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## Traditional Music and Song and the Poetry of Thomas Kinsella

*Seán Crosson*

He clutched the shallow drum  
and crouched forward, thin  
as a beast of prey. The shirt  
stretched at his waist. He stared  
to one side, toward the others,  
and struck the skin cruelly  
with his nails. Sharp  
as the answering arid bark  
his head quivered, counting.<sup>1</sup>

Music and song are both important influences on, and themes in, the poetry of Thomas Kinsella. His poetry also features several individuals associated with music, none more frequently than his close friend, the composer Seán Ó Riada, a central figure in the revival in popularity of Irish traditional music since the 1950s. The above passage is but one of several found throughout Kinsella's work recalling performances by Ó Riada. Three of Kinsella's poetry collections reflect on the life and premature death of Ó Riada: *A Selected Life* (1972), *Vertical Man* (1973) and *Out of Ireland* (1987). The collection *Her Vertical Smile* (1985) also includes further reminiscences of Ó Riada, while focusing primarily on the performance of two works by the composer Gustav Mahler (his eighth symphony and his final composition *Das Lied von der Erde*) which Kinsella has revealed himself and Ó Riada listened to 'again and again' in Ó Riada's apartment in Lower Mount Street, Dublin, in the early 1950s.<sup>2</sup> In this paper I want to chart some significant developments in Kinsella's work from the late 1950s, and indeed, intriguing parallels, and shared emphases, apparent in the comments and work of both Kinsella and Ó Riada. For Kinsella, his experience of traditional song – described in the poem 'The Shoals Returning' - preceded the incorporation of Gaelic literature into his poetry while his recurring emphasis on the audience's role in the act of communication echoes his own identification of a central characteristic of the performance of traditional song, or *sean-nós*, in Irish.

'The Shoals Returning' was published in Kinsella's 1968 collection *Nightwalker and Other Poems*, almost ten years after the event it describes.

The poem features Kinsella's continuing engagement with the theme of mortality in a work that is centrally concerned with the premature death of the Dingle fisherman and *sean-nós* singer, Jerry Flaherty, to whom the poem is dedicated. Indeed, it is a poem that features death literally coming to the surface in the opening verse:

I dip the oar and lean  
Supported and opposed  
On the green flesh of a wave.  
The ocean depth swallows  
My strength like a stone.

A corpse balanced among  
Striped fathoms turns  
Over face upward.<sup>3</sup>

*Nightwalker and Other Poems* marked a change in Kinsella's poetry that would see his descent still further into the 'Land of the Dead' in the subsequent collection,<sup>4</sup> a volume also marked by a change of style in Kinsella's work that would necessitate a particular intensity of engagement among readers, many of whom, some critics have suggested, declined the challenge.<sup>5</sup> However, for Kinsella this requirement became an increasingly important focus of his commentaries on his work. One possible source of this concern requires a return to the late 1950s and a holiday Kinsella and his family spent in Corca Dhuibhne [the Dingle Peninsula] with Seán Ó Riada.

As well as being an acclaimed English-language poet, Kinsella has also been one of the most important translators of Gaelic literature into English.<sup>6</sup> However, while his first translations appeared in 1954 with *The Breastplate of St. Patrick* and *The Exile and Death of the Sons of Usnech*,<sup>7</sup> few of his earliest poems in English from the 1950s reflected his interest in Gaelic literature.<sup>8</sup> It was with his 1960 chapbook *Moralities* (which was included in *Downstream* (1962)) that themes from this literature began to appear in his work. In the 'Love' section of *Moralities*, Kinsella draws upon Irish mythology and literary history with the poems 'Seventeenth Century Landscape: Near Ballyferriter', and 'Sisters'. Both poems feature the seventeenth-century Corca Dhuibhne [Dingle Peninsula] chieftain and poet of Norman descent, Piaras Feiritéar, who was executed following his participation in the Rising of 1641. Importantly, in a significant act of identification, Kinsella adopts the voice of the seventeenth-century poet in the first of these poems:

A last short-cut along Croaghmarhin's base  
Before the dark, the set sun at my back;  
On shales of desolation ends my race.<sup>9</sup>

The second poem features Feiritéar's wife, Sybil, who, in grief at her husband's death, threw herself from the walls of Feiritéar's castle in Corca Dhuibhne onto rocks below. Kinsella also connects her to an earlier period of Gaelic composition by comparing her death to that of the mythical 'Deirdre of the Sorrows', the female protagonist in *The Exile and Death of the Sons of Usnech*, who kills herself following her lover Naoise's killing under the orders of the King of Ulster, Conchobar Mac Nessa:

Grim Deirdre sought the stony fist, her grief  
Capped at last by insult. Pierce's bride,  
Sybil Ferriter, fluttered like a leaf  
And fell in courtly love to stain the tide.  
Each for a murdered husband – hanged in silk  
Or speared in harness – threw her body wide,  
And offered treachery a bloody milk;  
Each cast the other's shadow when she died.<sup>10</sup>

Kinsella's interest in Feiritéar grew following a holiday spent, along with Seán Ó Riada and his family, at Baile an Fheirtéaraigh [Ballyferriter] in Corca Dhuibhne in 1959.<sup>11</sup> He has described it in some detail in *Fifteen Dead*, in which he depicts the visit for Ó Riada as a 'swift liberation'.<sup>12</sup> 'But a profounder consequence of our holiday', Kinsella continues in the same essay, 'was his unabated new drive toward Irish music'.<sup>13</sup> This drive would be signalled later that year when George Morrison's *Mise Éire* was released with a soundtrack (orchestral settings for traditional tunes including 'Róisín Dubh' and 'Sliabh na mBan') provided by Seán Ó Riada.<sup>14</sup> Its release was a major national event taking, as Ruth Barton has noted, 'the Irish press by storm, garnering ecstatic reviews, even in the anglophile *Irish Times*, whilst filling cinemas'.<sup>15</sup> It would play a significant role in the revival of fortunes for traditional music throughout the 1960s.

While Brian John suggests that Ó Riada's work with traditional Irish music 'paralleled in many ways [Kinsella's] own translations and increasing preoccupation with the Gaelic tradition',<sup>16</sup> Carolyn Rosenberg finds that Ó Riada's interest in delving 'ever deeper into the music and lifestyle of the Gaeltacht was to influence Kinsella's own increased use of traditional Irish literature and material in his work'.<sup>17</sup> Among the poems

inspired by Kinsella's visit to Baile an Fheirtéaraigh was 'The Shoals Returning'. Kinsella and Ó Riada met Jerry Flaherty during their visit and both were impressed by his *sean-nós* singing in Kruger Kavanagh's pub in Dún Chaoin [Dunquin]. Flaherty tragically died in a drowning accident a week after returning from the 1959 All-Ireland Gaelic football final the following September. Kinsella has recalled meeting Flaherty and the legendary *sean-nós* singer and melodeon player Seán de hÓra (whom Kinsella had also met in Dún Chaoin) during their visit for the All-Ireland, indicating in his recollection the source of the title of the poem dedicated to Flaherty: 'In Reidy's house in Galloping Green they spoke of the good fishing season that was just starting: after years elsewhere the big mackerel shoals had come back and they were anxious to get home and make the most of it'.<sup>18</sup>

Kinsella draws considerably on the *caoineadh*, or Gaelic lament genre, in 'The Shoal's Returning'. As noted by several commentators, the *caoineadh*'s significance stretched beyond the immediate event and provided an important social importance.<sup>19</sup> For Kinsella this includes the decline of the Irish language and culture, which he appears to evoke in the poem's closing stanza, in a figure reminiscent, as Brian John has noted,<sup>20</sup> of one of the most accomplished Gaelic poets from the eighteenth century, Aogán Ó Rathaille:

A withered man, a coat  
 Across his shoulders, watches  
 From the cliff over the gorge  
 - A black outcrop thrust  
 Partly out of the soil  
 Into the salt wind.  
 The shale-grass shivers around him.  
 He turns a shrunken mask  
 Of cheekbone and jawbone  
 And pursed ancient mouth  
 On the sea surface.  
 A windswept glitter of light  
 Murmurs toward the land.  
 His eyes, out of tortoise lids,  
 Assess the crystalline plasm,  
 Formations of water  
 Under falls of air.<sup>21</sup>

An earlier reference in the poem to 'The Wave of Tóime'<sup>22</sup> would also seem to suggest this allusion for, as Seán Ó Tuama has observed, '[Ó

Rathaille] lived for a time in poor circumstances at Tonn Tóime, at the edge of Castlemaine Harbour'.<sup>23</sup> Equally, the 'crystalline plasm' mentioned above is reminiscent of Ó Rathaille's allusion to crystal in one of his most famous poems 'Gile na Gile' ['Brightness most bright'].<sup>24</sup> The final verse also reminds one of the final verse of another Ó Rathaille poem 'Is Fada Liom Oíche Fhírfhliuch' ['The drenching night drags on'] in which the poet laments his pitiful state as he looks out upon the waves off Castlemaine harbour:

A thonnsa thíos is airde géim go hard,  
meabhair mo chinnse cloíte ód bhéiceach tá;  
cabhair dá dtíodh arís ar Éirinn bhán,  
do ghlam nach binn do dHINGFINN féin id bhráid.

[You wave down there, lifting your loudest roar,  
The wits in my head are worsted by your wails.  
If help ever came to lovely Ireland again  
I'd wedge your ugly howling down your throat!  
(Trans. Thomas Kinsella)].<sup>25</sup>

Furthermore, the description in verse two and three of 'The Shoals Returning' of the powerful and destructive natural forces – epitomised in the 'Wave of Tóime' - that pound the cliffs of Corca Dhuibhne, 'chewing the solid earth', also echo Ó Rathaille's verse. In addition, Kinsella uses lines from 'Is Fada Liom Oíche Fhírfhliuch', along with several others by Ó Rathaille, for Ó Rathaille's direct speech elsewhere in *Nightwalker*, in 'The Poet Egan O'Reilly, Homesick in Old Age', where he again adopts the voice of the eighteenth century poet lamenting the turmoil of his life and how natural forces seem to have facilitated his enemies:

'Princes overseas, who slipped away  
In your extremity, no matter where I travel  
I find your great houses like stopped hearts. [...]

Our enemies multiply. They have recruited the sea :  
Last night, the West's rhythmless waves destroyed my sleep;  
This morning, winkle and dogfish persisting in the stomach ...'<sup>26</sup>

Brian John is surely correct in recognising in 'The Shoals Returning' the "dramatic or story-telling voice," which Kinsella and Seán Ó Tuama identify [...] as characteristic of much post-1600 poetry in Irish', in the marking off of 'the different phases of the action with the equivalent of stage directions or subheadings ("He comes from the sea," "He sings," "He

returns,” “He disappears”).<sup>27</sup> This structuring of the poem is reminiscent of one of the finest laments in the Irish language, Eibhlín Dhubh Ní Chonail’s ‘Caoineadh Airt Uí Laoghaire’ (1773). Kinsella’s translation of this *caoineadh* – including subheadings - was published in *An Duanaire 1600-1900: Poems of the Dispossessed* in 1981. In his introduction to this collection of Gaelic poetry, Seán Ó Tuama described this ‘dramatic or story-telling voice’ as following a clear pattern where ‘a situation or story is postulated, imaginatively developed and resolved in the presence of a listening audience’.<sup>28</sup> Significantly, the audience features prominently in ‘The Shoals Returning’. Indeed, in adopting the simple present tense for much of the poem, Kinsella seems to describe events as they happen, as if he too is part of this audience, listening (while writing) to the voice of Jerry Flaherty as he sings. He may well be attempting here to give the reader a sense of the immediacy of *sean-nós* singing that can only be truly appreciated in the live performance, rather than the recorded act, evident in the focus given to the audience’s response:

*He sings*

A voice rises flickering  
From palatal darkness, a thin yell  
Straining erect, checked  
In glottal silence. The song  
Articulates and pierces.

A boot scrapes the floor. Live eyes  
Shine, each open on its rock,  
In horn-darkness of paraffin,  
Rope and gas cylinders.  
Wet glasses of stout  
Cling to boxes and casks;  
Men, sunk in shade, listen  
On their benches, bodies tainted  
With cold sea wind.  
Their eyes respond;<sup>29</sup>

Kinsella’s increasing identification in the 1960s with the Gaelic poetic tradition and his incorporation of aspects of this tradition into his poems was highlighted in his address to the Modern Languages Association in 1966, two years before the publication of the *Nightwalker* collection. Included below is a substantial extract from this address to indicate the extent of the poet’s engagement with this tradition in his attempt to uncover his own identity:

If I look deeper still in the need to identify myself, what I meet beyond the nineteenth century is a great cultural blur. I must exchange one language for another, my native English for eighteenth century Irish. After the dullness of the nineteenth century, eighteenth century Irish poetry is suddenly full of life: art in the service of real feeling [...] And all of this in full voices, the voices of poets who expect to be heard and understood, and memorised - Eoghan Ruadh Ó Súilleabháin, Donnchadh Ruadh MacConmara, Seán Clárach Mac Domhnaill, Tadhg Gaelach Ó Súilleabháin. They are the tragic end of Gaelic literature - but they are at home in their language; they have no more need to question the medium they write in than, say, John Clare writing in English.

Beyond them is the poet Aogán Ó Rathaille writing at the end of the seventeenth century and the beginning of the eighteenth [...] Beyond Ó Rathaille, the course of Irish poetry stretches back for more than a thousand years [...] Here, in all this I recognise simultaneously a great inheritance and a great loss. The inheritance is mine, but only at two enormous removes - across a century's silence, and through the exchange of worlds [...]

For my own part I simply realise that I stand on one side of a great rift, and can feel the discontinuity in myself. It is a matter of people and places as well as writing: of coming, so to speak, from a broken and uprooted family, of being drawn to those who share my origins and finding that we cannot share our lives.<sup>30</sup>

Kinsella's sense of discontinuity with the Gaelic tradition appears to have encouraged his own engagement with it, apparent in 'The Shoals Returning', but also in his incorporation of aspects of Gaelic literature – from sources such as *Lebor Gabála Éirenn* [*The Book of Invasions*] and *Táin Bó Cuailnge* [*The Cattle-Raid of Cooley*] – in collections from the late 1960s onwards.

Such was the impact of Flaherty's performance on Kinsella's work that some critics have suggested that performance itself during the 1960s may have played a part in the development and transmission of his poetry.<sup>31</sup> The theme of performance has also been a recurring concern in Kinsella's work. His 1972 collection *Notes from the Land of the Dead* includes the poem 'Worker in Mirror, at his Bench,' a work which, as John Greening has observed, probably best expresses Kinsella's '*ars poetica*'.<sup>32</sup> Central to the poem is a sequence in which a craftsman fashions masks out of mirrors before inquisitive onlookers whose presence he barely tolerates. Interspersed with descriptions of the creative process ('The process is



elaborate, /and wasteful’),<sup>33</sup> the ‘worker’ describes the exchanges between himself and the ‘customers’ as they examine his creations. His descriptions of this interaction through the second part of this poem, and into the third, are phrased as answers by ‘the worker’ to questions: ‘Yes everything is deliberate.’ ‘It is tedious, yes.’ ‘Most satisfying, yes.’ ‘Yes, I suppose I am appalled/at the massiveness of others’ work’.<sup>34</sup> While suggesting the tense relationship between a performer and his audience, as Brian John observes ‘such drama relates to Kinsella’s practice of having the reader participate in and choose between positions in a search for understanding.’<sup>35</sup>

Volumes throughout the seventies, eighties, nineties and into the twenty-first century - including *A Selected Life, Vertical Man, One* (1974), *Her Vertical Smile*, and *Littlebody* (2001) - all offer descriptions of performances by characters such as Seán Ó Riada, members of Kinsella’s family, Gustav Mahler, and, in *Littlebody*, a leprechaun. *Out Of Ireland* includes, as a preface, an extract from one of the earliest descriptions of Irish music by the twelfth century Anglo-Norman ecclesiastic Geraldus Cambrensis:

the perfection of their art seems to lie in their concealing it, as if ‘it were the better for being hidden. An art revealed brings shame.’ Hence it happens that the very things that afford unspeakable delight to the minds of those who have a fine perception and can penetrate carefully to the secrets of the art, bore, rather than delight, those who have no such perception - who look without seeing, and hear without being able to understand. When the audience is unsympathetic they succeed only in causing boredom with what appears to be but confused and disordered noise.<sup>36</sup>

As the final lines in this extract suggest, these descriptions of performance also provide an important insight into Kinsella’s own concern with audience. He has provided a commentary on Jerry Flaherty’s singing in his note on *A Selected Life*, included with *Fifteen Dead* (1979), his Oxford collection of his first four self-published Peppercanisters.<sup>37</sup> What is striking in this account is the emphasis Kinsella places, not so much on the performance itself, as on the audience’s role in its completion:

A voice from a dark corner near the fireplace began to sing. The song was Casadh an tSúgáin and the singer Jerry Flaherty [...] Nothing intervened between the song and its expression. The singer managed many difficult things, but the result was to focus attention on the song, not on the performance or on the quality of the voice. It was a special voice, adapted (like a reptile or an insect) to its function. Mere beauty

of tone would have distracted, attracting attention for its own sake. And the singer's act of communication was thoroughly completed by his audience. They sat erect and listened, lifted their glasses and drank, and murmured phrases of appreciation.<sup>38</sup>

In this description, Kinsella gives one a sense not just of the appropriateness of Flaherty's voice for *sean-nós* and the immediacy of his singing, but also the communal event which the performance represented in which the audience's engagement was vital to the 'the singer's act'. As Tomás Ó Canainn has noted: '*sean-nós* is only completely at ease [...] where the singer and his listener are in real communication'.<sup>39</sup> What appeals to Kinsella here is the process through which Flaherty deemphasises his performance whereby the 'poet' disappears and understanding is achieved,<sup>40</sup> a process that, as Brian John observes, has been an enduring 'commitment, from at least Nightwalker' in Kinsella's work.<sup>41</sup> Floyd Skloot, a student of Kinsella's during his time at Southern Illinois University, remembers a seminar in modern poetry given by the poet in 1969 in which he discussed, in terms familiar from his description of Flaherty's singing above, 'something he valued and wanted to do himself' in poetry:

Kinsella talked about stripping away everything that stood between the song and its expression, things like predetermined forms and logic, imposed shape, literary reference, anything that implied the presence of a writer behind the poem.<sup>42</sup>

While *sean-nós* singing may have had its influence, particularly on Kinsella's concern with audience, his relationship with Ó Riada is also reflected in recurring motifs within his work. In 1982, Dolmen Press issued *Our Musical Heritage*, a compilation of the texts from a series Ó Riada presented on traditional Irish music on Raidió Éireann twenty years previously. In his attempt to emphasise the distinctiveness and authenticity of Irish music, Ó Riada was keen to distinguish it from other forms of European music, and employed the image of the snake with its tail in its mouth, or ouroboros, to describe its form:

The first thing to note, obviously enough, is that Irish music is not European [...] Ireland has had a long and violent history during which she remained individual, retaining all her individual characteristics [...] Traditional Irish art never adopted the Greco-Roman forms spawned by the Renaissance, which have become the basis for

European art [...] The simplest picture of traditional Irish art is the ancient symbol of the serpent with its tail in its mouth: 'In my end is my beginning'. It is essentially a cyclic form [...] It is represented in the carved stones of the great burial ground at Newgrange, in the curvilinear designs of the Book of Kells, in the old mythological stories, episodic and cyclic in form, in all Gaelic poetry - even in James Joyce's 'Ulysses' and 'Finnegans Wake'; and in the *sean-nós* singing which still survives as an art-form today. The basic pattern of the song remains in each verse, but the events, the ornaments, vary.<sup>43</sup>

While Ó Riada's exegesis may appear overly simplistic, incorporating thousands of years of history, and diverse artistic forms, according to a single motif, it would seem to have been influential for those poets closest to him. John Montague, for example, who had a long friendship with Ó Riada, has described experiencing 'the circular aesthetic of an art older than Western music' while 'listening to' the traditional air 'The Queen of the O'Donnells', played by the Sliabh Luachra fiddle player Denis Murphy.<sup>44</sup> Brian John also finds a similar circularity to that suggested by Ó Riada present in Montague's poems, a circularity 'most explicitly evident in *The Rough Field* and bear[ing] upon the poet's awareness of the world's rhythms'.<sup>45</sup>

A comparable circularity is apparent within Kinsella's work while his recurring use of the ouroboros, and snake motif echo Ó Riada's description of traditional music. Indeed, *Our Musical Heritage* was edited by Kinsella who also contributed a preface to the book in which he compliments Ó Riada's 'analytic ear for clarifying [...] the native music'.<sup>46</sup> Critics have commented on the circular process of Kinsella's work, often characterised by allusion and repetition, both within and between volumes, to previous poems as well as the eclectic array of influences the poet draws upon. Derval Tubridy argues Kinsella's poetry eschews 'linear progression in favour of a doubling or reflexive movement by which the early poetry finds itself being read from the perspective of the later work, and indeed, other's work'.<sup>47</sup> As Floyd Skloot has noted, Kinsella:

has habitually absorbed his past work into his new work, referring back to specific images and scenes, returning to situations dealt with in earlier poems, using the concluding lines of previous books as the opening lines of new ones, and developing a set of references that serve as the circulatory system for his body of work.<sup>48</sup>

While this 'circulatory system' is contributed to through the repeated revision of, and allusion to, his earlier poetry, it is also complemented by

the manner in which volumes lead naturally from one to the next, often through the use of an epigraph taken from poems in an earlier book. Such an epigraph is found at the beginning of *Notes from the Land of the Dead*, taken from the final four lines of 'Phoenix Park', the final poem of the previous *Nightwalker* collection:

*A snake out of the void moves in my mouth, sucks  
At triple darkness. A few ancient faces  
Detach and begin to circle. Deeper still,  
Delicate distinct tissue begins to form,*<sup>49</sup>

While Kinsella has stated the importance of this snake motif to his poetry, as a means through which his 'poems can organise their own behaviour',<sup>50</sup> it also contributes to the sense of circularity in his work. As the Swiss psychologist Carl Gustav Jung, a further important influence on Kinsella's poetry,<sup>51</sup> has noted '[i]n the age-old image of the urobores lies the thought of devouring oneself and turning oneself into a circulatory process'.<sup>52</sup> The ourobores has featured regularly in Kinsella's work, particularly following O'Riada's death in 1971. While the snake motif appears repeatedly in *Notes from the Land of the Dead* (first published by the Cuala press the following year), it would be included among the drawings by Anne Yeats that accompany the third peppercanister publication in 1974, *One*. However, as Carolyn Rosenberg notes it is a presence in many of Kinsella's volumes:

Wrapping in and out of all the texts, the snake that foreshadowed, in 'Phoenix Park' (*Nightwalker and Other Poems*), the new series serves as an additional guide [...] The snake which opens *Notes* with 'hesitate' and *One* with 'Prologue' moves explicitly in 'The great cell of nightmare' (*One*) but more subtly in 'Good Night' (*Notes*), *The Messenger*, and many other poems.<sup>53</sup>

It also appears in later volumes including *Madonna and Other Poems* (1991),<sup>54</sup> while snakes are featured on the cover of both *The Messenger* (1978) and *Godhead* (1999). *Songs of the Psyche* also alludes to a snake in the poem 'Model School, Inchicore' where the poet remembers rolling a ball of 'marla' [Plasticine] 'into a snake curling/around your hand'.<sup>55</sup>

The use of the epigraph, quoted above, at the beginning of *Notes from the Land of the Dead* leads the reader into Kinsella's deeper exploration of Irish mythology and his own unconscious. Kinsella has described this process as an attempt 'to plunge into the land of the dead to find my own

roots'.<sup>56</sup> *Notes from the Land of the Dead* draws on several ancient Gaelic texts, including the *Táin Bó Cuailnge* [*The Cattle-Raid of Cooley*] in 'The Route of the Táin'<sup>57</sup> and, particularly the *The Book of Invasions* (in the poems 'Nuchal'<sup>58</sup> and 'Survivor'<sup>59</sup>), a mythical and historical narrative of the Irish race from the beginning of time to the Middle Ages.

Influenced by Jungian psychology, and particularly the concept of the collective unconscious, Kinsella's work in *Notes from the Land of the Dead*, and subsequent volumes in the 1970s and 1980s, places recent events in Irish history 'into the larger circle of Irish patterns, using archetypes that stress the unconscious of his society. He places the current in terms of universals (such as fairy tales) that suggest recurrence and the potential to occur again'.<sup>60</sup> These archetypes include motifs such as the egg, the *cailleach*, and the snake, or ouroboros, all reminiscent of patterns and characters in Irish music and song.

In the first poem of *Notes from the Land of the Dead*, 'Hen woman', the symbolism of the circle, and the snake or ouroboros, in Kinsella's work is further developed. While the volume offers us various important experiences in Kinsella's life that contributed to the formation of his identity, this poem recalls specifically his memory of his grandmother's (a figure here reminiscent of the *cailleach*) attempt to collect an egg from her hen and its subsequent breaking and disappearance through a 'grating':

I saw the egg had moved a fraction:  
a tender blank brain  
under torsion, a clean new world.

As I watched, the mystery completed.  
The black zero of the orifice  
closed to a point  
and the white zero of the egg hung free,  
flecked with greenish brown oils.

It slowly turned and fell.  
Dreamlike, fussed by her splayed fingers,  
it floated outward, moon-white,  
leaving no trace in the air,  
and began its drop to the shore.



I feed upon it still, as you see;  
there is no end to that which,  
not understood, may yet be noted

and hoarded in the imagination,  
 in the yolk of one's being, so to speak,  
 there to undergo its (quite animal) growth,  
 dividing blindly,  
 twitching, packed with will,  
 searching in its own tissue  
 for the structure  
 in which it may wake.  
 Something that had - clenched  
 in its cave - not been  
 now was: an egg of being.<sup>61</sup>

The circular motif is suggested most obviously by the egg (this first section the collection is also entitled 'an egg of being') but also by the development of the poem in which the poet witnesses the emergence of an egg 'in the sphincter' of the hen, to its eventual breaking as it 'smashed against the grating / and slipped down quickly out of sight' followed by the woman's laughter and remark 'It's all the one / There's plenty more where that came from!'<sup>62</sup> While the egg may be gone, more eggs will be laid, and life goes on. During the poem, the child also witnesses a dung beetle's (a creature associated, in ancient Egypt, with life and rebirth) attempt to roll a ball of dung:

A beetle like a bronze leaf  
 was inching across the cement,  
 clasping with small tarsi  
 a ball of dung bigger than its body.<sup>63</sup>

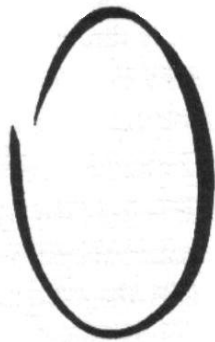
The final lines of the poem '*Hen to pan!* / It was a simple world',<sup>64</sup> brings us back again to Ó Riada's description of the form of Irish music, summarised above, as similar to 'the ancient symbol of the serpent with its tail in its mouth'.<sup>65</sup> As Carolyn Rosenberg has noted, the phrase 'Hen to pan':

links [Kinsella's] world to that of the Gnostics, who used a similar phrase in a wider sense. They used the Greek expression Hen to Pan (l. 84), which means 'The one, the all' as an inscription under depictions of the ouroboros.<sup>66</sup>

However, while this image of the ouroboros is associated with 'the primitive idea of a self-sufficient Nature', of one which 'continually

returns, within a cyclic pattern, to its own beginning',<sup>67</sup> the oval image which appears at the end of the first untitled poem of *Notes from the Land of the Dead* would seem to indicate yet another significance.

Deborah Sarbin, drawing on the work of Dillon Johnston, has described this oval image as an important symbol in the collection representing both 'an egg and the uroboros, a snake ingesting its own tail'.<sup>68</sup> While Daniel O'Hara has also suggested a numerological purpose to this oval,<sup>69</sup> Sarbin has argued that this 'figure from Celtic art suggests the circularity of time and culture, and, further, the insularity of a culture feeding upon itself'.<sup>70</sup> However, both neglect the fact that this oval, unlike zero, the ouroboros or the egg, is broken:



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Indeed, as noted above, a broken egg is the theme of the first poem of this collection, 'Hen Woman'. This broken 'ouroboros' may well refer to a persistent concern within contemporary Irish poetry, a concern with the fractured nature of the Irish tradition which Kinsella has outlined at length in *The Dual Tradition*. Inspired partly by traditional, or *sean nós*, singing, and informed by his relationship with Seán Ó Riada, who, as already noted, has also used the image of the ouroboros to describe traditional music and song, Kinsella has attempted to address this fracture by the incorporation of Gaelic literature into his poetry. However, there is a realisation that such an integration, 'across a century's silence, and through the exchange of worlds',<sup>72</sup> is impossible, reflected in the gapped 'ouroboros'.

This tradition, as described by Kinsella, also involved a close connection between the artist and his community. While Kinsella's work and comments suggest a belief that such a contemporary relationship may be no longer possible through public performance,<sup>73</sup> he has imagined it occurring within the text itself. Wolfgang Iser has argued that the reader's place is 'marked by the gaps in the text - it consists of the blanks which the reader is to fill in.' 'Whenever the reader bridges that gap' Iser continues, 'communication begins. The gap functions as a kind of pivot on which the

whole text-reader relationship revolves'.<sup>74</sup> Similarly, much as the experience of *sean-nós* singing brought home to Kinsella the central active role an audience plays in this tradition, he too has emphasized this role for his own readers, and in language familiar from his description of the performance of *sean-nós*. In 1975, Kinsella described poetry as 'a two-way process: the reader completes an act of communication initiated by the poet'.<sup>75</sup> In an interview in the mid-1990s, he required the 'reader to complete the act of communication. I don't want to entertain. If a person is looking for entertainment or information, or is merely curious, I am not interested'.<sup>76</sup> In 2004, Kinsella reiterated these words remarking: '[c]ommunication is central - an audience completing an act of communication'.<sup>77</sup> In *A Technical Supplement* (1976), Kinsella describes this act of reading as the completion of a 'circuit' between author and reader:

But for real pleasure there is nothing to equal  
Sitting down to a *serious* read,  
Getting settled down comfortably for the night  
With a demanding book on your knee  
And your head intent over it,  
Eyes bridging the gap, closing the circuit [...]<sup>78</sup>

However, the next verse clarifies the final line above by noting that, in fact, 'it is not a closed circuit'.<sup>79</sup> There is always room for ambiguity, for more possibilities in the text. As the gapped oval suggests, it is the assembling, accumulating, building of an understanding that is important for Kinsella, as much as the closure which the complete ouroboros might represent, a process with which he believes his 'ideal audience'<sup>80</sup> must also be engaged.

## Notes and References

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- <sup>1</sup> Thomas Kinsella, *Collected Poems* (Oxford and New York: Oxford UP, 1996) 143.
  - <sup>2</sup> Thomas Kinsella, *Fifteen Dead* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1979) 65.
  - <sup>3</sup> Thomas Kinsella, *Nightwalker and Other Poems* (Dublin: Dolmen Press, 1968) 37.
  - <sup>4</sup> Thomas Kinsella, *Notes from the Land of the Dead* (New York: Knopf, 1973).



- 5 Dillon Johnston, for example, has referred to Kinsella's 'shrinking readership's perplexity'. See Dillon Johnston, *Irish Poetry after Joyce* (Syracuse, New York: Syracuse UP, 1997) 97.
- 6 His work includes a translation of the early Irish epic *Táin Bó Cuailnge* [*The Cattle-Raid of Cooley*] as *The Táin* (1969), and translations of Gaelic poetry in both *An Duanaire 1600-1900: Poems of the Dispossessed* (1981) and *The New Oxford Book of Irish Verse* (1986). 'Translation', as Ciaran Carson has noted, 'is one way of trying to come to terms with the already created conscience of the Irish language'. See Ciaran Carson, 'Sweeneys Ancient and Modern', *The Honest Ulsterman*, 76 (Autumn 1984): 73.
- 7 An important initial influence on Kinsella's decision to translate Gaelic texts was the founder of Dolmen Press, Liam Miller, who encouraged Kinsella's translation efforts and published both *The Breastplate of St. Patrick* and *The Exile and Death of the Sons of Usnech*, as well as *The Táin* (1969). Miller had set up Dolmen Press in 1951 and also published Kinsella's earliest collections including *Poems* (1956) and *Another September* (1958).
- 8 See Brian John, *Reading the Ground* (Washington: Catholic U. Of America P., 1996) 114.
- 9 Thomas Kinsella, *Fifteen Dead* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1979) 27.
- 10 Kinsella., *Fifteen Dead*. 27.
- 11 John, *Reading the Ground* 55.
- 12 Kinsella, *Fifteen Dead* 69.
- 13 Kinsella, *Fifteen Dead* 70. See also Tomás Ó Canainn, *Seán Ó Riada: His Life and Work* (Cork: Collins, 2003) 34-35.
- 14 The film was premiered at the Cork Film Festival on September 30<sup>th</sup> 1959. See Kevin Rockett, Luke Gibbons and John Hill, *Cinema and Ireland* (London: Routledge, 1988) 86.
- 15 Ruth Barton, *Irish National Cinema* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004) 70.
- 16 John, *Reading the Ground* 49-150.
- 17 Carolyn A. Rosenberg, "Let Our Gaze Blaze: The Recent Poetry of Thomas Kinsella" (unpublished doctoral dissertation: Kent State University Graduate College, 1980) 344.
- 18 Kinsella, *Fifteen Dead* 70.
- 19 Lillis Ó Laoire, 'Ag Tabhairt Teanga don Tost', *Ag tnúth leis an tSolais*, 17-18. See also Breandán Ó Madagáin, 'Coibhneas na Filíochta leis an gCeol, 1700-1900', *Saoi na hÉigse: Aistí in Ómós do Sheán Ó Tuama*, ed. by Pádraigín Riggs, Breandán Ó Conchúir and Seán Ó Coileáin (Baile Átha Cliath: An Clóchomhar Ita, 2000) 93.
- 20 John, *Reading the Ground* 95-96.
- 21 Kinsella, *Nightwalker* 42.
- 22 Kinsella, *Nightwalker* 38.
- 23 Seán Ó Tuama and Thomas Kinsella, *An Duanaire: 1600-1900: Poems of the Dispossessed* (Portlaoise: Dolmen Press, 1981) 139.
- 24 'Gile na gile do chonnarc ar slí in uaigneas,/criostal an chriostail a goirmroisc rinn-uaine', ['Brightness most bright I beheld on the way, forlorn./Crystal of

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crystal her eye, blue touched with green' (Trans. Thomas Kinsella)] See Ó Tuama and Kinsella, *An Duanaire* 150-51.

25 Ó Tuama and Kinsella, *An Duanaire* 140-41.

26 Kinsella, *Nightwalker* 48.

27 John, *Reading the Ground* 92. Italicised in original.

28 Ó Tuama and Kinsella, *An Duanaire* xxxiii.

29 Kinsella, *Nightwalker* 38-39.

30 See Thomas Kinsella, 'The Irish Writer,' *Éire-Ireland* 2.2 (Summer 1967): 9-10.

31 See Donatella Abbate Badin, *Thomas Kinsella* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1996) 7; Rosenberg, 'Let Our Gaze Blaze' 174.

32 John Greening, 'Review of *Collected Poems* by Thomas Kinsella', *TLS -Times Literary Supplement* 5188 (, 6th September 2002): 24.

33 Kinsella, *Collected Poems* 128.

34 Kinsella, *Collected Poems* 128-29.

35 John, *Reading the Ground* 138.

36 Kinsella, *Collected Poems* 261.

37 Indeed, the peppercanister series began the year after Ó Riada's premature death and two of the first four, *A Selected Life* and *Vertical Man*, deal directly with the musician's passing and its aftermath.

38 Kinsella, *Fifteen Dead* 67-68.

39 Tomás Ó Canainn, *Traditional Music in Ireland* (Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978) 49.

40 Whether such understanding was actually achieved by the audience to which Flaherty sang is debatable. However, it is clear from Kinsella's comments that he believed it was.

41 John, *Reading the Ground*. 76-77.

42 Floyd Skloot 'The Simple Wisdom: Visiting Thomas Kinsella', *New Hibernia Review* 7.2 (2003): 12-13.

43 Seán Ó Riada, *Our Musical Heritage*, ed. by Thomas Kinsella (Portlaoise: Fundúireacht an Riadaigh i gcomhar le The Dolmen Press, 1982) 19-22.

44 John Montague, 'I also had Music', *The Figure in the Cave* (Dublin: Lilliput Press Ltd., 1989) 47.

45 Brian John, 'The Montague Music: "Everything Has a Sound"', *Well Dreams: Essays on John Montague*, ed. by Thomas Dillon Redshaw (Omaha: Creighton University Press: 2004) 222.

46 Seán Ó Riada, *Our Musical Heritage*, ed. by Thomas Kinsella (Portlaoise: Fundúireacht an Riadaigh i gcomhar le Dolmen Press, 1982) 12.

47 Tubridy, *Thomas Kinsella* 227.

48 Floyd Skloot, 'The Evolving Poetry of Thomas Kinsella', *New England Review*, 18.4 (1997): 174.

49 Thomas Kinsella, *Notes from the Land of the Dead* (New York: Knopf, 1973) 2. Italicised in the original.

50 Daniel O'Hara, 'An Interview with Thomas Kinsella', *Contemporary Poetry* 4 (1981): 17.

51 As Dillon Johnston notes 'much of Kinsella's recent poetic recovery of personal and public history can be clarified by the dream-analysis of Carl Jung and by the process Jung calls "individuation". As Jung defines it, individuation requires both

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- the recognition within the self of the arbitrariness of the public persona and a healthy communication between the conscious mind and the personal and collective unconscious' See Johnston, *Irish Poetry after Joyce* 99. Johnston draws on Jung's *Two Essays in Analytical Psychology*, trans. by R. F. C. Hull, vol. 7 of *The Collected Works of C.G. Jung*, ed. by Sir Herbert Read et al. (New York: Pantheon Books; Princeton UP, 1953-79) 171-72].
- 52 Carl Gustav Jung, *Mysterium Coniunctionis: An Inquiry into the separation and synthesis of Psychic opposites in Alchemy*, trans. by R.F.C. Hull, vol. 14 of *The Collected Works of C.G. Jung*, ed. by Sir Herbert Read et al. (New York: Pantheon Books; Princeton UP, 1953-79) 365. Jung uses a variant spelling here of 'ouroboros', also found in quotations elsewhere in this work.
- 53 Rosenberg, 'Let Our Gaze Blaze', p. 526.
- 54 Thomas Kinsella, *Madonna and Other Poems* (Dublin: Peppercanister, 1991) 20, 23.
- 55 Thomas Kinsella, *Songs of the Psyche* (Dublin: Peppercanister, 1985) 11.
- 56 Daniel O'Hara, 'An Interview with Thomas Kinsella', *Contemporary Poetry* 4 (1981): 16.
- 57 Kinsella, *Collected Poems* 124-5.
- 58 Kinsella, *Collected Poems* 112-3.
- 59 Kinsella, *Collected Poems* 114-16.
- 60 Deborah A. Sarbin, 'Writing/Righting History: The Revisionary stance of contemporary Irish Poetry' (unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1994) 38.
- 61 Kinsella, *Notes from the Land of the Dead* 10-11.
- 62 Kinsella, *Notes from the Land of the Dead* 9-12.
- 63 Kinsella, *Notes from the Land of the Dead* 10.
- 64 Kinsella, *Notes from the Land of the Dead* 12.
- 65 Ó Riada, *Our Musical Heritage* 21.
- 66 Rosenberg, 'Let Our Gaze Blaze' 270. Underlined in the original text.
- 67 J. E. Cirlot, *A Dictionary of Symbols* (London and New York: Routledge, 1983) 235.
- 68 Quoted in Sarbin, 'Writing/Righting History: The Revisionary stance of contemporary Irish Poetry' 50.
- 69 For O'Hara this oval represents 'the zero-opening of consciousness in childhood'. The numerological 'plot' as O'Hara describes it, continues in *One, A Technical Supplement*, *Song of the Night*, and *The Messenger*, where there 'is a loosely Jungian Process of individuation being worked out'. See Daniel O'Hara, 'Appropriate Performance: Thomas Kinsella and the Ordeal of Understanding', *Contemporary Irish Writing*, ed. by James D. Brophy and Raymond J. Porter (Boston, Mass.: Twayne Publishers, 1983) 76.
- 70 Sarbin, 'Writing/Righting History: The Revisionary stance of contemporary Irish Poetry' 50.
- 71 Kinsella, *Notes from the Land of the Dead* 6.
- 72 Kinsella, 'The Irish Writer' 9.
- 73 See Donatella Abbate Badin, *Thomas Kinsella* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1996) 10 for more on this issue.

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- <sup>74</sup> Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (Baltimore: John Hopkins UP, 1978) 169.
- <sup>75</sup> Johnston, *Irish Poetry after Joyce* 189.
- <sup>76</sup> Abbate Badin, *Thomas Kinsella* 198.
- <sup>77</sup> Andrew Fitzsimons, 'An Interview with Thomas Kinsella', *Poetry Ireland Review* 82 (2005): 92.
- <sup>78</sup> Kinsella, *Collected Poems* 197.
- <sup>79</sup> Kinsella, *Collected Poems* 197.
- <sup>80</sup> Andrew Fitzsimons, 'An Interview with Thomas Kinsella' 92.