

## Kinnell's *Walking Down the Stairs* · Susan B. Weston

IN THE RECENTLY PUBLISHED *Walking Down the Stairs*, selections from interviews with Galway Kinnell published by the University of Michigan Press, one of the interviewers asks Kinnell: "That loneliness you say you wrote out of—do you think that young poets today are less rich because they lack that?" Kinnell replies, "I never thought of it as richness." One of the charming things about these interviews is the way Kinnell changes a question by butting his head through the interviewer's premises. This particular question meant "richness for poetry," of course, but Kinnell refuses to distinguish lonely poets from lonely people: no one is richer for being lonely.

Questions like this one are generated by the notion that poets are a special breed who welcome suffering, madness, and poverty for the sake of their poetry. If art is to provide our alternate medium of transcendence, as Matthew Arnold predicted, then we assume sacrifices of our poet-priests. From the *poètes maudits*, who cultivated the image, to the desperate poets Sylvia Plath and John Berryman, poets' lives have encouraged us to think that some kind of dementia is a prerequisite to creativity. Yeats, who lived a complex and full life, didn't help by speaking so often of his own "choice" between life and art. Many of us, at any rate, presume not only that the poet converts experience into poetry, but that he has the experiences in order to convert them into poetry. It is refreshing, then, to watch Galway Kinnell sidestep such notions. Does political activity enrich your poetry, he is asked. "Any involvement that brings you to a sense of loving community," he replies, "is bound to be enriching—for a writer or for anyone." Similarly, when asked how he copes with "dry periods," Kinnell shows how much the question implies by answering that he regards "dry periods" as "complications of life."

This integration of poetry with life informs all of Kinnell's more interesting responses in *Walking Down the Stairs*. Sensitive to "either/or" thinking, he is quick to give "both. . . and" answers that are in the same inclusive spirit as his poetry. He balks, for example, at the distinction between "nature" poems and "urban" poems: "The idea that we and our creations don't belong to 'nature' comes from the notion that the human is a special being created in God's image to have dominion over all else. We are becoming aware again of our connection with other beings." Asked about surrealism, he makes a similar leap: "The use of the term 'inner life' means that one is not quite whole, that one has an inner life and an outer life, and they don't quite come together." In a culture that tends to separate the artist from his audience and art from life, these remarks make Kinnell an important spokesman for poetry. His commitment to relation—between poetry and everything else, between the poet and everyone else—makes this collection of interviews crucial reading for anyone interested in the survival of healthy literature.

Just this probing for relations, for coherent wholeness, characterizes Kinnell's best poems, and *Walking Down the Stairs* should send his readers back to the poetry with enhanced understanding. It strikes me that Kinnell's is an utterly healthy poetry, with none of the suppression of self that characterizes Eliot or Stevens and none of the perfecting of psychic wounds that characterizes much contemporary poetry. It is healthy precisely because it confronts horrors—drunks dying of cirrhosis; war and destruction; the communal nightmare of a failing culture; the individual nightmare of the failure of love—along with all that is lovely and loving. These facets of the single gem, the human condition, are examined with a jeweler's sense not only of their beauty but also of their dimension. "We're a race living for a while on a little planet that will die," Kinnell says in one interview. Kinnell's gift is a cursed awareness of time—not just of individual mortality but of geological time that lends special poignance to even the most hostile of human encounters. Thus when he concludes *The Book of Nightmares* with the message to his son, "the wages of dying is love," the moment is more than individual, more than parental; it looks back at all the nightmares recorded in the book and transforms them.

Less satisfying than Kinnell's general remarks in the interviews are his interpretations of specific lines in the poetry. The best reading in the book is his interpretation of the famous conclusion to "How Many Nights." The crow calling "from a branch nothing cried from ever in my life" elicits either-or questions: is the crow benign or evil? welcome or awful? Kinnell sweeps them all together in his answer that "whether or not the crow's cry is beautiful mattered less to me than that this hitherto mute region comes into consciousness." That's a wonderful reading, far superior to his comments about lines in *The Book of Nightmares*. Taken altogether, *The Book of Nightmares* affirms rather than horrifies, and Kinnell is insistent about the book's optimism. The conclusion, for example, is this vision of his dead body:

On the body,  
on the blued flesh, when it is  
laid out, see if you can find  
the one flea which is laughing.

"Fleas on the body of a happy person would be a bit happier than other fleas," Kinnell explains in an interview, significantly changing the possible single flea to a definite swarm of happy fleas. This image, part of Kinnell's attempt to depict the happy continuity of symbiotic animal life in which we participate, recalls the worms and maggots that are the actual price of our being, at the end, decaying meat. A horrifying image only when taken out of the context of the entire poem, it is not particularly happy either. The interviewers, intent on probing Kinnell's "dark side" and his fatalism, tend

to choose the book's most horrifying details to query, prompting him to respond with insistent optimism.

Kinnell's title, *Walking Down the Stairs*, is a confession of the interviews' fictional quality. He has tinkered with the actual conversations the way one does one's evening repartee after it's delivered—while walking down the stairs, that is. In fact, the difference between these and the original interviews is not as great as the title would suggest (*l'esprit d'escalier*, after all, refers to the difference between the committed banality and the intended brilliance), and is worth noting only because the unedited versions confirm what one suspects from *Walking*: the public man—good-natured, eager to help the interviewer, optimistic—has few of the acerbic, ironic, or horror-stricken moments that possess the hugely floundering, hugely loving, hugely possessed speakers of Kinnell's poetry. If there is a fiction here, it is less that the poet has revised his conversations than that he himself has been revised by the occasion, the circumstance of being interviewed. The occasion creates a "public" figure whose views of the poetry cannot be those of the "private" man who created it.

What the interviews obscure by eliciting this polite public figure is Kinnell's essentially sexual vision. Though he says much the same thing in the interviews—that what we fear from death is extinction, what we welcome is absorption—the sexual basis of this idea is presented more explicitly in his two essays, "Poetry, Personality, and Death" and "The Poetics of the Physical World." These essays are useful for a glimpse of Kinnell seen neither in the privacy of creation nor in the publicity of exchange, for they show how Laurentian is Kinnell's desire for union with the "other." In "Poetry, Personality, and Death," for example, Kinnell analogizes: "As with poetry, so with love: it is necessary to go through the personality to reach beyond it." It is significant, then, given the vision explicitly expressed by the essays and the poetry ("The Call Across the Valley of Not-Knowing" is a beautiful expression of this Laurentian view of things) that Kinnell closes *Walking Down the Stairs* with the one thing barely mentioned in the other interviews, with the one thing that amounts to an abiding truth for him: "The body makes love possible." That phrase, Kinnell concludes, "does seem to have the ring of truth."

For some readers, perhaps the most interesting remarks in these interviews will be those about the poets most important to Kinnell. Yeats, Whitman, and Rilke are the three: Yeats for the associative linking device that Kinnell uses so brilliantly in "The Porcupine," "The Hen-Flower," and other of his longer poems; Whitman for the inclusive, "through the personality to the universal humanity" vision; and Rilke, Rilke, Rilke, like some angel who haunts this earth-bound man. Much of Kinnell's poetry, especially that written after the birth of his children, is a meditation on Rilke's vision of the inseparability of life and death. *The Book of Nightmares*

stands as a tribute to Rilke's *Duino Elegies*, particularly the ninth, which sparked the composition of Kinnell's book.

Kinnell's transformation of Rilke's vision into the terms of his own earthier temperament is recorded in his every comment about Rilke. Both poets accept mortality as the very condition for rejoicing; "the subject of the poem," Kinnell says in "The Poetics of the Physical World," "is the thing which dies." This echoes, as so much of Kinnell's work does, Rilke's ninth Elegy: ". . . The things that live on departure/are aware of your praising; transitory themselves, they count/on us to save them, us, the most transient of all." Kinnell's participation in the world of things and animals is, however, more visceral than Rilke's, less spiritual, less intellectual. For Rilke the poem is the means to the transformation of the world; for Kinnell it is a means to participation. When Kinnell comments in *Walking Down the Stairs* that "language itself comes from the deepest place, from sex," we get a glimpse of the fundamental difference between the two poets.

"Sometimes when I read one of his poems," Kinnell says of Rilke, "I feel it's exactly the poem a man would write while staying away from his daughter's wedding—very spiritual so as to transfigure what in lesser spirits might be taken for callousness." These interviews amply show that Kinnell is, by necessity and temperament, not that sort. They also show that his reluctance and inability to make the daily sacrifices to his art have taken their toll, if only in meager production. Creativity brought to fruition in the face of adverse circumstances bears the stamp of those circumstances, and it is no accident that Kinnell's finest achievement is *The Book of Nightmares*. Kinnell remarks, "It's easier for writers if they don't have children to raise. . . mouths to feed, tuitions to pay, bank loans to repay." Easier, yes, but not necessarily better—at least for the poetry that manages to survive the circumstances. Kinnell is in his early fifties: with luck and the alchemy of energy, he might continue to live his busy, hard-pressed ordinary life and find the time to write what will certainly be the great poems of his maturity.