

'a taste of self and laurel leaves': The movement from confessionalism to a mythic/archetypal method in Thomas Kinsella's 'Nightwalker'

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Thomas Kinsella

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One of Ireland's greatest contemporary poets

Greater than Heaney?

Time will tell, but let me tell you...

Nightwalker (1968)

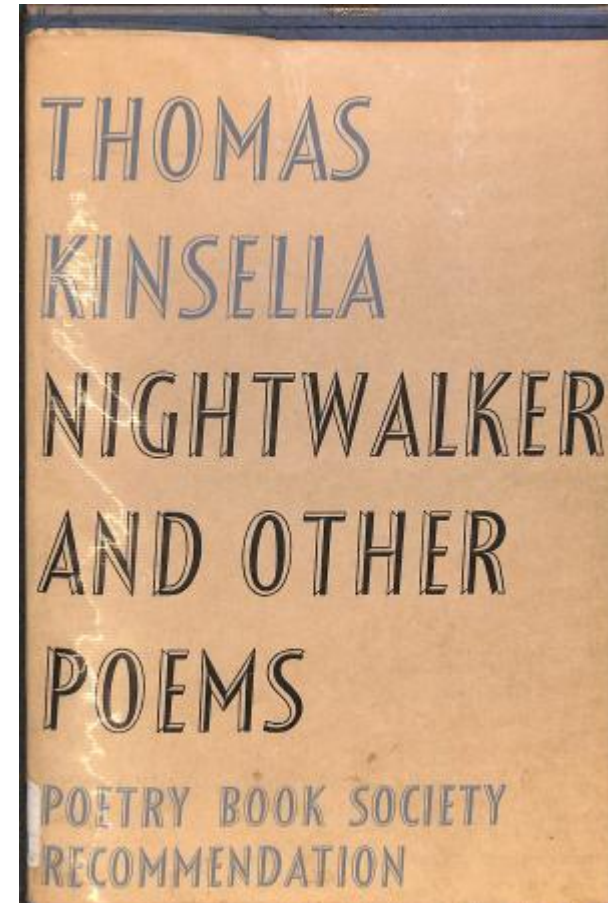
A walk through Irish history

A walk through the Irish psyche

This is a seminal point in Kinsella's development and shows the particular moment he makes a significant shift in his poetic method

In a way it shows his shifting style from a confessional method to a mythic/psychological style

It can be read as tracking this shift



Kinsella's search

Kinsella selects and organises experience as a part of the search for a way to represent that experience; he is looking for the most effective way to relate lived experience to the reader.

He attempts to document or map his outer experiences as well as the deep psychological impressions related to these experiences.

He is searching for what Andrew Fitzsimons compares to a version of the Real, or 'the artistic expression of the ultimate knowledge hidden within reality'.

In my doctoral thesis I argued that Kinsella's poetry undergoes major changes between the late 1960s and 1970s. The poems move from a more formal style of lyric poetry to a novel method that engages with the poetic subject in a form that uses the poem as a site of interaction between the reader and the page; the poem as event.

Confessional Poetry

'Nightwalker' shows us the shift from a more formal poetic experience to the mythic/ psychological methods that will dominate Kinsella's poetry into and through the 1970s.

One of the examples that Kinsella is using at this time, that I also argue helps him to make these adjustments, are the examples of the American Confessional poets.

Confessional poetry is a retroactive label applied to a form of poetry that used personal subject matter to highlight wider historical issues, or vice-versa.

Besides actually using these poets as examples, he also meets and socializes with them as we see from the late Richard Murphy's excellent autobiography *The Kick*.

Robert Lowell

Lowell's shift from the formal meter to the more relaxed poetry would become the quintessential moment of the confessional movement.

As Kinsella's poetry shifts in the late 1960s it, at first, matches some of the unique American experimentations in confessional styles of poetry such as those found in Robert Lowell's *Life Studies* (1959). Lowell's earlier collections, *Lord Weary's Castle* (1946) and *The Mills of the Kavanaughs* (1951), show a similar attention to formal lineation and metre as Kinsella's early work (*Poems* (1956) *Another September* (1958)).

Wormwood (1966)

The *Wormwood* sequence is confessional in certain aspects as it gets inside the personal life of the poet, his beloved and family, and uses that experience to highlight the universal condition of life and its futility in the face of death.

M. L. Rosenthal, one of the first analysts of the confessional movement, includes Kinsella in his section surveying contemporary Irish poets in *The New Poets* (1967). Rosenthal finds *Wormwood* (1966) 'almost entirely inward and at times confessional'.

If Rosenthal had continued reading 'Nightwalker' (*The New Poets* was published in 1967), he would surely have followed the poem's confessional trend. 'Nightwalker' is an intensely personal poem documenting the experiences of one man but contrasting it to wider public issues.

The analysis of Irish society in part I of 'Nightwalker'

The protagonist of the poem begins a walk through his native Dublin at night.

In an earlier draft found in Kinsella's archives at Emory University, he uses the metaphor of a pendulum swinging back and forth to represent the wild 'swings of reason and unreason' showing that a book opening and closing in the preface is meant to represent the human experience of these two extremes.

The moon is being used as a symbol for the great swings of mankind between the heights of reason and the depths of unreason which produces the vicious modern war he experienced (Kinsella experienced the London bombings as a child). The narrator says

It meant little to me then,
Though I remember playing in the silence
When the rain of fragments dropped in the streets afterward
(p.57).

As the poem develops it explores the creation of the new Irish state. The final stanza highlights thoughts about the principles behind the creation of the Irish state's new economic thrust as coming from someone who is at the heart of this process:

To show them our growing city, give them a feeling
Of what is possible; our labour pool,
The tax concessions to foreign capital (p.59).

These two examples highlight the inward and outward thematic of this section.

Part I of 'Nightwalker' is a confessional type exploration; the narrator walks through Dublin and begins to question his duties as a civil servant within the mid-century Irish state, but he also contrasts this to wider socio-political issues.

He uses this exploration to examine these subjects as well as historical events that background the society he writes out of.

The poem, to this point, could be contained within a broad and general definition of confessionalism since Kinsella uses the personal to contrast the public. But the psychological depth of the exploration needs to delve much deeper in order for it to match the confessional type explorations of Lowell and Plath.

'Nightwalker' part II: the private influences contrast with the public

The personal journey of part I, develops into a critique of the materialistic nature of the modernisation of Ireland and the current nationalist republic, but it is still lacking the deeper psychological concerns that mark it as fully confessional in line with the American examples.

In part II the critique of Irish society continues but some significant new ghosts are introduced as the journey moves further inwards; into the walker's psyche and experiences.

This inward movement helps to make the overall direction of the poem's theme more confessional but also begins the development towards the mythic/archetypal method that the poem ends with.

As this section opens the narrator notices that '[t]he human taste grows faint. / It is gone' suggesting that the reality of the walk is disappearing as he descends deeper into his own mind and experiences (p.62).

He is left with 'a taste of self and laurel leaves' implying that it is his own psyche and poetic influences which will guide him from here (p.62).

'Joyce's Martello tower/ Rises' up in this section shortly before a newspaper blows to the narrator's feet which reminds him of a 'new young minister' (p.62).

This is Charles Haughey who was first elected to the *Daíl* in 1957 and whose first cabinet post was as Minister for Agriculture in 1961. This contrasts two interesting antithetical characters in Haughey and Joyce.

Kinsella's reading points towards the idea of Haughey in this selection as does this note in the Kinsella Papers: 'Arise, dark brother, follower of the Fox' which insinuates that the 'dark brother' is one who follows Éamon de Valera.

We first encounter de Valera in section I of the poem represented as the 'Fox' in a dramatised account of the early Irish Free State (pp. 61-2).

This follower would then be Haughey since he was a Fianna Fáil parliamentarian during de Valera's presidency. But another note contains a draft verse as follows:

He, watcher on the tower is,
my dark brother rising
from the Jungian Sea.

The 'watcher on the tower' is Joyce as represented by a character watching from the Martello tower seen in the opening of *Ulysses*. He is also a 'dark brother', like Haughey; thus, the two characters connect into one. The Jungian other is not necessarily one person but the 'contents of the unconscious'

By delving into his own personal experiences in part I, and then his literary influences in part II, Kinsella has created an unusual portrait of mid-twentieth-century Ireland. This matches the confessional approach perfectly as the personal experiences of one poet are reflecting the experiences of the wider society.

The poems are beginning to register wider socio-political events through the psyche or consciousness of the narrator. A more communal vision is being created.

More mythically based

Poems interact with the public images of the first two parts of this poem.

The images also combine with the personal in some interesting archetypal formations such as the Great Mother.

Rely less on the personal representations of the poet and more on the archetypal and mythical symbols from the poet's collective past

'Nightwalker' part III: a movement towards a mythical/archetypal method

There is very little mention of Jung in Kinsella's notes outside of references to Jacobi's *The Psychology of C. G. Jung*; content comes from his reading of Jacobi on Jung.

Jung's systems for exploring sensual and the intellectual.

Blueprints for examining the divisive nature of human existence but also a way to seek unity. Kinsella's work since the 1950s explores something similar.

The 1952 pamphlet *The Starlit Eye* and the explorations of the 1970s that rely on certain numerological explorations such as those found in *Notes from the Land of the Dead*:

– what shall we not begin
to have, on the
count of [.]

Numerical explorations along with binary...

In part III of 'Nightwalker' the Jungian method develops and culminates in the feminine images mentioned earlier which combine with images of the narrator's beloved.

The inward journey of the narrator and his outward reflections on the society he lives in, draw towards conclusions that are based in the collective knowledge of the Irish as reflected through the narrator.

This is crucial because it shows how the confessional method is transferring into a mythic/archetypal method.

The narrator returns home to see a vision of domestic beauty in the opening of part III as he witnesses his beloved framed in the window. Upon his return the narrator again notices the '[v]irgin most pure, bright/ In the dregs of the harbour: moon of my dismay' as the journey of the poem brings us back full-circle to the moon seen in the opening of the poem but this time portrayed in heavily feminised imagery (p.67). The moon then morphs into the muse figure:

Quiet as oil, enormous in her shaggy pool.
Her brightness, reflected on earth, in heaven,
Consumes my sight. Gradually, as my brain
At a great distance swims in the steady light,
Scattered notes, scraps of newspaper, photographs,
Begin to flow unevenly toward the pool
And gather into a book before her stare (p.68).

The light of the moon/muse-figure is gathering together the bits of the walker's thoughts into this poem as we see the '[s]cattered notes, scraps of newspaper' and 'photographs' found throughout the poem combining into the book now before us.

The next stanza ends with:

There are times it is all part of a meaningful drama
That begins in the grey mists of antiquity
And reaches through the years to unknown goals
In the consciousness of man, which is very soothing (p.68).

This is a quote from Jung's *Alchemy* drawn from a paragraph in Jacobi's book which discusses Jung's theories of the archetypes and their recurring patterns in history:

Each epoch seeks and finds its own ways of illuminating the inner cosmos ... if we look more closely, we shall see that there has been no cessation and that everything that has happened up to now has been a meaningful chain of 'episodes in the drama that began in the grey mists of antiquity and stretches through all the centuries into a remote future. This drama is an *Aurora consergens*- the dawning of consciousness in mankind'. Jacobi, p.141.

The end of this section draws together the poem's images into a Jungian archetypal representation of the feminine:

A wind sighs, the pool
Shivers: the tide at the turn. Odour of lamplight,
Sour soil, the sea bed passes like a ghost
– the hem of her invisible garment.

Our mother
Rules on high, queenlike, pale with control.
Hatcher of peoples!
Incline from your darkness into mine!
I stand at the ocean's edge, my head fallen back
Heavy with your control, and oppressed! (p.68)

'Nightwalker' mirrors Kinsella's own descent into his personal and communal past to source his poetry by tracking the descent of the narrator into his own psyche. This material is a part of the 'meaningful drama' of archetypal and mythic meaning which underlies all subjective existence (p.68). He exposes his own personal life in a quasi-confessional manner contrasting the personal with the public life of Ireland that his own inner world is invested with. The development within the poem shows a progress from a confessional type approach to a more mythic/archetypal examination that still retains aspects of a confessional/psychological type of poetry.

We can see how truly unique 'Nightwalker' is; he is mapping his inner psychological impulses onto a broader public arena and thus taking poetry to where no other Irish poet has gone before. Kinsella's images of descent, found in the opening of his 1972 collection *Notes from the Land of the Dead*, are significant as they show him descending into the depths of his own psyche, but we can see the start of that descent here in 'Nightwalker'. He develops a new way to view his poetic subject through an analysis of the forces within his own psyche compared to wider communal images, and thus allows the reader to access these uniquely shared images.