translated)⁵, he envisages death as something like a negative presence, awaiting its appointed moment to emerge

⁵ Yves Bonnefoy, *On the Motion and Immobility of Douve*, translated by Galway Kinnell (Ohio University Press: Athens, 1968). Bonnefoy’s epigraph from Hegel is perhaps significant: “But the life of the spirit is not frightened at death and does not keep itself pure of it. It endures death and maintains itself in it.” (Translated by Kinnell.)

from beneath the surface of each individual life; and this vision extends to the whole creation; it cannot be denied but must be faced with strength and tenderness, as this passage from "Where the Track Vanishes" points out:

My hand on the sky
Cannot shut the sky out
Anymore than any March
Branch can. In the Boston Store
Once, I tried new shoes:
The shoeman put my feet
In a machine, saying Kid
Wrig yer toes. I
Wrigged and peered:
Inside green shoes green
Twigs were wrigging by themselves
Green as the grasses
I drew from her
Hair in the springtime
While she laughed, unfoliated
By sunlight, a little
Spray of bones I loved.

It is no more possible for the poet, as a man, to avoid participation in the life of nature than it is for a tree: both are wedded indissolubly to earth. Under the green light of the now old fashioned X-ray machine used to test the fit of shoes Kinnell watches, with a boy's fascination and an adult's understanding, the skeleton beneath the skin, his own mortality; suddenly, movingly, it recalls for him a girl whom he once loved and an affectionate gesture they shared. She takes form not in any ordinary description of her features but as an image of delicate, almost frail being lifted momentarily from the world like the season and surroundings in which he remembers her. The elegiac quality implicit in the last lines strengthens the impression of the evanescence of affection and, more emphatically, of personal identity, which also occupy Kinnell in "Freedom, New Hampshire."

The place "where the track vanishes" in this poem is a ruined mountain graveyard, "a heap of stones/Mortared with weeds and wildflowers—/The fallen church." Though everything here decayed long ago, and there would seem to be little chance of visitors, still a track is worn through the grass, ending among the gravestones. Perhaps, the poet muses, it is the crippled French peasant, leading his twelve goats up the mountainside to pasture, who has cut this path, but it is far from certain. Kinnell proceeds to another section filled with mythologies of the cosmos, the constellations, and finishes with a stanza opening out to the vastnesses of space. If the symbolic implications of herdsman, goats, cemetery, and ruined church were not quite pinned down for the reader till now, this last stanza does not permit him to mistake their purpose, though, of course, they remain essential as specific, literal details of actuality too, in keeping with Ezra

Pound's belief that "the natural object is always the *adequate* symbol." At this point the peasant becomes the "Herdsman," doubtless referring to the northern constellation Bootes but likewise certainly representative of Christ with His twelve disciples (somewhat ironically presented here as goats) ascending the night sky toward the stars, riddlingly described as "A writhing of lights," in search of the ever elusive "fields" of paradise. The stanza introduces both Christian supplication and pagan goddesses of fertility and renewal to delineate the ceaseless human desire for transcendence or rebirth. Looking back on the cemetery, where Kinnell imagines the dead merging with one another in the common soil, and the "fallen church," we note how they reinforce the main interests of the poem by indicating the universality of death and absorption into the earth, and by implying that creeds grow outworn. Nonetheless, the longing to go beyond the confines of mortality endures, the track climbs up. The three closing lines possess a dark ambiguity. They hint at a primal level of being which is associated with the earth, is at once the state of origins and the state of return; the poet conceives this as the source of our lives and mythologies and their conclusion. Existence begins to manifest itself constantly in Kinnell's work as inerringly cyclical in form:

Fields into which the limping Herdsman wades
 Leading his flock up the trackless night, towards
 A writhing of lights. Are they Notre Dame des Neiges
 Where men ask their God for the daily bread—
 Or the March-climbing Virgin carrying wheat?
 Where the track vanishes the first land begins.
 It goes out everywhere obliterating the horizons.
 We must have been walking through it all our lives.

Similarly, "The Descent" is constructed upon the symbolic pattern of human aspiration or ascent and the inevitable gravity of nature and fate that compels man downward to conclude in death and the earth. Designed in four parts, the poem alternates between a mountain-climbing expedition that results in tragic death and two moments in the Seekonk Woods—one the poet's recollection of childhood, the other a visit to the same location years later. All of these events demonstrate aspects of the cyclical scheme Kinnell intuitively grasps. At the outset he says of the string of mountain-climbers, seeing them on the slopes as if from below though he is really in their company: "it must have seemed/A lunatic earthworm headed for paradise"—already emphasizing the basic urge for transcendence the poem unfolds. One climber, Jan, a former member of the Resistance, tries to shortcut by jumping a crevasse and falls, mortally injured. Through some oddity or dimming of the dying man's vision he mistakes the declining moon before him for the rising sun behind, a misconception of the symbolic properties of which Kinnell puts to use:

Then he whispered, "Look—the sunrise!"
 The same color and nearly the same size

But behind his back, the new sun

Was rising. When the moon he was
Staring at set in the mountains
He died. On the way down the ice
Had turned so perilous under the sun
There was no choice: we watched while he went down.

The confusion of Jan's vision becomes for Kinnell a dramatic way of introducing into the poem the theme of human illusion in conflict with the undeviating cyclical pattern of sunrise and moonfall, ascent and decline, or birth and death, to which man and nature alike are subject. The conflict arises because the individual longs to retain his identity by rebirth or resurrection elsewhere; for while renewal occurs in the sense that new lives begin, death destroys each unique being, disperses the self into the undifferentiated whole again. As Kinnell writes near the close of "Freedom, New Hampshire," meditating on the loss of his brother, "But an incarnation is in particular flesh/And the dust that is swirled into a shape/And crumbles and is swirled again had but one shape/That was this man." So within the context Kinnell establishes in "The Descent" both mountain-climbing and what Jan thinks he sees are signs of man's wishes and illusions, while Jan's fall and consequent death, the sinking of the moon, and the fact that the sun's heat melting the ice makes the slopes treacherous, forcing the climbers to let Jan's body sled down the mountain alone, are actualities which complete the cycle. This pattern recurs in the second section where the poet remembers lying hidden in grass "In Seekonk Woods, on Indian Hill" when someone fired a shotgun at nearby crows; his reaction was instantaneous, boyishly impulsive, and touching:

Two crows blown out from either hand
Went clattering away; a third
Swam through the branches to the ground.
I scooped it up, splashed the ford,
And lit out—I must have run half a day
Before I reached Holy Spring. (Anyway,

I thought it was holy. No one
Had told me heaven is overhead.
I only knew people look down
When they pray.) I held the dying bird
As though, should its heart falter,
There wouldn't be much heartbeat anywhere.

After a while I touched the plumes
To the water. In the desert
By the tracks I dug a headstart
Taller than myself. I told him,
"Have a good journey, crow. It can't be far.
It'll be this side of China, for sure."

Thus the boy's childish but shrewd thought that heaven must be beneath the ground because the dead are laid to rest there and the praying head inclines this way contributes to Kinnell's symbolic scheme, as does the simple baptismal gesture the boy bestows as an unconscious allusion to rebirth. The poet is led to think again of his dead friend Jan, of the possibility that he might have kept a grip on life: had he been turned "to the sun/might not the sun have held him here?" He replies to his own query with a rhetorical question stressing the contrarities that work upon a person, pulling him in opposite directions:

Or did he know the day came on
Behind, not glancing back for fear
The moon was already dragging from his bones
The blood as dear to them, and as alien,

As the suit of clothes to a scarecrow
Or the flesh to a cross?

At this moment he can comprehend his friend's "descent," announced in the poem's title and grasped naïvely by the poet in his boyhood, for what it is, the unavoidable rounding off of the course of existence: "To his valleys/Rivers have washed this climber to the sun/The full moon pestled into earth again." Then the last two stanzas of this section play upon the important thematic suggestiveness of height and depth, light and darkness. The paradisiacal realm, however, is no longer located where boyhood had it, underground; the poet has learned what men believe, or imagine, that it is a luminous celestial dimension ("Heaven is in light, overhead,/I have it by heart"). By way of contrast, the realities of death, burial, night-fall, and the earth to which life is joined are brought forward.

Yet the dead

Silting the darkness do not ask
For burials elsewhere than the dusk.
They lie where nothing but the moon can rise,
And make no claims, though they had promises.

Formal religion makes these "promises," yet from this sleep comes no awakening; only nature, contained in the image of moonrise, continues its eternal circle. The milkweed seen growing at the start of the second stanza puts us in mind of the hopes and plans of men who try to launch themselves beyond the graveyard soil of their beginnings but become merely "drab," don't succeed in resolving the enigmas of existence or rising above them, and fulfill their lives only by extinction. New life springs from the deaths of others and progresses toward the same goal, that is the clear assertion emerging from the abundant detail of Kinnell's writing:

Milkweed that grow beside the tombs
Climb from the dead as if in flight,
But a foot high they stop and bloom
In drab shapes, that neither give light

Nor bring up the true darkness of the dead;
Strange, homing lamps, that go out seed by seed.

The final portion discovers Kinnell back at the scene of the crow shooting, attempting to recapture something of that moment in the past which is still redolent for him with grace. He seeks the spontaneous, honest feeling for the numinous that was his as a boy, but it has vanished beyond recovery. Instead, he looks upon a changed landscape; Indian Hill has turned into a subdivision, the crosslike TV aerials on the rooftops exhibit the secular interests now presiding over this once (for the poet) sacred spot. When he tries to find his "Holy Spring" he faces the blunt, incontrovertible facts of nature:

Fields lying dark and savage and the sun

Reaping its own fire from the trees,
Whirling the faint panic of birds
Up turbulent light. Two white-haired
Crows cried under the wheeling rays;
And loosed as by a scythe, into the sky
A flight of jackdaws rose, earth-birds suddenly

Seized by some thaumaturgic thirst,
Shrill wings flung up the crow-clawed, burned,
Unappeasable air. And one turned,
Dodged through the flock again and burst
Eastward alone, sinking across the wood
On the world curve of its wings.

With these lines Kinnell draws together the echoes, parallels, and recurrences of his poem. One can say that in a certain sense its construction reflects the cyclical pattern of existence which is everywhere so plain to him and dominates his imagination. When he attempts to revive the experience of his youth, he is answered only by nature with its fertility and its alternating creative and destructive energies. (The scene is reminiscent though hardly imitative of those in Richard Eberhart's "The Groundhog"; and there are thematic affinities with Dylan Thomas.) The actions of the crows and jackdaws, moreover, do not really differ from those of humans. We are all "earth-birds," like the "earthworm" mountain-climbers of the poem's opening, vainly scaling the heights or searching for the sacred of which we were once confident. Our desires are no different from the birds' instinctive climbing through the air: we are obsessed with the miraculous, the supernatural that will free us of death and preserve us. The lone bird flying eastward, away from its flock, follows the line of "descent" to earth, recalling Wallace Stevens' "casual flocks of pigeons" at the close of "Sunday Morning" who "make/Ambiguous undulations as they sink,/Downward to darkness, on extended wings." This jackdaw is the counterpart among unselfconscious creatures of Jan, who, dying, believes he sees the sunrise of renewal; the "world curve of its wings" pro-

claims unmistakably the universality of death, the return to earth. So we are "Strange, homing lamps, that go out seed by seed."

But Kinnell goes beyond these resolutions of imagery, parallelisms of quest and incident, to introduce the figure of Christ at the poem's end, once again clothing Him in an image from the natural world yet symbolically appropriate. He appears, then, as a "fisherbird," who still speaks in the voice of His suffering and despair upon the cross; and His cry articulates the agony of every living being, of all who feel the torment of mortality. Concentrating on the idea of the Incarnation, Kinnell sees Christ as the exemplary sufferer in whose speech, passion, and death the pain of others is embodied, manifested as the supreme, heart-rending instance of man's "thaumaturgic thirst" for immortality—and its defeat:

Nor do we know why,

Mirrored in duskfloods, the fisherbird
Seems to stand in a desolate sky
Feeding at its own heart. In the cry
Eloi! Eloi! flesh was made word:
We hear it in wind catching in the trees,
In lost blood breaking a night through the bones.

Once more Christ's presence occupies a central position in Kinnell's poetry, and that is in "The Supper After the Last," which is also the piece he selected for inclusion in Paul Engle and Joseph Langland's anthology *Poet's Choice*. His accompanying comment has a special relevance to his imaginative preoccupations at that time, and since:

It is from this poem, "The Supper After the Last," that I want to make a fresh start, and I chose it for this reason. I mean towards a poem without scaffolding or occasion, that progresses through images to a point where it can make a statement on a major subject.⁶

"A poem without scaffolding or occasion, that progresses through images . . ." Kinnell might have been speaking here about the poetry of Robert Bly, Louis Simpson, W. S. Merwin, Frank O'Hara, Donald Hall, or John Ashbery, among others, and certainly about much of the most important contemporary European and Latin American poetry—in fact, almost any poetry whose roots lie in the Surrealist or Expressionist traditions of twentieth century literature. A common concern of such poets is the creation of a poetry which relies less and less upon logical

⁶ *Poet's Choice* (Dial Press: New York, 1962), p. 257.

or narrative structure, upon the representation of external events (surely, these are the types of things Kinnell means by “scaffolding or occasion”), but which develops around a highly suggestive grouping of images whose source is inward experience, memory, dream, or vision. The purpose of this technique is to increase the authenticity of poetic statement, to dispense with artificiality, to free poetry from any ties that would prevent it from approximating as closely as possible its sources. Of course, this is not the only kind of poem Kinnell will write in the future; and he does not seem to have converted himself so completely to these artistic strategies as, say, Merwin or Bly; but there can be no doubt that this new direction to his efforts has strengthened, purified, and quickened the poems of his two later collections.

“The Supper After the Last” can best be approached as a culmination of a sort as well as a new start. Themes we have noted in considerable detail in previous poems are not only quite apparent in this one but reach a fierce, shocking resolution: a ruthless visionary statement that assimilates its predecessors, abolishes the hesitations, hopes, defeated yet renewed desires so evident before. The poem has near-surrealist qualities in its opening lines which bring forward mirage, illusion, and hallucination; but the particulars of water, sky, dragon-fly, the bather and his shadow, however puzzling at first, must not be overlooked, for they will reappear charged with meaning. A scene is offered at the start that is deliberately indefinite, that doesn’t permit the reader to settle securely on a specific landscape, for land and sea obscurely mingle while the sky overarches them in the mirage; then a brightly colored dragon-fly floats down to the desert floor and a bather comes into view, wading in what has already been called both “illusory water” and “The sea [that] scumbles in” and trying without success to destroy that dark reflection of himself which is his shadow. The atmosphere is mysterious, confusing. Kinnell has, in accordance with his prose remarks, confined himself to a mental occasion; the landscape before us has been formed by the inner eye:

The desert moves out on half the horizon
Rimming the illusory water which, among islands,
Bears up the sky. The sea scumbles in
From its own inviolate border under the sky.
A dragon-fly floating on six legs on the sand
Lifts its yellow-green tail, declines its wings
A little, flutters them a little, and lays
On dazzled sand the shadow of its wings. Near shore
A bather wades through his shadow in the water.
He tramples and kicks it; it recomposes.

Once we begin to read carefully, examining the recurrence and expansion of various details from this scene later in the poem, our bearings grow more distinct. The “illusory water” already seen returns as water reminding us of baptism or the waters of life, both implying faith or renewal. Such significance gains support by the assertion that this water “Bears up the sky,” that is to say, metaphorically speaking, it animates or sustains a belief in the transcendent, the other-worldly. This

notion of the passage seems less strained when we recall that the poem's title entertains the notion of resurrection: we can assume that it refers to a meal Christ eats after His return from the dead. In part two water is an essential element in another scene that discloses a "whitewashed house" while "Framed in its doorway, a chair, / Vacant, waits in the sunshine." We are not told for whom this chair waits, but undoubtedly it has been prepared for the risen Christ. The next stanza reveals the water in a container, and the invisible world hovers at the verge of visibility:

A jug of fresh water stands
Inside the door. In the sunshine
The chair waits, less and less vacant.
The host's plan is to offer water, then stand aside.

The anonymous "host," one who awaits the coming of Christ, and so one of the faithful, places the water as a sacramental gesture signifying new life or resurrection and as a token of his belief that it will come through Him. Thus far, the poem establishes an almost hypnotic stillness; the one violent act of the bather kicking in the first stanza is absorbed by the vagueness and fluidity of the mirage. As we observed, the second part opens on a stark, simple arrangement of house, doorway, sunlit chair, and jug of water; but as the host removes himself to make way for his expected guest the poem reaches a turning point that, with the beginning of part three, shatters the calm and jolts the reader's complacency. Suddenly we are shown "the supper after the last" carried on with savage gusto:

They eat *rosé* and chicken. The chicken head
Has been tucked under the shelter of the wing.
Under the table a red-backed, passionate dog
Cracks chicken bones on the blood and gravel floor.

As this section continues, so does the ferocity of the meal increase. The unidentified figure devouring chicken is, I take it, a particularly brutal portrait of Christ as Death, the universal destroyer whose ravenous jaws and digestive system are transformed into a horrifying image of the Styx down which everything must pass. The message of this Christ, who apparently has been robbed by His suffering and death of the illusions of His teachings, His promises at the Last Supper, is mortality without reprieve. This supper has nothing sacred or life-renewing about it; plainly it is a feast of sheer annihilation:

No one else but the dog and the blind
Cat watching it knows who is that bearded
Wild man guzzling overhead, the wreck of passion
Emptying his eyes, who has not yet smiled,

Who stares at the company, where he is company,
Turns them to sacks of appalled, grinning skin,

Forks the fowl-eye out from under
The large, makeshift, cooked lid, evaporates the wine,

Jellies the sunlit table and spoons, floats
The deluxe grub down the intestines of the Styx,
Devours all but the cat and dog, to whom he slips scraps,
The red-backed accomplice busy grinding gristle.

This "emptying" of the eyes can be understood, I think, as one instance in Kin-nell's work of the deprivation of spiritual significance from existence, a demythologizing of life and the cosmos we have observed in various poems which here assumes a more stringent character, for it refers to Christ's loss of His transcendental vision. At the outset of part four even the host, the man of faith, falls victim, his "bones . . ./Crack in the hound's jaw" as if to herald the wild man's speech, which begins with ironic reversals of the Gospels. His words inform men of their fundamental nothingness, describe them as creatures of dust who long for immortality, who form from these deep-seated wishes pictures of the eternal, the entirely compassionate and merciful, and insist on the veracity of the pictures because they have imagined them:

I came not to astonish
But to destroy you. Your
Jug of cool water? Your
Hanker after wings? Your
Lech for transcendence?
I came to prove you are
Intricate and simple things
As you are, created
In the image of nothing,
Taught of the creator
By your images in dirt—
As mine, for which you set
A chair in the sunshine,
Mocking me with water!
As pictures of wings,
Not even iridescent,
That clasp the sand
And that cannot perish, you swear,
Having once been evoked!

With the poem's closing part we look again on the desert mirage of the beginning. The vision of Christ trembles, blurs, "begins to float in water" as everything now seems illusory, uncertain. Christ is finally named as He is on the point of disappearing, but His voice continues while His figure blends into the liquid fluctuations of the atmosphere: "Far out in that mirage the Saviour sits whispering to the world,/Becoming a mirage." The words of His parting statement bring back

the images of dragon-fly, light and darkness. Man strives, He says, to ascend "from flesh to wings," an effort indicative of the will to escape his fate, and He admits that "the change exists"; but it is not a permanent change, and obtains only within the boundaries of mortal life, though man wishes it to endure beyond them: "But the wings that live gripping the contours of the dirt/Are all at once nothing, flesh and light lifted away." So the Saviour proclaims Himself the *idea* of God or the eternal, the objectification of man's desires—"I am the resurrection, because I am the light"—thus recalling, in "The Descent," a similar expression of the human will to survive: "Heaven is in light, overhead, I have it by heart." But the fading Christ, introducing again the dragon-fly we first saw laying "the shadow of its wings" on the sand, asserts that man's destiny is analogous to that small creature's downward flight; the earth is his last home, to vanish is his end. At the poem's finish the Saviour appears in the dual role of a phantasmal god of unattainable worlds and the architect of man's death. In spite of his metamorphoses, his struggles toward the "light," a man's final transformation brings him to the ground from which he came:

I cut to your measure the creeping piece of darkness
That haunts you in the dirt. Steps into light—
I make you over. I breed the shape of your grave in the dirt.

That moving "piece of darkness" is an individual's shadow, the reflection of his death inseparable from his existence which the bather at the poem's outset tries unsuccessfully to dispel. The poem concludes in the absoluteness of death, an assurance for Kinnell that holds little promise for appeal.

To be concluded in *The Iowa Review* Spring Issue.
