“Making Sense or No Sense of Existence”

The ‘Plot’ of Thomas Kinsella’s *Late Poems* in the Light of Norberto Bobbio’s *De senectute*

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Cyclicality has always characterized the poetry of Thomas Kinsella, one of the major Irish poets of the second half of the 20th century. It is not surprising then that in his more recent poetry, the poetry of *Late Poems* (2013), written in his seventies and eighties and initially published as pamphlets of his own Peppercanister Press,[1] he should not only be taking up familiar themes but indeed revisiting old poems whose titles are

1 Peppercanister Press was established by Kinsella in 1972 to allow the divulgation of the polemical *Butcher’s Dozen* and was operated from his home in the neighbourhood of the landmark church thus nicknamed. Most of his subsequent production first appeared in the form of pamphlets containing one long poem or gathering a few texts held together by a common theme, providing him thus the chance to take “another look at the work before publication – a final draft in published form” (Deane 1987, 87). Since 1988, John Deane’s Dedalus Press has been issuing and distributing the Peppercanister series retaining the same logo. The titles of the pamphlets published in Kinsella’s seventies and eighties, in other words in his old age, are *The Familiar* (1999), *Godhead* (1999), *Citizen of the World* (2000), *Littlebody* (2000), which are all part of *Collected Poems* (2001), and *Marginal Economy* (2006), *Man of War* (2007), *Belief and Unbelief* (2007), *Fat Master* (2011), and *Love Joy Peace* (2011), collected as *Late Poems* (2013).

proposed again with subtle variations. In doing so he completes a circular pattern going back to his beginnings and confirming some considerations on old age put forward by the Italian *maitre à penser*, Norberto Bobbio,[2] who, in his essay *De senectute* (1996) – an obvious allusion to Cicero's *De senectute* – suggests that old masters are so much "in love with their own ideas that they bring them up again and again." Many of the things they write are "variations on a single theme" (Bobbio [1996] 2001: 3).[3]

MEMORY AND UNDERSTANDING

As Bobbio puts it, since there is no future for the aged, the past is "the dimension in which the old live" (ibid: 12) so that, as a consequence, they "live on memory and for memory" (ibid: 31)[4] which is not necessarily a sterile or pathetic exercise for, as Bobbio writes, "by remembering you rediscover yourself and your identity, in spite of the many years that have passed and the thousands of events you have experienced" (ibid: 13).[5] Indeed, the inclination of ageing artists, who, at the end of their career, tend to dwell on the past and produce variations on the themes of their youth, far from being a sign of senile prattle or, simply, of lack of inspiration, lends itself to a different, more positive interpretation. Bobbio reminds us that old people "prefer to reflect on themselves and turn in on themselves where,

2 Norberto Bobbio (1909-2004) was a highly influential Italian philosopher of law and politics, an antifascist and a socialist. *De senectute*, his acceptance speech of an honorary degree at the University of Sassari, was translated into English by Alan Cameron as *Old Age*, 2001. All English quotations from *De senectute*, unless otherwise stated, are from Cameron's translation while the Italian quotations are from the Einaudi edition of his essays (1996).

3 "I vecchi professori sono tanto innamorati delle proprie idee da essere tentati di tornarci su con insistenza. Mi sto accorgendo io stesso che molte cose che scrivo in questi ultimi anni sono spesso variazioni sullo stesso tema" (Bobbio 1996: 17).

4 "Il vecchio vive di ricordi e per i ricordi." (ibid: 49)

5 "Nella rimembranza ritrovi te stesso, la tua identità, nonostante i mille anni trascorsi, le mille vicende vissute." (ibid: 29)

according to St. Augustine, truth is to be found" (ibid: 6),[6] and he recommends that, since the time ahead is so short because "old age doesn't last long […] you have to use your time not for making plans for a distant future that is no longer yours, but in trying to understand, if you can, the meaning of your life or the lack of it" (ibid: 12).[7]

The original Italian words, "il senso o il non senso della tua vita," correspond exactly to Kinsella's "making sense or no sense of existence," which, in the interview he granted Andrew Fitzsimons in 2004, he indicated as being the 'plot' of the poetic production of his seventies and eighties (Kinsella 2004: 75). Like Bobbio who opines that in old age it is essential to try and understand, Kinsella, too, explains that he tries to "achieve some kind of understanding. Looking into the process and making what sense we can; extracting order if possible; assembling some sort of structure to resist the effects of time; with the power to articulate, connecting the generations" (ibid: 76). The importance of understanding also appears, poetically, in the longing for it in such verses as "I […] allow / my arms to fall open in resignation, / desiring an understanding" (Kinsella 2013: 28). This is confirmed by the title of a section of Peppercanister 24, *Marginal Economy* (2006), called "Songs of Understanding." The poet expresses frustration at the vain aspirations of his life and art, between "waste" and "excess," but still asserts "the illusion, to a self-selected few, / of their positive participation / in a communal endeavour / with a final meaningful goal […]. Through a fault in the outermost rim / left open for the length of a lifetime / a glimpse of preoccupied purpose" (2013: 28-29). This is how far one can hope to go in terms of giving a meaning to one's life and doings – finding a glimpse of purpose which, moreover, is communal. In this light, much of his late poetry could be termed 'songs of understanding.'

The focus on understanding, however, has always been for Kinsella the substance of poetry and all the more so in recent years when taking stock of

6 "Il vecchio rimane indietro, si ferma o perché non ce la fa o perché preferisce riflettere su se stesso, per tornare in se stesso, dove, diceva Sant'Agostino, abita la verità." (ibid: 21)

7 "Ma proprio perché [la vecchiaia] dura poco impiega il tuo tempo non tanto per fare progetti per un futuro lontano che non ti appartiene più, quanto per cercare di capire, se puoi, *il senso o il non senso della tua vita* [my emphasis]" (ibid).

one's whole life appears as a necessity in front of its impending end. "It is not easy to take stock" writes Bobbio but looking into the past, remembering, is one of his recipes to achieve it: "When you are old, and what is more, feeling old, you cannot suppress the temptation to reflect on your own past." ([1996] 2001: 80)[8]

This understanding comes, for Kinsella, by examining and acknowledging the "whole" and its "individual parts" despite "a fundamental inadequacy / in the structure" (Kinsella 2013: 28) – the "individual parts" being moments of one's whole life salvaged through memory in all their "waste" and "excess" – and discovering that

> There is still an ongoing dynamic
> in the parts as they succeed each other
> and in the assembling record,
> that registers as positive.
>
> This can be thought of as purposeful
> permitting the illusion,
> to a self-selected few,
> of the positive participation
> in a communal endeavour
> with a final meaningful goal
> […]
> but sufficient to give the feeling
> of advancement toward an End.
>
> Accepting out of the past
> the Gift of the offered good
> add all of thine own best
> and offer the Gift onward. (Kinsella 2013: 28-29)

The fact that there is a Gift (and a capitalized one) and that it can be offered onward is what gives sense to individual and collective life, present and

8 "Quando si è vecchi, e per di più anche invecchiati, non si riesce a sottrarsi alla tentazione di riflettere sul proprio passato. […] un bilancio non è facile." (ibid: 163)

past. As David Lynch (2015) writes in the latest book published about Kinsella: "Although it is important in the Kinsellian world view to evaluate honestly humanity's bleakest and most evil attributes, the best of his work may not redeem humanity, but it does bring a level of understanding to our actions." (Kindle. Chap. 3)

Many of Kinsella's compositions, often in a Peppercanister sequence *ad hoc*, hail back to his own personal past in respect to the belief that understanding comes by taking in the whole of one's life through memory. *The Familiar* (1999), celebrates his long relationship with the woman of his life, Eleanor, married in 1955 (and lost in 2017) by evoking various of their moments together, their courtship, her moving in with him in the digs of Baggot Street and, interspersed throughout *Late Poems* a variety of other scenes of their married life such as having breakfast together, attending a wedding or a jazz concert. Houses and neighbourhoods play an important role in many poems. The graffiti seen in the first neighbourhood where he lived ("Love Joy Peace inside the white sign of a heart") provide the title of his latest Peppercanister (2011). Some poems bring back to life city characters met in pubs, boxing matches, funerals. Even the Department of Finance, where he had his first job, is evoked through memories of a hated colleague, now met and acknowledged in a graveyard. Indeed, as Bobbio writes: "The great wealth possessed by the old is the marvellous world of the memory, an inexhaustible source of reflections on ourselves, the universe in which we have lived, and the persons and events that have caught our attention along the way." ([1996] 2001: 31)[9]

"The Gift of the offered good" of "Songs of Understanding" (Kinsella 2013: 28) could be the gift of memory and what it brings about. Taking stock, interrogating life, understanding its sense and finding some good in it happen mostly by immersing oneself in this "marvellous world" and looking back at the past, and Kinsella has always been a poet of the personal as well as of the archetypal memory.

9 "Il grande patrimonio del vecchio è nel mondo meraviglioso della memoria, fonte inesauribile di riflessioni su noi stessi, sull'universo in cui siamo vissuti, sulle persone e gli eventi che lungo la via hanno attratto la nostra attenzione." (ibid: 49)

THE PAST IN KINSELLA'S EARLY AND LATE POETRY

Kinsella's whole career has been bent on the past which, he says, is part of his totality. The national and cultural past on the one side and, on the other, his own personal past are part of his poetry of memory through which he hopes to find some enlightenment not to say truth.

A salient characteristic of Kinsella's production as a retriever of the past was the work he did to repossess ancient Irish sagas and poetry through translation (the epic poem *The Tàin* (1970) and many other old Irish poems), anthologies such as *An Duanaire. Poetry of the Dispossessed 1600-1900* (1981) and *The New Oxford Book of Irish Verse* (1986) adding also seminal critical essays on the loss of a language and culture and the trauma of the broken tradition of Ireland (*The Irish Writer* (1970), *The Divided Mind* (1972), *The Dual Tradition* (1995)). In his most creative era (the 1970s and 1980s) it had also meant re-appropriating the foundation myths about the legendary invasions of Ireland to bare the original scar inscribed in the subconscious memory of each member of the community – a Jungian exploration of his own psyche that brought together mythical and individual history mirroring and enriching each other – a palimpsest of texts and time-frames.

The movement backwards however, in the more recent phase of his production, is polarized on the Self and its "moment of moral knowledge," as defined by Harry Clifton (2007), a prominent Irish poet, in a review of Kinsella's oeuvre in *The IrishTimes*. The recovery of the Irish material, in fact, is no longer part of his poetic project nor is he any longer preoccupied with healing the old wounds of the loss of language and tradition. He has long since come to terms with that, as he announced in his acceptance speech of an honorary degree from the University of Turin, in which he tried to define the aims of his recent poetry in relation to the ancient concerns.[10] Exploring the mythical past had only been a form of probing the self, animated, as Badin wrote, "by a process of self-investigation and by the search for a point of stability in the face of erosion" (1996: 12).

10 On May 9, 2006 the University of Turin granted Thomas Kinsella an honorary degree. His acceptance speech was first published in *Omaggio a Thomas Kinsella*, Torino: Trauben and then was included in Kinsella (2009). *Prose Occasions 1951-2006*, Manchester: Carcanet.

While the method now has changed, as it is no longer going through myth, he is still sifting the past in a process of self-understanding and search of a structure. In an early poem, "A Lady of Quality," he had suggested that communicating "recovered order to [his] pen" (Kinsella 2001: 8), was the aim of his poetic project and it continues to be so in spite of the fact that, especially after his move to the States and the publication of *Notes from the Land of the Dead* (1972), he broke away from the formal style of his early works that in itself had communicated clarity and order. In the poetry written in his late seventies and eighties, which continues being fragmentary and modernistic, we still find him intent on a search for a 'plot' or a 'structure' – terms he frequently used throughout his career – and which in Turin he called "the substance of a life expressed with understanding as best one can," (Kinsella 2009) and in his more recent poetry a form of "good."

In the poem, "Blood of the Innocent," contained in Peppercanister 24, *Marginal Economy*, he affirms that "we should gather in each generation / all the good we can from the past, / add our own best and […] leave to […] those behind us […] a growing total of Good (adequately recorded)" (Kinsella 2013: 20). Another short poem from "Songs of Understanding" in the same Peppercanister sequence reiterates his position towards the past with a view to the present and the future: "Reclaiming out of the past / all the good you can use, / and all the good that you can / and offer it all onward." (ibid: 29) The search for 'good' – a term he uses repeatedly – may mean acceptance, peace, finding a 'structure,' an 'order' in the universe, realising "That the life-form as we have it / is inadequate in itself; but that / having discovered the compensatory devices / of Love and the religious and creative imaginations" (ibid: 21) one has reached understanding for oneself and the generations to come and added a sense to what one has been doing. The search is incremental, including new material, and, at the same time, cyclical as it embraces the past. Its final purpose is that of reviewing and recording his findings transmitting them to the generations to come. Therefore, Kinsella cannot be catalogued as a griever of times past, as many old people are: the past is present for him, lively and to be used. Its loss is not bemoaned and its retrieval celebrated not only as a personal gift, but as a contribution to the community. A cyclical taking stock of past concerns and experiences is the hallmark of Kinsella's late poetry.

Thomas Kinsella's attachment to the ideas he had been "in love with," to quote Bobbio's ironical phrase, and which had yielded a sense of a structure, an understanding, is clearly displayed in his latest Peppercanister pamphlets in which he distils "a lifetime of writing" as poet and critic Harry Clifton (2007) wrote in *The IrishTimes*. Although remembering and "sifting and reconfiguring of a few archetypal elements" (ibid) is the favourite pastime of the elderly, including Kinsella, there are times, however, when he rebels against his continuous ruminations on the past. In the poem "Novice," a chilling vision of old age, the persona of the poet finds a moth on his path and recognizes it as an insect that he had seen in a childhood book, an insect belonging to a "species that sucks and swallows / only while it is growing; that cannot eat / once it reaches maturity" (Kinsella 2013: 51). The suspicion that there might be an analogy between this insect and the old poet who can no longer feed on anything new but must go back to what he absorbed or intuited in the past is so troubling that the speaker of the poem viciously crushes the "death moth" with his foot. The gesture reads as a rebellion against what old people mostly do, according to Bobbio, and what Kinsella himself has been mostly doing.

There are, however, many exciting inroads in contemporary territory, compositions that are not repetitive or backward-looking but on the contrary rooted in the present. Asked by John F. Deane to write a poem about war, after some hesitation Kinsella produced Peppercanister 27, *Man of War* (2007) launched at the Gate Theatre in Dublin on June 17, 2007 at a celebration of his career and his upcoming eightieth birthday.[11] The sequence deals with "the brutal basis in the human species" which is displayed not only in war – "the willed, and mass, occasional destruction / of others, face to face, of the same kind" – but also in human relations, at work, in sports, in the hunt, "in dealing with the lesser forms of life"

11 On the evening of 17 June 2007 a group of poets, writers and critics gathered at the Gate Theatre in Dublin to celebrate the long and influential career of a poet and scholar who had long been neglected and would be reaching briefly his 80th birthday (Kinsella was born in 1928). At that same time, the poet also received the prestigious Freedom of the City award, in other words the symbolic keys to Dublin, his native city which had played such an important role in his work. An *Irish Studies Review* special issue (edited by Derval Tubridy) dedicated to Kinsella followed in 2008 gathering the homages of friends and colleagues.

(Kinsella 2013: 33). In this philosophical and indignant sequence, Kinsella speaks not as a recriminating old man but as a human being fully involved in the present, a man that would "sign / all protests and appeals for abolition / of warfare in the world" if he could "find / where to send them" (ibid: 39). In John F. Deane's words (2007) "[i]t is, perhaps, Kinsella's fullest response to society's current urges towards wars and self-indulgent immorality" although we cannot ignore that in 1962 he had already made the voice of a pacifist heard, with equal graphic horror, in his "Old Harry" describing nuclear war and the attack on Hiroshima.

"Marcus Aurelius," too, a long philosophical poem from *Marginal Economy* (2006), comments on the present world "threatened by outer and inner forces hard to define" through the "uncommitted and marginal voice" of a ruler who incarnated "modern qualities," Marcus Aurelius, "one that had access to the bureaucratic world as well as the sensual, a figure that was alienated and involved at the same time" (Kinsella 2009: 128). Through his involvement and his stoic vision of the world, the emperor becomes an alter-ego for the speaker's vision of the world.

CIRCULARITY AND REPETITION

These sallies into the problems and evils of the present, are, however, an exception. In Kinsella's *Late Poems* (2013) we find the artist repeatedly turning, as we have seen, to "the good that came from the past" (especially the "good" he produced himself) and feeding, like the insect in "Novice," on what he had "swallowed" before. Old people do tend to repeat themselves, as Bobbio said. What Badin wrote about his production in the last century still applies to his twenty-first century production: "Similar situations, characters, and thematic concerns reappear in each phase [of his long career] enriched each time by the significance they have acquired within the macro-text. […]. A number of internal quotations from his own poems, in fact, underline their interdependency." (1996: 12) Adrienne Leavy (2016), in an article in *The IrishTimes*, confirms this assumption for Kinsella extending it to his more recent production: "[r]ecurring imagery and motifs are a hallmark of his poetry (especially his late poetry) […] with entire sequences and individual poems frequently and deliberately incorporating situations and language from earlier work."

Kinsella's probing the self by going back to the beginnings of his poetic questioning, to the tentative answers he found then, reminds one of Eliot's defence in "East Coker" of possible allegations of repetitiveness: "You say I am repeating / Something I have said before. I shall say it again. / Shall I say it again?" (Eliot 1963: 23). Kinsella "says it again" even to the point of picking up old titles of early poems. In searching for understanding which, in Bobbio's opinion, is what the elderly must urgently look for, Kinsella rehearses old approaches and terminology – "finding," as Leavy (2016) writes, "new aesthetic meaning in experiences and poems from decades earlier" and intentionally echoing creatively old poems of which "he retains (or slightly modifies) the titles and content." Two such pieces are "Into Thy Hands" and "Elderly Craftsman at his Bench," both from *Late Poems* (2013) that engage with antecedents from much earlier times. "Into Thy Hands" (2011) reiterates a title from one of his first collections, *Moralities* (1960). "Elderly Craftsman at his Bench" (2011), answers "Worker in Mirror at his Bench" from the collection *New Poems* of 1973.

In both pieces dealing with craftsmen / artists, the speaker contemplates his act of creation, and through it, of understanding, but with different reactions. The self-regarding "artist in mirror" of the earlier poem, apparently a craftsman talking to some visitors about his production, declares publicly that his work of art, which, privately, he had defined a "Self-Reflecting Abstraction," has no practical application:

> I am simply trying to understand something
> – states of peace nursed out of wreckage.
> The peace of fullness, not emptiness.
>
> […]
> Often the more I simplify
> The more a few simplicities
> go burrowing in their own depths
> until the guardian structure is aroused. (Kinsella 2001: 124)

The reader, however, tends to mistrust this optimistic declaration. Once alone, his visitors gone, the 'peace of fullness' feigned as resulting from finding the guardian structure is revealed to be, in fact, the peace of a blank

'emptiness', a fake: "Blackness – all matter / In one polished cliff face / Hurtling rigid from zenith to pit / Through dead" (Kinsella 2001: 126).

The elderly craftsman appears more positive. After all, despite his "bent body," the worker of the poem included in the pamphlet *Fat Master* is still at his "worn bench," (Kinsella 2013: 67) as was his counterpart in the earlier poem who, decades before, was searching "truth as tinkering / easing the particular of its litter" (Kinsella 2001: 124-125). The more recent impersonation of the artist is still searching by using the tool of memory, "think[ing] [his] way back / into the depths, beyond their origin" (Kinsella 2013: 67). His "serious efforts," however, are no longer so compulsive and he allows himself to pause, meditate and look back as a response to a surreal beckoning arm ("a soft arm reaching toward me / out of nowhere, / the fingers closing and opening") (ibid). This "signal reaching unfulfilled from somewhere in the past" (ibid), another of the poet's reminders to look back far enough to the prime source, leads however to the finding that "there is no peace here" (Kinsella 2013: 67). Although Kinsella writes to find clarity, his "efforts are always unfulfilled," writes his friend and prominent critic Maurice Harmon (2012: 14).

Although admitting failure, the older artist, unlike his desperate predecessor, hopes that "there will be a like thoughtfulness / for me and my concerns when the time comes" (ibid). Thus, the craftsman does find peace in the reminder of approaching death and the vague promise that his findings and concerns will not be unattended by those that will follow him. His is not the "peace of fullness" that his colleague pretended to have found but a peace of questioning, "a serviceable calm / so that I can attend to my work again" (ibid). In this beautiful statement of intimations of mortality and immortality in old age, the elderly craftsman, although he has no new input, can, like the mature insect, make new sense of what he had fed on before, by thinking his "way back" and experiencing at least acceptance if not understanding or truth.

This almost mystical peace is confirmed by the two other poems bearing the same title of "Into Thy Hands." A religious frame of mind is suggested by the title itself which resonates with Christ's words on the cross "Father into thy hands I commit my spirit" (Luke 23:46). The words are also to be found in psalms and prayers of the Catholic Church. The earliest "Into Thy Hands," included in *Moralities*, 1960, is part of a sequence entitled "Faith" presenting three different attitudes to belief thus

summarized by Badin (1996): "that of the skeptic, who finds nurture for his doubts in contemplating a polished seashell, a symbol of relentless erosion; that of the unconditional believer, whose total yielding to God's will is expressed through the metaphor of the diver […]; and that of the opportunist, a Lucifer whose 'puckish rump' is inscribed 'Do good / Some care and a simple faith will get you on'" (Badin 1996: 44).

The 1960 "Into Thy Hands" (the middle piece of "Faith") describes the "salty joy" of the start of "our dreadful journey into being" which involves hurling "the Present at the Past" and soaring confidently "into the azure chasm."

> Diver, noting lightly how the board
> Gives to the body, now with like intent
> I watch the body give to the instant, seeing
> In risk a salty joy: let accident
> Complete our dreadful journey into being.
>
> Here possessed of time and flesh at last,
> I hurl the Present bodily at the Past.
>
> Outstretched, into the azure chasm he soared. (Kinsella 2001: 24)

The more recent poem, first published in Peppercanister 28, *Fat Master* (2011) deals with a handicraft shaped by a careful, thoughtful worker (as do the two companion twin poems about artists at their benches) and is a common topos for a poet always interrogating himself on the sense of his art:

> The whole and all its parts
> made of a given substance.
> The parts self-selected,
> tried along the senses,
> founded on hard practice.
> The whole shaped and corrected
> To stand unsupported. (Kinsella 2013: 68)

In the last lines of the 2011 poem, the perfected object, like the body of the diver in the 1960 "Into Thy Hands", is "offered to an intimate, / wayward in acceptance, / self-chosen and unknown" (Kinsella 2013: 68). The oxymoron of "intimate" and "unknown" might refer either to a lover or to some divine entity. The man who has crafted it and the diver of the earlier poem both yield to a mysterious power, putting themselves into the hands of another entity, whether human or divine. The musician of *Fat Master* (possibly Bach) is also presenting his "orderly offering / of new discoveries […] / to the one adequate reflecting Other" (Kisella 2013: 77).

The two pairs of poems show that Kinsella's sifting his past production is not due to his having something new to say but to his wanting to return to the past, to his own words, in a new spirit, close, at times, to a mystical view of the world or at least to a position of acceptance and peace. Being unable to "suck and swallow" new food does not mean that a poet cannot feed on what he ate earlier to produce something new and valuable. There is a continuous refining and simplifying, in search of new answers to the old familiar questions. "Taking stock of one's life," Bobbio's advice, consists mostly in chewing on things of the past even if one can no longer "suck and swallow" and, starting from there, proposing new solutions and foraying in different directions knowing that "[t]he search for meaning and order will always be provisional" as Adrienne Leavy (2014), points out in a review of *Late Poems*.

The cycle of sifting and distillation seems to be one of the possible benefits of old age that, as Kinsella said in his Turin "Acceptance Speech", means, essentially, bearing in mind "what has been done before, by the same few human types, with slight variations" (Kinsella 2009: 127). As Kinsella suggests, "Everything […] will happen again" (ibid). In the background we can hear the words framing "East Coker": "in my beginning is my end" and "in my end is my beginning" (Eliot 182 and 190). The same circular trajectory describes Kinsella's poetic endeavour, interpreting now as in his youth, his present situation by going back to the personal, national, mythical and metaphysical beginnings. More pointedly, the latter verse points to how, in the case of Kinsella, the awareness of last matters approaching prompts him to try once again to give an answer to questions put before, in his beginnings, even by tentatively approaching religion, as the title of one of his recent publications, *Belief and Unbelief*, suggests.

But with a difference: it is now done in the awareness of last matters.

DISEASE AND THOUGHTS OF DEATH

In the general perception of old age, the consciousness of a decaying body, increasingly tormented by aches and disease, and the *memento mori* this brings about, are attendant to the final stage of life. This is certainly true about Bobbio who acknowledges being "increasingly tottery on feeble legs" and crossing "the road leaning on my stick and holding my wife's arm" (Bobbio [1996] 2001: 18). His essay gives voice to the experiences and fears of many old people confronted everyday by the miseries of ageing:

> [T]the descent into the void is long, much longer than I would have ever imagined, and slow, so slow as to appear almost imperceptible (although not to me). The descent is continuous and, what is worse, irreversible: you descend one step at a time, but having put your foot on the lower step, you know you will never return to the higher one. I have no idea how many more downward steps are to follow. I can only be sure that their number is steadily decreasing. (Bobbio [1996] 2001: 17)

Many diaries and fictional works dwell on ageing and the feelings of approaching death either, as Virginia Woolf suggests, because it is an interesting literary subject to be dealt with, or to dispel the anguish of the process by understanding and accepting it:

> Oh & I thought, as I was dressing, how interesting it would be to describe the approach of age, & the gradual coming of death. As people describe love. To note every symptom of failure: but why failure? To treat age as an experience that is different from the others; & to detect everyone of the gradual stages towards death which is a tremendous experience, & not conscious at least in its approaches, as birth is. (Woolf 1977-1984: 230)

At that time, she was still not considering giving herself death. It was an abstract topic she was curious about. Such a curiosity does certainly not pertain to Kinsella. Unlike Bobbio, who examines in detail what it means to grow old and enfeebled, and Woolf who would like to examine it (and partly does in many of her novels), Kinsella in his old age shuns, at least publicly, such preoccupations and his poetry rarely reflects directly the slow and painful process of ageing although publicly he at times wryly

hints at his approaching end. Before his reading at the Gate Theatre celebration of his career on 17 June 2007, for instance, he remarked that the occasion "has been slightly painful because I know that such an experience is granted only toward the end of one's life" (Tubridy 2008: 232). On the same occasion he quipped: "I think it was Yeats who said, 'Best of all is never to have been born. Second best is to die soon.' I've failed on the first but I am hoping to succeed on the second." (Byrne 2009. online) Apart from such occasional sallies, Kinsella mostly directs his concerns and fears towards what happened in the past and what is happening in the outer world, with its crises and decline, but pays no attention to his own diminishing powers. The subject is too urgent and painful to be addressed head on although his frequent mention of waste acts as a powerful euphemism.

On the contrary, when he was a relatively young man, an awareness of decay was central to Kinsella's view of man and made him "particularly responsive to failing powers or outright disease," as Badin (1996: 53) wrote in relation to some poems in the collection *Nightwalker and Other Poems* (1968). "[He] seemed morbidly obsessed with deteriorating physical forms and loss of power" (ibid: 53). In "Soft Toy," a battered teddy bear, or some similar soft toy, becomes a fitting persona for the poet – a "soiled," "crumpled," "beaten," "ragged," heaped" thing, "limp with use and re-use" with "a cold pitted grey face" (Kinsella 2001: 75). In "Mirror in February," a poem he wrote in his thirties, he straightforwardly expresses an awareness of ageing:

> Under the fading lamp, half dressed
> […]
> I towel my shaven jaw and stop, stare,
> Riveted by a dark exhausted eye,
> A dry downturning mouth.
> […]
> Now plainly in the mirror of my soul
> I read that I have looked my last on youth.
> […]
> And how should the flesh not quail, that span for span
> Is mutilated more? In slow distaste

I fold my towel with what grace I can,
Not young, and not renewable, but man. (Kinsella 2001: 53)

The compositions of the last twenty years rarely dwell so graphically on signs of physical deterioration, actual illness or death. There are a few exceptions, nonetheless, such as "Delirium," describing the awakening in hospital form an operation and drifting back into a daze, "Will drained bare / back to the dark / and the depths that I came from" (Kinsella 2013: 52). The nightmarish poem "Free Fall" is another symbolic representation of illness and approaching death "I was falling helpless in a shower of waste, / reaching my arms out toward the others / falling in disorder everywhere around me" (Kinsella 2013: 75).

Another piece, untitled, opens the collection *Late Poems*, with the account of a much too realistic dream of the indignities of old age, which lingers in mind as one reads the other poems. "*Wandering alone / from abandoned room to room / down the corridors of a derelict hotel, / searching for the lost urinal…*". The use of italics and the words "I woke" indicate this is a nightmare but one that announces the coming of "the waste" that will sink the active days of the speaker into night. The second part of the poem starts with an invocation to the Fates or Moirai, or, much closer home, to Banshees, asking them that all may not be lost: "Nightwomen, / picking the work of my days apart, / will you find what you need / in the waste still to come?" (Kinsella 2013: 13). The poem, set at the beginning of *Late Poems*, appears as an invitation to approach the whole collection *sub specie aeternitatis*, or rather, since expectations of eternity are doubtful in Kinsella's universe, under the perspective of an ending, in other words, *in substantia nostrae mortalitatis*.

Rather than of ageing and mortality, Kinsella prefers to talk about 'waste,' a term he has been using amply since the beginning of his career to indicate the unescapable outcome of all forms of existence. In Kinsella's stoic view of life, physical deterioration and the human indignities awaiting the ageing are, consistently with his past positions, to be seen as part of a general design and, therefore, to be endured. As in his past production, in *Late Poems* there is a constant talk of the waste marking our society at all times. Several poems contained in Peppercanister 24, *Marginal Economy*, deal with situations of difficult survival and risk of extinction of waning civilisations:

We worked farther out toward the edge
while anything could still be found.
Bringing back less and less,
until it was time to move again.
The need for care increasing.

We accepted things as they were,
with no thoughts of change.
The only change was in ourselves:
moving onward, leaving something behind each time.

There were ten years at most
even in the good places. (Kinsella 2013: 27)

The condition of the primitive society of gatherers or of the stranded wanderers alluded to in "Songs of Exile" as "your tired tribe" awaiting the word "in dust of the desert" (ibid: 26) lend themselves to be seen as metaphors of the waning conditions of ageing humans. Surviving in a weakening body is also a form of "marginal economy" as is the condition of the people in the sequence bearing the same name.

Death is also part of the process of waste and it, too, is not addressed directly in *Late Poems* nor does it play a great part there. This is surprising not so much because it is an event which should occupy the minds of old people as it looms so near, but because Kinsella's past production was rich in meditations on death and accounts of public and personal loss: there were elegies ranging from the loss of a family member to that of a public figure (Sean O Riada, John Kennedy, Valentin Ironmonger, but also the fisherman in "The Shoals Returning"); poems dealing with tragic events in the history of the Irish nation such as Bloody Sunday, Vinegar Hill, Robert Emmett's death at the dock, but also about foreign massacres (Hiroshima, for one). The concern and indignation for the horror of man-willed death, however, is still present in the 2007 sequence *Man of War*.

The explanation for the avoidance of the topic of one's individual end is simple. There is little to say about it apart from expressing fear about the way and the time it will happen or entertaining hopes of an afterlife. "By its very essence the manner of our destiny is unknown and shrouded in

mystery" as Bobbio (1996) explains. "Only other people can speak of my death. I can give an account of my life using my memories and the memories of those who are close to me […] I can speak of it up to my very last minutes. But I can never speak of my death. That is up to others." (Bobbio [1996] 2001: 17)[12] The stoic Kinsella, who does not complain about declining powers nor gives voice to fear, shows by his silence that he is in full agreement with Bobbio's privileging memory over meditations on death.

BELIEF AND UNBELIEF

Theologians, philosophers as well as the common man have endlessly discussed what will happen once our destiny is fulfilled, advancing all sorts of speculations about an afterlife. Believing that there is one would undoubtedly help reveal the meaning of life that Kinsella, like all people, especially ageing people, has been seeking. *Belief and Unbelief* is the title of one of his most recent publications (2007) signalling the importance this binary opposition has for him in the late stages of his life and underlining his wavering position. "In these poems," said Kinsella at the Gate Theatre ceremony, talking about two of his *Prayers* contained in the sequence, "the growing doubts and certainties of that lifetime are trying to live together" (Turbidy, 2008: 234). The chink of hope left open by his wavering represents his own version of Pascal's wager.

Total belief in the "transition to another form of life perceived and defined in different ways according to the individual, religion or

12 "Del proprio destino che è per essenza ignoto ed è quindi avvolto nel mistero […] si può parlare a ragion veduta soltanto quando è compiuto. […]. Della mia morte possono parlare solo gli altri. Io posso raccontare la mia vita attraverso i miei ricordi e i ricordi di coloro che mi sono stati vicini […]. Posso raccontarla sino agli ultimi minuti. Non posso raccontare la mia morte. Solo gli altri lo possono fare." (Bobbio 1996: 34)

philosophy" (Bobbio [1996] 2001: 17)13 cannot be accepted by confirmed agnostics such as Bobbio and Kinsella. Andrea Byrne (2009) in an article in *The Independent* quotes the Irish poet as saying: "I believe now, with a certain nervousness, that you simply go back from where you came from which is nowhere. We are phenomena, we are biological freaks, we simply come to the end of a given ordeal and go back to nothing." (22 March 2009) All this endorses the opinion of Maurice Harmon (2012) who maintains that "The awareness of the meaninglessness of the world […] underlies all his recent work. […] *Godhead* measured the Divine and found it wanting. *Marginal Economy* faced the truth that there is no redemption from outside. *Belief and Unbelief* that if there is no expectation, there is less disappointment" (2012: 14).

It is true that in "Love Joy Peace" Kinsella rejects the answers offered by traditional religions: "That the select only, the chosen few, / should enter effortless into the Kingdom / to meet a Maker wasteful on high / as in His worldly works. / Unacceptable." (Kinsella 2013: 89) The poem also criticizes the official Church: "a growing waste of ornament / […] / the waste increasing through the centuries / into what had been bothering me / – the hierarchies, councils of elders / […] / The Temple clattering with worldly goods" (ibid: 88). He has, however, sympathetic words for "the beliefs of the first Church," for the historical figure of Christ, and elaborates his own theory of Grace. Even Harmon concedes that "[t]he final poem 'Love Joy Peace,' is a statement of personal faith" (2012: 14).

The disbelief in an afterlife, in fact, does not close the door to all forms of religiosity and the sense of the divine. As Kinsella is walking the last stretch of his long life, there have been some signs of his searching the consolations of faith after for several decades refusing to see a source of understanding and of meaningfulness in God. He often uses, though gingerly, more explicit terms such as Belief, Faith, God and refers to the symbols of Christianity. The title of the two Peppercanister sequences, *Godhead* (1999) and *Belief and Unbelief* (2007), and the presence of several poems bearing the title of "Prayer" make one suspect that Kinsella besides trying throughout his career and especially in his latest years to take

13 "Che la morte […] sia il passaggio ad un'altra forma di vita diversamente immaginata e definita secondo i diversi individui, le diverse religioni, le diverse filosofie, non è un fatto, è una credenza" (Bobbio 1996: 35).

stock of life (as the ageing should), is also trying to find God. His condition is that of the women in "Songs of Exile": "In soiled survival, / awaiting the Word, / we are here assembled." (2013: 26)

Indeed in the latest publications, *Fat Master* and *Love Joy Peace*, the speaker gives voice both to the temptation and the refusal to believe. Other forms of faith are given a possibility and John F. Deane (2007) rightly sees some of these poems as "'prayers' to an unnamed but guiding force behind nature and human being." There is a sense of acceptance although, in Harmon's opinion, "understanding, even partial, is the most we can hope for" (2012: 14).

In the poem "Ceremony" the speaker goes through the motions of yielding "to an impulse" of entering a church, "kneeling before the altar / under the bowl of blood," raising his "palms together / before the hidden Host." All to no avail: there is no revelation and he returns disappointed to the awareness of his body and back, through Westland Row, "into the world" (Kinsella 2013: 59). "Religion has disappeared, but ceremony has not" he tells his interviewer Fitzsimon (Kinsella 2004: 79) and he finds in it some form of consolatory structure.

More importantly, in this phase of his career Kinsella elaborates what Harmon (2012) calls "his personal faith" (14): he surmises that a sparkle of divinity, an inkling of the meaning of life, may only be communicated by art – music and poetry especially – and by the contemplation of nature. "At a time like the present, when religion has more or less vanished, poetry can almost act as a substitute" he told Fitzsimon (2004: 74). The purpose of art becomes a kind of prayer or sacrificial offering. Both the artist of the second "Into thy Hands" contemplating the self-standing object of his craft, and the musician of "Fat Master" drawing powerful chords from the organ offer religiously the product of their art, the former to an "intimate," "unknown" being (Kinsella 2013: 68), the latter "to the one adequate reflecting Other" (ibid: 77). Bach reaching into "the heart of matter" (ibid: 77), Michelangelo "manipulating immensities of mind and matter" (ibid: 90) come closer to intimations of divinity than the speaker of the poem in his shows of religiousness. Nature also offers some glimpses of the divine. An ocean sunset provokes the poet into writing "In the face of God's creation / our last doubts fall silent," but the title "Rhetoric of Natural Beauty" disavows the emotion of the poem revealing it for what it is, a rhetorical figure (ibid: 30). Finally, there is the "Joy of the flesh. / Saying

all it can of love. Peace and nothingness of the last end" (ibid: 91). Like religion, art, and especially poetry "can contribute a view of the 'process' as a whole" (Kinsella 2004: 74). The glimpse one obtains from nature, art or sex is, indeed, nothing but a glimpse but it provides peace, the easing of the ache of life like the grace that comes by producing a carefully crafted object:

> Grace as routine.
> The lone artificer loosening the charged facts
> from an imagination arguing with itself
> until the ache is eased – by the will, in tedium;
> and the ache object eased in its correctness
> out of the containing inexactness. (Kinsella 2013: 90)

Moreover, while Kinsella does not seem to believe in a caring God that will welcome humanity into His bosom after death, he concedes, however, the existence of a creating god and of a god immanent in the universe. Answering Fitzsimon who had asked him whether he believed in God, Kinsella cryptically replied: "From the imagined vantage point distant overhead, it would be very difficult. And yet, there is a drive making things happen down there. And when you push back into the past, into the first microsecond of time, physics and poetry intersect in a kind of religion." (Kinsella 2004: 76) By going back to that instant, and to the many minor 'big bangs' of prehistorical and historical times, and by often recognizing a presence in the universe, the cycles of belief and unbelief are set into motion.

The persona of Marcus Aurelius, epitomises fittingly Kinsella's beliefs and scepticism:

> accepting established notions of a cosmos
> created and governed by a divine intelligence
> – while not believing in an afterlife;
>
> proposing exacting moral goals, with man
> an element in that divine intelligence
> – while pausing frequently to contemplate

the transient brutishness of earthly life,
our best experience of which concludes
with death, unaccountable and blank. (Kinsella 2013: 23-24)

CONCLUSION

Taking stock of one's life seems to be the first and most obvious imperative for the ageing. It is an endeavour requiring lucidity and courage. "Senility needs the energy and intuitions of youth," says Bobbio. (Bobbio [1996] 2001: 19) Kinsella's *Late Poems* display this sort of courage and energy for his constant attempts to understand and to share his understanding, his going through memory to the past even to the point of repetition in order to find new meanings in what has been done before. Yet he also often sounds ironical about the attitude he shares with people his own age. In *Fat Master*, written in his eighties, he is talking about "a dysrhythmia in some among you / the watchful and the partly fulfilled / A worrying for evidence of purpose / […] Trusting there will be / an easing of the disorder at a time to come" (Kinsella 2011: 13). In spite of such apparent distrust that the disorder may be eased and some purpose found, Kinsella displays in these poems a level of understanding and peace in contrast to his earlier production, as illustrated by the poem "Reflection" from *Fat Master* dedicated probably to Bach but staging a generic elderly artist "retiring homeward" but still questioning his beliefs and his achievements and grateful for the "minimal understanding" he has reached:

I pray You to remember me, as I retire
Homeward across a darkening Earth,

And still curious at my contaminated conception,
Not convinced that my existence
Might ever have been of relevance
[…]
but thankful, on the whole, for this ache
for even a minimal understanding. (Kinsella 2013: 74)

This "minimal understanding" in Kinsella's view is the only thing one can achieve by the backward look, the cyclicality in one's thoughts and works, the attempt to give fresh answers to old questions, in other words by the process of ageing.

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