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THE MIRROR AND THE SHADOW : The Struggle for Self in the Poetry of Thomas Kinsella

If one holds to accepted academic parlance, only imposters would pretend to discuss “Autobiography and Poetry” because, as we all know, Philippe Lejeune, the reigning and apparently unquestioned dean of autobiographical theory, at least in France, has defined autobiography as one thing and one thing only “a non-fictional account of a real person’s life told retrospectively”. In the hope of justifying our labors and in general making us look like honest, hard-working scholars, I’ll be bold enough to suggest (in my capacity of the anglophone Trojan horse) that we question and perhaps eventually undermine the hegemony of that position, especially Lejeune’s exclusion of all genres other than prose fiction. I turn for this task to two equally venerable authorities, James Olney and George Gusdorf, both of whom have ventured into the minefield of autobiography as genre, both of whose definitions seem eminently appropriate to our undertaking, as do any number of feminist attempts to define autobiography, and most particularly the work of Shari Benstock. All of these theorists insist, to varying degrees and for quite diverse reasons, on the necessity of avoiding programmatic, exclusionary definitions. Feminists concentrate on the marginality and sometimes on the self-willed malleability of the self who undertakes tries to undertake or dares to undertake the task of writing its own life. The very best of these studies go on to explore the final component of the undertaking, the act of writing “as writing” and its concomitant entry into the realm of the symbolic, a symbolic which is inescapably permanent black and white, neatly and indelibly inscribed on the page. For my own purposes, I take as a starting point James Olney’s definition not of autobiography in and of itself but of “life” which he conceives of as that set of circumstances “around which autobiography forms itself”. Life, for Olney, is thus not a countable progression of events worthy of being recorded whether dutifully, for posterity, or egotistically, for its inspirational value, nor even for mere self-aggrandizement. Instead, for Olney, and thus for the potential autobiographer, life is a mercurial, atemporal entity, one “committed to a vertical thrust from consciousness down into the unconscious”. Olney thus excludes any pretension to a linear retrospection, the

already familiar “horizontal thrust from the present into the past”. Olney’s position, I would suggest, constitutes the basis of a working definition for our appointed task, that of reading, and in the process, defining the autobiographical in poetry. I’ve chosen, you’ll notice, to speak of the autobiographical in poetry rather than of autobiographical poetry as a specific genre, for the term would be too limited, recognizing “The Prelude” but being reticent about some of Wordsworth’s sonnets, including confessional poetry but not Jackson MacLow’s “Light Poems”. And what, were autobiographical poetry our question, would one make of Blake, not to mention George Herbert, Lorine Niedecker, the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Poets and any number of poems haunted by an “I,” however skillfully disguised it be.

I should like to suggest then that one possible approach to reading and defining the autobiographical in poetry would be to examine how the poet takes hold of that mercurial vertical, downward and inward, rather than retrospective, thrust and how he then crafts that “peculiar psychic configuration” into words on the page, thus into poetry. My title today is an attempt at exploring this process, specifically my use of the words “mirror” and “shadow,” both of which are essential to the Kinsella universe. The first of these words has, as you’ve certainly realized, been borrowed, with all due respect, from M. H. Abrams whose timeless study *The Mirror and the Lamp* is an inescapable element in any exploration of the autobiographical in poetry. And while, strictly speaking, I depart from Abrams for the second part of my formula, I remain faithful, as I shall soon explain, not only to the spirit of his investigation but to his terms as well. In exploring these terms “mirror” and “shadow,” I will attempt to show that Thomas Kinsella’s poetry can be read as a carefully orchestrated, circular rather than linear and deliberately endless, struggle between, on the one hand, both the passive and the kinetic functions of the mirror and, on the other, the secrets generated by and in turn projected by that mirror. For if the shadows which the mirror/mind of the poems reflect seem a negation of romantic aspirations of wholeness, a mockery of modernist imperiousness and a curiously skewed reading of post-modern frenzy, we recognize nonetheless Kinsella’s argument for the omnipresence, the inescapable burden, the fertile riddle and, most importantly, the continuity of history, both personal and public.

Having thus established a framework, or at the very least a context within which to read the poetry as a whole, I shall go on to examine two poems, poems which are far from the most recognizably or most typically autobiographical of the Kinsella canon. They are, however, poems which represent a central consciousness attempting to confront itself in a specific context, ever present in Thomas Kinsella, the context of history. I shall argue that these two

poems, mirror images of one another, can and, in fact, must be read as an invitation to rethink the lyric impulse and to read the lyric as an attempt, albeit most frequently unsuccessful, to reconcile self with surrounding and to do so by orchestrating outer and inner disorder. It is, ultimately, finally this fertile exchange between inner and outer disorder which reveals itself as the very essence of Kinsella's poetry. The early poems, such as "A Country Walk," which combat the onslaught of disintegration with armored resistance, no longer stand in contrast to the late ventures into stylized frenzy of which "The Pen Shop" is a markedly sedate example. Instead the two become the antipodes of a whole in which a lyric poet is engaged in a coherent and seamless version of the inimitably romantic quest for self. The question of modernism, be it early, high or late and the possibility of postmodernism, or whatever we decide to name the various versions of the sensibility which will inevitably replace it, become secondary, yet still necessary, tools of the trade. The self, the lyric "I" of "A Country Walk" and "The Pen Shop," are one and the same. Neither comes to know, to master or to understand self. On the contrary, both serve to crystallize what Kinsella has called the "random persistent coherences" of the artist as craftsman. In other words, to borrow Georges Gusdorf's construct, the autobiographical impulse enters and begins to shape the poem at the very moment when "artist and model coincide [when] the historian tackles himself as object" [31].

Mirror as Looking Glass

My decision to adopt Abrams' mirror as my starting point forces me to take certain liberties with his terms. For Abrams, the mirror was a metaphor for the historical role of literary criticism, and he rightly identifies the shift in metaphors concerning that criticism—the shift from mirror to lamp—as the outcome of the evolution of the prevailing sensibility from a fixed, neo-classical position to the romantic sensibility. While retaining Abrams' sense of mirror as the reflector of something outside of itself, I should place that mirror within the central consciousness of a lyric poem and see it as reflecting—kinetically—the raw material of the life that the lyric poem would inscribe. This new mirror thus assumes a double function, going on to assure the role of Abrams' second instrument, the lamp—"the radiant projector which makes a contribution to the objects it perceives" [vi]. This, then, is the first level of mirror as instrument of self-writing in Thomas Kinsella's poetry.

The second level of the mirror, as constitutive of Thomas Kinsella's poetry, can best be appreciated by turning to feminist appropriations of Jacques Lacan's inescapable and fearsome mirror stage of development. For Lacan pointed out that at the very moment when the mirror initiates the child into

the symbolic, and thus into the possibility of recognizing “self” as “moi,” that same mirror also imposes a mistaken concept of that very “moi”. The self in the mirror is framed, whole and recognizable exactly because it is a reflection of an “other”. As Ellie Ragland-Sullivan argues, the self in the mirror is “a vision of harmony of a subject essentially in discord” [26-27]. Only when the subject seizes upon that contradiction, only when he makes it the very instrument of that vertical, even vertiginous thrust down into the unconscious, does autobiography begin. Kinsella’s poetry shows us how autobiography becomes poetry.

Mirrors are omnipresent in Thomas Kinsella’s poetry, taking forms and fulfilling roles as various as the images they reflect. For my purposes, I shall examine the workings of the Kinsella mirror as it confronts and attempts to transform the discord between inner and outer reflections of self. The inevitable starting point for a reading of Kinsella’s mirror imagery is his perhaps too frequently anthologized 1962 poem, “Mirror in February”. In that poem, a world-weary speaker, lost in the mindless routine of a morning shave, suddenly catches sight of his “dark exhausted eye” [54] and recognizes there his own mortality and insignificance:

Now plainly in the mirror of my soul
I read that I have looked my last on youth
and little more [54]

The menace of decay and the premonition of suffering are a reflection of the outer world, framed tidily in the bathroom window which frames the poem’s February morning and its trees, “suffering their brute necessities”. The inner disorder, barely recognized, is contained and all but entirely conquered by the gong of the poem’s hammering “d”s, the clash of its harsh vowels and its neat rhyme which, in the last of its three stanzas, operates closure by incorporating the seventh, formerly orphan line, into the rhyme scheme:

And how should the flesh not quail that span for span
Is mutilated more? In slow distaste
I fold my towel with what grace I can,
Not young and not renewable, but man. [54]

This mirror, which bespeaks wisdom and which teaches forbearance, soon splinters. By 1973, in “Worker in Mirror, at his Bench,” it is not only impossible but even unimaginable to reconstitute a harmonious self. The self has moved from ensconced domesticity to the workshop and from the privacy of early-morning reverie to confrontation with its public and, even worse, with the mirror. The poem is a jagged assemblage divided into three radically and inexplicably unequal parts which trace the speaker’s attempt to

“understand”. He begins by confronting what seems to be the detritus of his creative efforts and then, in a surreal version of open-house day for village artists, “welcomes” his detested and uncomprehending public, in an attempt, chiefly for his own “peace of fullness, not emptiness,” to nurse some sense out of the “dangerous litter/of lacerating pieces” he has been amassing. Part Three finds the artist alone, unprepared and locked into a face-to-face encounter with the fruits of his labor:

The bright assembly begins to turn in silence.
 The answering brain glitters one system
 answering another. [129]

Disorder and fragmentation can no longer be contained. The self is as fragmented as the shattered mirror which reflects its contradictions and pretensions as well as its intense suffering. There is no closing rhyme, no final period and no psychic closure.

“Worker in Mirror, at his Bench” belongs to the middle period of Kinsella’s poetry, a period introduced by the Joycean nightmare of “Night-walker” (1968) and a period which daringly explored the depths of psychic terror in the jagged forms exquisitely appropriate to their perilous quest. As of 1978, the year in which Kinsella published “The Messenger,” an elegy to his father, the poems become more contemplative and yet retain the haunting lesson of earlier madness. The mirror thus takes on a third identity, no longer shattered and thus capable of shattering but far less impassive than the implacable bathroom accessory of “February Morning”. The final poem of Kinsella’s 1985 volume, *Songs of the Psyche* seems a clear rewriting of the 1962 set piece. The mirror still reflects eye and mouth, but it has been transformed into a sacrificial triptych and invested with unfathomable wisdom. Secrets and shocks of recognition reverberate off one other in an infinite regression leading toward neither recovery nor wild abandon but merely determined continuation, reminiscent of Beckett’s “I can’t go on, I must go on, I’ll go on”. The poem in its entirety reads as follows:

Self-Renewal

Reverently I swung open
 the two side mirrors to reveal
 everywhere, on a white brow crossed,
 two ragged cuts; a wet mouth
 held shut; eyes hurt and full.

I peered into these
 and their velvet stirred
 with the pale secrets of all
 the lonely that had ever sat

by their lonely mirrors

studying the shame
that had brought them to sit there
and kiss the icy glass
and recover themselves a little

with icy brow on brow,
and one eye cocked at itself,
until they felt more able
to slip off about their business

with the glass clouding over
a couple of fading eye diagrams.

The kiss, the shame, the cocked eye, the crossed brow and even the business of going about one's business are all familiar elements in Kinsella's poetry, but here the looking glass clouds rather than illuminates the issue so that the speaker/artist/poet finds his vision obscured. Or, as Soshana Felman says of Mallarmé's doomed "noir sur blanc" [370], "Writing produces light only when, here and there, it projects shadows". [229]

Mirrored Shadows

Indeed, shadows, rather than a lamp, inform the mirror of Thomas Kinsella's central consciousness: the shadow of family, the shadow of Irish history and, as a product of these two, the shadow of an only partly-formed self. The genesis of knowledge, as we shall see, is darkness, darkness shed by the everyday, the recognizable, the here and now. Family is the primary source in the constitution of Kinsella's self, most intensely so in the fractured poems of his middle period. A cobbler/grandfather serves as craftsman/model, but the ever-present grandmother, chief amongst the innumerable female-as-knowledge figures in the poems furnishes the psychic bedrock. In "Tear," which might well be pronounced as if it were the verb "tear," the grandmother figure lies on her deathbed enmeshed in shadows which "eating away at the floor at [his] feet" threaten to engulf a small boy come to kiss his dying ancestor. In "The High Road," the same young boy, upon leaving the warmth of that same grandmother's grocery store, encounters nameless neighbors standing in the sunlight, "casting their long shadows across the path". [107] The shadows, which in fact block his own way home, terrorize the boy whose fertile imagination soon transforms them into a "mob of shadows". [197]. When family and history merge, as they inevitably do, the shadows takes on a distinctly menacing character, as in "Minstrel," in which an artist, "bent like a feeding thing/over my own source" his writing senses the onslaught of "a

shadow, or the chill of the night” only to recognize, having resisted the demons of his imagination, the source of his terror as both as both outer and inner.

A knock on the window
and everything in fantasy fright
flurried and disappeared.
My father looked in from the dark,
my face black-mirrored beside him. [176]

Ultimately, though, for all of their menace, the mirror and the shadow within it offer sustenance, albeit at the expense of serenity. In the terrifying final two stanzas of “Phoenix Park,” a poem which had begun as an antidote to the mad wanderings of the Joycean excursion of “Nightwalker,” the speaker, having bid farewell to Phoenix Park, and so to Dublin—a process during which he reaffirms his undying devotion to his wife, returns to the safety of home and long-awaited sleep. Only then does the shadow light the way toward continuation :

Attracted from the night by my wakefulness
Certain half-dissolved half-formed beings loomed close:
A child with unfinished features, in white
They hold hands. A shadow bends to protect them.

The shadow tries to speak, but its tongue stumbles.
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,

Like the skewed images projected onto the night-time window pane, the black of the shadows and the black of Mallarmé’s ink on the page become one. And out of this shadowy matrix, once refracted by the mirror of consciousness, will emerge the self the poet is trying to construct. M. H. Abrams rightly points out that precedent for the expressionist theory of art can be traced back to “Longinus’ discussion of the sublime style as having its main sources in the thought and emotion of the speaker” [22], and in this sense Kinsella’s poetry belongs to that tradition. It remains to see in what ways the central consciousness of the poems we will be examining, poems far less clearly autobiographical than countless others, attempts to write a self which is engaged in the endless process of writing itself.

Walking toward Redemption

Both “A Country Walk” and “The Pen Shop” are walking poems and owe a considerable debt not only to the British rural tradition and, as Brian John has

pointed out, to the Irish *immram* or voyage poem [61] but, in a more subtle fashion to Joyce, who, more than Yeats, was Kinsella's spiritual and formal Beatrice. In "A Country Walk," the "I" begins in exasperation, struggles for enlightenment and concludes, after stumbling over the ruins of history as failure and hypocrisy and by dint of an act of sheer will, with redemption. Self has acknowledged, if not entirely reconciled itself with, its surroundings. The journey had begun in the rural countryside, foreign territory to the most familiar Kinsella protagonists – an appalling landscape of "dead trunks in drapes of creeper" whose "hushed stations" hardly assured the solace they might have promised. In the absence of the sacred and in the face of the instability of the very land he stands on, the protagonist goes on to find his own salvation in "the holy stillness of a well," and, with the outlines of civilization in sight – "a steeple; the long yielding of a railway turn" –, confronts the madness of internecine war. The town offers no respite, only monuments to the same madness and hypocrisy, whether sacred or secular. Only by submitting, head uplifted, neck bared to receive the "Word" (which is a drop of water) does the speaker cross the final threshold, the one which enables him to attain a Wordsworthian communion with the ebb and flow and with the rolling secrets of the river beneath his feet. In the ultimate transformation of his distaste for the perfidy of his countrymen, the walker invokes the evening star and envisions transcendental commerce.

"The Pen Shop" might seem a curious companion piece for "A Country Walk," being dismissive rather than stoic in tone and jagged rather than deliberate in rhythm and even form. One recognizes nonetheless the brusque departure, the displacement from one spot to another, the naming of monuments which are all but indistinguishable from the ruins of history and the final recognition of the need for communion. Given these surface correspondences, the structural parallels become even more striking and point toward the evolving structure of the self as "I". Whereas in "A Country Walk" the speaker took leave of the "piercing company of women" in a fit of rage, in "The Pen Shop" his departure is more considered and his leavetaking more writerly :

Under my signature, a final kiss.
In fading ink. With added emphasis

That ought to tell her what she can do
with her fierce forecasts:

Rage, affliction and outcry!

Wide awake at the faintest scent of trouble;
contented, nosing around among the remains.

I brought it over to the big letter box
in the centre of the floor, and dropped it in.

Another cool acquaintance.

The redeeming draughts of the two poems differ just as remarkably. Whereas in "A Country Walk" the speaker refreshed himself at the "holy stillness of a well," the letter writer of "A Pen Shop" heads for coffee at Bewleys where "the black draft / entered the system direct, / foreign and clay sharp". Even the monuments which, in their separate settings, celebrate the very same skewed memories, differ, at least in the effect they produce on the observer. In "A Country Walk" they are nameless and yet sacred until they have been distorted into shopfronts, but in "The Pen Shop," the very specificity and the frozen lifelessness and the heroic postures of the statued heroes of O'Connell Street demean them. The sole exception is Cuchulain who, instead of taking his place upright and self-righteous along the O'Connell Street walkway, stands, or rather leans, ensconced in the picture window of the Post Office.

A Hand in the Matter

Clearly a self is in the making here, measuring the weight of history and driving onwards at whatever cost. It is a self which reveals itself to be a writer in gestation. In "A Country Walk," there is the mere suggestion of writerly craft. Recoiling from the frigid gaze of the disembodied eyes at the Christian Brothers' window, the speaker dismisses the subsequent intrusion come from the "neighbouring shades" and welcomes his benediction:

A naked sycamore
Dripping near the corner of the quay
Let fall from its combining arms a single
Word on my upturned face.

The parapet
Above the central arch received my hands

Then and only then and with a highly-charged gesture which appears repeatedly throughout Kinsella's work does the speaker "find" his hands: "The parapet / Above the central arch received my hands". The speaker then needs only to invoke the evening star "*Venit Hesperus*," in order to dismiss the gombeen jungle of opportunism and embrace his own "sweet trade".

Having opened with what Kinsella has elsewhere called "the scribal act," [269], "The Pen Shop" goes on to rediscover the genesis of that act, a discovery which enables the speaker/self to beget himself anew. Having stopped

upon O'Connell Bridge and left the posturing statues behind him, he once again grasps a parapet and once again finds the promise of renewal.

Cold absence under the heart.
Arrest of the will

My left hand distinct against the parapet.
The parapet distinct, with my hand against it.

It was over quickly. But something was indicated.
Measured to the need. While not forgetting the capacity.

Not until he has emptied the sacrificial cup of Bewleys' coffee and dreamt of foreign horizons, does the speaker accomplish his mission and acknowledge his destiny.

I turned aside
into the Pen Shop
for some of their best black refills

The same narrow cell, with the same attendant
over alert all my life long
behind the same counter.

Like the mirror image of his father in a long ago wintry window, the figure of the shopkeeper startles the self into self recognition. Once again, sweet trade, that necessary commerce with the outer, liberates the inner self and authorizes it to continue. Armed with pen, an instrument, even a weapon capable of transgressing "the intimacy of the flesh" [269]), the "attendant" self takes refuge in and in so doing transcends his own "narrow cell". Autobiography as circular, autobiography as forever unfinished, forever nascent.

It would thus appear that the autobiographical in poetry, at least in the poetry of Thomas Kinsella, is anything but linear, anything but horizontal. It is the circular and simultaneous rendering of and fashioning of a self. It is a suite of kinetic, interdependent images in which mirror and shadow answer one another, converge and begin again.

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