

## AN INTERVIEW WITH THOMAS KINSELLA



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The following interview took place at Thomas Kinsella's home in Co. Wicklow on 12 November 1996, shortly after the publication of his *Collected Poems 1956-1994* (Oxford). The poet did not wish to be recorded and this account is the result of extensive notes taken at the time, which were then expanded upon in the immediate aftermath of the interview.

IF: *I originally contacted you with some queries about the Peppercanister series. What did you hope to achieve in the pamphlets? Was there a Grand Plan and, if so, have its goals been attained?*

TK: I sketched a programme, made a scheme for everything I wanted to achieve in the Peppercanister series. Essentially, I was trying to count up to 5, which would represent totality. The opening section of *Notes from the Land of the Dead* finished in an open-ended circle, and that could be seen as a zero from which the other five numbers would then have come. The pamphlet, *One*, would then have been the first step taken, with 2, 3, 4 and 5 following. To define these numbers: "one" is the single ego alone; "two" would be awareness of another. With the third, I found myself unable to go any further because I felt I would be forcing things. The only potential I could see in a "three" was the opening out into some kind of third entity of the relationship between the two, a kind of double-ego, if you like, that would take the place of the two separate egos. "Four" I'd envisaged as this double-ego relating to everything in the external world, the outside world. "Five" then would be the ultimate solution, where totality would be understood. Five would be the Quincunx or Mandala both of Jungian theory and of Taoism, the four-pointed figure with the observer in the centre, making the five and making totality. The human race starts to function on the basis of "fours", all sorts of fours and trinities, which continue to crop up in my poetry. This was going to be the ultimate end, the Quincunx and the observer together... I suppose the final reason for abandoning this scheme of the five steps can be explained in very simple terms: ordinary experience began to take over.

IF: *You have undertaken numerous translations from Old Irish epics, most notably The Tain. How did this work come about and how has it influenced your thinking, especially with regard to issues such as "tradition"?*

TK: It had really just been a hobby for me and I had been encouraged by Liam Miller of Dolmen Press to actually produce books out of it. This translation work led in turn to an awareness of the dual tradition that I was working in. It is difficult to handle literature, history, anything basically, as it presented itself in Irish, and working in English—working in the English language—you get the English tradition and everything that that entails... the whole weight of culture, cultural imperialism behind that. In *The Tain*, in a way, I was trying to break out of that. I met this postgraduate student in Boston who was actually doing a thesis on the place-names in *The Tain*, which I investigated further. Up to this point I had not considered that geography of disinheritance, but it subsequently became a part of my *Tain*. From that time investigating the *Tain* placenames, my purpose for the book was to try and locate the whole story in its geographical place, to remove it from that anglicised culture that I live in. I live in Killalane; in the past this was someone's "kill", someone's sanctuary, but we don't know whose. There's a palpable sense of loss. . . even of living physically with this sense of loss, around where I live now.

IF: *In your introduction to the Oxford Anthology of Irish Verse, you speak of "a past heavy with loss", and in "The Irish Writer", of your "gapped inheritance". Is your translation work a real attempt to bridge those gaps, to regain contact with some kind of lost inheritance?*

TK: It isn't. The gaps can't be closed. The most you can do is attempt to understand it, to put it in its place as a gap, as fracture, as rupture. The failure of these ideas is as important as any success. Significant experience has to allow for failure.

IF: *One of the most visible features of your poetry is its insistence on the co-existence of successive layers of history interacting together. In Poems from Centre City, there is a poem about the Wood Quay debacle of 1979, when the State permitted the destruction of one of Ireland's most important archaeological sites. What role did you play in the protests?*

TK: I was actually at Wood Quay with other demonstrators getting in the way of bulldozers. Mary Robinson was there too—I met her in a tent on the site. I remember a priest almost offering himself up for crucifixion, throwing himself in front of one of those smaller bulldozers. I feel bitter still about what happened back then.

IF: *How did it finish? How did you know that it was all over?*

TK: We were just standing and this small bulldozer passed by our settlement, where we were camped out protesting, and its pick-up container was full of medieval remains, shoes, things like that. At that moment, we knew it was all

over, that everything had been destroyed. The events at Wood Quay were in a way the destroying of a birth-place.

IF: *Are you fighting this in your writing still?*

TK: No. I wouldn't say that I've accepted it, but things have to be endured.

IF: *The Wood Quay poem appeared in 1990. Why did it take 11 years for this experience, which you obviously feel so passionately about, to appear in print?*

TK: It wasn't the first time. During the protests at Wood Quay, a newsletter had been produced by the protesters and it had appeared in that.

IF: *You have said that one of the primary reasons for the founding of the Peppercanister Press was that it gave you an outlet which enabled you to respond almost immediately to any event. Butcher's Dozen was an example of this, while the two pamphlets dedicated to Sean O'Riada [Vertical Man and A Selected Life] are also responses to contemporary events. Of the four pamphlets which comprise Fifteen Dead, the odd one out is The Good Fight, which commemorates the tenth anniversary of the death of John F. Kennedy. Had you written about Kennedy prior to this?*

TK: No. I don't know why... Basically, I suppose, because it had never occurred to me to write about him. After the digestion process of the first ten years, the enormity of it had sunk in... The Robert Frost character at the end, of course, is a parody... *The Good Fight*, I suppose, is an example of the numerological construct not working, accident is free to have its effect... Events like that [the Kennedy assassination] lie in wait, the unconscious is full of material that might become useful.

IF: *Jung's writings similarly stress the potential of the unconscious in terms of "digested experience". Has Jung's work been helpful?*

TK: The temptation is to make maximum use of ideas from Jung, to replace maybe the numerological structure that didn't work with Jung's structure or Eriugena's structure and drape ideas and drape poems about them. For me, the idea of making use of Jung's ideas is as fascinating as the original ideas themselves... encountering or dipping into Jung. The unconscious as such can't be fitted into a scheme. If you're trying to fit reality into a numerological construct, it can't be done.

IF: *You said earlier that your translation work was just a serious hobby and that you didn't see it working in tandem with the poetry. Are they really mutually exclusive? I see similarities, for instance, between the grandmother figure in the poem "A*

*Hand of Solo" and Morrigan of The Tain and I feel that there is some interplay between your two enterprises.*

TK: The grandmother figure in "A Hand of Solo" possesses maximum experience ...

IF: *Does that mean she has attained the totality of the fifth step? Is she, in a Jungian sense, "individuated" or complete?*

TK: She and the other grandmother types are actual figures remembered from my childhood... these women in charge of shops, in back rooms, at card-games and myself, knee-high, going among them. There is a "folk-feel" ... strange smells, odours... it's not fantasy, but primarily deriving out of children coming to terms with maximum experience. They [the grandmother types] will stand for some kind of totality in the infant who encounters them.

IF: *What about a poem like "Ely Place", then? The female figure first appears metonymically as a flash of skirt against a railing and, later, is assaulted by the speaker with a knife and has her throat slit. This alludes to the surgical moments of A Technical Supplement and to the motif of the pomegranate. What else is going on in this poem?*

TK: I could make sense of it by falling back on Jung, if I wanted to [laughs] but I'm not going to. Things congeal themselves but reveal themselves in other ways. It's explicitly a sexual poem. . . I have allowed myself certain kinds of poems like that, that come out at any time, every so often. . . The dream world is every bit as real as the other world that's going on and every so often, it erupts like this and I make no attempt to control or suppress it. When you're dealing with enormous entities, say, standing on the edge of an ocean and things like that, there's no telling what might seem relevant and the whole totality will intrude some day and apparently irrelevant savageries can be touched off at a subconscious or a conscious level by apparently disconnected things.

IF: *The poem, "Nuchal", also features an interesting female figure. The Creation episode from the Book of Genesis is re-envisaged, with a divine female figure, and not the traditional "God" dividing the rivers. In your work, the Christ figure always somehow seems to—be inadequate, a failure.*

TK: The Christ figure is one of a line of sacrificial victims, but by no means accounting for the whole scene. The original godhead is totally different. The next Peppercanister pamphlet [to be published in April 1997], the first poem in that has the godhead that I have been formulating over the last ten or fifteen years, the godhead where the Christ figure is bent over his developing image...

IF: *In your poetry, the sacrificial victims have been overwhelmingly male, previous examples being Dick King and Mr Cummins . . .*

TK: I'm trying to think of an example of a female sacrificial victim [laughs]. I was contrasting these male victims, if you like, with the females of *The Tain*, Baddbh, Morrigan and so on. The masculine would have the impulse to make sense of something, whereas Morrigan and those female types do not have the compulsion. They are themselves. They are what it is... The deliberate sacrifice is always female. I have an earlier poem where there is an eating of an heart. That's female. The victim in that is female. Traditional sacrifices, marriageable virgins and so forth, it's a releasing of female potential, an incorporation of female potential perhaps... Thinking of "Ely Place" again—in a poem like that, the lid was lifted and things boiled out...

IF: *Is this what happened in Notes from the Land of the Dead, with the return of the cauldron and images like that? Is it a metaphor for how the unconscious works?*

TK: Before you allow yourself things like that, poems like that, you have to handle the daylight matter. You have to get ready, to prepare yourself to handle the marginal matter as opposed to the manageable matter.

IF: *So do you see yourself as earning the right to write about the marginal, once you have comprehensively documented the manageable?*

TK: After the manageable has been documented, you take the lid off and let the random happen.

IF: *When was the first time you saw yourself as having dealt with the manageable sufficiently to allow the marginal to intrude? In Downstream, maybe?*

TK: The first time would probably be the collection, *Wormwood*, where all the negative is taken account of, allowed for, not rejected. *A Technical Supplement*, *Songs of the Psyche*, I would see as similar... where that matter is allowed. This allowing the marginal, the unexpected, the sudden eruption, its own completely free behaviour was perhaps influenced by my work in translation where, in some ways, dealing with the very early poetry, the bardic poetry, poetry as ceremonial, you're facing two ways: back into the past and into the future, where you're working as editor. You have to strike that balance between controlling and allowing. You have to strike that balance between recording, between imaginative understanding and, in the end, communication, both of your own and of the poem. You must have that balance. . .

IF: *Could one see the last three lines of that poem, "The Little Children" ("At the*

*first trace / of backward pressure / the child grows unusable”), as a metaphor for this balance that you’re trying to strike, between the marginal and the manageable, between the random and the controlled?*

TK: Yes, I think that’s quite a good analogy. The dream world has to be represented in poetry. In drama, you can edit this dream world out among many characters, as in Beckett. So perhaps it’s not as evident in poetry. In the poetic voice, once religion disappears, you’re in trouble, you’re on your own and you’re really forced back on your own depths then.

IF: *You mention Beckett. In your Oxford Anthology, you included his poem, “my way is in the sand flowing”, a poem about the “neitherworld”. It straddles two worlds, but is of neither, is liminal to them both. A lot of your work seems, to me, to occupy a similar zone. “Nightwalker”, for example, where the speaker straddles daytime/nighttime, consciousness/unconsciousness. There are instances of speakers walking out on cliff tops, on beaches. Do you work between the trammels of “Nine waves out . . . nine steps inland” [“At the Head Table”]?*

TK: The ultimate logic of Beckett would be to remain silent, but I see quite the opposite. Beckett’s work relates completely to the impulse to record, to initiate the act of communication. This is terribly strong in Beckett. He has that basement up very close and still applies the logic of the waking world to it. He has that basement of the dreamworld up very close in his work... Beckett’s world operates on the word “deadlight”, the window in the attic that doesn’t open, that is also a window on a ship. The Beckett character is locked up looking for someone to communicate with.

IF: *What do you get from reading Beckett? What are you looking for?*

TK: Reading Beckett calls into question the whole point of poetry. I myself get a relationship at the outer margin of the art form, so far as it shows itself at the moment. The outermost phenomena of communication are engaged in Beckett... Out of this idea of being marginalised, off the main action, this liminal position allows for observation. You get this position in Shakespeare as well, where this dreamworld is on the margins allowing for observation, for particular interpretation... This is getting very bleak!

IF: *If we could move onto another area. I am interested in the period you spent in America, during the 1970s. What strikes you now as significant from your time there?*

TK: I think it was 1965 when I finally left the Civil Service. The biggest change was obviously the change in lifestyle, to writing full-time. I had originally a three-year contract at Southern Illinois University at Carbondale. I had the

luxury that my contract specified that I only had to give one lecture a year, which played a big part in my accepting the contract. I also had the nominal task of supervising a creative writing class, sitting down with people who were interested in poetry, who wrote their own poetry, and studying a series of texts. Ezra Pound emerged as quite an interest from this group of people and William Carlos Williams was another one ...

IF: *I read somewhere that you had always dismissed Williams until you actually went to America and heard his poetry spoken in an American voice. Is that right?*

TK: When I went to America, the voice [of Williams] suddenly took on flesh and made sense, which it wouldn't have if I had stayed here ...

IF: *Did the move to America introduce you to, or make you aware of other writers new to you, or to new experiences generally? Particularly in relation to how your own writing was affected?*

TK: Those creative writing seminars were a new experience. It was the first time in my life that I had minutely examined for perhaps an hour, perhaps two hours, a single poem and basically deconstructed the whole thing. I found that the close reading of a poem really paid off. I found it helpful for my own work... to watch poems dismantling and falling apart. It influenced my own perception of poetry. Dylan Thomas had been quite a favourite of mine until I subjected him to this treatment, dismantling. I now see Thomas more in the role of an entertainer than a serious poet. The opposite also happened. Someone like Robert Lowell actually strengthened, the more you demanded. The more you demand from a Lowell poem, the more is available... Reading the late poems of Yeats, the outcome is electrifying and you have a fairly clear idea of what it is, but when you subject poetry to this kind of examination, you appreciate the stages, and close reading really heightens the experience. It's a very strange procedure. You can't settle for anything but the facts and the procedures... It's like physics, where you just have those facts and procedures and work with those. It should be the same in poetry... What was confirmed for me by these seminars and investigations of poetry was that most poems are no good and most poets are no good.

IF: *What is "good poetry"? What kind of test can you apply to poetry to ascertain some form of inherent value?*

TK: Poetry is a dual effort. The poet initiates an act of communication, while also recording data, and readers complete the circuit. I'm really at a loss to explain poetry's function. I mean, it doesn't help to handle the experience of life. You just record significant encounters. Sometimes I wonder

why not just play golf or something else instead... Ideally, the data recorded, the observing of that data... eventually the observing gets absorbed into the matter and ideally you have that dual entity, the observing and the data initiating a communication that is, in turn, completed by the reader.

IF: In *"The Irish Writer"*, you say with regard to contemporary Irish poets that *"the word colleague fades on the tongue ... I can learn nothing from them except that I am isolated."* Do you still feel this, that there is no common purpose shared by these poets writing in Ireland at the moment?

TK: Yes. I can see no awareness whatsoever, I can see nothing in common with any of the writers. I admire Derek Mahon and understand what he's trying to do, but beyond that... You can't deny that public response is very pleasing, but public response can be off-key too. In luckier times, luckier times for writers, for instance, the time of Bardic poetry and, after that, Elizabethan poetry, I feel there was a shared purpose, particularly for the Elizabethans, a shared purpose between the writers and the entertainers, but that's been lost now.

IF: I heard Michael Hartnett recently, in response to the question of what books he currently read, reply *"mostly cookery books"*. This seems to be a fairly bleak summation of the state of Irish poetry at the moment. What are you reading?

TK: Well, let's see [goes to desk]... Gerald Dawe's *Against Piety* (I want to keep in touch), another of Dawe's books, *The Writer and Politics*, a book on scientific evolution by Richard Dawkins, one of those "where do we come from" books, a book of essays on Joyce and that American magazine *George*, which is edited by John Kennedy Jr. Have you read it? The advertisements are wonderful... And a copy of [Kinsella's own] *Collected Poems*, which has just been published.

IF: *Do the poems appear in their original form or have there been some changes?*

TK: Yes, there were a number of changes. It is the last chance I will have to leave the poems the way I want, and I have taken that opportunity.