

Peter Denman

SONGS OF UNDERSTANDING

Thomas Kinsella, *Marginal Economy*, Peppercanister 24, (Peppercanister Books, 2006) €10.

Thomas Kinsella, *Readings in Poetry*, Peppercanister 25, (Peppercanister Books, 2006) €10.

Maurice Harmon, *The Doll with Two Backs and other poems*, (Salmon Poetry, 2004), €12.

Thomas Kinsella's poems often step aside from time. This is not a move out of history, but a dwelling in a suspended moment to allow comprehension to settle into clarity before resuming the business of the quotidian. Perhaps the most elaborate statement of this is 'Tao and Unfitness at Inistiogue on the River Nore', summed up in the final precept: 'Be subtle, as though not there'. It is also to be seen in some of the very early poems: in the title of 'Pause en Route' and in the reflected gaze of 'Mirror in February'. In the 1968 *Nightwalker* volume, the turning back on the self in a moment of self-absorbing reflection is enacted by the 'Leaf-Eater' that 'gropes / Back on itself and begins / To eat its own leaf'. More complexly, in Peppercanister 14, the 'Personal Places' 'absorb in their changes / the radiance of change in us, / and give it back // to the darkness of our understanding'.

There is a poem in *Marginal Economy* called 'Making the Tea' that arrests the moment as boiling water is poured in a teapot to warm it for brewing.

I was passing the kitchen window, and stopped,
with the teapot half full of scalding water.
It was something about the children, quiet outside...

A grandson talks with his girl cousins, and in that momentary encounter the poet sees encapsulated the potential pattern of a lifetime of human activity. The poem hinges on the word 'still' in its penultimate line:

It was a game still.
I emptied my hot water into the sink.

The final emptying gesture is one of recognition rather than of dismissal. The water (note how it has cooled from 'scalding' to 'hot') is identified with reference to the poet with the same possessive adjective as in 'Mirror in February', where the folded towel was qualified with 'my' as well.

Like 'Personal Places', the title poem here envisages an economy of exchange with time:

The only change was in ourselves:
moving onward, leaving
something more behind each time.

There were ten years at most,
even in the good places.

This is reprised in 'Songs of Understanding', which begins with the recognition of 'A major element of waste / needed in the living process', but offers some possibility of redress in the lines

Reclaiming out of the past
all the good you can use,
add all the good that you can
and offer it all onward.

Marginal Economy also contains a scrupulously observed account of a wedding, in a piece that hovers delicately between being an 'occasional' poem and a wry meditation. And the tripartite 'Marcus Aurelius', on that model meditator (previously published in *Poetry Ireland Review* 82), stands as probably the richest poem in the pamphlet, prompting reflections on statehood, stoicism, the well-lived life and change. Is the line 'permitting the martyrdoms to run their course' at the end of Part 2, a conscious or unconscious echo of Auden's 'Musée des Beaux Arts': 'even the dreadful martyrdom must run its course'?

The companion *Peppercanister*, *Readings in Poetry*, represents something of a departure. It offers close readings – glosses if you will – as a critical commentary on some poems of worth: two sonnets by Shakespeare, 'The Tower' by Yeats, and 'The Love Song of J Alfred Prufrock'. Kinsella is a major anthologist of Irish poetry, and has written on the dual tradition affecting that literature. Here he becomes a textual critic, looking at the component parts of poems rather than at their contribution to a larger republic of letters. He brings to the task the credentials of a poet rather than those of a critic, but as Pound advises in his *ABC of Reading*, if you want to know something about an automobile you should go to someone who has made one and driven it, and if you want to know something about poetry go to a poet.

As well as the three poems chosen for scrutiny, there is a negative preface in which Kinsella holds out samples of poems by William Morris and Thoreau as bad poetry. The preface does not strengthen the platform of his argument. We know Kinsella despaired of much Irish poetry in the

Nineteenth century, and here he seems simply to be extending that attitude to English and American poets of the same period. He starts on Morris because he finds him included in a teaching anthology and so presumes that Morris is being held up as exemplary. But maybe Morris is included as an example of a type of poetry representative of its age, not as an example of excellence *sub specie aeternitatis*, and at this distance in time Kinsella's strictures on his work are attacks on a straw man. He sees Morris's use of the word 'tick' as a grotesque subjugation to the demands of rhyme, but its use here is scarcely more curious than Kinsella's own use of the word in 'Stars ticked uncontrollably down. . .' in 'First Light'. As for Thoreau, is he even worth discussing as a poet?

He mentions Helen Vendler on Eliot, but seems unaware of her book *The Art of Shakespeare's Sonnets*, which offers just the sort of close textual reading that Kinsella adopts in his own scrutiny of Sonnets 29 and 30. He is good on Yeats's 'The Tower', elucidating the internal debate of the poem to make it more dramatic – almost in the manner of a Shakespearean soliloquy. And he is indulgent regarding the use by Yeats of two egregiously contrived rhymes; Morris would not have been spared.

Kinsella has most to say about 'The Love Song of J Alfred Prufrock'. I question his account of the simile in its opening lines:

Let us go then, you and I,
When the evening is spread out against the sky
Like a patient etherised upon a table...

Of this he says; 'Prufrock sets out at evening with an unidentified companion. There is a low bank of cloud, outlined to Prufrock's imagination like a patient lying flat under a sheet on an operating table. Any traditional poetic expectations. . .are dismissed by this inert and unhealthy image. . .' This is a reading that offers both too much and not enough. Too much, in that the 'low bank of cloud' is Kinsella's invention – or maybe Yeats's, as 'The Tower' (discussed immediately before) has closed with a wonderful and 'traditional poetic' image of the 'clouds of the sky'. No cloud in Prufrock, however. I see the evening as one of those empty pale (unhealthy?) twilights. And there is a lot more going on in the language than Kinsella suggests: that word 'etherised' has a primary reference to an anaesthetic, but also suggests 'ether', the clear upper air. Discussing the larger movement of the poem. Kinsella fastens on the companion figure(s) accompanying Prufrock, and again is good on teasing out the successive states of mind in the protagonist. But overall, *Readings in Poetry* disrupts rather than contributes to the Peppercanister project, however loosely that project is conceived. Perhaps it tells us how Kinsella wants his own poems to be read.

The Doll with Two Backs and other poems is the latest collection from Maurice Harmon, one of the earliest critics to write on Kinsella's poetry. The title poem is a long sequence of lyrical pieces strung along a narrative of an encounter in a US university between a visiting lecturer and a Native American. The relationship contains multiple oppositions: teacher and student, old and young, man and woman, visitor and native, intellectual and instinctual. Overlying these and other possibilities is a historical consciousness, with the colonisation of Ireland four centuries ago as a precursor to the American experience. Not the least admirable aspect of the poem is the assurance with which it manages to negotiate the complexities of opposition through what is – ultimately – a failed relationship. He 'sought an ideal'; she is 'unselfconscious' and 'elemental'. The poem succeeds as an exploration of the residues of history. However, it does not quite escape the Eurocentrism of our intellectual tradition, in that the idealising of the girl (by the protagonist or by Harmon?) means that she remains an emblem rather than a character, as against the more psychologically complex treatment of the man.

The doll of the title is one of a number of artefacts or natural objects found in the wild, reminders of the past all but obliterated by the whites in America. In this instance, it is a piece of driftwood resembling a doll with two faces looking in different directions:

...two shapes back to back, two heads
stumps that could be arms, frayed ends
that might be legs, a blind togetherness.

Whatever its Native American symbolism, here it suggests an incompatibility of two cultures, while Harmon's name for the poem, echoing Shakespeare's rough description of sex in *Othello* as 'the beast with two backs', raids the canon of Western literature to suggest a more intimate relationship that ultimately cannot withstand the pressure of historical difference.

Most of the fifteen shorter poems completing the book are observational pieces. 'Beside the Griboedov' and 'Without Reservation' achieve a nicely observed sense of distance from their subjects as the play of human comedy unrolls in the most unlikely settings:

Waist-high above the gilded rail,
her white dress shines, her white flowers blaze.
Graceful beside the Griboedov, resplendent
where steeple and dome shimmer and disappear.

– 'BESIDE THE GRIBOEDOV'