Thomas Kinsella's 'Downstream' Revisions

In 1971, Thomas Dillon Redshaw published a magisterial account of Thomas Kinsella's poem-sequence *Wormwood* and the changes it underwent between its first Irish publication in 1966 and its inclusion in the American edition of *Nightwalker and Other Poems* (1968).[1] Redshaw's commentary is informed by a conviction that the 'experimental interlude' of *Wormwood* 'may […] well indicate the sources' of what in 1971 was still an 'adventurous development'; that even minor and relatively unsuccessful poems might be read closely for their insights into the shape of a poet's career.[2] This essay, though somewhat smaller in scope than Redshaw's exhaustive treatment, shares his conviction about the value of noting even small variations and revisions. Although the original version of 'Downstream' belongs to a period before Kinsella's experiments with open form and consciously modernist aesthetics, it is a poem which, even if only because of the poet's repeated revisiting of it, has a claim on the attention of any student of modern Irish poetry.

Since Redshaw wrote his article, Kinsella has emerged as a 'fanatic tinkerer'[3] who has developed a method of draft publication – the Peppercanister pamphlets – which precedes the compilation of his poetry into revised trade editions.[4] Kinsella's work rarely settles into final forms. The poet typically

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[1] Thomas Dillon Redshaw, 'The Wormwood Revisions', *Éire-Ireland* 6:2 (Summer 1971), 111-156.
[2] Redshaw pp.155-156.
[3] Skloot, Floyd, 'The Evolving Poetry of Thomas Kinsella', review of *Collected Poems 1956-1994*, *New England Review* 18:4 (1997), 174-186, p.174.
[4] For Peppercanisters as drafts, see Thomas Kinsella, *Collected Poems 1956-2001* (Manchester: Carcanet, 2001), p.365.

presents himself in interview and in his poems as a fastidious reviser, 'abolishing' frivolous and ornamental effects:

> It's not so much that I'm looking for anything laconic or lapidary, it's just that the notion of decorative language, of poetry as linguistic entertainment, seems to me a trivial exercise. I'm not talking about something necessarily elaborate, as with Rilke. What I mean is facile rhetoric, or "music", or mimesis for its own sake.[5]

This painstaking persona gets a satirical treatment in the poems, such as 'Worker in Mirror, at his Bench':

> It is tedious, yes. The process is elaborate,
> And wasteful – a dangerous litter
> Of lacerating pieces collects.
> Let my rubbish stand witness.
> Smile, stirring it idly with a shoe. (*Collected Poems 1956-2001,* p.124).

Nevertheless, there can be no doubt that Kinsella takes the business of revision seriously.

Both editions of his *Collected Poems*, the first published by Oxford in 1996, the second by Carcanet in 2001, incorporate substantial changes even to the early poetry. *Wormwood* is actually something of an exception to this pattern, hardly having altered since Redshaw wrote his article and, along with the never-revised 'Phoenix Park', constitutes one of the most stable features of the Kinsella canon. Other long poems which appeared in *Nightwalker and Other Poems* have proved far more volatile. The version of 'Nightwalker' in that volume is a revision of a limited Dolmen edition of the poem, published in 1967. Further revisions to 'Nightwalker' appear in both *Collected* editions. Another poem that

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[5] Dennis O'Driscoll, 'Interview with Thomas Kinsella', *Poetry Ireland Review* 25, (1989), 57-65, p. 65.

appeared in *Nightwalker and Other Poems* was ‘Downstream II’, in fact the *third* version of ‘Downstream’ to appear in print, which is also revised both in the Oxford and Carcanet collections. The modifications to both these allegorical poems are highly suggestive of Kinsella’s changing poetics, taking place as they do over five decades, but I have chosen here to focus on ‘Downstream’. Of the two poems, its revisions suggest more emphatically a changing attitude to poetic material and modality, where those to ‘Nightwalker’ seem mainly concerned with eliminating hyperbole and other forms of what Kinsella terms ‘bad material’.[6] It might be noted, however, that the 2001 version of ‘Nightwalker’ ends with a picture of domestic peace, ‘her dear shadow on the blind’, and Kinsella’s epigram ‘I believe love is half persistence / A medium in which from change to change / Understanding may be gathered’ (*Collected Poems 1956-2001*, p.84), rather than ‘The Sea of Disappointment’ which formed the closing image of its predecessors.[7] The new poem’s tentative final line notwithstanding – ‘Hesitant, cogitating, exit’ – this represents a rare example of Kinsella revising a poem to make its end more consolatory. As we shall see, however, this tendency towards comforting rhetoric has its counterpart in the most recent ‘Downstream’. These revisions suggest growing ease with sentiment, and a turn away from irony and caution.

Simply, we can define ‘Downstream’ as a progress allegory, and group it with Kinsella’s other journey-poems of the 1960s, ‘A Country Walk’ and

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[6] O’Driscoll, p.63

[7] See Thomas Kinsella, *Nightwalker* (Dublin: Dolmen, 1967), p.17; *Nightwalker and Other Poems*, (Dublin: Dolmen, 1968), p.69; Kinsella, *Collected Poems 1956-1994* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p.84.

'Nightwalker'. We are accustomed to thinking of allegory as a didactic mode, and all of these poems aim to teach, about corruption (both literal and figural), about the brutality of ancient and recent history, and the artist's proper response to these. A certain formal rigidity characterises all the poems,[8] and they share a social conservatism which is often felt to typify allegorical expression. Joel Fineman, for example, notes that 'allegory is always a hierarchizing mode, indicative of timeless order, however subversively intended its contents may be'.[9] Allegory shows an intense interest in placing its signifying objects and persons within a chain of being, a hierarchical structure which Angus Fletcher calls 'kosmic order'.[10] The hierarchical nature of allegory also sanctions a great deal of violence towards the bodies and things with which it makes its meanings. Twentieth-century theories of allegory stress the real, material quality of allegory's signifiers – for Walter Benjamin in *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, this materiality and propensity to decay make nature itself allegorical.[11] Equally, this materiality is something for which allegory has no concern, as it consumes lived particularity in order to produce ordered meaning.[12] In 'Downstream', Kinsella is concerned not only with the *portrayal* of violence, as the speaker

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[8] 'Nightwalker' is 'more closed than it looks', (O'Driscoll p.63).

[9] Joel Fineman, 'The Structure of Allegorical Desire', *Allegory and Representation*, edited by Stephen J. Greenblatt, (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins, 1981), pp.26-60, p.32.

[10] According to Angus Fletcher, the Greek word *kosmos* refers to small-scale signifiers of position and status as well as the universalized 'cosmic structures in which these have their meaning'. *Allegory: The Theory of a Symbolic Mode,* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1964), pp.70-146.

[11] Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, translated by John Osborne (London: New Left Books, 1977), p.166.

[12] For a very full account of this process see Gordon Teskey, *Allegory and Violence* (Ithaca, New York: Columbia University Press, 1996).

remembers one man's death and imagines the death of thousands, but with the ways in which the allegorical mode *enacts* violence upon nature.

Fletcher notes the tendency of allegories to infinite extension and, as a result, 'arbitrary closure'.[13] Analogical correspondences are 'incomplete and incompletable' and have to be forcibly truncated.[14] Balanchandra Rajan, discussing the unfinished aesthetic of *The Faerie Queene*, remarks that 'closure is foreseen but deferred, with the poem remaining receptive to and even infiltrated by the finality it cannot attain.'[15] The deferred resolution of 'Downstream' – 'Searching the darkness for a landing place' (*Collected Poems 1956-2001*, p.50) – is just about all that has remained unchanged over forty years of revisions. The changes register shifts in Kinsella's attitude to the 'poet's or artist's eliciting of order'.[16]

'Downstream' exists in five different versions. The first of these, a poem of 163 lines in *terza rima*, was published in the 1962 collection, also entitled *Downstream*. Kinsella revised this poem considerably, cutting almost half its length, removing ornamental *chiaroscuro* and local colour, and published the result in the *Massachusetts Review* in 1964. A finalized version of the *Massachusetts Review* revision, its imagery and diction tightened still further, appears in *Nightwalker and Other Poems* (as 'Downstream II'), in *Selected Poems 1956-68*, and in *Poems 1956-73.* A further revision, published in the

[13] Fletcher, p.175.
[14] Fletcher, p.177.
[15] Balanchandra Rajan, 'Closure', *The Spenser Encylopedia*, edited by A.C. Hamilton, *et al*. (Toronto, Buffalo and London: University of Toronto Press, 1990), pp.169-170.
[16] Philip Fried, ' "Omphalos of Scraps": An Interview with Thomas Kinsella', *Manhattan Review* 4 (1988), 3-25, p.15.

1996 *Collected Poems*, abandons some of the *terza rima* patterning and shortens the poem still further, while the latest version, published in 2001, restores certain features of the 1962 text.

In its first, 1962 incarnation, 'Downstream' is an intensely ornamented poem. Robin Skelton notes 'the almost decadent romanticism of the imagery'.[17] The reader finds that the demands of *terza rima* occasionally overwhelm narrative propulsion:

> Past whispering sedge and river-flag that lined
> The shallow marshlands wheeling on the furrow
> And groups of alder moving like the blind;
>
> By root and mud-bank, otter-slide and burrow
> The river bore us, with a spinal cry
> Of distant plover, to the woods of Durrow.[18]

Few critics have regretted the loss of such passages. Skelton welcomes Kinsella's 1964 and 1968 revisions as bringing rigour and discipline to the poem, while Brian John commends the 'universal relevance' afforded by the erasure of references to Durrow.[19] Jackson strikes a note of unease with Kinsella's revisions, finding 'Downstream II' 'more limited in scope than the original', which is a 'compendium of the thematic concerns of Kinsella's earlier work'.[20] 'Downstream II' is an oddly truncated poem compared with its precursor, which

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[17] Robin Skelton, 'The Poetry of Thomas Kinsella', *Éire-Ireland* 4:1 (1969), 86-108; p.101, p.104.
[18] Kinsella, *Downstream* (Dublin: Dolmen, 1962), p.50.
[19] Brian John, *Reading the Ground: The Poetry of Thomas Kinsella* (Washington: Catholic University Press, 1996), p.68.
[20] Thomas H. Jackson, *The Whole Matter: The Poetic Evolution of Thomas Kinsella* (Dublin and Syracuse: Syracuse University Press and Lilliput, 1995), p.24.

traces a progression in the speaker's attitude to nature and history that is analogous to the poet's response to allegory.

The first version of 'Downstream' gradually implicates its speaker in an authoritarian, hierarchical cosmos with allegorical devices. These include Yeatsian emblematics: 'A ghost of whiteness broke into life, upheaved / On crest of wing and water out of hiding / And swanned into flight' (*Downstream*, p.51), and more problematically, the pageantry of Ezra Pound's 'Chinese Cantos' (Cantos LII-LXI):

> I chose the silken kings,
>
> Luminous with crisis, epochal men
> Waging among the primal clarities
> Productive war. Spurred by the steely pen
>
> To cleansing or didactic rages, these
> Fed the stream in turn (*Downstream*, p. 51)

'His choice might seem curious,' Alex Davis remarks in his essay on Kinsella's debt to Pound: the Chinese Cantos are 'among the driest', in which polyphony is replaced by 'monologic' listing.[21] Davis also finds the choice of these Cantos politically troubling, quoting Massimo Bacigalupo, who describes them as 'a glaring example of regime art, or […] "fascist realism" '.[22] This overstates the case with regard to the 'Chinese Cantos' themselves – they are more than encomia to authoritarianism. It also risks losing sight of the implications of the speaker's *own* description of the Cantos in a debate about the fascistic nature of Pound's poetry. The pleasure Kinsella's speaker takes in these poems is

[21] Alex Davis, 'Thomas Kinsella and the Pound Legacy: His Jacket on the Cantos', *Irish University Review* 31:1 (2001), 38-53, p.39.
[22] Massimo Bacigalupo, *The Formèd Trace: the Later Poetry of Ezra Pound.* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), p.98.

pleasure in their allegorical structures, their cosmic orderliness. Attention to details of status and precedence establishes hierarchies which give the impression of 'primal clarities'. Within these allegorical structures 'men' may characterise epochs, and derive their epochal luminosity from violent crises whose human consequences have been suppressed, as allegory suppresses the resistance of its signifying bodies to the imposition of meaning upon them. Such art, as Kinsella's speaker himself describes it, and without reference to Pound's biography or criticism on Pound, is certainly authoritarian, allegorical, and may be described as fascistic. In this case, intertextual reference to Pound is less important than the speaker's admission of a culpable pleasure in art that imagines violence as purifying or instructive.

Like intertexts in allegory generally, the *Cantos* literally involve themselves in the world of Kinsella's downstream journey: 'these / Fed the stream in turn'. As it grows too dark to read, 'The gathering shades beginning to deceive / Night stole the princely scene', the speaker is vouchsafed a vision of order, the importance of which is suggested by its use as an epigraph to 'Downstream II':

> Drifting to meet us on the darkening stage
> A pattern shivers; whorling in its place
> Another holds us in a living cage
>
> And drifts to its reordered phase of grace;
> Was it not so? (*Downstream,* p.51)[23]

[23] Compare Kinsella, 'Downstream', *Massachusetts Review* 5 (1964) 323-325, p.323; *Nightwalker and Other Poems,* p.83; *Selected Poems 1956-1968*, (Dublin: Dolmen, 1973), p.56; *Selected Poems 1956-1973*, (Mountrath, Portlaoise: Dolmen, 1979), p.58. The words 'Was it not so?' appear only in *Downstream*.

Davis finds in these lines an 'interpretative crux […] Do these shivering "phase[s] of grace" provide a natural correlative to the "epochal men" […]? This question leaches into the central problematic of Kinsella's poetry, early and late: the relationship between poetic 'order' and the vagaries of lived experience.'[24]

The 'central problematic' of Kinsella's poetry in this account, then, is an allegorical one: can the 'hierarchizing mode' ever be other than hostile to human particularity; is it possible to wrest any kind of liberation from its ordering structures? Davis suggests that the question which immediately follows the revelation of pattern and grace ('Was it not so?') dispels or at least disrupts the illusion of timeless order and textual agency in the world (Davis p.41). But 'Downstream' continues in the illusion for another thirty lines, bringing its speaker to a point of embarrassing intensity in his desire to control and order the cosmos:

> I stood on the strange earth and stared aloft,
>
> *Urmensch* and brute, in glassy unconcern,
> Where specks of alien light icily hung
> Sprinkled in countless silence—there to learn
>
> How the remote chaotic, far outflung
> In glittering waste, may shiver and become
> A mesh of order, every jewel strung! (*Downstream* pp.52-53)

This revelation of order places the speaker in a chain of being: he partakes of demi-god ('*Urmensch*')[25] and 'brute', and thus occupies the place traditionally ascribed to humans in such cosmic arrangements. His 'glassy unconcern' is a

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[24] Davis, p.41

[25] *Urmensch* is the term used by historians of Gnosis to signify the primal man who is the creator, saviour and divine inner being of humans. See Kurt Rudolph, *Gnosis: The Nature and History of* Gnosticism, edited by Robert McLachlan Wilson, translated by P.W. Coxon, *et al*. (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1987), pp.92-4.

device characteristic of allegory. As Teskey notes in *Allegory and Violence*, the mode presumes an intelligence below its coded discourse, and is anxious to present that intelligence as benign and reclusive, withdrawing before the probing of a reader it posits as aggressive. In fact, the presiding intelligence of allegory is seductive, ideologically coercive and desires coincidence with the world,[26] something Kinsella's speaker finds it impossible to conceal beneath 'unconcern':

> Mind shifted in its seed; with ancient thumb
> I measured out above the Central Plain
> The named heavens' bright continuum,
>
> And, knowing the birth of soul again,
> The dim horizon uttered a word of thunder
> A soft flash of far Promethean pain. (*Downstream*, p.53)

The second movement of the poem rebukes the desire to control and ultimately consume one's environment by presenting grim images of man coinciding with nature in decay: 'A man one night fell sick and left his shell / Collapsed, half-eaten, like a rotted thrush's' or in a Boschian phantasmagoria inspired by the speaker's recollection of first hearing about the Holocaust: 'the evil dream where rodents ply, / Man-rumped, sowheaded, busy with whip and maul // Among nude herds of the damned.' (*Downstream*, p.54) The deceptive 'glassy unconcern' of the speaker, secure in the hierarchy between god and beast, is juxtaposed to the corpse's gaze: 'It searched among the skies / Calmly encountering the starry host / Meeting their silver eyes with silver eyes' (*Downstream*, p.55). ' "Downstream" subjects to quizzical scrutiny the "pattern" after which it nonetheless hankers'[27] but its power to scrutinise is fatally damaged

[26] Teskey, p.62
[27] Davis, p.42

by the implications of its own allegorical making. The speaker claims that the anecdote of the corpse 'like a rotted thrush's' made him aware to some extent of the magnitude and enormity of the Holocaust. He previously imagined the Nazis' victims as a collective, 'a formal drift of the dead/ Stretched calm as effigies on velvet dust / Scattered on starlit slopes with arms outspread', but comes to realize through his encounter with a more local death that each of them was particular, and each murder would leave 'actual mess' *(Downstream* p.55). By the end of the poem, this insight has been forgotten and allegorical order has taken possession of the speaker once again, in terms that recall his positioning of himself as '*Urmensch* and brute':

> The phantoms of the overhanging sky
> Occupied their stations and descended;
> Another moment, to the starlit eye,
>
> The slow, downstreaming dead, it seemed, were blended
> One with those silver hordes, and briefly shared
> Their order, glittering. (*Downstream* p.56)

Such a return to hierarchical allegory ('stations'), which legitimizes the desire of the self to order the other ('were blended / One') aids the poem's arbitrary closure, as in Rajan's account of allegorical ends. The permanent deferral of 'Searching the darkness for a landing place' is enabled by these infiltrations of hypostatized finality into the progress narrative. The shape of the original 'Downstream' is distinct: it builds to a point of fixed allegorical order, attempts to dismantle that order, fails, starts to build again, but defers forever the consequences of that second attempt to build. It illustrates the political problems that allegory brings with it, suggesting that they are, unfortunately and

uncomfortably, a function of the mode's appeal. It also points to the extreme difficulty, perhaps the impossibility, of disrupting allegorical hierarchy within the framework of an allegory.

'Downstream II', by omitting the first movement, in which the fascination of allegory is acknowledged through allusions to Pound's 'silken kings', foreshortens this allegorical shape. The poem now focuses roundly on the story of the corpse and the speaker's horror at the Nazi genocide. Between the 1964 and the 1968 versions we see a growing intolerance of personification and a commitment to plainer diction. Instead of 'the Wood's dark door / Opened and shut' (*Massachusetts Review*, p.323), Kinsella writes 'Dark woods: a door / Opened and shut' (*Nightwalker,* p.56), instead of 'Night devoured' (*Massachusetts Review*, p. 324), 'night consumed' (*Nightwalker*, p.57). The opening of the poem is rearranged, to avoid anthropomorphism: 'The ripples scattered, dying, to their task' (*Massachusetts Review*, p.323) becomes the simply descriptive 'The ripples widened to the ghostly bank' (*Nightwalker*, p.56). Where Kinsella allows a personification to stand, it is modified by homelier diction: 'hungry joy and sickening distress / Met in union by the brimming flood' (*Massachusetts Review*, p.324) is altered to 'Fumbled together by the brimming flood' (*Nightwalker*, p.57). These changes should make for a more humane poem, one less acquiescent in the imposition of allegorical patterning upon the world, but they do not. 1968's 'Downstream II' suppresses rather than avoids allegory's problematic textual interference in the real. We no longer have a sense of how the speaker's pleasure in allegorical pageantry and his positioning

of himself in allegorical terms permits and produces his vision of horror, and by inference, the 'calamity' itself (*Nightwalker*, p.54), but order and pattern still claim to function as benign instruments of a necessary and instructive revelation of death and violence. The rebuke which 'that story thrust […] / Into my very face' (*Nightwalker*, p.57) is no longer set in a context of a present pleasure in hierarchical ordering and 'luminous crisis', but in one of past misperception and naïveté. The problem of allegorical making – its violent imposition on the world – is relegated to a boyish past, not impinging on the 'now' of the text. Instead of moving from hierarchical ordering to censure of such systems and back to hypostasis again, 'Downstream II' develops from the particular to the general instance of death and decay, and thence to an ordered vision of '[t]he slow, downstreaming dead' (*Nightwalker*, p.59). It is a much more conventional essay into the heart of darkness than its antecedent.

In apparent recognition of these limitations, subsequent revisions reintroduce elements of the original poem. The Oxford *Collected Poems* restores the narrative of the first movement, the speaker reading from the Cantos, then getting out of the boat, 'Naming old signs above the Central Plain. / Distant light replied, a word of thunder.' (*Collected Poems 1956-1994*, p.48) The form of this restored first movement is much freer, however: *terza rima* is only resumed with the anecdote of the corpse. The speaker of this version is less enchanted by Poundian pageantry, its heroes being 'silken kings / Luminous with crisis' but not 'epochal men', and there are no 'primal clarities' in which to wage 'productive war', no 'princely scene'. He also seems more aware of, and resistant to, its

seductive power: 'I closed the book / The gathering shades beginning to deceive', though he is not impervious to the allegorical delusion that by naming, he can impose order upon nature, and reinscribe arbitrary events as a response to that imposition, an answering light or a 'word of thunder' (*Collected Poems 1956-1994*, p.48). The restoration of the first movement of the narrative refocuses 'Downstream' on artistic problems, on the responsibility entailed by any claim to represent nature or the historical past. The change in its form and diction means that it is harder to draw instructive parallels, for instance between the speaker's gazing at the stars and the corpse's empty upward stare. The disappearance of distancing poetic diction[28] makes the speaker a more sympathetic and thoughtful figure; his implication in the problems of 'regime art' is less immediately perceptible but more effective when it is perceived.

The version of 'Downstream' in *Collected Poems 1956-2001* restores more features of the original poem. The original opening line, 'The West a fiery complex, the East a pearl', returns. The boat becomes a 'skiff' again (*Collected Poems 1956-2001*, p.47). Although the form of the first movement is still looser than the *terza rima* of the second, there is less of an attempt than in 1996 to form longer, independent stanzas. The first movement is now arranged as a kind of fragmented *terza rima* which develops coherence as the anecdote of the corpse approaches (*Collected Poems 1956-2001*, p.47-48). Most surprising of all, some of the speaker's enthusiasm for the 'silken kings' has been restored: 'Luminous with crisis, waging war / Among the primal clarities. Their names dying / Behind

[28] For the distancing function of poetic diction in 'Downstream' and other early Kinsella, see Jackson pp.27-28.

us in the dusk' (*Collected Poems 1956-2001* p.47). Kinsella emphasizes allegory's nostalgia and anteriority, its assaults upon the past for material with which to forge new meanings, which make appeals to 'primal clarities' probable, if not inevitable. There is a certain self-reflexivity in his emphasis; the most recent 'Downstream' calls on forty years of alteration and revision. The speaker's naming of the stars is also embellished:

> Night voices: soft
> Lips of liquid, while the river swept
> Its spectral surface by.
>
> He coughed,
> Standing against the sky. I took my turn
> Standing on the earth, staring aloft
>
> At fields of light sprinkled in countless silence;
> I named their shapes, above the Central Plain,
> With primal thumb.
>
> Low on the horizon
> A shape of cloud answered with a soft flash
> And a low word of thunder. (*Collected Poems 1956-2001*, p.48)

A deliberately unshowy diction, with apparently artless repetitions of 'soft', 'Standing', 'shape', 'low', replaces the noisy rhetoric of '*Urmensch* and brute' so that the rhyme 'coughed / aloft' no longer seems bathetic. With regard to his political stance, however, this speaker positions himself exactly where his 1962 counterpart stood. He participates in the chain of being, '[s]tanding on the earth, staring aloft'. His vision is of the heavenly firmament laid out in passive silence, ready for him to name it. He orders the sky with an allegorical anteriority – 'primal thumb' – and his reinscription of natural noise as acquiescence is now unmistakable. Where the Oxford edition had 'Distant light replied, a word of

thunder' (*Collected Poems 1956-1994*, p.48), which could be interpreted as a rebuke or warning, the response is now 'soft', 'low', a gentler sound which seems to endorse the speaker's posturing. The *Urmensch*, almost totally excluded from the Oxford version, makes a return in 2001.

The alterations to the second movement of the poem, which retains its *terza rima* throughout all the revisions, are less momentous. However, with a small excision, Kinsella alters the last six stanzas significantly. In the 1996 *Collected Poems*, the beginning of this passage reads as follows:

> the river bed
>
> Called to our flesh from under the watery skin
> Breathless, our shell trembled across the abyss;
> I held my oar in fear. When deeper in
>
> Something shifted in sleep. (*Collected Poems 1956-1994*, p.50)

In 2001, this becomes:

> The river bed
>
> Called to our flesh, under the watery skin.
> Our shell trembled in answer.
> A quiet hiss
>
> Something shifted in sleep. (*Collected Poems 1956-2001*, p.50)

While the diction of the 2001 version is simpler, it does nothing to mitigate the sense of coincidence between water, boat and speaker. He still places himself in a privileged position of communication with nature, assimilating the other to the self in a characteristic allegorical manoeuvre. The latest version, in forsaking diction that might draw attention to it, naturalizes this authoritarian attitude to nature. The changes of lineation necessitated by the small alteration mean that

the resonant final line, ‘Searching the darkness for a landing place’, no longer stands alone. Again, this works to de-emphasize the allegory, since the reader’s eye is not drawn, as it was before, to the exceptional line. Its allegorical import is not lessened, but further integrated into the poem’s fabric. Allegory, though it is fatal to the integrity of that which is not the self, becomes a natural way to encounter the world.

‘Downstream’ is an allegorical progress narrative which also describes the progression of allegory. The poem details the mode’s aggregative ambition, gradually taking possession of a textual space, capturing the other to make it signify within its system. Resistance to the signifying scheme is posited, in the form of objects like the corpse, which might appear to be radically other and unable to signify.[29] Such resistance is ultimately captured in its turn, the ‘slow, downstreaming dead’ becoming a token of order to inspire the speaker’s quest. The textual history of ‘Downstream’, incorporating revisions to show the development of thought across time, is also a form of progress allegory. Kinsella’s other progress allegories of the 1960s, ‘A Country Walk’ and ‘Nightwalker’, might also productively be considered in this way, though the revisions made to ‘A Country Walk’ are less extensive and those to ‘Nightwalker’ less clear in intention than to ‘Downstream’.

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[29] The corpse is ‘that thing that no longer matches and no longer signifies anything’. Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror : An Essay on Abjection*, translated by Leon S. Roudiez (New York and Chichester: Columbia University Press, 1982), p.4.

The Peppercanister publications are often considered to mark something of a turn away from progress allegories articulated as physical journeys, towards psychic quests. In Davis's words:

> Jung's discussion of the process of individuation draws its inspiration from the procedures of medieval and renaissance alchemy, and structurally speaking, constitutes a variety of quest-romance: the alchemist's *decensus ad infernos* and culminating *hierogamos* or chymical wedding afford a formal analogy for a wholeness of being attainable through the integration of consciousness and unconsciousness.[30]

While the influence of alchemy and Neoplatonic esoterica on Jung (and on Kinsella) is undeniable, this assertion is troubling. A psychoanalytic procedure is only a 'quest' insofar as it has already been allegorized, even if it is heavily dependent on the archetypal imagery or mythic narratives from which allegories typically draw their material. Although in his later work Kinsella uses quest narratives, he usually employs other metaphorical structures to represent intense psychic scrutiny: vivisection, consumption and digestion and domestic scenery. The wandering, journeying persona in Kinsella often signifies the accommodation of the self in society, a theme which grows very prominent in his poems of the late 1980s and 1990s: the Peppercanister publications from *St Catherine's Clock* (1987) to *The Pen Shop* (1997) feature journeys and quests to a greater extent than anything since 'Nightwalker'. Kinsella's publications since *The Familiar* seem to be returning to more introverted and static concerns while maintaining a mobile lightness that we might associate with the kinetic societal self. Some of these chapbooks read like digests of the dense psychic explorations of the late 1970s and early '80s. The glosses which frame the chapbook *Godhead*, 'High

[30] Davis, p.51

Tide: Amagansett' and 'Midnight, San Clemente: a gloss' (*Collected Poems 1956-2001*, p.335, p.340), preserve a tension between the speaker inside his house and the world outside, which is reminiscent of *Song of the Night and Other Poems*. The poems in that collection, particularly 'Tao and Unfitness at Inistiogue on the River Nore' (*Collected Poems 1956-2001*, p.205) explore in understated detail the contrast between physical journey and psychic 'quest' – precisely that which is elided in allegory. 'Migrants', from *Citizen of the World* (2000) records an instant of equilibrium between stasis and movement, 'Migrants. Of limited distribution.' (*Collected Poems 1956-2001*, p.343). This brings a light touch to a characteristically Kinsellan image of 'insistent animal life confronting unknown immensities, the language of a blind groping and twisting, and the expressed need to sacrifice the supports of the self in order to sustain an inward progress'.[31] The moment of rest depicted in 'Migrants' is one in which the reader might find space to confront Kinsella's allegorical vocabulary of voracity.

Kinsella and his critics present his career as one in which growing confidence allows him to abandon, first, early influences (principally Auden), then constricting and artificial forms which encourage the production of 'bad material'. In some accounts the poet's development is made analogous with the processes of decolonization. For example, Ian Flanagan finds that Kinsella's later poetry reflects an 'uneasy recognition that his earlier urge to order replicates previous attempts at classification, all of which on some level served to sanction the

[31] Peter Denman, 'Significant Elements: *Songs of the Psyche* and *Her Vertical Smile*', *Irish University Review* 31:1 (Spring/Summer 2001), 95-109, p.95.

categorization both of his own family ancestors and of Ireland itself, as racially inferior'.[32]

The revisions to 'Downstream' complicate such accounts. Instead of moving smoothly away from elaboration and ornamented closed form to simplicity and open form, Kinsella incorporates old material into his most recent revisions, suggesting growing independence from the sarcasm which characterizes a 1970s poem like 'Worker in Mirror…' and acceptance of early work as emotionally and politically honest. It may be that Kinsella's break with formal elaboration and discursive rhetoric is not after all decisive, and that his work is entering a period of second simplicity using modified and renewed versions of those old techniques. We should not, however, conclude from this that he has altogether repudiated irony. The latest rendering of 'Downstream' restores political problems that were aired in the earliest and suppressed in intervening versions, but it does not move to resolve them. Indeed, the successive revisions add one more problem. In any version of 'Downstream' we read a poem which rebukes the nostalgic belief in primal clarity and order even as it indulges it. In the five different versions of 'Downstream' published to date, we see this nostalgia enacted as palimpsest.

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[32] Ian Flanagan, ' "Tissues of Order": Kinsella and the Enlightenment Ethos', *Irish University Review* 31:1 (Spring/Summer 2001), 54-77, p.56.