Daddy, Daddy/Mammy, Mammy: Sylvia Plath and Thomas Kinsella

Andrew Browne, National University of Ireland, Galway

In his memoir The Kick: a Life among Writers, Richard Murphy recalls Thomas and Eleanor Kinsella joining Sylvia Plath, Ted Hughes and himself in Ireland (Murphy, 226-27). Kinsella softens any profound inferences from this meeting in a 1989 interview with Dennis O’Driscoll. In response to O’Driscoll’s comment on the ‘torrid atmosphere’ of the meeting Kinsella says:

It doesn’t strike me in retrospect as having been very torrid. It was just a couple of people having trouble. It didn’t have the heavy implications that her subsequent suicide gave it. We went out fishing and, as far as I am concerned, those fish coming up on the hooks were the exciting thing. But we did enjoy her company, and we did drive her back to Dublin; and that’s as much as I remember of it. (O’Driscoll, 59)

This remark does not support any spectacular influence between Kinsella and Plath, and this critic is in no position to infer a direct impact upon Kinsella’s work from Plath’s, yet this essay will show connections between Plath’s and Kinsella’s poetry in their psychological imagery. I will also highlight differences while making certain assumptions about the way images of the masculine and feminine are interrogated, and how they impact their personal lives.

There is a significant influence from Lowell’s work and there are resonances between the confessional style and parts of Kinsella’s oeuvre. Brian John states that confessional poetry or other controversial American poetic inventions cannot safely contain the extent of Kinsella’s work (John, 77). John is correct in recognizing the limitations of these categories but certain classifications are essential for conceptualizing a poet’s work. If M. L. Rosenthal’s original definition of confessional poetry as an autobiographical form that explores intimate inner explorations is applied to Kinsella’s work, then certain similar aspects can be seen. Kinsella’s poems explore the inner world of the poet and his relationships with both one’s familial past as well as the present.
Kinsella, especially after *New Poems 1973*, continually uses the subject of his own psyche and personal life as thematic material. Kinsella employs a confessional approach but combines it with other mythological, historical, and archetypal explorations so that a simple confessional label will not suffice. In a later essay on Plath and confessional poetry, Rosenthal qualifies his definition of confessional poetry to include the fusion of the private and the culturally specific which greatly expands the scope of this type of poetry (Rosenthal, 1970, 69). It is here, in the creative collision of the public and the private, that Kinsella and Plath master their respective styles.

Rosenthal is also one of the first commentators to recognize the quality and confessional nature of Kinsella’s work. In 1967, Rosenthal comments that Kinsella’s poem ‘Wormwood’, a sequence of poems released separately and then collected in *Nighthawk and Other Poems* (1968), “moves toward an uncompromising acuteness of insight into private suffering that has painful confessional dimensions” (Rosenthal, 1967, 284). It is significant that Rosenthal recognizes the confessional aspect as just one dimension of Kinsella’s varied poetics.

Robert Lowell is one of Kinsella’s more contemporary American influences and several important parallels are found between them. Kinsella recognizes the importance of Lowell when he comments that there is “in American poetry a seriousness that is fruitful, and that is embodied…in…Robert Lowell’s poetic progress” (“Poetry since Yeats”, 106). Both Kinsella and Lowell use sequential themes, stylistic and formal explorations, as well as personal and cultural subject matter to examine their topics. Lowell’s poetry, along with the poetry of Ezra Pound and William Carlos Williams, allows Kinsella to move from his earlier formal style into a free verse style. These influences also spur Kinsella into a more personal interrogation of Ireland in *Nighthawk* of 1968, and then onto the primordial landscapes of “Notes from the Land of the Dead,” with a continuation and intensification of archetypal and psychological explorations throughout the Peppercanister poems.

While Kinsella credits Lowell’s poetry as an influence on his own poetic development, there are also significant resonances within Plath’s work as there are in the works of other poets from Lowell’s post-*Life Studies* era. Plath examines the archetypal/mythical male figure within her own psyche and poetry, but she is unable to
reconcile with these figures in her life and relationships. The failure to negotiate successfully with her animus leads Plath towards her tragic death. Kinsella performs an examination of the feminine and masculine images in his poetry by using them to explore the disjointed parts of his psyche. Plath’s examination eventually destroys her, while Kinsella manages a successful interrogation of his anima through his poetic progress. The example of Plath’s usage of the masculine archetypal/mythical images in her lyrical explorations may be part of the inspiration that Kinsella uses in his own early Jungian self-exploration. Kinsella highlights how he performs his inward poetic searches in the aptly titled “Worker in Mirror, at his Bench” from New Poems 1973:

Take for example this work in hand.
Out of its waste matter
it should emerge solid and light.
One idea, grown with the thing itself,
should drive the searching inward
with a sort of life, due to the mirror effect.
Often, the more I simplify
the more a few simplicities
go burrowing in their own depths
until the guardian structure is aroused. (Kinsella, 124)

Kinsella looks into his own life by “searching inward” and with “the mirror effect” of a quasi-confessional approach discovers the archetypal “guardian structure.”

In “The Colossus,” Plath examines the monumental impact of her father by comparing him to the Statue at Rhodes. Her father becomes the statue but, more significantly, he is shattered into the pieces that represent the shattered psyche of the young Plath trying to piece together the image of her father after his death. Kinsella also examines the impact of his father, mother, grandmother and grand-aunts in his seminal collection New Poems 1973. These representations are not as fully developed into the mythic figures seen in his later works, although the grandmother figures in “Ancestor” and “Tear” resonate with mythological imagery for the young boy narrator as he learns to fear their age and decrepitude.

The figure in Plath’s poem is a disheveled giant creature which she desires to
mend and clean. Plath’s statue “[a]rches above us” (Plath, 1981, 129) signifying its dominance as does Kinsella’s legendary creature in “The Oldest Place” from his 1974 collection One. Kinsella’s representation begins as an image of a living stone that haunts the narrator portrayed as a “black stone packed more / with dark radiance” (Kinsella, 167). The giant stone, like the giant statue, is crucially significant to Kinsella’s narrator as it morphs into the mythical creature that carries the imagery Kinsella uses to describe the feminine relatives from his own past.

In his 1990 collection Personal Places, Kinsella can be seen successfully recognizing the importance of his mother’s image in “Dura Mater.” He creates a dialogue between his psyche and the idea of his mother’s death and reconciles with it in a way that Plath is unable to. Interestingly, the term “Dura Mater” can mean “hard mother” in Latin, which connects to archetypal imagery, or the outer membrane of the brain which relates to the psychological and physiological aspects of Kinsella’s work (Badin, 163; Flanagan, 210). Once again, the stone imagery is significant:

The withheld kiss returned
onto her stone forehead. Dura Mater.

To take it, a seal on her stone will,
in under the screwed lid. (Kinsella, 291)

In this poem, Kinsella successfully accepts the image of his mother’s death within his psyche; whereas, Plath in “The Colossus” has tried for thirty years “[t]o dredge the silt from your throat” and is “none the wiser” (Plath, 1981, 129). Plath’s stone imagery reaches a chilling height in “Daddy” that nods back to “The Colossus”. Plath recognizes the significance of the father’s image as well as its impregnable veneer:

Daddy, I have had to kill you.
You died before I had time –
Marble-heavy, a bag full of God,
Ghastly statue with one grey toe[.] (Plath, 2001, 48)

While Plath cannot connect to the image of her father and reconcile it within her self, Kinsella succeeds in discovering the voice of his mother and successfully connects to its
importance, thus healing the rift created within his psyche from the loss associated with her death.

Kinsella performs a similar poetic healing in reference to his father’s death. In “The Messenger” from 1978, Kinsella examines the life of his father and the impact of that life and death on his own psyche through an analogous representation of the father as a Hermes-type figure who acts literally as a messenger but who also carries forward messages genetically into the poet’s life where he plants “[t]he eggseed Goodness / that is also called / Decency” (Kinsella, 214). Kinsella is able to negotiate successfully with the images of his father in his psyche and recognizes the positive influence of these representations. Plath’s father figure has “[m]ule-bray, pig-grunt and bawdy cackles” (Plath, 1981, 129), while Kinsella’s image also morphs into an animal-like creature with “the pewtery heave of hindquarters” and “wings down at heel” (Kinsella, 213).

These father figures are examined through a mythical imagery that acts to place the significance of the memory of the father into the lives of Kinsella and Plath. The father’s image becomes a part of the memory in which both poets live their present lives either empowered or tortured by. For Kinsella, it is god Hermes carrying his affirmative message onwards. But for Plath, it is the broken Statue at Rhodes which she struggles to piece together but can only find the tongue and ears signifying that her own poetry is the outlet and final destination of the father’s image.

“The Messenger” ends with the wonderfully evocative portrait of the father’s funeral:

He rolled on rubber tyres
out of the chapel door. The oak box
paused gleaming in the May morning air

and turned, sensing its direction.
Our scattered tribe began gathering itself
and trudged off onto a gravel path after it.

By their own lightness
four girls and three boys separated themselves
out in a ragged band from our dull custom

and moved up close after it, in front,
all shapes and sizes,
grandchildren, colourful and silent. (218-19)

The image of the family following the coffin creates a positive, life-affirming picture with its representation of the mingling of several generations. In “Berck-Plage,” Plath also examines the father amongst other male representations: “This is the tongue of the dead man: remember, remember. / How far he is now, his actions” (Plath, 2001, 25). This poem, like Kinsella’s, finishes with a funeral yet contains a much less life-affirming imagery:

Following the coffin on its flowery cart like a beautiful woman,
A crest of breasts, eyelids and lips

Storming the hilltop.
Then, from the barred yard, the children

Smell the melt of shoe-blackening,
Their faces turning, wordless and slow,

Their eyes opening
on a wonderful thing –

Six round black hats in the grass and a lozenge of wood,
And a naked mouth, red and awkward.

For a minute the sky pours into the hole like plasma.
There is no hope, it is given up. (Plath, 2001, 27)

Although Plath’s ending does seem to be heading towards some sort of a positive or “wonderful thing” in the children’s eyes, its tone then changes and ends with the finality

For Plath, the past represented by her relationship with her parents, especially her father, provides the touchstone for her poetic explorations. The present, as represented by her relationship with Ted Hughes, provides another focus. The combination of the two masculine representations of father and husband throughout her poetry with the archetypal and mythic male figures, structure the explorations of her psyche, providing her poetry with its power. But it is also these same areas that lead towards Plath’s eventual real-life, self-destruction.

In Kinsella’s poetry, the past and present are examined in a similar fashion yet his journey is towards an understanding of these images in his psyche and eventually towards a unification of the masculine and feminine within his poetry as well as his mind that Plath’s work never seems to resolve. Ian Flanagan recognizes that Kinsella’s interrogation of the feminine does not embody the negative representation that many critics attribute to it, but instead represents a more positive unification of the feminine and masculine into an androgynous image closer to the fully individuated self that is the goal of most Jungian psychology (Flanagan, 126-42). Kinsella’s work aspires to unify the masculine and feminine in the self.

The presence of Thomas’s wife, Eleanor Kinsella, in his life and poetry is a profound presence. As a muse and partner, “Fair Ellinor” has provided Kinsella with the stability to probe his art and self in a relentless and painful searching. An image of two trees intertwined about each other and growing into one recurs throughout Kinsella’s poetry, symbolizing the profound bond he and his wife share:

A black tree with a double trunk – two trees
grown into one – throws up its blurred branches.

Two trunks in their infinitesimal dance of growth
Have turned completely about one another [...] (Kinsella, 63)

The stability of his life with Eleanor allows Kinsella to anchor himself in the physical and emotional world of his relationship and descend deeper into his own psyche. The void that Kinsella’s poetic explorations find at the centre of human existence becomes
tolerable in the knowledge that he shares his time on this earth with a woman whom he truly loves. This is in conflict with our stereotypically troubled poet, represented by figures such as Plath and Dylan Thomas. Eric Ormsby remarks:

We prefer our poets to be wracked with anguish or, at least, chronically depressed and raving on Praxil. We want dark nights of the soul from our bards, not breezy afternoons. Happiness looks suspect; it appears obtuse, oblivious, smug. (O’Driscoll, 1990. 119)

Kinsella is well known for the darkness of his explorations; however, there is always the power of redemption and hope hovering on the horizon which could be attributable to the stability which his marriage to Eleanor has provided. Kinsella muses that “Love[…] will continue until we fail: in the sensing of the wider scope, in the growth towards it” (Kinsella, 62). A poet like Kinsella shows the power of a stable life that produces a deep and complex poetic exploration.

Plath’s poetic probing, however, was not emotionally supported by her relationship with Hughes and helped contribute to her own mental instability. In “Death and Co.” the husband becomes a bird of prey and the woman is the “red meat” (Plath, 2001, 30) that it devours. The female is an object, a token to be dressed and prettied by the male such as in “The Applicant,” where the marriage becomes a surreal bartering with negativity and the female is “a living doll” (7). The marriage images in Plath’s poetry bespeak an unequal relationship as the woman strives for attention and legitimation. The female is objectified and brutalized while the male dominates like a Nazi or a vampire, sucking the life out of the partner. Plath’s most well known poetry does not aspire to the positive and affirming marriage images such as these from Kinsella’s 1999 collection The Familiar:

Love bent the sinewy bow
against His knee,
saying: Husband, here is a friend
beseeming thee.

Comely Wisdom wearing
a scarf around Her throat. (329)

Kinsella’s relationship with Eleanor is an affirming presence and thus achieves representations that exemplify that significant influence in his life and poetry; whereas,
the male images in Plath’s poetry will not allow her to resolve the images of her father; Plath’s masculine images torment her instead of reaffirming or empowering her.

“Finistère,” also from Kinsella’s 1974 collection One, explores the land’s end of continental Europe from where Ireland’s first fictional inhabitants embarked. Interestingly, Plath also explores this place in her poem “Finisterre,” posthumously collected by Ted Hughes in Crossing the Water (1971). Plath’s poem explores violent sea imagery at this desolate place and resolves in an image of the sailor’s shrine to Our Lady of Shipwrecked whose “marble skirts blown back in two pink wings” contrast with the widowed woman praying at the monument that is “three times life size” (Plath, 1991, 15). Once again, another stone monument assumes a lifelike and godlike presence as Plath grants her “lips sweet with divinity” (15). Plath creates a legendary female at this land’s end as does Kinsella in his poem. Kinsella’s narrator is planning a crossing and prays to the “calm queen” that she may “pour peace” before their crossing, and ends with a superb incantation to this feminine entity from a masculine worshiper:

Who

is the word that spoken
the spear that springs
and pours out terror
the spark springs
and burns in the brain?

When men meet on the hill
dumb as stones in the dark
(the craft knocked behind me)
who is the jack of all light?
Who goes in full into
the moon’s interesting conditions?
Who fingers the sun’s sink hole:
(I went forward reaching out) [(Kinsella, 163-65)

Kinsella’s narrator sings adorations to this strange entity standing between himself and his journey, and he praises its feminine imagery contained in celestial representations.
Plath uses recurrent images of the masculine throughout her work, but the reader is left to speculate whether this could have developed into something more had she lived longer. Metaphors for the male such as the Nazi and stone-like images that contribute to her masculine imagery, like the connections found earlier between “Colossus” and “Daddy,” show a drive to associate images on a possible broader canvas, which is similar to Kinsella’s.

Plath’s work, like Kinsella’s, refuses easy classification. There does appear to be a lot more fruitful ground between Kinsella and Plath than that fishing trip they shared in Cleggan. The quality of the mythical and archetypal imagery developed throughout their work shows a development that is quite similar. If Plath had lived beyond her inner turmoil, one has to wonder what future relations could be deduced from her life’s work, as now can be found in the intriguing connections throughout Kinsella’s.
Works Cited


