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significant Elements: Songs of *the Psyche* and *Her Vertical Smile*

If we were to pick one poem to sum up the sense of Thomas Kinsella's work, it would be 'Leaf-Eater' from *Nightwalker and Other Poems* (1968):

On a shrub in the heart of the garden,
On an outer leaf, a grub twists
Half its body, a tendril,
This way and that in blind
Space: no leaf or twig
Anywhere in reach; then gropes
Back on itself and begins
To eat its own leaf.'

The image of an insistent animal life confronting unknown immensities, the language of a blind groping and twisting, and the expressed need to sacrifice the supports for the self in order to sustain an inward progress — all these are characteristic of Kinsella's poetry. Similarly, *Songs of the Psyche* may be regarded as the central, even the defining, pamphlet of the Peppercanister publication series so far. There are inevitable perils associated with making definitive pronouncements about what is a continuing project, or searching for the central statement of a series not yet at its end-point. Nevertheless, there are several grounds on which we might assign *Songs of the Psyche* a controlling significance on our perception of the work before and after. The ninth of the Peppercanister pamphlets, it appeared in 1985 — paired with *Her Vertical Smile* — thirteen years after the initiation of the Peppercanister as a publishing venture and a similar number of years after the new turn in Kinsella's poetry detectable in *New Poems* and 'Notes from the Land of the Dead'.² By the time *Songs of the Psyche* appeared, readers of Kinsella were persuaded — if they had not been before — of a sustained commitment

1. Thomas Kinsella, *Collected Poems 1956-1994* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 75. All future references to this text will be incorporated parenthetically using the abbreviation CP.
2. *Songs of the Psyche* Peppercanister 9 (Dublin: Peppercanister Press, 1985); references to this text will be incorporated parenthetically using the abbreviation SPs; *Her Vertical Smile*, Peppercanister 10 (Dublin: Peppercanister Press, 1985); references to this text will be incorporated parenthetically using the abbreviation HVS. These poems were subsequently included in *Blood and Family* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988) with changes to the text in a few instances, and then in *Collected Poems 1956-1994* with some further changes — mostly to *Songs of the Psyche* and mostly excisions at each stage.

being brought to bear on a poetic concept that extended beyond the individual poem, sequence, pamphlet or collection. The significance of the poems is in part due to the intrinsic qualities of the pieces themselves; it is also in part due to circumstance. Their publication coincided with a number of signal events in Kinsella's career: he had completed the editing of *The New Oxford Book of Modern Irish Verse*, and at around the same time *The Faber Book of Modern Irish Poetry* edited by Paul Muldoon was published, with Kinsella the first of the poets represented in that anthology.

By the mid-nineteen eighties, Kinsella was regarded either as a lone and venturesome experimenter, testing the limits of the possible in poetry, or as an obsessive practitioner of a poetry inexplicably resistant to lyric rhythms and formal clarity. The latter case was put by Douglas Dunn. Dunn was an enthusiast for Kinsella's early work, and contributed an appreciative essay on 'Baggot Street Deserta' (CP, pp. 13-15) to the *Tracks* special issue on Kinsella in 1987;³ but in the previous year, discussing the later poetry as represented in *The Faber Book of Contemporary Irish Poetry*, he finds Kinsella writing 'as if out of sorts with the artistry of his splendid earlier work' and, taking 'Tao and Unfitness at Inistiogue on the River Nore' (CP, pp. 210-213) as an example, he calls the writing 'slack' and 'prosaic', and the Taoism a 'preposterous' and 'imported mysticism'; the modernizing attempt leads only to 'heavy-handed self-consciousness'.⁴

The poems in *Songs of the Psyche* seemed to epitomize the concerns and methods of Kinsella's poetry; they are 'intrinsically significant because of their material, but also because the pamphlet was published at about the time readers were making up their minds whether or not they were going to travel with Kinsella. Terence Brown recognized the unevenness of the material but reported that the poems marked 'a distinct phase in this difficult, frustrating and richly endowed poet's career'.⁵

The first pamphlet to bear the Peppercanister imprint had been *Butcher's Dozen* (1972). Although remarkable in its own right, it remains something of a nonce poem rather than the inauguration of a series or sequence. The same, to a lesser degree, could be said of the elegies for Sean Ó Riada and John F. Kennedy which succeeded it. All are occasional poems which circle around deaths and meditate on the value of lives. The awkwardness with which they sit together is evident in the rather gauche title of the collection in which they were subsequently gathered in 1979, *Fifteen Dead*. While the poems for Ó Riada in *A Selected Life*

3. Douglas Dunn, 'Baggot Street Deserta', *Tracks*, No. 7 (1987), Thomas Kinsella Special Issue, pp. 14-18.

4. Douglas Dunn, 'Manoeuvres', Review of Paul Muldoon (ed.), *The Faber Book of Contemporary Irish Poetry*, *The Irish Review*, No. 1 (1986), p. 85.

5. Terence Brown, *Poetry Ireland Review*, No. 17 (Dublin: Poetry Ireland, n.d.), p. 84.

memorialize a friendship that was intense and formative, one gets the sense of their following the requirements of a ritual almost liturgical in its observance, and of a poetic method that aligns itself with the convention of elegy and *caorneadh*. These observances are disrupted in the continuation, *Vertical Man*; during the spiritual encounter that is its subject, Kinsella moves in nearer to his own psychological self, and he does so through the art of Mahler, whose presence will later inform *Her Vertical Smile*.

The next Peppercanister pamphlets, *One, A Technical Supplement, Song of the Night and other Poems* and *The Messenger*, published during the mid and late nineteen seventies, move nearer to the inner life; *A Technical Supplement* notoriously gives a physical slaughterhouse imagery to the exploration of the inner self. The first eight pamphlets appeared in rapid succession: eight in seven years. There was a gap of a further seven years before the next two, *Songs of the Psyche* and *Her Vertical Smile*, were published together in 1985. And with *Songs of the Psyche* there is a palpable sense that the tentative explorations, uncertainties, and preliminary manoeuvrings that make up the matter of the preceding pamphlets have given way to a full engagement with the composing consciousness. Kinsella has cleared a poetic space, created an expectant — albeit more restricted — readership, and is prepared to give full reign to a poetry developed through introspection rather than lyric display.⁶

In fact, when Kinsella speaks of the Peppercanister pamphlets as a group, he speaks of them primarily as a publishing venture rather than as a poetic structure.⁷ Kinsella has several times written about the importance of publication for Irish poetry. The story of Liam Miller's Dolmen Press is an intrinsic part of the account of modern Irish poetry he gives in *The Dual Tradition*, and he has gone over the same ground at greater length in an article for *The Southern Review*.⁸ It appears that Kinsella brought Peppercanister into being not so much to shape a creative process, but rather to supply himself with a controlled means of production and dissemination following the death of Liam Miller and the consequent disappearance of the Dolmen Press.

But an indigenous and personally controlled publishing venture offers some freedoms to a poet whose work is found to be resistant to the conventional expectations of readers of lyric poetry. His comments on Austin Clarke are therefore of particular interest in this respect. Clarke

6. It is with *Songs of the Psyche* and *Her Vertical Smile* that the pamphlets take on the publication format in which they have since stabilized.
7. Thomas Kinsella, 'A Conversation: Dublin, September 1986', Interview with John F. Deane, *Tracks*, No. 7 (1987), p. 87.
8. Thomas Kinsella, *The Dual Tradition: An Essay on Poetry and Politics*, Peppercanister 18 (Manchester: Carcanet, 1995), pp. 107-10; Thomas Kinsella, 'A Note on Irish Publishing', *The Southern Review*, Vol. 31, No. 3 (July 1995), pp. 633-38.

is the twentieth-century Irish poet to whom Kinsella has given more attention than to any other. The incidental parallels between the two poets are striking. It is frequently the case that one poet's commentary on another poet is revelatory of the writer's own work, and Kinsella's comments on Clarke in *The Dual Tradition* suggest an alternative to the line of modernist affiliation which would link Kinsella with Clarke's very different contemporaries, Denis Devlin and Brian Coffey.⁹ Like Clarke, Kinsella moves from the relative lucidity of an early formalism to a more demanding, contorted syntax; like Clarke, Kinsella finds it useful to produce self-published pamphlets of poetry; like Clarke, Kinsella takes early Irish poetry as exemplary; like Clarke's, whose work is 'a constant test of discrimination and patience',¹⁰ Kinsella's poetry is uneven. It was Clarke's fate to be 'scarcely heard of' outside Ireland, but in his later career to garner eventually 'a discerning, if tiny, public';¹¹ this also, it might be argued, is true of Kinsella.

And Kinsella's description of Clarke's departure into 'verbal idiosyncrasy' could, *mutatis mutandis*, describe the course of his own work:

There is also a problem of verbal idiosyncrasy.... Clarke abandoned the derivative richness of his earlier work for a compacted and constricted diction in which the elements of grammar and syntax transfer and contort. The mature style of his later work absorbs these complexities, but it does not simplify them. The diction of his last poems is a vivid, particular voice, rich and supple; nothing is unsayable. But it is no 'natural' voice.¹²

It is not the diction but the imagery and its fields of reference which problematize and complicate Kinsella's later poetry. For instance, when introducing the *Tracks* special issue in 1987, John F. Deane observed that 'a great deal has been written and said about the difficulty inherent in the later work', and ventured the opinion that 'academic essays generally tend to obfuscate more than clarify or endear'.¹³ But his first contributor, the poet Dennis O'Driscoll, tells us right at the outset that 'the inner exploration of "Songs of the Psyche" has taken [Kinsella] so deep that there is very little light available for our journey through its passages';¹⁴ other contributors similarly remark on the 'ontological indeterminacy'

9. Gerard Dawe, 'An Absence of Influence: Three Modernist Poets', in *Against Piety: Essays in Irish Poetry* (Belfast: Lagan Press, 1995), pp. 45-64.
10. Kinsella, *The Dual Tradition*, p. 94.
11. *Ibid.*, pp. 94, 97.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 95. Very similar material appears in Kinsella's 'Introduction' to Austin Clarke, *Selected Poems* (Dublin: The Dolmen Press, 1976), pp. ix-xi, and in his article 'Brothers in the Craft', in R. Dardis Clarke (ed.), *Austin Clarke Remembered* (Dublin: The Bridge Press, 1996), pp. 52-6.
13. John F. Deane, 'Editorial', *Tracks*, No. 7 (1987), p. 7.
14. Dennis O'Driscoll, 'Reading Patterns: Thomas Kinsella's Poetry', *Tracks*, No. 7 (1987), p. 9.

(the phrase is W.J. McCormack's)¹⁵ of the poems as the primary feature of Kinsella's work. It appears that even avowedly committed readers of Kinsella find that the work makes demands on them. In an interview, Deane asks: 'How do you react to comments that ... *Her Vertical Smile* and *Songs of the Psyche* are obscure?' and Kinsella responds:

Well, they are quite clear to me ... they are constructs rather than statements, of themes operating together. And they assume that the act of reading is a dynamic one, the contemplation of an act of communication, not an inert listening to something sweet or interesting or even informative. They are not meant to increase the supply of significant information, but to embody a construct of significant elements.¹⁶

The poet claims that the work has a clarity for himself; he then goes on to suggest that for others there is not only the matter of engaging with the material of the poetry but that, in order to do so, a particular type of approach is required. The 'dynamic' act of reading is, as Kinsella describes it, a more contemplative process than what we might understand by Barthes's *scriptible* quality.

Readers choose to see the Peppercanister series not just as a publishing imprint controlled by and dedicated to the work of an individual poet, but as encompassing a poetic work in progress. The various Peppercanister publications contain sequences which are gathered into pamphlets, and then these are assembled in volumes that are themselves constituent elements of a work which goes on 'without end: the quest for understanding in a world of process and dialectical tension can never be final'.¹⁷ This is the opinion of Kinsella's most sustained commentator, Brian John, and it is a view sanctioned by Kinsella himself in a recent interview. Demurring from a suggestion that publication of his *Collected Poems* marked an ending of any particular stage, he observed: 'The processes are continuing.' In the same interview, he cautions that '[w]riting to a programme is dangerous, now that the supportive structures — the religious and philosophic — are gone.'¹⁸

The poet may, creatively, attempt to swerve away from the constraints of writing to a pre-determined programme. Nevertheless, the programmatic aspect is a construction that a reader will bring to the poems or pamphlets when situating them in the context of the larger project of which each forms a constituent part, and in attempting sympathetically

15. W.J. McCormack, 'Politics or Community: Crux of Thomas Kinsella's Aesthetic Development', *Trucks*, No. 7 (1987), p. 72.

16. Kinsella, Interview with John F. Deane, p. 88.

17. Brian John, *Reading the Ground: The Poetry of Thomas Kinsella* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1996), p. 246.

18. Thomas Kinsella, Interview with Donatella Abbate Badin; see p. 113 of this issue.

to reach out to the level of experience that it conjures. Because the Peppercanister poems move into areas that are personal rather than public, and because they adopt formal characteristics that are challenging rather than immediately recognizable and conventionally supportive, readers feel a need to locate the work within some understanding of an overarching purpose. To this end we seek out structural and thematic continuities, or we relate the poems to their writer and his biography, or we account for differences and difficulties by seeing them as willed departures from the material that has preceded them and we read the disjunctive qualities as evolution.

Commentary on the Peppercanister poems nod towards the evident influences that feed into Kinsella's poetic framework: Jung, Mahler, numerology, Ezra Pound, Old Irish literature. This seems necessary because the dislocations and disjunctions that have become characteristic of his style seem to demand a totalizing and overarching structure or mythical background to which they can be referred in order to bring them within imaginative compass. In addition, the individual poems are consistently presented by Kinsella himself as part of a larger enterprise, even if not programmatic. He has spoken of the Peppercanister pamphlets as being suitable for sequences and longer poems, and has suggested that the poems resist closure: 'I have never seen why a poem need end absolutely with its final line. ... It can lie in wait.'¹⁹ In this sense each poem is proleptic, anticipating a continuation — if not a conclusion — in the future. This has been comprehensively demonstrated by Thomas Halpin, showing how the successive poems have origins not just in the earlier poems in the project, but back in the poems of the sixties, each a part of 'a closely-interwoven, breathtakingly variegated "system of living images"'.²⁰

The Cantos provide a precedent for a poetic work that is open-ended and continuing, composed and published on a serial and ongoing basis over a span of decades. The early cantos in particular also offer a model for the use of an early text taking The Odyssey and, later, Confucian philosophy as base-lines and sounding boards. This is the 'mythic method' of modernism, and is by no means exclusive to Pound; it is found also in Eliot, who coined the phrase when identifying it in Joyce's *Ulysses*. This has attractions for Kinsella, whose knowledge of and work on early Irish poetry are extensive; he brings the material of the early Irish writings into alignment with the contemporary texts of his own. Furthermore, the early Irish texts are anonymous, floating free of an historically identifiable personality; one consequence of this is that their presence serves to offset somewhat the intensely personal introspection

19. Kinsella, Interview with John F. Deane, p. 89.

20. Thomas Halpin, 'Foundations for a Tower?', *Poetry Ireland Review*, No. 35 (Summer 1995), pp. 27-8.

of the material that he brings from his own experience. It is a feature of Kinsella's work that it does not seek to preserve any great distance between the man who suffers and the artist who creates. *Songs of the Psyche* is notable in that its poems take as their foundation a set of symbolic references rather than an intertextual discourse. In *Her Vertical Smile* the reference is supplied by Mahler's music.

If the long-term composition of Pound's *Cantos* provides the model in large for Kinsella's work, the later poetry of William Carlos Williams provides the rhythms. Each canto is presented as a more or less formal unit; if the pamphlet is to be regarded as the equivalent section of Kinsella's work, then we find that his sections are composed of sequences, in which verse forms are varied, and each pamphlet section is made up of shorter named individual pieces. The presence of William Carlos Williams as a formal influence is more apparent: Kinsella's material is far removed from that of Williams. The American poet was primarily concerned with coming to know the world from the surface of things, and wrote about individuals as part of society. His apprehension of the world is based primarily on the sense experience of a material and living world, the significance of which needs to be felt and assimilated. Kinsella's poetic approach tends to bypass the immediate representation of objects and the social functions of people; it ponders on their more immanent qualities. But while there may be an experiential difference, there is a formal similarity. The use of the short line in many of the pieces, the sense of a continually invented form, mimics the rhythms of Williams. Especially when writing in three-lined stanzas, used throughout *Her Vertical Smile* and frequently in *Songs of the Ryche*, the shape of the poems is very like those of Williams.

Much of his writing in the pamphlets uses a sort of free verse paragraph, which allows for sentences to carry over a number of lines. This is particularly evident in *Her Vertical Smile* where the three-line stanzas run on to combine a visual spareness with discursive plenitude. Kinsella's use of the trinal stanza-form is based on the line as a unit, emphasized by the indented middle line. The length of the lines varies from a one-syllable single beat to a line of ten syllables or more (up to as many as fourteen), typically with four beats — although in 'Intermezzo' (HVS, pp. 17-18), the versified letter, the rhythm of the beats in the lines is difficult to discern until the shorter lines towards its conclusion. *Her Vertical Smile* makes the transition from pamphlet through *Blood and Family* to the *Collected Poems* with the text unchanged apart from one phase dropped from the opening poem, 'Overture' (HVS, pp. 7-8; CP, pp. 247-48).²¹ In the poems from *Songs of the Psyche* the numerous

21. The missing phrase is line 17 of the original, 'Ah Whoom', representing the sound of the 'low terrible string plucked/ ... on the great Harp of Life'.

revisions generally involve the dropping of some lines or short passages, and the original line lengths and line breaks are often radically altered. However, the larger rhythm of the stanza form is usually left intact through these changes; a poem arranged in two-line groupings remains in two-line groupings, a trinal stanza structure is preserved; even if the line lengths change.

The central title sequence of *Songs of the Psyche* is made up of thirteen short poems, of which the tenth and the last are the two longest, at about thirty-three lines each. The 'Songs' themselves are prefaced by 'Settings', three pieces describing places from the immediately recognizable territory of Kinsella's childhood and schooldays and a short 'Invocation'. After the 'Songs' comes a section headed 'Notes', containing eight poems. Both 'Settings' and 'Notes' punningly extend the musical reference of songs: 'Settings' suggests the idea of musical arrangements as well as the childhood locations which the poems describe, and 'Notes', of course, includes among its meanings a musical connotation.²²

However, the opening poem of the sequence, 'Model School, Inchicore' (*SPs*, pp. 11-13) works through language, not music. The language here has a prose sense that takes priority over any metaphorical or symbolic intention in the images that it offers. The realized personalities, and the discursive progress through a mixture of memory and stream-of-consciousness, are readily apprehended by a reader. At the same time, the language does display a poetic overdetermination that works through the ambivalence of semantic content, similar to the puns in the section titles. The play of words and sounds occurs throughout Kinsella's later poems, and is especially prevalent here. There is an awareness of names. Miss Carney's name prompts childish amusement in class when it is encountered in saying the arithmetic table in Irish: the Irish for four, *ceathair*, is similar to the Irish version of Carney, *Cathnirnigh*. Then Mr Browne is described as having a 'brown man's face'. Brown is a colour generated not just by the homophony with the teacher's name; it has already been introduced at the outset when the plasticine loses its individual colours. Presumably these are the two teachers whom Kinsella mentions in one of his interviews as having made sense of things for him. If so, they are characters with a verifiable history, but they also come out of the age-old mythical creativeness of language with its suggestion that '*nomen est omen*'.²³

22. The next pamphlet, *Out of Ireland*, Peppercanister 11 (Dublin: Peppercanister Press, 1985) did indeed conclude with some explanatory Notes.

23. Thomas Kinsella, Interview with Dennis O'Driscoll, *Poetry Ireland Review*, No. 25 (Spring 1989), p. 58. For wordplay in poetry, see Jonathan Culler (ed.), *On Puns: The Foundation of Letters* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988), especially Frederick Ahl, 'Ars est Caelare Artem (Art in Puns and Anagrams Engraved)', p. 35. Also Walter Redfern, *Puns: More Senses than One*, revised Edition (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2000), pp. 43-8. A similar pun on the name Brown is made in Joyce's 'The Dead'.

When the child says at the outset 'I am going to know/ everything', the statement immediately offers itself as ironic. The initial confidence of the child is undercut by the overall retrospective perception which has arrived at an accommodation with its ignorance. However, by the end of the sequence, the centre of gravity of the ironic intent has shifted. At first, the irony centres on the 'everything', and the unlikelihood or impossibility of such total knowledge ever becoming available to the individual. But by the end of the sequence the ironic weight has moved towards that word 'know'; the nature of knowledge and the ways in which we encompass experience have been challenged and augmented by other methods of comprehension. This is what is signalled to us by the concluding couplet in 'Invocation', the short poem which links the 'Settings' to the pamphlet's title poems:

Judge not.
But judge. (*SPs*, p. 17)

The lines suggest a change in the nature of understanding; the contradictory instructions can be reconciled only by taking them as inviting an evaluation that is free of prejudicial ethics. This has evident affinities with the state of 'active imagination' encouraged by Jungian psychology, in which the play of a consciousness freed for the moment from ethical judgement leads towards individuation. But locally, within the poem, the revisionary process enacted between the first 'Judge' and the second, is proleptic and preparatory to the encounter with the 'Songs of the Psyche' which follow immediately after. 'Invocation', short as it is, begins as an appeal to the 'Sweet mother' but ends as an instruction how to read. The puzzling lines — 'the subsequent / bustling/ in the previous' — that precede the instructions to judge, imply an awareness that looks forward and to the past. Within the structure of the pamphlet, the invitation to judge looks forward to ways of knowing adumbrated in the 'Songs of the Psyche' and also back to the end of 'Model School, Inchicore', where the Irish Catholic school catechism is quoted:

Will God judge
our most secret thoughts and actions?
God will judge
our most secret thoughts and actions
and every idle word that man shall speak
he shall render an account of it
on the Day of Judgment. (*SPs*, p. 12)

Secret thoughts and actions become the objects of poetic investigation in both *Songs of the Psyche* and *Her Vertical Smile*.

By the end of the 'Songs of the Psyche' sequence, in poem XIII, the arrival is 'a matter of/ negative release' into 'a state of peace// or sleep,/'

or a dream,/ or a system of dreams' (*SPs*, p. 34), and the remainder of the poem suggests the dreams that may come in that state of active imagination. The dreams seem to coalesce into a knowledge of the self, the psyche as soul, spirit or mind, in terms of archetypal myth images:

By normal process
organic darkness,
in potentia all things,

would summon
Self firstly into being,
a Shadow in *actu*,

an upright on a flat plain,
a bone stirs
in first clay

and a beam of light struck
and snaked glittering across a surface
in multi-meanings and vanishes.²⁴ (*SPs*, pp. 34-5)

The lines end with a provisional statement introduced by an apparently conditional verb ('organic darkness would summon'), and with a syntactical puzzle: what is the subject of the verb 'vanishes', or can we take it as newly-coined noun in apposition with 'multi-meanings'? In the last six lines of the poem these images give way to others, Promethean, heroic, animalist, and 'ultimately' Christian and redemptive:

Then stealers of fire;
dragon slayers; helpful animals;
and ultimately the Cross

Unless the things were to be based
on sexuality
or power. (*SPs*, p. 35)

That 'ultimately' offers a finality which is immediately rescinded as the poem continues towards an alternative possibility, taking us away from the totalizing archetypes and into the area of individual: 'sexuality/ or power'. Here it is useful to turn to Jung for elucidation:

Do we delude ourselves in thinking that we possess and control our own psyches, and is what science calls the "psyche" not just a

24. In *Blood and the Family* and *Collected Poems*, the text is altered from the above-quoted 1985 Peppercanister edition by omitting the text of the two lines containing Latin phrases and rearranging the lineation. The three-line stanza structure is preserved. While I have chosen in this article to discuss *Songs of the Psyche* and *Her Vertical Smile* primarily as the Peppercanister pamphlets in which they first issued, the substance of what I have to say applies equally to the poems as subsequently published.

question-mark arbitrarily confined within the skull, but rather a door that opens upon the human world from a world beyond, allowing unknown powers to act upon man and carry him on the wings of the night to a more than personal destiny? . . . The poet now and then catches sight of the figures that people the night-world — spirits, demons, and gods; he feels the secret quickening of human fate by a superhuman design, and has a presentiment of the incomprehensible happenings in the *pleroma*.²⁵

The psychic progress and eventual arrival in 'Songs of the Psyche' are managed through just such Jungian imagery. The poetic discourse in which that progress and arrival are enacted, and the imagery disposed, is one of statement and revision. Like the 'Leaf-Eater', it 'gropes/ Back on itself'.

This palimpsestic approach informs a great deal of the shape of Songs of the Psyche. It is evident in the final Poem XIII, both in its substitution of night-world archetypes for symbols, and in its two opening stanzas which are successively proposed and rejected. Elsewhere, it is evident in the introductory revisions of the nature of knowledge that cluster around the uses of the word 'judge'; and in Poem VII where speaker and woman end up as 'no longer two'

but a third
 fumbling
ghost at polite ghost
of its own matter. (*SPs*, p. 27)

The motif of revision occurs again in the final poems of Songs of the Psyche, grouped as 'Notes'; the first of these is called 'A New Beginning', and the last of them, 'Self Renewal'. In 'A New Beginning',

God is good but
He had to start
somewhere out of the ache
of I am

and lean Himself
over the mothering pit
in faith
thinking

a mouth
to My kiss
in opening

let there be
remote (*SPs*, p. 39)

25. C.J. Jung, 'Psychology and Literature', in *The Spirit in Man, Art and Literature*, trans. R.E.C. Hull (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966), pp. 95-6.

The 'mothering pit' here seems to refer us back to the 'sweet mother' of the 'Invocation' (*SPs*, p. 17). The feminine is encountered at various times in the pamphlet. In Poem X it is the moon imagined as 'A great delicate self', a sort of presiding deity (*SPs*, p. 30); in the parenthetical Poem III the poet enters into communion with some feminine presence:

(Chew nine times
on the chosen meat
and set it down
outside her door

then when you wake
rat small, rat still,
you will carry her life
in your palms, rat self.) (*SPs*, p. 23)

Female figures are sensed throughout *Songs of the Psyche*, from the teacher Miss Carney at the very beginning through the 'sweet mother' and the other women and girls implied in the 'Songs' themselves.

The awareness of the feminine is central and foundational in *Her Vertical Smile*, which starts with the powerful feminine presence of the contralto's voice on record. The imagined musical action of the poem sequence which follows is sexual and copulatory in its imagery. The man as artist (musician/conductor/composer/poet) enters and explores the figure of the inspirational woman: his baton is 'flourished and driven deep', it 'explores/ Her core of peace' (*HVS*, pp. 9, 10). At the moment of union they come together when the 'Patriarch-Mother' is invoked (*HVS*, p. 14), and then in Poem II there is the post-coital return:

For something magnuscule has been accomplished;
the entities that made it possible

are locked together still;
they have not even
begun to look at one another. (*HVS*, p. 19)

These symbolic women of the imagination have a long lineage in Kinsella's work, extending back to 'Justice, Truth, such figures' in 'Another September' (*CP*, p. 21). In Jungian psychology each is a version of the Anima, a projected epitome of the primordial esoteric and erotic feminine other. Jungians would no doubt see the poetic convention of the Muse as one possible manifestation of the Anima; readers unfamiliar with Jung will best understand Kinsella's poetry by making a reciprocal substitution. Kinsella can be regarded as a Muse poet in thrall to 'the White Goddess' as described by Robert Graves. However, Kinsella's poetry has developed and extended the convention of the Muse by internalizing it.

Graves writes that the 'function of poetry is religious invocation of the Muse; its use is the experience of mixed exaltation and horror that

her presence excites.²⁶ That excited mix of experience underpins Her *Vertical Smile*, where at the end, 'central to the Song's force', is an awareness of the singer's 'two nutrient smiles' (HVS, p. 24) — her lips and her labia. The sexual awareness at the end of Her *Vertical Smile* is a blend of prurience and urbanity, to which the 'Coda' then contributes a pathetic incongruity.

Nine are the enabling elements
in the higher crafts
and the greatest of these is Luck.

I lift my
baton and my
trousers fall. (HVS, p. 25)

The third line rewrites St Paul.²⁷ The numerological significance of 'Nine' includes the nine classical muses. The concluding stanza is a reiteration of Kinsella's recurrent image of falling,²⁸ and here combines sexuality and art, priapic arousal and clownish exposure, endeavour and failure. This is an echo of another juxtaposition which has informed Her *Vertical Smile*; alongside the sexual presentation of music there are also repeated references to the First World War as a contrastive type of engagement. The military images with their 'slow marches/ of tragic penetration' (HVS, p. 12) also enact an encounter between bodies which is physically invasive, but here exclusively male, and overtly public rather than intimate.

Elements of *Songs of the Psyche* and Her *Vertical Smile* cross-reference each other, although not all the cross-references are local to these two pamphlets; some of them belong to the general repertory of motifs found through Kinsella's poetry. Both pamphlets have musical references in their shaping, with sections of Her *Vertical Smile* headed 'Overture', 'Intermezzo' and 'Coda'. The sequence centres on Mahler, and the world of early twentieth-century Vienna just before the outbreak of the war. Underlying this sustained treatment of a historical moment and exemplary art on a global scale is the remembered personal history of Kinsella's friendship with the Irish musician Seán Ó Riada, recalled in the epigraph. A further cross-reference occurs in the ending of the introductory poem in Her *Vertical Smile*, which seems to echo the catechetical ending of the first poem in *Songs of the Psyche* by evoking God on the Day of Judgement:

26. Robert Graves, *The White Goddess: A historical grammar of poetic myth* (London: Faber and Faber, 1961), p. 14.
27. 'And now abideth Faith, hope, charity, these three; but the greatest of these is charity.' I *Corinthians ch.13*.
28. W.J. McCormack remarks that *New Poems 1973* 'is dominated by a single recurring theme — that of falling' ('Politics or Community', p. 6). In fact, the motif remains an important one in later poems.

Will God sit there on the Last Day like that,
the whole thing played out,
listening to a last echo fade (HVS, p. 8)

But here the answer is not in the domain of moral responsibility but of aesthetic interaction. Later in *Her Vertical Smile*, this image of an apocalyptic God is replaced by an aetiological one, again intimated through great art:

While as to a beginning
it is hard to see past
our first parent

patented on his Chapel ceiling
propped on an elbow,
a languid and burly young man

...
finger to finger with God the Father,
the Latter afloat toward him (HVS, p. 13)

The sexually explicit Anima-Muse figure of *Her Vertical Smile* had been given material presence towards the end of *Songs of the Psyche*: a Sheela-na-Gig is described in 'Talent and Friendship' as a 'fig-bodied stone devil' with her 'gross mouth open/ to all comers' (SPs, p. 43).²⁹ There is just such a Sheela-na-Gig carving near where Ó Riada is buried in St Gobnait's graveyard, a setting which has already figured in *A Selected Life* (1972). The burden of 'Talent and Friendship' is that neither quality is guaranteed to survive death. It ends:

There is no mantle
and it does not descend.

The mantle is a metaphor for authority and status. But the literal meaning, again with its imagery of the fall, suggests also the lewd exposure of the carving and the bathetic trouser-dropping end of *Her Vertical Smile*.

'Talent and Friendship', and 'Brotherhood' which precedes it, are probably two of the most unforgiving poems Kinsella has written. The latter is framed by the simple gesture of reaching out to shake hands with a brother. But,

It is Spring
and no time for kindness;

we must bear in mind
the quality of the Fall.

I dropped your hand. (SPs, p. 42)

29. This reference to the sheela-na-gig does not appear in the revised version of the poem in *Collected Poems*, pp. 242-43.

Here again is an instance of sombre wordplay, with the Hamlet-like pun on 'kindness', and the ambiguity of 'Fall': a season to match Spring, or some original sin, or a variation of the recurrent motif which is present also in the next line?

As with much of Kinsella's poetry, it is difficult to determine the meaning not only of the words, but also of the actions and events they describe. Earlier I quoted Kinsella on *Songs of the Psyche* and *Her Vertical Smile* where he said: 'They are not meant to increase the supply of significant information, but to embody a construct of significant elements.'³⁰ Of the two pamphlets, the former is the more profound; it is at the core of Kinsella's poetic intention, and a reader who assents to its qualities will readily engage with the rest of his work. *Her Vertical Smile*, with its sustained comparison of music, sex and war, offers an emblematic and revealing gloss on those qualities. The fascination and power of music for Kinsella seems to reside in the fact that it is intransitive; music *is* as it produces its own end. It is liberated from any requirement to supply significant information. The opening lines describing the voice of the recorded contralto combine time as duration and time as repetition, capturing the self-absorbed repetitions of art:

For ever and ever
she wept
for the nth time (HVS, p. 7)

The other imagery fields of *Her Vertical Smile*, sex and war, are transitive in that they have palpable designs on others. In this they resemble words, which cannot escape their meaning as they function, and consequently the language of poetry is at risk everywhere of catching on the contingent world and its accidents. While the language of Kinsella's poetry does not aspire to the condition of music, his poems look longingly towards that art. *Songs of the Psyche* has as its object an engagement with the inner life, in an attempt to disengage from the contingent world and to enter the realm of pure spirit. The inner exploration may be psychologically introverted, but it holds out the possibility of an intransitive poetry, eating its own leaf in the heart of the garden.

30. Kinsella, Interview with John F. Deane, p. 88.