

**Galway Kinnell's *The  
Book of Nightmares* :  
"The Wages of Dying  
Is Love"**

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**Introduction**

Since its publication in 1971, Galway Kinnell's *The Book of Nightmares* has been recognized as one of the major poetic accomplishments of the past decade. It is a fiercely critical book, both in terms of its unflinching inward-looking self-analysis and its scathing indictment of contemporary society. Yet it still remains a difficult work to enter, and once entered, to experience as the superbly crafted unity that it is. Part of its difficulty lies in its length. It is a seventy-five page poem made up of ten "books," each of which is then divided, sometimes very arbitrarily, into seven sections. Its structure can be traced to Rilke's *Duino Elegies*, which Kinnell calls "its historical ancestor. . . a ten-part poem without plot and yet with a close relationship of part to part, and if possible a development from beginning to end."<sup>1</sup>

But what the reader often finds is a work whose complexity, fragmentary structure and brutality leave him baffled. And indeed, many find its resignation to death too fatalistic to accept.<sup>2</sup> On closer examination of both Kinnell's stylistic peculiarities and thematic development, that is, once the work can be perceived as the whole

that it is and appreciated in its own mode of expression, such doubt and criticism should give way to the truly healing capabilities of the work, much as in tragedy. But we might also look at it from a very different perspective, as "Kinnell's *Divine Comedy* without God but with soul, a soul inseparable from body and from man's life in nature. Unlike Dante, but like the romantic poets to whose tradition he belongs, Kinnell tries to pull an immortality out of our mortality."<sup>3</sup> This perspective then gives us the ability to look at the fragmented nature of the poem from its grander movements of descent, suffering and personal redemption.

Yet Kinnell's style still presents difficulty, especially to those without much experience in the reading of contemporary American poetry. The longer poems of today are written under different aesthetic influences from those in the past. Every art has undergone transformation under the destructive pressures of modern life. So longer poems today are more and more formed of seemingly disparate juxtapositions, mixtures of the beautiful and the ugly, the delicate and the gross; sequences that mix the most poignantly poetic expressions with those that could never have passed for poetry in the past. And this is just what Kinnell does, "For in combining disparate lyrical passages, the sequence combines intensities without the need for slack transitions; and intensity is the main criterion of excellence."<sup>4</sup>

For its whole length the reader will find the intensity of *The Book of Nightmares* unabated, not only because emotional intensity is one of Kinnell's distinguishing stylistic marks, but because the themes that he weaves through this work are the most basic to human existence: that a man must suffer and die in a brutally dehumanized, hostile world; that he must suffer love as the most meaningful of human experiences even as those he loves are parted from him by uncontrollable circumstance and death. It is then not surprising that a man so infused with his own mortality might look about himself at the world of physical objects with renewed intensity, celebrating the

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natural world as it disappears from before his sight<sup>5</sup>. In doing this, Kinnell gives more than ample credit to his spiritual forbears, Whitman and Rilke.

In speaking of the greatness of the greatest of American poets, Kinnell cites how "Everything in Whitman is related to the visible,"<sup>6</sup> and that from this his strength emanates. In this the vision of Rilke was not as different as it might seem. Kinnell often refers to Rilke's Ninth Elegy in the *Duino Elegies* as having a primary formative influence on his own work, and paraphrases part of it as :

Don't tell the angels about the glory of your feelings, or how splendid your soul is, they know all about that. Tell them something they're more fascinated by, something that you know better than they ; tell them about the things of the world.<sup>7</sup>

No matter how the final result may differ from doing just that, the debt to Rilke can never be ignored.

Through the emotional intensity that he achieves, however, the very reality of objects before Kinnell's gaze is transformed, sometimes into cosmic proportions, sometimes into surrealistic nightmares. The voice he projects often has the authority of having suffered at all levels the life of all things. The use of animal imagery, then, is unique in how Kinnell is able to enter the animal consciousness "as an image of regression. . . . . a way of achieving intensity . . . . . a way of talking about the unconscious."<sup>8</sup> The surrealistic and the sub-human serve as a medium through which to integrate the inner and the outer dimensions of experience. He says :

If the things and creatures that live on earth don't possess mystery, then there isn't any. To touch this mystery requires, I think, love of the things and creatures

that surround us : The capacity to go out to them so that they enter us, so that they are transformed within us, and so that our own inner life finds expression through them. . . . In the purest poem the inner and outer meet. If a poem remains at a surrealist level, possibly it means that *no integration takes place*.<sup>9</sup>

If we look at the book in light of this basic urge to unify, “to return oneself and perhaps others to a sense of their natural beings,”<sup>10</sup> then its broad-ranging imagery, its transformations of consciousness and reality, its projections of the known into the unknown and imagined are very much like the image of modern man : painfully divided, painfully seeking unity. *The Book of Nightmares* becomes a symbolic expression of Kinnell himself. Toward the very end of the book are the lines, “This poem/if we shall call it that. . . .”<sup>11</sup> (All quotations from *The Book of Nightmares* will not be footnoted henceforth, but given Book, Section and page numbers for reference.) When asked if they were deprecatory in any way, Kinnell replied, “I suppose I meant something like what Whitman meant when he said, ‘Who touches this touches a man.’”<sup>12</sup> This is the enduring mystery of art.

All this has been said by way of very general introduction to give us at least a framework through which to approach a study of Kinnell’s most definitive work up to the time of its publication. Obviously, those who have studied him before find no great departure from themes and styles he had been preoccupied with for almost ten years before then. It is just that *The Book of Nightmares* is so breathtakingly sustained that it places him squarely as one of the major poetic voices to be reckoned with in this postmodern era, having brought us “out of the modernist cul-de-sac of irony into a postmodernist aesthetic.”<sup>13</sup> It is for this reason I have undertaken the task of introducing the poet and the poem, and hope that in the course of this paper I will be able to make accessible to you a new

dimension in the poetic imagination.

### **To Begin With Then, Death**

Kinnell begins *The Book of Nightmares* with a dedication to his children, Maud and Fergus, and it is no coincidence that Book I and Book X deal with the birth of each of them respectively. But right under his dedication, he has placed the following epigraph, again from Rilke :

But this, though : death  
the whole of death,--even before life's begun, to hold it  
all so gently, and be good : this is beyond description!

This epigraph sets forth the major theme (and challenge) that runs through the whole of the work. Again, I feel Kinnell's own words best explain the thematic framework that is established :

From one point of view, the book is nothing but an effort to face death and live with death. Children have all that effort in their future. . . . . They seem to understand death surprisingly clearly. But now time passes slowly for them. It hardly exists. They live with death almost as animals do. This natural trust in life's rhythms, infantile as it is, provides the model for the trust they may struggle to learn later on. . . *The Book of Nightmares* is my own effort to find the trust again. I invoke Maud and Fergus not merely to instruct them, but also to get help from them.<sup>14</sup>

But we also see implicit in Kinnell's explanation the recognition that man can learn from all levels of existence, and therefore we can

better understand his projections of intuitive consciousness “into pre-birth and subhuman organic nature,”<sup>15</sup> as we shall see later. Kinnell is trying to glean from every facet of nature, again in the romantic tradition, some means of dealing with the common denominator of all sentient beings, death.

### **Book I, “UNDER THE MAUD MOON”**

In Book I Kinnell begins his quest for self-knowledge on what can be characterized as the archetypal image of the path into the unknown: “On the path,/by this wet site/of old fires—” (I, 1, p. 3), but moves on quickly to establish other themes and images. Fire, one of the most dominant images in all of Kinnell’s poetry, is invoked from the very beginning of the book and burns throughout. Here, he lights a fire in memory of the one perfect love whose memory will haunt him through existence, “whose face/I held in my hands/a few hours, whom I gave back/only to keep holding the space where she was. . .” (I, 1, p. 3) It is this same woman whose image will reappear in Book VIII as he expands the theme of the halved self seeking its complement through love.

The fire imagery, from the outset, is invested with tremendous weight:

The black  
wood reddens, the deathwatches inside  
begin running out of time, I can see  
the dead, crossed limbs  
longing again for the universe, I can hear  
in the wet wood the snap  
and re-snap of the same embrace being torn.

The raindrops trying

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to put the fire out  
fall into it and are  
changed: the oath broken,  
the oath sworn between earth and water, flesh and  
spirit, broken, to be sworn again,  
over and over, in the clouds, and to be broken again,  
over and over, on earth.

The cosmic overtones of the individual's experience can clearly be seen in this and countless other passages as the mode of apprehension merges into transcendental awareness. But perhaps Richard Howard, in *Alone with America*, has the most thorough analysis of fire imagery in Kinnell's poetry, and is most relevant here: "It is fire which he evokes to set forth his plight, to enact his ordeal, and to restore himself to reality. It is fire—in its constant transformations, its endless resurrection—which *is* reality."<sup>16</sup> Thus the book opens with the fire of man's very mortality, placing his death before all things, and though bereft of any resolution, it echoes the challenge set forth by Rilke in the epigraph. But Howard goes on to speak of the paradoxical grief that is inextricably bound up with Kinnell's fire imagery, which is

the grief of history, the pain of things happening once and once only, irreversibly. . . The agony of that knowledge. . . that all must be consumed in order to be reborn, must be reduced to ash in order to be redeemed—gives Kinnell's poetry its astonishing resonance, the accents of a conflict beyond wisdom as it is beyond pity.<sup>17</sup>

This way, pain and death, the greatest afflictions of man, undergo a strange metamorphosis when passed through the transforming fires of Kinnell's poetic imagination, thematically not alto-

gether different from what Wallace Stevens achieves, though stylistically worlds apart. Charles Molesworth helps clarify the place of these afflictions in Kinnell's poetry by quoting from the poet's own essay, "The Poetics of the Physical World": "The poetics of heaven agrees to the denigration of pain and death: the poetics of the physical world builds on these stones."<sup>18</sup> The primacy of this kind of acceptance we will see is very different from fatalism. But for the time being, Molesworth then goes on to explain how it is that Kinnell can bring about his new poetics:

And the persistence of fire and death imagery throughout Kinnell's poetry forces us to disregard, or at least to minimize, the habitual expectation of ironic distance that we bring to much modern poetry. His obvious attempts to be a poetry of immersion into experience rather than a suspension above it.<sup>19</sup>

From the very beginning then, Kinnell commences his journey (or descent), caught in the fires of pain and death, saying in effect, that these are the givens of life and that we must continue through them in all consciousness, or else avoid the very essence of mortal life. By immersing the reader in these fires, Kinnell has created a poetry of the very highest order, one that conforms with Susanne K. Langer's definition of the true business of lyric poetry: "to create the appearance of 'experiences,' the semblance of events lived and felt, and to organize them so they constitute a purely and completely experienced reality, a piece of *virtual life*."<sup>20</sup>

It is then not surprising that "song," or poetry itself, is invested with symbolic meaning in Book I, as Kinnell remembers singing to his daughter at night "in her nightmares." (I, 2, p. 4) Song becomes the expression through which we reach across the gulf that separates two solitary bodies. It is almost a tangible thing as his daughter "puts/



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her hand/into her father's mouth, to take hold of/his song." (I, 3, p. 5)

There then ensue the sections on the birth and pre-birth of his daughter, reaching back in time as they reach down in consciousness, establishing the connections between birth and death, pain and song, and one of the stranger symbolic associations that has appeared in Kinnell before and which in *The Book of Nightmares* will almost become a symbolic obsession: the association of man and one of the most helpless of all birds, the chicken:

And as they cut  
her tie to the darkness  
she dies  
a moment, turns blue as a coal,  
the limbs shaking  
as the memories rush out of them. When  
  
they hang her up  
by the feet, she sucks  
air, screams  
her first song--and turns rose,  
the slow,  
beating, featherless arms  
already clutching at the emptiness. (I, 6, pp. 6-7)

It is the spirit of his daughter, Maud, that Kinnell invokes in Book I as he begins his journey, and she in essence becomes one of the muses that guides him through the darkness. The book becomes his gift of love to her, reaching beyond his own mortality through it into her future, just as she reached back in her helplessness as an infant and was the occasion for his learning to sing:

And in the days

when you find yourself orphaned,  
emptied  
of all wind-singing, of light,  
the pieces of cursed bread on your tongue,

may there come back to you  
a voice,  
spectral, calling you  
*sister!*  
from  
everything  
that dies.

And then  
you shall open  
this book, even if it is the book of nightmares. (I, 7, p. 8)

## Book II, "THE HEN FLOWER"

We find that the metaphor of the daughter's arms being chicken wings in Book I is expanded in Book II to the point that physical and psychic fusion seem to take place: "wing/ of my wing, / of my bones and veins,/of my flesh/hairs lifting all over me in the first ghostly breeze/after death." (II, 3,p. 12) And again it is the mortality of the hen, the images of being devoured, torn apart, of the fusion of birth and death, just as with the daughter, that make it a viable comparison: "When the ax-/scented breeze flourishes/about her,/... the next egg, bobbling/its globe of golden earth,/skids forth, ridding her even/of the life to come." (II, 2, p, 12) It seems that Kinnell is striving toward a reintegration with an alienated part of our nature, that part which we hold in common with other animal forms.

The persona that Kinnell creates to accomplish this reintegration

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and to face the other challenges that are presented is at once personal and universal :

Often a poem at least starts out being about oneself . . .  
But then, if it's really a poem it goes deeper than  
personality. It takes on that strange voice, intensely  
personal yet common to everyone, in which all rituals  
are spoken. A poem expresses one's most private feel-  
ings: and these turn out to be the feelings of everyone  
else as well. The separate egos vanish. The poem  
becomes simply the voice of a creature on earth speak-  
ing.<sup>21</sup>

And while he universalizes his own experience, the creatures and  
mundane things of the earth seem to glow with a life beyond them-  
selves :

I put to my eye the lucent  
section of the spealbone of a ram--

I thought suddenly  
I could read the cosmos spelling itself,  
the huge broken letters  
shuddering across the black sky and vanishing, . . . (II, 5, p. 13)

And when I hoisted  
her up among the young pines, a last  
rubbery egg slipping out as I flung her high, didn't it  
happen  
the dead  
wings creaked open as she soared  
across the arms of the Bear? (II, 5, p. 14)

These are the surrealist transformations into a transcendental reality of a poet trying to wring all that he can from the real, himself undergoing transformation in the process.

The major thematic thrust of "The Hen Flower," however, can be expressed as an existential fear of death, and therefore, of life itself, "the dread that is the poem's starting point. It addresses the protagonist before he begins the journey of the poem, instructing him to let go, to surrender to existence."<sup>22</sup> And the challenge of overcoming that dread can only be met by the recognition that fear pervades all levels of existence :

Listen Kinnell,  
dumped alive  
and dying into the old sway bed,  
a layer of crushed feathers all there is between you  
and the long shaft of darkness shaped as you,  
let go.

Even this haunted room  
all its materials photographed with tragedy,  
even the tiny crucifix drifting face down at the center of  
the earth,  
even these feathers freed from their wings  
forever  
are afraid. (II, 7, pp. 14-15)

**Book III, "THE SHOES OF WANDERING";  
Book IV, "DEAR STRANGER EXTANT IN  
MEMORY BY THE BLUE JUNIATA"; and  
Book V, "IN THE HOTEL OF LOST LIGHT"**

I have included these three books together for discussion because

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they figure collectively as the descent into and torture within man's internal hell. In Book I there were fleeting images of tramps. The tramp theme is taken up in Book III again when Kinnell buys a pair of secondhand shoes at the Salvation Army Store, "the eldershoes of my feet." (III, 1, p.19) He begins his journey forward by sinking backward into the consciousness of this derelict soul. By choosing such a character Kinnell aligns himself with more openly social writers and belies charges that he is too personal; rather often expressing "generosity of spirit--a keenly piercing reverence for society's derelicts--and his self-scalding empathy for the mutilated souls of the crushed, the beaten, the solitary proud vicims of back alleys. . ." <sup>23</sup>

It is in Book III that the path takes on its full metaphoric expression, with man as the lost traveler on the way, internally and externally :

the haunted

shoes rising and falling  
through the dust, wings of dust  
lifting around them, as they flap  
down the brainwaves of the temporal road. (III, 4, p. 21)

I long for the mantle  
of the great wanderers, who lighted  
their steps by the lamp  
of pure thirst,

and whichever way they lurched was the way. (III, 6, p. 22)

poor fool,  
poor forked branch  
of applewood, you will feel all your bones

break

over the holy waters you will never drink. (III, 7, p. 23)

Though the physical setting of all three books is a broken-down room in the Xvarna Hotel, that setting almost evaporates in Book IV under the pressure of the otherworldly atmosphere created by the letters from Virginia. She is a woman that Kinnell actually corresponded with, "a mystic, a seer,"<sup>24</sup> but one seemingly in the grip of demonic possession:

My tongue moved, my breath wasn't my own. The whisper which forced itself through my teeth said, *Virginia, your eyes shine back to me from my own world.* O Good, I thought. My breath came short, my heart opened. O God I thought, now I have a demon lover. (IV, 2, p. 28)

A great sense of loss ensues from the realization of the depths to which one can fall beyond reach of others, an unappeased loneliness that cannot be touched except through dream, through the dreamwork of poetry:

Your hand will move  
on its own  
down the curving path, drawn  
down by the terror and terrible lure  
of vacuum:

a face materializes into your hands,  
on the absolute whiteness of pages  
a poem writes itself out: its title--the dream  
of all poems and the text

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of all loves--"Tenderness toward Existence." (IV, 4, p. 29)

It seems then that even in the depths of this internal hell, the seeds of redemption have been found.

Book V brings us back to the hotel room in all its squalor and squalid imaginings about the tramp who might have died in the very bed Kinnell finds himself, "my body slumped out/into the shape of his." (V, 1, p. 35) This regressive descent into the consciousness of the tramp as he is dying is one way in which Kinnell is able to experience his own death and therefore come to terms with it, or at least begin to. It is a vicarious suicide. Again, a note from Kinnell's "The Poetics of the Physical World" makes an interesting commentary on this :

We may note that the desire to be some other thing is itself suicidal: it involves a willingness to cease to be a man. But this is not a simple wish for extinction so much as it is a desire for union with what is loved. And so it is a desire for more, not less life<sup>25</sup>.

Nonetheless, "In the Hotel of Lost Light" is still a series of gropings in the inner hell of man, but as such they are not a capitulation to the darkness, but a defiant recognition of its existence through the act of poetry :

The foregoing scribed down  
in March, of the year Seventy,  
on my sixteen-thousandth night of war and madness,  
in the Hotel of Lost Light, under the freeway  
which roams out into the dark  
of the moon, in the absolute spell  
of departure, and by the light

from the joined hemispheres of the spider's eyes. (V, 7, p. 38)

## **Book VI, "THE DEAD SHALL BE RAISED INCORRUPTIBLE"**

As internalized as the previous three books were, Book VI gives expression to the epitome of the external hell man has created: war. There is even a digression about the much more subtle war of man having been turned against his own body by the corrupt in television advertising. But apart from the other very obvious horrors of war that are catalogued here, Kinnell delivers a scathing indictment of Christian man for his hypocrisy, bloodshed and upsetting the whole balance of nature:

In the Twentieth Century of my trespass on earth,  
having exterminated one billion heathens,  
heretics, Jews, Moslems, witches, mystical seekers,  
black men, Asians, and Christian brothers,  
every one of them for his own good,

a whole continent of red men for living in unnatural  
community  
and at the same time having relations with the land,  
one billion species of animals for being sub-human,  
and ready to take on the bloodthirsty creatures from the  
other planets,

I, Christian man, groan out this testament of my last  
will. (VI, 4, p. 42)

It would be a mistake, however, to read this passage as anti-Christian in anything more than a historical sense of where western civilization has taken its more infamous turns. In fact, Kinnell has



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gone on to explain that what he really meant by "Christian man" was the savage nature of technological man, and that "Technology is the latest of the methods we use to overcome the fear of death."<sup>26</sup> It is this inherent contradiction in man's failure to openly face the problems of his existence, externalizing his dread of death in warfare and murder, that makes Book VI the most singularly ironic in *The Book of Nightmares*, the corpse that will not stop burning bearing eternal testament to man's destructiveness.

**Book VII, "LITTLE SLEEP'S-HEAD  
SPROUTING HAIR IN THE MOONLIGHT"**

You scream, walking from a nightmare.

When I sleepwalk  
into your room, and pick you up,  
and hold you up in the moonlight, you cling to me  
hard,  
as if clinging could save us. I think  
you think  
I will never die, I think I exude  
to you the permanence of smoke or stars,  
even as  
my broken arms heal themselves around you. (VII, 1, p. 49)

It seems that on the strength alone of this love beyond all logic of father and daughter for each other that the healing of the scars of life begins, and thus the way toward ascent is cleared. It is this dedication to other that allows one to overcome the paralysis of ego, to "let go," if only momentarily, of one's own fear of death in the cause of another :

I would suck the rot from your fingernail,  
I would brush your sprouting hair of the dying light,  
I would help death escape through the little ribs of your  
body,  
I would alchemize the ashes of your cradle back into  
wood,  
I would let nothing of you go, ever, . . . (VII, 2, p. 49)

In this book we see the mutual interaction of learning and teaching, mediated by love. And though ever-conscious of death, because of his love for his daughter, Kinnell “wishes for her the immortality she envisions”<sup>27</sup> in the passage above. He is also to envision a future for himself because of her, hoping to teach her what he has learned through her:

Little sleep's-head sprouting hair in the moonlight,  
when I come back  
we will go out together,  
we will walk out together among  
the ten thousand things,  
each scratched too late with such knowledge, *the wages  
of dying is love.* (VII, 7, pp. 52-53)

Such knowledge constitutes the moral center of *The Book of Nightmares*, making the nightmare of moral corruption of Book VI all the more horrible:

In the Twentieth Century of my nightmare  
on earth, I swear on my chromium testicles  
to this testament  
and last will  
of my iron will, my fear of love, my itch for money, and

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my madness. (VI, 4, p. 44)

**Book VIII, "THE CALL ACROSS THE VALLEY OF NOT-KNOWING"; Book IX, "THE PATH AMONG THE STONES"; and BOOK X, "LASTNESS"**

I have grouped these last three books together because they are all related to the same basic impulse of trying to reestablish relationships with existence, an impulse made possible by the saving grace of paternal love.

Basically, Book VIII is the poet's attempt to come to terms again with love of man for woman. It is the most sensuous of all the books, and also the most frustrating, since "each of us/is a torn half/whose lost other we keep seeking across time/until we die, or give up --/or actually find her. " (VIII, 2, pp. 57-58) Kinnell then goes on to speak of that perfect other that he did once meet and was forced by circumstance to part from. It was she that he lit the fire for at the beginning of Book I, and for whom that fire still burns within him, even as his wife now lies pregnant with their son. The undiminished ache of love is something that we share with the animals :

We who live out our plain lives, who put  
our hand in the hand of whatever we love  
as it vanishes,  
as we vanish,  
and stumble toward what will be, simply by arriving,  
a kind of fate,

.....

might we not hear, even then,  
the bear call

from his hillside—a call, like ours, needing  
to be answered -- and the dam-bear  
call back across the darkness  
of the valley of not-knowing  
the only word tongues shape without intercession,

yes... yes...? (VIII, 7, p. 61)

In Book IX an attempt is made to reestablish relationship with the world of things, for in the presence of the nonhuman “We are reminded both of the kinship and the separation between ourselves and what is beyond us. If there is one kind of moment from which poetry springs, I would say it’s this one.”<sup>28</sup> In light of these and other remarks Kinnell has made, I think we would have to consider the stones and other “things” of this book not symbolically, but literally, as realities existing in themselves, but with which we must yet establish our own psychic relationship.

I feel this interpretation helps us understand a curious event in Book IX. Kinnell descends into an old mine, and it becomes a descent “into the unbearable goaf/of everything I ever craved and lost.” (IX, 4, p. 67) It becomes a descent into the hell (yet again) of his own empty past. But something very unexpected happens as a result of his relating to the things around him. He finds his being renewed and restored to vitality :

I find myself alive  
in the whorled  
archway of the fingerprint of all things,  
skeleton groaning,  
bloodstrings wailing the wail of all things. (IX, 5, p. 68)

Book X, the last book, starts out with the same fire, coming full

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circle, that began Book I :

Somewhere behind me  
a small fire goes on flaring in the rain, in the desolate  
ashes.

No matter, now, whom it was built for,  
it keeps its flames,  
it warms  
everyone who might wander into its radiance,  
a tree, a lost animal, the stones,

because in the dying world it was set burning. (X, 1, p. 71)

Gone is the sting of loneliness, of separation; gone is the dread of death. In this final book real integration and acceptance seem to have taken place. Simply: "Living brings you to death, there is no other road." (X, 3, p. 73) Yet we still find a glimmer of that transcendental burning that has marked the path all the way to the end:

Lastness  
is brightness. It is the brightness  
gathered up of all that went before. It lasts.  
And when it does end  
there is nothing, nothing  
left,

in the rust of old cars,  
in the hole torn open in the body of the Archer,  
in river-mist smelling of the weariness of stones,  
the dead lie,  
empty, filled, at the beginning,

and the first

voice comes craving again out of their mouths. (X,4, pp. 73-74)

Just as in Book I his daughter's birth and guiding spirit carried him forth on his journey, here we find the birth of his son of equal importance, for it is for him that Kinnell wishes to make the final journey into death happily. In regard to the last, curious lines of the poem, Kinnell remarked that he imagined "that fleas on the body of a happy person would be a bit happier than other fleas."<sup>29</sup> Thus it is his own death he offers as a lesson to his son :

Sancho Fergus! Don't cry!

Or else cry.

On the body,  
on the blued flesh, when it is  
laid out, see if you can find  
the one flea which is laughing. (X, 7, p. 55)

Though perhaps this is not a very climactic ending to the poem, it is nonetheless very positive when viewed in the context of the whole work. Kinnell has taken us through the most painful of human emotions, and whether we believe in a God or not, has shown that through the transforming power of love, man can triumph over his own dread and despair. What more can we ask of a poet? What more of another human being? And though this essay has left myriad aspects of the work to be explored in the future, I hope I have given others a sufficient enough framework to enter on their own *The Book of Nightmares*.

## NOTES

- 1) Robert Boyers, ed., *Contemporary Poetry in America*. New York: Schocken Books, 1974. p. 243.

Galway Kinnell's *The Book of Nightmares* :  
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- 2) Galway Kinnell, *Walking Down the Stairs*. Ann Arbor : The University of Michigan Press, 1978. p. 89.
- 3) Robert Langbaum, "Galway Kinnell's *The Book of Nightmares*." *The American Poetry Review*, Vol. 8, No. 2, March/April, 1979. p. 30.
- 4) *Ibid.*, p. 30.
- 5) Charles Molesworth, *The Fierce Embrace*. Columbia and London : The University of Missouri Press, 1979. p. 99.
- 6) *Op. cit.*, Boyers, p. 249.
- 7) *Op. cit.*, Boyers, p. 243.
- 8) *Op. cit.*, Langbaum, p. 30.
- 9) *Op. cit.*, Kinnell, p. 52.
- 10) *Op. cit.*, Boyers, p. 251.
- 11) Galway Kinnell, *The Book of Nightmares*. Boston : Houghton Mifflin Company, 1971. p. 75.
- 12) *Op. cit.*, Kinnell, *Walking Down the Stairs*, p. 48.
- 13) *Op. cit.*, Molesworth, p. 99.
- 14) *Op. cit.*, Kinnell, *Walking Down the Stairs*, pp. 45-46.
- 15) Charles G. Bell in *Contemporary Poets*, James Vinson, ed. New York : St. Martins Press, 1975. p. 833.
- 16) Richard Howard, *Alone with America*. New York : Atheneum, 1971. p. 259.
- 17) *Ibid.*, p. 260.
- 18) *Op. cit.*, Molesworth, p. 100.
- 19) *Op. cit.*, Molesworth, p. 103.
- 20) Susanne K. Langer, *Feeling and Form*. New York : Charles Scribners Sons, 1953. p. 212.
- 21) *Op. cit.*, Kinnell, *Walking Down the Stairs*, p. 6.
- 22) *Op. cit.*, Kinnell, *Walking Down the Stairs*, p. 47.
- 23) Laurence Lieberman, *Unassigned Frequencies : American Poetry in Review, 1964-1977*. Urbana, Chicago, London : University of Illinois Press, 1977. p. 213.
- 24) *Op. cit.*, Kinnell, *Walking Down the Stairs*, p. 108.
- 25) *Op. cit.*, Molesworth, p. 101.
- 26) *Op. cit.*, Kinnell, *Walking Down the Stairs*, pp. 98-99.
- 27) *Op. cit.*, Langbaum, p. 31.
- 28) *Op. cit.*, Kinnell, *Walking Down the Stairs*, p. 88.
- 29) *Op. cit.*, Kinnell, *Walking Down the Stairs*, p. 28.

Galway Kinnell's *The Book of Nightmares* :  
"The Wages of Dying Is Love"

Stephen TOSKAR

*The Book of Nightmares* by Galway Kinnell has challenged readers since its publication in 1971 as one of the most significant poetic developments of the past decade. The difficulty of the poem lies not only in its length, but also in its fragmentary structure and dreamlike weaving of what seem at first to be contradictory and fatalistic themes. It is only after many careful readings that one can step back from the emotional immersion that the poem demands and see the integration and underlying unity of what finally turns out to be a very positive work of the human spirit.

My purpose in this essay, therefore, is to place the work in somewhat of a historical perspective and to provide a basic framework by which to interpret the structure and themes. It would be impossible to discuss all of the poetic effects that Kinnell has accomplished without making this essay several times longer than space permits. Thus, while I will try to explain the major thrust of each of the ten books that comprise *The Book of Nightmares*, the greater part of that effort will fall upon the first several books where the reader might confront the greatest confusion.



## 北星論集19号正誤表

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49	(5行目) ……考える。	……考えられる。
170	(注1) …… <u>Das Spiegel</u> , …… (主要文献⑤) …… <u>anu der bisher Jg.en</u> …… (主要文献⑦) <u>Mitteilungen, Mitteilungen28.</u>	……, <u>Der Spiegel</u> , …… …… <u>aus der bisherigen</u> <u>WSI-Mitteilungen, Jg.28.</u>
178	(12行目) 機関役員家	機関投資家
217	} (柱の部分) 国際通貨	国際通貨
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248	(10行目) ②バーデンヴェルテムベルク ……	②バーデンヴェルテムベルク ……
283	(奇数頁の柱の部分) } <u>Wuthering Heights</u> ……	<u>Wuthering Heights</u> ……
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364	(29行目) …… <u>aesthetic</u> , <sup>”13</sup> ……	…… <u>aesthetic</u> . <sup>”13</sup> ……
374	(12行目) <u>O Good</u> , I thought. (15行目～18行目の配置)	<u>O God</u> , I thought. (15行目を1文字、16行目～18行目を5文字左へ移動し、本文の行頭、行末にそろえる)