



**Citation:** D. Abbate Badin (2022) In Memoriam. Thomas Kinsella (1928-2021). Dublin, Turin, Philadelphia. *Sijis* 12: pp. 11-28. doi: 10.13128/SIJIS-2239-3978-13756

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**Data Availability Statement:** All relevant data are within the paper and its Supporting Information files.

**Competing Interests:** The Author(s) declare(s) no conflict of interest.

## *In Memoriam* Thomas Kinsella (1928-2021) Dublin, Turin, Philadelphia

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### *Abstract:*

In remembering Thomas Kinsella in this obituary, the author has dwelt on a little-publicized event of the poet's life, the granting of an honorary degree by the Turin University on 9 May 2006. The occasion is seen as a belated homage to a poet who had not always received his due in the past and as a harbinger of the full recognition that was to be granted to him in the succeeding years. By analysing his Acceptance Speech, the poem he read at the ceremony and the informal conversations that took place at the time, the author identifies some important concerns that would emerge in Kinsella's *Late Poems* that dwell on ageing, taking stock of one's life, understanding and belief.

*Keywords:* Ageing, Beliefs, Irish Poetry, Reception, Thomas Kinsella



Thomas Kinsella (1928-2021). Courtesy Irene De Angelis

Thomas Kinsella, one of the most prominent twentieth-century Irish poets, died in Dublin on 22 December 2021, at the age of 93 bringing to a close a year that had also bereaved the nation of other great literary personalities such as Brendan Kennelly, Seamus Deane, Denis Donoghue.

He did not get a state funeral (nor would he have wanted one) but at the secular ceremony that was held at the Victorian Chapel, Mount Jerome Crematorium, he was mourned by the highest civil and literary personalities, including President Michael D. Higgins, while the local and international press gave great prominence to the event. *The Irish Times*, for one, collected and published tributes and memories from his most important fellow-writers<sup>1</sup>. Poetry was read during the function. The music by Seán Ó Riada, Bach and Mahler had been carefully chosen by the poet himself for the major role these composers had played in his poetic production. Listening to it must have evoked with great immediacy such masterpieces as *A Selected Life*, *Vertical Man*, or *Fat Master*. It was a moving and subdued ceremony, with a strong emotional input, befitting the way Kinsella had lived and presented himself to the world through a production which avoided, as Tubridy had written, “the generalisation or the grand gesture” (2001, 1).

### 1. *Thomas Kinsella's Reputation at Home and Abroad and His Position in the Irish Canon*

Kinsella's production, which earned him such an accolade, can hardly be put in a nutshell. His poetic production, which over the years had grown in complexity, was profound, innovative and challenging and engaged the attention of eminent critics. He had also written popular and accessible poems which had made him well-loved by the general public. He had awakened strong emotions with his political satire. His scholarly contributions had breached the great gap between Ireland's past tradition and the present. He had introduced innovations in the publishing field. As Maurice Harmon said in the speech he made in University College Dublin, at the award to Thomas Kinsella of the Ulysses Medal on 16 June 2008: “The integrity of his remarkable career is confirmed in the two sides of his work, the translations from the Irish language and the significant and singular achievement of his own poetry”. All these achievements justify the words with which President and poet, Michael D. Higgins, hailed him as “a truly remarkable man with a special grace”, “of a school that sought an excellence that did not know borders” (Doyle 2021).

The decade and a half that preceded his death saw public honours piled upon honours through which Ireland, and Dublin especially, recognized the greatness of their son. In 2007, he was made a Freeman of Dublin because, as the Lord Mayor said at the time, “his pride in his home city [...] [had] shone through his work” (*ibidem*). Kinsella's poetry was, in fact, often likened to James Joyce's prose for its sense of place. His 2006 publication, *A Dublin Documentary*, a memoir, a collection of period pictures and a poetry book, is an original and moving tribute to his native city.

The public celebration of his life and work at the Gate Theatre on 27 July 2007 brought together a great number of his contemporaries who honoured him with a reading of his poetry. Presenting the Ulysses medal to Kinsella on 17 June 2008, Maurice Harmon, one of the ma-

<sup>1</sup> Martin Doyle, the day after the announcement of Kinsella's death, put together for *The Irish Times* a collection of short personal obituaries: “Thomas Kinsella: President Higgins and fellow writers pay tribute to a great poet”. The contributors were John Dean, Geraldine Dawe, Thomas McCarthy, Colm Toibin, Peter Sirr, William Wall, Hugh Maxton, Lucy Collins, Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin, John McAuliffe, Adrienne Leavy, Conor O'Callaghan, David Wheatley, Theo Dorgan, Peter Fallon.

for interpreters of his poetry, emphasized the stoic approach to life to be found in his works: “Although burdened with a keen awareness of impermanence and mutability he has engaged creatively with the forces that threaten human relationships, achievement, and existence itself”.

In 2018, both University College, Dublin (his *alma mater*) and Trinity College, Dublin, awarded him an honorary doctorate paying tribute to the excellence of his poetry as well as to his contributions to the understanding of the Irish literary and linguistic heritage. His 90th birthday was celebrated at Mansion House, the official residence of the Lord Mayor of Dublin, with a ceremony in which several fellow poets read from his works. Plaques were placed on his childhood home in 2018 and in 2019 at the public primary school he had attended, the Inchicore Model School. This was to be his last public appearance, marking the persistence of the dialectical move between past and present which is one of the trademarks of his poetry. In 2019, receiving the Bob Hughes Lifetime Achievement Award, he joined the Irish Hall of Fame. On the day of his death, flags flew half-mast in several institutional loci of Dublin. Ireland had realized it had lost a true master and Dublin, the writer who, after Joyce, had best celebrated it.

This kind of recognition had not always been accorded to him. After an initial enthusiasm over Kinsella’s early achievements when fellow poet, John Montague, as early as 1968 had hailed him as “the most accomplished, fluent and ambitious poet of the younger generation” he was somehow marginalized and overshadowed by several other equally eminent poets, as the Nobel Prize, Seamus Heaney, for one. As O’Callaghan wrote, in the last decades he was “scarcely anthologised, unheard of by two generations of British and American poets, unread by one generation of Irish poets apart from those early formal lyrics on the Leaving syllabus” (Doyle 2021). David Wheatley, also a poet, titled his *Guardian* review of the new edition of *Selected Poems* as “The Dethroned God” (2007).

The neglect was a cause of bitterness to the poet who, in an interview (his last) with Adam Hanna, complained: “My books still tend to go unreviewed” (Hanna 2018, 70). Kinsella attributed the neglect to the hostility that the publication of *Butcher’s Dozen* (1972) had awakened in England especially, but also in some sectors of his readership at home<sup>2</sup>. This was not the only reason. His absence from Ireland was the principal cause of his semi-eclipse from the literary life of the country. Kinsella spent most of his mature life between the United States (Carbondale and Philadelphia) where he was teaching and Dublin (or, later, Wicklow County) where he also maintained a residence<sup>3</sup>. “It was a dual arrangement [that] lasted until my retirement,” he said jokingly to Adam Hanna, playing on the title of his prose work *The Dual Tradition* (Hanna 2018, 71). Commuting and long absences certainly robbed him of visibility while a generation of younger poets, many of them from Northern Ireland, filled the space. Moreover, Kinsella, unlike many other poets of his generation, was reluctant to give public readings that would have promoted his work.

These, on the whole, are contingent reasons. The real one, ironically related to his greatness, was the stylistic change that followed his move to the States. The fragmentation of the style,

<sup>2</sup> In the note Kinsella appended to the 2022 reissue of *Butcher’s Dozen*, he comments that while this poem may be well-loved by Irish nationalists, it damaged him: “A regrettable longer term effect has been the loss of friendships and the rejection of my work by English readers” (Kinsella 2022, 33).

<sup>3</sup> Kinsella moved to The United States in 1963 on a scholarship to complete his translation of the *Táin*. In 1965, after giving up his career as a civil servant, he became Poet in Residence at Southern Illinois University, Carbondale. From 1970 to his retirement, he was professor of English at Temple University, Philadelphia. Eventually, he designed for Temple a course on the Irish tradition which took place in Dublin and allowed him to spend more time in his native city. Even after retirement, the couple continued residing in Philadelphia. It was only after his wife Eleanor’s death in 2017 that the poet moved permanently to Dublin, near his daughter, Sara.

together with the density of the content, are probably what robbed him of his readership even while these same elements attracted admiration and awe in the critical world. From being a challenging but well-loved poet, Kinsella had become “difficult” although he always denied the difficulty of his style.

It is not surprising, then, to see that the first reactions to Kinsella’s death in the Irish press, while paying lip service to the complexity and depth of his poetry, concentrated especially on aspects of his production that are not the most representative of his style and interests (admittedly important, however, since they made him a household name). *Poetry Ireland’s* first reaction to the news of his death is rather reductive: “Among his most noted works were the *Táin* (1969), *Butcher’s Dozen* (1992) and *Mirror in February* (1962)”<sup>4</sup>. This leaves out all the post-1962 creative career in which we find the highest examples of his poetic production, more than worth mentioning in spite of their not being “noted” by the man in the street. Equally belittling is the announcement of Kinsella’s death in *The Irish Times* which bears the following title: “Thomas Kinsella, one of Ireland’s finest poets and renowned for *Butcher’s Dozen*, has died aged 93”.

*Butcher’s Dozen* (1972) is, indeed, by far his most popular work, although it is totally out of line with the rest of his production. And yet, most Irish people (nationalist and non) actually identify Kinsella with this political pamphlet written in the aftermath of Bloody Sunday. On the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the event, Carcanet reissued the broadside with the author’s concluding remarks which were to be his very last piece of writing (the book was published shortly after his death):

*Butcher’s Dozen* was not written in response to the shooting of the thirteen dead in Derry. There are too many dead on all sides. The poem was written in response to the Report of the Widgery Tribunal [which whitewashed the British soldiers who, on 30 January 1972, had killed thirteen peaceful marchers in the Bogside area of Derry, Northern Ireland]. In Lord Widgery’s cold putting aside of truth, the nth in a historic series of expedient falsehoods [...] it was evident that we were very close to the operations of the evil real causes. (Kinsella 2022, 33)

In his final evaluation of what prompted him to write a modern *aisling* (a version of the ancient dream poems) in doggerel, we can see that the anger had not subsided up to his last days of life, although he recognized that the poem in “its kinetic impurity” was alien to his style. “I couldn’t write the same poem now” (*ibidem*).

Besides its continuing popularity, *Butcher’s Dozen* is also important because it was on this occasion that the poet established his own Peppercanister Press which was to become so important for his career, influencing the way he composed<sup>5</sup>. The reissue of *Butcher’s Dozen* is actually numbered Peppercanister 30 and Kinsella oversaw the text and design of the volume in the last months of his still productive life.

<sup>4</sup> Quoted by <<https://www.poetryireland.ie/news/poetry-ireland-deeply-saddened-by-death-of-poet-thomas-kinsella>> (05/2022).

<sup>5</sup> The Peppercanister Press was founded in 1972 in order to allow the immediate publication of the broadside, since “[t]he pressures were special, the insult strongly felt and the timing vital” (Kinsella 2022, 33). From then on, for several years, the Press (thus called after the nickname of a nearby church), was operated from the home of the poet who would personally set and print the booklets himself. In 1987 the Press was taken over by Dedalus Press. The pamphlets contained either a long poem (often an occasional one, such as the two elegies for Seán Ó Riada and the one written on the assassination of President Kennedy), or a gathering of a few poems, loosely connected. When he had a sizeable number of Peppercanisters he would collect them in a volume. The pamphlets were a sort of draft publication. “In the long run”, says Badin, “this form of publication also influenced Kinsella’s way of composition. [...] sequence-writing became his ruling mode of composition” allowing him to become freer, more daring, less dependent on the demands and tastes of magazines, commercial publishers or readers (1996, 9).

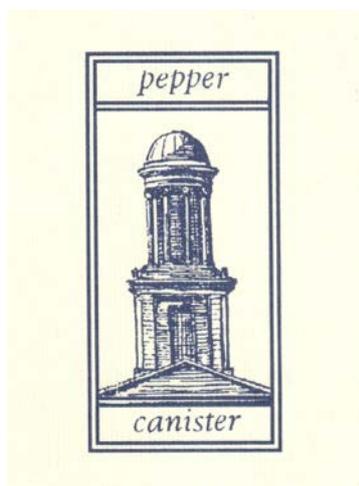


Figure 1 – The Peppercanister Logo

Two other texts, almost as famous in Ireland as Kinsella's satire, are the poems "Mirror in February" and "Another September" which for thirty years (1969 to 2000) were required reading for the final school-leaving examination<sup>6</sup>. Indeed, many Irish people nostalgically associate Kinsella with their school days, as appears in many of the obituaries.

## 2. *The Turin Honorary Degree: An Overdue Recognition of Kinsella's Merits "from the outer world"*



Figure 2 – Thomas Kinsella, Doctor honoris causa, University of Turin, 9 May 2006.  
Courtesy Irene De Angelis

<sup>6</sup> When Kinsella heard he was on the Leaving Cert he exclaimed "I must be dead." He was the only living poet to be included in the examination programme contained in the anthology called *Soundings* and his poems were generally appreciated although considered difficult. Due to popular demand, *Soundings* was republished in 2010 demonstrating the affection former students nourished for the anthology.

It would, indeed, be a daunting enterprise to list all of the poet's achievements. This has been done competently and with passion in numerous volumes and essays – much too many to list in a footnote – by Irish, American and international scholars who have examined all aspects and phases of his oeuvre. People reading this obituary are certainly all too familiar with the titles of glory of this great Irishman who, as early as 1968, had been hailed by fellow poet, John Montague, as “the most accomplished, fluent and ambitious poet of the younger generation” (1968) and as “a Titan” by David Wheatley in his review of *Selected Poems* (2007), “The Dethroned God”. There is little new to be said about such a multi-faceted genius.

There is, however, a little-publicized event of Kinsella's life, the granting of an honorary degree by the Turin University on 9 May 2006 (a harbinger of the many honours to come), that might have escaped the attention of his admirers. The “Acceptance Address”<sup>7</sup> the poet delivered at the time contained many interesting seeds that were developed in the succeeding years, giving rise to *Late Poems*. “Marcus Aurelius”, the poem Kinsella read on that occasion (actually, it was his daughter, Sara, who did the reading), gives us a hint on how Kinsella, himself a (former) civil servant<sup>8</sup>, thought his poetry might be received:

[H]e kept a private journal, in Greek, for which  
he is best remembered. Almost certainly  
because it engaged so much of the baffled humane  
in him, in his Imperial predicament:

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 the divine intelligence  
--while pausing frequently to contemplate

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

Like the Emperor's Greek journal, Kinsella's *Late Poems* deal with the themes of civic responsibilities, the “brutishness” of life, ageing and death, and they face the afterlife and the divine in a similar stoic bent of mind.

This obituary, then, will not dwell on the themes and qualities of his poetical and scholarly production (which are, however, briefly analysed in the two speeches of encomium which were delivered at the ceremony and are here reprinted in an Appendix) but will focus principally on some of the concerns that emerged on the occasion of his visit in Turin that reappear in full force in the publications that followed it. The work of his final two decades may be read as a long and profound parting address and there was, indeed already, a tone of parting in the final words of Kinsella's “Acceptance Address” which, emphasized the solitude (whether chosen or

<sup>7</sup> The “Acceptance Address” was included in Kinsella (2009, 124-130).

<sup>8</sup> Kinsella spent nearly twenty years as a civil servant in the Irish Land Commission, dealing, as he said in his interview with Adrienne Leavy, “with living history” (2011). He then moved to the Department of Finance, where he served as personal secretary of T.K. Whitaker, an influential economist who was responsible for the programme of economic expansion. He finally resigned when he was offered the opportunity to teach literature in the United States.

imposed) in which his efforts had been deployed: “And now not to end on too questionable a note, I would like to repeat how important it is that one’s best efforts, in solitude, over the long term, can sometimes bring a response of great value, like this, from the outer world” (Kinsella 2009, 130).

The acknowledgement of the Irish poet’s stature in the fields of poetic creation and of the scholarly and poetical retrieval of the fractured tradition of Irish culture was occasioned by the happy coincidence that two members of the Turin Faculty had been keen admirers of his oeuvre. Melita Cataldi, the Italian translator of the *Táin*, has, like Kinsella, contributed to spreading knowledge about the dual tradition of Ireland through scholarly work and translations from the Irish. As for the author of the present essay, she has been a long-time follower of Kinsella’s poetic achievement since the days of her doctoral dissertation. But even more than the object of her studies, Thomas Kinsella, as well as his wife Eleanor, became friends and she cherishes the memory of the welcome she received in Philadelphia and Dublin and, of course, of the poet’s generous help in her interpretations and translations of his work.

The occasion of the conferral of the degree, however, transcended the exertions of the promoters. Several Italian academics contributed translations of his poems to be gathered in a book, *Omaggio a Thomas Kinsella*, that was offered to the poet at the end of the ceremony<sup>9</sup>. The gesture illustrated the wide respect his oeuvre had elicited in the Italian scholarly milieu as appears from the numerous translations of his poetry into Italian and his presence in the Advisory Board of *Studi irlandesi. A Journal of Irish Studies (SIJIS)*<sup>10</sup>.



Figure 3 – Book cover of *Omaggio a Thomas Kinsella*. Courtesy Trauben Edizioni

<sup>9</sup> The volume gathers the poet’s “Acceptance Address”, the two *Laudatio* and an anthological choice of poems by Kinsella with parallel translations by eleven Italian scholars: Giorgio Melchiori, Donatella Abbate Badin, Rosangela Barone, Melita Cataldi, Carla DePetris, Riccardo Duranti, Valerio Fissore, Alessandro Gentili, Francesca Romana Paci, Giovanni Pillonca, Giuseppe Serpillo.

<sup>10</sup> Kinsella’s poems have been often translated into Italian. Among the most important translations, Riccardo Duranti’s pioneering edition of eight poems in the 1976 issue of *Almanacco dello Specchio*; Donatella Abbate Badin (1996), *Thomas Kinsella “Una terra senza peccato”: Poesie scelte di Thomas Kinsella*; Chiara De Luca (2009), *Thomas Kinsella Appunti dalla terra dei morti* and *Thomas Kinsella La pace nella pienezza, Poesie scelte, 1956-2006*. Kinsella is also strongly present in such Italian anthologies of Irish Poetry as *Rosa di Macchia. Antologia della poesia irlandese dopo Yeats*, a cura di Alessandro Gentili (1992).

The days of the Kinsellas' stay in Turin were also memorable for the enlightening conversations that were exchanged which touched on many subjects but, principally, on the poems he was working on and on such timely topics as ageing, the past, memory and, markedly, "belief and unbelief," to borrow the title of his then-forthcoming Peppercanister pamphlet. The memory of those conversations sheds light on Kinsella's final poetic publication, *Late Poems* (2013), which gathers the work he produced after his visit to Turin and which was, as usual, first made public in the form of Peppercanister pamphlets<sup>11</sup>.

### 3. *A Kinsella Memento*

As a memento of Kinsella's passing away, the family let mourners have two broadsides which, not surprisingly, tie in with the spirit of those remembered conversations. The first one contains only a lapidary verse, written shortly after Eleanor Kinsella's death (4 May 2017):

Nearing the centre / Hide nothing.<sup>12</sup>

The second reproduces the original of the poem "Prayer I" (from *Belief and Unbelief* [2007]) written in the shaky but still elegant handwriting of an old man and which is here reproduced with the parallel Italian text of Melita Cataldi's translation:

"Prayer"

In a disordered and misguided community  
It is the accomplished and the more fulfilled  
Who are to be found to one side,  
unwilling to take part.

Dear God, let the mind and hearts  
Of the main body heal and fulfil  
And we will watch for the first sign  
Of redemption

a turning away

from regard beyond proper merit,  
or reward beyond realneed,  
toward the essence and the source.

"Preghiera"

In una comunità sviata e confusa  
sono i realizzati e i più appagati  
che troveremo in disparte,  
restii a schierarsi.

Mio Dio, che le menti e i cuori  
di quel grande corpo siano risanati e appagati  
e noi saremo attenti a cogliere il primo segno  
di redenzione:

un declinare  
l'omaggio oltre il giusto merito  
o la ricompensa oltre il reale bisogno  
volti all'essenza e alla sorgente.  
(trans. by Melita Cataldi)

We like to interpret this gesture from the family as an invitation to contemplate the poet's stoic approach as he was "nearing the centre" – significantly not the end but the core of existence, the middle point between being and non-being, the moment when the meaning (or lack of meaning) of existence is finally revealed. "Prayer" too concerns one's turning away from

<sup>11</sup> The pamphlets included in *Late Poems* are: No. 24, *Marginal Economy* (2006), No. 26 *Man of War* (2007), No. 27 *Belief and Unbelief* (2007), No. 28 *Fat Master* (2011), No. 29 *Love Joy Peace* (2011).

<sup>12</sup> The broadside was originally printed for the ceremony that took place on 10 May 2018 at Mansion House to celebrate Kinsella's 90th birthday.

mundane concerns “toward the essence and the source,” tentatively suggesting that there may be a source to which one might return. These two final tokens of Kinsella’s poetic thought also intimate possible approaches to that conclusive moment. “Hide nothing” challenges to be sincere in revealing one’s naked self with its shortcomings, hesitations, doubts and contradictions. “Prayer” is an invitation to stand “to one side / unwilling to take part,” and to refuse to seek “regard [...] or reward”. This detached, ironic attitude, which is so distant from the prophetic stance elderly poets (such as Yeats) often adopted, appears repeatedly in Kinsella’s *Late Poems* (2013), which contain, as Clifton surmised, “the only thing that matters, the moment of moral knowledge” (2007).

#### 4. *Late Poems: Ageing and Understanding*

In the long conversations (indeed an informal interview) on his early production and on his present endeavours which marked the short stay of the Kinsella family in Turin, the theme of ageing was often approached. It was a theme that resonated strongly among the Turin intelligentsia after the publication of their *maitre a penser*, Norberto Bobbio’s own acceptance address, *De Senectute*<sup>13</sup>. In talking with Kinsella, it was surprising to note how the minds of these two great thinkers were moving along parallel tracks regarding the issues that concerned both the poet and his hosts with such urgency: old age<sup>14</sup>. Bobbio reminds us that old people “prefer to reflect on themselves and turn in on themselves where, according to St. Augustine, truth is to be found.” (2001, 6)<sup>15</sup> 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” (12)<sup>16</sup>.

Bobbio’s original Italian words, “il senso o il non senso della tua vita”, correspond exactly to the words Kinsella had used in his interview with Andrew Fitzsimons in 2004: “making sense or no sense of existence”, which he indicated as being the “plot” of the poetic production of his seventies and eighties (Kinsella in Fitzsimons 2004, 75). Throughout his career, however, Kinsella had written poetry with this same purpose which was expressed variously as “search for order”, “significant data”, “structure”, “patterns”, in other words, comprehension. Early on he had told Philip Fried he was trying to “elicit order from significant experience” (1988, 17) and he had used almost the same words in his 1993 interview with Badin (Badin 1996, 200); in the 2004 interview with Fitzsimons, he confirmed his purpose: “[T]he most we can hope to achieve is 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” (Kinsella in Fitzsimons 2004, 76).

<sup>13</sup> Norberto Bobbio (1909-2004) was a highly influential Italian philosopher of law and politics. *De Senectute*, his acceptance speech for 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).

<sup>14</sup> The ideal encounter between Kinsella and Bobbio, in other words, the coincidences in the thought of two ageing intellectuals debating in their final writings the questions of faith, scepticism and the meaning of life, is the subject of Donatella Abbate Badin (2018) from which parts of this section are drawn.

<sup>15</sup> “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” (Bobbio 1996, 21).

<sup>16</sup> “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; Bobbio 1996, 29).

The concern for order or understanding took the poet on a journey “back to the dark / and the depth that I came from” (Kinsella 2013, 52) or in search of a “personal place” which can give its radiance back “to the darkness of our understanding” (Kinsella 2001, 283). This sort of understanding which originates in the past becomes particularly important in old age when the backward look is imperative. This is the gist of the poem titled “Prayer II”, the companion piece of “Prayer I” (the poem chosen by the family to remember Kinsella):

That the humours settling  
hard in our hearts  
may add to the current  
of understanding.

That the rough course  
of the way forward  
may keep us alert  
for the while remaining (Kinsella 2013, 63)

The wish that the process of ageing, in spite of its shortness (“the while remaining”), roughness (“the rough course / of the way forward”) and hardening of the heart (“the humours settling hard in our hearts”) may add to the current of understanding and keep us “alert” and alive is in line with the urgency expressed by Bobbio regarding the need to understand because of – and in spite of – the shortness of residual time. For both old men understanding is the key to ageing fruitfully and responsibly. Indeed, it is “the substance of a life,” as Kinsella said in the Turin acceptance address, inviting the audience to view his career as a life “expressed with understanding as best one can” (Kinsella 2009, 127).

It is a commonplace that “old folk, time’s dotting chronicles” (Shakespeare, *2 H IV*, 4.3, 138), live of memories which they incessantly rehash. Bobbio, in an ideal dialogue with Kinsella, writes: “When you are old, and what is more, feeling old, you cannot suppress the temptation to reflect on your own past” (2001, 80)<sup>17</sup>. What makes both Kinsella and Bobbio different from the average rambling old person, however, is that the process of remembering is carried out with the aim of taking stock of one’s whole life in front of its impending end. Delving into the past is just another tool, leading to comprehension, which the two ageing thinkers adopt.

The past, whether personal, national, or mythical, had always been important in Kinsella’s poetry, even when he was young, but is especially so in *Late Poems* in which we find compositions, such as “Blood of the Innocent,” where the artist, bearing in mind not only his personal understanding but the transmission of it to future generations, affirms:

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)

The concern of the transmission of the past with a view to the present and the future is evident also in the aptly named “Songs of Understanding”:

<sup>17</sup> “Quando si è vecchi, e per di più anche invecchiati, non si riesce a sottrarsi alla tentazione di riflettere sul proprio passato” e fare “un bilancio non è facile” (Bobbio 1996, 163).

Reclaiming out of the past  
 all the good you can use,  
 and all the good that you can  
 and offer it all onward (29)

The search for ‘good’ – a term that in *Late Poems*, substitutes the concepts of “order” and “structure” of the past – may mean acceptance, peace, in other words, 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” (21) one has reached understanding for oneself and the generations to come and added a sense to what one has been doing. As Badin has commented:

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. (2018, 67)

Old people do tend to repeat themselves, and Kinsella’s late poetry intentionally proposes similar situations, characters, and thematic concerns as in the past, using internal quotations from his own poems and even rewriting them. The presence in his oeuvre of pairs of poems bearing the same (or a slightly modified) title<sup>18</sup> does not occur because of a lack of something new to say but because he wants 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 like the moth of “Novice” that belongs to a “species that sucks and swallows / only while it is growing; that cannot eat / once it reaches maturity” (2013, 51) does not mean that a poet cannot feed on what he “ate” earlier in order 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 consists mostly in starting from the memory of the past and proposing new solutions 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*. In Kinsella’s own words, bearing in mind “what has been done before, by the same few human types, with slight variations” (2009, 127) seems to be one of the possible benefits of old age. But with a difference: it is now done in the awareness of “last matters”.

### 5. Beliefs and Scepticism

This awareness prompts the poet to try once again to give an answer to questions asked before even through a tentative approach to religion, as the title of one of Kinsella’s recent publications, “Belief and Unbelief” suggests. Most of the poems comprised in *Late Poems*, together with those distributed by the family, are to be read as “songs of understanding”<sup>19</sup> as well as “songs of memory”. Moreover, they should be interpreted *sub specie aeternitatis*, or rather “since expectations of eternity are doubtful in Kinsella’s universe”, we should read them, in Badin’s words, “under the perspective of an ending, in other words, [...] *in substantia nostrae mortalitatis*” (2018, 76).

<sup>18</sup> “Into Thy Hands” (2011) is also the title of a poem in *Moralities* (1960). “Elderly Craftsman at his Bench” (2011), answers “Worker in Mirror at his Bench” from the collection *New Poems* of 1973.

<sup>19</sup> “Songs of Understanding” is the title of one of the poems contained in Peppercanister 24, *Marginal Economy* (2006) (Kinsella 2013, 28).

The theme of death itself, however, is almost absent in *Late Poems* although, as Theo Dorgan wrote in his eulogy, the earlier and mature work “can best be read as a quarrel with the great injustice of death, and few poets in the English language have sustained so long an argument with that injustice, so prolonged an empathy with mortal creatures, as Kinsella did” (Doyle 2021).

The explanation for the avoidance of the topic of one’s individual end is simple. There is little to say about it, as Bobbio explains, apart from expressing fear about the way and the time it will happen or entertaining hopes of an afterlife. In his poetry, the stoic Kinsella rarely complains about declining powers nor does he give voice to fear, privileging memory and reinterpretations of the past over meditations on death. He does, nonetheless, gingerly deal with the question of an afterlife.

Critics have debated the relationship between scepticism and faith in the poet’s last years, which, as Catriona Clutterbuck suggests, “is one of symbiotic interaction” (2008, 245). To Andrew Fitzsimons’ question about whether he still believed in God, put to him in his 2004 Interview, Kinsella answered: “From the imagined vantage point distant overhead, it would be very difficult. And yet there is a drive to make 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 in Fitzsimons 2004, 76). On the other hand, Andrea Byrne 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” (2009). This endorses the opinion of Maurice Harmon who maintains that “the presence of meaninglessness in the world and this awareness 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).

Total belief in another form of life cannot be accepted by a confirmed agnostic, such as Kinsella was. The disbelief in an afterlife, however, does not exclude forms of religiosity and the sense of the divine. As Kinsella was walking the last stretch of his long life, there were some signs of his searching for the consolations of faith after refusing for several decades to see God as a source of understanding and meaningfulness. He often used, although gingerly, more explicit terms such as Belief, Faith, God and referred to the symbols of Christianity as in the poem reproduced in figure 4, “Trinity” from *Godhead* (Kinsella 2001, 336).

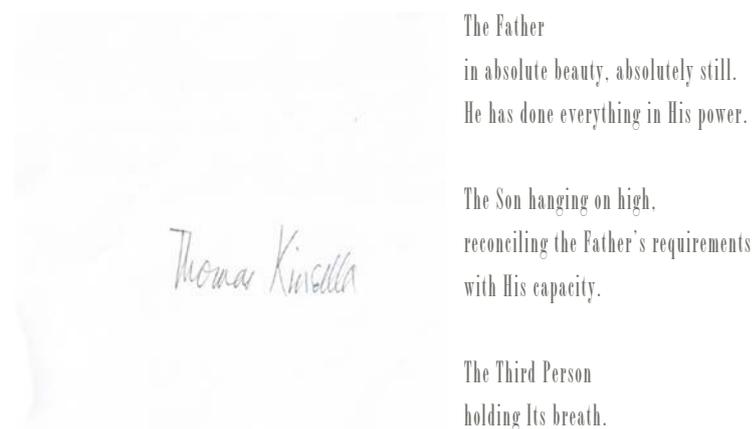


Figure 4 – Thomas Kinsella, “Trinity” from *Godhead*.  
Courtesy Donatella Abbate Badin

The presence of several poems bearing the title of “Prayer” (as well as of others with titles suggesting religion) makes one suspect that Kinsella, while he was engaged in taking stock of his life, was also examining the possibilities of the divine.

Naming *Godhead* one of the Peppercanister sequences (1999) signals the importance the issue of divinity had acquired for him at that stage of his life, while the binary opposition of *Belief and Unbelief* (2007) emphasizes his wavering position. As for *Prayers* I and II, “the growing doubts and certainties of that lifetime are trying to live together” as Kinsella said at the Gate Theatre ceremony (Tubridy 2008, 234). Other forms of faith are given a possibility and John F. Deane rightly sees some of these poems as “ ‘prayers’ to an unnamed but guiding force behind nature and human being” (2007). There is a sense of acceptance although, in Harmon’s opinion, “understanding, even partial, is the most we can hope for” (2012, 14). In his two final publications, *Fat Master* and *Love Joy Peace*, the speaker gives voice both to the temptation and the refusal to believe.

It is true that in “Love Joy Peace”, the final poem of the homonymous sequence and of the last published collection of poems, 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)

That same final poem, “Love Joy Peace”, however, also contains what even Harmon concedes is “a statement of personal faith” (2012, 14): “Grace” (in other words a sparkle of divinity, an inkling of the meaning of life) may be communicated by art – music and poetry especially. “I rest my faith in the orders of earthly genius” he writes, naming Michelangelo, Picasso, Mozart, Bach, Shakespeare, Ben Jonson. Grace also takes other forms, the “routine” of the “lone artificer” and, in line with what he wrote in the past about sex and love, “desire [...] Joy of the flesh / Saying all it can of love”. Through these avenues, one may finally obtain “Peace and nothingness of the last end” (Kinsella 2013, 89-91). The disbelief in a Christian view of life and afterlife, in fact, does not close the door on other forms of religiosity and the sense of the divine.

In later years, Kinsella changed his views about the possibility that art could be a form of religion. In a 1993 interview with Badin, he had been categorically negative. To the question “Has poetry become a substitute for religion?” he had replied: “Religion [...] has disappeared totally. I don’t see any room for it. Poetry has no connection with the religious impulse” (Badin 1996, 199). In 2004, however, he communicated to Fitzsimon: “At a time like the present, when religion has more or less vanished, poetry can almost act as a substitute” (Kinsella in Fitzsimons, 74). Thus, while poetry or art in general are his final speculative version of religion, the object of art may become a kind of prayer or sacrificial offering.

Kinsella’s beliefs and scepticism were fittingly epitomised in the already mentioned poem named after Marcus Aurelius, the statesman and philosopher who, like the poet, “had access to the bureaucratic world as well as the sensual, a figure that was alienated and involved at the same time” (2009, 128) and best incarnated the stoicism that mostly governed Kinsella’s vision of life and the world.

By distributing the two broadsides containing samples of Kinsella’s late poetry that offered glimpses of belief, the family may have wanted to counter such alternative statements of Faith as in “Love Joy Peace” or the stoic position of a poem such as “Marcus Aurelius” and suggest

the interaction between doubt and faith which troubled the poet especially in his last years, thus giving a special meaning to the secularism of the funeral ceremony.

Whether Kinsella found a glimmer of faith or not, in *Late Poems* he seems to have reached a level of understanding and peace contrasting with his earlier production. It would be fitting to remember him as he asked readers to remember Bach in “Reflection” from *Fat Master*: an 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 cyclicity 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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*Appendix*

Figure 5 – Kinsella with members of the Faculty of the University of Turin.  
Courtesy Irene De Angelis

*Laudatio by Donatella Abbate Badin*

Many years ago – I don't even dare to say how many – I was on a train taking me from Washington to Philadelphia where I was to meet a distinguished Irish poet, Thomas Kinsella. The supervisor of my doctoral thesis had arranged the meeting and the two were waiting for me at the station. Trains, however, as we Italians know, stop at times in the open countryside. Mine, although American, did. The minutes were passing and I was growing increasingly restless. To calm myself, I picked out of my briefcase a recently published book by Kinsella, bearing the anodyne title of *New Poems*. It was nothing like what I had read before by him: a totally new experience.

I had known and appreciated the works that from the late 50s had made Kinsella famous in Ireland and the United States and which had earned him the professorship at Temple University in Philadelphia and the title of Poet-in-Residence at Southern Illinois University, Carbondale.

I had developed a taste for Kinsella's sombre poetry in which I could detect a strong opposition between the perception of "dislocation and loss" that dominate, in his eyes, both the personal and the public planes of existence and the "positive counter-moves" of love, and of the creative act. His was a rigorous brand of poetry, built around a confrontation with darkness, disorder, suffering – represented by deaths and diseases but also by the economic policy of the government, the Troubles in the North, all forms of injustice, and especially the divided soul of an Ireland that had lost touch with its past. The brief moments of light in the poetry of those years were only a prelude to a new cycle of gloom.

The first phase of the poet's literary production was organized along the axes of order/disorder and structure/fragmentation. This was evident both thematically and mimetically, in other words through formal structures of order such as stanzas, rhymed and unrhymed (he favoured Dante's *terzina*), anaphoras, repetitions and listings which are characteristic devices in Irish poetry.

“Poetry is a tool for eliciting order from experience” (Fried 1988,17), in short, was the poetic tenet of the early Kinsella I was familiar with. *New Poems* did not fit this frame. No paradigmatic “fabric of order” could be found in the fragmentation, the apparently shapeless architecture, the many experimental aspects of this open work with which I was confronting myself. The hermeticism of the poems I was reading for the first time made the moments of waiting fly by, so much so that I didn’t realize that the train was an hour late.

As I advanced in my feverish reading, I realized that the two semantic axes around which themes and images of Kinsellian poetry coalesce, chaos and structure, also supported these new poems. Except that the exploration was no longer transversal, but vertical. There was a movement downwards, an immersion in the depths in search of the roots of being. To take up the title of the sequence of poems that formed the heart of the volume, *Notes from the Land of the Dead*, the new poetry mimicked a descent into the land of the dead, the world of the unconscious for Jung. I was soon to discover the strength of the Jungian influence in *New Poems* as well as in subsequent volumes. Kinsella even claims to have carried out a self-analysis through poetry. The search for individuation and the knowledge of the ego is conducted at several levels – biographical, genetic, historical and mythical. Kinsella moves freely and without apparent logical and temporal links from one level to another, from the conscious to the individual and collective unconscious, from childhood memories to historical ones and above all to ancestral ones. The assimilation of the latter into a poem that fathoms the evolution of the psyche constitutes, indeed, the most relevant peculiarity of Kinsella’s mature poetry. The mythical method of Kinsella was, however, very different from Joyce’s: it made use of a mythological substratum that escaped me.

As the train was entering the station, I had become fully aware of the importance of meeting the author of a project in continuous development, a complex work in progress, extraordinarily rich in references to the present and the past that would continue to stimulate and engage me in the years to come. As it came to pass.

Kinsella had waited patiently for me and patiently answered my questions, starting a clarifying dialogue that was to last until today. The full extent and scope of his work of recovery and assimilation of the Irish heritage that was the basis of the extraordinary construct of his poetry were fully revealed to me only when many years later I arrived in Turin and was lucky enough to share an office with prof. Melita Cataldi, an enthusiastic expert in ancient and modern Irish literature, to whom I now give the floor so that she can illustrate the importance of Kinsella with regard to tradition.

#### Laudatio by *Melita Cataldi*

It would be wrong to Thomas Kinsella if this laudatio expressed in two voices meant that in him the two aspects of his artistic activity of poet and translator were dealt with separately. The opposite is true: Kinsella is a poet in his own right when he translates the literary heritage of his country from Irish; but, on the other hand, the profound assimilation of that heritage, which took place through translations, is the root and foundation of his poetic production. That great and stubborn work he carried out on early medieval epic prosimetric texts and over a thousand years of Irish poetry – suggested his themes, stylistic features and forms.

In a poem written after completing the translation of *The Táin*, which was done over ten years, Kinsella says he faced that long effort conscious of “enriching the present / honouring the past”. Honouring the past is an act of devotion and understanding: it means bowing down with patience and humility to it, aware that the past is part of us; but at the same time this

bowing down is an act of *responsibility*: it means feeling the duty to re-take possession of what one has been deprived of, an experience which, if it was traumatic for the Irish, is to some extent inevitable for all of us. The sense of loss, the awareness of discontinuity, of the fragmentation of what can be preserved of the past are distinctive features of the modern sensibility. And that past – retrieved and made living again – “enriches the present” not because it puts new goods on the cultural market, but because it revives in us as a model full of potentiality.

Today, by giving Thomas Kinsella an honorary recognition, we also intend to honour that literary heritage which he – perhaps more effectively than anyone else in Ireland, with the spirit of a poet rather than that of a philologist – has made accessible, vivid again, and more fully appreciable.

When translating the *Táin Bó Cúailnge*, a masterpiece of the early medieval epic, Kinsella reflected on one of the themes that are most close to his heart. In the clash between the hero Cú Chulainn and the heterogeneous army of Queen Medb, between those who even in the conflict try to enforce certain rules and those who continually transgress them, Kinsella was able to encounter the myth of the perpetual conflict between destruction and persistence, shapelessness and form, chaos and order. Similarly, in the large medieval pseudo-historical compilation *Lebor Gabála Éirenn* (Book of the Invasions of Ireland) he found material to reflect on the theme of successive invasions and assimilations: the constitution of a unity and its dissolution.

He basically emphasized the same theme when he anthologized and translated, in 1981, *An Duanaire 1600-1900. Poems of the Dispossessed*, the Irish poetic production of the centuries of the progressive dismantling of the Gaelic literary culture under the English rule, at the time when the bardic poets and their heirs tried to resist through the exercise of poetry and reflected in verse on the concepts of loss and deprivation. In the careful survey of Irish poetry (both in Irish and English) made with his powerful *The New Oxford Book of Irish Verse*, stand out the short monastic lyrics of the eighth century, the golden age of early medieval literature, sometimes preserved only because the texts were annotated on the margins of the Latin codices that those monks were transcribing and studying. This is often classified as “poetry of nature”, but it is at the same time, “poetry of culture” because the two dimensions meet and intertwine in it. When, at the end of his anthology, among many contemporary Irish poets, Kinsella includes himself, he chooses a lyric of only 10 lines, crystalline, almost elementary, in which the echo of the poetry of those laborious glossators resounds clearly. In fact, the title contains the word “a gloss”.

It is said of a little bird that, on a branch beyond the window where the poet is working, swallows a red berry, shakes a few drops from its wings and disappears towards a stormy sky. Under the copper light of that sky, the pages on which he is writing appear brighter and the poet bends over them to work with renewed dedication. The last words – “and over them I will take / ever more painstaking care” (2001, 130) – seem to evoke an eminent quality of this great modern poet: painstaking means “accurate, meticulous” but it contains the idea of “taking pain upon oneself”: it alludes to the acceptance of a hard artistic effort which is at the same time an ethical commitment to tradition. Kinsella says he feels gratitude towards those scribes: thanks to them, only those fragments of the ancient Irish culture have been preserved. Similarly, we are grateful to him, the poet, for continuing – bowing down over his papers like an amanuensis – that task, thus recreating comparable beauty in his translations.