

Representations of Women in the Poetry of Thomas Kinsella

by

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation addresses the representation of women in the poetry of the Irish poet Thomas Kinsella. Using a variety of theoretical approaches, including historical criticism, French feminist theory and Jungian psychoanalytical theory, I argue that although women are an integral part of Kinsella's ongoing aesthetic project of self-interrogation, their role in his poetry is deeply problematic from a feminist perspective. For purposes of my discussion I have divided my analysis into three categories of female representation: the realistically based figure of the poet's wife Eleanor, often referred to as the Beloved; female archetypes and anima as formulated by the psychologist C.G. Jung; and the poetic trope of the feminized Muse. My contention is that while the underlying effect of the early love and marriage poems is to constrain the female subject by reinforcing stereotypical gender positions, Kinsella's aesthetic representation of this relationship undergoes a transformation as his poetry matures. With regard to Kinsella's mid-career work from the 1970s and the 1980s I argue that the poet's aesthetic integration of Jungian archetypes into his poetry of psychic exploration fundamentally influences his representation of women, whether real or archetypal. These works represent a substantial advance in the complexity of Kinsella's poetry; however, the imaginative power of these poems is ultimately undermined by the very ideas that inspire them - Jungian archetypal thought - since women are represented exclusively as facilitators and symbols on this male-centered journey of self-discovery. Further complicating the gender dynamics in Kinsella's poetry is the presence of the female Muse. This figure, which becomes of increasing importance to the poet, transforms from an aestheticized image of the Beloved, to a sinister snake-like apparition, and finally into a disembodied voice that is a

projection of the poet and his alter-ego. Ultimately, Kinsella's Muse is an aesthetic construction, the site of inquiry into the difficulties inherent in the creative process, and a metaphor for the creative process itself. Through his innovative deployment of the trope of the Muse, Kinsella continues to advance the aesthetics of contemporary Irish poetry.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

In 2007 Thomas Kinsella was awarded the Honorary Freedom of the City of Dublin. A few months later the Dublin Writers Festival and *Poetry Ireland* staged a public celebration at the Gate theatre with many of his peers in attendance, reading from his poetry. This public recognition for one of Ireland's most prolific writers arrived at a late stage in Kinsella's career, as it coincided with the poet's eightieth birthday, and it illustrates the corresponding lack of critical attention that his work suffered from until recently. For almost six decades Kinsella has continued to produce diverse and challenging poetry, characterized by a symbiotic relationship between his autobiographical experiences and their aesthetic rendering. He is unique in Irish letters for the extent to which he incorporates ancient Irish mythology and poetry into his work, and his creative interest in dreams and psychoanalysis has no other counterpart in Irish poetry, excepting W. B. Yeats's interest in occultism and spiritualism. In comparison to the critical scrutiny paid to the generation of poets who emerged after Kinsella, including Seamus Heaney, Derek Mahon and Michael Longley, and subsequently, Paul Muldoon, Eavan Boland and Nuala Ni Dhomhnaill, Kinsella's work has been neglected by critics and scholars for most of his career. Although the critical tide in Kinsella studies began to turn in the early 1990s, many facets of Kinsella's work including his representation of women are either ignored or under-represented, and the work that does exist tends to focus on the same issues repeatedly.

A number of factors have contributed to the poet's low critical and commercial visibility, including the brooding sensibility that surfaced in his work after a radical

change of style in the late 1960s, his decision to self publish his material through Peppercanister Press, which he founded in 1972, and a general reluctance by Kinsella to engage in public readings or actively promote his work. Although Kinsella is widely known in Ireland, he occupies an oddly marginal role in Anglo-Irish poetry, where the reception to his work is muted and his audience in both England and North America is now almost negligible.¹ Most contemporary readers know Kinsella either through his early lyric poetry (which continues to be anthologized on the Leaving Certificate syllabus in Irish secondary schools), or because of his reputation as a translator of Gaelic poetry and mythology. In particular, his definitive translation of the eighth century epic Ulster saga, the *Tain Bo Cuailnge*, published to wide acclaim in 1969, brought Kinsella to international prominence. In addition to the *Tain*, Kinsella's other critically acknowledged work of translation is *An Duanaire. 1600-1900: Poems of the Dispossessed*, an anthology of one hundred Irish poems, with the Gaelic version on one side of the text and Kinsella's English translation on the other side.² Neither of these

¹ This lack of recognition does not apply to Kinsella's early career, when Kinsella was awarded the Guinness Poetry Award and the Denis Devlin Memorial Award. *Another September* (1956) and *Downstream* (1962) were choices of the Poetry Book Society in Britain.

² Although Kinsella's stature as a translator and editor of early Gaelic poetry and Irish mythology is of undoubted significance, and he also has an established reputation for his prose work concerning the effects of the loss of the Gaelic language on Irish writers, the emphasis in this dissertation is on Kinsella's poetry.

achievements, however, substantially increased the audience for Kinsella's poetry on either side of the Atlantic.

As this dissertation will show, one of the unique components of Kinsella's poetic corpus is the variety of ways in which he represents female figures. The vital significance of women in the poet's work is evident from the inception of his career and has continued up through his most recent publications, *Fat Master* and *Love Joy Peace*, published simultaneously in 2011. This study confirms the profound importance of women to the poet's general development by showing how they are an integral part of Kinsella's career-long investigation of the creative process and ideas of the self. Kinsella routinely portrays himself in the process of emotional growth, and invariably women are invoked as part of his larger dynamic of understanding. Using a variety of theoretical approaches including historical criticism, French feminist theory and Jungian psychoanalytical theory, this critical study will analyze how Kinsella's representation of women, which moves between realistic and metaphorical, develops as his poetry matures, revealing women to be a powerful source of understanding and a central figure in the poet's work. In the chapters that follow this introduction, I will look at a selection of Kinsella's individual poems and sequences, representing different stages of his career, in which the female figure is deployed in a number of guises – realistic, archetypal, and mythic – in the service of the poet's search for understanding. Each chapter focuses on a different aspect of Kinsella's poetic engagement with women and their importance to his major themes and concerns. For purposes of my discussion I have divided my analysis into three distinct categories of female representation: the realistically based figure of the Beloved; Jungian archetypes and anima; and the mythological Muse. While these

categories of representation are not mutually exclusive, they do tend to be individually prominent at different stages of his career, and it is possible to chart a biographical map for his poetic development.

At the beginning of his career Kinsella's work was primarily concerned with the matter of romantic love and its relationship to creativity. His wife Eleanor, the subject of Kinsella's love poems, was typically represented in a fixed position in the domestic sphere, with no independent agency. In the poet's mid-career poetry of psychological self-examination, the representations of women centered on Jungian ideas of female archetypes and female anima, and these figures are invariably portrayed as conduits to the poet's emotional growth and his process of self-realization. As the poet has aged his focus has shifted back to questions of creativity and the role of the artist in society. At the site of these questions is the presence of a feminized muse, who is initially represented as a conventional variation of this poetic trope. In the later Muse poetry, Kinsella moves away from representing this figure as an idealized sexual female and the Muse is no longer a feminine presence or a projection of aesthetic male fantasies. In the poet's most recent work the Muse represents the poet's alter-ego, and also the ideal audience to whom he offers his life's work.

My dissertation will demonstrate how Kinsella's early poetry and Jungian-inspired sequences reinforce stereotypical gender roles by placing women in subordinate and instrumental positions with respect to the male poetic speaker, but that these pre-conceived notions of gender roles are gradually displaced. As his representation of the female presence in his work develops women are no longer silenced or appropriated for male authored purposes, but instead are represented with greater equality and agency. I

argue that Kinsella's poetry often engages with traditional patriarchal representations of women, particularly those found in Irish literary and mythological traditions. However, while Kinsella often falls back into abstract gender stereotypes, most noticeably in the early lyric poetry, as his poetry matures there is openness and a greater awareness of the dangers inherent in such representations. The ambivalence so evident in his work raises questions of female agency, that is, whether Kinsella's poetry represents agency as a given or grants it as the property of the poem or by design of the poet. As will be evident from the discussion in subsequent chapters, both scenarios are present in the poet's manifold aesthetic representations of women. My conclusion, however, is that despite the stereotypical construction of female figures in Kinsella's early lyric poetry, his representations of women evolve into multiple challenging manifestations, all of which are important contributing features to the remarkable innovation that characterizes Kinsella's poetic canon. By charting the changes in Kinsella's representation of women we can observe the alterations in his perspectives on gender and also appreciate the continuous significance of women to his work.

Before outlining the focus of each of the subsequent chapters I will give a brief overview of Kinsella's career which will provide a context for the chapter discussions and demonstrate the measure of his achievement. It is also necessary to first clarify the terms "early," "later" and "mature" which I use when discussing Kinsella's poetic development. While the Peppercanister sequences and the first Jungian influenced collection, *Notes from the Land of the Dead* (1972), clearly indicate a new direction for the poet, I am in agreement with the majority of critics who view *Nightwalker and Other Poems* (1968), as the dividing line between Kinsella's early and later work. The title

poem “Nightwalker,” an impassioned denunciation of the venality of the independent Irish State, incorporates various modernist techniques such as shifting perspectives and ventriloquism to convey the hallucinatory dream-like state that the nightwalker experiences. Kinsella’s early poetry, which includes *Poems* (1956), *Another September* (1958), and *Downstream* (1962), was characterized by elegant formalism, and a lyrical style deeply influenced by the poet’s first influence, W. H. Auden.³ Despite strong critical and commercial reception to these collections, both in Ireland and England, Kinsella quickly grew dissatisfied with conventional poetic forms and the borrowed Audenesque style which he subsequently distanced himself from.

At the time Kinsella decided to abandon formal verse he might have gravitated towards the Movement poets in Britain and consolidated his growing reputation there, or even looked to the Irish tradition of W.B. Yeats, Austin Clark and Patrick Kavanagh. Instead, he rejected both Irish and British poetic models and adopted the Anglo-American modernism of Ezra Pound and William Carlos Williams, finding in both poets exemplars of technical experimentation that could facilitate his unique aesthetic vision. The formal innovations derived from modernism, including the modernist propensity for fragmentation and dissociation, facilitated the creative expression of Kinsella’s growing

³ While individual collections are referenced by name, all poetic citations and excerpts are taken from the North American Wake Forest edition of Kinsella’s *Collected Poems*, referenced throughout as “CP” along with the corresponding page number. The exception to this manner of citation is in regard to *Peppercanisters* 24-29 which do not form part of the *Collected Poems*.

interest in psychic exploration and his attempts to aesthetically make sense of what Robert Garratt sees as “his alienated consciousness” (171). This radical change in style and direction coincided more or less with Kinsella’s move to the United States in 1965 where he began an academic career as writer-in-residence and professor of Irish literature, first at Southern Illinois University and subsequently at Temple University in Philadelphia, where he taught for twenty years. Exposure to Pound and Williams provided Kinsella with “a sort of leverage out of a rather clamped tradition” (see Daniel O’ Hara 9). Kinsella drew inspiration from William’s “creative relaxation in the face of complex reality” (see John Haffenden 106), and the American poet’s modern, colloquial voice resonated with the Dublin poet. As he elaborated in an interview with O’ Hara, “hearing the American voice in Williams, listening to him in the American accent, let me take the poetry straight and understand it” (9). Furthermore, as Dillon Johnston points out, “Pound affected Kinsella’s point of view within the poems by employing a poetic speaker who was intermediate to levels of consciousness and epochs of history” (104). More broadly, Pound also offered Kinsella an instructive example of what a poetic career could be, and to the extent that Kinsella’s corpus can be viewed as one continuous creative endeavor, it is arguably similar in scope and ambition to the *Cantos*.⁴ Pound also influenced Kinsella self-interrogation aesthetic. Maurice Harmon calls attention to Pound’s practice of introducing himself as a character in his work, as the artist in the act of discovery, and how “this accorded will with Kinsella’s tendency to portray himself

⁴ Kinsella has considered Pound’s work closely because one of the classes he regularly taught at Temple was a close reading seminar on the *Cantos*.

within the poem in an act of emotional growth, while at the same time showing himself as its observer” (xx).

Kinsella’s adoption of free verse in the late 1960s has resulted in a complex poetry of personal interrogation which is simultaneously traditional in theme and formally experimental. Beginning with *Notes from the Land of the Dead* Kinsella employs a deliberately disjunctive form, represented by dislocated syntax and an open-ended quality in numerous poems and sequences. Often the poems appear to begin in the middle of the event described, with no authorial presence or clear narrative. His work is difficult to categorize as the formal choices he makes change with each new collection. He deliberately and creatively repeats and echoes himself, finding new aesthetic meaning in experiences and poems from decades earlier. Recurring imagery and motifs are a hallmark of his work, with entire sequences and individual poems frequently incorporating situations and language from earlier work. Images and themes recur in different contexts, often linked together with the minimum of narrative or logical connective tissue. This practice of referring to past work distinguishes Kinsella from his peers, and as one critic astutely observed, Kinsella has developed “a set of references that serve as the circulatory system for his body of work” (see Floyd Skloot 174). The poet has admitted that he views his work as “a totality that is happening, with the individual poem a contribution to something accumulating” (see O’ Driscoll 59), which is in marked contrast to the isolated lyric poem of his early aesthetic practice. For the first time reader of Kinsella, or for those who are only familiar with his early work, these connections are not always obvious or clear, and the resistance to closure that so many of his poems exhibit only reinforces the perception that his work is difficult and inaccessible.

Kinsella's mature poetry also places great demands on his audience in terms of source material and the rich complex of philosophical ideas it tackles. A reader coming to Kinsella's work without a cursory knowledge of the philosophical ideas that interest him, or of Irish history and mythology and Jungian psychology, is likely to be somewhat at a loss when trying to understand his poetry.⁵ For example, entire Peppercanister sequences revolve around historical figures such as the composer Gustav Mahler (*Her Vertical Smile*), the eight-century Irish philosopher Johannes Scotus Eriugena (*Out of Ireland*), and the Enlightenment philosophy of Denis Diderot's *Encyclopedie (A Technical Supplement)*. He has also drawn upon figures from the bardic tradition such as Amergin, Ireland's first poet, and Aogan O Rathaille, one of the last of the Irish language poets. These Gaelic poets are a recurring presence in his work, as are the characters and poems from *Lebor Gabala Erenn (The Book of Invasions)*.

In addition, the brooding psychic exploration of his mid-career, essentially an extended poetic meditation on a Jungian journey inward, was not particularly fashionable or well-received by critics when it was initially published. One early supporter, Calvin Bedient, who considered Kinsella to be the most seriously talented Irish poet since Yeats, grew critical of the depressive sensibility that surfaced in Kinsella's work after *Nightwalker and Other Poems*. In a review of *Notes from the Land of the Dead* Bedient

⁵ This assessment does not apply to all of Kinsella's work. For example, the first four Peppercanister sequences, *Butcher's Dozen*, *A Selected Life*, *Vertical Man*, and *The Good Fight*, are straightforward narratives, as is a later sequence about the poet's father, *The Messenger*.

wrote that with the publication of *Notes*, “Ireland’s best living poet has brooded himself to pieces” (54). A similarly unsympathetic view has been expressed by Hugh Kenner, who characterized these poems as “intensely solipsistic verse” (599). Kinsella’s poetry of psychic exploration, which dramatizes man’s isolation while at the same time offering the possibility of understanding and self knowledge, is perhaps his most challenging work. Unpredictable shifts in perception and deliberately unresolved or enigmatic endings are atypical in Irish poetry, and the poet has made little effort to reach out to a broader audience or explain his work to critics and interviewers.

With the establishment of the Peppercanister Press in 1972 Kinsella further distinguished himself from his peers in that he now had the unprecedented ability to control how he first published his work, but this freedom also removed his work from mainstream publication channels.⁶ Typically Peppercanister issues two chapbooks at a time in limited deluxe editions and trade editions, and reprints them subsequently in groups of five issued by Oxford University Press or Carcanet Press in Britain and Wake Forest University Press in the United States. This method of publication has allowed Kinsella considerable freedom with regard to revising and editing his work, so that when the sequences are issued in discrete groups or as part of a larger Collected or Selected edition the text has often been revised and a prologue or epilogue have been added. The

⁶ The first Peppercanister publication was *Butcher’s Dozen* (1972), written as a response to the findings of the Widgery Tribunal, which exonerated the British soldiers responsible for killing thirteen unarmed peaceful civil rights demonstrators in Derry on January 30, 1972.

disadvantage to this method of publication is that it has restricted Kinsella's audience since it was not until the publication of the *Collected Poems* by Oxford University Press in 1996 that the full trajectory of Kinsella's career became accessible for the first time. In each Peppercanister sequence Kinsella's poems stand as discrete texts, but their underlying meaning is often derived from a re-reading of an earlier poem or sequence, and this feature is particularly true with regard to the poetry concerning female figures. As the Peppercanisters increase in numbers, critics are recognizing that they are in fact "a series of distinctive and interconnected poetic sequences that build together to form a loosely structured whole" (see Derval Tubridy 1). Another distinguishing feature of Kinsella's work is his incorporation of visual imagery on the cover and in the text of many of his sequences. This practice began before Kinsella founded his own press, with the publication of *Finistere* by Dolman Press in 1972, which included designs taken from the monolithic burial chambers at Newgrange and Knowth, County Meath, and Cardonagh, County Donegal, and has continued to the present day. These images have a direct bearing on the thematic concerns of the particular sequence, and this intertextuality is another facet of Kinsella's work that sets him apart from his peers.

Before outlining the chapters I wish to provide a brief review of the critical work already existing on Kinsella which will demonstrate the necessity of this current study. The first book-length study of Kinsella's work, Maurice Harmon's *The Poetry of Thomas Kinsella*, did not appear until 1975. Harmon examines Kinsella's thematic concerns from his first published work *Poems* up through the publication of the Jungian inspired

sequence *One* in 1974.⁷ With the exception of four short critical essays published in the 1980s, Robert F. Garratt's chapter in *Modern Irish Poetry: Tradition and Continuity from Yeats to Heaney*, Dillon Johnston's chapter in *Irish Poetry after Joyce*, Seamus Deane's chapter in *Celtic Revivals: Essays in Modern Irish Literature*, and Daniel O' Hara's chapter in *Contemporary Irish Writing*, the critical attention paid to Kinsella was negligible until the early 1990s.⁸ Although Kinsella's aesthetic engagement with female figures is recognized, the precise nature of this engagement has not been analyzed in any detail, nor has the previous criticism addressed the issue of gender representation. Thomas Jackson's study, *The Whole Matter: The Poetic Evolution of Thomas Kinsella*, was the first comprehensive study on Kinsella's poetry to be published in North America. Jackson concentrates on the influence of Carl Jung, James Joyce and the American modernism of Pound and Williams on Kinsella's work up through the publication of

⁷ In addition to these monographs Kinsella's work has been the subject of a number of journal articles and book chapters, and there have been three special issues of scholarly journals devoted to a consideration of his work: *Tracks* 7 (1987), *Irish University Review* 31.1 (2001) and *Irish Studies Review* 16.3 (2008).

⁸ Since then, Kinsella's poetry has been receiving the long-overdue critical attention it deserves and there have been a number of monographs published by Irish and American scholars. Typically, these texts have adopted a strict chronological approach in their survey of Kinsella's writing, confining the scope of their analysis to the poet's incorporation of Jungian psychology and archetypal figures in his mid-career poetry, or to the influence of the Gaelic literary tradition on his work.

Open Court, in 1991. Underpinning his study is the stated conviction that “Thomas Kinsella is the most important and the most compendious Irish poet since Yeats” (xi), a claim which sometimes gets in the way of his critical assessment of the poems. However, his study expands considerably on the discussion initiated by Maurice Harmon, and he is the first critic to recognize the importance of Pound, Williams and Robert Lowell to Kinsella’s development.⁹ Brian John’s monograph, *Reading the Ground: The Poetry of Thomas Kinsella*, is a more informed account of Kinsella’s Jungian-influenced poetry and the importance of early Irish literature and mythology for his work. John pays particular attention to *Notes from the Land of the Dead* and Kinsella’s use of material drawn from *The Book of Invasions* to support the psychological quest detailed in such poems as “Finistere,” “Nuchal,” “Survivor,” and “The Oldest Place.” His study traces the poet’s development up to the publication of *From Centre City* in 1994, but again the discussion on Kinsella’s representation of women is minimal. Badin, who has translated most of Kinsella’s work into Italian, emphasizes the continuity in Kinsella’s early and later poetry in her 1996 introductory study, *Thomas Kinsella*, by considering the interdependence of his work. Badin is one of the first critics to focus on this aspect of Kinsella’s poetry (perhaps because there were sufficient volumes published by the time she wrote her book to enable her to reach this conclusion), and she argues that each volume of the

⁹ Catriona Clutterbuck faults Jackson’s reading of the gender dynamics at play in *Notes from the Land of the Dead*, arguing that “Jackson clearly suggests that the psychic individuation process ideally involves the poet’s disengagement with historical women” (247).

Peppercanisters, “although different in thematic interests and stylistic peculiarities, gains significance through its links with the others and the sequential organization of the poems as a whole” (x). Tubridy’s comprehensive review of the Peppercanister series up through the publication of *Godhead* in 2000 is perhaps the most critically useful monograph on Kinsella; however, issues of gender and the representation of women are discussed only briefly.¹⁰ Tubridy seeks to rectify the lack of critical attention paid to Kinsella’s mature work, not from a particular theoretical perspective, but from a comprehensive and detailed close reading of each Peppercanister volume her study includes. More recently, in 2008, two new monographs were published to coincide with a celebration of the poet’s work in Dublin when Kinsella was awarded the freedom of the city: Andrew Fitzsimons’s *The Sea of Disappointment: Thomas Kinsella’s Pursuit of the Real*, and Maurice Harmon’s expanded study, *Thomas Kinsella: Designing for Exact Needs*. Neither of these studies, however, examines in any detail the question of how Kinsella treats established notions of gender and sexuality in his work.

Scholars and critics now enjoy even greater access to Kinsella’s work with the recent establishment of an archive for his manuscripts and papers in the Robert W. Woodruff Library at Emory University in Atlanta. This material has allowed researchers the opportunity to gain new and valuable perspectives on the poet’s creative process.

¹⁰ Tubridy’s book is also the first study to critically discuss the significance of the various illustrations and cover art that are a key component to many of the Peppercanisters. She is one of the few critics that recognize the extent to which Kinsella’s incorporation of visual art into his poetry provides another layer of meaning to his work.

Tubridy's book draws heavily on Kinsella's notes to explicate many of the more obscure references in many of the Peppercanister sequences. Fitzsimons also draws heavily on Kinsella's unpublished drafts and notes contained in the archival material at Emory to support his examination of what led Kinsella to his rejection of received forms and his "re-evaluation of poetic procedure" (2). Fitzsimons argues that Kinsella's work is continually fueled by disappointment and the corrosive encounter with the "pursuit of the Real" (2). He further relies on the poet's papers to argue that Kinsella's poetic themes matured during the formative period in the poet's development that occurred between the late 1960s and the early 1970s. In Fitzsimons view, "individual Peppercanister poems do not advance Kinsella's poetics as much as refine and distill discoveries made during the composition of *Notes from the Land of the Dead*" (xi). With regard to the representation of women, Fitzsimons thesis is flawed as there is movement and change in this aspect of Kinsella's poetry; however the issue I address is not the focus of this scholar's research. I also have reviewed Kinsella's papers at Emory and, although the material is valuable with regard to understanding his writing process and various other critically important issues such as his work in establishing one of the first Irish Studies programs in an American University, the material was not particularly relevant to the topic of this dissertation.

Aside from a critical essay by Gerald Dawe, "Poetry As Example: Kinsella's Peppercanister Poems," in which he draws attention to the ambition of Kinsella's uncompromising vision in the first twelve Peppercanisters (and Tubridy and Harmon's monographs discussed above), many of the more recent Peppercanister volumes have received scant critical attention. Dawe's essay covers the Peppercanister volumes up

through the publication of *St Catherine's Clock* in 1987, and one of his main arguments is that "There is no predictable thematic seam that the reader or critic can readily extract as Kinsella's poetry; by its very nature, it challenges such consolations" (204, 205). While each of the volumes that Dawe examines are distinct in theme and form, I would counter that Kinsella's evolving representation of women is a connective seam that joins many of these volumes.¹¹ In the majority of the criticism reviewed above, the focus is still on Kinsella's early and mid-career poetry rather than the later Peppercanisters. By virtue of the publication dates of the Tubridy, Harmon and Fitzsimons monographs, Peppercanisters 26 and 27, *Man of War* and *Belief and Unbelief*, published in 2007, have not been considered in any critical detail. Since the monographs that appeared in 2008, Kinsella has published two more Peppercanisters, *Fat Master* (2011) and *Love Joy Peace* (2011). To the best of my knowledge, Chapter 4 of this dissertation is the first critical evaluation of these two recent Peppercanisters.

More critically, the existing scholarship has not adequately addressed the multiplicity of ways in which Kinsella represents female figures in his poetry. Because these figures and this presence are so prominent in the poetry, understanding their importance is vital to a broader understanding of Kinsella's oeuvre. To date, no book-length study has been devoted to a serious investigation on the representation of women

¹¹ Specifically, of the Peppercanisters that Dawe discusses, five of these sequences are analyzed in this dissertation with regard to Kinsella's representation of women. They are *One*, *A Technical Supplement*, *Songs of the Night and Other Poems*, *Songs of the Psyche*, and *Her Vertical Smile*.

in Kinsella's poetry and the essays that address this topic, while useful, are limited in scope by the parameters of their inquiry. Lucy Collins and Ruth Ling investigate the links between male-female relationships and aesthetic meaning in the poet's work in their respective essays in the *Irish University Review's* special issue on Kinsella. Two other essays of note are Guinn Batten's discussion of how the poetry of Medbh McGuckian and Kinsella returns poetry in surprisingly similar ways "to its sources in an embodied or even sexualized imagination" (213). Most recently, Catriona Clutterbuck offers a reading on the relationship between skepticism and faith in Kinsella that focuses on issues of gender. She argues that the poet analyzes this issue in terms of "the female who is occluded within patriarchy" (245).¹² The lack of focus on representations of women in Kinsella's poetry is particularly troubling because women are of central importance to Kinsella's aesthetics. My dissertation attempts to fill this gap in Kinsella scholarship and broaden the readership for the poet's work by analyzing the complex ways in which he represents women, and by challenging the gender-based assumptions evident in much of his poetry.

¹² Two early essays by Peggy Broder and Carol Tattersall address the issue of Kinsella's representation of women, but they were published early in Kinsella's career and are limited in terms of the scope of their analysis. I have studied both articles and am not confident that the authors would reach the same conclusions or offer the same readings if they had the benefit of access to Kinsella's later work; therefore, they are not discussed in this dissertation.

Dillon Johnston is one of the few critics who acknowledge Kinsella's multiple representations of women and he draws attention to this facet of Kinsella's work in the context of the poet's "evolving representation of Dublin" ("Kinsella's Dublins" 295). When Kinsella began writing in the early 1950s he deliberately shied away from locating his work in a specifically Irish context, either in theme or setting, and his early poetic influence was the English modernist W.H. Auden. With *Nightwalker and Other Poems* (1968), we can see a change in the topography of his poetry, as the disillusioned nightwalker wanders through the streets of Dublin. Dublin continues to be an important setting for future sequences that include *St. Catherine's Clock* (1987), where Kinsella explores national and family history at the site of Robert Emmet's execution in Dublin, and *The Pen Shop* (1997), in which Kinsella's walker revisits James Joyce's Dublin by reversing Leopold Bloom's walk through the city centre. Further evidence that Kinsella's poetic identity is located in Dublin can be found in his 2006 prose memoir, *A Dublin Documentary*, in which the poet revisited the Dublin neighborhoods of his youth through prose, poems and photographs. Johnston reads Kinsella's evolving representation of Dublin as one where the poet projects a view of the city as "a separate world with a feel of the country" (295), and he is the first critic to identify the palpable presence of female figures in this urban setting: "Kinsella imports the dark presences of ancestral females, while in poetic accounts of his later life in Baggot Street and Percy Place, his wife Eleanor joins in association with the poet's mother and other mysterious female figures" (295).

Turning now to the chapters that follow this introduction, I will begin my analysis with Kinsella's early love poetry and his marriage sequences, which are the subject of the

second chapter, “Domestic Drama and the Ordeal of Life: Thomas Kinsella’s Marriage Poems.” In 1955 Kinsella married Eleanor Walsh, and from this union emerge many poems on the theme of romantic love and its ability to survive despite the ordeals of life. This chapter will discuss Kinsella’s lyric love poetry concerning Eleanor, who is typically referred to in Kinsella’s work as the “Beloved,” and also three individual sequences dedicated to an aesthetic examination of their marriage: *Wormwood* (1966), *Madonna and Other Poems* (1991) and *The Familiar* (1999). The conflict between the masculine and the feminine is a theme rehearsed along conventional lines in the early work with the poet questioning whether the lovers’ different temperaments – the poet rational, his Beloved instinctual – are capable of achieving true unity. As Harmon points out, “it is central to the narrative of the relationship between Tom and Eleanor that they learned to recognize and respect each other’s differences” (xiii), and the struggle to achieve this balance is conveyed in the poetry about the Beloved. Several important questions regarding Kinsella’s representation of women arise in these poems. Is the underlying effect of the early love poetry to endorse traditional gender roles as the female subject cannot move beyond the ontological status assigned to her? Should we regard the Beloved as a mere conduit for the poet’s development if, throughout these sequences she never finds (or is given) her own voice? And to what extent is the Beloved’s agency truly hers if it is in fact “given” to her by the poet? If the female figure of the Beloved is evoked, addressed, and revealed only by her masculine opposite, to what extent does the Beloved grow within this union? Does the poet regard women in masculinist terms in these conventional love poems, and if so, how does that affect our reading and evaluation of these lyric poems?

My contention is that while the underlying effect of the early love and marriage poems is to constrain the female subject by reinforcing stereotypical gender positions, Kinsella's aesthetic representation of this relationship undergoes a transformation as his poetry matures, and the discomfiting distance that the poet maintains from his Beloved in the early work disappears by the time of *The Familiar*, a late career sequence of marriage poems that reaffirms the strength of the lovers' bond and acknowledges the independent strength of the female partner. Having become aware of gender inequality, women are no longer silenced or objectified in the poetry. I argue that this late sequence should be read as a corrective to Kinsella's much earlier love poem, "Phoenix Park," where the poet and his Beloved are portrayed as achieving only a tenuous truce after a process of surrender, confrontation and reconciliation. *The Familiar* offers a renewed reading of the gender dynamics between the poet and his wife, providing an example of woman as an autonomous speaking subject, no longer reliant upon the poetic speaker. Woman in this context provides an avenue through which the poet's entire conception of gender roles can move forward.

In this chapter, I will draw on the work of Helene Cixous and Luce Irigaray, along with recent writing by Irish scholars on issues of gender in the field of Irish writing. Cixous's expose of the binary thinking inherent in Western language and culture that ultimately serves to reaffirm "Man" not "Woman" will be discussed in the context of Kinsella's poetic binaries. The work of critics Batten, Clutterbuck, and Patricia Coughlan is also relevant to this chapter with regard to understanding the gender dynamics present in Kinsella's poetry. I will also draw attention to the social and historical context in which Kinsella began writing and suggest that his representation of women must be

examined against the backdrop of the politically sanctioned socio-cultural and religious subordination of women that existed in Ireland from the formation of the Irish Free State in 1921 up through the mid 1970s.

In chapter three, “Female Archetypes: Thomas Kinsella and C.G. Jung,” I argue that Kinsella’s aesthetic integration of Jungian archetypes into his poetry of psychic exploration fundamentally influences his representations of women, whether real or archetypal. Some of Kinsella’s most critically acclaimed and technically challenging volumes revolve around his poetry of self-discovery from the 1970s and the 1980s. These works represent a substantial advance in the complexity of Kinsella’s work, both technically and thematically; they also constitute a significant development in how women are represented. In this chapter, I will look closely at *Notes from the Land of the Dead* (1972), *One* (1974), *A Technical Supplement* (1974), *Song of the Night and Other Poems* (1978), and *Songs of the Psyche* (1985). I will draw upon fundamental aspects of Jungian psychology, particularly Jung’s theory of mythic archetypes, and the concepts of “the collective unconscious” and “individuation” and show how they are imaginatively interpreted by Kinsella. Jung’s belief that deeper psychic understanding or individuation can only happen for a male by confronting the female anima or archetype that is buried in the male psyche lies at the heart of Kinsella’s poetry of self exploration, and he is unique in Irish letters for his sustained poetic focus on this inward journey. However, as I will show, Jung’s theory of mythic archetypes and the process by which the male subject achieves genuine Selfhood or individuation is deeply problematic from a feminist standpoint, and Kinsella’s poetry is not immune to the same criticism.

As I will show, the poet's persistent self-analysis fuses childhood memories with female Jungian archetypes through an analysis of a series of autobiographical poems about Kinsella's maternal and paternal grandmothers that constitute the aesthetic heart of *Notes from the Land of the Dead*. With this suite of poems, Kinsella acknowledges and celebrates the importance of these women to his poetic enterprise. Another key aspect of Kinsella's Jungian-influenced poetry is the manner in which he frames his personal journey into the land of the dead within the context of Irish history and mythology. Kinsella draws on stories from *Lebor Gabala Erenn: The Book of the Taking of Ireland (The Book of Invasions)*, as a metaphor for the collective unconscious of his ancestors. Kinsella's aesthetic rendering of the relationship between the poet's questing persona and the collective unconscious, as filtered through the Sovereign Hag or *cailleach* of Irish mythology, is another distinguishing aspect of his poetry. By grafting the stories and myths from *The Book of Invasions* onto the poems that explore Jung's concept of "the collective unconscious," Kinsella establishes an Irish context for his modernism. In these poems female autobiographical figures, Celtic goddesses and Jungian anima converge in a collective Irish unconscious, and in Kinsella's unconscious mind, in a multi-dimensional representation of women.

One of the central questions that arise in relation to Kinsella's Jungian-influenced poetry is whether these female figures simply function as facilitators and symbols on this male-centered journey. Jung's concept of spiritual rebirth has been charged by some critics as ultimately patriarchal, and he has been accused of essentializing the feminine through his psychological methodology. The arguable problem with Jung's theory is that even though the male's process of individuation is achieved through reconciliation with

the male and female components of the self (animus and anima), once the feminine principle has been confronted and acknowledged the male has no further need for this figure. The question then arises, is Kinsella simply endorsing the myth of the phallic hero in these poems? Or, as Anthony Mellors argues, is the archetypal Great Mother only functioning as a “handmaiden to male identity”? (Mellors 92). I argue that the female figures in these poems represent an intermediate stage on Kinsella’s psychic journey towards individuation, and even though their significance to his poetics and his psychic quest cannot be denied, ultimately the poetry of psychic exploration shores up gender stereotypes. While the poet acknowledges his feminine side as integral to his selfhood, the Jungian self that Kinsella seeks to create can only be constructed by integrating the feminine, which is thereafter subsumed in a spiritual rebirth that is ultimately patriarchal and profoundly masculinist.

Further complicating the gender dynamics in the poetry is the presence of the female Muse. In chapter four, “Not *The White Goddess* but the ‘Necessary Enabling Other’: Thomas Kinsella and the Muse,” I offer a critique of Kinsella’s distinctive representation of this central figure in his poetic world, who is often described as “the enabling contrary” or the “necessary enabling other” (Kinsella, pers. comm. 7/1/12). My argument in this chapter has a dual focus: to analyze Kinsella’s longstanding aesthetic engagement with the Muse, and to propose that Kinsella’s repeated invocation of his Muse can be best understood through an explication of his views on the creative process itself. The manner in which Kinsella genders the nature of his artistic inspiration is another facet of the poet’s work that has received very little critical scrutiny. Traditionally, the Muse appears as a desirable woman who inspires the poet’s

imagination, yet I will show that Kinsella's Muse is not simply another reductive variation of this trope. Rather, as his work matures, the Muse transforms from an aestheticized image of the Beloved to a sinister snake-like apparition, and finally into a disembodied voice that is a projection of the poet and his alter ego. Ultimately, Kinsella's Muse is an aesthetic construction, the site of inquiry into the difficulties inherent in the creative process, and a metaphor for the creative process itself.

The Muse represents a new dimension of the feminine in Kinsella's work by embodying the enabling potential of the imagination. In Kinsella's early work, the figure of the Muse and the Beloved are sometimes conflated, and the Beloved is allegorized as a seductive muse-figure. In the later work, I argue this aesthetic creation of the poet's imagination has developed into an independent figure, one that represents Kinsella's unconscious creative potentiality. Kinsella's Muse is no longer conceived as a woman who excites the poet's imagination through desire or their physical union; on the contrary, the Muse is now imagined as an independent figure, not subject to the fantasies of masculine desire. Kinsella expands the concept of the Muse in several poems when he adopts a female persona and speaks through the voice of his Muse, his necessary enabling other. I argue that in doing so he moves beyond traditional poetic representations of the Muse, and grants her a powerful aesthetic agency in her own right. In Kinsella's most recent Peppercanister publications, *Fat Master* and *Love Joy Peace*, the poets' lifelong imaginative engagement with this figure culminates in a series of revealing poems, with the poet and his Muse still engaged in constant conversation about the nature of artistic inspiration and creativity. I contend that Kinsella's ambivalent representation of women is reflected in his equally ambivalent relationship with his Muse. In these poems, their

conversations are not always amenable, as the poet struggles with the toll that the artistic process takes on him. Yet these poems also reveal that Kinsella conceives the figure of the Muse to be an essential aesthetic partner who has provided a necessary and enabling foil over a lifetime of writing.

Robert Graves's study of the language of poetic myth and the function of the Muse in modern poetry, *The White Goddess: A Historical Grammar of Poetic Myth*, will be discussed in relation to Kinsella's ideas about the importance of the Muse in his own work.¹³ I will also make reference again to the writings of Jung, who viewed the figure of the Muse as representing the writer's anima, an image of the mysterious woman in the psyche of man. Because snake imagery is replete in Kinsella's poetry of psychic exploration, it will be necessary to consider the Jungian implications of this representation. In a sense, both Graves's and Jung's ideas can be seen at work in different ways in Kinsella's Muse poetry, but I argue that the poet's Muse is a more complicated and aesthetically interesting character than these writers allow. In the early Muse poetry, this figure is a conventional female presence that inspires the male poet. Irigaray's work on the tradition of representing woman as Other in patriarchal discourse is relevant with regard to critiquing Kinsella's conception of the feminine Muse. When the Muse is reconceived as the poet's alter-ego, I argue that this figure no longer has a discernible feminine identity that is compromised by gender-representation. On the contrary, through

¹³ Graves argues in *The White Goddess* that after a struggle for supremacy, the ancient religion of the goddess was hidden from view, and the imaginative power of the male or patriarchal culture dominated.

this unorthodox representation, Kinsella can be read as writing against the patriarchal discourse that usually surrounds the trope of the Muse.

I hold that the search for meaning and self-knowledge is the primary theme running through Kinsella's poetry. This search is inextricably connected with his identity as an artist and is conducted primarily through the varied representations of women that populate his work. Kinsella has persistently subjected his major preoccupations – love, the artistic act, and the quest for self – to rigorous scrutiny, often through the figure of women. While their representation within the poetry is sometimes one-dimensional, the imaginative and technical daring that characterizes Kinsella's mature work makes these figures resistant to simplification. Kinsella's whole career has been devoted to an intimate examination of "the ordeal of life" and the nature of the artistic process, and he has explored these themes through a variety of poetic forms and through a myriad of autobiographical and imaginary female figures. As this study will show, Kinsella, unlike many of his contemporaries, does not reproduce patriarchal paradigms of gender consistently across his career, but rather, as his work matures, he destabilizes and unsettles such paradigms, in both abstract and experimental ways. This makes him a unique phenomenon in contemporary Irish poetry, and much of his later poetry deserves to be read and evaluated as a poetic corpus that in its own unique way subverts the phallogocentric traditions of western literature.

CHAPTER 2

DOMESTIC DRAMA AND THE ORDEAL OF LIFE: THOMAS KINSELLA'S MARRIAGE POEMS

This chapter will concentrate on the evolving poetic representation of Kinsella's wife Eleanor, who has been aesthetically associated with his poetry since the beginning of the poet's career. In 1946 Kinsella entered University College Dublin to study science, but within a couple of months he realized that the sciences were not where his interests lay and he opted instead for a career in the Irish Civil Service. He moved into a flat in Baggot Street, close to his office, and continued to attend university as a night student taking courses related to his employment. It was during this period in the late 1940s that Kinsella met three people who became pivotal in his life: Eleanor Walsh, whom he married in 1955, Liam Miller, the founder of Dolmen Press, which published all of Kinsella's early work, and Sean O' Riada, the Irish composer and traditional musician, whose premature death inspired two of the initial Peppercanister sequences, *A Selected Life* and *Vertical Man*. Eleanor was a radiology student at UCD but had to abandon her studies when she developed tuberculosis and was subsequently hospitalized for two years in St. Mary's Hospital in Phoenix Park. Kinsella's experience of watching Eleanor battle through this disease informed his burgeoning poetic sensibility and much of his early work exhibits a realization of the fragility and the precariousness of both life and romantic love. Another important theme running through Kinsella's work is a deeply held belief that love and the creative response to experience can together transmute the inevitable challenges and disappointments of life, and he often expresses these views in the poetry concerning his wife.

Kinsella's love poems usually revolve around the figure of Eleanor, who is referred to at various times by name or alternatively as the "Beloved." Beginning with his earliest work, *Poems*, published in 1958 and presented as a wedding present to Eleanor, Kinsella has reiterated and examined the viewpoint first expressed in a poem from this volume, "Echoes": "Love I consider a difficult, scrupulous art" (CP 1). With this short sentence, Kinsella's announces the significance of love to his poetic practice and to his search for understanding, and also the exacting seriousness with which he views both love and creativity. I will first discuss a representative selection of Kinsella's early love poetry and will then analyze in detail Kinsella's three marriage sequences, *Wormwood* (1966), *Madonna and Other Poems* (1991) and *The Familiar* (1999). Over the course of his career, Kinsella's aesthetic affirmation of his relationship with Eleanor becomes more pronounced, with the initial dissonant tone of *Wormwood* giving way to an acceptance of their differing temperaments in *Madonna*, leading to a full embrace of their union and what I argue is a recognition of her independent subjectivity in *The Familiar*. Kinsella's early poetry engages stereotypical images of women that too often enshrine gender differences in an oppressive rather than a celebratory sense. However, while his work seems at times to repeat this oppressive enshrinement, the complexity of the relations he describes undermines any unreflective reinscription of gender inequality.

In discussing the problematic representation of women in the poetry that is the subject of this chapter I will incorporate the work of French Feminist theoreticians, in particular Helene Cixous and Luce Irigaray, along with recent perspectives of Irish scholars on issues of gender in the field of Irish writing. Feminist theory has shown how women have been systematically excluded from representation in patriarchal cultures,

whether it is through the discourse of literature, psychoanalysis, philosophy or linguistics. The representation of the feminine by male writers has objectified women and defined them in terms of absence or lack, in contrast to men. I argue that the underlying effect of the early love poetry and *Wormwood* marriage sequence is to endorse traditional patriarchal gender roles, as the female subject cannot move beyond the ontological status assigned to her in the poems. She is a silent presence whose sexuality is represented only in masculine terms, as a means through which the poet can define himself and his art. However, in the later meditations on marriage Kinsella's representation of women evolves as he negotiates pre-determined gender roles, and the result is a more even handed commentary on the relations between poet and Beloved. In *The Familiar* she is no longer presented as an addendum or a catalyst to his art, but instead is recognized as an autonomous figure and an equal partner.

One way to examine the representation of women in Kinsella's love poetry is to read his work against the backdrop of a Catholic ethos which dominated the political and cultural nature of the Irish Free State after it achieved independence from Britain in 1921. In the lead up to independence various women's groups were active in colonial Ireland. Some of these groups such as Maud Gonne's Daughters of Erin were affiliated with the nationalist cause while others, such as the Irish suffrage movement, were less focused on a nationalist agenda and instead focused on advancing the rights of women irrespective of their ideological affiliations. After independence, a patriarchal and repressive nationalism infused with Catholic and Gaelic values dominated all aspects of life in Ireland. What this meant for women was a severe curtailment on the advances that various women's groups had tenuously achieved in the lead up to independence, with the effect that for the next

several decades “women were nearly invisible in the formal and public structures of Irish life” (Shannon 258).

When Kinsella began writing in the mid 1950, the culture of the country was still dominated by Catholic doctrine that actively sought to confine women to the domestic sphere, and the existing laws supported this agenda, rendering women economically, socially and politically powerless. Restrictions on Irish women’s freedom included a ban on the importation of contraceptives and a constitutional prohibition on divorce. Terence Browne explains how the Church’s subordination of women was endorsed by the Irish state:

Church teaching with its emphasis on the virtue of motherhood had been buttressed by the constitutional affirmation of 1937 that “by her life within the home, woman gives to the State a support without which the common good cannot be achieved.” Legal force to such pious expression had been given in a marriage bar in the Civil Service and in Local Authorities and Health Board employments, which meant that upon marriage a woman resigned from her post (Browne 232).

These restrictions on married women in employment continued until they were outlawed through the passage of the 1977 Employment Equality Act.¹⁴ Economic and social change, which began in the 1960s, rapidly gained ground in the following three decades, brought on by “the cumulative effects of industrialization, urbanization, and

¹⁴ For additional perspectives on the gradual erosion of conservative, Catholic, and patriarchal values in Irish society see Shannon and Coulter.

secularization [that] seriously eroded the Catholic, parochial, socially and economically conservative values” of the Irish Free State (Shannon 257).

The powerful and all-persuasive influence that the Catholic Church exercised over the country has been described by Kinsella as one that “hardly counted as an influence” because, as he remarked to John Haffenden, “it was really like oxygen” (100). Given this admission, albeit, an exceedingly disingenuous admission of influence, it is disappointing in Kinsella’s poetry to find no evidence of any challenge to Catholicism’s pre-ordained gender roles. Kinsella abandoned his faith at an early age, and in interviews and poems he has criticized the intellectual poverty of modern Irish Catholicism while remaining silent on the Church’s treatment of women. Instead, his aesthetic engagement with religious themes revolves around loss of faith and the relationship between skepticism and faith. Loss of faith dominates *Moralities*, with the poet declaring in “An Old Atheist Pauses by the Sea,” “I choose at random, knowing less and less” (CP 24). The significance of lapsed faith for Kinsella’s poetry is what Andrew Fitzsimons identifies as “the loss of the controlling perspective of religion” (58), with the poet thereafter continually attempting to impose a secular order on his experiences through the medium of poetry. In his later work Kinsella has turned his attention to an exploration of the relationship between skepticism and faith, and how to live in a post-Christian world, but these questions are not addressed in the context of gender or the religious subordination of women.¹⁵

¹⁵ See in particular Peppercanister 21, *Godhead* (1999) Peppercanister 27, *Belief and Unbelief* (2007), and Peppercanister 29, *Love Joy Peace* (2011).

With the possible exception of Paul Durcan, this legislative and religious subjugation of women has rarely been acknowledged or questioned by male Irish poets, and even contemporary poets such as John Montague and the late Seamus Heaney have been accused by one feminist critic of relying on “old, familiar and familiarly oppressive gender positions” (Coughlan 88). In one of the few feminist critiques of these poets Patricia Coughlin charges that women in Montague and Heaney’s poetry are silenced and the stereotypical gender identity of domesticated compliant women is positively endorsed. Taking as her starting point Montague’s *The Rough Field* and *The Dead Kingdom*, along with Heaney’s early collections, *Death of a Naturalist*, *Door into the Dark*, *Wintering Out* and *North*, Coughlin demonstrates how the masculine speaker “celebrates the domestic as immemorial and relishes it as sensually and emotionally satisfying” (90), while at the same time defining himself outside of the domestic sphere, “in the performance of his most characteristic activity, poetry” (90). In their poetry concerning women as guardian of the domestic sphere, Coughlin argues that woman is “admirably observed, centre stage but silent” (90). Furthermore, these representations of women fall into two stereotypical categories, “beloved or spouse figures versus mother figures, which are in turn benign and fertile or awe-inspiring and terrible” (89). Her essay also calls attention to a paradox in their work, wherein both poets write about a politically oppressed, unspoken minority, Northern Irish Catholics, and yet there is a glaring lack of women as speaking subjects in their poetry. Since Montague and Heaney fail to interrogate the pervasive discrimination of women in Irish society, the result is that the disempowerment of only one minority group is highlighted. While Kinsella’s early work may be subject to the same charge of reinforcing traditional gender positions, I argue that

his mature representations of female figures does not reinscribe the binary categories that Coughlin identifies in the work of Montague and Heaney. Kinsella, unlike his peers, acknowledges in his mature work the existence of an autonomous subjectivity in the female figure who is the subject of his poetry.

Catriona Clutterbuck differentiates Kinsella from his contemporary Montague, and near contemporary Heaney, because of the “consistency and openness with which he invokes the feminine as central to his larger dynamic of understanding” (246).¹⁶ In her view, Kinsella’s career long critique of what she terms “over-absolute belief systems or ideologies” (258) such as those found in the enlightenment, nationalism and religion, involves a repositioning of the feminine, whose presence is marginalized under these patriarchal systems of thought. She argues that in Kinsella’s work the idealisms found in these belief systems are predicated on “the displacement of an originary body or flux of experience” (245), and that “this body of experience is understood by Kinsella in terms of the female who is occluded within patriarchy” (245). Clutterbuck notes the variety of ways in which the poet engages with female figures, whether real or archetypal, and states that Kinsella’s “alertness to the elision of the corporal presence of women in history in favor of her symbolic role is central to the larger practices and ethics of

¹⁶ Clutterbuck’s essay also usefully contextualizes the dynamics of understanding that aesthetically unfold in the Jungian quest for individuation discussed in chapter three, and her comments about the problematic nature of the Jungian individuation model from a feminist standpoint are similar to the issues that I raise; however, her essay does not analyze the poems of psychic exploration in any great detail.

consciousness in his work” (245). Clutterbuck interprets this ethics of consciousness as an aesthetic engagement with the relationship between skepticism and faith: “In Kinsella, the task of sustaining idealism in the context of its inevitable debunking, once its collusion in life-denying systems is diagnosed, underpins the relation that his work explores between skepticism and faith” (260).

A crucial aspect of this exploration is the representation of women and the recognition of their exclusion from existing belief systems. To support her argument Clutterbuck quotes “Songs of Exile,” from Peppercanister 24, *Marginal Economy*, as confirmation of Kinsella’s questioning of the subordinate positions assigned to women under a masculine creative aesthetic. The relevant section is as follows:

Our women grouped
in the rear gallery;
our male chorus
calling together

- our women veiled
without a word;
our men’s mouths
wide open; (P24, 29).

I agree with Clutterbuck’s reading that this late poem does highlight the occlusion of the female presence “as a condition of the security of tradition of the male poetic authority” (248). Furthermore, it shows an alteration in Kinsella’s perspective as the poem exposes this gender bias and subjects the privileging of male poetic voices at the expense of

female silence to his customary skepticism about accepted cultural norms and belief systems.

Kinsella's early love poetry reflects his awareness of the precariousness of life and the impermanence of romantic happiness. These views are informed in large part by the experience of watching Eleanor's lengthy battle with tuberculosis after the pair began dating, and then subsequently her fight against a debilitating disease that struck after they were married.¹⁷ The first of Kinsella's poems to address these issues is "A Lady of Quality," which describes a visit to the hospital where his Beloved is convalescing. The poem is typical of Kinsella's initial lyric style, and the formal elegance of the poem creates a detached measuring tone which serves to distance the poetic speaker from the woman and the intimate scene described. The specter of mortality is ever present, even though the lovers try to talk around it with "pillow chat," hoping to "bless the room from present dread / Just for a brittle while" (CP 7). The Beloved is a passive figure because of illness, but she is also transformed into an abstraction of beauty and "womankind" (CP 7). As Lucy Collins points out, "the woman, though real and cherished, becomes strangely metonymic, losing her specific identity to gain a timeless universal role" (139).

¹⁷ Eleanor Walsh was hospitalized between 1952 and 1954 at St. Mary's hospital in the Phoenix Park in Dublin, where she was treated for tuberculosis, which was still a life-threatening disease at that time in Ireland. She was subsequently afflicted with a debilitating disease, *myasthenia gravis*, which left her unable to care for the Kinsella's young children. Part of the reason the Kinsella's moved to the United States was to secure better medical treatment for Eleanor.

Representing the Beloved in this timeless manner can be read as a creative strategy to counter the fear of mortality and its attendant threat to love, which has been brought on by illness. The poet's generalization of his Beloved serves to transform this very real threat of death into a mythical abstraction.

In the latter part of the poem the poet shifts his perspective from the Beloved to himself, as he tries to maintain some sense of aesthetic order in the face of this personal turmoil: "While I communicate again / Recovered order to my pen" (CP 8). Order in the face of uncertainty is recovered through the process of art. Even at this early stage of their courtship the poet is not sure he can do creative justice to their relationship and the challenges it faces: "It will be hard, it seems, and I / Would wish my heart to justify / What qualities remain" (CP 8). I read this reference to "qualities" as recognition by the poet that the couple's future may be limited because of serious illness. The important matter is to create through poetry a sense of order on their past, present and future memories. What is especially noteworthy is that the speaker is more preoccupied with the act of aestheticizing the experience of the Beloved's illness, and with documenting its effect on his poetic practice, than with the sick woman who is the subject of the poem.

One of Kinsella's best known poems is "Another September," from his second published collection of the same name, and it is an early example of the male-female dichotomy that is more fully explored in *Wormwood* and "Phoenix Park." The poet captures himself in a detached and reflective mood as he watches his wife sleeping in the bedroom of her childhood home. The sleeping woman is welcomed by "Domestic Autumn" (because the poem is set in September), but the poet, who describes himself as "this half-tolerated consciousness" (CP 19), is not. The poem suggests she is welcomed

because Autumn knows her and has sensed “a fragrant child come back again,” but more troublingly, it also suggests that she is unthinking (by virtue of sleep), and therefore more in harmony with nature than the cerebral poet. This conclusion is borne out by the contrast the poet makes between his wife, the “unspeaking daughter” of the house, and the wakeful, thinking poet, whose half-tolerated consciousness “plants its grammar” in Autumn’s “yielding weather” (19). Here, woman is deprived of the power of speech, while man is active in language which gives him power. The sexual undertones of the act of planting in the yielding season reinforce the physical as well as intellectual dominance of the speaker.

Interestingly, Eavan Boland, who has consistently challenged the Irish poetic tradition for its history of excluding women by silencing them, has written approvingly about “Another September,” because it offered an example to her as a young poet of how a domestic environment could be a credible setting for poetry. For Boland, Kinsella’s achievement lay in his ability to write beyond the pastoral elegies and what she terms “Yeatsian rhetoric” and craft a domestic poem that was engaged in a “tense combative conversation with poetic convention” (110). Boland reads this poem as a nature poem that was forced by the poet to enter an interior domestic scene, “a country bedroom” (CP 19), where the Beloved was sleeping. As Boland observes, this is a poem involving real people; in an identifiable environment which she notes was “located in the new Ireland, where downright working lives were lived” (110). I agree with Boland’s reading that the poem is an example of how domestic space could become “an actual character in a poem” (111), and her assessment points to a shift in Kinsella’s aesthetic away from an

imaginative landscape of formal lyricism towards a more interior drama and the realism of his mature work.

In the final stanza of “Another September” the poet turns from description to vision and the sleeping figure of the woman is transformed into a persona, imagined as bearer of knowledge. Watching “The black breathing that billows her sleep” he experiences a vision: “down the lampless darkness they came, / Moving like women: Justice, Truth, such figures” (CP 20). The ideals of Justice and Truth are not really embodied in the feminine, as the poem does not describe these abstractions as women but simply notes that they are moving “like women”. And since the real woman in the poem is silent and stereotyped into a complacent role, it is unlikely that she would at the same time embody the powerful archetypal figures of Justice and Truth. Moreover, in contrast to the benign pastoral scene described in the first two stanzas which revolve around the sleeping woman, this silent vision is frightening and threatening. The figures of Justice and Truth are ominously portrayed as being shrouded in darkness and described as “bearing daggers” (CP 198). Given Kinsella’s subsequent use of Jungian archetypes, one could interpret the imagery of these figures as a precursor to the archetypal female anima in the later work. Brian John, however, cautions perspective, arguing that “rather than being threatening figures, these women symbolize that awareness of darkness that we all must acquire if understanding is to be achieved” (44). Although misinterpreting the figures as “women,” John’s reading correctly reflects Kinsella’s preoccupation with the conjunction of understanding and knowledge through ordeal and suffering.

The cry of despair that was heard in “A Lady of Quality” also sounds in “Out Mother,” another poem set in a hospital that addresses themes of illness and suffering,

life and death. In this poem from *Nightwalker and Other Poems* the Beloved is again portrayed as a passive, almost spectral figure, who is “struck dumb” (CP 55) through identifying with her sick daughter. The room where the couple’s daughter is convalescing is also occupied by another patient, an elderly woman “dying of age,” who is described in a manner similar to the language Kinsella uses to portray the archetypal Great Mother of Jungian psychology. The old woman represents death, she is the “carrier of all our harm,” with a terrifying face that is “an emptiness / Of open mouth and damp eyes” (CP 55). The poet is presented as isolated from the “three women, two in my care,” and his alienated sensibility renders him helpless: “Living dying, I meet their stare / Everywhere, and cannot move” (CP 55). Rather than evoking empathy, bodily decay and the young girl’s illness have a distancing effect on the poet, who is presented as a detached chronicler, clinically observing the scene. The girl has “bowels burning and disarrayed” (CP 55), and this language lends a voyeuristic quality to the poem. There is also a sense of uneasiness on the part of the speaker at being surrounded and outnumbered by these women, whose collective silence and stares transform them into ominous figures, harbingers of death and mortality.

The pessimistic tone evident in the poetry that addresses illness continues in *Wormwood*, Kinsella’s first marriage sequence, which interprets the sustaining force of the couple’s love and their continuing growth together as a bulwark against loss and disappointment. The foundation upon which a great deal of Kinsella’s work is constructed is a strongly held belief that life is a series of ordeals through which one must persevere in order to mature, both as an individual and as an artist. For Kinsella, poetry represents an attempt to transmute the bitterness and impermanence of life into an

aesthetic creed of endurance. As he explained to John Haffenden: “an awareness of life as ordeal will lead inevitably, in a certain temperament, to an artistic response, an attempt to hold things in place” (102). In *Wormwood* the poet confronts the ordeal of marital strife and offers an unsparing assessment of the complex nature of the couple's relationship.¹⁸ Despite the challenges they face, the couple's love sustains them, enabling them to continue what Maurice Harmon term's their “suicidal dance” (24). The title *Wormwood* comes from the Apocalypse of John (8:10-11), and Kinsella incorporates the relevant section as an epigraph that serves to explain the title and set the tone for the themes of suffering and endurance explored in the sequence:

and a great star fell from heaven, burning as it were a torch; and it fell on the third part of the rivers and upon the fountains of waters; and the name of the star is called Wormwood; and the third part of the waters became wormwood; and many men died of the waters because they were made bitter (CP 62).

Despite the seemingly grim introduction, the epigraph reinforces a positive reading as only one third of the waters were afflicted by the blighted star. Kinsella has described *Wormwood* as “a positive response” to the marital strife that is the focus of these poems (see O'Driscoll 64). As the sequence makes clear, love and the artistic act are panaceas to the bleakness that confronts the poet and his wife. By choosing to explore the negative aspects of the couple's relationship Kinsella reinforces his view that although bitterness

18 *Wormwood* originally appeared as a limited edition from Dolmen Press. The version I am discussing is the one included in the *Nightwalker* volume in the *Collected Poems*, which consists of a prose prologue followed by seven short poems.

and affliction are part of life, it is neither desirable nor advisable to ignore these elements of human existence.

In *Wormwood* the poet speaks as two selves, husband and artist, and the Beloved is imagined as both wife and muse, with the internal dynamics of the relationship analyzed from both perspectives. The prose prologue, a direct address to the Beloved, outlines the general emotional ideas that inform the sequence: life is a series of ordeals which the poet and his wife must face together, working through the afflictions that the act of living recurrently forces upon them. By accepting the “bitter cup” they will find the strength to “grow towards the next ordeal.” The bitter cup offered to the Beloved is a recurring motif in Kinsella’s work, later described as the “ordeal cup” in “Phoenix Park” that the lovers must accept, be it “sour or sweet” (CP 89). Kinsella’s theory of redemptive endurance relies on the strength of the couple’s love to “transmute” the bitterness of life, and also on the couple’s willingness to accept and embrace the cyclical aspect of the challenges their relationship faces. Kinsella cautions as much at the outset of the sequence: “It is certain that maturity and peace are to be sought through ordeal after ordeal, and it seems the search continues until we fail” (CP 62).

Following the prologue, the poet invites the Beloved in the opening poem to read the poems and see the speaker, who is imagined as “A waste, a nearly naked tree” (CP 63). Kinsella relays his torment to his Beloved, telling her that this emblem of the poet, the shivering naked tree, “will not rest till it is bare,” but instead will endure “Convulsions of self-punishment” (CP 63). Emphasizing the theme of endurance, the poem rhetorically posits a riddle in the final two lines: “What cannot rest till it is bare, / Though branches crack and fibers tear?” (CP 63). The speaker’s obsessive self-

punishment calls to mind the clichéd tortured artist, risking all for his art. Yet the suffering speaker needs the love and support of the Beloved as he pursues his aesthetic calling, and he stresses this at the onset of the sequence by the plea for understanding that he makes to the Beloved: “Open this and you will see” (CP 63). The elegant lyricism of the early poems is now replaced by a tough poetic language that tries vividly to replicate the actuality of the confrontations between the poet and his wife. As Seamus Deane points out, this loss of elegance is a deliberate aesthetic strategy used by Kinsella to “transmit to us the experience of lost control” (142).

In the title poem “Wormwood,” the image of a tree reoccurs as the poet relates a dream, in which the couple's marriage is imagined as a tree “with a double trunk.” The individuals who comprise the union are two trees that have “grown into one,” that are embarked on an “infinitesimal dance of growth” (CP 63). This growth through suffering is a fundamental aspect of human existence and Kinsella sees this “necessity to learn” from life as “the only individual joy” (CP 62). The metaphor of intertwined trees also reveals that the marriage is not without challenges; pain and love combine, just as the union of these two tree trunks has left “a slowly twisted scar” (CP 63). Despite Kinsella’s emphatic rejection of Catholicism, I read a residual effect of Catholic doctrine, with its particular emphasis on spiritual redemption through pain and suffering, lingering around the margins of the Wormwood poems. This residue clearly aligns Kinsella with the Dedalean artist, and provides another example of Kinsella’s affinity with James Joyce, another disaffected working class Irish Catholic who grew up in Dublin. Kinsella’s dissatisfaction with Catholicism mirrors the dissatisfaction of Stephen Dedalus who, like Kinsella, still yearns for spiritual redemption despite his disillusionment with the religion

of his youth. In Kinsella's poems about his family he displays a Joycean eye for detail, and Joyce is also an underlying influence in many other poems, including "Nightwalker," where the nocturnal rambler makes a direct plea to the "Watcher in the tower," and *The Pen Shop*, which incorporates several references to *Ulysses* and follows part of Leopold Bloom's walk through the city. John often calls attention to the parallels between both writers, noting at one point that "Kinsella, learning from Joyce, recognizes how readily the quotidian, especially that of Dublin and of his own experiences, takes on mythic dimensions" (134).

In the first stanza of "Mask of Love," which follows "Wormwood," the familiar image of Eleanor allegorically becomes the poet's muse who wears the mask of love.¹⁹ The poet then returns to chronicling the period of marital strife that informs the entire sequence. The lovers are described as climbing "the peaks of stress" where they "wearily" confront each other "again and again" (CP 64). The poet cautions the Beloved to remember these stressful times and also not to forget that their "very bodies lack peace" (CP 64). Harmon reads this emphasis on remembrance as a sign that the poet "fears their situation might be misrepresented, or minimized, its value not understood and therefore not made available to absorption and transmutation" (CP 64). The poet's fears are for himself and the Beloved, as he cautions both himself and his wife to value all of their experiences together whether positive or negative. Here we see Kinsella's insistence upon ordeal as a necessary part of the continuing process of self-examination and the

¹⁹ See chapter four, where I discuss the figure of the Muse in this poem at greater length.

search for meaning. Transmutation and renewal for the lovers comes only after accepting the repetitive nature of this ordeal, which they must face in their lives together.

With “The Secret Garden” the sequence moves into a different, more hopeful mood. Images of destruction co-exist with images of beauty and the poet allows for the possibility of growth and regeneration in the form of his son, who will one day experience his own “sour encounter” with life and death. Amidst the inevitable erosion and ultimate decay of life, symbolized by the withering garden where the poet “picks off one sick leaf,” there is some solace to be found in the person of his young son, who “smells of energy” and is “light as light” with incandescent “pearl flesh” (CP 65). Kinsella presents the poetic speaker as a wise and insightful presence, fully aware of the tribulations his son will face, which would be unobjectionable except that his mother does not make an appearance in the poem. In a sequence that is ostensibly about the couple’s life together the absence of her voice reinforces the impression that the *Wormwood* poems only reflect the speaker’s concerns about suffering in life. Ultimately, their relationship is analyzed only from the poet’s perspective of life as a continuing ordeal, with the female partner’s views excluded.

“First Light” returns to the theme of conflict and marital strife. In the cold light of dawn the “prone couple” is still sleeping after another argument: “- shrill / Lover and beloved have kept / Another vigil far / into the night, and raved and wept” (CP 65). In contrast to the later marriage sequences, the domestic environment in *Wormwood* is an “empty” unwelcoming place, filled with “silence” and “blank with marriage” (CP 65). The demands of child-rearing also take their toll on the couple, as when an “ugly wail” emanates from a child’s bedroom. All these characterizations of their house, their

marriage and their child is done by the male speaker as part of the aesthetic construction of his own autobiography, and the failure of the Beloved to be constructed as a speaking subject in this drama to some extent undermines Kinsella's objective which is to focus on the mutual love he and his wife share. Her silence leaves unanswered the following questions: How does the Beloved feel about this rough period in their marriage? What are her thoughts on the purpose of their union?

Wormwood closes with "Remembering Old Wars" and "Je t'adore," in which images and vignettes of suffering and endurance are contrasted against those of love and mutual support. The poet grimly describes how the lovers lie down each night "in the smell of decay" only to awake and find "adversity / Flooded up from inside," as they greet a new day and "laboured upright / Once more to face the hells of circumstance" (CP 66). Yet with each new dawn, "without hope of change or peace," the lovers recollect "their purpose" and "renew each other with a savage smile" (CP 66). Notwithstanding that the smile they direct at each other is savage, which suggests an underlying hostility that sleep does not erase, the couple is depicted as renewing each other every morning. Moreover, poet and Beloved are described as "clamped together" (CP 66), suggesting a firm bond that cannot be broken or destroyed. The image of being clamped together also suggests an earlier image of the couple as two intertwined trees. This qualified optimism in the strength of their union is confirmed in the concluding poem, "Je t'adore," where the lovers are unceremoniously depicted as "Sighing in one another's / Iron arms, propped above nothing." There is nothing to sustain their precarious relationship except their faith in each other, and the poem concludes on an ambiguous note with the lovers praising "Love the limiter" (CP 66). Kinsella recognizes that when all the other props are gone,

love remains. Yet the concluding line begs the question, what exactly is being limited? Is it marriage that has a limiting effect on the couple? Because of their love the poet and his Beloved remain in this union, yet given the savagery of their arguments and the suffering endured, this decidedly unromantic sequence of poems does not offer any solace to the couple. Bitterness may be transmuted but in *Wormwood* the poet suggests that achievement does not necessarily guarantee happiness or peace of mind.

In the painful drama of the *Wormwood* sequence the couple's intellectual and emotional conflicts are subject to a bitter evaluation, beginning with the didactically phrased address to the Beloved in the opening prose poem, and ending with the short stanza of resignation and acceptance of the closing poem. Paradoxically, these marriage poems also allow for a more optimistic reading, in large part because marital strife and pain are seen as a source of renewal for their love and, just as importantly, the means of spiritual growth for the lovers. A question arises: to what extent does the Beloved grow within this union? Arguably, she is merely a conduit for the poet's development, for throughout the sequence she never finds her own voice. Instead, she is evoked, and addressed by her masculine opposite. She is the silent partner to whom the poetic speaker both lectures and appeals to for support and understanding. The extreme objectification of the Beloved within these poems serves to reduce her to a symbol of the poet's existential angst about marriage and love. Kinsella places the figure of the Beloved in a subordinate position, where only the male is allowed to articulate what the union represents to the lovers. Because these poems only address his perspective, the pain which the poet experiences due to marital strife is by implication accorded greater weight than that of his wife. Further compromising any reading of equality between the couple is

the fact that the Beloved's concerns are presented as trivial (“She, bent on some tiny mote”) in contrast to what the speaker considers to be his more profound, existential, concerns about human existence (“I...clasping my paunch in grief/ For the world is a speck of dust”) (CP 64).

This reductive representation of the Beloved is also evident in “Nightwalker,” where the demoralized nocturnal rambler returns home to find substance and nurturance from his domestic environment and his wife: “Her dear shadow on the blind / The breadknife. She was slicing and buttering / A loaf of bread” (CP 84). The power of love assuages the speaker’s disillusionment with contemporary Irish political leaders; but the female figure is assigned the classic domestic role ingrained in Irish society which was still prevalent at the time Kinsella was writing “Nightwalker.” This leads to the paradoxical conclusion that while “Nightwalker” is a scathing indictment of the crass materialistic society that emerged in Ireland in the 1960s, it nevertheless shores up traditional Irish notions of the nurturing female presence firmly ensconced in the home.²⁰ Moreover, by presenting the Beloved in such a gender-based stereotypical setting, the qualities of the individual women are obliterated in the face of an idealized cliché, thus

²⁰ Clutterbuck differs in her analysis of the representation of the female presence at the close of the poem. In her reading, the turn towards home represents a desire for nurturance that reveals the indebtedness of the poet to the Beloved: “Accompanying the nightwalker’s overdue recognition of this maternal realm is his awareness that he was all along ‘starved for speech’ (CP, 84), for communication with the living, significant other” (262 n38).

undermining the power of the poem's interrogation of the Irish State and its debasement of cultural values. The poem's warning against the materialist society that betrayed the ideals of the founding principles of nationalism survives the test of time, and it stands with Yeats's "Easter 1916" as an eerily prescient prediction that still resonates in contemporary Irish culture. It cannot, however, escape the charge of essentialism with regard to the depiction of the Beloved, or with regard to women in general.

Throughout the poem, the moon hovers in the sky as "a malignant female presence" (see Badin 65) that oversees the nightwalker's ramble. The poet writes that she is the "Moon of my dismay, Virgin most pure, / reflected enormous in her shaggy pool" (CP 83). This omnipresent moon is a regal figure that "rules on high, queenlike, pale with control" (CP 83). Here, the poet is arguably making a reference to Britain's Queen Victoria, who ruled over Ireland prior to independence. Given that the poem is concerned with the manner in which Irish society evolved post-independence, this reading seems appropriate, and is underscored by the lines that follow, where both speaker and nation are oppressed: "My head fallen back heavy with your control, / and oppressed" (CP 83). The fact that Kinsella is referring to a colonial ruler who happened to be female, however, does not absolve the poet from charges of gender stereotyping. The Beloved is the non-threatening domesticated female, who provides solace and comfort, while the more powerful female moon is a threatening figure that oppresses the masculine nightwalker. The poem is thus self-undermining, in that while it critiques Irish society it also reinforces certain stereotypical ideas of the society it criticizes. Kinsella seems to recognize this paradox at the beginning of the poem as the nightwalker is "Not unmindful

of the madness without, / The madness within – the book of reason / Slammed open, slammed shut” (CP 76), but still persists in perpetrating these gender stereotypes.

Throughout Kinsella's poetry the dichotomy between man and nature is represented as a contrast of male and female consciousness, womanly instinct versus manly intellect. These binary ideas about men and women find full expression in “Phoenix Park,” a lengthy love poem set on the eve of the couple’s departure to the United States in 1965, which ends the *Nightwalker* volume. Many of the themes that have preoccupied Kinsella throughout his career are addressed in this poem, but it is important also as a clear example of the problematic manner in which the Beloved, and women in general, are represented in the poet’s early work. As the poet and his wife drive around the Phoenix Park memories of their life together are recalled in a series of meditations that elaborate on Kinsella's ideas about the nature of understanding gained through their love. The poem allows for the phoenix-like rebirth of love, but this love is not glamorized or romanticized, as the poet recognizes that “to give totally / Is to be torn totally” (90).

As the poem opens the Beloved is characterized as the more passive partner, “quiet and watchful,” full of misgivings about their imminent departure from Ireland. A twig lands on the bonnet of the car, which brings forth the following description of the Beloved: “- You start at the suddenness, as though it were / Your own delicate distinct flesh that had snapped” (CP 87). Her fragility is emphasized by the line, “*Fragility echoing fragilities,*” and again later in the poem where the poet recall's Eleanor's lengthy hospitalization for tuberculosis: “You lay still, brilliant with illness, behind glass; / I stooped and tasted your life until you woke” (CP 87). This troublesome imagery recalls

the fairy tale heroine Sleeping Beauty, which is suggested elsewhere when the poet again returns to this memory, this time with the implication of princely rescue: “I found you, in feverish sleep, where you lay” (CP 88). The poet’s protective concern for the Beloved again implies a level of vulnerability that contrasts with his masculine strength: “You wait a minute on the path, absently / - Against massed brown trees – tying a flimsy scarf / At your neck. Fair Elinor. O Christ thee save” (CP 91). The exclamation at the end of this second line is transposed from Percy’s *Reliques*, a collection of ballads and popular songs collected by Bishop Thomas Percy and published in 1765. Kinsella’s poem retains the spelling of Eleanor found in the original *Relique*, and this courtly plea underscores the mannered formality in which the Beloved is portrayed. Physical frailty is imagined as feminine and the lines above suggest Hamlet’s charge to his mother, “Frailty, thy name is woman” (William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, Act 1, Scene 2). Once again, the figure of woman is used to explore themes of sickness and decay; however critics tend to read the emphasis on the Beloved’s frailty in a strictly biographical context. As an example, Harmon reads the poem as “a hymn of praise to the Beloved” (32) for her ability to survive a deadly illness that jeopardized her life and threatened the couple’s future happiness together.

Throughout this poem the following impressions emerge: woman is sensuous and irrational, in contrast with the speaker, who is characterized as intellectual and rational. She is represented as the possessor of intuitive knowledge and insight that the male speaker lacks, and the charge of biological essentialism is not one the poem can withstand. On the contrary, the poem shores up a reductive gender perspective. The poet writes, “Everything you know you know bodily” (CP 87), for as Guinn Batten points out,

Eleanor's intelligence is presented as "indistinguishable from her body's wisdom and its generosity" (223). In response to Eleanor's complaint that he writes her "nothing, no love songs" any more, the poet offers her a dream in place of a song. Even though the dream is not for singing, he assures her that "[Her] body would know that it is positive" (CP 87), thereby implying that her intelligence is intuitive rather than logical. It is precisely these kinds of assumptions that Cixous says have "oppressed and repressed female consciousness" (xiv). The contrast between his restless cerebral nature and her more instinctive nature is bluntly stated when the poet pays the Beloved a back-handed compliment by describing her "thoughtless delicate completeness" (CP 91). Moreover, even though the Beloved's instinctive wisdom is recognized for being important, her strength and wisdom serve only to foreground the poet's self development: "Laws of order I find I have discovered / Mainly at your hands" (CP 90). The speaker's cerebral wisdom is still accorded higher stature than the woman's intelligence, which is seen as less important because it is seen as deriving from her body rather than her brain.

Cixous challenges this reductive mode of thinking in *The Newly Born Woman*, when she argues that it debars woman from patriarchal discourse. She points out that the net effect of such perspectives on relationships between men and woman is that the woman is seen as "Night to his Day – that has forever been the fantasy. Black to his white. Shut out of his system's space, she is the repressed that ensures the system's functioning" (67). The binaries that Cixous exposes in her essay "Sorties" are remarkably similar to the perceptions of gender aesthetically rendered in "Phoenix Park":

Activity/Passivity
Sun/Moon
Culture/Nature

Day/Night

Father/Mother

Heart/Head

Intelligible/Palpable

Logos/Pathos (Cixous, 63).

The essential feminine is evident throughout the poem, which represents the Beloved as not only passive but also disempowered, for despite her misgivings the poem makes clear that the couple will emigrate: “One stays or leaves.../....And we are leaving” (CP 87). While the closeness of the couple in the poem is never in doubt (“We’ll perish in each other” [CP 92]), it is portrayed in such a manner as to make the Beloved an adjunct of the speaker, who regards her as a repository for their shared history: “My past is alive in you” (CP 93).

Because the male speaker consistently identifies himself with the dominant masculine side of the oppositional categories established in the poem and elaborated on by Cixous, the Beloved is *the other*, defined only in relation to the poetic speaker. Cixous points out the dangers in reducing woman to the position of “other”:

[I]n the (Hegelian) schema of recognition, there is no place for the other, for an equal other, for a whole and living woman. She must recognise and recuntinize the male partner, and in the time it takes to do this, she must disappear, leaving his to gain Imaginary profit, to win Imaginary victory (“Sorties” 79).

Cixous rejects Hegel’s formulation of *the other*, and argues that “the category of the *other* takes on a productive dimension and is the site of strategies for overcoming the relentless Manichaeism of sexism and patriarchy” (Turkkan 372). However, in the

context of “Phoenix Park,” the representation of the Beloved as *other* serves to perpetuate traditional gender stereotyping rather than subvert such stereotypical dichotomies.²¹

In these early poems the Beloved is either a silent figure or an instinctual, maternal presence, represented as being outside the realms of language and knowledge. Her configuration accords with Irigaray’s charge that historically, women have been aligned with lack in patriarchal culture, while at the same time they are “allotted everything in culture that men have to deny in themselves – nature, biology, the body” (see Clutterbuck 263n43). In her foundational text, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, Irigaray charges that for the profession of psychoanalysis, female sexuality has remained a “dark continent” (71), unfathomable and unreachable, its nature misunderstood by those who continue to regard it in masculine terms. This misunderstanding of female sexuality extends beyond the arena of psychoanalysis (and in this context Irigaray was specifically addressing Freudian psychoanalysis) into literature, where a masculine ideology has traditionally been implicit in Western literary discourse. Women have consistently been represented and defines as a disadvantaged version of the masculine writer, with no discernible identify of their own. Unfortunately, Kinsella’s early poems about the Beloved replicate this masculine discourse, thereby denying her an independent identity outside of her relationship to the poet.

As in the *Wormwood* sequence the ordeal of life is often symbolized in Kinsella's later work by a cup from which the poet and his Beloved must drink. In “Phoenix Park”

²¹ Kinsella’s early poems addressing the Muse, as I show in chapter four, rely on a conception of “the Other” that is more in line with Cixous and Irigaray.

the poet exhorts his wife, who is “uneasy” over their forthcoming move, to accept this poisoned chalice as part of life: “The ordeal-cup, set at each turn, so far / We have welcomed, sour or sweet. What matter where / It waits for us next, if we take and drink?” (CP 89) Echoing the ideas underpinning the *Wormwood* poems about the cyclical nature of life, Kinsella writes that “life is hunger, hunger for order, / And hunger satisfied brings on new hunger” (CP 90). Their love is an uneasy alliance, for the poet recognizes that “Giving without tearing is not possible.” The underlying hostility evident in *Wormwood* still lurks beneath the surface, a point the poet makes when tells his Beloved, “*I consign my designing will stonily / To your flames*” (CP 92). The poet's ambivalence about marriage surfaces, and their union is described in violent imagery calling to mind images of self-immolation: “*Wrapped in that rosy fleece, two lives / Burn down around one love...*” (CP 92).²² In “The Furnace,” included in *Out of Ireland* (1987), Mary Anderson argues that the lines “Eriugena’s notion matching / my half-baked bodily own, /who have / *consigned my designing will / stonily to your flames*” (CP 257), invite a re-reading of “Phoenix Park” and encourages a comparison between the two poems that involves similar themes of regeneration and rebirth through imagery of fire and resurrection. The cyclical nature of their relationship is again stressed as a positive source of strength for the couple:

Love, it is certain, continues till we fail,

²² These lines provide yet another example of Kinsella’s practice of repeating, echoing, and referencing lines from earlier poems since in “The Furnace,” Kinsella quotes directly from “Phoenix Park.”

Whenever (with your forgiveness) that may be

- At any time, now, totally, ordeal

Succeeding ordeal till we find some death (CP 91).

The poem concludes by welcoming “A snake out of the void” and “A few ancient faces,” a welcoming that anticipates the poet's solitary Jungian journey inward that will begin in earnest in *New Poems*. This change of direction is signaled mid-way through the poem by a dream sequence, in which Kinsella digresses from the realism of his conversation with the Beloved to introduce “women-shapes” who pass “Unseeing, full of knowledge, through each other” (CP 89). These women-shapes recall the visionary figures in “Another September,” who symbolize truth, justice and knowledge, and also represent a precursor to the female archetypes and anima that will preoccupy the poet in subsequent volumes. The poem ends with a comma, as “Delicate distinct tissue begins to form,” (CP 94), signaling the open-endedness that will characterize Kinsella's work in the future.

The same words are included in a prologue in the original edition of *Notes from the Land of the Dead*, but not in the *Collected Poems*; however, in both instances, the opening poem begins in mid-sentence (continuing the unfinished sentence from “Phoenix Park”) with the words “hesitate, cease to exist, glitter again” (CP 95). Although the manner in which “Phoenix Park” ends suggest a different direction for the poet, which will surface in different thematic concerns, it also closes with a memory of the Beloved, whose own “delicate distinct flesh” (CP 87) is evoked at the beginning of the poem and is suggested in the delicate distinct tissue that begins to form.

This gendered representation of the Beloved, which privileges the masculine speaker, begins to change in *Madonna and Other Poems*, Kinsella's second marriage

sequence, published nearly twenty five years after *Wormwood*. In the interim period, Kinsella's work was preoccupied with his Jungian quest for self-knowledge and individuation, and also with an examination of the role of the artist in society.²³ The intensity of the *Wormwood* sequence has disappeared along with the stereotypes of the feminine and the Beloved found in "Phoenix Park." Instead, the poet offers a multi-faceted portrait of the Beloved who is imagined in various guises as wife, companion, muse and goddess. Kinsella is concerned in this volume with the wife companion and in his notes on the poems he connects the female figure back to early Irish literature:

This was a very important subject in early Irish literature, where the woman figure takes on a no. of forms, not just of the beloved, that we are mainly used to in modern poems – but as wife companion; as queen (when there were queens and they mattered); or as the old woman, wise with the experience of life and a mediator when it comes to important things like the sign of artistic creativity; the creating of the earth (Kinsella papers, box 29, folder 10).

Arguably, Kinsella could be accused of perpetuating the idea of the "Eternal Feminine" in his notes, and the astrological cover image on the *Peppercanister* of a female figure

²³ These latter sequences include *St. Catherine's Clock* (1987), *One Fond Embrace* (1988), *Personal Places* (1990), and *Poems From Centre City* (1990).

supported by the trajectories of the planets reinforces such a reading.²⁴ However, the description of women in Kinsella's notes do not define the female figure exclusively in reproductive terms, as he also indicates that women are inextricably bound up in the creative process. As a recurring female figure in male authored texts, the trope of the sovereignty goddess in Irish literature is discussed in detail in chapter three, where the parallels with that figure are more evident in Kinsella's representations of Jungian archetypes than in the representations of the Beloved.

Another distinguishing facet of Kinsella's distinctive representation of women is his avoidance of the practice by male writers in Irish literature of allegorizing the female figure as the nation of Ireland. This poetic trope has a long tradition in Ireland, particularly in *Ashling* poetry, which dates back to the seventeenth century and extends across all literary genres, with perhaps the most famous modern example being Lady Gregory and Yeats's play *Cathleen ni Houlihan*.²⁵ Despite his frequent incorporation of Irish mythology and history into his poetry, Kinsella has successfully avoided gendering women in this manner, and his work does not portray women as metonymic of the land and sovereignty of Ireland.²⁶ Moreover, with the exception of *Butcher's Dozen*, Kinsella

²⁴ This sequence, and the cover image used in the Peppercanister edition, is discussed in more detail in chapter four in the context of Kinsella's evolving representation of the Muse figure.

²⁵ See also Paul Muldoon's poem "Aisling," for a reworking of the genre.

²⁶ Seamus Heaney, by contrast, consistently reinforces the male/female dynamic with political Irish/English stereotyping, with the subjugated Irish always represented as a

has shied away from exploring what Anthony Bradley and Maryann Gialanella Valiulis call “the political nationalist metanarrative and the cultural nationalism of traditional history and literature” (6). Even though in his prose work he has famously addressed the loss of the Irish language through colonization, which has left Irish writers as the inheritors of a “gapped, polyglot tradition,” in his poetry Kinsella avoids the tendency to represent Ireland and its colonization by, respectively, the figure of woman and marriage.²⁷

Madonna opens with an epigraph on a familiar theme in Kinsella’s work, the nature of strife within love, only this time their “loving upset” is minimized (CP 305). Tubridy drew my attention to the fact that the epigraph is a direct quote from Ecclesiastes IV: 6. What the poet said in his address to the Beloved at the beginning of *Wormwood* has here been distilled into a statement of illumination. As Andrew Fitzsimons has noted, “though lapsed, Kinsella, like Beckett, uses language and themes derived from his religious background” (53), and Tubridy points out that Kinsella here elaborates on the overall themes of chapter four of Ecclesiastes which places great importance on partnership: “Two *are* better than one; because they have a good reward for their labor.

female. One critic has charged that “the ‘feminine’ in Heaney cannot be understood apart from Irish national and cultural contexts, any more than those contexts can be separated from his gender politics” (Brearton 83).

²⁷ Instead, Kinsella has focused in his prose work on an examination of the literary isolation a contemporary writer experiences in the Irish tradition, which is a result of the loss of the Gaelic language through centuries of colonization.

For if they fall, the one will lift up his fellow; but woe to him *that is* alone when he falleth; for *he hath* not another to help him up” (Tubridy 197, Ecclesiastes IV: 9-10). The poems reinforce the importance of their partnership and the mutual support they derive from each other. This epigraph, “*Better is an handful with quietness / than both hands full / with travail and vexation of spirit*” (CP 305), can be interpreted as a maxim against discontent, one that serves to remind himself and the Beloved to treasure their union. The poet realizes that if he succumbs to bitterness, if his “blind fingers” forsake her face, then understanding would be lost and he would be destroyed by turning away from his Beloved: “Yet worst is the fool that foldeth his hands / and eateth his own flesh” (CP 305).

This meditation is followed by the title poem, “Madonna,” a series of vignettes on the Beloved beginning with their initial meeting. The church setting dovetails well with the title of the sequence and the biblical epigraph. The seductive physicality of the woman is emphasized with her high heels “tapping on the tiles” (CP 305), and her close proximity to the speaker as they kneel together under the Christ figure in candlelight. This woman is portrayed in highly sensuous, physical imagery and in a position of supplication: “Her head bowed. Her meat sweet” (CP 305). The recognition of equality between the male and the female partners is signaled by the fact that both partners are kneeling together under the feminized Christ figure, “the Body with the woman feet” (CP 305). The pierced Christ figure is not valorized for his heroic or masculine presence, but is instead aligned with the feminine. The second section moves to the intimate setting of the couple’s bedroom at night, where the woman is brushing her hair. Light from the street lamps throws a shadow into the room, which invades their “urinary privacy,” a

phrase suggesting the physical closeness of the couple. Their sexual union is described in the third section, as their “two awareness / narrowed into one point, / our piercing presences exchanged / in pleasantry and fright” (CP 306). This description of their lovemaking recalls the lines in “Phoenix Park” and the two lives that “Burn down around one love” (CP 92). As always, the specter of mortality is never far from the surface in Kinsella’s poetry, and the poet realizes after they make love that “the tally of our remaining encounters” is now “reduced by one” (CP 306).

“Madonna” closes with a morning ritual that is later reproduced with more significant consequences in “The Familiar.” The poet is described as making tea and cutting grapefruit for himself and the Beloved. This is an important reversal from the kitchen scene in “Nightwalker” where the Beloved was engaged in the domestic activity of cutting bread. Here the poet prepares the meal, an action symbolic of a new direction in their relationship. In this reversal of a power imbalance of poet and Beloved, gender roles are reversed and the male partner attends to the nurturing task on behalf of the Beloved. The presence of the Beloved is evoked through “a stubborn memory.” While preparing his offering the poet recalls “her tender, deliberate incursions,” a reference to the couple’s lovemaking from the previous night.

The binary thinking that affects the earlier love poems and sequences is notably absent in *The Familiar*, a late sequence that reaffirms the strength of the lovers' bond and celebrates the balance struck between the competing demands of love and creativity. The poet casts a retrospective glance back over their life together and subsumes these experiences into a more complete portrayal of the Beloved. The sequence opens with an epigraph in which “Love” with his “sinewy bow / against His knee,” tells the poet,

“Husband, here is a friend / beseeming thee” (CP 329). Eleanor’s wise counsel is acknowledged with courtly formality in the lines describing her as “Comely Wisdom wearing / a scarf around Her throat” (CP 329).²⁸ By capitalizing the figures of love, husband and comely wisdom, Kinsella presents the couple as uniting in love to form an emotional trinity. From the onset, the poem establishes the continued importance of Eleanor as Wife/ Companion / Muse. Kinsella presents a more optimistic and accepting image of their union that unites male and female in equal partnership at the site of the home and the creative act.

This epigraph is followed by the title poem, “The Familiar,” which, like “Madonna,” focuses on specific private moments within the lengthy span of their relationship. The early days of their courtship is recalled along with an acknowledgment of their disparate temperaments which were “mismatched, under the sign of sickness” (CP 329). The moment when Eleanor moved into the flat in Baggot Street (where Kinsella wrote his first poems), is remembered by the poet as the end of his isolation: “My last thoughts alone” (CP 329). No longer alone with his “solitary shortcomings” the poet is now joined by Eleanor and the couple enter the flat together with their “animal thoughts” (CP 330). Their early sexual life is revisited in language that valorizes the

²⁸ The complex intertextuality of Kinsella’s poetry is again evident in this sequence which is replete with recurring images and motifs from previous work. The image of the Beloved with a scarf around her neck reminds the reader of a poem from three decades earlier, “Phoenix Park,” where Eleanor is imagined “Against Massed brown trees – tying a flimsy scarf” (CP 91).

feminine maternal body and the poet remembers his Beloved as the “Muse on my mattress” (CP 330). Section V shifts to the present tense and the Beloved is associated with the “the three graces” in a painting that hangs in the bathroom of their house. The aging lovers have attained a closeness that transcends their differences, and the image of the couple’s legs “locked in friendship” (CP 331) suggests contentment with the familiar domesticity of their marriage.

In section VI the Beloved is represented allegorically as a nymph, “spurning the blades of grass with little tough feet; / picking the pale-stemmed blossoms in her path” (CP 331). While this section may appear to contradict my reading of this sequence, I see it as another instance of Kinsella referencing an earlier poem about the Beloved, in this case, section 7 of *Songs of the Psyche*. In the earlier poem the Beloved as nymph approached the poet “by a little-haunted path / with modest run advancing / dancing in her flowers” (CP 228). This song of the psyche celebrates the moment when the couple joined together to form a third entity:

She offered me her hands.

I took them in mine

- adverse

but it was enough:

we were no longer two

but a third (CP 228,229).

The reference to this earlier in a sequence dedicated to celebrating their union, underscores the importance of this ongoing union to the poet. The nymph in *The Familiar*

beckons the poet, “Whispering *Come*” (CP 331), and Ruth Lang reads these words, along with the earlier lines propelling the nymph forward with a modest run, as inducing “an incipient movement not merely for the pair but for a new lyric direction in Kinsella’s work” (169). Taking the entire sequence as a whole I would canvas for a more optimistic reading and argue that the movement in Kinsella’s representation of the Beloved is more robust than Lang suggests.

As I have already argued, the troubled nocturnal Rambler in “Nightwalker” finds consolation in the domestic scene that awaits him when he returns home, where his wife is depicted in a stereotypical domestic setting, preparing food in the kitchen. These gender roles are reversed in section VII of “The Familiar” as the poet re-enacts what Tubridy calls “the breakfast ritual sacrifice”(222). The poet as nurturing male prepares breakfast for the couple and presents his offering through a gesture of openness and humility, “with arms extended / over the sweetness of the sacrifice”(CP 332), which is met with approval by the Beloved. In “The Familiar” the role reversal initially suggested in *Madonna and Other Poems*, where the poet was similarly engaged in preparing breakfast, is now fully revealed. The symbolic sacrifice of breakfast that the poet makes to the Beloved finally creates a new openness and equality between the couple, and dissolves the customary poetic distance between them. The poem progresses from depicting the couple’s early sexual attraction and limited understanding of each other to a celebration of their individuality, which Harmon describes as “the affirmation of a willingly accepted closeness and of union within separateness” (188). Whereas in *Wormwood* the tone of the marriage poems was disconsolate, in this sequence, especially

in “The Familiar,” the mood is one of acceptance, with the tension between love and art disappearing.

Another indication that the representation of the Beloved has undergone a transformation is that in “The Familiar” the Beloved is no longer a silent presence. Instead, it is her voice we hear, uttering words of approbation to the poet when he presents her with the breakfast tray: “You are very good. You always make it nice” (CP 332). Lang reads these lines as the Beloved thanking the poet not merely for each individual act of love, symbolized by the act of making breakfast, but rather for each “individual poem that has been ‘made’ and for the poet’s ongoing creative gift of being ‘good’ at love and poetry” (155). Whereas in the earlier work, art and love were often represented as being in conflict with each other for the poet’s attention, here a resolution is arrived at where love and language can intimately co-exist. The words of approval that the Beloved utters become an integral part of the poem that Kinsella creates. In earlier love poems the Beloved was represented as a silent, fragile woman, and Lang draws attention to the image of Eleanor in “Phoenix Park,” tying a flimsy scarf around her throat, arguing that in the earlier poem “the image of the woman’s throat had epitomized silence”(160). Now, however, the woman is not silent, and the poet looks to her for approbation.

The continuity with the past and the resistance to closure that characterizes much of Kinsella’s work continues in “St. John’s,” which revisits the setting of an earlier poem from *Another September*, “In the Ringwood.” In that earlier poem Kinsella explored the historical connections of the area to the United Irishmen Rebellion of 1798, and the horrors of that “ancient slaughter” (CP 16), which is mirrored in Eleanor’s changing

countenance. The Beloved becomes symbolic of the suffering of past generations, as the poet writes “My love cried out and I beheld her/ Change to Sorrow’s daughter” (CP 16). The change in the aesthetic representation of the Beloved from symbol to autonomous figure can be seen by comparing “In the Ringwood,” to “St. John’s.” In this recent poem from *The Familiar*, the couple has returned to Wexford, and is exploring the new developments that have sprung up in the Ringwood forest. Whereas in the early poem the Beloved is an emblem for the sorrows of the past, in St. John’s she is no longer a representative of an historical moment. Now it is the Beloved who takes charge, as she is the one “in front, finding the way” (CP 333) on their explorations. The relationship between these two poems illustrates the extent to which Kinsella has aesthetically re-evaluated gender relations. No longer tethered to his quest for understanding, the Beloved now guides the poet through the Ringwood.

In “Wedding Evening” the poet celebrates another marriage as he remembers his daughter, “Sara in certainty,” (CP 333) on her wedding day. Later on the same day Kinsella sees “Three women from the North side / sitting together in the dark / on the Canal wall” (CP 333). Tubridy reads these three women as representing three sides of the ancient Irish *cailleach* figure, and argues that for Kinsella, this figure “embodies the ancient mother, the beloved and ‘everything else’” (223). If the three women sitting opposite Kinsella’s house symbolize the archetypal great mother, the Beloved and the Muse, then once again, Kinsella places his family history within the larger context of Irish mythology and Jungian archetypal thought, and highlights the centrality of the Beloved to his life and work. *The Familiar* concludes with a poem that signals both rejuvenation and a more hopeful future for the poet and the Beloved. In “Iris,” the winged

goddess of the same name appears “on a spear of a leaf, / her wings shivering” (CP 334). In Greek mythology Iris was both the personification of the rainbow and the messenger of the gods who appeared to humans. She represents a rainbow of the future after the stormy legacy of the past, “a maiden messenger” who appears to the poet, “whispering detail” and leaving a delicate “virginal drop” (CP 334). The virginal drop continues the imagery of the previous poem where the bride Sara stood “in the front window / in her white veil” (CP 333).

The Familiar can be read as a corrective to both “Phoenix Park” and the *Wormwood* sequence, in which the poet and his Beloved achieve only a tenuous truce after a process of surrender, confrontation and reconciliation. The pain expressed in the *Wormwood* sequence has given way to a celebration of their life together, while the poetic speaker of *The Familiar* is no longer obsessed with issues of death or decay, or the tension between love and art. Nor is the distance that characterized some of the early work in evidence in this sequence. On the contrary, by calling attention so explicitly to the idea of “familiarity,” Kinsella reinforces the impression of intimacy that pervades these poems. Moreover, patriarchal gender discourse which privileges the male at the expense of the female is no longer in evidence and the Beloved is no longer portrayed in essentialist terms. Instead, the emphasis is on the Beloved as a dynamic enabling force whose presence is central to Kinsella’s poetic project of personal and creative understanding.

As indicated at the beginning of this chapter, Kinsella came of age as a writer in a patriarchal culture which was suffused with the ethos of Catholicism. In the early love poems the female subject is occluded within a patriarchal structure, and to a certain

extent Kinsella's work replicates and reinforces the subordinate position assigned to Irish women through the institutions of the Irish government and the Catholic Church. The Beloved is initially portrayed as passive and silent, incapable of independent agency, in keeping with traditional representations of women in love poetry. As Elizabeth Butler Cullingford points out, "the freedom to constitute herself as a subject has been routinely denied to the beloved woman in the canon of Western male love poetry" (57); however, I argue that Kinsella reverses this gender paradigm in his late marriage sequence. In *The Familiar*, the independence of the female partner is celebrated through a contrast between the early and later aesthetic representations of the Beloved. If in the early love poetry the Beloved was represented in conventional terms, this portrayal changes in the late poems, where the Beloved is an active, speaking presence. Aware of gender inequality, the Beloved no longer fulfills a largely symbolic role, but instead is portrayed as an "indispensable source of strength" (see Harmon xxii) who sustains the poet through her own autonomous presence in his life. She is the wise life partner, "Comely Wisdom," a sympathetic female who not only listens to the poet but is also a speaking subject who speaks to the poet as equal. Collins reads Kinsella's change in representation as marking "not only a reinterpretation of the place of women in his work but a means by which his entire thinking can move forward" (141), and indeed the character and the tone of the latter two marriage sequences differs remarkably from the earlier, more fraught poetry on the subject of love. Gender related problems with distance and acknowledgment are now disallowed and have been replaced with a new openness and respect.

The poet's aesthetic engagement with the Beloved develops from the remote position of the early work, with its focus on sickness, death and marital strife, to

recognition of the importance of the Beloved as a powerful force in the poet's art and his equal partner on the quest for understanding. As Collins points out, "Kinsella's attempts to portray both the fluidity of the relationship between self and other and the centrality of this relationship to his inquiry result in the emergence of a variety of strategies for representing the female" (143). This repositioning of the figure of the Beloved reveals how much Kinsella's representation of women has grown more open and more inclusive as his investigation into the nature of love matures. In both times of strife and harmony, Kinsella affirms the presence of the Beloved as an emotional and artistic necessity who shares equivalent dignity in the relationship. Ultimately, Kinsella's aesthetic examination of his marriage leads to a recognition of a subjectivity other than his own, in the presence of the Beloved.

CHAPTER 3

FEMALE ARCHETYPES: THOMAS KINSELLA AND C. G. JUNG

Kinsella's representation of women, whether based on real or imaginary figures, cannot be fully understood without reference to crucial aspects of Jungian analytic psychology, in particular Jung's theory of mythic archetypes and the key concepts of "individuation" and "the collective unconscious." Kinsella is unique in contemporary Irish poetry for his aesthetic incorporation of Jung's writing, which has resulted in some of his most original and challenging poetry, where persistent self-analysis is given imaginative expression and the psychic quest for individuation is intimately bound up with the creative process. The only other contemporary poet who has successfully absorbed and transformed Jung's teachings into a poetics about the psychic potential of what the psychologist called "the fully realized self" is the American poet Charles Olson.²⁹ This deliberate incorporation of Jungian psychology is an important contributing factor in the development of the highly idiosyncratic personal voice that characterizes Kinsella's work from 1968 onward, where dissonant and fragmented syntax become expressive devices for conveying the poet's psychic explorations into the personal and

²⁹ Anthony Mellors claims that "of the many modern poets who have associated themselves with Jung's ideas, Charles Olson is significant in developing an entire poetic from the relationship between a transcendental self and its origins in the collective unconscious filtered through world religion and arcane knowledge" (95). I argue that Kinsella achieved a similar result in his-mid career poetry where the mythic aesthetics were derived chiefly from Jungian psychology and symbolism.

collective unconscious. As this chapter will show, Kinsella's Jungian inspired poetry marks his vision as profoundly serious; however, the merits of his investigations are severely compromised because his aesthetic confrontations with the archetypal female *anima* consolidate gender differences rather than ameliorate such differences.

Jung believed that individuation involves an unequivocal affirmation of the "Self," which in turn liberates the creative energies of an individual. Anthony Stevens explains that in Jungian terms the Self is different from the ego or the self of everyday life as it "transcends the ego and inheres the age-old capacities of the species" (61). For Jung, deeper psychic understanding of the Self and consequently individuation for a male can only happen by confronting the archetypal female anima, who is "a spontaneous product of the unconscious" (Jung *Psyche* 13). The female anima appears in a multiplicity of guises, both realistic and mythic, and according to Jung, "whenever she appears, in dreams, visions, and fantasies, she takes on personified form" (13). This archetype is envisioned in accordance with her Eros nature, and in classical mythology she is represented by Aphrodite, Helen, Persephone and Hecate. She is also the universal Great Mother who is simultaneously loving and terrifying, depending on the psychic projection involved.

In the early 1970's Kinsella began writing about his quest to achieve the Jungian goal of individuation and to bring to the surface the contents of his unconscious.³⁰ This

³⁰ The poetry discussed in this chapter was written after Kinsella had quit his job in Dublin as a senior civil servant and moved to the United States to accept a teaching position at Temple University. It is probable that it was within this environment that

poetry of self-discovery began with *Notes from the Land of the Dead* (1972), incorporated in the *Collected Poems* into *New Poems*, and continued into the mid 1980's with the publication of *One* (1974), *A Technical Supplement* (1976), *Song of the Night and Other Poems* (1978), and *Songs of the Psyche* (1985). In Jungian psychology, the collective unconscious of mankind is comprised of functional units which he termed "archetypes." He conceived these archetypes as psychic structures that were common to all individuals; in other words, "innate neuropsychic centres possessing the capacity to initiate, control, and mediate the common behavioural characteristics and typical experiences of all human beings" (see Stevens 48). Consequently, Jung believed that the role of personal experience was to develop *what is already there* – to activate the archetypal potential already present in the self. For Jung, masculine and feminine are the two great archetypal principles: the female is Mother Nature, Goddess of Fertility, the Great Mother, while the male is Ruler, Elder, King and Lawmaker. In Jungian psychology, the initial struggle of the male's urge toward wholeness is with the archetype of the feminine or the feminine element of the male psyche. This may be threatening if repressed, so in order to achieve individuation, the contents of this archetype must be acknowledged and its characteristics integrated into one's psyche.

Kinsella encountered Jung's work. Mellors draws attention to Jung's pre-eminence in American academia at the time: "There is little acknowledgment by the academic community today of the reach of Jung's influence. From the 1950s to the 1970s, many academics were weaned on existential readings of Heidegger and Jung's analytical psychology" (83n12).

Jung also believed that “the human psyche possesses a common substratum transcending all differences in culture and consciousness,” and he named this substratum “the collective unconscious” (*Psyche and Symbol* 340). In Jung’s view, a work of art is not necessarily the product of the *personal unconscious* of the individual artist, but rather has its source in “a sphere of unconscious mythology whose primordial images are the common heritage of all mankind” (*The Spirit of Man* 80). Jung argues that the collective unconscious “is no more than a potentiality handed down to us from primordial times in the specific form of mnemonic images or inherited in the anatomical structure of the brain” (80). These images are imbedded in the human psyche, and through art these archetypal images of the collective unconscious find expression:

The primordial image, or archetype, is a figure - be it a daemon, a human being, or a process – that constantly recurs in the course of history and appears wherever creative fantasy is freely expressed. Essentially, therefore, it is a mythological figure. When we examine these images more closely, we find that they give form to countless typical experiences of our ancestors. They are, so to speak, the psychic residua of innumerable experiences of the same type. They present a picture of psychic life in the mythological pantheon. But the mythological figures are themselves products of creative fantasy and still have to be translated into conceptual language (Jung, *The Spirit in Man* 81).

Kinsella turns to both male and female mythological figures to give expression to this collective unconscious, and frames his vision in a decidedly Irish context that reaches back to primordial origins and the collective experiences of the first people of Ireland. He forges connections between his personal past and the Gaelic past, giving this collective

unconscious a palpable presence in his work, as narratives and archetypes reoccur across time and Irish history.

Jung's concept of individuation has proven controversial for several reasons, not least of which is the charge that his reasoning of how the individual confronts his own fears and "libidinal darkness" is ultimately "geared towards identifying and authorizing the type of the phallic hero" (see Mellors 92). As Mellors explains, "Jung's concept of the Self is theorized as a holistic condition in which the (male) subject reconciles the imaginary coherence of the ego with the 'real' coherence of collective archetypes, nurtured by the desire to restore lost unity with the mother" (7). Jung envisioned individuation as an expression of a biological process by which every living person, male and female, becomes who they were destined to become from the moment of their birth. However, because this chapter is concerned with the manner in which Kinsella creatively harnessed Jungian psychology for his poetry, it necessarily focuses on the issue of male individuation. I argue that although feminine figures, whether actual women or anima, play an important role in the Jungian influenced poetry their presence is simply to function as a facilitator and a symbol on this male-centered journey. Women are not enabled through the poet's process of individuation; on the contrary, they exist solely as a collection of fixed images that mirror the psychic projections of Kinsella's imagination as he explores his own personality and the potentiality of the Self. As this chapter will show, Kinsella's representation of the archetypal anima sustains and perpetrates traditional attitudes towards gender and sexuality, with the paradoxical result that some of his most creative work is also some of his most conservative.

The theme of *New Poems* is a reenactment of Kinsella's psychic journey inward, towards self-formation and a confrontation with his own libidinal darkness, which he encounters while dreaming. In the prologue to this collection Kinsella sets the stage for a series of exploratory poems, describing himself as "getting quietly ready / to go down quietly out of my mind," suggesting he will leave his conscious self behind and prepare for a journey into an unpredictable unconscious state via his dreams (CP 95). The use of dreams is central to Jungian analysis, as Jung considered them to be the spontaneous products of the unconscious psyche, outside the control of the will or ego, which required interpretation in an archetypal light. Thus Kinsella describes how his dream begins with his descent "toward a ring of mouths," evoking the archetype of the insatiable, devouring Great Mother. The prologue begins in the lower case, with the first word un-capitalized, and takes up the ideas introduced at the end of "Phoenix Park," the poem immediately preceding this volume. In the last stanza of "Phoenix Park" the poet describes the beginning of an amorphous, primordial dream, where "A few ancient faces" begin to circle around him and "Delicate distinct tissue begins to form" (CP 94). In this process of submersion into his unconscious he will be "cooped up /with the junk of centuries," reflecting Jung's belief that dreams provide a conduit to the primordial experience of our species (CP 95).

Kinsella describes a three stage process where he will "hesitate, cease to exist, glitter again" (CP 95). Images of the feminine predominate as the poet describes his process of psychological rebirth with the female anima appearing in the form of a hag. He will "dither in and out of a mother liquid" as he descends into unconsciousness, before waking in the company of "naked ancient women" (CP 95-97). These ancient

women, with “Nothingness silted under their thighs / and over their limp talons,” are guarding a cauldron which contains Kinsella’s childhood memories, “a vapour of forms” that “curdled, glittered and vanished” (CP 97). The poem does not make clear who these women represent, but based on the poems that follow one could read the women hovering around a cauldron as a Macbeth-like trio, the Archetypal Great Mother; a woman representing Kinsella’s grandmothers and the Sovereign Hag of Irish mythology. The cauldron symbolizes the repository of the memories, both individual and collective, that Kinsella must confront in order to transition from one psychological state to another. The poet describes how he “stole through to my enterprise. . . to the recovery of the cauldron” (CP 97). Once in possession of this cauldron of memories he must return to consciousness, a process that involves considerable psychological effort, as the poet is required to pass through “that seemingly unattainable grill” (CP 97). The self-knowledge that Kinsella’s developing consciousness seeks may seem unattainable at this stage of his psychological journey, but Kinsella recognizes that such self doubt is part of the journey towards individuation as the grill described only *seems* out of reach.

As part of this Jungian struggle for individuation Kinsella wrote several key poems, which he described as “completely exploratory,” that revolve around youthful memories of the poet’s maternal and paternal grandmothers (see Haffenden 104). In the introduction to his memoir of growing up in a working class area of Dublin, *A Dublin Documentary*, Kinsella describes his grandmothers as “formidable women” who

dominated his childhood.³¹ Both women managed small grocery shops in their houses, and to the youthful Kinsella these “ancient women” were a source of fascination and also terror. It is this world that informs a suite of four individual yet connected poems in *New Poems*: “Hen Woman,” “A Hand of Solo,” “Ancestor” and “Tear.” After the prologue poem a series of youthful encounters with these women are dramatized. In this group of poems the grandmother is a catalyst for memories which must be confronted and acknowledged if the poet is to achieve full integration of his personality. In foregrounding these female figures to illustrate the memories stored in his unconscious Kinsella gives voice to the feminine aspect of his character and also identifies the creative process with the feminine, an identification more fully explored in the following chapter, which discusses the poet’s feminized Muse.

The grandmother figures, often conflated into one woman, symbolize the Jungian archetypal Great Mother; however, they can also be read as symbolizing the Irish *cailleach* or ancient crone of Irish mythology. Brian John argues that while the archetype of the Triple or Great Mother is primordial and universal, she can also be viewed as “distinctively Irish.” He writes that “the parallels in early mythology and history are manifold, whether the three goddesses representing Ireland, Eriu, Banba, and Fotla, greeting the sons of Mil; the triple figure of Brigid; the three Machas, or the fearful war

³¹ Published in 2006, *A Dublin Documentary* is a mixture of prose, poetry and photographs, which detail Kinsella’s memories of growing up in working class Dublin. Kinsella also discusses his growing awareness of poetry and its importance to him.

goddesses, the Morrigna” (“Imaginative Bedrock” 115). Kinsella’s extensive background as a translator and editor of Old Irish Poetry lends further credence to the multiple Irish mythological parallels suggested by John. The poet’s specialized knowledge enables him to creatively fuse Jungian archetypes with early Irish experience and embody these diverse sources in the autobiographical persona of his grandmother.³²

The first of this suite of childhood memory poems is “Hen Woman.” His grandmother, who had grabbed a hen about to lay an egg, fumbled the emerging egg which dropped to the ground and broke, eliciting the following comment from the woman: “It’s all the one. / There’s plenty more where that came from!” (CP 99). The incident is recalled through the voice of the child which is interrupted mid-way through the poem by the mature speaker who meditates on the significance of the event. The grandmother is both a familiar figure and a frightening female who emerges from the cave-like “black hole” of her cottage in search of a hen, “her face dark with anger” (CP 97). The emergence of the egg, which “showed in the sphincter,” teaches the child about origins and birth, but also about death and destruction as the egg fell to the ground where it “smashed against the grating /and slipped down quickly out of sight” (CP 99). The slow motion fall of the egg parallels the dream-like state of falling into unconsciousness which the poet describes in the prologue poem.

³² The most important of Kinsella’s translations from Irish are *The Tain* (1969), the epic Ulster mythological saga, and, with Sean O Tuama, *An Duanaire, 1600-1900: Poems of the Dispossessed* (1981).

Kinsella's own explanation of the poem underscores the importance of this scene from childhood: "A scene ridiculous in its content, but of a serious early awareness of self and of process: of details insisting on their survival, regardless of any immediate significance" (*A Dublin Documentary* 17). This explanation accords with Kinsella's own sense of his poetry as a response to lived experience. No detail is too insignificant or trivial to escape the boy's attention, including a beetle, which he observes moving across the yard "clasping with small tarsi / a ball of dung bigger than its body" (CP 98). The adult speaker imbues the beetle with retrospective significance given that the scarab was considered a symbol of rebirth in ancient Egyptian mythology. Through this layering of allusion the tiny insect forms part of the symbolic tableaux of the poem that includes the grandmother, the hen, the falling egg and the poet's younger self. This early experience continues to resonate with the poet and provides a means for Kinsella to dwell upon the source of his creativity:

I feed upon it still, as you see;
there is no end to that which, not understood,
may yet be hoarded in the imagination,
in the yolk of one's being, so to speak,
there to undergo its (quite animal) growth (CP 99).

The recurrent imagery of the egg, both whole and destroyed, emphasizes the cycle of birth and death which is fundamental to Kinsella's poetics and his aesthetic search for meaning; the egg which the grandmother unsuccessfully tries to retrieve from the hen represents birth and new life, yet its careless destruction underscores both the fragility and the randomness of life.

Images of the underworld and the land of the dead also appear in “A Hand of Solo,” where the young boy is sent to fetch his grandmother in her small shop so she can join a game of cards. Kinsella places a description of the scene in *A Dublin Documentary* beside a photo of his maternal grandmother’s family and ahead of the poem, so that when readers encounter the poem in that particular volume they bring the following information to bear on their reading:

In the Casserly home, in a room behind the shop, the family would gather at week-ends, playing cards. Some of my first awarenesses are places in the dark of that room. Taking in the textures of life in their random detail: the firelight on the shelves of the dresser and on the card table; the voices of the players familiar and mysterious (Kinsella, *A Dublin Documentary* 8).

The grandmother is imagined as a terrifying Hecate-like figure, and as the Jungian Terrible Mother, presiding over her own land of the dead in her small backroom shop: the child recalls that “Her eyes glittered,” and “Strings of jet beads wreathed her neck / and hissed on the black taffeta / and crept on my hair” (CP 101). The grandmother reinforces this impression when she remonstrates with the child, who is reluctant to be hugged by “Her stale abyss,” with the comment, “...You'd think I had three heads!”(CP 101). With this joke she also unwittingly associates herself with the three fearsome Irish war goddesses, Morrighan, and the archetype takes on a distinctively Irish character.

The boy's memory is mythologized, as is the figure of the grandmother, when he buys a pomegranate, “an Indian apple,” from the old woman. The pomegranate is the fruit of life and death: it is full of seed and blood. The rape of Persephone is crudely brought to mind in the closing lines describing the poet's recollection of his younger self

sinking his teeth into the pulpy, seed filled fruit: “I drove my tongue among them / and took a mouthful, and slowly / bolted them. My throat filled / with a rank, Arab bloodstain” (CP 102). Kinsella has stated that he was “electrified and thrilled after putting so much weight of memory on the pomegranate it also responded mythologically,” yet this lucky coincidence resulted not from a deliberate aesthetic choice, but rather from the poet having “the impulse merely to understand, not to impose order” (see Haffenden 108-109).

Kinsella continues to explore his preoccupation with personal ancestry and inheritance in “Ancestor,” which paints a vivid picture of his paternal grandmother, who is described as moving in darkness, her hard profile “old, and dark like a hunting bird’s” (CP 104). The image of a predatory bird imbues the woman with a sinister and threatening air, suggesting the frightening visage of an old person as seen through a child’s eyes. She is also the Jungian anima of Kinsella’s unconscious, with a “black heart” and a “smell, musky and queer” (CP 104). Small details inconsequential to the boy are recalled, such as the grandmother’s action of putting a Baby Power whiskey bottle in her apron and walking past the child, her shadow ominously darkening the passageway as she makes her way towards the back bedroom:

She shoved a small bottle under her aprons
and came toward me, darkening the passageway.

Ancestor...among sweet – and fruit boxes.

Her black heart...

Was that a sigh?

- brushing by me in the shadows,

with her heaped aprons, through the red hangings

to the scullery, and down to the back room (CP 104).

The structure of this stanza conveys the sense of a series of surface impressions that do not quite coalesce in the mind of the young boy: the approaching figure of the woman blocking out the light, the setting of the small grocery shop, her character signaled by a black heart and an unexplained sigh. Was it a sigh of dissatisfaction, disappointment, or impatience at the boy standing in her way? One can sense the mature speaker's efforts to interpret and make sense of this half-grasped memory. Eventually one of these journeys down into the back bedroom would be his grandmother's last, and the bed would become her death-bed, as is made clear in, "Tear," the poem that immediately follows "Ancestor."

Kinsella describes in "Tear" how he is sent to see his ailing grandmother on her deathbed. The woman who was described in "Ancestor" as having a "black heart" now lies in the "chamberly dusk," and the child recoils from "the smell of disused / organs and sour kidney" (CP 104). As in the previous poem, the grandmother's tough disposition is conveyed through images of her face. Here, the "lines of ill temper" mark her mouth, and the child stands horror struck, unable to move in case she might tempt him "with some fierce wheedling whisper" to hide against her one last time and bury himself "in her dying mud" (CP 105). She is the embodiment of the Jungian anima, still powerfully threatening and seductive, even though she is on her death-bed. The interaction between the child and the dying woman is couched in physical terms throughout the poem as

Kinsella attempts to confront his own libidinal darkness. Frightened by the image of the dying old woman, the child recoils from kissing her, promising himself that he would do so “when she was really dead” (CP 105). Instead, he places his farewell kiss on “the chill / and smell of her black aprons,” signifying with this compromised kiss that at this stage, his confrontation with this female anima is still provisional. The child’s physical contact with his grandmother has the sensory effect transporting him back to the land of the dead “into a derelict place / smelling of ash” (CP 106). This sensation provokes another, older memory in the young boy, involving the death of another Kinsella family member, as he recalls the voice of his grandmother when younger, “talking to someone / about my father” describing the father’s grief at the death of Kinsella’s infant sister.

The child and the grandmother momentarily become one when he experiences “her heart beating in my mouth” (CP 106). This final image of their two selves briefly merging into one body symbolizes Kinsella’s reconciliation of male and female principles (animus and anima), which occurs only after the poet successfully overcomes his libidinal darkness, aesthetically represented as an incestuous coupling between the boy and the grandmother. Ultimately, the grandmother in this poem is a reductive figure, an abstraction of the Jungian anima, symbolizing sexual menace and death, which the male must confront if he is to achieve true individuation. Her authority is further undermined by the manner in which her body is used to evoke various psychic impressions that the poet remembers when dreaming about this incident from childhood. She has no ownership over her body; instead, her flesh is a blank screen on which Kinsella can project his own emotions and sensory perceptions.

O' Brien Johnson and Cairns ask whether "the essentialism of mythically produced figures must inevitably be reductive and have disabling effects on mere historical women" (4). In these poems about Kinsella's grandmothers the answer is yes, despite the fact that these female family figures provide a conduit to the poet's creative self and his unconscious perceptions about himself. In Jungian terms, these versions of the female anima embody the nurturing and threatening mystery of the feminine, and also the desire and fear that the male psyche has been conditioned to feel towards the feminine. They symbolize the earth mother of creation and the hag of death and decay. The grandmother figure initiates the boy into the mysteries of the adult world, where the encounters described are represented as a generational chasm between the boy and the old women, youth and age, innocence and worldliness. And while Kinsella's grandmothers are pivotal figures in the poet's journey towards individuation, a hierarchical dynamic is inherent in this relationship because these women are reduced to symbols against which the masculine subject is being constructed. Luce Irigaray has traced how women have been consistently regarded in masculine terms and excluded from representation in Western patriarchal culture. Although this may not have been Kinsella's aesthetic intent, the representation of women in this suite of poems reinforces many of Irigaray's observations. The grandmother figure is defined only in relation to Kinsella, and "like that of any (female) being cannot move, or move beyond, the ontological status assigned" to her (Irigaray 163).

After this series of autobiographical poems "Touching the River" resumes the themes enumerated in the prologue, signaling from the opening line the primacy of women in Kinsella's journey to the land of the dead and his subconscious. This poem

opens with an image of a nude woman kneeling on “her shelf of moss.” An image of the woman's fingers, which are described as “affectedly trailing” in the water, recalls the “Dark nutrient waves” of the opening poem. With the introduction of this elemental figure the poem announces that the subconscious journey inward will now focus on the primordial past and the collective unconscious rather than on Kinsella’s personal past. The speaker and others are pictured on the brink of the river ready to descend into the depths of the waters and the depths of unconsciousness: “...we kneel on the brink and drive our stare / down, now, into the current. / Our unstopped flesh and senses / - how they vanish!” (CP 109). Spatially and thematically the poem moves downward and inward as Kinsella’s search for origins continues into the abyss of his psyche where he will explore his personality “entirely free of the expectations of social realism” (see Collins 147-148).

In the following poem, “Nuchal,” Kinsella combines Jungian archetypes with the Irish mythological past, specifically stories that comprise *Lebor Gabala Erinn* (the *Book of Invasions*), as he continues to chart his psychological journey. Dillon Johnston explains Kinsella’s use of Irish mythology as source material in his attempts to access the collective unconscious of his ancestors: “*The Book of Invasions* serves as a metaphor for the collective unconscious; specifically, it represents the Irish nation’s collective memory of successive invasions and of the necessity for repossession, as this memory manifests

itself in dreamlike images within one individual's consciousness" (98).³³ Kinsella acknowledged as much in an interview with Daniel O'Hara, stating that with regard to *Notes from the Land of the Dead* he wanted to incorporate stories from Irish myth into his poetry "in a dramatic way, almost certainly by having the undefined consciousness, which is at the root of the poems in *Notes*, becoming more defined...so that the thing will have a dramatic effect and gather up the mythical Irish contents of the subconscious" (7, 8). I interpret Kinsella's use of the term "undefined consciousness" to mean an unpredictable subconscious state, and Kinsella uses the stories from the *Book of Invasions* as the scaffolding upon which to aesthetically shape the fragmented and experimental explorations of this unpredictable subconscious. This mythological material serves a twofold purpose: it is a route into the Jungian idea of the collective unconscious, and a road map of the poet's search for origins and beginnings.

"Nuchal" is considered by critics to be "a very free translation or adaptation of the sixth poem of *Lebor Gabala Erinn*" (Badin 95). As in previous poems images of water are either feminized or associated directly with women. "Nuchal" is described in *The Book of Invasions* as the source of the four rivers of Eden. The poem retells the creation of the four rivers by the nude woman earlier described in "Touching the River." In the second stanza a rivulet makes contact with the fingers of the sleeping woman and "divides and subdivides into four" (CP 109) to become the four great rivers of Eden, but

³³ For an extensive discussion on the contents of *The Book of Invasions* and the textual criticism that surrounds it see Carolyn A. Rosenberg's dissertation *Let Our Gaze Blaze: The Recent Poetry Of Thomas Kinsella*. Kent State University 1980.

also of ancient Ireland. Here woman is portrayed as the source of all creation and creativity - she is simultaneously the Sovereignty Goddess from Irish mythology, a figure synonymous with the land of Ireland, and the Great Mother archetype of Jungian psychology. The trope of the “sovereignty goddess” from the native Irish tradition takes various forms and reoccurs down through the centuries, particularly in Gaelic songs and poetry. She is a powerful mythological figure, primarily concerned with the well being of the land, often depicted as using her sexuality to protect the ancient kingdoms of Ireland. From the seventeenth century onwards, she appears allegorically, particularly in the Irish poetry genre *aisling* as the colonized nation of Ireland. Joseph Valente argues that in Gaelic mythology “any candidate for kingship accedes to the crown by way of a mating ritual in which the Sovereign Hag (Erin, the Poor Old Woman, the Shan Van Vocht, the Cailleach Beare, Cathleen) attempts to seduce or accost him” (95). Once the union is sexually consummated the Hag is magically transformed into a beautiful young woman. As Valente notes, “the feminine agency originally attaching to the Sovereignty myth constituted a specifically sexual agency” (97). In “Nuchal” this sexual agency is underscored by the fact that the goddess is described as being “nude”; however, the poem strips her not only of her clothing but also of her power, whether sexual or political. Kinsella’s land/body analogy confines this version of the sovereignty goddess to the realm of her body with the effect that this timeless repetitive figure becomes a reductive symbol of women, whose sole function is limited to the traditional female role of creation and procreation. This representation of the sovereignty goddess finds parallels in Jungian psychology, where the mother figure is given nominal control, but ultimately the concept of spiritual rebirth is patriarchal.

The third poem in the sequence, "Survivor," offers a different vision of woman who is now an elemental and threatening force. Kinsella here draws on a different story from *The Book of Invasions* as he re-enacts the escape of Fintan from the sexually predatory expedition of Cessair, the female leader of the first, predominantly female invasion of Ireland before the Flood. John summarizes this section of the *Book of Invasions*: "The expedition consisted of three males and fifty females, but with the deaths of two men, Fintan was left to satisfy the sexual appetite of the whole contingent" (*Reading the Ground* 131). Fintan survives "the Deluge" or the flood by hiding in a dark cave, and later changing shape, first into a bird and then into a fish. His torment is aligned with Kinsella's confrontation with his unconscious: "What it is, to suffer: / the dismal rock nourishes. / Draughts creep: shelter in them" (CP 111). The poet reaches back to his origins, back to the womb which the dark cave resembles, as he lies "curled in delicious self hate" (CP 111). Jungian archetypes and Celtic mythology intermingle in the third section of the poem as Fintan and "a shoal of women" emerge after the Flood into "Perpetual twilight" which is "A Land of the dead." The Great Mother is transformed into the Terrible Mother, as creation is transformed into destruction, and the surviving moonscape is inhabited by a hag who sits "staring up at nothing" (CP 112). In *Survivor*, the boundaries between personal and cultural identity are deliberately blurred. The old woman is emblematic of the darkness beneath the surface of the poet's own consciousness yet she appears in this dream as a figure from the collective unconscious of Kinsella's cultural past.

In the final section Fintan strives to remember and recount his experiences, "I must remember / and be able some time to explain," just as the poet strives to remember

his nightmarish dreams and make sense of the communication between his conscious mind and the personal and collective unconscious. The poem ends on a note of incoherence as poet and Fintan confront the emptiness of the land of the dead: “Hair. Claws. Grey. / Naked. Wretch. Wither” (CP 112). Both have survived their terrible ordeal, yet the effort of confronting one’s inner psyche exacts a terrible price and the breakdown in syntax parallels the speaker’s inner turmoil and emotional distress. The fragmentary syntax used in this and several of the other poems in *Notes* serves to emphasize the disjointed and contradictory images that the poet glimpses in his dreams and visions. Johnson lauds Kinsella for drawing “the fragmentary and inchoate into art,” finding parallels in the classical literary tradition for Kinsella’s incorporation of “aspects of real discourse as muttered words, broken syntax and fragmentary sentences” (119).³⁴ In the search for meaning language breaks down in the face of contradictory and shifting perspectives. The poetic speaker is both immersed in the experience and at the same time trying to describe through language the visceral sensations he experienced.

With the publication of *One* in 1974, Kinsella resumed his private investigation of the self after a series of four elegies that launched his private press, the Peppercanister Press.³⁵ The poems in *One* return to the Jungian quest of individuation and the search for

³⁴ Johnston labels these “parataxis, anacoluthon, and aposiopesis” 119.

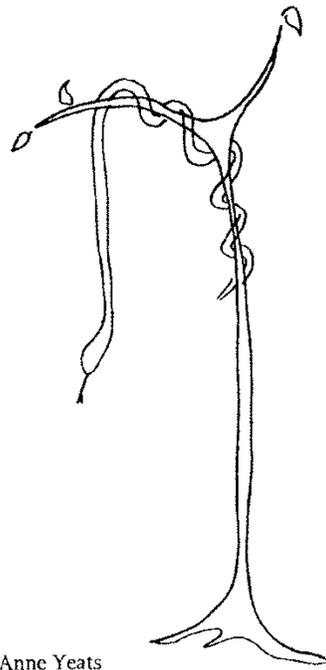
³⁵ Kinsella established his own press in 1972, with the publication of *Butcher’s Dozen*, a satire in rhyming couplets that was written as an immediate response to the findings of the Widgery Tribunal of Inquiry, which exonerated the British Army of any wrongdoing in the shooting of thirteen unarmed civil rights demonstrators in Derry on

origins, essentially taking up the concerns of *Notes* in a series of poems that combine psychological, mythical and familial elements. Kinsella continues to explore the relationship between his own origins and the collective unconscious of the first people of Ireland through the prism of Celtic mythology, specifically, the myths contained in *The Book of Invasions* “as explained by H. D’Arbois de Jubainville’s *The Irish Mythological Cycle and Celtic Mythology*” (see Tubridy 58). *One* is comprised of six poems, with the first three based on Irish mythology and the latter three dealing with Kinsella’s family history. These poems are bookended by two dreams structured as a prologue, where the poet sets the scene for the sequence, describing how he journeyed in a dream back to “the Voyage of the First Kindred” (CP 159), and an epilogue where the poet yet again encounters the Great Mother of Jungian analysis.

One of the features of Kinsella’s work which sets him apart from the main stream of contemporary Anglo-Irish poetry is his distinctive use of visual imagery in the Peppercanister editions of his work. It is unfortunate that the cover art and the images contained in specific sequences were not included in the *Collected Poems*, because in

January 30 1972. The second and third Peppercanisters, *A Selected Life* (1972) and *Vertical Man* (1973) are elegies written for Kinsella’s close friend, the Irish composer Sean O Riada. A fourth elegy, *The Good Fight* (1973), was written on the tenth anniversary of the assassination of President John F. Kennedy. Peppercanister continues to publish all of Kinsella’s individual sequences work, with the exception of *Man of War* and *Belief and Unbelief*, which were both published in 2007 by Dedalus Press and Carcanet Press.

several sequences the intertextuality created between the printed text and the visual images enhance the text and provide another layer of interpretative meaning. In *One*, a series of seven sparse black and white line drawings by Anne Yeats reinforce the stark nature of Kinsella's Jungian journey of descent downward into the psyche toward myth and origin. Time is suspended and the exact environment in which the poet finds himself in is unclear. Two recurrent images central to Kinsella's poetics, the snake and the coil, visually reinforce the nightmarish quality of the journey undertaken. The first three drawings depict a snake draped around a tree, a head of a snake with a forked tongue, and a coiled snake with either its offspring or victim emerging from its gaping mouth.



drawings by Anne Yeats

Fig. 1.

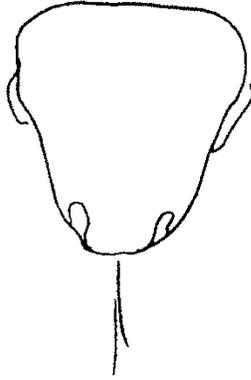


Fig. 2.

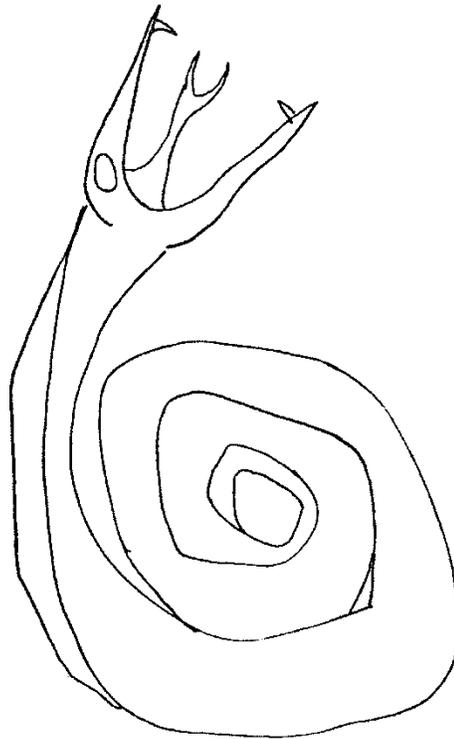


Fig. 3.

These three images are followed by a simple drawing of rough waves set against the opening stanza of “Finistere,” which retells the story of Ith, who sights the land of Ireland as a distinct shape across the sea from The Land of the Dead. Above the crude image of the waves is an intricate image of the sun, moon and clouds co-mingled,

reflecting the co-mingling of the poetic voices in the poem, where the speaker is both Ith and Amairgin, the legendary first poet of Ireland, and also at times Kinsella himself.

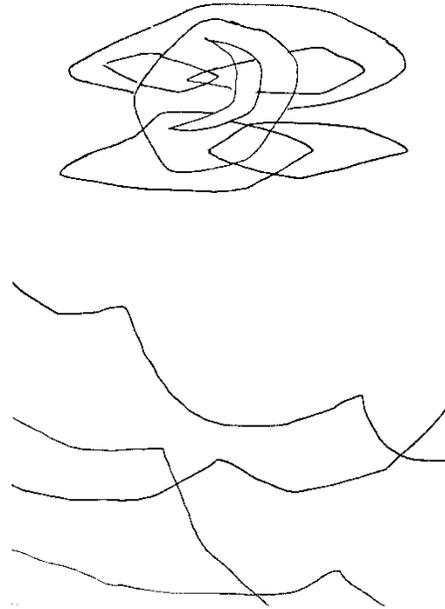


Fig. 4.

The archetypal Great Mother and the Irish *cailleach* are embodied in a surreal stone structure standing in a barren landscape in “The Oldest Place.” Yeats’s drawing is an eerie depiction of a standing stone, which appears to be surrounded by debris at its base, and covered by a flapping shawl or cloth on top.



Fig. 5.

When Kinsella encountered this archetype previously she was described as a hag, “staring up at nothing,” and a similar void is imagined here as a “complex emptiness” (CP 167). The “crumpled face” of this creature mouths incomprehensible words “*Agath, Kak,*” which serve to illustrate man’s isolation in the world through the breakdown in language.

In earlier work, Kinsella explored issues of origins and identity through his female ancestors, yet the masculine role in the reproductive process is not acknowledged until this suite of poems involving the poet’s father and grandfather. Three autobiographical poems, “38 Phoenix Street,” “Minstrel,” and “His Father’s Hands,” do not make any reference to the female members of the family. On the contrary, the female presence is notably absent from these poems, and the impression one gets is that Kinsella’s patriarchal history is privileged over the maternal, with the former viewed as

cause for celebration, while the latter languishes in anonymity. Matriarchal influences and the feminine anima are eclipsed as the emphasis shifts to a celebration of the male members of Kinsella's family. The last of these poems, "His Father's Hands," examines the relationship between the poet and his father and grandfather through the family's participation in history. Kinsella highlights the involvement of the male members of the family with early Irish rebellions: "Your family, Thomas, met with and helped /many of the Croppies," and also identifies their trade: "the Men Folk were either Stone Cutters/ or masons or probably both" (CP 172). In these stories of the familial past there is no mention of the role women played in the family or national narrative. Their exclusion leaves Kinsella open to the charge of reproducing patriarchal paradigms of gender, with men playing an active and decisive role in history and women confined to the margins in the subordinate roles of wife and mother.

Furthermore, this particular poem associates the life cycle with masculine symbols and imagery, in contrast to all other Kinsella poems. The poet describes how he found a wooden block from his childhood, which breaks open in his hands, spewing out "countless little nails / squirming and dropping out of it" (CP 173). The imagery suggests spermatozoa or embryonic cells in their first stages of evolution, an impression reinforced by the Yeats line drawing accompanying the poem in the original *Peppercanister* publication, which depicts a group of small chromosomes arranged in a semi-circle around a much larger version. Tubridy also interprets this drawing and its placement alongside these three domestic poems as underscoring "the importance of the biological, and therefore familial, in the identity of self" (Tubridy 69).

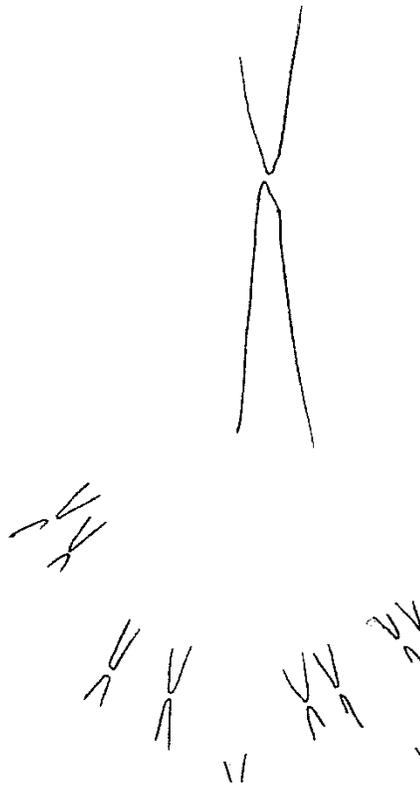


Fig. 6.

Since Tubridy's study does not focus on gender issues she does not see this vexed association of procreation with patriarchal rule as significant. I would argue that with this group of family poems Kinsella is supporting certain established notions of gender, where the traditional importance of the male line is supported, and the female line rendered insignificant through absence.

Images of the Great Mother, along with a Medusa or Hecate figure, return in the final poem, "Epilogue." Once again we see Kinsella conflating female Jungian archetypes with the Irish *cailleach* or sovereignty hag. Recalling the imagery in "Tear," where Kinsella's grandmother lay on her death bed with her long grey hair loosened, "like a web of strands tying down her head / and tangling down toward the shadow / eating away the floor at my feet" (CP 105), "Epilogue" opens with an image of a woman

“with lank hair.” The woman in this final dream spreads her hair, which “stiffened and moved / by itself, glistening on her shoulders.” The imagery of the woman’s hair is suggestive of a snake, which connects the poem to the three snake drawings in the Peppercanister edition, and also to the speakers in the poem who “squirmed in expectation” and “hissed, in praise” of the woman (CP 174). In this first part of the poem the woman is threatening and sinister, and through the association with the poet’s ailing grandmother, connected with death. The poet attempts to communicate the sensations he experiences when he confronts this archetype: “Caught in her cold fist, I writhed and reversed” (CP 174). Yet paradoxically, she is also associated with fertility and birth as the squirming spermatozoa nails from the wooden block are transformed into an image of harvesting and sheaves of wheat:

We squirmed in expectation. Then there rose
a suffused heart, stopped, clenched on its light.
‘Reap us!’ we hissed, in praise. The heart beat
and broke open, and sent a fierce beam
among our wriggling sheaves (CP 174).

The state of transcendence suggested by these lines is achieved by reinscribing gender roles with the female deified and depicted as a form of earth mother. Such a figure has no independent power but is instead merely an intermediate stage on the male journey towards individuation.

The associations of birth and reproduction that the harvest imagery suggests continues in the second section of the poem, where the female figure is portrayed in a tender light as Kinsella’s fall into unconsciousness “is cradled / immediately in a

motherly warmth” (CP 174), recalling both the “mother liquid” and the “Dark nutrient waves” that the poet encounters in the prologue to *New Poems*. The fear that the speaker experienced in the first half of the poem when he was “caught” in the Great Mother’s “cold fist” has now dissipated and is replaced instead by “motherly warmth,” signaling an acceptance by the poet of this feminine figure and her integration into the poet’s psyche. Yeats’s final drawing in the Peppercanister edition, which is placed directly above the “Epilogue,” reinforces the themes of origins, birth, and motherhood.

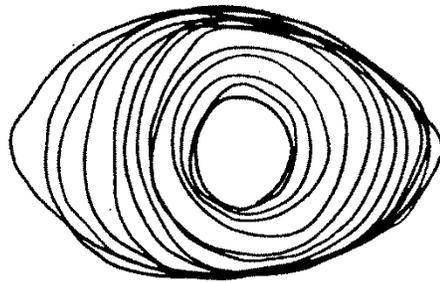


Fig. 7.

The image of a dense black circular design can be interpreted as representing zero, the point of origin, and also a reproductive cell or embryonic egg. When given a Jungian interpretation the drawing can also be read as representing a womb of “motherly warmth,” reinforcing the impression that the poet emerges at the end of this sequence from “the dark maternal cave of the unconscious” (Jung, *Symbols of Transformation* 374).

The next Peppercanister, *A Technical Supplement*, continues Kinsella’s Jungian influenced explorations of his personal and racial past; however, this aspect of the sequence has received less critical attention than the six anatomically themed poems

which employ graphic images and metaphors of bodily dissection and ingestion.³⁶ On one level, the twenty-four interrelated poems are intended to function as “a technical supplement” to the ethos of the Enlightenment and Denis Diderot’s efforts to bring together the rational and scientific knowledge in his *Encyclopedia*. Although Kinsella begins this sequence with an epigraph in the form of a letter written by Diderot to Voltaire dated February 19 1758, the volume is bookended by a prologue and final poem which focus on the continued inward journey, signaling that the entire inquiry of *A Technical Supplement* grows out of the matrix of the poet’s conscious and unconscious psychic probing. The lack of critical focus on the Jungian imagery in these poems is partly because the striking visual imagery in *A Technical Supplement* reinforces the parallel with Diderot and the Enlightenment. Kinsella interspersed six black and white illustrations throughout the Peppercanister edition which were originally created by Diderot in order to illustrate the multi-volume *Encyclopedie*, which was published in seventeen volumes over the period 1751-1752. A penknife provides the cover image, followed by a hand holding a quill, an anatomical drawing, a severed head, and two surgical drawings. I have included three of these drawings to illustrate their powerful impact. Throughout the sequence, anatomical inquiry is used as a metaphor for the nature of understanding, with the poet attempting to understand “how the whole thing / works” (CP 177).

³⁶ Even Kinsella’s most perceptive critics, John and Tubridy, focus their critique of *A Technical Supplement* on the parallel of Diderot and the poet’s similar quest for encyclopedic understanding. See John (178-184) and Tubridy (75-93).



Fig. 8.

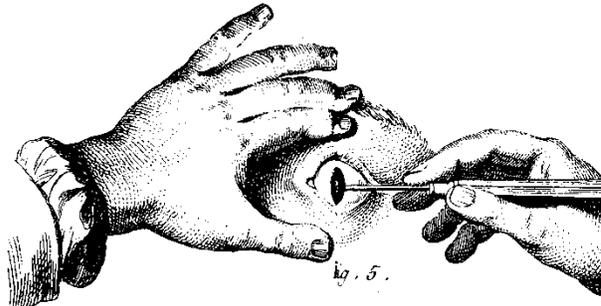


Fig. 9.

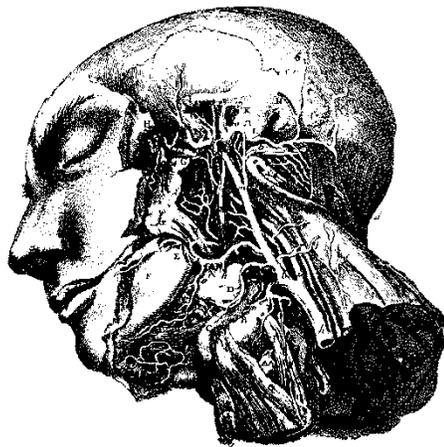


Fig. 10.

However, before issues of rationality and the poetic process are subject to the anatomical gaze of the poet, the stage is set for another descent into unconsciousness. An untitled prologue introduces five unidentified characters, “slumped there in the dark” (CP 176). The poem is deliberately vague as to the identity of these characters because in a dream-like state not all experiences are coherent and subject to a singular explanation. They could be different aspects of the psyche as it struggles for wholeness, or early Irish invaders from the *Book of Invasions*. In language that evokes the “Epilogue” of *One*, in which the figures “squirmed in expectation” among their “wriggling sheaves,” the figures here start “wriggling away” journeying “across the mud” (CP 176). Both the language and the theme of this opening poem are reminiscent of earlier poems that attempt to describe the various manifestations of the poet’s psyche in terms of a visionary experience as “the whole past and future” presses in on him” (CP 176).

The Muse rarely makes an appearance in Kinsella’s mid-career sequences; she is not represented as a Jungian archetype or a symbol of Celtic mythology. However, she appears in poem 15 as a sad prowler in Kinsella’s home, with the poet openly antagonistic to her “sudden and / Peremptory incursions” (CP 186). The Muse is imagined in sexual terms, one who must be penetrated and dissected (I’ll pierce her like / a soft fruit, a big soft seed”), in order for the poet to harness his creativity.³⁷ I believe this is a reference to the box of Indian apples, and the pomegranate that the young Kinsella recalls eating in “A Hand of Solo,” where the sensation of consuming the fruit and its

³⁷ As will be discussed further in chapter four, in Kinsella’s later work we see a move away from casting the Muse in purely sexual terms.

seeds kindled the first stirrings of the poet's imaginative impulse. I read this hostility as an acknowledgment by Kinsella of the difficulties inherent in creating art and the Muse, who is forever lurking at the back of Kinsella's consciousness, must of necessity be confronted and probed by the pen. A Jungian reading of Kinsella might suggest that this aesthetic feminized muse is a manifestation of the anima; however, I disagree, seeing her instead as an anomaly in this poetry which attempts to chart the process of individuation. The female figures that emerge from Kinsella's unconscious are predominately archetypal ancient women and female ancestors who are repeatedly objectified and exist only in relation to Kinsella's construction of a fully formed psychic self. Kinsella's treatment of the poetic convention of the Muse, which is the subject of chapter four, involves the poet in a different type of investigation that is centered on the artistic act.

The only other female figure in *A Technical Supplement* is a young girl who makes an appearance at the close of poem 19 in which the poet describes how he "met a fair maid all shining" (CP 189). Kinsella adopts the voice of the maid, and her words are both nightmarish and threatening, in contrast to her appearance: "*My heart is a black fruit. / It is a piece of black coal. / When I laugh a black thing hovers*" (CP 190). I believe this poem can be read fruitfully in comparison to the tradition of the Irish *aisling*, or vision poem, which typically concerns a beautiful young woman who is a disguised personification of Ireland, and who appears to the poet mourning her captivity and

appealing for ransom.³⁸ Kinsella uses the *aisling* trope, but refashions it so that instead of symbolizing Ireland the beautiful young woman becomes a symbol of the poet's archetypal shadow, which he feminizes.³⁹ When the maid addresses Kinsella in this dream he describes the experience as though it was his own "nervous nakedness / spoke to me" (CP 189). For Jung, an essential step in the journey towards self knowledge "involves recognizing the dark aspects of the personality as present and real" (*Psyche and Symbol* 8). The lines spoken by the maid are a reflection of Kinsella's view that the dark aspect of his psyche is the wellspring of his creative self. In Jungian psychology the shadow personifies the aspects of the self that an individual refuses to acknowledge about himself. Jung writes that "the shadow is a moral problem that challenges the whole ego-personality," and that to confront this aspect of the self requires considerable moral effort (*Psyche and Symbol* 8). Jung believed that the creative impulses could be successfully harnessed only after confronting one's archetypal shadow; Kinsella incorporates this archetype into this sequence which dissects the search for creative and psychic understanding. By feminizing his shadow, which is part of the personal unconscious,

³⁸ Aogan O Rathaille and Eoghan Rua O Suilleabhain perfected *aisling* form of Gaelic poetry in the Eighteenth Century and Kinsella has translated their work in *An Duanaire: Poems of the Dispossessed 1600-1900*.

³⁹ Some scholars like Tubridy interpret these lines as a conventional *aisling*. 81. John also interprets poem xix as an *aisling*. *Reading the Ground* 182. Granted, Kinsella's poem is linked to the *aisling* tradition, but he brings to the fore a Jungian principle which explicitly underpins this poem.

Kinsella strengthens the connections he makes between creativity and the feminine aspect of the self, a connection that is developed further through the figure of the Muse.

The sequence concludes with a favorite Kinsella image of a dressing table with a triple mirror, as the poet in poem twenty-two looks in the mirror and sees his image divide in triplicate. This multiplicity of vision, occasioned by the three-sided mirror and the poet's perceptions, is part of the Jungian journey of psychic exploration. The poet's relentless self-examination is graphically visualized in terms of a surgical dissection, with "a great private blade" planted in him "from bowels to brain" in poem twenty-three (CP 191, 192). This sequence ends with the poet once again turning inward in poem 24, where Kinsella announces that it is "time I continued my fall" (CP 193). In the closing lines the poet signals the continuation of his journey toward self-realization, as his split self "drifted to rest in a warmth of flesh / twinned, glaring and growing" (CP 193). The imagery is reminiscent of the "motherly warmth" that cradled Kinsella's fall into unconsciousness at the close of *One*, and gives the impression that the archetypal female figure is no longer threatening but is instead being embraced by Kinsella's consciousness: the Terrible Mother is now also the Great Mother.

With the publication of *Song of the Night and Other Poems* (1978), the vigorous interrogative tone of *A Technical Supplement* gives way to a quieter, more subtle poetic music. Kinsella combines his poetry of psychic exploration with a number of poems that have a physically realistic setting such as Carraroe in County Galway and Philadelphia. The journey towards self-knowledge is intimately linked to the creative process, and the articulation of this journey yields a complex collection of poems on the nature of love and responsibility. The sequence begins with a memory of Kinsella's father, carrying the

youthful poet, “warm and chill, / homeward, abandoned, onward to the next shadow” (CP 195). With this introductory poem Kinsella signals to his readers that he is about to engage on another stage of his journey towards individuation. As discussed above, the “shadow” is one of the archetypal components that Jung considered fundamental to psychic development and social adjustment. This archetype, which usually represents a sinister or threatening figure, appears in several of Kinsella’s poems as a figure hovering at the edge of the poet’s consciousness. In Jungian analysis, it is necessary for an individual to confront his own shadow as part of the journey towards individuation. Recognizing one’s own shadow is a difficult emotional process because, as Anthony Stevens points out, “the whole shadow complex is tinged with feelings of guilt and unworthiness, and with fears of rejection should its true nature be discovered or exposed” (67). If an individual can successfully come to recognize this archetype the creative energies locked away in the shadow can be accessed by the Self.

The second poem in this collection is titled, appropriately enough, “C.G. Jung’s ‘First Years.’” Tubridy identifies the source material for this poem as a passage from Jung’s autobiography: “Drawing directly from Jung’s autobiography *Memories, Dreams, Reflections* the poet focuses on certain key dreams or visions in Jung’s early life” (95). The particular dreams which Kinsella draws on are telling, for they reveal Jung’s anxieties about gender and the power of the phallus. The female anima is personified here in the figure of Jung’s childhood nurse, and the contradictory feelings that this anima evokes in the poet is dramatized in sexual terms. In the first stanza she is described as having an “intimate warm ear,” and the speaker recalls “the sallow loin of her throat” (CP 196). What appears at first to be a fond, slightly sexual memory of this particular woman

takes a more sinister and anxious turn as the poem goes on to describe the woman singing “as she dreamily (let us now suppose) / combined in her entrails / memories of womanly manipulations / with further detailed plans for the living flesh” (CP 196). Woman here is imagined as manipulative and threatening, using her sexuality to ensnare the “living flesh” of the poet. In Kinsella’s poetry sexuality is often portrayed as a biological imperative, and a form of consumption, where the cycle of birth and death, growth and renewal, endlessly repeat themselves. His sense of alienation from woman, which is imagined in terms of appetite and lust, comes to the fore in “Artist’s Letters,” where this biological process of being consumed is imagined as a confrontation with the Jungian Great Mother who opens “A toothless mouth” as the poet and his wife make love. Sexual anxiety surfaces in the traumatic image of the couple being devoured by this anima: “And when we have / been nicely eaten and our parts / spat out whole and have become / ‘one’ (CP 201). Once again, Kinsella equates sexuality with devouring as the physical union of the couple only occurs after they have been “nicely eaten and our parts spat out” (CP 201). The relationship between writing and desire is crucial, and here the poet acknowledges that it is only after their sexual desire has been satisfied that he can resume writing, “and turn back calmly to distinguished things.”

Songs of the Psyche (1985) is the final sequence that incorporates Jungian archetypes and imagery. In these poems, Kinsella builds on the mythic, psychological and familial concerns of previous volumes in a complex series of poems that give voice to the poet’s psyche. The songs themselves are in thirteen parts, followed by eight poems

grouped under the heading “Notes.”⁴⁰ Kinsella opens the volume with “Settings,” a series of three poems of memory and childhood recollection. With their acute attention to detail and calmly descriptive tone, this first suite of poems is akin to a group of miniature still life portraits. The first of these poems, “Model School, Inchicore” takes us back to Kinsella’s primary school days, and is narrated in the voice of the young Kinsella. Yet while the language and diction are that of a child – “Miss Carney handed us out blank paper and marla, / ... I am going to know / everything” – the theme is consistent with Kinsella’s mature concerns: knowledge, history, divine retribution.⁴¹ The ball of plasticine given to the boy by his female teacher is rolled into the familiar Kinsella shape of a snake, signifying both death and regeneration, which the child keeps rolling “in one place until it wore down into two / with a stain on the paper” (CP 221). Knowledge is again associated with appetite: “The taste / of ink off / the nib shrank your / mouth” (CP 223). The female anima is represented by the teacher, “Miss Carney,” who in contrast to the devouring, emasculating figure encountered in “C.G.Jung’s ‘First Years’” and “Artists’ Letters,” is a life force symbolizing knowledge and the pursuit of meaning. The teacher is a facilitator on the boy’s journey towards knowledge and it is noteworthy that there is an absence of any kind of sexual tension between the boy and this benign female figure.

⁴⁰ This final section of *Songs of the Psyche* is not informed by Jungian archetypes or the inner process of the psyche, but instead, offers a quiet meditation on the poet’s art.

⁴¹ For more on Kinsella’s religious speculations see Peppercanister 21 *Godhead* and Peppercanister 27 *Belief and Unbelief*.

The poems of childhood recollection are followed by “*Invocation*,” a prayer to the archetypal Great Mother, who is depicted as simultaneously maternal, sexual and destructive: “Sweet mother, sweet muscle, / predatrix.” This representation of the Great Mother as threatening and loving, sexual and maternal is a constant in Kinsella's poetry, and as noted elsewhere, is further evidence of Kinsella's ambivalent relationship to his female anima. Tubridy does not read this prayer in an archetypal light, instead arguing that the grandmother from the previous poem is here transformed into the “Sweet Mother” of the *Invocation*, and she sees this connection as underlining “the importance of the relationship between grandparent and child” (124). I view this connection as circumstantial, and would counter that her reading is inferred from the positioning of “*Invocation*” directly after “Bow Lane,” a poem involving Kinsella's grandmother. Instead, charting the invocation or prayer introduces a triptych of figures in the first three stanzas. As already noted, the Jungian Great Mother is evoked in the first stanza. Just as importantly, the Shadow archetype “always in the midst / yet walking to one side” is acknowledged by the poet in stanza two. Finally, the Muse figure, “silent, reticent, rarely seen / yet persistent” (CP 225), is appealed to as the poet implores her to “Judge not. / But Judge” (CP 225). The poet appeals to all three figures for understanding as he continues charting the psychic progress of his emotional journey.

The thirteen “Songs of the Psyche” find the poet in middle age, still seeking wisdom and appealing again to the female anima in his quest for self knowledge, as he prepares to enter a dream-like state. Describing himself as “indistinct,” “graceless” and “unsightly,” he “settled back and / turned inward.” Accessing the unconscious level of his psyche, he “smelled at a crack in the dirt / and was taken away / teeth grinding / and

eyes alight” (CP 226). His descent begins with an offering to the Great Mother: “Chew nine times / in the chosen meat / and set it down / outside her door” (CP 227). As he embarks on his painful journey the animosity that lies beneath Kinsella’s poetry about his mother comes to the surface:

What a thing it is
to know a thing
fifty years
.....
A monster bore me
and I bear
a monster with me (CP 228).

Kinsella wrote very few poems about his mother and in those instances where she appears the representation is tied to the dark side of the female anima. Given that one of the most crucial archetypes to be actualized in the personal psyche of a child is the mother, it is noteworthy that the first substantial mention of Kinsella’s mother does not occur until mid-way through his career. Instead, self-realization and psychological re-birth is achieved through mythological and other ancestral female representations.

The semantic ambiguity of the title of “Dura Mater” signals from the onset the poet’s ambiguous feelings towards his mother, a woman who inspires a mixture of fear, resentment and pity. “Dura Mater” is the scientific term used to describe the outer membrane enveloping the human brain, but it is also Latin for the phrase “hard mother.” The poet reinforces the impression of his mother as hard and unyielding, characterizing the woman as “stiff necked,” with “ill temper in her eyes” (CP 290). The poem describes

an encounter between the boy and his mother who “offered and withdrew, a Cupid’s Bow” (CP 290). In an earlier poem, “A Hand of Solo,” the boy recoiled in horror at the idea of embracing an elderly woman, and avoided kissing his dying grandmother on the lips, instead burying his face in her apron. This woman has more independent agency than the dying grandmother who laid passively on her sick-bed as here the mother chooses to withhold the kiss. Kinsella, however, persists, returning an unpleasant kiss on his mother’s forehead:

The withheld kiss returned
onto her stone forehead. Dura Mater.
To take it, a seal on her stone will,
in under the screwed lid (CP 291).

The representation of this female figure, the woman who gave birth to the poet, is paradoxically sterile in contrast to the manner in which Kinsella writes about his grandmothers. The women of the earlier generation assist the poet in his quest for self knowledge by facilitating the transition from boyhood to manhood, from ignorance to knowledge, from the unrealized self to individuation. In contrast, when Kinsella writes about his mother, there is no indication that she is a gateway to knowledge or personal development. On the contrary, she appears to be entombed by a “stone will” that is clamped shut under a “screwed lid,” which represents the woman’s physical forehead but also, more disturbingly, calls to mind an image of a coffin.

Kinsella’s second poem involving his mother is considerably more ambiguous than “Dura Mater.” In typical Jungian imagery “Visiting Hour” imagines a female figure who is both mother and seductress. Confined to a hospital bed, and perhaps hallucinating

from the effects of medication, the poet imagines both his brother and his mother visiting him. This female figure is imagined as “pulling the lace back from her thigh / and the dark stocking with the darker border / toward the pale motherly places” (CP 309). The phrase “motherly places” refers to the mother’s womb, and harkens back to the “motherly warmth” the poet experiences in the final Jungian poem in *One*. The connection between mother and son is reinforced in the next stanza, where her womb is described as “the sac of flesh and fervour where we met / and nourished each other for a while” (CP 310). The tenuous bond between mother and son does not last, as she is unable to tempt him or win his affections and the lost unity with the mother is not restored. Instead, she is rejected, as the poet/patient vows to “take my love back, into the medicine dark” (CP 310). Like the Great Mother who is consistently represented as a devouring force, the mother is also associated with a potentially destructive appetite, accused by the poet of “taking refreshment at my well of illness” (CP 310).

As part of the inward turn on which the poet embarks on at the beginning of *Songs of the Psyche* Kinsella encounters both real and imaginary women, and in song six he confronts the Muse, acknowledging that “it was time again / to surrender / to your / beaten smile” (CP 228). The language here suggests that it is the Muse who has the upper hand in their relationship, with Kinsella reluctantly yielding to the aesthetic pressure she exerts. In the seventh, eighth and ninth songs in *Songs of the Psyche* Kinsella revisits the early days of his marriage and his courtship of Eleanor. The importance of this relationship to Kinsella’s psyche journey is underscored in song eight which repeats a central motif from *Wormwood*, that of intertwined trees that symbolize the couple, using the lines from the earlier poem to describe the couple as “two trees grown into one” (CP

229). Song nine describes the lovers as predatory nocturnal animals, “Night foxes,” who also embody the darker side of the self in the form of the Jungian shadow (evoked earlier) as they lie “dreaming / one another” (CP 229).

Jungian imagery continues in song ten, where the female anima is imagined as predatory and threatening, “a great moth of prey,” which came “from nowhere.” Kinsella’s confrontation with his fear is not easy as he describes how his “great delicate self” “approached her cold face” and he “writhed in memory” (CP 230, 231). Taking us back to the beginning of his dream, where Kinsella described how he fell through a “crack in the dirt,” the poet now upon awakening describes how he “slipped through a fault / into total dark” (CP 232). The imagery also connects back to an earlier dream-like state that the poet woke from in *Notes*, where he described “that seemingly unattainable grill” through which he must return to consciousness (CP 97).

In this final song Kinsella returns to *The Book of Invasions* and the narratives from *One* to consider the ways in which human existence has been understood down through the centuries. Celtic and Christian mythology are dismissed and instead the poet offers an understanding of existence based on basic animal impulses: “Unless the thing were to be based / on sexuality / or power” (CP 232). The descent into the psyche, which had been represented at the end of *A Technical Supplement* as a painful division of self, reaches a provisional conclusion, even if it is “a matter / of negative release: / of being thrown up / out of a state of storm / into a state of peace, or sleep” (CP 232).

Kinsella's aesthetic integration of Jungian thought into his mid-career poetry has produced some of his most original and challenging work, and he is unique in contemporary Irish poetry for the extent to which he has incorporated Jung’s theories

about the psychic potential of the fully formed self. His work has become increasingly preoccupied with establishing who he is and where he comes from, and he has creatively used Jungian archetypes to explore issues of spiritual and psychological ancestry. Kinsella's use of Jung's theories as thematic and structural devices to document the growth of his psyche has been lauded by critics including Johnston, who believes that "Kinsella's ability to enfold his reader in psychologized experience which resonate with mythical allusions and references accumulated within the series constitute his prime achievement" (112). Jung viewed mythology as an important tool for explaining the "living process of the psyche"; he considered myth a more expressive and dramatic way "of thinking and speaking" about the unconscious (Jung *Psyche* 13). Kinsella's work can be distinguished further from his peers through his use of material drawn from *The Book of Invasions* to aesthetically illustrate certain features of Jung's theories. With the notable exception of Yeats, Kinsella's incorporation of Gaelic mythological sources is unparalleled in Irish poetry, and the skill with which he does so contributes to his reputation as a cerebral, scholarly poet. Moreover, the poetry concerning the female anima, who must be confronted, understood and integrated by the male if he is to achieve his goal of spiritual and psyche wholeness, has resulted in some of Kinsella's most unorthodox and complex representations of female figures, in particular the portraits of his grandmothers and his mother.

Nevertheless, Kinsella's aesthetic absorption of Jung's belief that deeper psychic understanding or individuation for a male can only happen by confronting the female anima within is deeply problematic. The difficulty that arises when reading these poems through a Jungian lens is that women are trapped in stereotypical roles. The discourse of

psychiatry, as Irigaray points out, is a discourse of men about women “which again puts women in the position of objects. And which returns then to silence” (“Women-Mothers” 48). I would argue that the discourse of Jungian psychology achieves similar results. This journey to selfhood, which Kinsella describes as a descent into the land of the dead to the source of primal creation, involves a variety of encounters with female anima whose agency is contingent on the power vested in them by the poet. Even if the intention of this Jungian quest for individuation involves the integration and acknowledgment of the feminine, rather than a denial or sublimation, the Jungian questing male still regards women as a means to self-realization and therefore reinscribes traditional gender roles. Women in these poems are frequently represented as inspiring fear and sexual anxiety and are confined to making stereotypical gestures. No matter how powerful or wise these feminine archetypes may be, their function is to bolster the masculine persona. Thus women are the site of the specular, existing only in a limited, male authorized world. Ultimately, the imaginative power of these poems is undermined by the very ideas that inspired them – Jungian archetypal thought.

CHAPTER 4

NOT *THE WHITE GODDESS* BUT "THE NECESSARY ENABLING OTHER":

THOMAS KINSELLA AND THE MUSE

A central tenet of Kinsella's poetry is the search for understanding and self-knowledge, with the artistic response representing the means through which the poet strives to aesthetically scrutinize what he describes as "a lifespan which manifests itself largely as ordeal" (see John Haffenden 102). This developing view of life began around the time Kinsella completed *Nightwalker and Other Poems*, and since then what constitutes a proper artistic response to "the continuing encounter with reality" (see Donatella Abbate Badin *Irish University Review* 115) is a profound metaphysical question that runs through his work. The ordeal of life as subject matter encompasses what Kinsella calls "love's difficulty," along with the struggles of psychic exploration, and the inevitability of physical deterioration and death.⁴² The search for order is realized through poetry; as he explained to Haffenden, "the artistic act has to do with the eliciting

⁴²"Soft to your Places" (CP 6). All quotations from Kinsella's poetry that are not part of the Wake Forest 2006 edition of the *Collected Poems* will be referenced parenthetically by the Peppercanister volume in which the poem appears, using the abbreviation "P" followed by the sequence number and page number on which the quote appears.

of order from significant experience” (113).⁴³ Most recently, the poet’s struggles in crafting a creative response to issues of suffering, erosion and mortality coalesce around the figure of the Muse, who in the late poetry is represented as both a metaphor for the creative process and as the artist’s ideal audience, “the one only adequate Other” (P28, 19). This division in Kinsella’s aesthetic representation of the Muse is reflected in the poetry that is the subject of this chapter. In much of the work, the difficulties and challenges inherent in the creative response are symbolized by the Muse, who is frequently depicted as an unwelcome trespasser on the poet’s consciousness. In the late poems, the Muse shifts from being either an object of desire or vituperation to an internal projection of the poet and it is this figure who is imagined as the poet’s ideal audience. Kinsella signaled this latter perspective to Badin, stating that “from one point of view, the poetry is directed inward, to a single qualified reader” (*Irish University Review* 114). I argue that this emphasis on the inner life is not evidence of solipsism on Kinsella’s part, but rather points to a sustained focus on exploring how the self responds to the demands of creativity. Moreover, Kinsella’s evolving representation of the Muse demystifies traditional gender based constructions of this poetic figure.

One of the distinguishing features of Kinsella’s work is that it does not attempt to maintain any discernible distance between the poet who creates and the poetic speaker. Like Eavan Boland, Kinsella insists on speaking in the first person in his poetry, filtering

⁴³ Paradoxically, this aesthetic attempt to seek to impose order in the flux of primary experience does not manifest itself in traditional poetic *form*, as contemporaneous with the recognition of life as an ordeal, Kinsella renounced received forms and rhyme.

all experience through an autobiographical speaker, and this is particularly noticeable in poems that feature the Muse. In these poems, there is an intimate immediacy apparent in what one critic has described as the “unique and intensely personal voice he developed after 1968” (see Badin *Irish University Review* 20), which bolsters Dillon Johnston’s contention that “much of Kinsella’s poetry can be seen as a negotiation with the muse” (“Kinsella’s Dublins” 299). This negotiation has produced a series of private meditations about the nature of aesthetic understanding and its articulation, a theme which dominates Kinsella’s later work, with the result that the Muse figure occupies a place of increasing importance in his poetry. As a source of inspiration the Muse is a Janus-faced figure, described variously as “a necessary enabling Other,” and also the poet’s adversarial “old opposite” (P 29, 12). Kinsella’s Muse is also an example of the intense self-reflexivity that characterizes his work and of the problematic ways in which creativity and the search for meaning and structure are initially gendered by the poet. At times the Muse poetry reinscribes traditional gender-based notions of femininity, yet as noted above, in the later poems the poet dispenses with conventional imagery and this figure is conceptualized as the poet’s alter-ego, with no discernible feminine identity.

This chapter will begin by looking at the connection between sexuality and the creative process that is evident in Kinsella’s early Muse poetry. The stereotypical imagery that characterized Kinsella’s ideas about the Muse at the beginning of his career often mirrored Robert Graves’s celebrated definition of the “Lunar Muse” or “White Goddess.” For Graves, “the source of poetry’s creative power is not scientific intelligence, but inspiration” and he attributes all creative inspiration to the mythological Muse (490). According to Graves, (who focused only on male poets) the test of a poet’s

skill is the accuracy of his portrayal of this figure, for in his view “a true poem is necessarily an invocation of the White Goddess, or Muse, the Mother of All Living, the ancient power of fright and lust” (24). In Kinsella’s work, when this figure is imagined in sexual terms the Muse is typically embodied in or conflated with the figure of the poet’s wife Eleanor, and the distinction between the real woman and the symbolic woman is often blurred and ambiguous. Eleanor is the subject of much of Kinsella’s early poetry, most notably, the love poems written in the English lyric tradition and the subsequent marriage poems; however, it is her aesthetic representation as Muse that is of relevance to this chapter. This manner of representation also accords with Graves’s argument that “No Muse-poet grows conscious of the Muse except by experience of a woman in whom the Goddess is to some degree resident” (490). Graves’s argument, and Kinsella’s development of it, poses problems from a feminist standpoint, however, as the gendering of artistic inspiration is not necessarily an empowerment of the feminine Muse. There is a patriarchal undercurrent flowing through these poems, with the female figure only surfacing in the context of masculine creativity, which the Muse figure validates. The inscription of femininity on the internal creative process in Kinsella’s early work raises similar questions about gender relations that have been addressed in previous chapters. Is the female presence simply a conduit to the male poet’s artistic or psychic growth and enlightenment or does she possess independent power and agency? Should we read Kinsella’s celebration of feminine inspiration as simply another form of essentialism? These questions abate when the poet reconfigures his conception of the Muse in the later work and the trope of the Muse is transformed into Kinsella’s poetic alter-ego.

After a consideration of the early work, this chapter will focus on a close reading of Kinsella's most recent Peppercanister sequences, *Fat Master* and *Love Joy Peace*, which represent the culmination of Kinsella's aesthetic trajectory with regard to his representation of the Muse figure.⁴⁴ I argue that in these late poems Kinsella deliberately destabilizes the poetic convention of the Muse and offers an alternative to a gendered, sexist encounter between poet and Muse. If the Muse in the early poetry was represented as an idealized, erotic image of the Beloved, the feminine embodiment of the Muse in the later work is dispensed with and the Muse is no longer identified as a male-constructed stereotype of sexual difference in binary opposition to the male author. What we find instead in the late poetry is a Muse figure that is typically imagined as a snake or associated with serpentine imagery. In a number of poems the Muse becomes a *disembodied* influence, neither woman nor snake, but rather an alter-ego to whom the poet speaks or who alternatively speaks to him. I argue in this chapter that Kinsella's evolving representation of this poetic trope unsettles conventional notions of what constitutes the poetic persona of the Muse and absolves his later Muse poetry from the charge of gender bias.

⁴⁴ These volumes are Peppercanisters 28 and 29 respectively. Both sequences were published simultaneously in 2011, and will be collected and reissued in October 2013 by Carcanet with Peppercanister 24, *Marginal Economy* (2006), Peppercanister 26, *Man of War* (2007), and Peppercanister 27, *Belief and Unbelief* (2007) as Peppercanister 30, *Late Poems*.

This departure from traditional and symbolic characterizations based on actual or mythological women is particularly evident in Kinsella's most recent Peppercanisters. Throughout *Fat Master* and *Love Joy Peace*, this figure is presented as "Other" in relation to the poetic speaker, and is described variously as the "indistinctly conceived Other," or the "enabling necessary Other."⁴⁵ The perspectives afforded by French feminist theory, specifically the work of Luce Irigaray regarding the representation of woman as Other, is helpful to a discussion of how to read Kinsella's conception of the feminine Muse. Irigaray's formulation of the Other, which is rooted in the natural world and "continually elaborates a human universe, a human identity" (*The Irigaray Reader*, 183), is particularly relevant in relation to the gender based Muse of the early work. However, in Kinsella developing aesthetic, the Muse as Other in the recent poetry is not the other of physical sexual difference, but is instead an internal projection of the poet and his alter-ego. Another facet of my reading is the issue of language, which is the arena in which such stereotypes are constructed and perpetrated. I argue that by imaginatively casting the Muse as either a snake or a "necessary enabling Other," Kinsella uses language to challenge conventional representations of this trope.

The extent to which Kinsella has developed his representation of the Muse can be appreciated by looking first at the early incarnations of this figure. In "Westland Row," from *Nightwalker and Other Poems*, the poet exits a Dublin train station with various other commuters and observes a young woman who is in the act of lighting a cigarette. The girl, who is described in the poem as "Thick-lipped, in her grim composure" (CP 60),

⁴⁵ Kinsella, Thomas. Letter to the author. July 1 2012.

is “a nondescript young girl, standing briefly for the enabling feminine.”⁴⁶ In the final line of the poem the poet directs a plea for attention to this figure with the supplication “Daughterwife, look upon me” (CP 60). This is the only instance in the poetry where this figure is characterized as both daughter and wife, and I read this merging of two female figures as a reference to Eleanor, the Muse/wife and also to a more general conception of the Muse, who is characterized as “daughter” because of the youth of the girl who symbolizes her. Lucy Collins interprets this plea as not only an appeal for aesthetic assistance, but also a plea “for their attention; to beg for the direction of the gaze to move from poetic object to poet, from woman to man” (141). Although the lines could be read as suggestive of the meaning proffered by Collins, the poem’s progression does not countenance a reversion of the gaze as the poetic speaker is far more concerned with eliciting artistic assistance from his Muse. The young woman who symbolizes the Muse is described as being “grim in her composure,” and her stern affect signals strain and discord in the symbiotic partnership between poet and muse. In my reading, Kinsella’s appeal to the “daughterwife” is not based on a desire to reverse a gaze, but rather a desire to gain inspiration and the woman is a symbol of disengaged or remote creativity with whom the poet is attempting to communicate. In addition, there is no evidence elsewhere in the early poetry that at this stage of his career Kinsella was interested in reversing any type of male gaze. In representing the Muse as a young girl who appears to a male poetic speaker the poem conforms to the poetic convention of the Muse. However, the supplicant poet is not necessarily inspired by this apparition but rather acknowledges his

⁴⁶ Kinsella, Thomas. Letter to the author. July 1 2012.

failures through his abject plea for assistance, foreshadowing the more complex invocations of the Muse that occur in the later poetry.

The friction between poet and Muse is again evident in “Mask of Love,” a poem from *Wormwood*, Kinsella’s first marriage sequence. The poet addresses both the Beloved and the Muse, who appears as an image of his wife wearing the mask of love – “Her, whose face you bear” (CP 64). The significance of this confusion is that the marital strife between husband and wife (which is the subject matter of the entire *Wormwood* sequence) is mirrored in the conflicted relationship between poet and Muse. This is no ideal Muse grounded in the real Beloved, but rather an unwelcome voyeur on the lovemaking of the poet and his wife. The poet begins by asking the Muse, who wears the mask of love, “Do you turn to us for peace?” and he describes himself to her as “flinching from your stare” (CP 64). The erotic engagement between the couple is interrupted by the third partner in the relationship, Kinsella’s Muse, and the poem suggests that the artistic impulse intrudes on even the most intimate moments between the lovers: “You have seen our nocturnal / Suicidal dance” (CP 64). In this poem, it is the Muse who gazes, not the poet. The intrusion of the Muse is a source of creative tension, and in a reversal of “Westland Row,” the poet cruelly rejects her claims for attention at the end of the poem: “*Dumb vapours pour / Where the mask of Love appears, / Reddening, and disappears*” (CP 64).

Kinsella returns to a representation of the Beloved as Muse in *The Familiar*, a series of marriage poems discussed in chapter two that celebrate Eleanor’s role as wife and companion. The sequence also reinforces her aesthetic mythological importance in the title poem, which returns to the early days of the Kinsellas’ life together when the

poet was still working for the Irish Civil Service. The poem revisits the time before their marriage when Eleanor Walsh moved into the poet's flat on Baggot Street. Memories of love and sexual consummation surface and Kinsella's Muse is represented as an idealized erotic image of the Beloved, described as the "Muse on my mattress (CP 330).⁴⁷ Creativity and sexuality are harmoniously aligned in this pre-nuptial poem, where Eleanor's importance as Muse is affirmed. This poem refers back to a time before the days of marital strife that is the subject of the *Wormwood* poems, and is part of the broader strategy of marital affirmation that characterizes *The Familiar*, already discussed in chapter two. In these early poems the Muse is a figure of sexual difference, which Irigaray would argue is "an other with its roots [also] in the natural universe, in the body" (*Reader* 183). When representations of the Muse cease to be inspired by Eleanor or by woman in general, as in "Westland Row," and instead are increasingly occasioned by creative tensions and the demands of artistic endeavor, the poetry ceases to portray woman as other, confined by a scopic male gaze.

The relationship between creativity and the sexual act is made more explicit in poem 15 of *A Technical Supplement*, although now the Muse is not specifically embodied in the figure of the Beloved.⁴⁸ The writer's pen is crudely imagined as a phallic symbol, aroused by the approach of the Muse: "The pen writhed. It moved / under my thumb! / It had sensed / that sad prowler on our landing again" (CP 186). Sexual excitement quickly

⁴⁷ As Maurice Harmon has noted, throughout Kinsella's work "the flat in Baggot Street is associated with Eleanor" (xiii).

⁴⁸ *A Technical Supplement*, published in 1976, is Peppercanister 6.

turns to sexual aggression, as erotic contact with the Muse is represented as an unwelcome intrusion on the poet's consciousness, and as a cliché of erotic wounding:

If she dares come nearer, if she dares . . .

She and her 'sudden and

peremptory incursions' . . .

I'll pierce her like

a soft fruit, a soft big seed! (CP 186).

The act of writing is presented as analogous to the act of sexual penetration, and the poem disturbingly posits the idea that an oppositional sexual encounter with a potentially lethal female is the cornerstone of poetic inspiration. This openly hostile characterization of the Muse's "sudden and / peremptory incursions" is atypical of Kinsella's work (the other noticeable exception being "Mask of Love"). In later poems this attitude softens considerably and the poet welcomes the Muse instead of resenting her intrusions and resisting the creative impulse to create.

The first sequence that incorporates the figure of the Muse is *Her Vertical Smile*, an extended meditation on evil and the role of art in relation to it.⁴⁹ Set in Vienna at the time of the collapse of the Austrian Empire, the sequence is structured as a music score, and opens with the premiere of Mahler's Eight Symphony. Music is also an organizational device, with the poem divided into an *Overture*, *Intermezzo* and a *Coda* and, as Badin points out, "point by point the performance is compared with the sexual act" (144). An epigraph describes how Kinsella was introduced to Mahler's work by the composer Sean O'Riada, in the latter's flat, where they listened to a recording of Der

⁴⁹ *Her Vertical Smile*, published in 1985, is Peppercanister 10.

Rosenkavalier. The opening lines describe the voice of a self-absorbed female singer, a Muse figure “overladen with feeling / and dwelling upon herself (CP 239), who is imagined as retreating “through the luxuriant heavens” leaving the two entranced listeners “pale against the chilly fireplace” (CP 239). Contralto, Muse and music are conflated when the recording ends leaving a void in the air: “And there goes / that last lovely heartbeat / of the world” (CP 239).

The relationship between creativity and sexuality, the composer and his muse, is expressed through a series of sexual tropes. The composer/conductor is “Masterful yet sensitive” as “his baton explores / her core of peace” (241). Calling to mind the female Jungian archetypes of Kinsella’s poetry of psychic exploration, the Muse figure is also the “Patriarch-Mother,” associated with life and death, “endings or beginnings” (CP 224). She is further represented by the composer’s wife Alma Mahler, who couples “her attentive shadow with his” as they stroll along a beach. The composer broods on “how to admire the solid beloved” (CP 250), yet the impression one gets from the poem is of an artist who nurtures his own creative powers at the expense of their relationship. The composer’s absorption in his art mirrors the contralto at the beginning of the sequence, “dwelling upon herself” (CP 239). In the *Coda*, Kinsella references the nine classical muses who enable the artist, but allows how an element of luck is involved in any artistic endeavor: “Nine are the enabling elements / in the highest crafts / and the greatest of these is Luck” (CP 252). The concluding stanza further undercuts any glory which might be attributed to the figure of the artist with an image of the conductor lifting his baton, only to have his “trousers fall” (CP 252). As Peter Denman points out, falling is “a recurrent image” in Kinsella’s work, symbolizing “endeavor and failure” (107). The artist

must continue to try to create art or music with the aid of the Muse, and if lucky, will succeed in creating a sublime piece of work just as Mahler did with his masterpiece.

The concern with this and with previous representations of the Muse in Kinsella's poetry is that this figure is represented as a poetic screen for the projection of masculine fantasies, whether they be erotic fantasies or the desires of creative power. Irigaray warns of the dangers inherent in these projections of male fantasies because they continue to exclude the embodiment of women in the symbolic and social order. She describes that in *Speculum* she critiques how "the philosophical subject, historically masculine, has reduced all otherness to a relationship with himself – as complement, projection, flip side, instrument, nature – inside his world, his horizons" ("The Question of the Other" 10). In other words, the trope of the Muse perpetrates a strategic essentialism of women because a separate subject position does not exist. With this form of conventional representation the feminine Muse is always portrayed as a figure in the service of the masculine writer.

The comic humor that occasionally intrudes upon the poem is undercut by the serious issues explored alongside the specifically sexual asides (which are also telegraphed none too subtly by the sequence title). Artistic endeavor and warfare exemplify the best and the worst of mankind, as the sublime music created by Mahler is contrasted with the atrocities of World War I. A running theme in Kinsella's work is the symbiotic link between order and disorder, with the artistic act constituting an attempt to attain order. In this instance it is the beauty of Mahler's masterpiece that is contrasted with the horrors of war. Couples waltzing to the music "down mirrored halls" are transformed in the next stanza into doomed soldiers, "And it's off to the muttonchop

slaughter,” who march to the rhythm of the waltz, “Belted and buttoned brilliant hosts / march to their places line abreast” (242).

The gendered representations of the Muse begin to shift in the early 1990’s with the publication of *Madonna and Other Poems*.⁵⁰ In another example of Kinsella’s incorporation of art into his work, the cover illustration on the Peppercanister edition shows an image of a woman taken from a woodcut attributed to the German artist Albrecht Durer, entitled “Woman with the Zodiac.” This image (see fig. 11) is set against a pale blue background, the color traditionally associated with the Virgin Mary’s robes, which reinforces the association with the Madonna. The woman’s outstretched arms surround a heavenly sphere containing a band that identifies the signs of the zodiac and discreetly covers the nude figure. The suggestion of an eternal Muse-goddess sensuously watching over the poet’s creative efforts, her long hair flowing behind her naked body, is undercut by the poems in this sequence that draw a very different picture of a difficult and demanding muse figure. These conflicting representations are not readily apparent to a reader of Kinsella’s *Collected Poems*, which does not contain any of the Peppercanister art; however, it is an important distinction worth pointing out as it occurs just at the point in his career when Kinsella was turning away from such traditional representations of the Muse. In the poetry after *Madonna*, Kinsella’s confrontations with the Muse become more frequent and his representations of this figure are decidedly more ambivalent and less prone to gender stereotyping.

⁵⁰ *Madonna and Other Poems*, published in 1991, is Peppercanister 16.

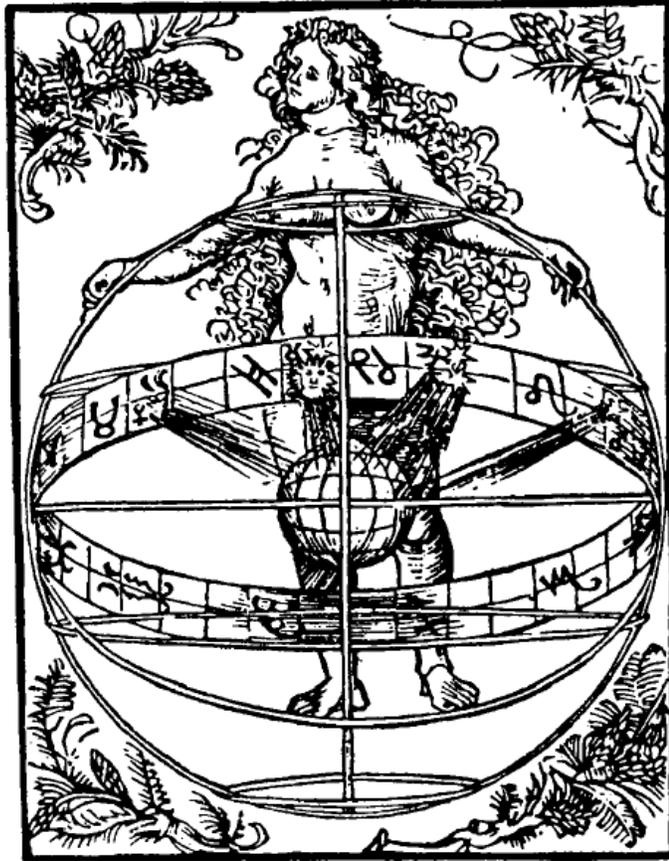


Fig. 11.

In the title poem “Madonna,” the figure of the Muse intrudes on the poet simply as a “stubborn memory” while he prepares breakfast for his wife. In contrast to the previous engagement described in *A Technical Supplement*, the Muse’s intrusions are tolerated and the poet fondly recalls her “tender, deliberate incursions” (CP 306). Although the Muse is still referred to as “she,” and the reference to “tender” could be construed as stereotypically associating gentleness with femininity, unlike previous poems there are no overt sexual connotations attached to this figure. Instead, the Muse is portrayed as a creative spur on the poet, who acknowledges his need for this figure on his quest for aesthetic understanding.

In the key poem of this sequence, "At the Head Table," Kinsella meditates on the difficulties and challenges inherent in the creative process and sums up the principles of behavior that have guided him as an artist. The poem is structured as a lengthy toast to the Muse-mother-wife figure, the all encompassing "Madonna" of the title who underpins the sequence. In the course of his toast the poet complains to the Muse that his work has often been greeted with "dislike" and "misunderstanding" by the public even though he has devoted his life and his entire career "to the avoidance of affectation" (CP 310). The Muse symbolizes the challenges inherent in artistic endeavor; she is "the source of trouble" (CP 310) but also, for the first time, the specific audience whom he addresses. Lifting a beaker filled with "the best blood brandy" the poet offers a toast to her "motherly regard" (CP 312). The raised cup (not unlike the "ordeal cup" from "Phoenix Park") is a metaphor for the craft of poetry and, as Guinn Batten points out, in the poet's hands the cup "suggests renewed generative powers" (224). The poet allows that the genesis of poetic communication gives "the greatest trouble, / in impulse and idea / and management of material" (CP 311). Nevertheless, the work must continue if the poet is to advance to a further stage of self-understanding. Snake imagery is paired with creativity for the first time, as the beaker is described as having "slim amphibian handles" (CP 310) and the poet is rewarded for his toast with "A smile, dry and lipless" (CP 313). In a continuation of the Muse-mother analogy, she is described as opening her arms "acknowledging her son" (CP 313), a gesture that mirrors the pose of the Madonna image on the Peppercanister cover.

"Coffee Shop," published in *Citizen of the World*, continues the movement away from conventional representations of the Muse towards a more complex and less

stereotypical portrait.⁵¹ The setting for the poem is realistic, a coffee shop reminiscent of Bewley's Café in Dublin, which also featured prominently in Peppercanister 19, *The Pen Shop*. One of the features of the later Muse poetry is the avoidance of any kind of localized or Irish orientation, and this particular Muse poem is the last one Kinsella sets in an identifiable locale. Once again the poet is gathered in a setting with several other men but no women present except for the one of his imagination. This particular poem marks an important departure from previous work, as the Muse does not take human form. In an image reminiscent of the line drawings by Anne Yeats in *One* (see fig.1, 2, 3), the Muse appears in the form of a snake "hanging from a branch / in her livid skin" (CP 348). Kinsella characterizes this figure as his "old opposite," who returns to challenge and enable the poet's creative self, this time in the shape of a snake. No longer a beautiful woman, she is instead "the enabling contrary," a symbol of "creative absorption, mental needs and subconscious impulses" (see Harmon 198) who intrudes upon the poet's consciousness, "whispering her needs" (CP 348). Although represented as a snake, the Muse is still referred to a "she" and exhibits human characteristics, whispering her "needs" to the poet. The snake imagery introduced in this poem continues the change of direction in Kinsella's representation of the Muse, first suggested in "At the Head Table," where the woman toasted was described as having a smile "dry and lipless" (CP 313).

As the plates are cleared, the poet offers a toast to the Muse, which recalls the toast previously offered in "At the Head Table," except that in "Morning Coffee" the Muse is not a Muse-mother. Instead, a different biological connection is suggested when the poet utters the following words: "Sister. To your requirements: / my black drink / to

⁵¹ *Citizen of the World*, published in 2000, is Peppercanister 22.

the last drop” (CP 349). By addressing this figure as “sister” Kinsella suggests that he and his Muse are physically united, not in sexual terms, but through a shared DNA, which in later poems transforms into an alter-ego projection of the poet. The toast also suggests that, even if the Muse’s requirements for emerging creativity are not necessarily the same as the poet’s, her needs must come first. In the final stanza the snake imagery is more pronounced, as the Muse responds to the toast and “slithered in acceptance” (CP 349). The poem ends on a note of concordance as the Muse is now no longer whispering her needs to the poet but is instead, “coiled quiet in a tree fork / with her tongue to herself” (CP 349). I do not read this silencing of the Muse as a gendered one imposed by the male author. On the contrary, by articulating her needs Kinsella makes clear that in this poem, speech is no longer the prerogative of the male poet. The Muse’s silence comes only after the poet acknowledges and acquiesces to her “needs” through his toast, and the poet accepts the call for an artistic response and turns inward to the work at hand.

Derval Tubridy reads the prevalence of serpentine imagery in Kinsella’s work as “emblematic of his concerns with destruction and regeneration” (121), and I would offer a qualified agreement with this assessment with regard to the notion of creative regeneration, as the Muse in these poems is not portrayed as a destructive force. On the contrary, even though the Muse can be threatening, and the serpentine imagery is unsettling, this figure is represented by Kinsella as the source of his creativity and a necessary conduit to understanding. Kinsella had employed snake imagery earlier in his career as an organizing device, specifically in the Jungian sequence, *One*, but in these later Muse poems the snake is a symbol of Kinsella’s intuitive ideas rather than an

archetypal image or structuring strategy.⁵² The figure of the snake has traditionally been associated with temptation, dating back to the temptation of Eve by the serpent in the Garden of Eden. By casting the Muse in the image of a snake, Kinsella suggests that ideas come to him in the shape of a serpent, which tempts the poet into the process of writing. Kinsella's approach to his work has been a continuous process of isolating details out of the chaos of experience and then trying to give shape and meaning to these details in his poetry. I also read Kinsella's reliance on snake imagery as another example of avoiding ostentation in his attempt to distill primary experience, in this case, the demands of creativity on an artist. The notion of the Muse needs no aesthetic embellishment in his examination of the artistic process, and in fact it is distracting for Kinsella's purposes to have her represented as woman. This reading is borne out by Kinsella's most recent work, where the traditional Muse figure is first represented by an image of a snake and then later as a disembodied voice which is neither woman nor snake. The poet's engagement with the recurrent figure of the Muse is particularly intense in these late poems, as he continues to formulate his views on poetic craft and transform his version of an omnipresent present Muse into the alter-ego projections in *Fat Master* and *Love Joy Peace*.

Although C.G. Jung regarded the creative process as feminine in nature I do not read these poems as a late career variation of the Jungian journey of individuation. Jung

⁵² When discussing *One* in a 1981 interview with Daniel O'Hara Kinsella described how "the device for the volume is a snake: a unitary living thing . . . that snake uncoils and strikes at every significant moment of beginning" (17).

focused on the process of accessing the artist's inherent creativity, which he considered subliminal, until the process of individuation carried these creative impulses "over the threshold into consciousness" (*The Spirit of Man* 78). Whereas encounters with female archetypal figures and anima assist the poet's self-investigation in the mid-career work, the encounters with the Muse are not portrayed as a struggle of self-formation that disempowers the feminine. Neither is the poet attempting to graft the poetic convention of the Muse onto a Jungian archetypal framework. As developed by Kinsella, this poetically enabling figure has an autonomous subjectivity that asserts a strong creative (if sometimes unwelcome) influence over the poet. Unlike the grandmother figures in some of his work, she is not a facilitator in enabling consciousness, nor does the Muse feature prominently in any of the poems of psychic exploration. In these poems, the interaction between poet and the Muse takes place in Kinsella's conscious state of mind, not as part of an engagement with a female anima buried in the unconscious mind of the poet.

Fat Master begins with "Elderly Craftsman at his Bench," which sets the stage for a series of meditations on the issue of an adequate creative response to the ordeal of existence. The poetic speaker is described sitting at his "worn workbench, in my bent body" (P28, 7), which is a typical Kinsella image of the poet as craftsman. Kinsella's career-long engagement with questions of the artistic process and the role of the artist in society reaches a climax in these poems of old age, with the poet still involved in his quest for understanding. The poet stands as an isolated figure, turning inward toward the source of his creativity to reflect on the poetic process and to question the effectuality of his creative efforts. Earlier in his career Kinsella dramatized his search in similar terms in "Worker in Mirror, at his Bench," from *New Poems*, wherein he declared "I am simply

trying to understand something / - states of peace nursed out of the wreckage” (CP 124). Only now, instead of the poetic speaker narrating his thoughts to the reader, the primary audience to whom these introspective inquiries are focused is the figure of the Muse. And whereas the trope of the Muse has appeared previously as a gendered imaginative projection, Kinsella jettisons the gendered feminine figure that characterized his early work in favor of another imaginative self in these recent Peppercanister publications. Harmon points out that Kinsella frequently speaks “to projections of himself”(228), and the critic identifies several of the various historical figures that the poet voices “opinions and values through,” which include his deceased friend Sean O’Riada, along with Denis Diderot, Oliver Goldsmith and Marcus Aurelius. In these late poems however, the imaginative projection is not based on an historical or autobiographical figure, but is instead based on the Muse figure as Other, representing Kinsella’s internal creative process. Sometimes this figure is referred to using a feminine pronoun, but usually the poet makes reference to a gender neutral Other, and the Muse is no longer represented as the other gender in opposition to the male poet.

This poem is followed by “Into Thy Hands,” which reads like a manifesto of Kinsella’s poetic creed, that begins with a search for “the theme and its right treatment” (P28, 8). The poet acknowledges that there is no guarantee of successful affirmation, for sometimes the work will fail or be misunderstood; what matters is the effort. Writing is viewed by Kinsella as “hard practice,” and ultimately the finished poem must be “shaped and corrected / to stand unsupported” (P28, 8). The work is then offered to an enigmatic Muse, who inspires the poet: “All offered to an intimate, / wayward in acceptance / self-chosen and unknown. (P28, 8). If these lines suggest that the Muse does not always

appreciate the poet's offering, Kinsella's readers may evince a similar reaction when the work is placed in their hands due to the poet's high expectations. Kinsella expects his readers to complete what he terms "an act of communication" which the finished poem or sequence initiates. He explained his views to John F. Deane, stating that the act of reading is "a dynamic one, the completion of an act of communication, not an inert listening to something sweet or interesting or even informative" (88). And while this figure can be read as an imaginative alter-ego, there is an unknown quality to this well spring of the poet's creativity, which is part of the mystery of artistic inspiration.

Underscoring the spiritual dimension of Kinsella's relationship with his craft, the title "Into thy Hands" suggests a play on Jesus' last words on the cross, which have been variously translated from the Gospel of Luke 23:44-46 as either "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit" or "Into thy hands I commit my spirit." Yet I do not read this spiritual reference as endorsing Graves' view that poetry necessarily involves a religious invocation of the Muse. Rather, the poet is announcing that he is figuratively placing his trust in the hands of the Muse, who will guide his artistic endeavors and serve as his audience.

In "*She continued:*" Kinsella adopts the persona of the Muse and it is this figure that is the poetic speaker. The grammar in the title signals from the onset that the poem is structured in the voice of a third person and with the exception of the penultimate line the entire poem is bookended by quotation marks as the "she" of the title speaks. The word "continued" in the title also implies that this poem is only a segment of an on-going conversation between poet and Muse, and it underscores Kinsella's famous dismissal of the "notion of a 'complete' poem" in his later work (O'Driscoll 59). The organic, open-

ended nature of many of Kinsella's Peppercanister sequences exemplifies how the poet crafts his work as a continuous process resistant to closure. As he elaborated to O'Driscoll, his creative endeavors have a larger unity than even a sequence or a set of connected poems, and he approaches his works as "a totality that is happening, with the individual poem a contribution to something accumulating" (59). Kinsella uses an ever expanding referential framework drawn from previous work to contextualize his exploration of the self and the creative process, with the result that his search for meaning is an uninterrupted aesthetic inquiry, with the poetry embodying significant elements of Kinsella's experience. And while the search for meaning remains a constant theme, the Muse figure undergoes a transformation as the poet matures.

Once again, the Muse oversees all the poet's artistic efforts and it is this figure who reminds Kinsella of what he may achieve even though "There is an inadequacy and an imbalance / in the source material" (P28, 13). The Muse exists to give voice to Kinsella's concerns, and counsels the poet that he should welcome and use his search for meaning and order in the universe, his "worrying for evidence of purpose." There is no guarantee of illumination, but Kinsella appears to concede that he should be satisfied with that the fact that such a possibility exists. Poetry has the capacity to transform the "disrhythmia" that he feels, and the Muse tells the poet to trust his poetic endeavors, which will provide "an easing of the disorder at a time to come" (P28, 13). This disrhythmia has informed Kinsella's writing since the beginning, and the search for meaning is accompanied by a recognition that no all encompassing solution lies ahead. In these late poems the poet deliberately eschews any notion of a systemized resolution to his search. The Muse concludes this address to Kinsella with the wry qualification that

the poet must be “content” with provisional moments of understanding even “if there is not” any easing of the disorder evoked by the ordeal of life (P28, 13). The only line in the poem not written in the voice of the Muse, “*She turned away, her voice tired,*” mirrors the internal tiredness of the aging poet, still searching for meaning and understanding within the disorder and waste of life. I read this dialogue as dispensing with the hierarchical relationship between poet and Muse, male and female, as the Muse is presented as an autonomous figure, guiding the poet toward their common goal which is the completion of the work.

“Reflection” is another address to the Muse, who is described as a “Jewel of the Total,” and identified as a kind of amorphous, free-floating constellation, “solitary and most high / radiant in nothing” (P28, 14). The symbiotic relationship between poet and Muse is underscored through Kinsella’s use of similar language to describe both the poet and the figure that illuminates his imagination. This solitary Muse, who was “toying with matter / and with cause and effect,” found the “solitary” poet, who was “toying with [his] own basics / of process and waste” (P28, 14). The raw material of life, the process and waste, must be worked through and evaluated for its significance and its cause and effect, then shaped into a coherent piece of work. The Muse, who for the first time is not referred to as “She,” brings order and purpose to the poet, who writes that he was without direction “until I found / You and Your preoccupations.” Poet and Muse come together aesthetically and after this moment of visionary communication the Muse retreats, or as Kinsella terms it, “And You faded into Your own Self” (P 28, 14). Although their “preoccupations” could be regarded as similar (the workings of creativity and the artistic process), Kinsella separates himself from his Muse by addressing this figure in the third

person throughout the poem. He further signals their separation by choosing to capitalize the “You” throughout, a characterization which could be interpreted as elevating the Muse to a higher, mythic level, thus returning this figure to the traditional stereotypical position. However, I read this privileging as a way of underscoring the extent to which the poet sees this overarching figure as his aesthetic alter-ego.

In the second section, Kinsella makes an uncharacteristically emotional plea to the Muse: “I pray You to remember me, as I retire / homeward across a darkening Earth” (P28, 14). The act of retiring homeward is an acknowledgment by the elderly poet that his life’s journey is drawing to a close and upon his death he will be returned to the “darkening Earth.” He is a supplicant, dependent on the Muse, the omnipresent “You” of his imagination, for reassurance, wholly devoid of masculine narcissism. The elderly poet is full of self-doubt, “not convinced” that his existence “might ever have been of relevance,” or that there is “any usefulness” in the awareness of his condition (P28, 14,15). Kinsella evinces a sense of his own randomness in the universe; however, the poem ends on a more optimistic note after this admission, as the poet concludes that despite his doubts he is “thankful, on the whole, / for this ache for even a minimal understanding” (P28 15). Minimal understanding comes from the self-exploration Kinsella undertook on his Jungian journey towards individuation and from his life-long endeavors to make aesthetic sense of the ordeal of life. In these Muse poems, the poet expands his investigation of the self to encompass an investigation of the human process in general, “as it endures disorder, and erosion and death” (see O’Driscoll *Irish University Review* 2).

The title poem in this sequence, "Fat Master," finds Kinsella returning to his interest in music, which earlier in his career found expression in the two elegies to his friend, the Irish composer Sean O'Riada, and in the sequence devoted to Gustav Mahler.⁵³ The fat master of the title is Bach, and Kinsella sees an affinity between himself and the composer with regard to the nature of the audience to whom they dedicate their life's work: "That your offerings / are to the one and only adequate Other" (P28 19). When the Muse is envisaged by Kinsella as an Other, this figure is accorded a primary status as the other half of the creative process, in a relation of equality to the masculine poetic speaker. Once again, the ideal audience is symbolized by the Muse, who is "capable of responding to the perfect work of art with an intense and total awareness that perceives its complexity, coherence and unity" (see Harmon 180). Kinsella seeks a cerebral response to his work, one that matches his integrity of focus, and the Muse as audience is imagined as sharing this vision the same as or similar to him. The poet appears to suggest that the Muse may be the only audience capable of fully appreciating his introspective, difficult art, which may be Kinsella's way of commenting on the sometimes muted reception to his work by critics and readers. The imaginative connections Kinsella makes in reaction to lived experience are not always readily apparent in the poems, and the note of dissonance that is a pervasive theme throughout his poetry is not always easily digestible. As O'Driscoll has noted, "Kinsella refuses to

⁵³ The O'Riada sequences are *Peppercanister 2, A Selected Life* and *Peppercanister 3, Vertical Man*.

restrict the scope of poetry by subscribing to the commonly held view that its prime function is to celebrate” (*Irish University Review* 17).

The most recent Peppercanister sequence, *Love Joy Peace*, reaffirms the necessary presence of the Muse, who is no longer identified as a feminine figure of female other, but is instead an imagined abstraction, Kinsella’s alter-ego and constant companion. For Kinsella, artistic inspiration is always a matter for self-interrogation and critique as well as a cause for celebration, and with these late poems he reveals a distinctive perspective on the range of possibilities that an interaction with the Muse allows.

The thread of continuity running through Kinsella’s work is again visible in “Anatomy,” which draws together themes of love and creativity and the uneasy alliance that sometimes exists between them. The poet’s flesh is still “active,” and he continues his search for meaning by internalizing experience, aesthetically “Embodying Process.” Kinsella describes how he carries himself “onward / in ignominy and fuss” (P 29, 8) as he attempts to impose order on experience. On this journey through life “The self, concerned primarily / with the business of survival,” discovers love. The Muse, who is here described as “Awareness,” resents the lovers, and is “irritated by their behaviour, / not discerning Purpose” (P 29, 8). Yet the self is also constantly searching for the appropriate imaginative response to experience:

A part, passive in process
and studying its own condition,
presumes from inadequate data

to understand the whole (P29, 8).

This stanza mirrors in poetic form Kinsella's earlier explanation of his poetic process as a search for a "totality of imaginative response with the merely linguistic characteristics deleted so that one is brought closer and closer to the data and to the form of unity embodied in the data" (see O'Driscoll 65). What this means, and what the poet seems to be striving to explain in this poem, is his distaste for "facile rhetoric" and the notion of poetry as "linguistic entertainment" (see O'Driscoll 65). It also seems to suggest somewhat naively that somehow we can distinguish "ornament" from "substance," a distinction that Derrida and others have called into question. Kinsella, however, continues to see his poetic project as a process of distilling significant experience into poetic form, a process that he says calls for fidelity to the "data" of lived experience.

The active flesh of the poet is assaulted verbally in the poem "*Flesh Eater*," which briefly recalls the Great Mother of Jungian archetypal thought with the lines "The great Mouth / opened out of nowhere" (P 29, 10). However, the great mouth is more likely another manifestation of the Muse as alter-ego. Kinsella continues his attempts to understand the creative process and his role as an artist, and this drive for understanding takes on a more urgent quality in these late poems as the specter of mortality looms on the horizon. The poet asks the flesh eater, "Is there anything we might offer / to lessen the hunger / of the next phase?" to which the Muse answers, "Truth" (P 29, 10).

Underscoring Brian John's observation that throughout his work Kinsella pursues "the theme of appetite, its instinctive drive within the self and within the external world" (15), the poem ends with an image of the great Mouth eating "Its own word." Appetite in Kinsella, as John reminds us, often leads to "vision and consciousness" (15) and this

appetite for truth, which the Muse swallows, mirrors the poet's search for understanding and self knowledge, which he continues to pursue aesthetically.

Just as the relationship between the poet and the Beloved is portrayed in the marriage poetry as a constantly changing dynamic, the relationship between Kinsella and his Muse is equally complicated. The self-reflexive negotiated push and pull between these partners is exemplified in "Tenants in Common," where the Muse is introduced by the poet as "my old opposite" (P29, 12). The terminology does not, however, imply a negative construction of this figure for, as the jurisprudential title suggests, poet and Muse are now on an equal footing. She is an extension of the artist, and exemplifies Yeats's famous distinction between rhetoric and poetry, which Helen Vendler summarizes: "rhetoric comes from the quarrel with others (and looks outward to that audience as it shapes its sentences), but poetry issues from the self's quarrel with itself, which the poem exists to express (and sometimes to resolve)" (1). The enabling Muse is cast in the familiar trope of a snake, with the poet alerted to her appearance by "A hiss near my heel. / A slither up out of the shallows" (P29, 12). The Muse then addresses the poet, and the vocabulary reveals a conscious recognition of the interdependence between poet and Muse, who are described as "Mismatched here together" (P29, 12). Once again Kinsella speaks through a projection and it is the Muse who speaks and the poet who listens:

I had been hoping for this.

To solve our joint requirements:

you, needing my nothingness,

to quieten your fevers;

I needing the leap of life
for my inertia.

We were made for each other (P29, 12).

I read this poem as an example of patriarchal Muse poetry being replaced by Kinsella with a dialogue among equals. The Muse then reminds the poet that disappointment is part of the process of experience and must be acknowledged: “hoping for the unexpected / to change matters;” yet “knowing it is unlikely” (P 29, 12). Understanding will always be provisional; what matters is the effort in crafting a poetic response to human experience. The poem closes with a repetition of the snake imagery from “At the Head Table” and the lipless smile that greeted that toast: “The thin leathery lips approached my neck” (P29 12). The imagery, suggestive of a vampire, underscores the level of interdependency between the pair. Poet and the source of his creativity mutually feed off each other in a continual process of affirmation.

A different relationship between the poet and his creativity is suggested in “Colloquy of the Carnal,” where the conflation of sexuality and creativity seen in earlier poems reoccurs and the interaction with the Muse is expressed in the language of an illicit tryst. The poet, in the pursuit of understanding, writes that he “bears the Source / in its red meat / toward an indistinctly conceived Other” (P29, 9). The “source” refers to the artist and his subject matter, full of sensory perception in his bodily “red meat,” still creatively active in his engagement with the Muse, the “indistinctly conceived Other”. The lines echo another statement of artistic values from a different later poem, “Prayer 1,” published in *Belief and Unbelief* (2007). In this poem the poet once again outlines his approach to his craft, which involves “a turning away / from regard beyond proper merit,

/ or reward beyond real need, / toward the essence and the source” (P27, 22). In both poems the Muse is the “essence” of Kinsella’s artistic endeavor and the “source” represents the artist. This essence is by turn feminine, or serpentine, and when the poet dispatches with concrete imagery, a disembodied alter-ego who represents the source of his creativity.

The imaginative physical union between poet and Other is ambiguous, lending credence to an interpretation of the text as a celebration of the creative, rather than the sexual, consummation of their colloquy. Poet and Muse come together in aesthetic union, reinforcing an interpretation that suggests artistic redemption comes from a sense of spiritual, not physical, understanding between poet and Muse. The poem ends with the Other waiting “unbegotten, / at the appointed place,” where “They will meet once, / speechless, / in carnal understanding” (P29, 9). If one reads these lines to mean that the poet experiences the Muse and his creativity bodily (which is different from sexually) as a form of “carnal understanding,” this would bring the theme of knowledge full circle in Kinsella’s work, back to the early representation of Eleanor in “Phoenix Park” as embodying knowledge essential to the poet: “Everything you know you know bodily” (CP 87).

In Kinsella’s early work the Muse is often entrenched within an aesthetic or cultural stereotype of the feminine Muse, a timeless reproduction of a poetic trope, usually perceived in sexual terms. However, in his recent work, Kinsella deviates from a simplistic idealization of the Muse to aesthetically construct a figure that is part artistic inspiration, part audience. And while Kinsella genders the Muse as feminine in contradistinction to his own masculinity in the early work, the late poetry does not assign

a gendered subject position to this figure. On the contrary, in these late poems the poet, who is speaking to a projection of himself, acknowledges a more complex understanding of this aspect of his creativity. *Fat Master* and *Love Joy Peace* reveal a poet who is not obsessed with either the Beloved or the eternal feminine Muse. Rather, the poet's obsession is with the on-going project of writing and the effort it takes to craft an adequate response to the evidence presented by experience. When the Muse becomes an aesthetic construction, this figure is transformed from an object of desire or feminine source of inspiration, into the site of inquiry into the difficulties inherent in the creative process.

In these late poems the Muse is both literally and figuratively the Other - both the source of creativity and the unknown audience to whom the poet's life work is handed over. By jettisoning the trope of the Muse as goddess or lover, Kinsella refashioned his Muse as an enabling Other. In the poems where Kinsella splits the self into a Muse alter-ego and the observing poet, this Other is not necessarily outside or beyond the self, but rather represents a different part of the poet's personality, the "only adequate Other" for whom the poet writes. This later conception of the Muse resists containment within the literal or the physical. This extremely personal articulation of what role the Muse plays in Kinsella's work reveals the figure to be a hybrid construction, part artistic conscience, part ideal audience. The spectrum of representations of the Muse, whether as the Beloved, Goddess, snake or poetic alter-ego, are united by their common poetic function – the embodiment of Kinsella's creative engagement with the ordeal of understanding. Through his innovative deployment of the trope of the poetic muse Kinsella continues to

question the role of the artist in society and advance the aesthetic frontiers of contemporary Irish poetry.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

In this study I have discussed the representation of women in the poetry of Thomas Kinsella and have argued that women are an essential aesthetic component in the poet's work from the inception of his career up to his most recent publications, *Fat Master* and *Love Joy Peace*. Through a close reading of Kinsella's extensive body of work I have shown that this feminine presence is a connective thread that binds Kinsella's obsessive quest for understanding and self knowledge through personal, mythological and familial connections. Kinsella's imaginative interrogation of the self necessarily involves encounters with women, and while in certain instances his poetry shores up patriarchal versions of women, in other cases he subverts conventional gender representations. Despite the sustained presence of female figures in his poetry Kinsella's multiple representations of women has received hardly any sustained critical attention, and the scholarly work that has addressed this issue has typically been in the form of a journal article or essay. Given the significance of women to the poet's intensely personal vision, it is hoped that this study will facilitate future gender-based critical attention and discussion.

As discussed in the introduction, Kinsella's abandonment of received forms and strict meter in favor of a more open Anglo-American free verse resulted in a poetry that became increasingly fluid and fragmented, particularly in his mid-career poetry of psychic exploration. Paradoxically, this switch to looser forms accompanied a corresponding intellectual and syntactical rigor, with the poems pared down to their

essence, devoid of all superfluous language and ornamentation. Seamus Heaney described Kinsella's change in style in the following terms:

In his own work he has long since – and deliberately – given up considerations of ‘the reader comfort.’ He has strenuously punished the lyricist in himself who carried off such stylish performances in the early books. As the influence of Pound and indeed O Rathaille has taken hold, he has gradually evicted traces of Audenesque, iambic – strictly English – melody, in order to find a denser, more laconic, more indigenous way with the poetic line (Heaney 32).

The poet's career-long search for meaning in the chaos of lived experience involves a search for structure that will provide order, while simultaneously recognizing that any understanding or order will be provisional. What knowledge the poet derives from his continual search is typically achieved with the enabling assistance of a female presence, either real or archetypal. Whether it be the question of love and its ability to survive the bitterness of life, the psychic explorations of the self, or the questions of artistic creativity and the role of the artist in society, all of these encounters involve the enabling presence of women. At times, Kinsella reinforces gender-based assumptions of women, while at other times his work destabilizes patriarchal representations of female figures and women are recognized in his poetry as having their own autonomous subjectivity.

Despite Kinsella's skepticism in conventional belief systems, his belief in love's ability to survive and triumph over the bitterness of life is a hallmark of his poetry. As discussed in chapter two, the relationship between the poet and his wife Eleanor, the Beloved, is central to how Kinsella creatively explores this belief in his work. The complexity of this relationship, which evolves in the poetry over several decades,

undermines any charge of a continuous reinscription of gender inequality. If the early love poetry and the *Wormwood* sequence are flawed due to the lack of autonomy accorded the Beloved, in the late marriage sequence, *The Familiar*, the poet's position on gender relations has evolved into one of mutual respect and support. I have argued that *The Familiar* is also a clear example of Kinsella's practice of revisiting earlier work and that this revisitation is also a revision, with the Beloved acknowledged as an equal partner without whom the poet could no longer creatively express himself.

As discussed in chapter three, Jung's psychoanalytical theories were profoundly enabling in Kinsella's aesthetic quest for knowledge and understanding. However, from a feminist standpoint, the Jungian goal of male individuation is severely questionable and these concerns necessarily affect the reading of this work. Kinsella's poems about this journey towards individuation focus in part on what Jung calls the "female archetype" or "anima." Jung holds that by confronting these female figures in his unconscious, the male can incorporate the feminine within and convert this presence into his own creativity, thereby attaining a fully realized individuated state. Aside from the inbuilt gender essentialism underpinning Jung's theory of individuation (the feminine is the emotional unconscious that must be confronted and conquered, the male is the rational consciousness), the newly individuated male, freed from the feminine archetypes within his psyche, "has no necessary training or incentive to engage with actual women on the basis of equality and respect" (Clutterbuck 247).

In his mid-career work Kinsella descends into the abyss of his own familial and cultural inheritance to confront the female archetypes and anima of his unconscious, and this Jungian quest underpins some of his most formally and thematically experimental

sequences including *Notes from the Land of the Dead, One, Song of the Night and Other Poems* and *Songs of the Psyche*. Jungian female archetypes or anima are typically represented by female ancestors, specifically his maternal and paternal grandmother, or the Hag figure from Irish mythology. For Kinsella, self-awareness is achieved only by confronting these women and the memories that they trigger.

Another key concept in Jungian analytical theory is his concept of the “collective unconscious,” or the shared unconscious history common to all individuals and cultures. This idea is understood by Kinsella in terms of the collective unconscious of the first peoples of Ireland, and the poet is unique among his peers for the manner in which he fuses the native Irish tradition with psychoanalytical myth. Specifically, Kinsella draws upon the mythic history of Ireland and the Gaelic poetry found in *The Book of Invasions*. The creative incorporation of the Irish tradition which informs Kinsella’s poetry of psychic exploration is part of the poet’s ongoing project of repossessing the culture and poetry lost after the decline of the Irish language. This process of repossession and preservation is the other facet of Kinsella’s accomplishment, which includes his translation of *The Tain* (1969), *An Duanaire* (1981), and his edition of the *New Oxford Book of Irish Verse* (1986).

The diversity and richness of Kinsella’s representation of women is further evident in his aesthetic reformulation of the poetic trope of the Muse. Initially, the figure is a stereotypical version of this poetic trope; she is a feminine figure placed in a hierarchical relationship with the poetic speaker who projects his creative fantasies onto her image. In Kinsella’s mature work, however, this figure assumes independent agency and becomes a speaking voice in the poetry, advising the poet and encouraging him to

persevere in the face of a lack luster reception to his work. In Kinsella's most recent publications, *Fat Master*, and *Love Joy Peace*, the convention of the Muse is deliberately destabilized and the figure becomes first a snake-like apparition and ultimately a disembodied voice who symbolizes the poet's alter-ego and also his ideal audience.

Despite the long overdue critical attention that Kinsella's work is now beginning to receive, and the fact that the poet is now in the sixth decade of an unbroken writing career, Kinsella still remains an isolated poet within the Irish tradition. As discussed in the introduction, part of this neglect stems from the perception that his post-*Nightwalker* work is difficult and austere. Kinsella's embrace of the Anglo-American modernism of Pound, Williams and Lowell has resulted in an experimental body of work characterized by free verse and High Modernist strategies such as fragmentation, intertextuality, lack of exposition and rapid switches in subject and image. Another reason is that his method of self-publication, while allowing the poet considerable freedom with regard to how and when he publishes, restricts his ability to connect with a large readership that he might otherwise reach with the assistance of a commercial publishing house. Commentators also point to the rise in prominence of the subsequent generation of Northern Irish poets, Seamus Heaney, Michael Longley, and Derek Mahon, arguing that to a certain extent their work, by virtue of the public perception that it is more accessible, has eclipsed Kinsella's.

Kinsella also appears to have had little direct effect on the poetic practice of subsequent generations; however, his decisive shift to open forms in the 1960s expanded the frontiers of Irish poetry and provided an example for future experimental work by poets such as Paul Muldoon and Trevor Joyce. It may be difficult to assess his direct

impact on these and other poets of the post Heaney generation, but the remarkable innovation of his mid career work should not be discounted. Dillon Johnston draws attention to the conservative nature of Irish poetry after Yeats, stating that aside from Kinsella's work in the late 1970s and early 1980s the Irish tradition "produced no works we could honestly label avant garde, until the appearance of *Quoof* in 1983" (*Irish Poetry* 263).

Writing about the abstract imaginative tension and the distinctive tone of voice that Kinsella employs, Gerald Dawe argues that "There does not seem to be an acceptable poetic context for Kinsella, Irish or otherwise, except perhaps if one considers Lowell or goes back a little to a poet like Montale or the Greek poet Seferis" (211). Part of the difficulty of placing Kinsella is the self-referential nature of his work, and also his practice of habitually violating linear time. David Kellogg succinctly sums up Kinsella's practice in his description of the way time works in *St. Catherine's Clock*:

In organizing his sequence, Kinsella proceeds not chronologically but in a kind of forth and back movement, a spiraling of past and present, exploration and return, which is characteristic of his recent poetry's persistent self-exploration through evolutionary and organic metaphors (Kellogg, "Kinsella, Geography, History" 161).

Alex Davis, who astutely aligns Kinsella's interwoven sequences, which "bring together autobiographical, historical and mythological materials with a minimum of connective tissue" (85), with the work of Charles Olson, specifically *The Maximus Poems*, also reads Kinsella's brand of modernism as one in which "localism conjoins augmented experimentation" (53). In his representations of ancestral female figures, his wife

Eleanor, and mysterious archetypal figures that represent the mythological Irish Hag or *Cailleach*, Kinsella successfully assimilates ancestral history with Irish history and mythology within his modernist poetic imagination.

Kinsella is also distinctive from his peers for the extent to which his poems revolve around encounters with female figures. While he is not always successful in transcending gender biases and patriarchal representations of women, his representations of female figures are constantly changing and defy easy analysis or judgment. He has made his own life his myth and his theme, and on every step of the journey women are the dominant aesthetic influence.

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APPENDIX A
ABBREVIATIONS

In this study I have used the North American edition of Thomas Kinsella's *Collected Poems*, published by Wake Forest University Press in 2001. In the case of individual Peppercanister volumes published since 2001 I have referred to the individual edition number under consideration, using the abbreviation *P*. The following is a complete list of abbreviations used in this dissertation.

CP Thomas Kinsella: Collected Poems:1956-2001. Winston-Salem, NC: Wake Forest University Press, 2006.

P 24 Marginal Economy. Dublin: Dedalus Press; Manchester: Carcanet Press, 2006.

P 27 Belief and Unbelief. Dublin: Dedalus Press; Manchester: Carcanet Press, 2007.

P28 Fat Master. Dublin: Peppercanister Press, 2011.

P29 Love Joy Peace. Dublin: Peppercanister Press, 2011.

APPENDIX B

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