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“Deeper Than Personality”: A Conversation With Galway Kinnell

Edited by
Philip L. Gerber and Robert J. Gemmett

The present conversation results from Galway Kinnell's appearance in October, 1969, on the *Writers Forum* program at the State University of New York, College at Brockport. With Mr. Kinnell are Gregory Fitz Gerald, Director of the Forum, and William Heyen, author of *Depth of Field*.

The editors are both of the Brockport English Department. Mr. Gerber has recently published critical volumes on Robert Frost and Theodore Dreiser; Mr. Gemmett is the author of *William Beckford*, forthcoming in Twayne's English Authors Series.

The conversation begins with the poet's reading of his poem "How Many Nights":

How many nights
have I lain in terror,
O Creator Spirit, Maker of night and day,

only to walk out
the next morning over the frozen world
hearing under the creaking of snow
faint, peaceful breaths . . .
snake,
bear, earthworm, ant . . .

and above me
a wild crow crying 'yaw yaw yaw'
from a branch nothing cried from ever in my life.

Heyen: I'm somewhat bothered by "How Many Nights" because it leaves me not knowing quite where I stand. It opens with the speaker's impatience: "how many nights before I can come to a new understanding" is the implication. Then, in the second stanza, the speaker senses the harmony of the natural world. But after that I lose my sense of direction. I know you feel—and I certainly feel—that a poem must have mystery to live, so perhaps I'm saying that I don't fully understand the tone of the poem.

- Kinnell: In writing a poem one has a certain intention perhaps, but when the poem is finished you can't be sure that it remains in the poem. When I wrote "How Many Nights" I was thinking of moving from a night of terror to a dawn in which one senses hibernating animals under the winter, and the knowledge that they will be reborn in spring, to the possibility of rebirth within oneself. I wrote the poem as a kind of prayer.
- Heyen: For me the critical point centers on the intrusive speech of the crow, whether it is an ironic, mocking sound, or something entirely different.
- Kinnell: I know that that last crow passage is a little puzzling. What I had in mind was that if the consciousness is like a tree, there would be a bird on every branch, and at the great moments of one's life, the moments of full consciousness, every bird would be singing. Even in this case; I think of the crow as a beautiful animal. But then someone else who reads the poem puts in his own associations with regard to the crow. He half-creates the poem, and that's okay with me also.
- Heyen: You know, to Roethke the crow is a dark image. And the speech of the crow, he says somewhere, tells him that his drinking breeds a will to die. But I suppose we've come to the old bugaboo of intention. I mean, I hear these things in the poem, the things that you've mentioned, and then I hear other things as overtones. Maybe I ought not to be bothered by the directing consciousness behind it all.
- Fitz Gerald: Your use of animal images in "How Many Nights" seems characteristic of many other poems in *Body Rags*. If I were to suggest that from the use of animal imagery you develop a kind of mythology, would I be reading too much into the poems?
- Kinnell: I would like it if it were true. There are a lot of animals in my poems, and though I don't intentionally try to create a mythology, I do try to feel out how the animal may represent me and my deepest life. I think it's the dream of every poem—to be a myth.
- Fitz Gerald: Am I correct then in stating that the animal, especially in poems like "The Bear" and "The Porcupine," seems to be a metaphor for some human state or for some quality in the nature of the human being, especially of yourself?
- Kinnell: Yes. At the same time, I feel hesitant about speaking of "The Bear." It is the poem of mine which I understand the least.

What I intended when I started that poem is hardly worth trying to specify, because I know that the poem sailed off on its own. I knew when it was finished and right, so far as I was concerned, just by *hearing* it. But I didn't know then what it was *about*, and I still don't. The bear seems to be like the dark, non-mental side of a person. And the hunter, who is stalking the bear, is like the mental side. In the central moment of the poem, the hunter opens up the bear, crawls inside, and perhaps he then becomes whole.

Fitz Gerald: Isn't it at that very moment that the hunter becomes the poet?

Kinnell: I'm not sure if the poem is about poetry at all. But you may well be right—that when the brain enters and inhabits the body, then is born the poet.

Heyen: Even though “The Bear” is mysterious to you, isn't it for that reason, maybe, one of your favorite poems? Don't you intuitively sense that the poem is doing its job?

Kinnell: Yes, that is what I feel. What I hope.

Heyen: When I first read “The Bear,” the word “poetry” and the idea of Poetry seemed to rise out of nowhere. But, on subsequent readings, it seemed to me, mysteriously, what the whole poem was about.

Fitz Gerald: This central image of the bear interests me in that so many American writers, Schwartz, Faulkner and others, have seized upon this animal as a metaphor. Is it coincidence that you and others use this kind of metaphor?

Kinnell: It is coincidence in a sense. I hadn't thought of other works about bears. The source for my poem was when I met somebody who told me of his hunting for bear with the Eskimos in the Arctic. His story had a terrific impact on me, and I wrote directly out of his narrative. The diet of the hunter as he trailed the bear was the detail which gave the story a mythic force for me.

The bear was a religious animal for the Northwest Indians, of course; it was in their poetry, and it's in ours. Gary Snyder has written a marvelous poem about bears; Norman Mailer has written of them, as well as the others you mentioned. I don't know why this is. Perhaps it is just that the bear carries his own tradition with him, into our world. He is the last truly great animal we have in North America. I believe that part of our fascination with the bear lies in that long winter's sleep he takes,

arising weak and trembling and *new* in the spring. He eats berries, is a vegetarian, and though he is powerful and capable of ferocity, he is a most gentle animal. He cares for the land he lives on. When he eats at an apple tree, for instance, he plucks the fruit carefully; he doesn't, like the porcupine, chew the whole branch down.

Fitz Gerald: In the poem you mention this terribly powerful odor of the bear as if it had a kind of emotional intensity for you. What was it that led you to emphasize this aspect?

Kinnell: Though I've been close to bears, I've never been close enough to smell one. So it has nothing to do with the animal.

Fitz Gerald: An act of the imagination, then?

Kinnell: I was thinking of some kind of *inner* smell; an inner smell which goes beyond aesthetics, which from the aesthetic point of view is unpleasant, maybe.

Fitz Gerald: The smell is a metaphor?

Kinnell: Something like that.

Heyen: Mr. Kinnell, I've already indulged in the questionable activity of trying to pin down an idea in a poem. The poem says what it says, of course, and this business of paraphrase is maddening. But the first poem in *Body Rags*, "Another Night in the Ruins," ends with an interesting stanza. Would you read this for us, this last stanza?

Kinnell: How many nights must it take
 one such as me to learn
 that we aren't, after all, made
 from that bird which flies out of its ashes,
 that for a man
 as he goes up in flames, his one work
 is
 to open himself, to *be*
 the flames?

Heyen: Again that opens up with the "how many nights" refrain and with the speaker's impatience. I am trying to understand what kind of realization the speaker may be coming to here. He says that the phoenix is not his bird. Does this have to do with acceptance, and with being willing to see one's flesh consume itself in time?

Kinnell: I think a poem is different from an essay or philosophy or anything else. In the next poem you might say what seems to be the opposite of what you had said in the one before. In the next poem, the phoenix might *be* your bird. I guess that in my poems I've been trying to destroy, or to release myself from something inculcated. You know, almost every poem is a self-exploration. I was just thinking that one of the blessings of being my age is that you need not talk about the *purpose* of your life. When one is young, one perhaps longs for a goal or purpose. But life itself is insulted by having to be justified by a goal; life *is*, and that is all there is to it. And to open oneself to the rhythm of reality, the whole rhythm of being born and dying, while it is awful, since it means facing your terror of death, it is also glorious, for then you are one with the creation, the cosmos.

Heyen: Maybe the straining for that oneness never ends. One of your poems closes with the words "the wounds of all we had accepted open." If they didn't, I suppose the poems might stop coming.

Fitz Gerald: Speaking of wounds, Mr. Kinnell, you have written a number of poems about warfare. Would you read us one of these? I'm thinking especially of "Vapor Trail Reflected in the Frog Pond."

Kinnell: 1
The old watch: their
thick eyes
puff and foreclose by the moon. The young, heads
trailed by the beginnings of necks,
shiver,
in the guarantee they shall be bodies.

In the frog pond
the vapor trail of a SAC bomber creeps,

I hear its drone, drifting, high up
in immaculate ozone.

2
And I hear,
coming over the hills, America singing,
her varied carols I hear:
crack of deputies' rifles practicing their aim on stray dogs
at night,
sput of cattleprod,
TV groaning at the smells of the human body,
curses of the soldier as he poisons, burns, grinds, and stabs
the rice of the world,
with open mouth, crying strong, hysterical curses.

And by rice paddies in Asia
 bones
 wearing a few shadows
 walk down a dirt road, smashed
 bloodsuckers on their heel, knowing
 the flesh a man throws down in the sunshine
 dogs shall eat
 and the flesh that is upthrown in the air
 shall be seized by birds,
 shoulder blades smooth, unmarked by old feather-holes,
 hands rivered
 by blue, erratic wanderings of the blood,
 eyes crinkled up
 as they gaze up at the drifting sun that gives us our lives,
 seed dazzled over the footbattered blaze of the earth.

Heyen: That's a powerful poem; almost stops conversation. Would you tell us what's behind it, where it came from?

Kinnell: I wrote that just as the Vietnam war was stepping up its pace. The frog pond is just off the dirt road that leads up to my house in Vermont. I used to walk a mile down to get my mail, then walk back to the frog pond, sit down on the bank and read my mail in the late morning. Then I would often take a bath in the frog pond before going back up home, the water was mild and warm and very bacterial.

Once I was walking home from the frog pond, holding my clothes in one hand and my soap in the other. It was a marvelous day, with the sun shining from above and the heat of the earth coming up from below; I felt as though in my own body the joining of heavenly and earthly light were taking place. Maybe some people live all their lives in super-happiness. For me anyway, that feeling comes only by moments; this was one such moment of being totally alive in one's own body. The thought of injuring another creature could not then possibly enter the mind—it would be an obscenity. Then I looked up and saw the vapor trails of the Strategic Air Command bombers moving slowly across the sky. I had recently come up from the South where I had been involved in the Civil Rights movement. Vermont with its hills seemed to me a retreat. Its hills formed a barrier to the rest of America. But when I saw these vapor trails, the noises from the rest of the country came breaking into my protected valley. I wrote the poem then. The second part is a parody of Whitman's "I Hear America Singing," and the third part is some kind of attempt to imagine how it might

be to a Vietnamese person walking along a road in his own country before our bombers arrived.

Fitz Gerald: You seem to have a strong commitment. Is this a political one?

Kinnell: It's just human. I'm not a very political person. I find traditional Political Science a destructive enterprise. But I believe in politics which springs from the human impulse to share and commune with each other.

Heyen: A while ago, a satirical poem in an English magazine made the point that there hadn't been a single good war poem which was also art. Would you agree?

Kinnell: No. There have been thousands of poems written about the Vietnam war, a number of them very good. One of the best—maybe the most *intelligent* of all those poems—is the one by Robert Bly called “Counting Small-Boned Bodies.” It was written in the days when we actually went through the ritual of the body-count. I guess Bly was thinking about the difference between our large bodies and those small bodies that we were counting. It's nothing you could talk about in a Political Science course; it was therefore in the domain of poetry. Robert Bly is also writing a long poem on the war, which promises to be truly great. Then there is Denise Levertov's “Life at War”; Gary Snyder has a poem; the most intense, most passionate is Robert Duncan's “Uprising,” an incredible outpouring of grief and anger at the war; and Merwin's “The Asians Dying”; and a number of others.

Heyen: I mean, the complaint is always made that these poems become polemical and therefore are fleeting and evanescent.

Kinnell: It is true, of course, that a lot of poems about the war are really bad. They separate humanity into two camps: *we*, the “good people,” poets and lovers; and *they*, Rusk and Johnson, Nixon, and so on, who are killers and therefore a different species. But since we aren't a different species, since we are all related—as that Ethridge Knight poem goes, “I am all of them, they are all of me”—that premise can't produce a good poem. The great poems about the war have been those whose outrage never allows the poet to forget that he and Lyndon Johnson are also brothers.

Heyen: Do you think it is true, as Auden said, that “poetry makes nothing happen?” Or do you think that poetry can help in some practical way with the tremendous problems we have today?

- Kinnell: All I know is that in the protest against the Vietnam war, poetry has played a role. Wherever there is a meeting against the war, poems opposing the war are almost always involved. But basically, it is by restoring our feeling for the sacredness of life that poetry contributes most.
- Fitz Gerald: If poetry is a minority art, just what are the effects that this kind of anti-war poetry may have on its relatively limited audiences?
- Kinnell: Its “relatively limited audiences” are young people who hate the war and refuse to be drafted. They are the ones who are stopping the war. The ones who are going to jail.
- Heyen: Again and again at poetry readings against the war I’ve seen an emotional community established.
- Fitz Gerald: Isn’t it true, though, that the current protest poetry is not so much polemical as it is reinforcement for a position already held? It really isn’t serving to convince or persuade anyone in an anti-war audience.
- Kinnell: I think that is true in large part, but I would say also that a poem like Robert Bly’s “Counting Small-Boned Bodies” really does illuminate the nature of the Vietnam war; it gives you an awareness you didn’t have before hearing the poem. And so it is possible for a person to feel more ashamed about the war after reading this poem than he did before. In that sense it really is persuasive; it causes you to know more of the truth.
- Fitz Gerald: To shift ground a bit, I’d like to ask you something about your writing habits. Every poet seems to work differently from his fellow poets; this provides a glimpse at one’s uniqueness, I suppose.
- Kinnell: In general, in my life, I don’t have habits. That’s true of my writing, also; I don’t have writing habits. Sometimes I write a great deal all at once, and other times I will just scratch little phrases down on pieces of paper and shove them into my pockets. I’m a completely disorganized person, and hence, writing novels seriously would be a near-impossibility for me.
- Fitz Gerald: And yet you have written a novel—
- Heyen: —A novel that reads like a poem, by the way.

- Kinnell: Yes, I happened to be living under rather stable conditions at that point; I worked at the book every morning, you know, from a certain hour to a certain hour. But I have never been able to do that with poetry.
- Fitz Gerald: You are suggesting an essential difference between the kind of writing activity going into a novel and that going into a poem?
- Kinnell: There is that simple but important difference in routine. When writing a novel, your time has got to be all your own for a long period; you can't write a paragraph and then wait a week to write another. But also, writing a novel means conceiving of a whole world outside of yourself, populated with different human beings and involving yourself in their reactions to each other. But it is an inner world in a poem, and the search probes down into yourself, not into others. So, in writing the novel and the poem, one looks in altogether different directions though the ultimate quest may be the same.
- Fitz Gerald: The poem then is the exploration of the inner self—here again the poet is metaphor for humanity, perhaps?
- Kinnell: The enterprise of a poem is, perhaps, to start writing about yourself and your problems, and your particular personality, a kind of autobiography—and then to go deeper than personality, to write in the voice with which prayers are spoken, which is both universal and extremely personal, a voice to which you can give all your feelings, all your devotion. Anyone who might whisper that prayer—or say that poem—would feel it spoke exactly for him, the separate egos would vanish and the poem would become simply the voice of a creature on earth speaking.
- Fitz Gerald: The poem is essentially outer-directed, then, although it begins inside?
- Kinnell: Yes, in the sense that when you do get deep enough within yourself, deeper than the level of “personality,” you are suddenly outside yourself, everywhere.
-