

GOING UNDERGROUND



David Wheatley

THOMAS KINSELLA, *Collected Poems 1956-1994*. Oxford, n.p.g.

THOMAS KINSELLA, *The Pen Shop*. Peppercanister, £5.95

BRIAN JOHN, *Reading the Ground: The Poetry of Thomas Kinsella*.

Catholic University of America Press, £35.95

For many years, calling Thomas Kinsella Ireland's finest unread poet had a certain irony. Whatever his potential audience, his actual readership remained small for the simplest of reasons: he wasn't in print. In 1972 Kinsella made the decision to publish in limited-edition pamphlets with his Peppercanister press; his earlier work, issued by Dolmen Press, became scarcer and scarcer and finally invisible. *Blood and Family* (1988) and *From Centre City* (1994) were two Oxford collections of Peppercanister pamphlets, but for the vast majority of readers *Collected Poems 1956-1994* will represent a first and very belated chance to read Kinsella in his entirety.

Kinsella's forbidding presence in Irish poetry, his relishing of his own obscurity, place him at an opposite extreme from the more approachable work of Seamus Heaney and all that he stands for—and not just Heaney, to judge from angry comments by Paul Muldoon in a recent *Thumbscrew* interview. If Heaney learned from Patrick Kavanagh, Kinsella's acknowledged Irish mentor was another figure who knew a lot about obscurity, Austin Clarke. Kinsella shares with Clarke a commitment to re-imagining the heritage of the Irish language tradition in English which has resulted in his translations of *The Táin* and large sections of his *New Oxford Book of Irish Verse*, as well as a prose book like his recent monograph, *The Dual Tradition*. To this he has added an international dimension, drawing heavily on the influences of William Carlos Williams and Ezra Pound. The cadences of his free verse owe something to the former, the epic scale of his Peppercanister sequence something to the latter. Again unlike Heaney, he also resembles Pound in his capacity for hate: "That there is more spleen / Than good sense in all of this, I admit" he writes in "One Fond Embrace", while the last poem in the book ends with Kinsella "turning away in refusal" from "our foul ascending city". The objects of this animus vary from philis-

tine Dublin city planners and developers to his contemporaries, whom he so sternly puts in their places in "Open Court". Perhaps Kinsella sees the sourness of his work as an occupational hazard of being Ireland's poetic conscience, but his straining after moral seriousness produces some badly offbeam effects:

Handclasp; I do not exist; I cannot take my eyes
From their pallor. A red glare plays on their faces,
Livid with little splashes of blazing fat.
The oven door closes.

This is a description from "Nightwalker" (1968) of two young Germans wondering whether or not to invest in Sean Lemass's Ireland, for which Kinsella worked as a civil servant in the Department of Finance. For the crime of their foreignness Kinsella has invoked an image of the Holocaust which is, to say the least, inappropriate and offensive.

A mood of spitting misanthropy is seldom far away in Kinsella, but if it sometimes drags him into bathos it also contributes to the metaphysical intensity and indignation that, most of the time at least, lift his poetry above self-indulgence. Heavily under Auden's spell, the earliest work relied on strict forms to keep the chaos of experience at bay. Even so, Kinsella's formalism does not always come off, with many poems too creakingly architectural, too laden with writ-large poeticality. "In the Ringwood", "Another September", "Love" and "Song", all written before 1960, are more successful, and fine poems by any standard:

Now it is Easter and the speckled bean
Breaks open underground, the liquid snail
Winces and waits, trapped on the lawn's light green;
The burdened clothes-line heaves and barks in the gale,
And lost in flowers near the garage wall
Child and mother fumble, tidy, restrain.

And now great ebb tides lift to light of day
The sea-bed's briny chambers of decay. ("Love")

The baring of the submerged "chambers of decay" is a good metaphor for the change that Kinsella's work begins to undergo in the Sixties. *Downstream* (1962) introduces a new mood of psychological depth-probing; its title-poem is a visionary *terza rima* allegory of remarkable effect. Kinsella's self-revisions have been a feature of his work since the

beginning, with “Downstream” passing through another incarnation here; if and when Kinsella finally leaves it alone it deserves to become a permanent poem. The drowning of a friend in 1959 may have something to do with his interest in “the slow, downstreaming dead”, but death by water becomes a recurring emblem for Kinsella of dissolution and waste around this time, as when the vacant harbour of “Ballydavid Pier” fills with a “misbirth [that] touches the surface / And glistens like quicksilver.” Unlike the misbirth rising to the surface however, Kinsella’s poetry was preparing to go underground.

As the Sixties progressed Kinsella gradually exchanged the sweetness of the lyric voice for the more pared-down experimentalism that has dominated his *Peppercanister* series. Critics have lamented this development as a surrender to obscurity, but to celebrate the pre-1972 Kinsella to the exclusion of everything he has written since is meaningless. The fact is that the *Peppercanister* series represents the most audacious project to have been undertaken by any living Irish poet. “I sketched a programme, made a scheme for everything I wanted to achieve”, Kinsella told *Metre* in a recent interview. *Butcher’s Dozen* appeared in 1972, the first in a pamphlet series that has since reached number nineteen. It is untrue to claim that Kinsella has abandoned form: if anything, formally he has been a pioneer. His short-line free verse stanzas are perfectly adapted to the narrative style of these poems, and are endlessly supple and adventurous. The best of these sequences are *One*, *The Messenger*, *Songs of the Psyche*, *St Catherine’s Clock* and *Madonna and Other Poems*. In them Kinsella maps a psychic geography of inner-city Dublin, meditates on Irish and family history, and constantly circles back to the great Kinsella themes of emptiness, falling, cultural loss, decay and death. Later Kinsella is a difficult poet to excerpt, but here is the opening of *St Catherine’s Clock*, a Joycean revisiting of a Dublin childhood:

The whole terrace
slammed shut.
I inhaled the granite lamplight,
divining the energies of the prowler.

A window opposite, close up,
In a corner, a half stooped image
focused on the intimacy
of the flesh of the left arm.

The fingers of the right hand are set
in a scribal act on the skin:

a gloss, simple and swift as thought,
is planted there.

The point uplifted,
wet with understanding,
he leans his head a moment
against the glass.

I see.

The Pen Shop, Kinsella's first addition to the Peppercanister series since the publication of *Collected Poems*, is in the strictest sense of the word a pedestrian piece of writing, charting a walk from the General Post Office to a pen shop on Nassau Street with a stop in Bewley's café along the way. Sir John Gray is "unremembered on his pedestal", the exhaust-peweing number 21 bus is cursed, and the "thick back of an enemy" is caught sight of disappearing into Trinity College. It's a charming piece of topographical writing, if hardly one likely to win him any new readers. Mention should also be made here of Brian John's *Reading the Ground*, by far the most thorough study of Kinsella to date and a big improvement on Thomas H. Jackson's 1995 study, *The Whole Matter*.

Kinsella is a difficult writer, nor would he wish it any other way. He aspires to representative status, to embody the tradition he so imperiously laid out in his Oxford anthology. If he is representative though, I suspect it is of an Ireland that no longer exists, the pre-EEC Ireland that remains his spiritual homeland. This is what gives his work its sense of passionate witness and unassailable integrity, but also what makes him seem so stranded a figure in many ways, not least in terms of his influence on younger writers. Has playing the lonely eminence of Irish poetry harmed his great talents? It is undeniable that he is often self-righteous, solemn and portentous. But as Geoffrey Hill has written: "It is not only the 'bad artists' who are cruelly judged. The good are too." Kinsella is a necessary writer, responsible for some of the very small body of enduring poetry to have come from Ireland in our times. "My papers seem luminous. And over them I will take / ever more painstaking care" Kinsella wrote in "Wyncote, Pennsylvania: a gloss". The best of his *Collected Poems* shows his efforts have not been in vain.