

Lo and Behold

Thomas Kinsella, *The Familiar and Godhead*. Peppercanister 20, 21, Dedalus, £6.95/£11.95.

Fifty years after the publication of his first verse, Thomas Kinsella remains a formidable presence in Irish poetry. After almost singlehandedly restoring the Gaelic tradition in a series of brilliant translations (*The Táin, An Duanaire* and *The New Oxford Book of Irish Verse*), he continues to enlarge his own epic in the making—the Peppercanister poem—our first and only example of that genre in the English language. Above all, Kinsella represents the need to digest the worst that history can offer, from the disaster at Kinsale to the ovens of Auschwitz; and the ability to elicit order from a vast collection of unruly data. It is Kinsella who completes the Big Four (after Yeats, Joyce and Beckett) that twentieth-century Dublin has bequeathed to *Welthliteratur*. And yet his contribution to date has been sorely neglected by critics and the nature of the Peppercanister project only just beginning to dawn upon a wider audience. One hopes for something else, therefore, than the cursory and misinformed treatment given to these latest two additions to the poem in the pages of *The Irish Times*.

As the Nineties came to an end it was easier to view this project in its near entirety, given Kinsella's Oxford collection of his poetry to date (1996) and the critical remarks in *The Dual Tradition*. It seems clear that Kinsella's art is one of radical modernity, sharing with the other Big Four the ever deepening commitment to exploratory new states. It comes closest to the late prose of Joyce and Beckett as it plunges recklessly into areas of consciousness left untouched by our more timid bardic performers. The two new pamphlets in the series—*The Familiar* and *Godhead*—are explorations in this sense and develop Kinsella's treatment of the feminine and the divine, after the latest Dublin reconnaissance of *The Pen Shop* (Peppercanister 19). In these fragmentary pieces the artist leaves behind his city and delves into the mythic depths beneath everyday surfaces. "The Familiar" focuses

on the many manifestations of the feminine, the life principle as *Finnegans Wake* would have it. The title poem, consisting of seven sections, moves from the poet's early love relationship, in Baggot Street of the Fifties, to its full expression in a ritual breakfast decades later in Killalane. Hovering between the visionary and the mundane, the parts exhibit Kinsella's customary wit ("I lifted in her case. / It was light, but I could tell / she was going to stay") as well as ever more profound simplicity ("Our legs locked in friendship"). The highpoint here, and a classic Kinsellesque passage, is section VI where the poet, searching for a lost well-head (or inspiration), encounters the archetypal dreamwoman of Irish poetry:

A nymph advancing,

spurning the blades of the grass with little tough feet;
picking the pale-stemmed blossoms in her path;
laying them in the crook of her arm and against her cheek...

Much has been made of Kinsella's increasing difficulty, of the abandonment of *jouissance* and the general lack of humour. Kinsella lacks humour no more than Beckett does; his earlier aesthetic has never vanished but rather grown selective at the service of a maturing vision; and his difficulty must be measured in direct proportion to the poetry's ever richer imaginative yield.

The feminine presences in "The Familiar" exist in both senses of that word—both as familiar companions and occult helpers. The booklet closes with three glosses—on wife, daughter and goddess—the last of which looks forward to *Godhead* and the subject of divine inspiration. Here the Classical goddess Iris is envisaged as "a maiden messenger / whispering detail". This theme of inspiration, and its feminine channelling, had already been broached in part III of "The Familiar" ("Muse on my mattress..."). The spiritual value of acceptance, underpinning artistic inspiration (exemplified by Anna Livia) has also been voiced in the close to "St. John's", where the woman is "head low / in the confusion of assent".

The muse, wife, daughter triad of "The Familiar" is mirrored in "Godhead" where father, son and spirit embody different aspects of the artistic process. This installment of the Peppercanister epic is prefaced by another classic late Kinsella text, "High Tide: Amagansett". Here, against the incoming outgoing ocean, Kinsella's poetic of waste and regeneration is perfectly reflected:

The waves, arguing among themselves
along the slopes of shore, are alive,
hurrying in disorder between two stillnesses

Here is the classic Kinsella scenario—systems of order and disorder snatched from the natural world in an ever increasing awareness of waste and inevitability: “the thin shape of sea water / halted on the sand at my bare feet / discovering the first thought of withdrawal”. Against this background art is imagined as the impulse to countermand the dictates of time. In “Father”, the speaker confronts the godhead “enthroned, with head hanging and stone beard”. When the god-artist speaks, it is “with a palpable tongue / trafficking in carnal things”. The very waste, the foul rag and bone matter of Yeats, Joyce and Beckett, is to become the chief ingredient of this epic prayer:

Proclaim Our incompleteness, only begotten.
While I prepare
the next part of the Prayer.

In the next part of the poem, “Son”, the artist figure is crucified into detachment:

The Head hanging on one side,
signifying abandonment.

The hands hammered open,
signifying acceptance.

The smile empty,
signifying passive understanding.

Just as the prototypes in *Finnegans Wake* signify themselves on several planes at once, so too do those in the Peppercanister poem—whether it is as the crucified Christ, Cuchulain strapped to a rock, Connolly to his armchair, John F. Kennedy or the poet’s father. The final poem here, “Spirit”, exhausts the breath of inspiration (“A wind that passes and does not return”) just as it was drawn in at the volume’s beginning (“A breath / at my open window”). Lo and behold, an epic unfolds.