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THE EMBRACE IS ALL: GALWAY KINNELL'S POETRY, 1950 - 1985

JAMES WILLIAM ROBINSON
University of New Hampshire, Durham

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Abstract
This dissertation contains two major parts: an essay and an extensive bibliography. The essay discusses Kinnell's poetry in order to illuminate his major themes and describe his poetics. The bibliography provides virtually complete lists of primary and secondary materials. Both essay and bibliography owe much to a study of the Charles G. Bell Collection at Dimond Library, University of New Hampshire. The collection contains letters and drafts sent by Kinnell to Bell over a 33-year period. Notes on the Bell Collection appear in an appendix to the dissertation.

The essay, first major part of the dissertation, examines Kinnell's poetry and poetics from the 1950s to 1985, focusing on the poems of Mortal Acts, Mortal Words, the books of poetry represented in Selected Poems, and Kinnell's latest collection, The Past. Section I of the dissertation charts the evolution of Kinnell's poetics and his major themes through the individual poets who have influenced him as well as through the traditions with which he aligns himself. Then it demonstrates the effects of these influences and traditions on the form and substance of individual poems in Kinnell's first four books of poetry. Section II interprets Mortal Acts, Mortal Words in terms of the primary goal underlying all of Kinnell's poetry: spiritual growth. Kinnell's poetry, rooted in a shared human reality, is the spiritual autobiography of a man both individual and representative, who suffers from a spiritual and emotional ailment common in secular, technological societies and who searches for ways through poetry to renew, recreate and perfect the self.

The bibliography provides two chronological listings of primary materials. The first lists periodical publications from Kinnell's first published poem to poems published in September, 1985. The second annotates Kinnell's periodical writings, except for original poetry, and publications in book form. The bibliography covers secondary materials, including interviews and book reviews, through 1984, and lists and annotates as many references to Kinnell as can be located by standard bibliographical tools, including databases accessible through on-line searches. Additional items were located by luck and by examination of the Bell Collection.

Keywords
Literature, American

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THE EMBRACE IS ALL:
GALWAY KINNELL'S POETRY, 1950 - 1985

BY

JAMES WILLIAM ROBINSON, JR.
BA, University of Hawaii, 1965
MA, Pepperdine University, 1973

DISSERTATION

Submitted to the University of New Hampshire
In Partial Fulfillment of
the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy
in
English

December, 1986
This dissertation has been examined and approved.

David H. Watters
Dissertation director, David H. Watters, Associate Professor of English

Charles D. Simic, Professor of English

Paul T. Brockelman, Professor of Philosophy

Lester A. Fisher, Associate Professor of English

David E. Leary, Associate Professor of Psychology

Date December 1995
for Patricia and Michael
PERSONAL ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Special thanks to David Watters, friend and mentor. He encouraged me from beginning to end and helped me put the pieces together. His professional vigor as critic and editor was surpassed only by his friendship and kindness, his sustained loyalty, and by the personal interest he devoted to this essay.

Thanks also to Professors Charles Simic, Paul Brockelman, Lester Fisher, and David Leary. Their suggestions and criticisms were gently given and gratefully received.

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J. W. R., Jr.
Honolulu, HI
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ABSTRACT

THE EMBRACE IS ALL:

GALWAY KINNELL'S POETRY, 1950 - 1985

by

James William Robinson, Jr.
University of New Hampshire, December, 1986

This dissertation contains two major parts: an essay and an extensive bibliography. The essay discusses Kinnell's poetry in order to illuminate his major themes and describe his poetics. The bibliography provides virtually complete lists of primary and secondary materials. Both essay and bibliography owe much to a study of the Charles G. Bell Collection at Dimond Library, University of New Hampshire. The collection contains letters and drafts sent by Kinnell to Bell over a 33-year period. Notes on the Bell Collection appear in an appendix to the dissertation.

The essay, first major part of the dissertation, examines Kinnell's poetry and poetics from the 1950s to 1985, focusing on the poems of Mortal Acts, Mortal Words, the books of poetry represented in Selected Poems, and Kinnell's latest collection, The Past. Section I of the dissertation charts the evolution of Kinnell's poetics and his major themes through the individual poets who have influenced him as well as through the traditions with which he aligns himself. Then it demonstrates the effects of these influences and traditions on the form and substance of individual poems in Kinnell's first four books of poetry. Section II interprets Mortal Acts, Mortal Words in terms of the primary goal underlying all of Kinnell's poetry: spiritual growth.
Kinnell's poetry, rooted in a shared human reality, is the spiritual autobiography of a man both individual and representative, who suffers from a spiritual and emotional ailment common in secular, technological societies and who searches for ways through poetry to renew, recreate and perfect the self.

The bibliography provides two chronological listings of primary materials. The first lists periodical publications from Kinnell's first published poem to poems published in September, 1985. The second annotates Kinnell's periodical writings, except for original poetry, and publications in book form. The bibliography covers secondary materials, including interviews and book reviews, through 1984, and lists and annotates as many references to Kinnell as can be located by standard bibliographical tools, including databases accessible through on-line searches. Additional items were located by luck and by examination of the Bell Collection.
INTRODUCTION

Galway Kinnell shares with many other contemporary American writers and thinkers, as well as with his fellow countrymen, the alienated condition of the modern technological society. His poetry and prose of the past 40 years chronicle his spiritual odyssey, describing and embodying the disintegrating and then fragmented consciousness characteristic of modernist and post-modernist literature. In Kinnell's poetry from the beginning (circa 1946) roughly until the poems of Body Rags (1968), his speakers are isolated from their fellow creatures, from the natural life of the planet, from a meaningful past; moreover, despite their struggles to press closer to their inner and outer experiences, they remain strangers to themselves, ignorant of their deepest needs and desires. They attempt to discover meaning among the beauties of a dying world in which even the power of love cannot overcome or compensate for human pain, suffering, the violence of the 20th century, and death. Their hard-won, provisional knowledge is usually that life is lonely and consists primarily of suffering and that human consciousness ends with death. In these poems life is finally viewed as precious perhaps only because the alternative to life is a terrifying nonexistence.

The final section of "The Porcupine," from Body Rags expresses a spiritual and emotional state common in Kinnell's first three books of poetry, as well as in his 1966 novel, Black Light:

And tonight I think I prowl broken
skulled or vacant as a
sucked egg in the wintery meadow, softly chuckling, blank
template of myself, dragging
a starved belly through the lichflowered acres,
where
burdock looses the arks of its seed
and thistle holds up its lost blooms
and rosebushes in the wind scrape their dead limbs
for the forced-fire
of roses. (BR 59, SP 91)

Kinnell's body of poetry does more than describe the secularization
(or emptying) of a deeply sensitive religious and spiritual temperament,
however; his poems since the mid-1960s also depict the struggle to
discover a way to heal this alienated condition. In the poems of What a
Kingdom It Was (1960) and Flower Herding on Mount Monadnock (1964),
Kinnell sought something to replace orthodox Christian beliefs and
traditions, from which he had turned away profoundly in his twenties.
Kinnell's preoccupation with the harsher realities of the natural
world and his religious skepticism, which replaced the traditional
Christian belief of his upbringing, suffuse these first two books, as
well as Kinnell's other works of the 1960s, including Body Rags and The
Book of Nightmares (1971). In Nightmares, though Kinnell discovers the
power of love to heal the alienated condition, his persona fails to
discover the spiritual solace or happiness he seeks.

In Mortal Acts, Mortal Words (1980), however, Kinnell seems to have
discovered the healing balm for his own divided spirit in his love of
the natural world and in the process of writing his poetry. Neither
less hopeful of transcending the pain, loneliness, and sorrows of living
nor less fearful of death, in these poems of the 1970s and 1980s Kinnell
finds consolation, and the possibility of joy and happiness, which he
could not find in previous works. The poems of *The Past* (1985), though
complicated by the loss of the love that had sustained Kinnell's quest
in *Mortal Acts* for a cure to loneliness, seem written in this same
spirit.

This dissertation consists of two major parts. The first part is
an essay that discusses Kinnell's seven books of poetry in order to
illuminate his major themes and to discover and describe the main
elements of his poetics. The second part of the dissertation is an
extensive annotated bibliography of primary and secondary sources. The
bibliography and the essay have been augmented by close examination of
the Charles G. Bell Collection at Dimond Library, University of New
Hampshire. The collection contains letters and copies of poems sent by
Kinnell to Charles Bell over a 33-year period.

The essay, which constitutes the first major part of the
doctoral dissertation, examines Galway Kinnell's poetry and poetics from the
1950s to present, focusing on the poems of *Mortal Acts*, the books of
poetry represented in *Selected Poems*, and Kinnell's latest collection,
*The Past*. The essay also includes discussion of Kinnell's three major
essays, "The Poetics of the Physical World" (1969), "Poetry, 
Personality, and Death" (1971), and "Whitman's Indicative Words" (1973).
In addition to poems and essays, other primary materials supporting this
examination of Kinnell's poetics include interviews [e.g., those
collected in *Walking Down the Stairs* (1978) and others published in
periodicals], letters in Special Collections at Dimond Library at the
University of New Hampshire to Kinnell's long-time mentor, the poet
Charles G. Bell, and my private conversations with Kinnell (in Honolulu,
It is not the purpose of this dissertation to fully analyze Kinnell's perhaps most famous poem, Nightmares, since much critical attention has already been directed to it (see, for example, in the attached annotated bibliography the sections, Bibliography of Secondary Sources, II. Articles in Periodicals; and Bibliography of Secondary Sources, IV. Dissertations). In order to demonstrate cohesion among Kinnell's works, however, the major theme of Nightmares, as well as of earlier books represented in Selected Poems, will be the focus of Section I of the dissertation, which charts the evolution of Kinnell's poetics and his major themes through the individual poets who have influenced him as well as through the traditions with which his poetry aligns itself, and at the same time, demonstrates the effects of these influences and traditions on the form and substance of individual poems in Kinnell's first four books of poetry. Section I, in this way, provides the necessary background to a close reading of Mortal Acts.

Section II, The Embrace Is All, offers an interpretation of Mortal Acts. The book collects Kinnell's expressions over a period of about five years (1975-1980) on his fundamental subject, or "obsession": his commitment to relation, to obliterating or refusing to recognize the borderlines between things (people, natural objects, animals, life/death, poems, and so on). The idea of merging (other metaphors for the process include marrying and embracing) is vital to Kinnell. It is not just a union of voices, but a merging of all things into one. He sees all life and things as in some mysterious, invisible way united, and in many or most of his poems he provides instances of this
fundamental connectiveness of all things (e.g., in Mortal Acts the poems "Daybreak," "The Gray Heron," "Lava," "The Rainbow," "There Are Things I Tell to No One," and "The Milk Bottle"). In his poems Kinnell has discovered numerous ways to demonstrate that all things are interrelated; that is, to obliterate the apparent space and/or differences between individual human beings and all other creatures and things. In the poems of Mortal Acts and The Past, Kinnell, like Emerson's poet, places himself "in the center of things, and a ray of relation passes from every other being to him."

In addition to defining in Mortal Acts and The Past the ground—or basic conditions—of ordinary earthly life, Kinnell also attempts to discover through his own feelings, compulsions, experiences, observations, thoughts, and admittedly incomplete or inaccurate memories, the force that unites all creatures, making individual human pain, fear, and loneliness more bearable by being shared, and individual life happier, if happiness is possible, through a knowledge of and participation in the fundamental connectiveness of all things. The fulfillment of his poetics thus emerges out of a profoundly religious vision that has struggled to discover, after a spiritual voyage of 35 years, a positive focus, an affirmation—rather than a negation—for its belief.

In this effort, Kinnell feels he is no different from any other human being. He has often said, as he did in his 1971 essay "Poetry, Personality, and Death," that the deepest desire of all men and women is "to be one with all creation." Poetry is important to this desire in that its task is to help all of us break out of the "closed ego" and realize spiritual union with physical reality.
This basic identity theme or obsession also closely relates to the forms that Kinnell's poems have taken. He doesn't mind that many of his poems, as James Dickey remarked of the poems in *What a Kingdom*, have a tendency to blend into one another. Asked to comment on Dickey's criticism in 1970, Kinnell responded, "... if [Dickey] means they all sort of flow one into the other and all deal with similar things, that seems all right to me" (Goldbarth 33). Kinnell thinks of many of his "smaller" poems as parts of one long fragmented poem, similar in form to many of his shorter part-poems, such as "Another Night in the Ruins" (BR 3, SP 67) or "The Porcupine," (BR 56, SP 88) or "The Last Hiding Places of Snow" (MW 41), which consist of "fragments" or "scraps" that have been woven into coherent patch-work poems. This effort to contain within the poem many diverse and often opposite or contradictory elements has been taken even further in poems like "The Rainbow" (MW 51) and "The Seekonk Woods" (TP 54), which attempt to contain all aspects of a complex subject (ideally all of human existence) within a single, extremely long Faulknerian paragraph.

This essay asserts that all of Kinnell's work is marked by thematic cohesion, developing from Kinnell's central identity theme and taking expression in his poetry and poetics since the early 1970s as encapsulated in the phrase from "Goodbye" (MW 38, SP 135), "It is written in our hearts, the emptiness is all. / That is how we have learned, the embrace is all." Kinnell hopes to heal himself and others, to make himself whole, through his "singing": "There is time, still time, / for those who can groan / to sing, / for those who can sing to heal themselves." ("The Still Time," MW 57). Most of the poems in Mortal Acts demonstrate this concern with connections, and the book
itself fits into a progression in which the forms of Kinnell's poems over the years gradually assumed the shapes best adapted to this central idea. His poems published since Mortal Acts continue to embody this line of development and are the subject of the conclusion to this essay.

The essay thus focuses on the single developing vision underlying and structuring all of Kinnell's poetry, most especially the poems of Mortal Acts and The Past. No other full-length study has yet done this. In addition, no other study has provided an extensive bibliography of primary and secondary sources. The bibliography of primary sources provides two chronological listings of Kinnell's works. The first, Poems in Journals and Periodicals, lists virtually all of Kinnell's periodical publications, from his first published poem in 1947 to poems published in September 1985. Since Kinnell habitually revises poems between periodical publication and book publication, this list should prove useful to those wishing to trace the changes in a poem between first appearance and collection in a volume. The second part of the primary bibliography, Books and Essays, annotates a chronological listing of Kinnell's periodical writings, except for poetry, and the appearances of his prose, poetry, and translations in book form. Together, the two parts of the primary bibliography contain nearly all of Kinnell's publications.

The annotated bibliography of secondary sources grew out of a search for critical materials on the poetry of Galway Kinnell. It is hoped that the listings included here and particularly the annotations will save the user a great deal of time and false steps. The overall purpose of compiling an annotated bibliography was to encourage others in their study of Kinnell's works and in a study of contemporary poetry,
in general. The only bibliography published to date on Kinnell is dated 1968. The present bibliography includes critical materials from the earliest reviews of Kinnell's work through 1984 and annotates every source personally seen and verified. This annotated bibliography of secondary sources attempts to include as many references to Kinnell as can be located by standard bibliographical tools, including those few now located in databases and available through on-line searches. Additional items are included which were located by luck and by close examination of the contents of the Charles G. Bell Collection at Dimond Library, University of New Hampshire. A few notes on selected portions of the Bell Collection are included in this dissertation (see Appendix 2).

It was a pleasant surprise to discover at the end of this project an annotated bibliography of 59 pages, but judging by this writer's experience attempting to locate primary and secondary materials on contemporary poetry in several libraries throughout the United States, much spade work still needs to be done in the fertile grassland of contemporary American poetry. Some interesting and valuable discussion of contemporary poetry and poetics, and much contemporary poetry as well, was and still is published in the little magazines, most of which publish only a few volumes before expiring, and many of which were and are not indexed in the major bibliographies.

Of the more than 230 secondary sources examined in preparation for this study 27 are longitudinal analyses of Kinnell's poetry; that is, they include discussion of poems appearing in more than a single volume. Some attempt to establish characteristic concerns or methods in Kinnell's poetry; others attempt to demonstrate the development of
Kinnell's method, style, or themes over a longer time frame than that represented by a single book of poems. Only three of these studies were published after the 1980 publication of Mortal Acts, although none makes more than casual reference to this book. Joe Marusiak's 1981 article, "Where We Might Meet Each Other: An Appreciation of Galway Kinnell and William Everson," discusses the surface beauty and symbolism in Kinnell's poetry through Nightmares.

From the point of view of my study a more relevant and substantial analysis is Cary Nelson's " Ecclesiastical Whitman: Galway Kinnell's The Book of Nightmares," chapter three of his 1981 book, Our Last First Poets: Vision and History in Contemporary American Poetry. Nelson briefly traces Kinnell's poetics of death through his first three books of poetry, then demonstrates how the language of Nightmares, which, Nelson says, fulfills everything that Kinnell attempted before it, is permeated with Kinnell's conception of death as a restorative force. Nightmares succeeds, according to Nelson, because in it "Kinnell's vision is a wholly verbal achievement, no longer dependent on the reader automatically granting an American poet the right to Whitmanesque prophecy" (77). Nelson describes Nightmares as a verbal matrix in which the ten individual sections lose their identity through their relationship to the poem's larger form. His analysis of Kinnell's verbal structures and imagery in Nightmares supports my assertion that Kinnell's concern for uniting all experience, including but not limited to the fact of death, extends to the forms, shapes, and structures of individual poems; in fact, this tendency of Kinnell's individual poems to overlap one another and lose their separate identities as verbal constructs can be traced back to the "part-poems" Kinnell began writing
In the 1950s, a genre he brought to perfection in such poems as "The Avenue Bearing the Initial of Christ into the New World," "Spindrift," "The Last River," "The Porcupine," and "The Bear," as well as the separate sections of *Nightmares*. While Nelson is primarily concerned in his article with Kinnell's use of American materials and experience in *Nightmares*, and he views Kinnell's major goal as the creation of a poetics of death, my study asserts that Kinnell's major concern is for connections, for a poetics of immersion in experience rather than a poetics limited to or focusing only on the experience of death. *Mortal Acts* is a logical development of this central concern rather than a book that, as Nelson says, "reads like it predates The Book of Nightmares" (76).

The publication of *Mortal Acts* precedes only one dissertation, Lee Zimmerman's 1984 "Intricate and Simple Things: The Poetry of Galway Kinnell." In his study Zimmerman "charts the shifting relationship" among the feelings of strangeness and "terrible kinship" in Kinnell's poetry through *Nightmares*. Zimmerman's discussion of the influence of Rilke and Whitman on the imagery used by Kinnell to dramatize a struggle to participate in the whole encouraged my pursuit of the effect of Kinnell's basic identity theme and essentially religious temperament on the forms and subjects of his poetry in *Mortal Acts* and *The Past.*

II.

In his poetry from the beginning, Kinnell's speakers yearned for God, but discovered only their own isolation and loneliness in an apparently chaotic, moribund universe. In their spiritual wanderings, they learned that life reveals little spiritual or religious meaning
that they can perceive, deduce, or imagine, despite their determined efforts to uncover meaning in and occasionally wrench meaning out of all visible phenomena. They also cannot avoid dwelling on the conviction that human consciousness ends with the body's death (when the body disappears back into nature). Thus, in Kinnell's early poems his speakers exist moment-to-moment in a stultifying present, isolated, lonely, spiritually empty--trapped in a cell of self.

Kinnell's body of poetry from 1946 to 1985 chronicles modern man's struggle within this cell of self, progressing or regressing, as Kinnell's spiritual wanderings progress or double back on themselves, through these stages: (1) the discovery of separateness from the rest of creation (and accompanying feelings of loneliness and isolation); the exploration of possibilities of conquering this separateness, of completing the self; (2) the discovery of sources of separateness: separation from God; personal and social alienation; separation from nature; duration; (3) the attempt to eliminate, elude, or live with the alienated condition. This cell of self, which Kinnell called the "closed ego" in the 1971 essay, "Poetry, Personality, and Death," keeps man from accomplishing his deepest desire: "to be one with all creation" (61).

I mean that ego which separates us from the life of the planet, which keeps us apart from one another, which makes us feel self-conscious, inadequate, lonely, suspicious, possessive, jealous, awkward, fearful and hostile... (PD 61)

Moreover, man is not aware that he is prevented from realizing this desire by his "divided consciousness," which comes about, Kinnell said in 1981, because man is "part animal, part being who regards itself as
superior to the animal" (Moffet 7). Ten years before, in the essay, "Poetry, Personality, and Death," he had said essentially the same thing:

Our alienation is in proportion to our success in subjugating [life]. The more we conquer nature, the more nature becomes our enemy, and since we are, like it or not, creatures of nature, the more we make an enemy of the very life within us. (61)

The closed ego and the divided consciousness emerge from two major sources, according to Kinnell: (1) the loss of religious belief, which sustained and nourished mankind for thousands of years; and (2) the rise of a technological culture, which worships materialism and the present moment and abhors man's animal nature and his past. Both sources separate man from his personal past, his cultural heritage, and, in Kinnell's view, even from his "sacred past": his biological connection to the natural world, vestiges of which can be seen still in many of man's surviving traditions. Kinnell expressed this in a 1980 interview:

Traditional acts connect us to the distant past, even to a degree to our animal origins. Somewhere in the course of evolution, part of what we call instinct became sublimated into traditional behavior. Acts we perform by the dictates of tradition are in some way related to instincts. (Wheeler 116)

Those who act on tradition keep the past alive. Manual labor, for instance, embodies ancient, traditional actions, Kinnell says, but "technological substitutes for manual labor, while they make life easier, tend to break this relationship with the past" (Wheeler 116).

Kinnell believes the poet, however, a being especially sensitive to the gap between himself and nature, is convinced of the
necessity to bridge it. The oneness of the inner and outer worlds must be achieved and can be achieved through poetry. Conscious of his alienated condition and uncomfortable with it, the poet grapples with it and attempts through his poetry to connect with the natural world. In Kinnell's view, the poet is a product of his profane, technological culture, like other men; unlike others, though, the poet deliberately engages his divided consciousness, instead of ignoring, adjusting to, or accepting his "technological madness" (Beckman 15). As he said in a 1982 interview,

*I guess there has to be something wrong with you [to make you want to write. You have to be] schizophrenic to some degree. Because that's really what's wrong with the human being... So that divided consciousness... that's why we write poems, that's why there is religion. If you're going to write poems that address this question, then you have to experience the schizophrenia a little more intensely than the average person. And the person who doesn't experience it, except very vaguely, will never be driven to address it or cure it, heal it, or even just merely see it.*

(Moffet 7)

The poet is a man like other men, one who is as tired as the rest of us, as lost as the rest, as full of sorrow, and as incomplete, but who explores these conditions intensely, with a mind more verbal and sensitized. Because of his sensitivity, the poet lives always in the anxiousness of the present moment. He presses close to what is most difficult in human life, which is loneliness caused by the separateness from other human beings and from nature. He strives to be a part of the world, to feel and to interact, to be involved in relationship and to
affirm his connectedness with the animal kingdom (Beckman 15). At the same time some part of the technological culture in which he was reared lives within him, resisting his efforts to unite with creation, so that, as Kinnell said in a 1972 interview,

To some degree or another we have all been rendered into what you might call "technological beings." We are part of a technological society consecrated to controlling, using and disposing of the natural, this is a part of the consciousness we all have. Poetry simply can't spring out of that consciousness, therefore writing is more difficult. But if poetry has any function, it is to return oneself and perhaps even others to a sense of their natural beings. (McKenzie 217)

This is perhaps also the inner force Kinnell spoke about in a 1980 interview, when he said, "when we write poetry we write against some force inside ourselves" (Wheeler 122). This is the part of us, received from our culture, which believes that the world of man and the world of nature should be allowed to drift further and further apart (see "To the Roots").

Despite human kind's inner drive to harness nature to its will, Kinnell felt even more strongly that man needs to be one with all creation, that is, to return to a joyous connection with all creation, such as the infant feels, such as mankind felt in the infancy of the race. Thus Kinnell was driven to overcome this internal force, and he gradually came to believe, during the 1970s, that poetry, and perhaps only poetry, can save the human race; that is, that poetry can soothe and perhaps heal the divided consciousness, helping man become whole again by nourishing and healing his separation from nature.
He apparently had not attained such high hopes for poetry by the late 1960s and early 1970s, however. During these years he was primarily concerned with saving himself. In a 1968 essay, "The Poetics of the Physical World," he defined poetry as "not consolation, but insight" (PW), as a vehicle of self change. In this same essay, he called poetry "the wasted breath" (PW 20). In a 1969 interview, he expressed essentially the same idea, saying "basically, it is by restoring our feeling for the sacredness of life that poetry contributes most" ("Deeper than Personality" 133). He defined the poem as a kind of prayer, a search into the self for sources of spiritual transfiguration. In a 1971 interview he still viewed poetry as personal exploration, during which the poet's loneliness is eased. The search, he said, was still for the "bottom of [one's] being" (Goldbarth 35).

In a 1971 essay, "Poetry, Personality, and Death," is found Kinnell's most eloquent expression of his faith in poetry to help the poet break out of the "self-absorbed, closed ego" (56), one of the efforts we make to reintegrate ourselves with life (64). This innate desire for more life arises from the roots of our lives (from our sexuality), and its goal is to be renewed "more giving, more alive, more open, more related to the natural life" (74). The essay implies, towards its end, that one might hope to be "reborn... more related to the natural life" by deeply desiring such a transfiguration: "Isn't it possible that to desire a thing, to truly desire it, is a form of having it?" (74). Thus Kinnell for the first time offers to the reader or chanter of poetry the hope he had previously offered only to the poet. Of a Navajo night-chant he offers as final example of the role of poetry in helping human kind satisfy its desire, Kinnell says, "[This poem]
gives whoever says it with his whole being, at least for the moment of saying it, and who knows, perhaps forever, everything he asks" (74). The rest of the essay, however, continues to view poetry as a vehicle of self-transfiguration, of moral and spiritual growth, through which the poet "seeks an inner liberation by going so deeply into himself--into the worst of himself as well as the best--that he suddenly finds he is everyone" (64-5).

In a 1972 interview, "The Weight that a Poem Can Carry," Kinnell repeated his view of poetry as "an inner revolution, a means of changing [oneself] inwardly" (34). In this same interview Kinnell confessed to occasionally believing that in time the disparity between what modern man is in the technological society and what poetry has always asked a man to be will get worse. Poetry as an exploration and expression of the spiritual life (as prayer and devotion), its function for thousands of years, will then cease to exist. At that point in man's evolution, Kinnell says,

Our connection with ritual and sacred traditions, the things which in humans are elaborations of instincts in animals, may be completely broken. ("The Weight that a Poem Can Carry" 35)

Kinnell's more characteristic response to his alienated condition, however, affirmed the value and importance of poetry: if one could learn to touch the mystery of life on earth through his poetry, he could bring together his inner and outer lives, achieving the desired goal of integration.

After 1972, however, Kinnell apparently began to center his attentions on a poetry that would teach the reader how to re-discover within himself the natural, untechnological self. Through the deepening
influence of Rilke and the Whitman tradition, Kinnell turned in the 1970s to a didactic poetry that hoped to teach ways of coping with the inherent sadness of life and of discovering the sacred in ordinary life. In a 1973 essay on Whitman, Kinnell felt more optimistic about poetry's future. Moreover, he had added a social dimension to his view that poetry was a means by which the poet might heal himself. Kinnell is discussing Whitman's poetry here, but he describes also the goal of his own poetry in the 1970s and 1980s. Kinnell writes that in *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman,

set out not only to rescue the things and creatures of the world; it also tried . . . to redeem [Whitman]: to transform him from one who felt ill toward himself into one who exuberantly loved himself. . . . (WW 59)

Whitman not only succeeded in his goal, says Kinnell, but he then "bravely undertook that most difficult role, of being a model for others to do the same for themselves" (WW 63).

He indicated to poets to come—and in fact to everyone—that one's poetry, and also one's life, is not to be a timid, well-made, presentable, outward construction. It is to be the consuming enterprise, leading if possible to intensified life, even to self-transfiguration. (WW 63)

The poet strives to heal himself, and then, through his poetry, he hopes to soothe and perhaps heal others. In a 1975 interview, Kinnell stated essentially the same belief:

Sometimes I think that poetry belongs to a world where there was a sense of the sacred, and as that world disappears, poetry will too. . . . But on other days, I believe that poetry will save us:
poetry in a broad sense, poetry as an art which represents that effort made in so many ways to re-attach oneself to the natural world. (Nuwer 43)

In his 1977 introduction to The Poems of Francois Villon, second version, Kinnell writes of poets who have received the power "to compose songs, speeches, and poems so that they can win the hearts of their beloveds and thus be cured" (FV xix). Only after these poets are purified through the ordeal of the poem can they be healed, and they are healed through love.

This is the hope for poetry that Kinnell held when writing the poems of Mortal Acts and The Past. In a 1981 interview, he said, poetry can "nourish that part of us which is left empty in a modern technological society like ours--like that which is becoming the society of the whole world" (Cronk 40). In 1983, he said, the "original and continuing function" of poetry "has been to counteract technological madness and to reconcile the human being once again with existence" (Beckman 15).

In his poetry of the 1970s and 1980s, then, Kinnell was attempting to bridge the gap between himself and nature in order to achieve what Robert Bly has called "this true union, this oneness of worlds" (in Donald Hall's Claims for Poetry 49). According to Kinnell, poetry expresses "that part of us that wants to flow with creation" (Wheeler 122); it brings the human being "into harmony with the rhythms of nature" (Cronk 40) and "tries to connect with the sacred past" (Hilgers 110).

Kinnell's earlier poetry reflected the fragmented consciousness and, in Nightmares, attempted to soothe it, after abandoning hopes of
healing his own divided consciousness and curing his existential loneliness. At the end of *Nightmares*, for instance, he could offer his daughter and son only the most tentative hopes for happiness through love; for himself he could find none. The poems of *Mortal Acts* and *The Past*, however, as this study hopes to prove, in addition to differing from *Nightmares* in style and structure, have moved toward the fulfillment of Kinnell's renewed hopes for poetry: to soothe and cure through singing.

In *Mortal Acts* and *The Past* emptiness exists between all things and creatures. Kinnell attempts through sound (singing) to obliterate this emptiness, to find visible and invisible connections among all things, and especially between himself and all other things. In short, Kinnell now uses poetry to serve at least one of the functions formerly served by religion: to cure or heal—and if not to heal, then to soothe—the divided consciousness and reconcile the human being with the natural world. Kinnell states the goal this way in "The Still Time" (MW 58):

". .  .  there is time, still time, / for those who can groan / to sing, / for those who can sing to heal themselves." The singer's healing song will then perhaps soothe and heal others, if we can be reconciled to our animal natures and especially to our natural place in nature and in the life cycle:

. .  .  the apple
still brightening its bitter knowledge above us
. .  .  only needs to be tasted without fear
to be the philosophers' stone and golden fruit of the risen world. (MW 54)

One of Kinnell's major tasks in his poetry has been to chronicle
his own spiritual odyssey for the purpose, as he gradually came to understand it, of addressing, curing, healing, or merely making people aware of the divided consciousness, which he believes makes modern man mad and may eventually cause his self-destruction. In his poetry of the 1970s and 1980s (as well as in his teaching and in his devotion for many years to taking his poetry to the people) Kinnell reaches out to all creatures and to all experience in order to expand and complete the self--to heal the divided consciousness. Moreover, in poems written after 1971, he takes on Whitman's task of curing his countrymen's spiritual ills.

Kinnell's is a male vision, probing outward to unite with the loved other--with all visible and invisible creation and experience. His aim, like the aim of alchemy, to which he often alludes, is "to propitiate the sexual, creative forces in nature, and to transfigure the inner life" (PD 61). In an increasingly hostile, violent and fragmented world, Kinnell's employment of this male vision is a healthy sign, for his use of male sexuality, out of which both creative and destructive desires emerge, is creative and loving; it attempts to embrace all experience, the dreaded and hated as well as the loved, to unite outer and inner, divine and human, intelligence and matter. He employs it to negate and perhaps to replace its destructive counterpart (the desire to subdue and harness) in himself and in his poetic subjects.

Kinnell's answer to the alienated condition of the modern world, simply stated, is love--the love of all existence and ultimately the love of oneself as one is. He hopes to unite the animal and the spiritual natures of man. This can only be accomplished through the body, for the spirit (the invisible) can be addressed only through the
body (the visible)—the bodies of the creatures of the earth, the body of the poet, the body of the poem—the instruments through which man receives true intimations of his forgotten relations (his sacred past). This central theme of love expressed through touching (through the body) is at the core of Nightmares. When the speaker picks up his daughter after a nightmare awakens her, he says, "You cling to me / hard, / as if clinging could save us" (BN 49), and, a few lines later he adds, "my broken arms heal themselves around you." It is also the major theme of Kinnell's poetry in Mortal Acts and The Past and is expressed in the last two lines of "Goodbye" (MW 38), a poem occasioned by the death of Kinnell's mother in 1975: "It is written in our hearts, the emptiness is all. / That is how we have learned, the embrace is all."
NOTES, INTRODUCTION


After first reference within each chapter, the titles of Kinnell's books are abbreviated as follows: The Book of Nightmares = Nightmares; First Poems, 1946-1954 = First Poems; Flower Herding on Mount Monadnock = Flower Herding; Mortal Acts, Mortal Words = Mortal Acts; What a Kingdom It Was = What a Kingdom. Kinnell's long poem, "The Avenue Bearing the Initial of Christ into the New World" is abbreviated "Avenue
C" within the text; the book of the same title is abbreviated Avenue C.

In his poems Kinnell has discovered numerous ways to demonstrate that all things are interrelated; that is, to obliterate the apparent space and/or differences between individual men and all other creatures and things. The idea of merging is vital to Kinnell. It is not just a union of voices, but a merging of all things into one. He reaches out to all things and creatures in order to expand, complete, or heal the self. Many of Kinnell's metaphors for this desire contain this outward going quality. He flows into the lives of other creatures, goes out to and merges with them imaginatively in order to "re-attach" himself "to the natural world" (Nuwer 43; see also PD 69). A partial listing follows of some of the metaphors used by Kinnell in prose statements.

Poetry (the poet) can address, cure, heal, or merely just bring to awareness the divided consciousness by

- entering
- going out to
- uniting with
- submerging into
- merging with
- connecting with or to
- flowing into or with, or flowing outward into
- transforming into
- being transformed into
- fusing with
- re-attaching to or with
- being brought into harmony with
- making contact with
- reconciling the human being with
- connecting with
- belonging wholly to
- moving into
- becoming one with
- relating to

what?

- the things and creatures that surround us
- the natural, the natural life
- the animal kingdom
- ordinary things
- the natural world
the rhythms of nature, or the rhythm of reality
creation
existence
the sacred past
the life of the planet
the unknown
things around us

Although they are not directly relevant to a discussion of these
two books, longitudinal studies published before 1980 were extremely
helpful in establishing Kinnell's characteristic concerns, influences,
poetics, styles, and themes. Among these studies, the most helpful are
summarized below.

Sherman Hawkins' 1963 article, "Galway Kinnell: Moments of
Transcendence," traces the interplay in Kinnell's poetry from First
Poems and What a Kingdom It Was of two impulses: the mimetic and the
analyzes Kinnell's voice and structural methods in poems from What a
Kingdom It Was and Flower Herding on Mount Monadnock, including
Richard Howard's "Galway Kinnell: 'Everything that May Abide the Fire
Was Made to Go Through the Fire','' in his 1969 book, Alone with America,
provides an excellent analysis—one which Kinnell himself has praised--
of Kinnell's fire imagery in What a Kingdom It Was, Flower Herding on
Mount Monadnock, and Body Rags. Charles Molesworth's "'The Rank Flavor
of Blood': The Poetry of Galway Kinnell," a 1973 article also published
in his 1979 book The Fierce Embrace, analyzes the poems of Flower
Herding on Mount Monadnock, Body Rags, and The Book of Nightmares. I am
endebted to Molesworth's view that the poems of these books reveal
Kinnell's poetics of empathetic immersion, a view also substantiated by
Kinnell's three major critical essays. Donald Davie's interesting 1974
article, "Slogging for the Absolute," reviewing Kinnell's career through
Body Rags, criticizes Kinnell chiefly on spiritual and ethical grounds. For my study I found most interesting, and stimulating, Davie's criticism that Kinnell occasionally misuses the language, "like any adman or politician." By the terms of Davie's argument, two of Kinnell's major influences, Emerson and Whitman, would be found guilty of the same offense. William Thompson's 1974 article, "Synergy in the Poetry of Galway Kinnell," discusses primarily the imagery of the poems of Body Rags and The Book of Nightmares. Thompson's view of The Book of Nightmares as a "song for the poet's daughter . . . a meditation" supports a view of the book as a kind of "domestic poem," like many of those in Mortal Acts, Mortal Words. Finally, Andrew Taylor's 1977 "The Poetry of Galway Kinnell" asserts that the characteristic structure of Kinnell's poems through Nightmares turns on a death of the self through union with the non-human. By contrast, my study contends that Kinnell reaches out to all creatures and things in order to expand and possibly complete the self; that is, to cure and heal the divided consciousness. Kinnell thus desires a spirit expanded through empathetic immersion in experience, rather than a new spirit created through the imagined death of the old.

Among the dissertations on Kinnell's works, I learned something of value about Kinnell's poetry preceding Mortal Acts, Mortal Words from Meeker's thematic approach (1975), Reiter's study of the tradition of transcendental and religious meditation to which Kinnell's poetry attaches itself (1975), Buechler's anthropological approach (1979), Elliott's psychological approach (1978), Gianoli's study of the changing forms and imagery in Kinnell's poetry (1978), Marcello's study of Kinnell's personas (1976), and, as discussed above, Zimmerman's 1984
study of a basic Kinnell dialectic, the struggle to participate in the whole, which Kinnell's poetry demonstrates.

Reviews of Mortal Acts, Mortal Words and Selected Poems, finally, provided much appreciated critical perspective. Some were especially valuable because the reviewers took the opportunity of the publication to discuss Kinnell's career as well as to evaluate the book. Some of the reviewers noted Kinnell's effort to "bind the world together" (Berger 3), but none made mention of the causes and consequences of this essential identity theme, nor did they trace the theme or discuss its sophisticated state of development with the attention and detail it deserves. The best reviews of Mortal Acts, Mortal Words were by Berger, Edelman, Flint, and Yenser; the best of Selected Poems by Funsten, Molesworth, and Stitt.

Published interviews with Kinnell, along with personal conversations between 1979 and 1984, provided important extraliterary material on Kinnell's poetics and personality. This information served to reinforce the evidence of the primary material--Kinnell's poems, novel, and essays--that the speakers of Kinnell's poetry share crucial concerns with Kinnell. These concerns are discussed at length in the body of this study. The interviews collected in Walking Down the Stairs (1978) indicate how consistent were Kinnell's views and singleness of vision between 1969 and 1976 (or perhaps, since Kinnell collected and edited these interviews, the book is Kinnell's way of highlighting his central concerns. The introduction to the book certainly allows for this interpretation). Kinnell sat through other interviews in those years, however. The most interesting of those not appearing in Walking Down the Stairs are by Gerber and Gemmett (1970), and Nuwer (1975). More recent interviews of interest are by Wheeler (1980), Cronk (1981),
Moffet (1981), Hilgers and Molloy (1982), and Beckman (1983).

4 See also Dodd interview, pp. 34-35.

5 The section of "The Weight That a Poem Can Carry: An Interview with Galway Kinnell" (Ohio Review, 14 (Fall 1972), 25-38) from which this quotation is taken was cut from the original interview when Kinnell edited it in 1978 for inclusion in Walking Down the Stairs.

6 The influence of Whitman's poetry and world view, and of Emerson's through the Whitman tradition, is discussed more fully in Sections I and II of this essay, but it should be noted here that the influence of the major tradition of American poetry on Kinnell (see, for example, Hyatt Waggoner's discussion of the Emersonian tradition in American Poets from the Puritans to the Present) intensified in the 1970s. Announced in Kinnell's poetry, essays, and interviews in the mid-1960s, the acknowledged influence of Whitman, Crane, Lawrence, William Carlos Williams, Ginsberg, and Roethke—along with other poets in the same tradition (for example, Poe, Thoreau, Tuckerman, and Dickinson)—deeply influenced Kinnell's poetry of Mortal Acts, subject of Section II, and continues to provide formal and spiritual foundation for the poetry of Kinnell's latest collection, The Past, which will be discussed in the conclusion of this essay. Additional testimony to the influence of Whitman can be found in Kinnell's 1973 essay, "Whitman's Indicative Words," and in Kinnell's essays of 1968 and 1971, both of which quote frequently and approvingly from Whitman's poetry.

7 Kinnell has also said more than once in interviews that all criticism is self-criticism (see, for example, WS 104).

8 Not only does Kinnell have a passion for and a devotion to poetry, he extends these same feelings to his friends and students, to political
issues, and to the natural world around him (Beckman 15). For instance, when asked how he had been affected by being awarded the Pulitzer Prize in 1983 for Selected Poems, Kinnell responded that he was not as affected by the prize itself as he was by "the great outpouring of letters, telegrams, and telephone calls from all over the country," from what a reporter had called "all your unmet friends." Kinnell said that the "wave of affection that did come through all those messages did affect me" (Beckman 15).

Kinnell has believed for many years that a poet is not just a private human being, but that he also has public responsibilities. In 1963 Kinnell worked as a laborer for CORE (Congress for Racial Equality) in Hammond, Louisiana. In the late 1960s he was active in poetry readings protesting United States involvement in the Vietnam War. In 1969 he expressed his strong commitment against the Vietnam War as "human," not political, adding, "I believe in politics which springs from the human impulse to share and commune with each other" (Gerber and Gemmett 131). In 1982 he organized a protest against nuclear arms called "Poetry Against the End of the World"; and in 1982 he was among the poets reading in "An Evening to Support Humanitarian Relief for the Children of Lebanon" (Beckman 15).

Perhaps one more example of Kinnell's willingness to become directly involved as a teacher in the lives of others will suffice. In May 1981, a year after the publication of Mortal Acts, while he was Citizen's Professor of English at the University of Hawaii, Kinnell devoted time to helping young people at the Hawaii Youth Correctional Facility and senior citizens of a local senior citizens' club. He did this, he said at the time, because he "wanted to do something for the community," and because he is, as one senior citizen said, "an
extraordinarily generous man" (Kaser C3). He enjoys the role of teacher and is not teaching to support his poetry. "I love teaching," he said in 1985. "Because of the thrill of seeing people do better."

The following chronology of Kinnell's teaching experience only partially reveals the extent of Kinnell's commitment to teaching and to taking his poetry to others; omitted are the many more sites of Kinnell's public readings. Kinnell enjoys reading his poetry to an audience because, as he said in 1972, "A poetry reading is the one time that you come face to face with people who respond to [your poems]" (McKenzie 206).

Chronology of Galway Kinnell's Teaching Experience

1949-51 Alfred University, Alfred, NY
1956-57 Lecturer, Univ. of Grenoble, Grenoble, France
1956-57 Lecturer in summer session at Univ. of Nice, Nice, France
1957 Research associate at New York Univ.
1957 Teacher in adult ed. program, NYU
1959-60 Fulbright lecturer at Univ. of Tehran, Iran
1965 Post-in-residence, Juniata College, Huntingdon, PA
1966-67 Post-in-residence, Reed College, Portland, Oregon
1968 Post-in-residence, Colorado State University, Fort Collins, Colorado
1968 Post-in-residence, University of Washington, Seattle, Washington
1968-69 Post-in-residence, University of California, Irvine
1969-70 Resident writer, Deya Institute, Spanish island of Mallorca
1970 Post-in-residence, University of Iowa, Iowa City
1971 Visiting professor, Queen's College of the City University of New York
1971 Visiting professor, Pittsburgh Poetry Forum
1972-76 Adjunct professor, Columbia Univ.
1972-78 Visiting poet, Sarah Lawrence College, Bronxville, NY
1974 Visiting professor, Brandeis Univ., Waltham, MA
1975 Visiting professor, Skidmore College, Saratoga Springs, NY
1976 Visiting poet, Princeton University, Princeton, NJ
1977, Spr Visiting poet, University of Hawaii, Honolulu
1977 Post-in-residence, Holy Cross College, Worcester, MA
1978 Visiting writer, Univ. of Delaware
1979 Visiting writer, Macquaria Univ., Sydney, Australia
1979 Visiting writer, Director, Squaw Valley Community of Writers
1979-81 Citizen's Chair Professor, Univ. of Hawaii
1981- Morse Professor of Arts and Science, NYU
1985- Director, Creative Writing Program, State Univ. of New York at Binghampton
SECTION I:

Galway Kinnell's poetry, 1950-1971

Chapter 1

The major crisis in the development of most young artists occurs during their struggle to identify and subsequently confront the theme or vision they feel most deeply. The struggle involves a search among the traditions their art has offered for models to be imitated and allegiances to be claimed. The few poets who eventually achieve greatness do so through the rare ability to align themselves with the "new" so that it seems to flow within their veins, and at the same time to have by heart enough literature of the past to contain and shape the flow. The poetry of Galway Kinnell testifies to the power and intensity that can be amassed after poets have discovered and begun to explore their major themes, within the matrix of influences that help them most freely and successfully articulate their visions.

This section discusses the processes and influences through which Kinnell intuitively identified the elements of his major vision and the poetry by which most successfully to communicate it. Chapter one outlines the evolution of Kinnell's poetics and major themes from the early 1950s to the publication of The Book of Nightmares in 1971 and discusses the individual poets who have influenced Kinnell as well as the traditions with which he aligns himself. Chapters two and three then demonstrate the effects of these influences and traditions on the forms and substance of individual poems in Kinnell's first five books of poetry. Chapter two examines precursors to Kinnell's poetics of...
immersion through analyses of selected poems from his second and third books of poetry: What a Kingdom It Was (1960) and Flower Herding on Mount Monadnock (1964). Chapter three briefly discusses Kinnell's fourth and fifth books of poetry, Body Rags (1968) and The Book of Nightmares (1971). The discussions focus on the main themes and underlying poetics of these two important books, wherein Kinnell first articulated his poetics of empathetic immersion. The goal of Section I of this essay is an understanding and appreciation of Kinnell's maturing poetic vision as it responded to the challenge of the continuing spiritual task of his life: the struggle to re-establish the connection between himself and what is beyond him.

This chapter traces the development of Kinnell's poetics in two phases: the first provides a brief overview of the changes in Kinnell's poetics between the publication of Flower Herding in 1964 and Body Rags in 1968; the second phase outlines the primary influences on Kinnell's poetry from his earliest successes in the late 1940s to Nightmares. Contrary to Kinnell's intentions, the poetics operating in his first three books of poetry, First Poems, 1946-1954, What a Kingdom, and Flower Herding, held the world at a distance, leaving Kinnell by 1964 thrashing about among modes and techniques that precluded achievement of the poetic vision and psychic health he desired. An image from a poem of 1964, "Spindrift," characterizes the personas of Kinnell's poetry through 1964. They may be imagined as solitary wanderers floundering on the shifting sands of an unstable world (not yet the dancers or leapers they would become in Body Rags and Nightmares). They are fragmented, lonely and fearful individuals. Kinnell's embodiment of a commonly shared alienated condition produced excellent poetry, but Kinnell needed to discover a poetry that could do more than reflect a common spiritual
ailment; he needed to discover a cure. From the beginning his poetry is the product of a soul deeply concerned with salvation, i.e., of a psyche or imagination deeply concerned with psychic health and regeneration. His search, then, was for a process of re-novation and integration, which Kinnell most often dramatizes as a quest for wholeness or completeness.

Although Kinnell had identified his two major themes, love and death, early in his career (note that of the four poems chosen from First Poems to be included in Selected Poems two meditate on death and two focus on the joys and sorrows of love), he wasn't able to develop and articulate the poetics most suitable to his personal thought and feeling until he had discovered that his early attachment to the traditions of Pound and Eliot served not to facilitate the healing process he desired, but rather to increase his separation from the things to which he was most attached: the complex, mysterious workings of life on the body of the planet, and the joys, pains, emotions and spiritual life of his fellow men and women. Thus he turned to the transcendental optimism of Emerson, perhaps at first through the influence of Roethke, Frost and the later William Carlos Williams. The sexual nature of Kinnell's vision and his preoccupation with death and the dark side of human nature, however, eventually led him to his most important influences, Whitman and Rilke, whose attachment to a commonly shared physical existence and to discovering a poety by which to embody its reality within the poem was as strong as Kinnell's.

The world in which Kinnell lives and writes no longer resembles the world as Whitman or Rilke saw it, however, despite the wars experienced by both. Kinnell's personal experiences and his temperament have taught...
him understanding of the existential condition. Twentieth-century outrages such as Nazi Germany, Hiroshima, and Vietnam, as well as the ability to foresee the end of human life and of our world, and to see it in the conceivable future, according to Kinnell, have invalidated all previous coping mechanisms. Kinnell knows he is displaced from all traditional myths, but he tries to find a way through poetry to put himself and his world back together again. His importance to twentieth-century poetry rests on the success or failure of this mission. The future of the human race and of poetry, Kinnell began to believe, may depend on the poet's success in returning himself and others to a sense of relation to the rest of creation.

Kinnell had need of a poetics that could enable this process. For him, as for many other poets of his generation, the dramatic, ironic mode of the modernists and their conception of the poem as a machine made of words had to be thrown over for a poetics of inward movement or growth and a conception of the poem as an exploration into the unknown. The alienated poet, instead of dwelling on his psychic pain and seeking to amplify or perfect it, would strive to understand his condition for the purpose of healing it, or, in Kinnell's terms, of completing the self. Taking a clue from Nietzsche's poet, but going a step further, Kinnell's persona would embody an ailing but otherwise idealized modern man, who would seek wellness for himself; only after he had regained psychic health could Kinnell and his poetry help cure his fellow men and women.

Thus in the mid-1960s, Kinnell began a regenerative process. He abandoned a poetics of detachment or separation, manifested in a dramatic or ironic poetry, and began experimenting with a poetics of immersion into the physical world. While in his poetry he imaginatively
embraced all of existence, in life he immersed himself in social and political movements. He participated in the civil rights movement of the 1960s and in protests against the United States' involvement in the Vietnam War. These dramatic changes in his aesthetic and private lives made possible his most highly regarded and most popular books, Body Rags and Nightmares. In addition, to make clear his alignment with viable poetic traditions, he began to express his ideas about a new poetry in his finest essays on poetic theory, "The Poetics of the Physical World" (written 1968, published 1969) and "Poetry, Personality, and Death" (1971), published, perhaps not coincidentally, in the same years as were his two most successful books of poetry.

The discovery of a way to begin the long process of self-healing was slow in coming, however. Kinnell's break with the traditions that had nurtured his beginnings took twenty years and three books of hard-earned poetry. The poems in these books reveal the attempts both to achieve a unifying vision and to connect with the influences that would enable it and give it legitimacy in the long run. First Poems, What a Kingdom, and Flower Herding reveal a mixture of poetic styles and tendencies: the modernist poetry of Yeats, Pound, and Eliot; the "American poetry" of Frost, Sandburg, and William Carlos Williams; the symbolism of Poe and the French symbolists; the spiritual yearnings, formal beauty, and natural settings of English Romantic poets, especially Wordsworth, Shelley and Keats; the beginnings of formal and thematic borrowings from Whitman, or Whitman received through Hart Crane and Roethke, from older contemporaries like Roethke and Lowell, and from younger ones like Levertov, Logan, Bly and Snyder. In a few poems can be seen the influence of contemporary French and Spanish
surrealists, as well as the influences of Yves Bonnefoy and Pablo Neruda. Kinnell eventually cast off most of these influences in his drive toward a more satisfying poetics, and as his vision began to focus steadily upon the poetics of immersion in the mid-1960s, he began to identify himself with a single American tradition, whose greatest poet is Whitman, as well as with a spiritual tradition he associated with another great poet, the German, Rainer Marie Rilke.

The Emerson/Whitman line of influence, is a strong spiritual force in Kinnell's early poetry and is especially strong in the nature poems of Flower Herding, Part II, in which Kinnell, seeking in the natural world both psychic health and self-exile from a failed American dream, draws closer to his poetics of the physical world. The Transcendentalist identification with things, immersion into nature, and dedication to spiritual living remain constantly and perhaps increasingly influential on Kinnell's poetry. In addition, like Thoreau, Kinnell believes in the dignity of manual labor, in living close to nature, and in going out into nature to seek through solitude knowledge of oneself and of the world. Kinnell also criticizes his age for its materialism, its inhumanity toward minorities, its political corruption, and its alienation from nature. Finally, as has become more evident in recent years, Kinnell seeks a unifying force, a unity of being and of existence similar in many respects to Emerson's Oversoul, though without reference to a creating divinity. The influence of Emerson's poetics and broader world view on the goals of Kinnell's poetry in the 1970s and 1980s will be discussed in Section II. Kinnell's belief in the social and spiritual importance of poetry is in consonance with Emerson's as expressed, for example, in "The Poet," and his intense effort to respond fully to experience as a person and as an
artist is certainly a kind of Emersonian self-reliance.

By the mid-1960s, however, the Emerson/Whitman Tradition had not yet achieved the central position it presently occupies, but by 1968, when Body Rags was published, it became clear that Kinnell had drawn closer in spirit and in style to Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman. The complex of influences aiding Kinnell's poetics of immersion in the late-1960s include the Emerson/Whitman tradition; elements of the Romantic, Symbolist, Surrealist, and Modernist movements; and the intensifying spiritual and poetic influence of Rilke.

Kinnell's attraction to the Emerson/Whitman tradition can be traced back to poems of the 1950s. Its influence began with Hart Crane, whose The Bridge was the subject of Kinnell's master's degree thesis. Theodore Roethke's later poems, especially North American Sequence, also influenced Kinnell's style and had a pronounced effect on his attitude to poetry. In the 1960s Whitman himself became Kinnell's master, taking over the role previously occupied by Yeats. Kinnell then aligned himself with Whitman's sources (the English Romantic poets, the King James Bible, and Emerson), and the continuing influence of Whitman as evidenced in the poetry of D. H. Lawrence, Hart Crane, Theodore Roethke, and Alan Ginsberg. Kinnell took from each of these poets and traditions, though his most acknowledged and visible debt is to the body of Whitman's poetry. In Kinnell's poetry may be seen the influence of Whitman's forms and symphonic arrangements and especially his attempt to achieve a unified poetic vision, sexual in nature, embracing the whole of life--and death. Like Whitman, Kinnell celebrates both sensuous, sexual, bodily being and spiritual emotions and intuition and insists that the two realms are and should be interfused. Kinnell's poetics of
the physical world makes this assumption, though in practice he seems less certain than Whitman that bodily being and spirit, under the circumstances of the modern world, are easy bedfellows. Most of his poems seem to be attempting to discover a body/spirit connection that Whitman took for granted or to make body and spirit interfuse within the poem. In Kinnell's three major essays, one of which is a discussion of Whitman's language, Kinnell acknowledges Whitman as the primary influence on his poetics of immersion. As will be seen in my discussion of Kinnell's poetry and poetics of the 1970s and 1980s, Whitman's influence on Kinnell has intensified and deepened over time, and has included in Kinnell a renewed celebration of the clarities and rhythms of ordinary speech.

Kinnell's poetry in Body Rags and Nightmares also attaches itself to the tradition of the English Romantics, especially Blake, Shelley and Keats. But the following facets of Kinnell's poetry since the mid-1960s has other sources: his emphasis on the unattractive aspects of the human-animal creature; his symbolic, intensely personal imagery; his cosmopolitan vocabulary; his gothic surrealism; his attempt to use ancient Christian and pagan myths in new and subtle ways; his distrust of technology; his embracing of social and political reform movements, especially since the 1960s; the psychological orientation of his imagination; his dedication to the exploration of poetic forms. In these aspects of Kinnell's poetry may be seen the influence of modern and contemporary French and Spanish surrealism, and beyond that of the traditions of French symbolist and French and Italian medieval poetry. Kinnell has successfully translated works of the poets Joao Cabral, Yves Bonnefoy, and Yvan Goll, in addition to that of the great medieval French poet Francois Villon. Kinnell's debt to Dante's vision is
acknowledged by his structuring his long poem, "The Last River" (BR), on Dante's "Inferno," and the epigraph and title of Mortal Acts, Mortal Words (1980), the subject of section II, derive from Petrarch.

These lines of influence temper the strong optimism prevalent in the Emerson/Whitman tradition. In view of twentieth-century history this optimism seems without foundation in reality. These spiritual and poetic sources also perhaps explain the eclectic mixture of idealism and naturalism in Kinnell's poetry since the mid-1960s. Taking into account just the poetic influences on Kinnell's works, Kinnell's work from the mid-1960s to the early 1970s might be described as both neoromantic and neosymbolist, a poetry more closely identified with a world poetry than with a uniquely American tradition or line of development. However, Kinnell himself, in 1972, identified one of his lines of influence as the tradition, in America, of evoking "physical things," of trying to give the physical world "actual presence in a poem" (Dodd and Plumly 35). Poets in the tradition Kinnell describes would include nearly all the poets named as influencing Kinnell's poetics of immersion, foreign and American.8

Finally, tempering the earthiness, worldliness, and darkness of Kinnell's vision as expressed in Body Rags and Nightmares, is the spirit of another great poet, Ranier Marie Rilke, a primary influence on contemporary American poetry, as can be seen in the works of James Wright, Maxine Kumin, Richard Hugo, John Ashbery and many others. Next to Whitman, Rilke has had the greatest influence on Kinnell's works for the past twenty years. The fully realized artistic statements in Nightmares, Mortal Acts, and The Past, despite the differences in the embodiments of those statements, are greatly indebted to Rilke, who has
been both spiritual and poetic mentor for Kinnell. Like Kinnell, Rilke suffered from the horror of emptiness—from the alienated spirit—and turned inward in an effort to spiritualize his body. Kinnell's poetics of immersion makes the same attempt, although Kinnell has not yet given his body and devotions over to exploration of pure spirit as completely as Rilke did in his later poetry.

Before he discovered Rilke, Kinnell held nature at a distance and generally expressed his deepest feelings and concerns ironically or through a dramatic speaker. From Rilke he received his religion, if you will, a vital mystical spiritual sense rooted deeply in human and incarnate acts. From Rilke, as from Whitman, he learned the gesture of reaching into human and animal nature in order to discover and receive salvation. In "The Poetics of the Physical World," first delivered as a lecture in 1968, Kinnell quoted at length from Rilke's "Ninth Elegy," which says, in part, that the poet speaks about and for inanimate things. One of the most successful of Kinnell's efforts in Body Rags, "The Porcupine," pays tribute to Rilke, when Kinnell calls the porcupine that "ultra-Rilkean angel." Nightmares was inspired by Rilke's Duino Elegies. Its epigraph comes from the "Fourth Elegy":

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

(Leishman and Spender trans. Norton, 1963)

Like the Elegies, Nightmares is a poem in ten parts, lacking a plot or narrative structure, yet nevertheless developing the story of a personal spiritual crisis. Mortal Acts and The Past, though looser in organization than Nightmares, at least in part share this same goal.
Kinnell might be said to bring himself closer to the creatures of the world than did Rilke, and to be without Rilke's belief in God or in the certainty of a spiritual life after death. Kinnell is willing to throw himself into association with the earth's creatures in a way that Rilke was not. While Rilke seemed content to say what should be done in the poem, Kinnell attempted to do it in life and in poetry. A Rilke poem tells us, for instance, that it is good to go beyond the contentment of love; in Kinnell's poems, as in Lawrence's love poems and Whitman's "Song of Myself," Kinnell attempts to present this going-beyond, to dramatize it and make it take place as an experience within the poem.

The major influences, then, on the first expressions, in essay and in poetry, of Kinnell's poetics of the physical world were the Emerson/Whitman Tradition and Rilke: the primary sources of the main elements of his newly discovered major focus. In Whitman and in Rilke, as different as their temperaments and poetries were, Kinnell found the path along which to continue his growth inward and the main threads to bind his themes together within a single vision. Both Whitman and Rilke embodied to Kinnell the truest and most encompassing understandings. He felt their responses to experience were reliable for their times and perhaps for all time. Rilke's vision of poetry, in many respects similar to Whitman's, would also become Kinnell's:

O Lord, give each person his own personal death.
A dying that moves out of the same life he lived,
In which he had love, and intelligence, and trouble.
NOTES, CHAPTER ONE


3 Many critics have written on this change in dominant poetic mode that took place in the 1950s and 1960s. Among those who trace this change in Kinnell's style are Sherman Hawkins, Charles Molesworth, Ralph J. Mills, Jr., and Cary Nelson.

4 See Hyatt Waggoner's *American Poets, from the Puritans to the Present* for a discussion of this tradition as I am employing it here.

5 Sherman Hawkins records Kinnell's assertion in 1963 that his ideas of transcendence originate with Plato and the Transcendentalists, particularly Thoreau (63).

6 In the Beckman interview Kinnell says the duties of his religion are to admit his own ignorance.

7 See, for example, Waggoner's discussion of Roethke, pp. 564-77. Waggoner says that Roethke's "preoccupation with the self" is more like Whitman's than Emerson's or Thoreau's in two ways:

   The self takes itself as representative, and the self finds itself, discovers its deeper identity, in love, which requires a full acceptance of the reality of other selves, and not just human ones.

   (575)
Kinnell's poetics of empathetic immersion, as we shall see, in these respects, as in many others, more resembles those of Whitman and Roethke than of Emerson and Thoreau.

In her dissertation, "The Poetry of Galway Kinnell" (U of Kansas, 1975), Lora Reiter says that Kinnell's poetry is in the "organicist tradition," which has been dominant in American poetry since Emerson, and includes Whitman, Levertov, and Creely. Kinnell, she says, states that his poetry, "reattaches itself to the tradition of transcendental and religious meditation."

Emerson expresses this belief also in Nature and "The Poet." Whitman, perhaps echoing Emerson, says it in the 1855 Preface to Leaves of Grass. See also, Waggoner, pp. 154-159, which discusses the effects of "The Poet" on Whitman.
SECTION I

Chapter 2:

WHAT A KINGDOM IT WAS and FLOWER HERDING ON MOUNT MONADNOCK

This chapter examines precursors to Kinnell's poetics of immersion through analyses of selected poems from Kinnell's second and third published books of poetry. Each successive book of Kinnell's has recorded a new phase in the process by which he identified and confronted his major issues.

Critics were quick to notice the possibilities of Kinnell's poetry in What a Kingdom It Was, though most were reluctant to call the book an unqualified success. James Dickey, for example, praised Kinnell's "authentic beginning," but added that Kinnell's vision was not as "deep and abiding" as he would like (104-5). Sherman Hawkins observed Kinnell's employment of Christian symbology and terminology to make reference to a religion without meaning for him and concluded, "Kinnell seems to be a religious poet without religion" (63). Reviewing The Avenue Bearing the Initial of Christ into the New World, a collection containing Kinnell's first three books of poetry, Donald Davie noted the "coarse" writing in What a Kingdom and criticized Kinnell primarily on religious grounds, complaining that he, "wants to experience the transcendent without paying the entrance fee" (20). Davie's primary objection to the book appears to be Kinnell's use of Christian symbol, image, and rhetoric in an unChristian, or secular, sense. In a 1977 article, Andrew Taylor remarked that in What a Kingdom Kinnell was in the process of "divesting later preoccupations of their more habitual
and more traditional Christian vestments" (230). In a 1981 book, Cary Nelson said that in his earlier poems, Kinnell was not yet able to "confront his own cynicism and anguish" (68); thus "The Avenue Bearing the Initial of Christ into the New World" is badly marred by an "unfortunate barrage of mythological, biblical, and literary illusions" (68). Despite these objections to aspects of Kinnell's manner and technique in the book, many critics in the end echo John Logan's opinion, if not his hyperbole, that What a Kingdom was the best first book of poems since James Wright's The Green Wall and "one of the finest books of the past decade" (155).

What a Kingdom contains poems written over the ten-year period between 1950 and 1960. The poems reflect Kinnell's discovery of his separateness from the rest of creation (see "First Song," AB 41 and SP 13; "To Christ Our Lord," AB 44 and SP 14; "The Schoolhouse," AB 83 and SP 18). They also record his first explorations of possibilities of conquering this separateness and completing or healing the self. One possibility of conquering this separateness has traditionally been union with God; that is, belief that one emanates from the Godhead and will reunite with it after human existence ceases. Although even in his early poetry Kinnell rejects this possibility, the poems of What a Kingdom continue to rely on an orthodox symbology and a traditional religious sense. Many of the poems in the book describe a search through the manifestations (symbols and rituals) of traditional, formal, and established religious belief for adequate images to embody and perhaps to soothe the divided consciousness. In this book Kinnell gradually sloughs off, or attempts to secularize Christian belief, vocabulary, imagery, and symbolism as they prove inadequate means to achieve and communicate his personal religious vision. "First
Communion," "To Christ Our Lord," "Easter," "Toward the Wilderness," "Seven Streams of Nevis," and "The Supper After the Last," as their titles suggest, focus on religious and spiritual concerns. They do so from the viewpoint of a speaker, who, though nominally a churchgoer, believes nothing he hears there and gains no comfort from the teachings of Christianity. Through these poems, written in dramatic, ironic modes, Kinnell finds traditional Christian teachings inadequate to his spiritual needs. Though a deeply religious poet, Kinnell was moving from a formal, established religious belief to a more personal one.

"The Supper After the Last," first published in 1960, exemplifies Kinnell's rejection of traditional belief in a form that lowers, and secularizes, familiar spiritual phrases. He hopes to salvage an emptied religious vocabulary to express the alienated condition and perhaps to discover new truths within the traditional words and imagery. The dramatic, ironic mode itself, however, dooms his effort to failure. The poem consists of five fragmented images, strongly influenced in form and substance by Spanish and French surrealists. The opening section reveals a world of sand and illusory water, a wasteland world of spiritual sterility.

In the second section the images from nature are vivid and solidly real, though arranged and lighted like a still-life painting (the initial concentration on the surface details is reminiscent of some of William Carlos Williams' poems):

Outside the open door
Of the whitewashed house,
Framed in its doorway, a chair,
Vacant, waits in the sunshine.
A jug of fresh water stands
Inside the door. In the sunshine
The chair waits, less and less vacant.

("The Supper After the Last," AB 100, SP 25)

The wild man, "the wreck of passion / Emptying his eyes," who then comes
in from the desert to share the host's table, is neither prophet nor
The Savior. He nevertheless brings and embodies the truth of earthly
existence:

I came not to astonish
But to destroy you. Your
Jug of cool water? Your
Hanker after wings? Your
Lech for transcendence?
I came to prove you are
Intricate and simple things
As you are, created
In the image of nothing,
Taught of the creator
By your images in the dirt--

In the last section, the Savior appears, but as a mirage only, despite
the grip on the imagination of the longing for salvation. The Savior
ceases to exist because belief in him is fading: "Far out in that
mirage the Savior sits whispering to the world, / Becoming a mirage."
Our illusions about God and the Christ stripped away, we hear the bare
truth of human existence through the voice of the only Savior, Death
himself:

You are the flesh; I am the resurrection, because I am the light.
I cut to your measure the creeping piece of darkness
That haunts you in the dirt. Step into the light--
I make you over. I breed the shape of your grave in the dirt.

"The Supper After the Last" exemplifies a main theme of What a Kingdom: the secularization of a deeply sensitive, even embittered, religious and spiritual temperament, whose only reference to belief nevertheless remains Christian imagery and symbology. Kinnell doesn't believe the teachings of Christianity, but he finds its emptied and increasingly secularized symbols everywhere. Their emptiness suggests to him that man, as a creature of nature, lives in and dies into nature just as do all other creatures. This theme is also expressed in these last lines from "Freedom, New Hampshire," an elegy for Kinnell's brother, who died in an automobile accident in 1957:

It is true
That only flesh dies, and spirit flowers without stop
For men, cows, dung, for all dead things; and it is good, yes--

But an incarnation is in particular flesh
And the dust that is swirled into a shape
And crumbles and is swirled again had but one shape
That was this man. When he is dead the grass
Heals what he suffered, but he remains dead,
And the few who loved him know this until they die.

(AB 99, SP 24)

Obsessed with death, Kinnell had found by 1960 nothing to cure the divided consciousness, short of death. He discovers a limited consolation in the idea that the dead do not suffer. Little consolation
can be offered the living, however, who must continue to suffer until they die. Traditional religious belief and its symbology are bankrupt as vehicles of transcendence and salvation. They neither alleviate suffering nor heal the spirit living in the knowledge of the most dreadful fact of human existence. Kinnell thus shuts the door on this possibility of conquering his separateness from the rest of creation.

In a few poems in What a Kingdom, however, Kinnell does discover a way to achieve the unity he desires, a way to achieve integration that he may have learned early on from Yeats or Roethke. This theme becomes more central to his life and poetics with each succeeding book, as we shall discover in discussions of Flower Herding on Mount Monadnock, Body Rags, The Book of Nightmares, and especially Mortal Acts, Mortal Words, where it becomes a central tenet in Kinnell’s poetics of empathetic immersion. In What a Kingdom, however, its inauspicious beginnings in a few poems may be expressed in this way: life lived in the attempt to merge with existence through the vehicle of the poem occasionally offers relief from suffering (from knowledge of separateness); that is, music made of the plain, ordinary, disparate or perhaps even ugly materials of life intensely examined and vividly imagined can bring momentary peace of mind, consolation, even joy, to the poet, as in "Freedom, New Hampshire," but only when it arises out of one's deep love of the earth, its beauties and its dark mysteries (see "First Song," AB 41 and SP 13; "Alevives Pool," AB 62; "The Schoolhouse," AB 83 and SP 18, "The Avenue Bearing the Initial of Christ into the New World," AB 105 and SP 28). "Alevives Pool" announces the theme that will become essential to Kinnell’s hopes of discovering the unity of all things: though "the world [burns] on the pulse of April,"

The mind
Can only know what the blood has accomplished
When love has consumed it in the burning pond. (AB 63)

Only when able to freely love all existence can the rational mind (the intelligence, the conscious portion of man's psyche) gain access to man's animal nature, including the unconscious portion of his psyche, which contains memories and abilities, and perhaps even what passes for instincts, normally hidden from the rational mind. The desired state of integration occurs during the simultaneous merging of conscious and unconscious with external reality.

Kinnell discovered he is incomplete, lonely, and isolated because of his separation from nature (a division approved by Christianity). In nature, however, he thinks he discovers manifestations of the supreme harmony and mystery he is seeking. Part of the mystery resides in his obsession with and fear of death ("Where the Track Vanishes," AB 93; "Freedom, New Hampshire," AB 96 and SP 21): his acute sense of the narrow passage of time allotted each of the earth's creatures and of each creature's dissolution into the earth at death. Moreover, life on earth consists primarily of suffering: "The living burn" ("Easter" AB 59). On rare occasions, however, come opportunities for happiness, brief moments during which joy simply happens, usually moments of imaginative union with the natural ("Duck Chasing" AB 75). By the late 1950s, Kinnell had found his major themes (death, alienation, the pain and brevity of life, loneliness, the beauty of the world, love) and was actively seeking a way to gather them together under one vision and spiritual goal. Only a few poems in What a Kingdom touch on what would become Kinnell's major quest, to complete the self by immersing oneself in all of life's experiences, whether joyful or painful:
Now by the trembling water let death and birth
Flow through our selves as through the April grass--
The sudden summer this air flames forth
Makes us again into its blossomers--
Stand on the pulse and love the burning earth.

("Alewives Pool," AB 63)

This desire to love all aspects of existence, despite the suffering that would surely ensue, nevertheless had yet to be made the main theme of his poetry. "Alewives Pool," first published in 1957, is thematically unique among the poems in What a Kingdom. The best of the poems, those in Parts III and IV of the book, were written after the death in 1957 of Kinnell's only brother, Derry, in an automobile accident. Kinnell's intimations of his main theme, suggested by the uncharacteristic poems "Duck Chasing" and "Alewives Pool," as well as by the scope and vision of "Avenue C," perhaps could not become more central to his vision until he had learned to conquer his fears of being burned in the act of metaphorically throwing himself into the fires of life.

Kinnell may have had a failure of belief, or of non-belief, if you will. Just as he could find little personal consolation for his brother's death in the idea that at least the dead no longer suffer, so he was prevented from discovering the imagery that would enable him to unite conscious and unconscious minds through the embrace of the natural world. Christian belief and its imagery failed him; so did the modernists' and surrealists' poetica. "The Supper After the Last" is a wonderful surrealist poem. At the time Kinnell thought it his best poem (see Bell Collection Notes), but it is a machine in which the closed, skeptical rational mind discovers within the unconscious only images of fear and horror. It is difficult to imagine a healthful integration
emerging from this mental state. For this reason, perhaps, Kinnell wrote few surrealist poems, despite his opinion of "The Supper After the Last" as poetry. This poem is unlike most in What a Kingdom, which are characterized by their similarities to the poems of Yeats, Eliot, or Frost. By the end of the volume, Kinnell had recognized his separation from the rest of creation (his solitariness), had begun to explore possibilities of conquering this separateness, during which he had begun to discover sources of his separateness. However, he had yet to discover ways to eliminate the separateness, and was unable either to elude or live with the alienated condition. Thus most of the poems in the volume describe and dramatize the situation of a man trapped in the cell of self. Even the long poem, made of time itself and thus a vehicle for eluding or transcending duration, fails to liberate him:

Maybe the last instant,
The dying itself, is easier,
Easier anyway than the hike
From Pitt the blind gut
To the East River of Fishes,
Maybe it is as the poet said,
And the soul turns to thee
O vast and well-veiled Death
And the body gratefully nestles close to thee--

("The Avenue Bearing the Initial of Christ into the New World," AB 113, SP 36)\textsuperscript{8}

As "Supper After the Last," "Duck Chasing," "Alewives Pool," "Freedom, New Hampshire," and "Avenue C" suggest, however, Kinnell was on the right track. In seeking a new mode for his poetry, he knew intuitively the modernist programs of Pound and Eliot had in them something
destructive to his needs as man and artist: there was in them a drive
toward the extinction of personality. Because theirs was an outward
movement toward objectivity, their poetics precluded the possibility of
getting the unconscious into the poem. Fortunately, Kinnell had early
on instinctively gravitated toward the mentors who could most facilitate
his effort: Yeats and Whitman (see Hawkins 63). Yeats believed the poem
was an infinite concentration of personality, and his body of poetry has
the inward sweep to it that Kinnell desired. The characteristic
structure of a Yeats poem, which Kinnell imitated and modified, moves
inward toward the fusion of conscious and unconscious, while bringing
the things of the world up to the mind and feelings of the poet. "The
Supper After the Last" achieves this inward movement, though it stops
short of the attempt at immersion into experience that Kinnell would
eventually desire. The part-poem patterned after Yeats' forms would
sustain Kinnell's poetry for twenty years and facilitate his quest for a
major unifying vision, as the discussion on Flower Herding, Body Rags,
and Nightmares will demonstrate. By 1960 Kinnell had not yet
assimilated the aspects of Whitman's poetics and broader world view that
would help him most, but he had begun his study of the Whitman
tradition, perhaps at first through the influence of Roethke and Hart
Crane. In What a Kingdom it struggles unsuccessfully against Kinnell's
more deliberate patternings in the Pound and Eliot manner.

What a Kingdom thus represents a 10-year struggle during which
Kinnell discovered his major themes, cast off the forms and influences
that led him away from the search for psychic wholeness he desired, and
began to explore the influences that would assist his effort to discover
a facilitating vision and poetics. In his next book of poetry, Flower
Herding, he turned to nature for comfort from the spiritually stultifying world of cities and the unbearable sufferings of fellow humans as alienated as himself.

II. Flower Herding on Mount Monadnock

Flower Herding contains poems written before 1964. The book is a much more unified work than either of Kinnell's two previous volumes, a fact which critics applauded. Its style is also closer to the style of Kinnell's earlier poems in What a Kingdom, Parts I and II, than to that of poems like "The Supper After the Last" or "Avenue C." Most critics, it appears, were more enamored of Kinnell's poetry in the modes of Yeats, Eliot, Stevens, and Frost (like the poems of What a Kingdom, Parts I and II) than those more ambitious poems in which the influence of Whitman and Roethke mixes and occasionally clashes with other influences, as in Parts III and IV of What a Kingdom. The direct influence of Whitman and Roethke is not apparent in Flower Herding. It appears, rather, to be submerged in the obligations Kinnell pays off in these poems to Thoreau, Hart Crane, Denise Levertov, and Frost. Terry Comito congratulates Kinnell on his "return to the severities of simple statement" (192). In Cry of the Human, Ralph Mills suggests that Kinnell tightened his language in Flower Herding so that he might reproduce original experience as accurately as possible (167). Donald Davie, reviewing Avenue C in 1974, calls Flower Herding Kinnell's best book to date, a statement which elevates Flower Herding above Body Rags (1968) and Nightmares (1971).

A few critics were generally pleased with Kinnell's themes and methods in the book, even when they were not sure whether they understood his methods or agreed with his ideas. Mona Van Duyn, for
instance, likes the way Kinnell's imagination "mingles with and transforms the details of the world" (265), but believes that Kinnell "turns away from the openly personal" in this book. Alan Helms also finds Kinnell writing "his own good poetry," especially in Part II, but assumes that Kinnell's mode in this part is dramatic. Kinnell's "principal posture," he writes, is that of "representative post-Christian existential sufferer" (321). In my view Kinnell was (and is) not posing, and his poetics of immersion enables him to be in his poetry the existential sufferer that he, in fact, is, a condition he feels he shares, as we have seen, with fellow victims of the technological culture. For Kinnell, as for Emerson and Whitman, the man who suffers and the poet who creates are not distinct, but united (see Waggoner 156). Also acknowledging the suffering that is the ground bass in Kinnell's poetry, Robert Pack finds himself dissatisfied with what he believes is Kinnell's easy acceptance of it. At the end of his review, he hopes that Kinnell will "go on [in other books] to render the mystery he believes in more palpably to others' senses, or perhaps to show what it is within himself that bestows benevolence on what he beholds of human anguish" (63). Mills also discovers acceptance at the end of Flower Herding, "a passionate declaration of acceptance that asks nothing further but binds man to temporal creation" (173). However, Comito is closer to the mark, I believe, when he finds commitment, rather than acceptance, in the final poems of the book:

If Kinnell is "slogging toward the absolute," he begins with a recognition of the dense and stubborn particularity of the world he wishes to transcend. And his quest is ballasted—as in Frost and Dickinson—by the colloquial tone that represents, for all the
Andrew Taylor also sees in the poems of Flower Herding Kinnell's "deep involvement with . . . an unremitting regenerative bias" (233), an optimism "bound to a wheel of fire," which Kinnell dramatizes and demonstrates out of his own dark loneliness. Though the style of the poems in Flower Herding may differ from those in Parts III and IV of What a Kingdom, they emerge from the sensibility of a man as alienated and fragmented as the persona of the earlier book.

A section from "The River That is East," originally published in 1961 and first poem in Flower Herding, expresses, among other things, the same spiritual and emotional state with which Kinnell ended "The Supper After the Last," "Freedom, New Hampshire," and "The Avenue Bearing the Initial of Christ into the New World," all poems published in 1960:

We stand on the shore, which is mist beneath us,
And regard the onflowing river. Sometimes
It seems the river stops and the shore
Flows into the past. Nevertheless, its leaked promises
Hopping in the bloodstream, we strain for the future,
Sometimes even glimpse it, a vague scummed thing
We dare not recognize, and peer again
At the cabled shroud out of which it came,
We who have no roots but the shifts of our pain,
No flowering but our own strange lives.

What is this river but the one
Which drags the things we love,
Processions of debris like floating lamps,
Towards the radiance in which they go out?

(AB 124 and SP 46)

Kinnell's predicament is no better in 1964, at the end of *Flower Herding* than it was in 1960, at the end of *What a Kingdom*. He is by now acutely aware of his alienated condition. He is separated from his fellow man, from religion, from the failed promise of the American dream, from himself, from nature. "I love the earth," he wrote in "Middle of the Way," "and always / In its darkness I am a stranger" (AB 165, SP 55). Because of his obsession with death, perhaps exacerbated by the death of his father in 1948 and of his only brother in 1957, he finds himself unable to look closely at a beloved woman, a "beautiful degree of reality," without imagining the skull beneath the skin drifting on the river of time toward the void at the end of human existence:

I think of a few bones
Floating on a river at night,
The starlight blowing in place on the water,
The river leaning like a wave toward the emptiness.

("Poem of Night," AB 161, SP 53)

Other poems in the volume express this emotional state, especially those in Part I, most of which in structure and tone resemble the earlier poems in *What a Kingdom*. Only three poems in this first section resemble the later, more accomplished poems of the previous volume. These are "The River That Is East," "The Homecoming of Emma Lazarus," and "For Robert Frost." All three reflect Kinnell's loss of faith in the American dream and his shaken belief in the notion, suggested in a
few poems in *What a Kingdom*, that poetry, if nothing else, could offer consolation, if not salvation to the poet. Kinnell might be speaking of himself when he says of Robert Frost,

    Poet of the country of white houses,
    . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . .
    . . . who spent

Your life on the point of giving away your heart
To the dark trees, the dissolving woods,
Into which you go at last, heart in hand, deep in:
When we think of a man who was cursed
Neither with the mystical all-lovingness of Walt Whitman
Nor with Melville's anguish to know and to suffer,
And yet cursed . . . A man, what shall I say,
Vain, not fully convinced he was dying, whose calling
Was to set up in the wilderness of his country,
At whatever cost, a man, who would be his own man,
We think of you . . . ("For Robert Frost," AB 145, SP 52)

Kinnell needed to belong to something greater than himself, but he was disillusioned with Christianity and with the "Great Republic," subject of many of the "city" poems of Part I. Thus in Part II Kinnell seeks psychic renewal in the American countryside. He turns to nature, and alone in a landscape simultaneously real and imagined, he searches for the spiritual meaning of life. He hikes alone into places where "the snow is putting down / A last, saprophytic blossoming," and it is "only steps to the unburnable sea" ("Tillamook Journal, second version," AB 149). Physical immersion into nature, however, does not bring mental or spiritual comfort. Unlike the Transcendentalists, with whom he
identifies in these poems, but whose hopeful vision he is unable to achieve, Kinnell sees in nature, despite its variety of life and beauty, the macrocosm of his cell of self. Even hiking alone on a mountain side or along a beach, Kinnell is incomplete: separated from nature, as he was from his fellow man, unable to discover a way inward, to express the "dark" (unconscious, animal) side of himself and in this way re-attach himself to nature:

I know that I love the day,
The sun on the mountain, the Pacific
Shiny and accomplishing itself in breakers,
But I know I live half alive in the world,
I know half my life belongs to the wild darkness.

("Middle of the Way," AB 166, SP 56)

By 1964, lost, fragmented in city and country, Kinnell probes for connections intuitively, stringing fragments and isolated images together into a form he had been approaching for several years, a kind of patch-work poem, hoping the threads he flings will catch somewhere. This kind of poem, made seemingly of fragments or a series of brief images and observations, held together by the predominant emotional state of the persona, effectively reflects the mind in this disconnected, alienated condition. "The Supper After the Last" (WK), as we have seen, and sections of "Avenue C" also embody this fragmented structure. Kinnell would bring this form to perfection in his next two books, *Body Rags* and *Nightmares*, where he uses it to achieve the connectedness he fails to attain in the poems of *Flower Herding*. He continued to use this form, somewhat modified, in poems written in the 1970s.

Because the "part" poem facilitated the development of Kinnell's
poetics of immersion, a close analysis of one of them should reveal the progress of Kinnell's attempt through his poetry to escape or transcend the cell of self, an attempt that eventually led him to transcend the construct of personality by exploration into the unconscious mind. "Ruins Under the Stars" (AB 167, SP 57), first published in 1964, should be read without interrupting explanation, to appreciate the emotional and tonal effects of the part-poem made of these concise, intense, highly charged smaller poems. In "Ruins Under the Stars" and "Spindrift," Kinnell found a technique to express the emotional states and main themes of his next two (and some critics would say greatest) books of poetry: Body Rags and Nightmares.

"Ruins Under the Stars," a poem in five parts, focuses on the physical and emotional state of a lonely, solitary "lost" soul, while he reflects on his own emptied, deadened emotional and spiritual condition and makes an attempt to escape it, primarily by hoping for some kind of spiritual resurrection through participation in the sights and sounds of nature. In part 1 we find the speaker in the ruins of "a plank house sunk up to its windows / In burdock and raspberry cane." The ruined house represents the speaker's empty, devastated spiritual life, as well as the "ruins" of his vision of the American dream, exemplified here by the newspaper article criticizing political independents (by calling them "Mugwumps") and the farmboy turned marine full of pro-war propaganda (in a V-letter, he says he has "tasted battle"). Kinnell had also documented his disappointment with the sins of America elsewhere in Flower Herding, for instance, in "The River That Is East," "The Homecoming of Emma Lazarus," "For Robert Frost," and "Tillamook Journal." Thus the speaker's condition is the result of both inner and
external causes. In addition, he has come to an actual ruined house, its orchards and pastures, either as an act of self-exile (the poems of *What a Kingdom It Was* and the earlier poems in this volume allow for this interpretation) or perhaps hoping to cure himself, possibly through the labor of repairing the damage of time and neglect to the actual house and farm described in the poem. Here is part 1:

All day under acrobat
Swallows I have sat, beside ruins
Of a plank house sunk up to its windows
In burdock and raspberry cane,
The roof dropped, the foundation broken in,
Nothing left perfect but axe-marks on the beams.

A paper in a cupboard talks about "Mugwumps,"
In a V-letter a farmboy in the marines has "tasted battle . . ."
The apples are pure acid on the tangle of boughs,
The pasture has gone to popple and bush.
Here on this perch of ruins
I listen for the crunch of porcupines.

The scene is set. Swallows, the image of the spirit, fly freely and easily in the heavens, while the speaker, spiritually disconnected, sits in the ruins of the farmhouse, listening with dread for the sounds of porcupines, who would devour whatever repairs he has made to the house. In part 2, the speaker longs for spiritual connection, for something to ease his loneliness, but he is frustrated by the immensity and chaos of passing time and expanding space and his failure to believe in Christian conceptions of love and guilt. He feels the need to change himself, to
slough off the old self, as the snake does its old skin, or to accept
death, as willingly as the owl, as a cure for his feeling of incompleteness:

2

Overhead the skull-hill rises
Crossed on top by the stunted apple,
Infinitely beyond it, older than love or guilt,
Lie the stars ready to jump and sprinkle out of space.

Every night under those thousand lights
An owl dies, or a snake sloughs its skin,
A man in a dark pasture

Feels a homesickness he does not understand.

To ease his loneliness, the speaker then turns to thoughts of Canada
geese, in spring, migrating south. We already know, from part 1, that
birds seem to symbolize a kind of freedom, perhaps spiritual, or a
unification of spirit and body lacking in the speaker. At any rate,
they are "in" nature in a way the speaker envies. Perhaps they are part
of nature because they lack free will, human intelligence, or moral
sense. Kinnell does not appear to be denigrating human intelligence or
freedom of choice, however. A man would not choose to become one of
Kinnell's geese, although he is perhaps more like them than he would
care to admit. They do not consider where or why they are flying, but
merely follow instincts, "cranced," and they are lonely, even among
thousands of their fellow geese. This part of the poem seems Kinnell's
answer to other poems that romanticize nature, like Bryant's commonly
anthologized "To a Waterfowl," as well as to the Romantic poets, like
Whitman and Shelley, who envied the birds. In Kinnell's poem it is
instinct, not God, that guides the unthinking geese on their migration:

Sometimes I see them,
The south-going Canada geese,
At evening, coming down
In pink light, over the pond, in great,
Loose, always-dissolving V's--

I go out into the field and listen
To the cold, lonely yelping
Of their tranced bodies in the sky.

The image of these lonely, "tranced" geese, at the center of the poem, represents the distance between the speaker and the cycles of nature, toward which he yearns; but the image also represents the failing attempt of the speaker (and the poet) to bridge that gap. The speaker cannot approach the flock, but must stand his distance, listening to the voices or the songs of the geese. He can no more go among them as a human than he can become a fellow goose. We are reminded of the end of part 1, where the speaker, spiritually dead, sits listening for the "crunch of the porcupines," a sound he dreads.

Part 4 of the poem consists of descriptions of three instances of apparently purposeful human activity, followed by a stanza in which the speaker questions the "flopping and batting about" of a hairstreak (a small butterfly):

This morning I watched
Milton Norway's sky-blue Ford
Dragging its ass down the dirt road
On the other side of the valley.

Later, off in the woods
A chainsaw was agonizing across the top of some stump.
A while ago the tracks of a little, snowy,
SAC bomber went crawling across heaven.

What of that little hairstreak
That was flopping and batting about
Deep in the goldenrod—
Did she not know, either, where she was going?

The speaker questions the purpose of his own activity, and of his life. He may also be questioning the purpose of all human activity. Do any of us know the purpose and meaning of our lives? Perhaps the universe has a hidden meaning, revealed, were we capable of understanding it, in nature's mysterious mechanisms. Instances of the tracings of nature's mechanisms abound in Flower Herding. In this poem we have the lure of man's handiwork to porcupines, the death of the owl, the shedding of the snake's skin, the migration of the geese, the apparently random movements of a small butterfly. Is it through lifting nature intensely to the imagination that one might catch glimmers and flashes of the force which underlies and somehow makes meaningful all activity, all life, revealing at the proper moment, to the one who is ready for it, the harmonies of the universe, uniting inner and outer nature? In the final section of the poem, one feels that Kinnell desires this insight, that it has been the goal of the poem. But the insight doesn't occur, perhaps because Kinnell is not ready. He is reluctant to take anything
on faith. The bird, or angel, that truly reveals the presence of a spiritual realm remains unseen:

Just now I had a funny sensation,
As if some angel, or winged star,
Had been perched nearby.
In the chokecherry bush
There was a twig just ceasing to tremble . . .

The bats come in place of the swallows.
In the smoking heap of old antiques
The porcupine-crackle starts up again,
The bone-saw, the blood music of our sphere,
And up there the stars rustling and whispering.

The speaker returns at the end of his meditation to the setting of part 1. What is confirmed by this structure, based on the circle or spiral, is that the speaker has had no insight, or at least not the one he had hoped for. The swallows (with connotations of goodness and many associations to poetry) are replaced by bats (with unpleasant associations with death, evil, black magic, and so on, and perhaps with the "dark" side of human nature, the unconscious). Day is replaced by night; light by dark. The ruins are now "the smoking heap of old antiques," the aftermath of unholy, earthly fires. The music of the inner life consists of the ordinary sounds of nature: the "porcupine-crackle," the "blood music of our sphere," representing, perhaps, the dark side, the deadly and destructive in nature and within man. While the porcupine represents the earth-bound creature (the body), the birds
in the poem represent the creature of the heavens (the spirit). The speaker, whose motionlessness or inactivity throughout the poem ("All day . . . I have sat" and so on) signifies emotional and spiritual death or death-in-life, is alienated from the entire realm of nature and spirit; thus though he has "sensations" or intimations of the presence of the spiritual, he is unable to achieve the vision of it he desires. The music of the spheres, finally, consists of an imagined "rustling and whispering" of stars that in part 2 were ready to "jump and sprinkle out of space."

"Spindrift," a part-poem like "Ruins Under the Stars," explores the themes of time, dying, and death from the perspective of man's ignorance of all three. At the center of the poem, in part 4, the speaker sits on the shifting sands of an unstable world, "listening / To the surf," to the "power and inexhaustible freshness of the sea," a symbol for Kinnell of the richness, variety, goodness, and ultimate mystery of earthly life. The sounds of the waves collapsing onto the beach recall the hidden rhythms of nature, as they did for Whitman and Hart Crane: "It is the most we know of time, / And it is our undermusic of eternity." In the end, however, as in "Ruins Under the Stars," the mysteries for which Kinnell hungers remain unrevealed, life and death remain disconnected, and Kinnell, regressing to the dramatic mode of What a Kingdom and of Part I of Flower Herding, must be satisfied with the rationalizations of an imagined old man:

The swan dips her head
And peers at the mystic
In-life of the sea,
The gull drifts up
And eddies toward heaven
The breeze in his arms . . .

Nobody likes to die
But an old man
Can know
A kind of gratefulness
Toward time that kills him,
Everything he loved was made of it.

("Spindrift," AB 171, SP 59)

Neither the stars in heaven nor the "mystic in-life of the sea" reveal any spiritual essence to him. This remains invisible (that is, nonexistent).

Is the poet alienated from everything? What of poetry itself? Does the act of composing poems perhaps provide solace, if not healing?

In a few poems in What a Kingdom, Kinnell had suggested the idea that integration might be achieved through imaginative union with nature through the poem. In "Homecoming of Emma Lazarus," published in 1961, however, Kinnell wrote, "She has wept a long time now, and now poetry / Can do no more to her" (AB 128 [emphasis mine]). In "To a Child in Calcutta," a photograph of Kinnell holding the Indian child represents "all for which his heart tore itself" (AB 133, SP 47); in "For Denise Levertov," Kinnell hopes the sight of a bum will rekindle in the poetess and friend "the hapless / Witness crying again in your breast" (AB 140).

In the penultimate section of "For Robert Frost," Kinnell attempts to explain why Frost, despite his suspicion that the basic principle of life was evil, turned away from death and continued to live and to write poetry:
He turned. Love.

Love of things, duty, he said,
And made his way back to the shelter
No longer sheltering him, the house
Where everything was turning to words,

Where he would think on the white wave,
Folded back, that rides in place on the obscure
Pouring of this life to the sea--

And seal the lips

Of his sorrow with the mot juste. (AB 144, SP 51)

The poet, like all of nature, responds to the sorrows in his life through sounds: "Blown on by their death / The things on earth whistle and cry out" ("Tree from Andalusia," AB 170). The poem is a record of the poet's sufferings, from which he can expect no release through the poem. This same image recurs in the last poem in the volume, "Flower Herding on Mount Monadnock." The poem, the elegy, can provide only temporary relief from thoughts of the deaths of friends and loved ones. Through the poem, one can only momentarily break through to happiness:

There is something joyous in the elegies

Of birds. They seem

Caught up in a formal delight,

Though the mourning dove whistles of despair.

But at last in the thousand elegies

The dead rise in our hearts,

On the brink of our happiness we stop

Like someone on a drunk starting to weep. (AB 175, SP 63)
The face, like the poem a sensitive instrument for recording human emotions, also reveals Kinnell's preoccupation, in Flower Herding with death and dissolution. Even his self-portrait, at the center of "Flower Herding," like the face of his beloved in "Poem of Night," reflects his obsession with death:

I kneel at a pool,
I look through my face
At the bacteria I think
I see crawling through the moss.

My face sees me,
The water stirs, the face,
Looking preoccupied,
Gets knocked from its bones. (AB 175, SP 63)

Thus at the end of Flower Herding, Kinnell had come this far: "... as if the life in me / Were slowly remembering what it is" ("Poem of Night," AB 162, SP 54). Love, it appears, and only love brings him back occasionally from obsession with his sorrows, disappointments, failures. Primarily, the mood of Flower Herding, as Kinnell notes himself, is elegiac:

I know
The birds fly off
But the hug of the earth wraps
With moss their graves and the giant boulders.

("Flower Herding," AB 176, SP 64)

Kinnell's situation is no better in 1964, at the end of Flower Herding than it was in 1960, at the end of What a Kingdom. He is
separated from his fellow men, from religion, from the failed promise of the American dream, from nature, and from his inner self. Both books document Kinnell's continuing search for the forms and poetics to express and to heal his isolated spirit. In this respect, *Flower Herding*, like *What a Kingdom*, may be considered a failed attempt. In the last section of the final poem in the book, Kinnell's appeal to heaven brings him only to death:

In the forest I discover a flower.

The invisible life of the thing
Goes up in flames that are invisible
Like cellophane burning in the sunlight.

It burns up. Its drift is to be nothing.

In its covertness it has a way
Of uttering itself in place of itself,
Its blossoms claim to float in the Empyrean,

A wrathful presence on the blur of the ground.

The appeal to heaven breaks off.
The petals begin to fall, in self-forgiveness.
It is a flower. On this mountainside it is dying.

("Flower Herding on Mount Monadnock," AB 177, SP 64)

Kinnell's "appeal to heaven" through the ministry of nature "breaks off" at the end of *Flower Herding*. The most he can say here is that the drift of all life is to be nothing. Kinnell's poetics reach a dead end.
His poems can accurately and convincingly embody the alienated condition, but preclude the possibility of relief from it. By the time he published his next book of poems in 1968, however, he had discovered an enabling poetics and the major influences to help him develop the meditative forms with which to explore and begin to heal his existential loneliness.
NOTES, CHAPTER TWO

1Kinnell's first book of poetry, *First Poems 1946-1954*, was apparently published in limited edition in the mid-1950s. In 1971 it was republished by Houghton Mifflin. In 1974 Kinnell collected *First Poems, What a Kingdom It Was*, and *Flower Herding on Mount Monadnock* in a single volume entitled *The Avenue Bearing the Initial of Christ into the New World: Poems 1946-64*. The *Avenue C* versions of some of the poems from *What a Kingdom* and *Flower Herding* differ significantly from the versions as originally published in the individual volumes. Kinnell explains how the changes came about in the Preface to *Avenue C*. In my discussions of *What a Kingdom* and *Flower Herding*, I have used, and footnoted, the versions collected in *Avenue C*. Some of these poems were subsequently published in *Collected Poems* (1982).

2Since *First Poems* was published in a limited edition, until the publication of *Avenue C* in 1974, most critics and readers believed *What a Kingdom* was Kinnell's first book of poetry.

3See Hawkins, p. 63, for discussion of these poems.

4See Ralph Mills' *Cry of the Human*, pp. 158-163, for an analysis of this poem as "a culmination of a sort as well as a new start" (158). Mills says at the end of his discussion, prematurely, I believe, that "Kinnell has purged himself in the poems [of *What of Kingdom*] of personal anxieties and questionings with regard to death, Christ, the purpose and goal of existence" (162).

5Several critics have noted the influence of Eliot on many of the poems in *What a Kingdom*, among them Helms, Mills, Nelson, and Jane Taylor. Hawkins, Helms, and Logan have listed the influence of Frost,
Williams, and Yeats, and more significantly, all three noticed, as early as 1963, Kinnell's indebtedness to "Father Whitman" (Logan 156).

6 In a note to First Poems in Avenue C, Kinnell wonders if he might have better spent the time he devoted in his late teens to searching for "the right iambic beat" and rhyme word. Then he adds, "I will never know, and in any event, it is not possible for me to regret a travail which released in me so much energy and excitement, to which I gave myself so entirely, and which saved me" (italics mine) (AB 3).

7 Poems of this kind are rare in Kinnell's writing until Mortal Acts, Mortal Words. "Duck Chasing" is whimsical, yet reaches deeply into human yearnings for contact with the spiritual and natural realms; it is convincing in use of realistic detail, yet evokes out of the natural symbol a sense of union and satisfaction with nature. Andrew Taylor correctly assesses the importance of "Duck Chasing" in the development of Kinnell's poetry, when he calls the poem a "lighthearted illustration of Kinnell's later pronouncement that our deepest desire . . . is to be one with all creation" (233). Here is the poem in its entirety:

Duck-Chasing

I spied a very small brown duck
Riding the swells. "Little duck!"
I cried. It paddled away,
I paddled after it. When it dived,
Down I dived too; too smoky was the sea,
We were lost. It surfaced
In the west, I swam west
And when it dived I dived,
And we were lost and lost and lost
In the slant smoke of the sea.
When I came floating up on it
From the side, like a deadman,
And yelled suddenly, it took off,
It skimmed the swells as it ascended,
Brown wings burning and flashing
In the sun as the sea it rose over
Burned and flashed underneath it.  
I did not see the little duck again.  
Duck-chasing is a game like any game.  
When it is over it is all over.  (AB 75)

8For illuminating discussions of "Avenue C," consult Hawkins, p. 65; Mills, pp. 163-67; and Nelson, p. 69.

9See WS 42-3, where Kinnell acknowledges the influence of Yeats on his early poetry and on the forms of his part-poems at least through Nightmares.

10The title of "The River That Is East," alludes to Hart Crane's phrase in The Bridge, Part VII, "The Tunnel." Kinnell wrote his master's thesis on Crane's The Bridge and as American and artist felt a spiritual kinship with Crane. Both men believed the American dream had failed the common person. Crane once lived in the room in Brooklyn that the builder of the bridge had lived in. While he was composing parts of his epic, the room provided Crane a clear view of the Brooklyn Bridge over the East River. Kinnell understands the attraction of Crane's dream of America, which was failing even as he wrote his epic praising the America of his imagination. Kinnell's empathy with Crane's effort is expressed at the end of "The River That Is East," where he writes, ", . . . it is the River that is East, known once / From a high window in Brooklyn, in agony" (AB 125, SP 46).

11I borrow the term "part" poem from Jane Taylor's, "The Poetry of Galway Kinnell," an analysis of selected poems from What a Kingdom and Flower Herding.

12Linda Wagner's interesting analysis of "Spindrift" in "Spindrift: The World in a Seashell," discusses the poem as an example of the structures used in Body Rags and Nightmares. Kinnell employed these structures in order to "depict ways of living and thinking which
would move readers because of the aptness and beauty of the language used" (5). In "Spindrift," Kinnell explores the "intimations of immortality" theme succinctly and vividly. Jane Taylor also discusses it in "The Poetry of Galway Kinnell." She views "Spindrift" as a meditative poem of a special kind, whose audience consists of the reader as well as of the "larger, total mind of the poet himself" (198). Thus Kinnell's goal in the poem is the achievement of a "moment of emotional resolution." Taylor's view, closer to my own than Wagner's, is that the poem enacts a process of self-discovery.
SECTION I

Chapter 3:

Body Rags and The Book of Nightmares

Chapters 1 and 2 of this section sketched the process of psychic integration that has been the goal of Kinnell's poetry from the beginning. The primary goal of his poetry has been to close the gap through signs between his consciousness and his "sacred" biological past. In his poetry before Body Rags (1968), however, Kinnell was unable to make significant progress toward the fulfillment of this desire. Through the new type of poem that he wrote after 1965, however, Kinnell was increasingly more successful within the poem at merging conscious and unconscious, inner and external realities, visible and invisible, secular and divine. In the late 1960s he began writing a poetry that made possible the eventual achievement in The Book of Nightmares (1971) of a richly textured poetry based solidly on his poetics of the physical world.

This chapter discusses the main themes and underlying poetics of Body Rags and Nightmares, poems written after Kinnell had formulated and articulated a poetics of empathetic immersion. Kinnell's new poetics coupled with his essentially dark, but deeply sensitive temperament, in which spirituality continually warred against earthiness to produce a visionary poetry of intense specificity and darkness. Kinnell termed this conflict the contest between wanting to transcend and wanting to belong (Gardner 423). First, the chapter examines Kinnell's poetics of empathetic immersion, which he began to work out in the late 1960s in
healthy response to his need to unify, or heal, his own fragmented personality (see especially PD). By the mid-1960s, as chapter 2 argued, Kinnell doubted that this reintegration of personality could happen through the poem; but after Nightmares he would feel that it perhaps could occur, but only within the poem; that is, that while composing the poem, the poet has a feeling or sense of completeness, which disappears when he stops writing.

Second, the chapter demonstrates, through an analysis of poems in Body Rags and Nightmares, Kinnell's attempt to write a new poetry of empathetic immersion into the dream-like, fragmented world of the unconscious, through the mediation of fellow creatures, like rooster, tadpole, porcupine and bear. In a 1972 interview, Kinnell explained why the porcupine and bear seemed to hold such meaning for him as personal symbols: "They [the porcupine and bear] were animals in whom I felt I could seek my own identity, discover my own bearness and porcupinehood" ("The Weight That a Poem Can Carry," 37; Dodd and Plumly in WS [emphasis mine]). Kinnell would employs his own experiences in "The Last River" and Nightmares in an attempt to achieve the same goal more directly.

The poems in Body Rags and Nightmares, finally, harmonize with Kinnell's poetics as expressed primarily in two essays, "The Poetics of the Physical World" (1969) and "Poetry, Personality, and Death" (1971). Through a deeply sensitive personality, obsessed with the dark side of life, Kinnell attempts to transform the self through empathetic unification of whole self with all that is outside it. In Body Rags and Nightmares he does this by expressing a love for all things, made deeper and more precious by suffering and the looming presence of death. The main subject (the light) of these two books is neither death, nor the horrors of the spiritual and moral life in the 1960s in North
America, although these subjects figure prominently in both books. The emotion guiding Kinnell's explorations in these poems is love—a love that encompasses all experiences, all existence—a love that surpasses understanding, because it is ultimately a process of the unconscious and not the rational mind. This nearly forgotten instinct to love the self and all creatures and to "belong wholly to the life of the planet" (PD 69) is to Kinnell the only power that can save the human species from destroying itself and the planet.

In the 1960s Kinnell had seen enough of the social turmoil within the United States to justify his growing belief that madness prevails in the technological society. Between 1964, when Flower Herding on Mount Monadnock was published, and 1968, when Body Rags appeared, Kinnell worked for six months, in 1963-1964, as a field worker for the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) registering voters in Hammond, Louisiana. In 1965 he was injured in a demonstration against segregation in Montgomery, Alabama. He was arrested for his part in the protest and spent a brief time in jail. In 1966 with Robert Bly and James Wright, he toured New York state colleges, reading poems in protest against the United States' involvement in the Vietnam War (WS 110). From 1965 through 1968, he was poet-in-residence at several colleges during a time of commitment to social causes, in which many college students, like Kinnell himself, were deeply involved (see Gerber and Gemmet 132).

A lecture Kinnell delivered in September 1968, "The Poetics of the Physical World," indicates the direction his poetry and poetics took between the 1964 publication of Flower Herding and the publication of Body Rags in 1968, though his poetry itself did not fully reflect the poetics until Nightmares. The lecture advocates a poetry contrasting in
several important ways with the poetry Kinnell had written in *What a Kingdom It Was* and *Flower Herding*. It constitutes, in fact, a final rejection of Pound and Eliot. Kinnell's poetry would no longer use the dramatic or ironic modes, in which the poet/speaker distanced himself from the experiences depicted in the poem. Neither would the poet observe and record sufferings and joys of a deliberately created persona or speaker (see especially PD). The poem itself would no longer be defined primarily as a completed, consciously crafted artifact of the rational mind. Kinnell, the man and the poet, would abandon his role or pose as self-exiled seeker of the spiritual, whose concerns transcended the daily and the ordinary. Instead, he would plunge into experiences that before he had feared and avoided. Like the other activities in his life as husband, father, teacher, friend, civil rights activist, and anti-war protester, his poetry would not just reflect or represent his search for wholeness, but would be a significant part of the search itself: the poem as process, as an exploration of the inner self, would be the vehicle by which the consciousness explored inner and outer experience. The goal of the poem would be to open, transfigure, and complete the self (PD 67-8).

In other words, Kinnell's poetry began to be another way by which he participated in daily earthly existence. The speaker of the poems is the conscious self (beginning with his own personality), exploring the particular circumstances and experiences of his own life in an effort to reunite the elements of the fragmented self. Kinnell's poetry of *Body Rags* is more difficult than his earlier poetry in part because of the concentration in the new poetry of images and symbols arising from Kinnell's unconscious and placed intuitively on the page in an effort to coax unconscious thoughts and memories into the open; that is, to trust
the creating and symbol-making abilities of the unconscious. The acquired symbol, having a long literary and cultural history, is easier to understand because of its familiarity, but because of its long association with the literature of the past, it necessarily subverts the process of inner exploration that Kinnell placed at the center of his new poetics. Kinnell's poetry would be the experience itself of his own search in the dark side of life for understanding of his alienated condition. It would embrace the dying world and search out the "music of its broken nature" (Gardner 422) in order to dance "the still undanced cadence of vanishing" (BN 52).

In "The Poetics of the Physical World," Kinnell advocates a modern poetry that expresses the bare truth about reality, the joyous and the painful, without providing or relying on those myths of consolation that prevent him from exploring and understanding his most fundamental emotional nature:

The modern poem discards the inner conventions of poetry, as well as the outward forms. A function of these old conventions is to give us ways of dealing with painful reality. The more entrenched the conventions, the more consolation they try to offer, and consequently the more irrelevant they become. They embue us with conventional feelings to the point that we no longer feel anything at all. (PW 11)

Kinnell rejects "conventional feelings" because he wishes to discover the naked truth of his own emotional existence and the gritty realities of human life. Poetry is a search not for consolation or for beauty, but for truth:

Simone Weil writes: "Keep away from beliefs which fill the
emptiness, which sweeten the bitterness. Avoid the belief in
immortality, and the belief in the guiding hand of Providence.
For," she goes on, "love is not consolation, it is light." And
this is also true for poetry. The poetics of heaven agrees to the
denigration of pain and death; the poetics of the physical world
builds on these stones. (PW 14)

Although he rejects traditional sources of consolation, Kinnell
believes life is intrinsically painful, a living death. In the poems of
his first two books, What a Kingdom and Flower Herding, his favorite
metaphor for the painful processes of life is fire, representative of
the Heraclitean flux, as, for example, in "Flower Herding on Mount
Monadnock":

In the forest I discover a flower.

The invisible life of the thing
Goes up in flames that are invisible
Like cellophane burning in the sunlight. (AB 177, SP 64)

The constant transformations and endless resurrections of fire
represent reality in Kinnell's poetry. Since pain and suffering, and
dying itself, constitute life, death is desired. At the same time,
however, death is also feared. These conflicting attitudes toward death
obsess Kinnell. They create a conflict central to his poetry; what he
fears from death is extinction; what he welcomes is absorption. While
we fear our own disappearance from the physical world, Kinnell says, and
cannot believe in the existence of a spirit or soul that outlives the
body, within each of us is a desire to be changed, to become a "new"
person or to be "re-newed" through merging with another creature.
Kinnell sees this as an essentially sexually based desire for fusion
with other life (WS 112). It is a kind of death-wish, he says, and simultaneously a desire for more life. Kinnell wrote,

We may note that the desire to be some other thing is suicidal; it involves a willingness to cease to be a man. But this is not a simple wish for extinction so much as it is a desire for union with what is loved. And so it is a desire for more, not less, life. ... It may also happen, in life, that to truly desire this kind of oneness is already to achieve it. Whatever we love may enter us and exist anew within us. (PW 19)

This is Kinnell's first expression in prose of what would become his major theme, which in this context, might be paraphrased as follows: The desire to become another creature is a desire for union with what is loved, which is a desire for more life. If in our poetry we truly desire this oneness with another, we have perhaps achieved it. Kinnell knows that growth involves extinction of the old self, and he fears this death, but, at the same time, he desires self-knowledge through union with the other (see PD 74). In the end his "hunger to be changed" proves stronger than his fear of losing his identity:

It is perhaps true that a poem entails a struggle with one's own nature, that it comes partially out of our hunger to be changed—and so may be an act of longing for what we are unable to be. ... I doubt that, in serious poems, death and life can be separated at all. It is obvious that poems craving heaven involve a certain death-wish. But in the great poems affirming life we may be even more clearly in the presence of some kind of will to die. (PW 18)

Kinnell's poetics of immersion developed while he was writing the poems that eventually appeared in Body Rags and Nightmares. These ideas
about the purpose of poetry and the thorniest paradoxes of life and death appear in his essays and interviews of the time, as well as in masterful poems like "The Porcupine," "The Bear," "The Hen Flower," "Little Sleep's-Head Sprouting Hair in Moonlight," and others in these two collections. Though not explicitly autobiographical or confessional, these poems contain tracings of the experiences that informed and altered Kinnell's inner life.

The poem too

is a palimpsest, streaked

with erasures, smelling

of departure and burnt stone. ("The Poem," BR 27)

The poem is like a scarred hill in which layers of time past lie fossilized. It contains whatever the poet has done or been.

Kinnell ends "The Poetics of the Physical World" with a fragment of a poem "by or about American Indians" (PW 21):

The earth is all that lives
And the earth shall not last.
We sit on a hillside, by the Greasy Grass,
And our little shadow lies out in the blades of grass,
until sunset. (PW 20)

The first sentence of this fragment becomes the central question in Nightmares: "Is it true / the earth is all there is, and the earth does not last?" (BN 73, SP 118). The question leads to a point central to the meaning of Nightmares and to Body Rags: "Living brings you to death, there is no other road" (BN 73). As the ending of Nightmares loops back to its beginning, so the ending of Kinnell's longest poem, on one level a dramatization of the situation of a fragmented consciousness in the United States in the late 1960s, returns to the first statement of the
poetics that nourished and enabled its embodiment.

The goal of *Body Rags* is the goal of Kinnell's earlier poetry of *What a Kingdom* and *Flower Herding*: he still seeks the spiritual meaning of the pain and suffering of life. Between 1964 and 1968, however, he had decided upon a new approach to the achievement of this goal, which can be expressed in the form it took as the central theme of his 1966 novel *Black Light* and of *Body Rags* and *Nightmares*: the only way to discover salvation (the sacred in life), if salvation is possible, is by embracing the imperfect, dying world. Kinnell's poetics and poetry between 1964 and 1968 turned inward, as we have seen, toward an exploration of the inner self, and downwards, toward a poetry invoking the actual presence of the things and creatures of the natural world. Poetry would continue to be a search for personal salvation, spoken in the voice "with which prayers are spoken" (Gerber and Gemmett 133; "in which all rituals are spoken," WS 6), but the poem would itself be the vehicle of the plunge inward and downward, and the voice and experience of the poet himself would validate and authenticate the quest for psychic wholeness. Instead of being a record of the poet's or his speaker's sufferings (the experience itself, recollected in anxiety), the poem would fulfill the poet's desire to be one with what is loved (PW 19), and to be "more related to the natural life" (PD 74). The poem, in short, would be the vehicle for and simultaneously the expression of the poet's attempt to merge with creation.

*Body Rags* is one long wish (desire, prayer for help to) open oneself to the rhythms of reality—to embrace the dying world—and in the end the attempt is an oddly qualified partial success in its last poem, "The Bear." *Nightmares*, an attempt to make connections with other human beings, ends also in only partial success. This "concert of one /
divided among himself" (BN 75), ends with the speaker letting go, making the "earthward gesture," but not yet in contact with the earth, which represents, in part, the physical world that Kinnell longs to touch.

Critical reception to Body Rags was immediately enthusiastic. Although a few readers called the shorter poems of Part I too trivial (see, for example, Floyce, Lieberman and Dicks) and others found some of Kinnell's lines unpoetic (for example, Davie, Hazo, and Jerome), most reviewers called Body Rags Kinnell's best book of poetry and "The Last River" and "The Bear" remarkable poems. Expressing the sentiments of many others, Alexander Floyce, called "The Bear," "one of the great poems written these past years" (69). Only a few voices were raised against Kinnell's ideas and methods. Donald Davie, for instance, accused Kinnell of descending "into the bestial" in "The Bear" (22).

Judson Jerome said that Body Rags is awash in "the green language of fertility that springs from scum"; he suggested that Kinnell restrain his "steaming imagination and concupiscent vocabulary" (33).^6

Other critics' analyses of poems in Body Rags have provided useful starting points for the present study. I am greatly indebted to Charles Molesworth's "The Rank Flavor of Blood." In "The Poem," "The Porcupine," and "The Bear" Molesworth, almost alone of the critics writing in the early 1970s, found "sure indicators of a new postmodern aesthetic in contemporary poetry." Kinnell, Molesworth wrote, moves "beyond the suspension of irony toward the immersion of empathy" (235). I have adapted Molesworth phrase "immersion of empathy" to describe the poetics Kinnell in 1968 called "the poetics of the physical world." Among other studies of value to my analysis of Body Rags are Andrew Taylor's "The Poetry of Galway Kinnell"; the chapter on Kinnell in Ralph
Mills' *Cry of Human,* Cary Nelson's discussion of *Body Rags* in chapter three, pp. 70-76, of *Our Last First Poets;* and, finally, B. J. Williams' review of *Body Rags.* I have borrowed freely from Williams' ideas on Kinnell's treatment of the poetic line, although I cannot agree with his conclusion that Kinnell "is moving toward a rejection of the poetic line as a structural element" (34). In addition, I have adapted, and learned from, his discussion of *Body Rags* itself as an experiment in the long poem.

Critical reception to *Body Rags* lined up enthusiastically on the side of Kinnell's experiments in a poetry of immersion, in the tradition of Roethke, Whitman and Rilke. Kinnell's final rejection of Eliot's influence caused little stir (only Davie seemed morally outraged), compared to the receptions accorded the Whitmanesque poems in *What a Kingdom* and *Flower Herding.* Additional testimony to Kinnell's achievement in *Body Rags* and to the book's value to readers in 1968-69 appeared the year after it was published. In 1969 *Body Rags* received special mention by judges of the American Book Award for Poetry.7

*Body Rags*8 brings together Kinnell's first expressions of a new poetry based on his poetics of empathetic immersion. The goal of the book is to embrace the imperfect, mortal world. Kinnell's quest fails, in part because Kinnell cannot bring himself or is simply unable to embrace fully the "dark" side of himself and nature. In terms of his own favorite metaphor for the process of life, fire, Kinnell cannot bring himself to embrace the flames, to throw himself onto the bonfire of life, knowing that a man cannot fly out of his own ashes.

The quest also fails because, although Kinnell has found the world view, the poetics, and the personal voice to facilitate his journey toward psychic, the forms many of his poems took and his method of
"assembling" these part- or "patch-work" poems\(^9\) guaranteed the continuation of fragmentation, and in fact perhaps exacerbated the disintegration of his personality, which contributes such a vital authenticity and intensity to the speaker's voice in Nightmares. His poetics say he is writing poems that wander in search of fulfillment and that record the wandering, but do not necessarily find the desired union of self (see PW). In Body Rags each attempt at easing existential loneliness fails because the forms Kinnell's poems took precluded an integration he desired so deeply he claimed more than once that to truly desire a thing is a form of having it (see, for example, PW 19 and PD 74).

Kinnell's poems in Body Rags resemble Wordsworth's spots of time; they reveal "lightning-flashed" moments of either intense self-illumination or of attempts, through poetry, to understand the unknown self\(^{10}\) by opening the consciousness to experiences, memories, dreams, fears, fantasies, hallucinations, and objects of contemplation with an indefinable sense of intensity or depth or inwardness about them. They might be archetypal or mythic patterns, or fascinating for some singularly personal yet mysterious reason. These moments of illumination, which reveal the unconscious mind to us, appear in the conscious mind as short, intense, somewhat cryptic or mysteriously symbolic images or portions of narratives. They do not resemble finished poems, but rather are like what Kinnell called "scraps" of poems. These scraps or parts of poems also do not usually come to the poet in series, one after another, in forms the conscious mind easily recognizes as poem-like shapes. Instead, in Kinnell's case, one lightning-flashed moment might occur many months or perhaps years before
another one having a similar subject or object of contemplation. Or part of one poem consisting of several such images might eventually become a poem when combined or placed before or after a section of another poem made of a number of such "deep" images.\textsuperscript{11} By means of this psychic progression or "progression of consciousness," as Kinnell called it ("The Weight That a Poem Can Carry" 27), the poet's rational mind probes for the bottom of his being, "without maps," in a deep exploration of his subject.

*Body Rags* contains many poems of varying length written in this manner, from the two-part "Lost Loves" to the 27-part "The Last River." They interweave common images, words, and concerns, and sometimes blend into one another, each poem a variation on a few themes. All of the poems concern the central character's attempt to discover why he cannot open himself to the "rhythm of reality" (Gerber and Gemmett 129). The primary quest of the book might be stated this way: If a man could only open himself to the rhythm of reality, then he might hope for the birth of an integrated self (or a renewal of self) more attuned to the natural and primitive within himself as well as to the creatures of the earth, whose whole beings effortlessly exist in harmony with creation.

In "Ruins Under the Stars" (AB 157, SP 57), as we saw in chapter 2, Kinnell's persona, at the center of the poem, goes out into a field, and, "amazed and moved," watches the southern migration of Canada geese, a vision of the deep mystery of nature, if not of the infinite, from which man is excluded. At the end of the poem, as the discussion of it revealed, Kinnell's persona realizes his alienation from the realms of nature and spirit. "Another Night in the Ruins," first poem in *Body Rags*, returns to the scene of the earlier poem, but with a new vision and a new poetics by which to explore man's spiritual relationship to
the natural world. At the center of "Another Night in the Ruins," Kinnell is the bird, a condition he shares with others, and he is a flightless bird, profoundly earth-bound:

Wind tears itself hollow
in the eaves of my ruins, ghost-flute
of snowdrifts
that build out there in the dark:
upside-down
ravines into which night sweeps
our torn wings, our ink-splattered feathers. (BR 4, SP 67-8)

At the end of "Ruins Under the Stars," Kinnell longs for the infinite, for the music not just of this sphere, though he can only imagine "up there the stars rustling and whispering." At the end of "Another Night in the Ruins," Kinnell states in explicit terms his poetics of immersion, his desire to participate in the rhythms of reality:

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 own ashes,
that for a man
as he goes up in flames, his one work
is
to open himself, to be
the flames? (BR 4, SP 68)12

Responding to questions about this last part of the poem, Kinnell said during a 1969 interview,

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. . . . 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. (Gerber and Gemmett 129)

Other interviews suggest what it is that Kinnell wishes to release himself from: the portion of his personality that is the "product of an unmythetical, technological society" ("The Weight That a Poem Can Carry" 34). In other words,

To some degree or another we have all been rendered into what you might call "technological beings." We are part of a technological society consecrated to controlling, using and disposing of the natural, this is a part of the consciousness we all have. . . . [The function of poetry] is to return oneself and perhaps even others to a sense of their natural beings. (McKenzie 217)

Kinnell, like Thoreau, is one who "sickens in the presence of the will to detach, objectify, and dominate" (WS 18).

I suppose that in human societies from the beginning, there was both a drive to control and dominate the rest of life, and also a desire to be one with the rest. These opposing urges must have been in reasonable balance, often both must have been present in the same act, of hunting, cultivation, propitiation, and so on.

Since the Renaissance the drive to dominate has won out. (WS 18)

Several of the poems of Body Rags, Part I, express as a fervent wish Kinnell's desire to open himself to the rhythm of the natural, for example, in phrases like "how many nights" (both "How Many Nights" and
"Another Night in the Ruins") or "could we only" ("Last Songs"). In "How Many Nights" (BR 22, SP 74), this hope for the rebirth of an integrated self, a self with greater knowledge, is encouraged in the speaker by his intimation of a correspondence between the awakening in the spring of hibernating animals and his possible spiritual renewal.

This poem provides a good example of the method Kinnell used to assemble many of the poems in Body Rags. Kinnell said it originally was written in fall, 1962 for a reading at St. John's (see Bell Collection Notes 9). The original took this form (entitled "The Tree" by 1965) when Kinnell was writing a group of poems on trees:

To climb those trees
in summer
to feel the right light
the flesh of leaves
the green light-flesh,

to hear a wild crow
calling 'yaw, yaw, yaw,'
far back in my life
on a branch nothing,
not a leaf even, ever perched on before.

(Bell Collection, The Trees, "To climb those trees")

In the mid-1960s, Kinnell was also writing a long poem, in sections, under the working title "The Visible Shore." Kinnell sent a draft of the poem to Charles Bell, with the following comment: "A draft of a new piece, pretty much of a jumble, I'm afraid. The same themes touched on but without suitable progression. But how to have one, with so many
bits and scraps?" (Bell Collection, handwritten note on draft of "The Visible Shore").

Several sections of this poem later appeared in Body Rags [see Bell Collection Notes]. Here is section 10:

How many nights
Have I lain in terror, faithless,
O Creator Spirit . . .

Only,
The next day,
To walk out
Into the strange dazzled world

And hear underneath my feet
That creaked in the snow slow
Breaths in the sleep of trust . . . slept by cold lives . . .
Lizards . . . snakes . . . frogs . . .
Bats (Bell Collection, draft of "The Visible Shore," Section 10)

The last part of "To climb those trees" was subsequently affixed to the revised "Creator Spirit poem." The result, published in 1967 as "How Many Nights," is a prayer for union of mind, spirit, and body with or through the "sleep of trust" of animals hibernating under the earth:

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.

("How Many Mights," BR 22, SP 74)17

The speaker, afraid of his own loneliness and incompleteness or of his own imperfections, senses a harmony in the natural world. This insight leads to the desire for more consciousness, which Kinnell expresses as a prayer for self renewal. The insight takes the form of an image that represents both the new understanding itself (the analogy of rebirth following hibernation and the possibility of the rebirth of the speaker out of his old self) as well as the results of that insight (increased consciousness and relatedness to the natural). A new portion of the mind, the wild crow on the branch, opens up, is revealed or made active. The finished poem makes a statement intensely, but, judging from Kinnell's need to explain its meaning (see WS 4) not altogether lucidly. At least some of the difficulties of the poem result from what might be called its intuitive structure, a form that emulates the "rough terrain" of the mind's wandering:

Naturally, in a poem, you wish to reach a new place. That requires pure wandering—that rare condition, when you have no external guides at all, only your impulse to go, or to turn, or to stand still, when each line does not, by the sound of the word on which
it ends, force the direction of the next line, when the voice does not subjugate speech, but tries only to conform to the irregular curves of reality, to the rough terrain itself. (PW 5)

Once the meaning of "How Many Nights" has been explained to us, we understand that Kinnell's imagery expresses his intention vividly and cogently. We also understand that the form of the poem supports Kinnell's belief in a poetry derived from a psychologically realistic attention to and portrayal of the things of the world. Since in life there is a lack of connections, at least of connections the rational mind can perceive, the poem should avoid transitions, explicit connection between parts, and rational patterning based on received poetic. Instead, it should seek connections through the unconscious.

Kinnell's poems began to imitate the mental processes within the fragmented mind itself. He divided them, apparently intuitively, into a series of small parts, or "scraps," separated and isolated from other parts in the series by a field (or emptiness) of blank space and as individualized (or undifferentiated) as the other parts, without overt relation to them. The form was thus admirably suited to the sense (or non-sense) from which and through which Kinnell pursued the "irregular curves of reality." In order to discover and explore unknown aspects of himself, the poet chooses absolute freedom to wander over other more familiar methods of organizing a poem. However, he must expect the progression of his consciousness occasionally to elude his readers. In pursuit of psychological reality, Kinnell determined to take the risk.

The longest "patch-work" poem in Body Rag is "The Last River," a poem in 27 sections. Its structure recalls Dante's Inferno, and the hell that Kinnell's speaker visits is the corrupt political and social
landscape of America in the 1960s. The poem is based on Kinnell's experiences as a field worker for CORE in Louisiana in 1963-64; thus Kinnell places hell in the swamps of the American South. At the end of the poem, Kinnell fails in his attempt to discover salvation through immersion in his own experiences. He cannot fully embrace the destructive element within himself, the element associated with an animal nature, which he loves, as well as with the murderousness within his fellow man, which he hates. Still, Kinnell is unable to cross over the "Healing Stream free to all / that flows from Calvary's Mountain . . . the liquor / that makes you forget . . ." (BR 45, SP 85) because he is unable or unwilling to seek a love "without human blood in it." Despite the pains, the imperfections, the loneliness of human life, Kinnell is faithful to it and clings to the hope of completing himself in it, even though each attempt results in frustration. Section 26 of the poem reveals Kinnell's awareness of failure to accept the imperfections of himself and of the world. The lines themselves are as isolated and lonely as Kinnell:

    For Galway alone.
    I send you my mortality.
    Which leans out from itself, to spit on itself.
    Which you would not touch.
    All you have known. (BR 47, SP 86)

A more successful psychic progression, which also left the poet free to explore his subject fully, occurs in "The Porcupine" (BR 56, SP 88)20 The poem explores Kinnell's kinship to porcupines. It is his effort to discover within himself a reality most of us don't like to acknowledge. Kinnell said this about his relationship to the porcupine and bear, subjects of the last two poems in Body Rags:
They were animals in whom I felt I could seek my own identity, discover my own bearness and porcupinehood. Depending on how well I succeeded, the reader would be able to do the same for himself, and the animals could have a symbolic resonance. . . . (Weight 37).

"The Porcupine" establishes "explicit connections between [mankind] and porcupines" (WS 56). The poem flatters neither one, and since Kinnell believes that the porcupine represents some aspect of himself that he shares with all humans, he is also writing in "The Porcupine" an unflattering self-portrait. The porcupine may represent the destructive in nature and in man, the "inner redness" they both participate in. Comparing the bear and the porcupine, Kinnell said in 1969, 

[The bear] 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. (Gerber and Gemmett 128)

Explaining why he had called the porcupine an "ultra-Rilkean angel," Kinnell said that he had been thinking of Rilke's Ninth Elegy, "where Rilke tells how angels are attracted by ordinary, earthly things" (WS 111). Porcupines, he added, eat anything with salt on it, including wooden things which man has built and thus sweated on. Thus "like Rilke's angels, the porcupine loves axe handles, doors, chair arms, and so on" (WS 111). He then tells a story of personal experience with porcupines hungry for the salt in the wood of his own house:

Once they actually ate their way through the cellar door of this house [the interview took place in his house in Vermont]. If they
had climbed the stairs into the house itself, they would have reduced the place to rubble, since it is splashed--floor, walls, and ceiling--with my sweat. As it happened they didn't get in, because they ate down the cellar stairs on the way up. (WS 111-112)

Because of their destructiveness, farmers consider porcupines nuisance animals and kill them.21 "The Porcupine," then, might be an exploration into the worst of oneself, and by association, into the worst of humankind. Kinnell knows that he can never be re-attached to the sacred within nature unless he comes face to face with the worst in himself, the aspect of himself that destroys nature, and explores it fully and honestly.

In its seven sections "The Porcupine" explores the mind and emotions of a speaker alienated from himself and from nature. Sections 1 through 3 describe a porcupine and compare porcupine and humankind, The porcupine, and by extension a part of humankind as well, wants only to fill (or overfill) its own stomach, has no sense of beauty, is selfish and destructive, has no spiritual yearnings, is nourished by human misery, and wants the world to itself:

... he would
gouge the world
empty of us, hack and crater
it
until it is nothing, if that
could rinse it of all our sweat and pathos. (BR 56-7, SP 88)

Section 4 then describes the murder of a porcupine by a farmer. The speaker might be expected to approve this act, considering the characterization of the porcupine in sections 1-3. In section 5,
however, the speaker is so disturbed by what might be guilt ("The Avesta / puts porcupine killers / into hell for nine generations") that he cannot sleep and awakens his wife with his tossing in bed. The most meaningful common denominator between man and porcupine, the speaker imagines, is an inner emptiness, which he describes fully in the last section:

And tonight I think I prowl broken
skulled or vacant as a
sucked egg in the wintry meadow, softly chuckling, blank
template of myself, dragging
a starved belly through the lichflowered acres,
where
burdock looses the arks of its seeds
and thistle holds up its lost blooms
and rosebushes in the wind scrape their dead limbs
for the forced-fire
of roses.

The agitation of the speaking voice in the first half of this section amplifies the reader's awareness of the speaker's psychic pain, a combination of guilt over crimes imagined or committed against nature and of deeply felt desire to bring the inner and outer worlds together within himself. The porcupine within him is part of nature, too, and thus is part of the sacred. Through going into the worst of himself, through openly admitting his wretchedness, Kinnell hopes to discover sources of transfiguration and to come out the other side of this experience (the poem) a better person. As in "Another Night in the Ruins," "How Many Nights," and several other poems in Body Rags, Kinnell
suggests the possibility of such a renewal through knowledge of the regeneration of other living things in nature. In this poem the last six lines function, as did the middle stanza of "How Many Nights," through the seeds, blooms, and "forced-fire / of roses," to remind us that seemingly dead things can be reborn in the spring. This image of revivification suggests, to Kinnell, the possibility of rebirth within the self.

In "The Porcupine" Kinnell wants to be the porcupine, but at the climax of the poem it is not the porcupine’s life, but rather its death, that Kinnell participates in. The action is somewhat ambiguous. After discovering his likeness to the porcupine, does Kinnell then attempt to murder the porcupine-like animal within himself rather than accept and integrate (or control) these aspects of his personality? As a porcupine, he faces his own death and comes away desiring, or praying for, a rebirth, the situation he was in at the beginning of Body Rags. He seems no closer to achieving his desire for completeness at the end of Body Rags than he was at the end of any previous book. However, one poem remains to be examined before it can be determined how successful Kinnell’s quest in Body Rags has been.

"The Bear," last poem in Body Rags, may be Kinnell’s most famous shorter poem. Its central metaphor certainly seized the imaginations of a generation of readers. While the poem may have taken on meanings Kinnell himself was unaware of while composing it, his intention when he started the poem should be noted. In a 1969 interview, he said,

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. (Gerber and
Kinnell's interpretation of the climactic moment of the poem is not presented here as the only or even the most fitting opening to an analysis of this complex poem. However, the explanation does suggest one possible reading of the poem as an attempt to dramatize the quest for completeness: a quest, as this chapter has suggested, that is the main theme of *Body Rags*.

This dramatization of Kinnell's main theme takes on the form of a single narrative line, unlike the other more fragmented psychic progressions employed in "Another Night in the Ruins," "How Many Nights," "The Last River," and "The Porcupine." It thus presents less initial difficulty understanding the relationship among its parts. Kinnell intimately knew the other animals he identifies with in *Body Rags*, and in fact had killed a porcupine shortly before writing "The Porcupine" (see Bell Collection Notes); but he had never killed a bear, nor even been close enough to one to smell its "ordinary, wretched odor" (BR 62; see also WS). In addition, unlike in the other poems listed above, the speaker of "The Bear" appears to be an Eskimo hunter and not Kinnell. In "The Bear," as in crucial poems of his earlier volumes, Kinnell returns to the dramatic mode, which had previously proved inadequate to his stated desire to enter personally into his own experiences and psychic life so as to "transform the world within one's self" McKenzie 215). Through the image of the bear, though, Kinnell does attempt to "know the life of another creature by imagining it" (WS 5), and in the bear, as we have seen, Kinnell seems to have discovered a "good" animal, unlike the porcupine, whose existence represented a powerful medium of psychic integration.
In "The Porcupine" Kinnell's persona participates in the porcupine's death, and the poem ends at that moment. In "The Bear," however, the psychic integration that Kinnell desires occurs in the scenes following the bear's death, when the hunter opens the bear's carcass, merges his body with the bear's, and falls asleep in its body cavity. The transformation is almost complete. Now the hunter must merge his identity with the bear's in order to become the poet, for the poet is born, Kinnell believes, when the mind (the hunter) inhabits (merges with) the body (the bear). While sleeping in the bear's body, the hunter's unconscious engages the most dreadful experience the self can imagine. In parts 5 and 6, he dreams of his own death:

5
[1] dream
of lumbering flatfooted
over the tundra,
stabbed twice from within,
splattering a trail behind me,
splattering it out no matter which way I lurch,
no matter which parabola of bear-transcendence,
which dance of solitude I attempt,
which gravity-clutched leap,
which trudge, which groan.

6
Until one day I totter and fall--
fall on this
stomach that has tried so hard to keep up,
to digest the blood as it leaked in,
to break up
and digest the bone itself; and now the breeze

blows across

my sore, lolled tongue a song

or screech, until I think I must rise up

and dance. And I lie still.

Thus emerges a theme common to all of Kinnell's poetry: out of suffering, the torments he undergoes in dreaming (or nightmaring) the bear's death as his own, out of the empathetic identification with the life and death of a fellow creature, comes the possibility of poetry. More than the primitive "song / or screech" blown from the mouth of the dying bear/poet or the sudden desire to perform a dance of death, it is a more profound and personal sense of the poem and what makes it live that emerges in the closing stanza after the hunter/poet awakens. He recognizes the landscape of late winter/early spring, becomes aware of his rebirth into the rhythms of nature, yet he further realizes that he is now both bear and man (he has become whole through ritual union with what Jung called his "bush soul"), and has his own deathward journey to make, renewed by the painful myth he has enacted:

I awaken I think. Marshlights

reappear, geese

come trailing again up the flyway.

In her ravine under old snow the dam-bear

lies, licking

lumps of smeared fur
and drizzly eyes into shapes
with her tongue. And one
hairy-soled trudge stuck out before me,
the next groaned out,
the next,
the next,
the rest of my days I spend
wandering; wondering
what, anyway,
was that sticky infusion, that rank flavor of blood, that
poetry, by which I lived?

"The Bear" is not an allegory about recognizing or killing the animal in oneself, as "The Porcupine" appears to be. The bear is killed, but his body is readily inhabited by the spirit and body of the hunter/poet, who is by that time already half-bear. As the hunter becomes bear, his conscious self dies. But while the bear, as a bear, dies, the hunter/bear/poet is reborn to humanity, awe, and the possibility of a completed self. The "lumps of smeared fur / and drizzly eyes," which the dam-bear licks into shapes "with her tongue," like the seeds and blooms at the end of "The Porcupine," represent the regeneration within the natural world that gives the poet hope for a rebirth of self. By entrusting himself to the animal, to that part of himself, which "belongs to the wild darkness," he regains contact with a regenerative vitality.

"Another Night in the Ruins," first poem in Body Rags, ends on a note of impatience with self. "The Bear," last poem in the book, ends on a note of puzzlement. The poet asks "what, anyway, / was that sticky infusion, that rank flavor of blood, that / poetry, by which I lived?"
Was it only the frozen, blood-soaked spoor of bear? Or the viscous, unformed essence of reality itself? Kinnell wonders if poetry, defined in a broad sense as the effort made in many ways to be reconnected to the natural world, might arise directly out of the innermost nature of the poet. Abandoning his conscious, human self, not just letting it die but actively killing it, Kinnell reaches inward to creative sources within the unconscious that carry him back into the world, lonely, wandering, wondering, but affirmatively alive.

II. The Book of Nightmares

*Body Rags* and *The Book of Nightmares* contain many similarities. For one, Kinnell uses similar forms in both books, experimenting in *Body Rags* with the form he mastered in *Nightmares*: the part-poem, articulated more by progression of consciousness than by deductive or narrative sequence, and rendered in sinewy lines, like those of the poems in *Body Rags*. These lines achieve their strength and individuality, and also a graceful awkwardness, through adversity. They embody the struggle to grapple with and utter the ineffable, which Kinnell felt could only be expressed through a kind of "chopped prose" (BR 25). In both books, also, Kinnell uses assonance, interrelated images, and juxtaposition to interweave his themes and images and to connect the several parts and sections of the poem. Four poems in *Body Rags* (significantly the first, "Another Night in the Ruins," and the last three, "Testament of the Thief," "The Porcupine," and "The Bear," consist of seven short sections, as do all ten parts in *Nightmares*.

The books share the same essential form, but more importantly, both are explorations of an alienated condition and, to some degree, a resolution or understanding of it. Central to both is Kinnell's poetics
of empathetic immersion, reflected in his determination in both books to penetrate to psychic truths about himself through engaging intensely and directly in his poetry the worst and best of himself. Body Rags ends with four poems that actualize and explore life as nightmare: "The Last River," "Testament of the Thief," "The Porcupine," and "The Bear." These poems are explorations as well as records of Kinnell's struggle to make and maintain an imaginatively acceptable world out of a personal reality that had taken on the super-real nature of dreams. Closer in spirit to "The Last River" than to the three poems in Part III of Body Rags, Nightmares directly explores Kinnell's own experience in order to integrate the self through love of all things, including the worst in himself.

Nightmares is, of course, an even more intense and more sustained grappling than evidenced in "The Bear." In "The Bear," and in "Testament of the Thief" and "The Porcupine," the grappling is in a sense second-hand, achieved through the medium of a hanged thief, a porcupine, a hunter/poet and a bear. In Nightmares, as in "The Last River," Kinnell faces his deepest fears directly. He faces the nightmares of what he dreads most as the man Kinnell. In this book Kinnell completes his journey, begun in Body Rags and such earlier poems as "The Supper After the Last," "Middle of the Way," "Ruins Under the Stars," and "Spindrift," into the middle of things, toward the unconsolable truth of his own psychic and physical existence.

While he was writing the poems that eventually made up Body Rags, Kinnell was translating the poems of the fifteenth-century French poet Francois Villon. The influence of Villon's forms may be seen in both Body Rags and Nightmares, for example in the medieval mock testament
form used in "Testament of the Thief" (BR 51) and in "The Dead Shall Be Raised Incorruptible" (BN, Part VI). Kinnell's earthiness and gothic surrealism also seem to owe something to Villon's insistence on looking squarely and steadily at the corruptions of the flesh. Kinnell's attraction to Villon's life and poetry can be explained in part by Kinnell's identification with Villon's accomplishment. Kinnell wrote these words about Villon's poetry in the introduction to his book of translations, The Poems of Francois Villon, second version, but they apply equally well to Kinnell's achievement in Nightmares:

Villon does not ever speak seriously of peace in heaven or moralize at all on the vanity of human life. He writes out of a peculiarly fierce attachment to our mortal experience. . . . What he holds on to is only an unspecified vitality, the vitality of decay, perhaps, or of sorrow, or simply of speech. In these poems, which start out with conventional mourning for the passing of human glory, we are made to realize all of a sudden that this glory is, as much as it is anything, the vivid presence of an ordinary man or woman. The lament reaches deep into nature. It is a cry not only against the brevity of existence and the coming on of death but also against this dying life itself, this life so horrified by death and so deeply in need of it. (FV xvii)

The Book of Nightmares is an apparently unmediated, intensely participatory testament of a representative man, whose subjects are the commonly shared realities of human existence, including death, which is the underside of everything, and love, which is the power that saves us from despair and madness. Kinnell's destiny in his wanderings as 20th century technological man is to return himself to a sense of his natural being. To do so, he must seek release from the darkest elements of his
Thus the basic structure of *Nightmares* closely resembles the structure of "The Porcupine," "The Bear," and other poems in *Body Rags*. Its descent into the body, into the carnal nightmares, like that of the other poems, echoes archetypal descents into and returns from the underworld. From the beginning Kinnell conceived of *Nightmares* as a single poem. It has ten parts, each consisting of seven sections, and it involves Kinnell into a descent into death in a number of different forms, out of which he is finally, as expected, in some sense reborn. This rebirth, however, if we can call it that, is extremely tentative, and is evidenced not so much by any event or image, as by the poem's overall vitality of language and rhythm. Kinnell himself said in a 1978 interview that at the end of the ninth section he decides to remain in and happily accept the imperfect condition, though now, he said, "I can't see any explicit statement to that effect" (Gardner 425).

The following necessarily brief reading of *Nightmares* owes much to the critics and interviewers who have uncovered so much of the poem's meaning and contributed their own insights on this richly textured poem. More has been written on *Nightmares* than on any other work by Kinnell, so the present brief discussion can only outline a few of the approaches I found useful for this study. I am especially indebted to the interviewers who coaxed from Kinnell so much about the occasion of many poems in *Body Rags* and *Nightmares*. Many of them are collected in *Walking Down the Stairs*. The Bell Collection at Special Collections, Dimond Library, University of New Hampshire, also provided information about Kinnell's intentions in the book as well as about his efforts to structure a book-length poem (see Bell Collection Notes).
Robert Langbaum's article (most readily found in CLC, Vol. 13) outlines Nightmares, and is recommended for its overview of the poem as well as for its insights. Ed Ochester (Modern Poetry Studies, Vol. 3) reads the book as a spiritual autobiography. Robert Peter's review (in The Great American Poetry Bake-Off) provides a necessary corrective to the critics who found nothing in Nightmares to criticize; Peters disliked the poem, finding it passive and predictable. Kinder than Peters, but with similar reservations about the poem, W. M. Ransom found Nightmares overwritten and loose, problems he believed inherent in Kinnell's "superstitious or otherwise arbitrary" structural divisions. Still, he concluded that the poem is "the finest next-to-final draft of a long poem that I have ever read" (190). Alone among reviewers of the time, William Thompson read Nightmares as a song for Kinnell's daughter, an idea which I found compelling, since Kinnell's love for his daughter, Maud, in Nightmares stands in somewhat the same relation as his love for his son, Fergus, and for his wife and friends in Mortal Acts. Mortal Words. It dramatizes Kinnell's belief in and effort to love the other, an effort perhaps impossible of fulfillment. With the exception of dissertations, thorough studies of Nightmares are rare. Cary Nelson's in Our Last First Poets, is valuable for many reasons. My reading of both Nightmares and Mortal Acts was stimulated by Nelson's analysis of the poem as a verbal matrix and by his conclusion that Nightmares fails because it is "a body suspended between communal fusion and communal disintegration" (96). Finally, the studies of Ralph Mills and Andrew Taylor ultimately became touchstones of my developing understanding of Kinnell's poetry. Though I disagree with them now in several particular ways, they carved out territories in the study of Kinnell's works that have aided all who have followed them.
Nightmares begins in "Under the Maud Moon" (Part I) with the poet lighting a fire in the rain to memorialize either the birth of his daughter, Maud, or perhaps an encounter with his ideal other "half" in Waterloo, Iowa. The twin themes of birth/death and renewal through love, or through merging with the other, are in this way introduced simultaneously and ambiguously. Later in Part I, Kinnell confesses to his daughter that all his songs come from the ambivalent and animal darkness where beginnings happen, from the half of him that belongs to the wild darkness.

I had crept down

to riverbanks, their long rustle
of being and perishing, down to marshes
where the earth oozes up
in cold streaks, touching the world
with the underglimmer
of the beginning,
and there learned my only song. (BN 7-8)

In order to revisit this darkness, to be reborn, Kinnell has to learn to "Let go," like the hen in "The Hen Flower" (Part II), which can be hypnotized to lay its head "thrown back / on the chopping block, longing only / to die" (BN 11). Kinnell accomplishes this death in several ways. As in Body Rags, Kinnell participates in the deaths of animals, and, in keeping with his facing his experiences more directly, he shares the agonizing deaths of fellow humans. Kinnell adopts the shoes, postures, and clothes of other men who have died. Primarily in Nightmares, he identifies with a human mortality rather than with the mortality of animals in nature, and he identifies with the pain and
suffering that all human beings participate in: "Can it ever be true-- / all bodies, one body, one light / made of everyone's darkness together?" (Part IV). In his quest for union with the other, Kinnell haunts the sagging beds in "The Hotel of Lost Light" (Part V), to seek out and assume the shape of a previous occupant, in order to undergo his death:

Flesh
of his excavated flesh,
fill of his emptiness,
after-amanuensis of his after-life,
I write out
for him in this languished alphabet
of worms, these last words
of himself, post for him
his final postcards to posterity. (BN 36)

And as he writes out the dying man's last words, all that will remain of him after death, Kinnell himself dies:

Violet bruises come out
all over his flesh, as invisible
fists start beating him a last time: the whine
of omphalos blood starts up again, the puffed bellybutton explodes, the carnal nightmare soars back to the beginning. (BN 37)

As he dies, Kinnell is reborn. His renewal, however, offers little relief from the endless fires of life, for he is returned to the beginning of this "carnal nightmare."

Kinnell suffers considerable anguish in the central parts of the poem (Parts V and VI). "The Hotel of Lost Light" (Part V), in which Kinnell figuratively dies, is the book's nadir, its Inferno. In this
part the murderousness of nature is so sordid that reality appears more horrifying than any nightmare. Kinnell discovers the renewal he seeks only in the uses to which nature will put the human bones:

\[
\text{they shall re-arise}
\]

\[
\text{in the pear tree, in spring, to shine down}
\]

\[
\text{on two clasping what they dream is one another. (BN 37)}
\]

His despair is so profound that he has no hope even in the power of his poem to transcend time. In a few poems in *What a Kingdom* and *Flower Herding*, he consoled himself with the idea of immortality through his art, but in this poem, he imagines the perishibility of his words:

\[
\text{As for these words scattered into the future—}
\]

\[
\text{posterity}
\]

\[
\text{is one invented too deep in its past}
\]

\[
\text{to hear them. (BN 37)}
\]

In "The Dead Shall Be Raised Incorruptible" (Part VI), Kinnell awakens from the nightmare of Part V to find death all around him in the outside world. The murderousness of man matches or exceeds the murderousness of nature. At the core of human existence, Kinnell finds only the urge to destroy. This part contains gruesome scenes of the Vietnam War and terrible indictments of technological man, yet even within this vision of man's madness and inhumanity to his fellow man, Kinnell discovers in a soldier's words a kind of renewal in death: "**Lieutenant! / This corpse will not stop burning!**" (BN 41). In some form life goes on after death. Perhaps the form is the poem itself, made of human suffering: "**the flames may burn the oboe / but listen buddy boy they can't touch the notes!**" (BN 44). In the last section of Part VI, despite the horror with which life has been depicted in Parts V
and VI, Kinnell imagines "the memories of itself left on the earth by
the human race" (WS 109) praying for life to continue: "do not let this
last hour pass, / do not remove this last, poison cup from our lips" (BN
45). In the refrain, a wind holding the cries of human joy, an
utterance of all nature embodying the desire for renewal, responds,
"Lieutenant! / This corpse will not stop burning!" Kinnell's images
dramatize his faith in the strength of human desire for life and
happiness, despite the impossibility of a life without pain, suffering,
and death.

Parts V and VI represent the Inferno of Nightmares. They explore
the naked reality of death and the almost equally dreadful vision of a
life consisting of suffering and madness. Parts VII and VIII, in
contrast, explore possibilities of happiness on earth. These two
sections develop and complicate the theme of self-renewal through love.
In "Little Sleep's-Head Sprouting Hair in Moonlight" (Part VII), the
biological link between Kinnell and his infant daughter, Maud,
compensates for the nightmare portrayed in Part VI. Kinnell is
delivered out of the nightmare through his innate impulse to give and to
love. At the end of the part, Kinnell receives the insight which he has
earned through his suffering. He will help Maud learn what he himself
has learned perhaps too late: "the wages / of dying is love" (BN 53).

"The Call Across the Valley of Not-Knowing" (Part VIII) complicates
the main theme of love. In the doomed hope of attaining completeness of
self, which he had sought and failed to find in Body Rags, Kinnell is
compelled to seek union with another person. He is urged on by the
idea, attributed to Aristophanes, which Kinnell may partially believe,
that each of us

is a torn half
whose lost other we keep seeking across time
until we die, or give up--
or actually find her... (BN 57-58)

Kinnell seeks completion of self, his perfect second half being part of
himself from which he has been separated. The incompleteness and
loneliness of the self result from the "wound," which Kinnell wishes to
heal:

it must be the wound, the wound itself,
which lets us know and love,
which forces us to reach out to our misfit
and by a kind
of poetry of the soul, accomplish,
for a moment, the wholeness the drunk Greek
extrapolated from his high
or flagellated out of an empty heart,

that purest,
most tragic concumbrance, strangers
clasped into one, a moment, of their moment on earth. (BN 58)

Unable to find happiness through completing the self ("the torn
half... we keep seeking across time"), Kinnell seeks happiness
through union with the other, though he knows the completeness he
desires is not possible, for even the most apparently perfectly matched
lovers are actually misfits, "strangers / clasped into one." Love, like
life itself, is continually changing; the perfect union is not possible,
but Kinnell has had glimpses of a transcending love when he and his wife
were younger, while in the grip of the natural rhythms of "holy desire."
In that union, the mind's descent into the body, like the hunter/poet's dream while he sleep's in the bear's carcass, is a submission to the flesh that brings enlightenment: "And the brain kept blossoming / all through the body, until the bones themselves could think" (BN 59). In the last section of this part, Kinnell realizes that this compulsion to fuse with the other and with the natural world is universal—"all of nature is a call across the valley of not knowing—and the part ends with understanding and acceptance:

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

some field, maybe, of flaked stone
scattered in starlight
where the flesh
swaddles its skeleton a last time
before the bones go their way without us,

might we not hear, even then,
the bear call
from his hillside—a call, like ours, needing
to be answered—and the dam-bear
call back across the darkness
of the valley of not-knowing
the only word tongues shape without intercession,
yes . . . yes . . . ? (BN 61)

In parts VII and VIII, then, Kinnell is reborn, through love, more accepting of love's transience. Now he must learn to embrace life's transience as well as his own unending desire for renewal. He must learn to accept both aspects of death: "the extinction, which we fear, and the flowing away into the universe, which we desire..." (Poulin and Rubin interview, WS 23). When he seeks in Part IX to be one "with the unearthly fires kindling and dying / in space," (BN 66) Kinnell realizes how much he longs to live. His wish to live matches his desire to flow away into the universe. Yet to live fully, Kinnell must "go down / into the unbreathable goaf / of everything I ever craved and lost" (BN 67). He must experience all aspects of life as fully as possible, embracing the dark as well as the bright side. Only after he has done this (after re-dreaming all his nightmares) can the non-human, the animal within him begin its regenerative activity:

In clothes
woven out of the blue spittle
of snakes, I crawl up; I find myself alive
in the whorled
archway of the fingerprint of all things,
skeleton groaning,
blood-strings wailing the wail of all things. (BN 67-8)

At the end of Part IX, Kinnell's deepest fear and strongest desire stand in tentative and momentary balance:

The witness trees heal
their scars at the flesh fire,
the flame
rises off the bones,
the hunger
to be new lifts off
my soul, an eerie blue light blooms
on all the ridges of the world. Somewhere
in the legends of blood sacrifice
the fatted calf
takes the bonfire into his arms, and he
burns it.

As at the end of "Another Night in the Ruins," first poem in Body Rags, fire must be met with fire. In order to live fully, Kinnell must embrace the dying life, even if that action hastens his own death. At the end of this descent into the self, Kinnell returns with an imaginatively acceptable world in precarious balance:

As above: the last scattered stars
kneel down in the star-form of the Aquarian age:
a splash
on the top of the head,
on the grass of this earth even the stars love, splashes
of the sacred waters . . .

So below: in the graveyard
the lamps start lighting up, one for each of us,
in all the windows
of stone. (BN 68)

"Lastness" (Part X) contains another birth, the birth of Fergus, Kinnell's son; thus the births of Kinnell's children frame Nightmares.
As in several poems in *Body Rags*, for example, "How Many Nights," the natural act represents to Kinnell the possibility of the spiritual act: birth of the child suggests and implies re-birth of the spirit. In this part Kinnell sums up the precarious resolution finally achieved through great psychic pain and suffering:

This is the tenth poem
and it is the last. It is right
at the last, that one
and zero
walk off together,
walk off the end of these pages together,
one creature
walking away side by side with the emptiness. (BN 73)

Standing on the margin between a life that consists of dying and death itself, Kinnell achieves the poem's central insight: "Living brings you to death, there is no other road." Lastness is the heightened feeling that one might have for life at the dying moment. Living in the spirit of the end makes each moment precious and, though painful, makes one love and cling all the more tightly to this dying, imperfect life. Though when lastness does end, "there is nothing, nothing / left" (BN 74), Kinnell believes that each ending is a new beginning, though not necessarily a beginning that man can understand:

the dead lie,
empty, filled, at the beginning,

and the first
voice comes craving again out of their mouths.
Nightmares itself is a beginning, a sign of the possibility of renewal in life through art, like the timeless music of Bach that the violinist makes from the "sliced intestine / of cat,"

the sexual wail

of the back-alleys and blood strings we have lived
still crying,
still singing. . . .

His essential loneliness still unresolved, still not completed or fulfilled, Kinnell nevertheless retains hopes of completing himself. In "The Hen Flower" (Part II) he wished for the trust of the hen in the rhythms of nature; in "Lastness," more understanding of the nature of life and revitalized in some sense through the suffering he has undergone and the depth of his desire for a fuller participation in life, he at last lets go:

This poem

if we shall call it that,
or concert of one
divided among himself,
this earthward gesture
of the sky-diver, the worms
on his back still spinning forth
and already gnawing away
the silks of his loves, who could have saved him,
this free floating of one
opening his arms into the attitude
of flight, as he obeys the necessity and falls . . . (BN 75)

In the last section of the poem, Kinnell arrives at a kind of tragic resignation. Life consists of pain and suffering, and thus it is
neither truthful nor helpful to tell his son "Don't cry!" One who lives must cry. Attempting to reassure his children, and his readers, Kinnell, characteristically, searches for a gesture of affirmation in the natural world:

On the body,
on the blued flesh, when it is
laid out, see if you can find
the one flea which is laughing.

In terms of the cycle of nature to which Kinnell has consistently referred in Body Rags and Nightmares, the poet/corpse has become the laughing flea and thus continues to exist in nature. Kinnell no doubt felt that anything more positive at the end of a poem of such unsettling visions would be either gratuitous or melodramatic. Even so, The Book of Nightmares, like Body Rags, is probably, as Andrew Taylor says, "a survival poem rather than a triumph" of Kinnell's hope to heal his alienated condition (239). The poem results in loneliness and acceptance of the imperfect condition, rather than integration. At the end Kinnell must be content with zero. By accepting zero, however, Kinnell can set off once more on his journey, more certain of his goal, with eyes fixed on the earth he loves and feet firmly treading a rock-strewn path.
NOTES, CHAPTER THREE

1 I borrow the expression from Charles Molesworth, who uses it in an article on Kinnell's poetry through Nightmares, to describe a new "postmodernist aesthetic," which he finds in Kinnell's poetry of Body Rags and The Book of Nightmares. Molesworth writes that Kinnell moves "beyond the suspension of irony toward the immersion of empathy" (235). See also Molesworth's review of Selected Poems. He views Kinnell's career as an example of one of the major shifts in poetry since World War II, a shift that altered the idiom of American poetry "toward a language of empathy and celebration.

2 See Hyatt Waggoner's Appendix, "A Note on Whitman's Mysticism" in American Poets, pp. 637-56. Explaining what Emerson meant by the "mystic" in "The Poet," Waggoner distinguishes between two types of mysticism. Emerson and Whitman, he says, wanted the type of mysticism called the via affirmativa ("the way up"). This type of mysticism opposes the type Waggoner calls the via negativa ("the way down"). Emerson's "nature mysticism" and Whitman's "erotic mysticism," according to Waggoner, are variations of the via affirmativa. Kinnell's conception of the role of the poet and of the origins of poetry align him more closely with Whitman than Emerson. In addition, Kinnell's fierce attachment to life, his placing the sacred only in the things and creatures of the planet, probably would place him, in Emerson's eyes, squarely on the side of the via negativa. If asked which side he was on, Kinnell would no doubt answer that the way down is the way up.

3 See Life Magazine 26 Mar. 1965, for photo; see also WS 16.

4 1965, Juniata College in Huntingdon, PA; 1966-67, Reed College,
Portland, OR; 1968, University of Washington, Seattle; 1968-69, University of California, Irvine.

5 Published in 1969 as "The Poetics of the Physical World" by Colorado State University.

6 See Kinnell's reaction to this remark in WS.

7 Robert Bly's The Light Around the Body won the 1968 National Book Award for Poetry; John Berryman's His Toy, His Dream, His Rest won in 1969.

8 The title may derive from Yeats's old men in "Byzantium" or a letter of Pound's in which he wrote, "This body rag thing tattered on my soul." See also Bell Collection Notes for working titles of Body Rags.

9 I have called them "patch-work" poems, a notion arising from these lines in "The Porcupine": "I roll / this way and that in the great bed, under / the quilt / that mimics this country of broken farms and woods" (BR 58).

10 To "get in touch with the self" was a popular expression of the time, revelatory perhaps of the dissociation of a large number of Americans.

11 Imagine a poet assembling a poem by combining, partly rationally, mostly intuitively, several of these scraps into short, intense, highly symbolic meditations, during which he continuously brings the rational and unconscious minds into contact. Placing one part next to another, he might have a sudden insight into himself, a new understanding of his own hidden thought processes. This insight becomes the poem itself: a series of intense scraps or fragments without transitions, and thus without slackness or looseness, but progressing through a series of images to an intuited illumination or insight.

12 See Bell Collection Notes for earlier versions of this last
images to an intuited illumination or insight.

12See Bell Collection Notes for earlier versions of this last stanza. See Kinnell's account in WS 34-5 of the origin and development of this poem, which began as a string of "disconnected fragments." See also McKenzie 209.

13This interview appears in WS under the title, "An Interview with William Heyen and Gregory FitzGerald." Many of Kinnell's most telling comments on poems in Body Rags, several of which will be quoted in this chapter, were deleted from the original interview, "Deeper Than Personality," ed. by Philip L. Gerber and Robert J. Gemmett, when Kinnell edited the interview for publication in WS.

14A poem resembling "Walking Out Alone in Dead of Winter" (FP, AB 17) and "On Frozen Fields" (FH, AB 157).

15Kinnell explains the meaning of the last stanza in WS 4, where he also includes "The Mind," a short poem written to explicate the last lines of "How Many Nights"; see also Gerber and Gemmett 126.

16See Bell Collection Notes for list of first lines of at least 26 of the poems.

17See Andrew Taylor's analysis of this poem in "The Poetry of Galway Kinnell," 235. Taylor's interpretation suggests that the cry of the crow represents a new life brought about by "intimacy with the subworld of animal life."


19Ralph Mills' reading of "The Last River" appears on pp. 177-82 of Cry of the Human.
The Porcupine was first published in *Buzzard's Luck* [Tougaloo College, Tougaloo, Mississippi] in 1966. Here is the first published version.

The Porcupine

1

Fatted
on herbs, swollen on crabapples,
puffed up on bast and phloem, ballooned
on willow flowers, poplar catkins, first
leaves of aspen and larch,
the porcupine
drag and bounces his meal across ice,
through mud, roses and goldenrod, and over the stubby fields.

2

In character
he resembles us in seven ways:
he puts his mark on outhouses,
he alchemizes by moonlight,
he shits on the run,
he uses his tail for climbing,
he chuckles softly to himself when scared,
he's overcrowded if there's more than one of him per five acres,
his eyes have their own inner redness.

3

Digger of
going across floors, of hesitations
at thresholds, of
handprints of dread
at doorpost or windowjamb, he would
gouge the world
empty of us, hack and crater
it
until it is nothing, if that
could rinse it of all our sweat and pathos.

Adorer of ax
handles aflow with grain, of arms
of Morris chairs, of hand
crafted objects
steeped in the juice of fingertips,
of surfaces soaked
with elbow oils and fist grease,
of clothespins that have
grabbed our body-rags by underarm and crotch...

Unimpressed—bored—
by the whirl of the stars, by these
he's astonished, ultra-
Rilkean angel!

for whom the true
portion of the sweetness of earth
is one of those bottom-heavy, glittering, saccadic
bits
of salt water that splash down
the haunted ravines of a human face.

4

A farmer shot a porcupine three times
as it dozed on a tree limb. On
the way down it tore itself open
on a broken
branch, hooked its
gut, and continued falling. And on the ground
it sprang to its feet, and
paying out gut heaved
and spartled through a hundred feet of goldenrod
before
the abrupt emptiness.

5

And I have seen him
wallow on windfalls
and come up with
prickles stuck full of apples,
one winesap locked in his mouth,
and
go rambling for home,
applerods glittering all over him,

little squat
hedgehog of Blois, who
turns into (language is very greasy with salvation)
a gold crown,
if it should be by sunset he slithers down a dungheap.

6

The Avesta puts
porcupine killers
in hell for nine generations, sentencing them
to gnaw
out each others' hearts for the
salts of desire.

7

I roll this way and that
in the great bed, under
the quilt
that mimics this country of broken farms and woods,
the sheath of the man
melting,
the self-stabbing coil
of artichoke bristles reversing, blossoming outward,
urchin tossing up mattress feathers,
pricking the
woman beside me until she cries.

8

In my time I have
crouched, quills erected,
Saint Sebastian of the
scared heart, and been
beat dead with a locust club
on the bare snout.
And fallen from high places
I have fled -- have
jogged
over dazzled fields of goldenrod,
terrified, seeking home,
and among flowers
I have come to myself empty, the rope
strung out behind me
in the fall sun suddenly
glorified with all my blood.

9

And tonight I think I prowl broken
skulled or vacant as a
sucked egg in the wintry meadow, softly chuckling,
blank template of myself, holylanding
with starved belly
through the lichflowered
acres
of windfalls and burdock and thistle
where
thornbushes scrape their dead limbs
for the forced-fire
of roses.

21The speaker of "First Communion" (AB 42) recalls "Carrying a
sackful of ears to collect / The nickel-an-ear porcupine bounty."

22Kinnell describes the origin of "The Bear" in Gerber and Gemmett,
127, and McKenzie, 208, but deleted these accounts from the versions of
these interviews published in WS. Kinnell has this to say about this
aspect of the Eskimo hunting story he had based the poem on: "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" (Gerber and Gemmett 127).

23 See Jung's "Approaching the Unconscious" in Man and his Symbols, 24-5).

24 For Kinnell's account of the genesis of Nightmares, see McKenzie 209-10; most of the interviews in WS also include discussions of this poem. Kinnell's 1976 recording of Nightmares is well worth having: Caedmon Records, TC 1502.

25 Cary Nelson's excellent analysis of the interweaving of theme and image in Nightmares.

26 That Nightmares has ten parts is in tribute to Rilke's Duino Elegies. When he began writing Nightmares Kinnell intended to write a long poem like the Elegies, without plot or logical progression, but nevertheless telling the story of a spiritual crisis. The epigraph of Nightmares is from The "Ninth Elegy."

27 Ralph Mills claims that the last four poems in Body Rags "best demonstrate Kinnell's attempt to integrate himself with his experience . . . without mediation or protection," (177); however, it is clear that Kinnell is neither thief, porcupine, bear, or Eskimo hunter. Only in "The Last River" and Nightmares is Kinnell's persona named "Kinnell" and given Kinnell's own personal history and temperament.

28 See also WS 27, where Kinnell says that Nightmares "is as affirmative as anything I've written"; and WS 45, where Kinnell suggests that he feels an affirmative force in Nightmares similar to that which
emerges from Greek or Shakespearean tragedy.

29 Kinnell identifies the different speaking voices in this section in "An Interview with Margaret Edwards," WS 109-110.

30 In WS 99 Kinnell identifies the "Christian man" of the poem as "technological man."

31 The minor theme of the relation of suffering to song, which Kinnell continues to make more central to his poetics with each succeeding book, will in Mortal Acts become an explicit subject of several of the poems, inextricably bound up in the origin and purpose of life and art.

32 See WS 28 for Kinnell's explication of this image of the happy flea.
This chapter explores the manifestation in *Mortal Acts*, *Mortal Words* (hereafter *Mortal Acts*) of Kinnell's career-long attempt to heal his alienated condition through his poetry, an attempt which comes closer to achievement in the poetry of this book than in any other Kinnell has written. In this book the attempt to understand and heal the incompleteness (the emptiness that is Kinnell's favorite metaphor in *Mortal Acts* for the alienated condition or divided consciousness) resembles the attempt of *The Book of Nightmares*, a major theme of which was the speaker's effort to discover the unity of all life and to learn "Tenderness toward Existence" (BN 29). In *Mortal Acts* in order to rediscover and to teach these same values, Kinnell embraces the people, experiences and things of his own life, and he creates an imaginatively acceptable world with a poetry made of the ordinary, yet sacred sounds of human existence. The sounds are sacred because they emanate from a life that is sacred. Poetry made of these sounds sings devotion to the holiness of life on earth.

*Mortal Acts*, though published nine years after its companion book, *Nightmares*, develops many of the same themes; for instance, the ache of the knowledge of life's transience and the flowing away of true love; the attempt to learn to sympathize with the imperfect and dying in nature; and the possibility of discovering a common bond among all life on earth. In *Mortal Acts*, however, the treatments of these themes takes
different forms, evolving out of deeper understandings. In Nightmares, Kinnell wondered about the possibility of "one light / made of everyone's darkness together" (BN 30); in Mortal Acts he imagines a "music of grace," made of ordinary human sounds, which "speaks in notes struck / or caressed or blown or plucked / off our own bodies" (MW 59, SP 131). Discovering this music makes it possible for him to continue existing "in this place that loses its brothers, / in this emptiness only the singing sometimes almost fills" (MW 12). In Mortal Acts Kinnell's effort is to "face / the spaces which gather into one sound," which is the "singing / of mortal lives" (MW 62, SP 134), and enfold them within the embrace that by the end of the book becomes physical, imaginative, emotional, and spiritual; the many facets of the single embrace, the gesture, that is the poem.

Though related through the themes and the major vision whose evolution this essay has been tracing, the poems of Mortal Acts differ in several ways from the poems of Body Rags and Nightmares. The two most striking differences occur in the immediately apparent visual structures of the poems and in the speaking voice of Kinnell's persona. Only a few "part" poems, the genre used in Nightmares and most of Body Rags, as well, appear in Mortal Acts. Kinnell writes in more open, expansive, yet syntactically denser forms than those he employed in the earlier book. The speaking voice, too, seems to have adopted an openness in harmony with the expansiveness of the forms. It seems less anxious and world-weary, more open and direct, and possibly more adjusted to the world it inhabits than the voice of earlier books.

The environment providing background and context for the spiritual and emotional conflicts of the poems also differs from the world of social upheaval and war described in the two earlier books. Living
conditions, however, have not changed for the common people with whom Kinnell identifies; ordinary life is still hard and intrinsically painful. Moreover, just below the surface of what appears to be a civilized society still lies the madness of modern technological man, the victim of his own drive to subjugate or destroy. At the core of existence, finally, lies the profound spiritual emptiness of modern life, caused, Kinnell believes, by the fragmentation of man's consciousness (by the dissociation of his mind from his animal nature). The speaker of Mortal Acts thus wrestles with the same concerns of earlier books.

One final difference between Mortal Acts and Nightmares can be introduced here. In Mortal Acts Kinnell actively seeks the consolation he was unable to find for himself or offer to his readers at the end of Nightmares. At the end of that long poem, the speaker "obeys the necessity and falls," an impulse to trust in the rhythms of the natural world, an earthward gesture that leaves him nevertheless falling through empty air at the end of the poem. "Fergus Falling," first poem in Mortal Acts, finds the feet of an experienced Kinnell (who has himself fallen from high places, as he told us in "The Porcupine") firmly on the earth, while his innocent son falls from a tree he has climbed. At the end of "Flying Home," last poem in the book, the airplane in which Kinnell is riding lands to the "imponderable world," touching down on the "home ground." In between these two poems, Kinnell attempts to discover sources of healing or consolation for the alienated condition through a poetry celebrating the joys and woes of ordinary human life on the actual earth, spoken in a real voice, perhaps closer to Kinnell's own voice than any other in his poetry. Kinnell's goal in Mortal Acts,
as in his earlier books, is to heal his deep feelings of alienation by learning to accept and to love the world and the self. In these poems, moreover, Kinnell is not afraid to teach others, to pass on to his readers what he himself has learned from life.

This chapter will develop its argument in a two-part movement that might be paraphrased as follows. Part I: Kinnell's alienated condition, or cosmic loneliness, causes him to reach out and embrace others, through physical touch as well as through sounds (that is, poetry). This loving embrace, which Kinnell traces to its roots in human sexuality, ideally encompasses all things and creatures. In his poetry, an extension of the physical embrace, Kinnell reaches out through sounds to all existence, including his readers. The poems in Mortal Acts, then, are acts of discovery, in which Kinnell searches for hidden connections between things and creatures. In Emersonian terms, Kinnell attempts, through his poems, to re-attach himself to the whole of creation by weaving connections between himself and all life outside himself (see Waggoner 638). Out of the chaos of existence on earth, Kinnell discovers or creates order by writing a poetry that arranges into patterns the ordinary sounds of mortal existence. Through his poetry Kinnell heals his own divided consciousness and finds salvation in his abiding love for life on a sacred earth.

Part II: After discovering his own sources of union and consolation, Kinnell, like Whitman, then offers to his readers the salvation that he has achieved for himself. The major themes of Mortal Acts teach how the alienated condition may be healed through at first imaginative and then actual union with the loved other. In the final poems of Mortal Acts, Kinnell teaches that the act of opening one's arms to the rhythms of nature requires courage and perseverance. Yet to
Kinnell the possible gain is well worth the risk, for through the embrace of the imperfect, dying life on the actual earth, we may discover the only sacredness we may ever know.

I. The Search for Connections

In "Wait," first published in 1975, Kinnell describes the "desolation of lovers": that "enormous emptiness / carved out of such tiny beings as we are" (MW 15, SP 127). Emptiness in Kinnell's poetry (see "The Porcupine" and Nightmares, for example) represents both bodily death and existential loneliness: separation from fellow man and from nature—to Kinnell a death-in-life. In life, therefore, Kinnell moves to fill the "enormous emptiness" by making contact with nature and fellow humans; in his poetry he attempts to "complete" himself, to make himself "whole," by writing poems, by filling with sacred sounds the emptinesses between himself and the outer world. Throughout Mortal Acts, then, emptiness represents the loneliness and feelings of incompleteness that Kinnell strives to eliminate or alleviate in himself and for others. In a 1976 interview, he described the role of writing in this healing process:

Everyone knows that human existence is incomplete. Among those who are especially troubled by this are those who turn to writing. Writing is a way of trying to understand the incompleteness and, if not to heal it, at least to get beyond whatever is merely baffling and oppressive about it. ("An Interview with Margaret Edwards" WS 102)¹

An eloquent expression of this faith in poetry occurs at the end of "The Still Time" (published in 1975), where Kinnell writes, "there is time,
still time, / for those who can groan / to sing, / for those who can
sing to heal themselves" (MW 58). In "Brother of My Heart" (published
in 1976), a poem addressed to the black poet Etheridge Knight, however,
Kinnell appears to be less optimistic about the power of poetry to heal
the singer in this "place," this "emptiness only the singing sometimes
almost fills" (MW 12).

Kinnell's poetry, whether a vehicle of understanding or of psychic
renewal, nevertheless represents only one way to fill the emptiness, a
single element in an encompassing and characteristic reaction to
existential loneliness. Because, as he said in a 1976 interview, he
"[doesn't] take at face value the doctrines that suggest some further
individual life for a person" ("An Interview with Jack Crocker," WS 97),
Kinnell fears death and clings tenaciously to a life that holds all he
knows of holiness and mystery. In "Goodbye" (published in 1979) Kinnell
expresses this intuitive response to the emptiness in a memorable
phrase: "It is written in our hearts, the emptiness is all. / That is
how we have learned, the embrace is all" (MW 39, SP 136).

Mortal Acts continues Kinnell's life-long effort to ease his
loneliness by making contact with the human and the non-human realms and
by writing poems. In Nightmares Kinnell had embraced the emptiness; at
the end of that poem, he was "one creature / walking away side by side
with the emptiness" (BN 73, SP 118). In Mortal Acts he attempts to fill
the emptiness by embracing the mortal world with his body and his
poetry. The emptiness causes him to reach out, through physical action
and poetry, and embrace all things and creatures in order to expand,
and, if possible, heal his incompleteness. The "embrace" so vital to
Kinnell thus consists of two distinct yet interwoven actions. Out of
his spiritual and psychic need emerges physical actions and imaginative
acts.

The embrace so vital to Kinnell's poetics in Mortal Acts is first of all an actual physical action, Kinnell's characteristic response to his loneliness, an impulse arising out of his essentially sexual nature. Like two of his mentors, Whitman and D. H. Lawrence, Kinnell believes that sexuality is the basis of all things (see WS 62 and 109-112; see also "There Are Things I Tell to No One," where "the supreme cry / of joy" is "the cry of orgasm," MW 60, SP 132). According to Kinnell, one communicates most deeply in a relationship that combines friendship and sexual love (Edwards interview, WS 112). As the last chapter demonstrated, the attempt to complete the self with the loved other is a theme of Nightmares. It also figures prominently in poems of Mortal Acts, including "Flying Home," last poem in the book, which, as we shall see, picks up the theme where Kinnell left it at the end of Nightmares, Part VIII. Unless we are predisposed in infancy, however, to experience a "primal embrace" as adults with a lover, we may never be able to participate in this desired self-completing relationship. For this reason Kinnell places the highest value on "cosmic hugs" for children (see, for example, WS 111 and "Little Sleep's Head Sprouting Hair in the Moonlight," BN 47, SP 112). Without the experience of giving and receiving the primal embrace, Kinnell believes, one will be unable truly to know the loved other later in life, because an intimacy is part illusory, if purely platonic: "I think it's the opposite of what Plato thought. I think that if people know each other only mind to mind they hardly know each other at all" (Edwards interview, WS 109).

To know another fully, then, for Kinnell, means to know physically, through the touch or embrace, as well as mentally and sensuously. The
body, Kinnell says, makes love possible (see WS 112). The hug, the embrace, the touch are not just signs of affection, they are significant means by which the lover comes to know his beloved and, through her, himself as well. For this reason most of the poems in Mortal Acts include reference to human embraces, hugs, and mortal touch. In "After Making Love We Hear Footsteps," for example, Kinnell and his wife are lying together, "touching along the length of our bodies, / familiar touch of the long-married," when their son Fergus comes into their bedroom and says, "Are you loving and snuggling? May I join?" He then "flops down between [his parents] and hugs [them] and snuggles himself to sleep" (MW 5, SP 125). At the end of "The Sadness of Brothers," Kinnell imagines that he and his dead brother "hold each other, friends to reality / knowing the ordinary sadness of brothers" (MW 37). In "The Last Hiding Places of Snow," Kinnell's regret that he was not at his mother's bedside when she died, holding "her ancient, / huge-knuckled hand," leads him to thoughts of an ideal moment of death:

I would know myself lucky if my own children
could be at my deathbed, to take
my hand in theirs and with theirs
to bless me back into the world as I leave. (MW 43)

Embraces, hugs, and touches occur frequently throughout Mortal Acts. Hugging and touching, humans close the gap between them, bringing the other to the self. In the sexual union, the supreme human relationship, as in that of long-married man and wife in "After Making Love" and "Fisherman" or of girl and boy in "Pont Neuf at Nightfall," one can complete the self or at least momentarily transcend the painful incompleteness inherent in life through the joyful act of bringing the loved other into the self. At the end of "Pont Neuf at Nightfall," for
example,

... a girl and boy give themselves

into time, and memory, which affirms time,

lights their moment

all the way to the end of memory. (MW 64)

Kinnell believes also in physical contact between human and non-human. The touch, for Kinnell, as for the child and the primitive, provides essential "first hand" knowledge about the basic context (the essential ground) of human existence: the non-human (see "An Interview with Ken McCullough" WS 88). Touch reassures us of the reality of the physical world, and of ourselves, as in "The Rainbow" (MW 51). The disappearance of the rainbow from the sky makes us "turn more carefully to what we can / touch and feel, things and creatures / we know we haven't dreamed." We can expand the self, too, through physical contact with non-human creatures. Touching them can lead to valuable insights about oneself as well as about the greater world, as in "The Milk Bottle" (MW 67, SP 143), when Kinnell reaches down to touch a sea anemone in a tide pool, whose mild sucking on his finger leads him through a progression of feelings, thoughts, and memories to a climactic insight into the renewal of the self through imagination and memory. Touch is so important, in fact, that Kinnell employs the image in "The Apple Tree" (MW 65, SP 141) to represent how much human kind treasures the moments of life. He touches and embraces time itself:

Having tasted

the first flower of the first spring

we go on,

we don't turn again
until we touch the last flower of the last spring.

And that day, fondling
each grain one more time, like the overturned hourglass,
we die
of the return-streaming of everything we have lived.

Finally, if the primal touch or embrace is essential to humans, might it not also be equally important to human kind's fellow creatures, like the sow of "Saint Francis and the Sow"?

. . . sometimes it is necessary
to reteach a thing its loveliness,
to put a hand on its brow
of the flower
and retell it in words and in touch
it is lovely
until it flowers again from within, of self-blessing;
as Saint Francis
put his hand on the creased forehead
of the sow, and told her in words and in touch
blessings of earth on the sow. (MW 9, SP 126)

On the cusp between rough reality and the completed poem are words, which have physical substance and can therefore be touched, held, and even eaten--like blackberries:

. . . certain peculiar words
like strengths or squinched,
many-lettered, one-syllabled lumps,
which I squeeze, squinch open, and splurge well
in the silent, startled, icy, black language
of blackberry-eating in late September.

("Blackberry Eating," MW 24, SP 130)

Language, too, like all of man's inventions, Kinnell says, comes from "the deepest place, from sex, particularly when love is involved" (WS 112, see also "There Are Things I Tell to No One," MW 61, SP 131). The poem, then, through an act of the imagination, becomes itself a way of embracing the loved other: people, experiences, and even readers. Kinnell embraces the other, whether human, creature, or thing, through the words, which themselves, being physical extensions of the self, can be said to have physical substance. The purpose of the embrace/poem is to achieve integration through the act of gathering all human experience, joyful as well as painful, into one sound:

Just as the supreme cry
of joy, the cry of orgasm, also has a ghastliness to it,
as though it touched forward
into the chaos where we break apart, so the death-groan
sounding into us from another direction carries us back
to our first world. . . .

("There Are Things I Tell To No One," MW 60, SP 132)

Many of the poems in Mortal Acts relate thematically to Kinnell's attempt to gather the emptiness into one sound, to connect diverse human experiences with similar sounds, or to embrace all life and experience with the same primary human utterances. He begins with sounds common to all humanity and perhaps to all existence, those attempts to communicate the inexpressible that man utters through his birth-cries, heavy breathings, groans, sighs, come-cries, death-rattles, and so on--sounds of pain, joy, fear, and ecstasy.
Here's a partial list of the mortal utterances employed by Kinnell in part to provide a realistic background layer of human sounds with symbolic resonances (like the wordless utterances of Chekhov's characters in moments of intense emotion), to fill the silences (representing the void between humans), and, in parts I and II, to provide through humor a sense of balance:

1) that cry / as though he were attacked ("Fergus Falling")
2) come-cry, the cry of orgasm ("After Making Love"; "There Are Things I Tell to No One")
3) snorrs ("After Making Love")
4) heavy breathing ("After Making Love")
5) death-groan (the last cry in the throat in "There Are Things I Tell to No One"); ("groaning breath" in "The Rainbow")
6) singing (singing "Ah!" and "Oi!" in "The Choir"); ("Brother of My Heart"; "In the Bamboo Hut"); (singing "Ha ha!" in "Crying"); ("I laughed forth a song or two" in "Memory of Wilmington")
7) crying ("Brother of My Heart"; "Crying"; "The Sadness of Brothers"); "The Last Hiding Places of Snow"; "The Milk Bottle")
8) laughter ("Two Set Out on Their Journey"; "In the Bamboo Hut"); (laughing "Ha ha! ha ha!" in "Crying")
9) groans ("The Last Hiding Places of Snow"); (groaning "aaaah! aaaaah!", 2 aa’s in each, in "Lava")
10) "Unh-unh" (expressing "No!") ("Lava")
11) gasp of pain (gasping "ah! ah!" in "Lava")
12) sound of commiseration: "aaaaaaah" (4 aa’s in this sound; "Lava")
13) grunting ("On the Tennis Court at Night")
14) the struggle for breath ("The Last Hiding Places of Snow")
15) sighs ("The Last Hiding Places of Snow")
16) groans "shredded to a hiss" ("The Last Hiding Places of Snow")
17) howls of the damned -- birth-cries ("The Rainbow")
18) heart beat ("two hearts drummed" in "There Are Things I Tell to No One")
19) intake of breath: gasp ("The Milk Bottle")
20) sounds of the human voice; talking (several poems)
21) murmuring ("In the Bamboo Hut")
22) wasted breath ("The Last Hiding Places of Snow")
23) "slow-given sighs of post-coitum bliss" ("52 Oswald Street")
24) "voice creaking out slower and slower" ("Memory of Wilmington")

These mortal sounds are woven throughout Mortal Acts--common, ordinary, emotive expressions used by humans in times of joy, fear, ecstasy, and sadness, as well as other sounds, those "notes struck / or caressed or blown or plucked / off our own bodies," that our bodies emit (e.g.,
snores, sounds of voices). Note, from the list above, how similar are the sounds (and their spellings) for a laugh, "Ha ha!" and a groan, "aaaah! aaaaah!" They are connected by the two letters, "a" and "h," they share. Thus the words "ha" and "ah" represent the close relationship between laughing and crying and song, as in "Crying" (MW 26) and several other poems in Mortal Acts. Crying can evoke singing, which arises out of and evokes happiness:

... And if people say, "Hey, what's going on up there?"

"Ha ha!" sing back, "Happiness was hiding in the last tear!

I wept it! Ha ha! [sic]

These most commonly shared mortal sounds are then turned into song: "the singing of mortal lives" ("There Are Things I Tell to No One," MW 62; see especially "The Choir," "In the Bamboo Hut," "Lava," "Blackberry Eating," "Crying," and "On the Tennis Court at Night"). The sounds that humans share among themselves and these sounds transformed into song (pain and sorrow transformed into the joy innate in true singing) constitute the "one sound" that is "the singing / of mortal lives" ("There Are Things I Tell to No One," MW 62, SP 134). The source of the singing is sorrow and loneliness, and the singing itself occasionally contains laughing (as in the quote above), sometimes crying and laughing (as in "Crying"), and often just the crying. Kinnell records a few instances, however, in which the song contains crying/singing/laughing, as in the indistinguishable singing and crying of past nights remembered in "In the Bamboo Hut" (MW 21), where Kinnell hears the washerwomen outside his hut,

... murmuring,
laughing, sometimes one more forlorn
singing, a sound like that aftersinging
from those nights when we would sing and cry
for one another our last breathing... .

"On the Tennis Court at Night" provides a memorable example of the poet at play, but playing seriously, for poetry, like tennis a "tremendously happy activity," unlike tennis is definitely not "an entirely escapist activity" ("An Interview Based on Conversations with Don Bredes and David Brooks" WS 81). The following section of the poem, which exemplifies the poetry Kinnell makes from the ordinary sounds of everyday human life, contains at its end a variation on the theme of renewal through art, like the violin music emerging "from the sliced intestine / of cat" in Nightmares, Part X.

The breeze has carried them off but we still hear
the mutters, the doublefaulter's groans,
cries of "Deuce!" or "Love Two!",
squeak of tennis shoes, grunt of overreaching,
all dozen extant tennis quips--"Just out!"
or, "About right for you?" or, "Want to change partners?"
and baah of sheep translated very occasionally
into Thonk of well-hit ball. (MW 28)

Through his songs, his music made of laughing and crying, Kinnell then attempts to bind together all existence, to integrate through the truth and power of a single vision. To make music of these "notes struck / or caressed or blown or plucked / off our own bodies" ("There Are Things I Tell to No One," MW 59, SP 131), however, requires "an absolute happiness" ("The Choir," MW 10). Song, like life itself,
consists primarily of time and sorrow ("Two Set Out on Their Journey," MW 11), which, naturally evokes crying in those who feel and see truly. The "bravery of the crying [then] turns it into true song... in this emptiness only the singing sometimes almost fills" ("Brother of My Heart," MW 12). The qualifications in this last line, the words "only," "sometimes," and "almost," remind us that on some days Kinnell believes only the courageous singing (creating art out of time and sorrow despite the dangers and difficulties) brings some relief from the spiritual loneliness of existence.

Kinnell, then, derives some spiritual and emotional benefit from the act of writing, but the solace achieved through writing may last only as long as Kinnell embraces the words; that is, during the moments he is composing the poem. In a 1979 interview, given a few months before the publication of Mortal Acts, Kinnell indicated that using the poem to aid one's process of integration might have unwanted consequences. "Maybe what you learn is only momentary," he said. "Only while writing a poem do you have an illumination about things, and then it disappears." Two poems in Mortal Acts demonstrate that this illumination might sometimes disappear while the poem is being written ("Memory of Wilmington," MW 55, SP 137; and "The Apple Tree," MW 65, SP 141).

The image of the poem as an embrace of the physical world aligns Kinnell with the poetry of Whitman and Rilke, whom Kinnell paraphrased when, in a 1972 interview he associated himself with the "rich tradition" in this country "of trying to evoke physical things, of giving them actual presence in a poem," rather than with the movement of surrealism:

If the things and creatures that live on earth don't possess
mystery, then there isn't any. To touch this mystery requires, I think, love of the things and creatures that surround us, becoming one with them, so that they enter into us as Rilke says. They are transformed within us and our own inner life finds expression through them. The use of the term "inner life" means, of course, that one is not whole, one has an inner life and an outer life, and they don't come together. If a poem remains at the level of surrealism, possibly it means that no integration takes place, that the inner world and the outer world do not come together. ("The Weight That a Poem Can Carry" 35)

Only by embracing physical reality can the desired integration take place. Kinnell explained in a 1973 essay, "Whitman's Indicative Words," that while the loving acts, which "evoke things and creatures and bring them alive in words," rescue them from "time and death" (WW 56), those same acts enable the things and creatures to speak for the poet:

"... to enter a thing is to open oneself to it and let the thing enter oneself, until its presence glows within oneself. Therefore, when Whitman speaks for a leaf of grass, the grass also speaks for him. The light from heaven which shines in Whitman's poetry is often a consequence of these loving unions. (WW 57)

Poetry therefore allows Kinnell to "flow outward, to flow into things and creatures" ("An Interview with Students in a Writing Class at the University of Vermont" WS 65), to embrace them with the body of his poetry, and to unify things and words within the utterance of the poem: "I'm aware that language and things are separate realms, but when I'm writing I want to write in a language which unifies them, so the things are there in the words" (Cronk 40).
The embrace, as in *Body Rage* and *Nightmares*, is the loving union with creation that Kinnell desires so deeply. In *Mortal Acts* it takes place, for example, in Kinnell's identification with the sow ("Saint Francis and the Sow"), the heron ("The Gray Heron"), the hermit crab and sea anemone ("The Milk Bottle"), blackberries ("Blackberry Eating"), and even with lava rock ("Lava"):

I want to be pahoehoe,
swirled, gracefully lined,
folded, frozen where I flowed,
. . . . . . . . . .
. . but even more,
I want to be, ah me! aa,
as mass of rubble still

tumbling after I've stopped. ("Lava," MW 22)

"Pahoehoe" and "aa" are the two distinct types of lava rock. Pahoehoe is smooth, with a black, glass-like finish; aa is more "rock-like," with a dull, rough, uneven surface. In "Lava" Kinnell thus feels that he and his poetry are more like aa (stone) than pahoehoe (glass). As was the primary building material for the ancient Hawaiians, who used it for walls, platforms, and especially for their temples, or heiaus. Kinnell thus also associates his poetry with the religious structures of the ancient Hawaiians, who, like Kinnell, cherished the earth and felt a kinship with its creatures.

Kinnell says the English language itself makes possible this union with the natural: "The English language is one of the few languages that really can sort of poke around physical things, feel them, and touch them, and smell them and make them come alive on the page" (Nuwer 45).

Like his masters, Whitman and Rilke, Kinnell embraces the physical
world in order to transform the world within himself. Like Whitman, he takes "the surfaces of things, the faces of things, [brings] them into himself and [resurrects] them within himself" (McKenzie 215).

While the poem allows the poet to unify things and words (to embrace his loved other in the body of the poem), it also allows Kinnell to embrace the reader, through the words:

Since words form in the poet's throat muscles, they can be said to come out of his very flesh. And since the reader's throat muscles also have to form the words, the words enter the reader's very flesh. Poetry goes not merely from mind to mind, but from the whole body to the whole body. (WW 55)

In the poems of Mortal Acts, Kinnell writes in a mode closer to direct speech than the mode of Nightmares in order to open his poetry to a wider and more general audience: to embrace and to teach a greater number of his fellow human beings (Wheeler 120).

The embrace, in brief, was the image and action that Kinnell needed to make a solid, direct connection between his deepest impulses and desires and the expression and simultaneous accomplishment of those impulses and desires in his life and poetry. It dovetailed in healthy conjunction his life, poetics, and poetry. In his life and poetry of the 1970s, Kinnell was able to turn away from the embrace as an act of self-immolation (an embrace of the feared other), as in Body Rags and Nightmares, and to conceive of it as a loving, sexually-based creative act emerging out of the desire for more and better life on earth. The embrace of Mortal Acts enfolds ordinary real people and common, actual experiences and makes possible a seamless whole of man/poet Kinnell and his life/poetry. The image and action of embrace focuses and
facilitates Kinnell's quest for a solution to the major problem of his life and work: how to heal the divided consciousness, which causes man's feelings of emptiness.

In terms of this central image, then, the direction of Kinnell's quest for completeness has clarified since the poems of Body Rags and Nightmares. In the 1970s he turned to a poetry rooted more firmly than his earlier poetry in the realities of his own psyche and experiences, in his "involvement in the ordinary" ("An Interview Based on Conversations with Don Bredes and David Brooks WS 85), to poems that included and meditated directly on his subjectives: family, friends, and neighbors; his experiences in daily living and in observing the creatures in nature; and his memories of life as child and young man. Thus Kinnell lifts the raw materials of his poetry in Mortal Acts from rough reality itself, in order to base his primarily religious response to life on commonly shared realities of life: the everyday, ordinary life we all live.

II. The Embrace Is All

Mortal Acts contains poems that teach by example and by the direct expression of ideas. The spiritual goal of the book is the achievement out of a full adult understanding of the "ground," or basic context, of earthly existence a childlike innocence, some quality in which one gasps with wonder and is drawn irresistibly and emotionally to things and events. In the book, however, Kinnell's desire to admit his ignorance and thus openly "experience the rhythms of the world" (Christenson B-2) struggles with his equally strong desire to gain even more knowledge of himself and of the world in order to live more fully, to discover moments of happiness, and to make the world a more loving place. Mortal
Acts ends with an acceptance of ignorance, but only after Kinnell has made a sustained effort to understand fully and state completely and honestly his state of being in the late 1970s.

The book may be viewed, then, as a movement from childlike naivete and wonder at life's mysteries and beauties to a sophisticated acceptance of life as it is. Poems of parts I and II about childlike innocence, playfulness, longings to escape painful realities, the simple joy of living, the appreciation of the beauties of the world, the keenly felt sympathy for fellow humans and creatures, the impulse to fill the emptiness and loneliness with "singing" thus give over in part III to meditations on the personal and spiritual meanings of the deaths of Kinnell's father, mother, and only brother. In these poems Kinnell explores painful memories of loneliness, guilt, and remorse. In part I he is able to offer consolation to others in "Brother of My Heart," "Fisherman," and "Wait." At the end of Part III, however, he is unable to discover for himself convincing consolation for the deaths of brother, father, and mother. He can conclude only that life fills our emptinesses with grief and a sense of "the lost fullness," through which we know "how / far our hearts have crumbled" ("52 Oswald Street," MW 46). In part IV, however, in an effort to discover sources of consolation, something greater than himself (outside himself) to believe in, Kinnell's spent heart fully embraces life and death, past and present, the inner self and the greater world. In the effort, he seems to have discovered consolation unavailable to him in the poems of Body Rags and Nightmares.

In part IV of Mortal Acts Kinnell attempts to contain all of life in a single utterance, partly in order to dramatize life's complexity
and the impossibility of a complete understanding even after determined and sustained effort. Part IV collects the efforts to embrace the fullness and complexity of human existence within a single poem, a single sentence, perhaps ultimately even a single phrase so that through the loving, though difficult, embrace Kinnell might gather into one sound the empty spaces between creatures on earth. Through the poem Kinnell attempts to alleviate his loneliness by embracing life outside himself. The main goal of Mortal Acts, as of Nightmares, is to learn to reach out lovingly to all existence. In terms of the central metaphor this chapter has so far discussed, the main goal of the book is to enfold all of life within the body of the poem, which, by extension, is the body of Kinnell himself.

After he had apparently achieved his own salvation through the embrace of ordinary life, Kinnell then adopted Whitman's, and Emerson's, didactic concerns; he became the "lyric moralist" whom Neruda saw in Whitman, a poet, according to Neruda, "not afraid to teach— which means to learn at the hands of life and undertake the responsibility of passing on the lesson" (WW 62). With the body of his poems Kinnell would embrace the reader, who, he hoped, could be "anyone of normal intelligence and experience" (Wheeler 120). The subjects of his poems would be the most important matters of life and death, explorations of the decisive moments in his life. The forms of the poems, derived in part from Rilke's forms, and especially the forms of the Duino Elegies, would "open the possibility that some truth could be said directly rather than by parable" ("The Weight That a Poem Can Carry" 26), in the manner of Rilke and much of Whitman. The poem would consist of moments of direct statement, but would follow the intuitive "psychic progression" Kinnell had employed in part-poems like "The Porcupine" and
"Another Night in the Ruins" and all of Nightmares.

In Mortal Acts Kinnell writes few part-poems (only five in the entire book) preferring, instead, a more continuous, relaxed, freer structure of short-to-medium-length poems containing few stanzas (14 poems contain a single stanza; six have two stanzas). Two observations might be made about this structure. First, since the verse paragraph tends in Kinnell's poetry to represent a logical unit, he seems in the majority of poems in Mortal Acts to want to enfold all the ideas of a poem within few (ideally a single) logical utterance. Second, the poems containing the most complicated stanzaic structures (part-poems and poems of more than two stanzas) are clustered near the end of the book, in Parts III and IV, where Kinnell writes unmediated songs of experience, bringing the full complexity of his thought and feeling to bear on the themes of love and death. The multi-paragraph stanzaic structure of these poems thus reflects the complexity of their subjects and the tenuous nature of Kinnell's hard-earned, but provisional and temporary, illuminations on them.

The sentence structures of the poems of Mortal Acts, like the paragraph structures, reflect this same attempt to contain all expression of a subject within a single utterance. The poems of the book are characterized by what Charles Bell in a letter to Kinnell called a "stretched syntax" (see Bell Collection Notes). Part I, for instance, contains only one poem more than three sentences long ("Wait," first published in 1975). Only 3 poems in Part II contain more than three sentences ("Lava" has four; "On the Tennis Court At Night" five; and "Crying," one of the shortest poems in the book in number of words, nine). Just as paragraph structure becomes more complex in Parts III
and IV of the book, so does sentence structure. The trend of the rest of the book, however, holds true in the sentence structures of the poems in Parts III and IV. Although "Memory of Wilmington," for instance, contains 13 sentences, "The Rainbow," which is a two-page poem of a single stanza, contains only one sentence. Like "Fergus Falling" (Part I), "Blackberry Eating" (Part II), and "52 Oswald Street" (Part III), "The Rainbow," first poem of Part IV, exemplifies the tendency of the poems in Mortal Acts to want to exhaust their subject within a single stanza and, if possible, a single clause. "Fergus Falling," "Angling, A Day," and "On the Tennis Court At Night," like the poems of Parts I and II in general, exploit the humorous or comic potential of the elongated, involuted sentence. "Angling, A Day," for example, is a comic three-page, single-paragraph, two-sentence tour de force, which teaches, through humor, the life-values of perseverance and a realistic (i.e., somewhat pessimistic) outlook: "I'm not saying I'm a fisherman," Kinnell's son Fergus says at the end of the poem, which recounts in a single Faulknerian sentence a full day of bad luck attempting to catch fish across the state of Vermont "up at its thick end." "But fishermen know / there are days when you don't catch anything" (MW 8).

The poems in Parts III and IV, however, turn the long sentence to more serious purposes. "The Rainbow" (MW 51), for instance, is a stream-of-consciousness meditation occasioned by the appearance, and the sudden disappearance of a rainbow. The various subjects (fire, a woman, birth, death), beginning with the things "we can / touch and feel" and ending with "those invisible fires, / the other, unfulfilled galaxies," are subsumed in and connected by an expanding, freely wandering syntax, a rainbow of the misery sounds of human existence. The single sentence, single paragraph of "The Rainbow" contains all the pain of human life...
within a single utterance. The birth cries, "howls of the damned so fierce / they put terrified grooves permanently into the throat," lead without break to the death sound of "defeated desire," the "final curve of groaning breath," which Kinnell envisions as another rainbow, "the misery-arc,"

. . . a last outrush
which rises through the iridescence
of spent tears, across a momentarily
heavenly sky, then dies
toward those invisible fires,
the other, unfulfilled galaxies,
to win them over, too, into time and ruin. (MW 52)

The "stretched syntax," of most of the poems of Mortal Acts in tension with the lineation holds the poem in the simplest of free-verse (open field) structures, providing the pleasant illusion of a poem without scaffolding; a poem, that is, consisting entirely of apparently direct statement. This structuring device harmonizes with the forms of the poems, with what Kinnell has called their "inner shape," the logic, narrative, or psychic progression that makes it possible for the poet to unite the apparently diverse elements of a poem into a pursuit of a single goal (see WS 105). The voice, structures, and forms of the poems in Mortal Acts allow Kinnell to write a poetry consisting almost entirely of direct statement, held together by a consciousness probing emotions, events, memories, and objects for illumination.

The structures and forms of the poems of Mortal Acts could perhaps be described, in terms of Kinnell's main theme, then, as the emptiness awaiting the words that will fill it; "that enormous emptiness / carved
out of such tiny beings as we are / asks to be filled" (MW 15, SP 127). The poem is constructed against the emptiness, the chaos; and the structures at times seem about to let the chaos in. The poems admit to the chaos; their rhythms and flow are the uneven rhythms of existence pushing back the chaos: "[we] advance so far, then stop, then creep / a little, stop again, suddenly gasp . . . " ("The Milk Bottle," MW 67, SP 143). The poems fill the emptiness with the sounds of mortal existence, bringing order into the chaos. In this way, the embrace becomes the forms of the poems as well as their occasion and primary theme.

Kinnell's voice, like the materials of the poems, also achieves more directness in Mortal Acts than in earlier poems. He speaks as the man and poet Galway Kinnell of his family and friends ("actual known people," like his wife, son, mother, father, brother and sisters; like Etheridge Knight, Allen Planz, and the friends and neighbors named in "Fergus Falling," "Angling, A Day," and "On the Tennis Court at Night," for instance). Employing the real names of people (Kinnell once said that in poems he tends to use the names of real people to identify largely fictional personages) keeps Kinnell's meditations rooted in the experienced world. This technique assists his continuing effort to write a poetry of psychic realism based, or grounded, in a commonly shared environment. Kinnell writes in his own voice, out of his own personality and experience, using the people and realities of his own existence, within a setting of common or domestic life immediately recognizable to most readers. Kinnell's responses in interviews since the late 1960s reveal that he feels his experiences, emotions, and suffering are no different from anyone else's (This holds true throughout WS, for instance). Poems like "Brother of my Heart" (MW 12) and "Fisherman" (MW
reveal his deep sympathy for the plight of others. In the poems of Mortal Acts, Part IV, Kinnell frequently merges his voice with the voices of all, and speaks in the first-person plural about his deepest spiritual concerns, as in "The Rainbow" (MW 51), "The Apple" (MW 53), "Pont Neuf at Nightfall" (MW 63), "The Apple Tree" (MW 65, SP 141), and "The Milk Bottle" (MW 67, SP 143). Kinnell believes himself to be "one of us" ("Flying Home," MW 70, SP 145), whose deepest concerns are also ours: "Yes, I want to live forever. / I am like everyone" ("There Are Things I Tell to No One," MW 61, SP 133). The voice of Mortal Acts becomes our voices blended into one universally human voice, which suffers as we do the anxieties of modern life:

There's an element of unavoidable suffering in everybody's life, insured by sickness, the loss of people we love, and our own death, which we foresee. It makes us realize that life is intrinsically painful. (Christenson B1)

Moreover, Kinnell shares with us the knowledge of the incompleteness of human existence and of modern man's destructiveness and hunger for domination. We must all somehow live, he says, with "the psychic pain or anxiety of knowing that we are a mad species" (Christenson B1). In Mortal Acts, we hear the voice of a sane man, who has found ways of living with these anxieties and seeks ways that he might live and love even more fully. Nearly every poem in the book is an active search for sources in everyday life of psychic renewal, or of escape from the knowledge of the transience and pain of life. Kinnell discovers renewal through avocations, like carpentry, fishing, music, sport; through emotional release, like crying; through imaginative identification with non-human creatures and things; through love; and most importantly, through poetry, which permeates and subsumes all the
other sources, through the image and physical fact of the embrace. It is through poetry, that is, through art, that Kinnell discovers the only possibility of full participation in experience. In Nightmares and in earlier poems discussed in this essay (see, for example, "Alewives Pool") Kinnell had sought salvation through poetry and, in fact, had wondered whether it was possible that poetry could save him (see poems in Flower Herding and the end of Nightmares). Only in poems of Mortal Acts do we feel that Kinnell's poetry has saved him. We feel it in the long lines and rambling syntax of the poems in the first two parts of the book; we hear the reassuring tone in the voice that tells us, "there is time, still time, / for those who can groan / to sing, / for those who can sing to heal themselves" ("The Still Time," MW 58, SP 140). We hear and share in the healing laughter of a man who transforms the sorrows of life into art, and who may have also thereby healed himself:

Everyone who truly sings is beautiful.

Even sad music
requires an absolute happiness:
eyes, nostrils, mouth strain together in quintal harmony
to sing Joy and Death well. ("The Choir," MW 10)

In his poetry Kinnell seems to have discovered "the light heart . . . made of time and sorrow" ("Two Set Out on their Journey," MW 11). His most complete and personal expression of the theme of salvation through art occurs in one of the long, meditative poems of Part IV, "There Are Things I Tell to No One" (MW 59-62, SP 131-134). Here the themes of love, death, tenderness toward existence, and the healing properties of art are woven together in a structure that balances love and death on a fulcrum, tilted in favor of life and love.
by the sustaining and creating power of art:

1

There are things I tell to no one.

Those close to me might think

I was sad, and try to comfort me, or become sad themselves.

At such times I go off alone, in silence, as if listening for God.

Rather than listening for the voice of God, however, Kinnell is

listening for an inner music, a "music of grace," made from the sounds

of the mortal body:

2

I say "God"; I believe,

rather, in a music of grace

that we hear, sometimes, playing to us

from the other side of happiness.

When we hear it, when it flows

through our bodies, it lets us live

these days lighted by their vanity

worshipping—as the other animals do,

who live and die in the spirit

of the end—that backward-spreading

brightness. And it speaks in notes struck

or caressed or blown or plucked

off our own bodies: remember

existence already remembers

the flush upon it you will have been,

you who have reached out ahead

and taken up some of the black dust

we become, souvenir
which glitters already in the bones of your hand.

Section three of this five-section part-poem unites all experience from birth to death by discovering similarities in the overtones of "the supreme cry / of joy, the cry of orgasm" and "the death groan." By the connection of the sexual orgasm, death, and birth (or re-birth), Kinnell suggests here at the center of this part-poem renewal through sexual fulfillment (that is, through the embrace):

Just as the supreme cry
of joy, the cry of orgasm, also has a ghastliness to it,
as though it touched forward
into the chaos where we break apart, so the death-groan
sounding into us from another direction carries us back
to our first world, so that the one
whose mouth acids up with it remembers
how oddly fearless he felt
at first imagining the dead,
at first seeing the grandmother or grandfather sitting only
yesterday
on the once cluttered, now sadly tidy porch,
that little boned body drowsing almost unobserved into the
agreement to die.

In lines that echo earlier poems in Mortal Acts as well as the ending of Nightmares, Kinnell returns, with a full knowledge of the unpleasant ground of human experience, to a restatement of the main theme of both books: the theme of the physical embrace of all life. If we could only "bless / . . . whatever struggles to stay alive / on this planet of
struggles," then we could learn to feel grateful for life, despite its disappointments:

4

Brothers and sisters;
lovers and children;
great mothers and grand fathers
whose love-times have been cut
already into stone; great
grand foetuses spelling
the past again in the flesh's waters:
can you bless—or not curse—
whatever struggles to stay alive
on this planet of struggles?
The nagleria eating the convolutions
from the black pulp of thought,
or the spirochete rotting down
the last temples of Eros, the last god?

Then the last cry in the throat
or only dreamed into it
by its threads too wasted to cry
will be but an ardent note
of gratefulness so intense
it disappears into that music
which carries our time on earth away
on the great catafalque
of spine marrowed with god's flesh,
thighs bruised by the blue flower,
pelvis that makes angels shiver to know down here we mortals make
love with our bones.8

We are reminded in this section of Kinnell's belief that language, and thus also poetry, originates in the sex drive, from what he calls in the last poem of the book, "Flying Home," "compulsions to repeat / that drive [us] . . . to union / by starlight, without will or choice" (MW 69, SP 145).

In the last section of "There Are Things I Tell to No One," Kinnell finds comfort in contemplating the source of the "music of grace": the sexual embrace; that is, the physical embrace that in the course of the book becomes also the emotional and spiritual embrace out of which emerges the work of art, the poem and the book of poems. The knowledge of the possibility of happiness through love of the other makes Kinnell feel grateful towards life and gives him the courage to fill the emptiness between creatures with the sound of poetry:

5

In this spirit
and from this spirit, I have learned to speak
of these things, which once I brooded on in silence,
these wishes to live
and to die
in gratefulfulness, if in no other virtue.

For when the music sounds,
sometimes, late at night, its faint
clear breath blowing
through the thinning walls of the darkness,
I do not feel sad, I do not miss the future or need to be comforted.

Yes, I want to live forever.
I am like everyone. But when I hear that breath coming through the walls, grace-notes blown out of the wormed-out bones, music that their memory of blood plucks from the straitened arteries, that the hard cock and soaked cunt caressed from each other in the holy days of their vanity, that the two hearts drummed out of their ribs together, the hearts that know everything (and even the little knowledge they can leave stays, to be the light of this house),

then it is not so difficult
to go out, to turn and face the spaces which gather into one sound, I know now, the singing of mortal lives, waves of spent existence which flow toward, and toward, and on which we flow and grow drowsy and become fearless again. (MW 61-62)

The long last sentence of this poem dramatizes, in the accumulated weight and relentless movement of the words, both the weariness of the speaker ("You're tired. But everyone's tired. / But no one is tired
enough," "Wait," MW 15, SP 127) as well as his tireless energy. The vitality of the speaking voice is like the flowing life force that Kinnell gathers into one sound in Mortal Acts. Despite fatigue and fear, he probes the life force for the ultimate goal of all existence. In Mortal Acts, as in Nightmares, this goal is love of all existence. Kinnell's words enfold life itself as he struggles to re-attach himself, through love and poetry, to sources of rejuvenation.

The love he wishes to discover is not a stifling or possessive, and thus selfish, love, for that love, he feels, is the source of his feelings of separation from others. He expresses this clearly in the most direct of his poems about the death of his mother, "The Last Hiding Places of Snow" (MW 41):

My mother did not want me to be born;
afterwards, all her life, she needed me to return.
When this more-than-love flowed toward me, it brought darkness;
she wanted me as burial earth wants—to heap itself gently upon
but also to annihilate—
and I knew, whenever I felt longings to go back,
that is what wanting to die is. That is why
dread lives in me,
dread which comes when what gives life beckons toward death,
dread which throws through me
waves
of utter strangeness, which wash the entire world empty. (MW 42-3)

This dread caused Kinnell to deny his love to his mother, expressed in this poem by his failing to be at her bedside when she died:
But for my own mother I was not there . . .

and at the gates of the world, therefore, between
holy ground
and ground of almost all its holiness gone, I loiter
in stupid fantasies I can live that day again.

Yet Kinnell now understands that his mother's capacity to love, which he has inherited, is also a positive power and can be turned to life-giving and life-enriching uses. He continues:

I know now there are regrets
we can never be rid of;
permanent remorse. Knowing this, I know also
I am to draw from that surplus stored up
of tenderness which was hers by right,
which no one ever gave her,
and give it away, freely. (MW 44)

The task of Nightmares was to learn "Tenderness toward Existence" (BN 29), and at the end of that poem Kinnell arrived at a willingness to attempt to embrace all experience, though he embraced, instead, the emptiness. In "The Last Hiding Places of Snow" Kinnell returns to that theme. To somewhat ease his "permanent remorse," he must freely give of his "surplus stored up / of tenderness." In "There Are Things I Tell to No One" (MW 59), Kinnell asks us, his "Brothers and sisters,"
can you bless--or not curse--
whatever struggles to stay alive
on this planet of struggles? (MW 60, SP 132)

We should even bless the destroyers of what we most highly value: "The nagleria eating the convolutions / from the black pulp of thought" and "the spirochete rotting down / the last temples of Eros, the last god"
(MW 60, SP 132). If we could learn to bless all existence, then we
could learn to wish "to live / and to die / in gratefulness, if in no
other virtue" (MW 61, SP 133). We could then flow toward the ultimate
goal of human life: love of all existence. In order to love all
existence, however, we must learn to accept the limitations of life,
including its brevity and its imperfections. Death is the darkness at
the end of our brief lives, the last and most terrifying nightmare of
Body Rags and Nightmares. Fear of it darkens even our moments of
happiness, but perhaps we could learn to seek spiritual fulfillment (the
sacred or holy) during our mortal existence, instead of hoping for
fulfillment after death. Then dying would not be so difficult. If we
could learn that life itself is sacred, then we could see "that any time
/ would be OK / to go, to vanish back into all things" ("The Milk
Bottle," MW 67, SP 143),

... as when
lovers wake up at night and see
yhey both are crying and think, Yes,
but it doesn't matter, already
we will have lived forever.

A major theme of Mortal Acts is that the human imagination and memories
of happiness make life sacred. In imagery reminiscent of Rilke, Kinnell
suggests, in "The Milk Bottle" and several other poems, that memories
transfigure the self as one remembers. The imagination, moreover, can
change everything, even the future:

Look. Everything has changed.

Ahead of us the meantime is overflowing.

Around us its own almost-invisibility
If Kinnell finds it easier to accept life's transience in Mortal Acts than in Nightmares, he has also learned to be more accepting of the teachings of experience that life consists primarily of pain and "defeated desire" ("The Rainbow," MW 52; see also "The Still Time," MW 57, SP 139). Mortal Acts contains these beliefs about life—the ground of existence—but does not dwell on them obsessively, as Nightmares did. Instead, in these poems Kinnell largely embraces what is to be valued about life, especially the beauties of the natural world and love of family and friends. At the end of Nightmares Kinnell accepted love's transience. He also accepted as futile the attempt to complete the self with the loved other ("our misfit"). In "Flying Home," the last poem in Mortal Acts, Kinnell picks up the theme of love where he left it at the end of Nightmares, regretting the loss of a transcending sexual union with the loved other. In "Flying Home" he begins by saying that it is good for strangers to "merge in natural rapture" (MW 69, SP 145), but then he goes beyond sexual love to praise a more difficult, more fulfilling, and more sacred love:

It is also good—and harder—
for lovers who live many years together
to feel their way toward
the one they know completely and don't ever quite know,
and to be with each other
and to increase what light may shine
in their ashes and let it go out
toward the other, and to need
the whole presence of the other
so badly that the two together
wrench their souls from the future
in which each mostly wanders alone. (MW 70, SP 146)

Kinnell does not condemn the difficulties of love. In fact, taking another cue from Rilke, he attempts in this poem the enormous, if not impossible, task of describing and praising what Rilke called "the long experience of love":

Also die Schmerzen. Also vor allem das Schmerzen,
also der Liebe lange Erfahrung,--also
lauter Unsagliches. (The Ninth Elegy, 11. 25-7)

One achieves purity through the difficult process of learning to love the other. Love is the light of the world (see "Pont Neuf at Nightfall," MW 63, and "There Are Things I Tell to No One," MW 62, SP 131), which human kind bring to the world by increasing it within themselves (learning to love the other) and letting it go out toward the other (embracing the loved other). Thus holding the loved, and thus known, other (not just a stranger) in one's arms lights the darkness, discovers the sacred in, or brings it to this "ground of almost all its holiness gone" ("The Last Hiding Places of Snow," MW 44). Even if one cannot complete the self with the loved one, because he or she is "only the loved / other" (MW 70, SP 146), struggling to love someone else brings good to the earth (the knowledge of lovers stays "to be the light of this house" in "There Are Things I Tell to No One," MW 62, SP 134) and can bring happiness:

Flying home, looking about
in this swollen airplane, every seat
of it squashed full with one of us,
it occurs to me I might be the luckiest
in this planeload of the species . . .

. . . . . . .

. . . at the very same moment

I feel regret at leaving

and happiness to be flying home. (MW 70-1, SP 146)\(^{10}\)

What Kinnell has learned about love since *Nightmares* is not to expect a natural or spontaneous wholeness of self to suddenly emerge out of "strangers" merging "in natural rapture." Love, like life itself, must constantly adjust itself to difficulties and must struggle to keep its focus on the other:

Very likely she [Kinnell's wife, Ines] has always understood what I have slowly learned

and which only now, after being away . . .

. . . . . . .

. . . can I try to express:

that love is hard,
that while many good things are easy, true love is not,
because love is first of all a power,
its own power,
which continually must make its way forward, from night into day, from transcending union always forward into difficult day. (MW 71-2, SP 147)

Love continues to be a struggle of mismatched halves, as Kinnell conceived of it in *Nightmares*, but it is a power we must propitiate, and if we are to make good of it, we must bring to it a characteristic that all aspects of living require: courage.

And as the plane descends, it comes to me,
in the space
where tears stream down across the stars,
tears fallen on the actual earth
where their shining is what we call spirit,
that once the lover
recognizes the other, knows for the first time
what is most to be valued in another,
from then on, love is very much like courage,
perhaps it is courage, and even
perhaps
only courage. . . . (MW 72, SP 147-8)

Once the lover fully understands that his loved one is a unique person, separate from him or herself, not the romanticized alter ego or the ideal second self one fantasizes about, then the act of love becomes an embrace of the other, an act requiring—and Kinnell suggests here perhaps consisting of—courage.

The difficulties and joys and goodness of loving one's wife, then, are paradigmatic of Kinnell's task in Mortal Acts. To open one's arms to the rhythms of the natural world constitutes the greatest challenge, yet this act is required of all of us, if the human race is to regain its natural vigor and health. Kinnell wants us to understand clearly the demands of the enterprise:

. . . Squashed
out of old selves, smearing the darkness
of expectation across experience, all of us little
thinkers it brings home having similar thoughts
of landing to the imponderable world,
the transcontinental airliner,
resisting its huge weight down, comes in almost lightly,
to where
with sudden, tiny, white puffs and long, black, rubberish smears
all its tires know the home ground. (MW 72, SP 148)

Love brings Kinnell home. He embraces the home ground—joys, sorrows,
fulnesses, emptinesses, the essential loneliness—with the vehicle of
the poem. Mortal Acts admits the existence of darkness and emptiness; sorrow and pain; loss and unfulfilled desire; feelings of utter strangeness and loneliness. Yet it also describes moments of transcending union with loved ones and with nature; instances of the beauty and mystery in natural life; modes of escape from the dark side of life through serious play. With full knowledge of the facts of life and death (the "home ground"), Kinnell discovers the sacred in and through the embrace of the living.

In Part IV of Mortal Acts, Kinnell explores various possibilities of consolation, as if for the first time. With each hard-earned advance in knowledge, no matter how small, he goes back over the old ground, searching it for clues to ways of bringing the sacred into the ordinary life. He brings to each poem the full deliberate weight of his consciousness, his vitality and unique combination of realism and idealism, and finally the lyric power of his imagination. In the end he finds moments of consolation, tentative, limited, and provisional perhaps, but consolation nevertheless in an honest, hard-won poetry and a transcending, though difficult, love for his wife. The physical embrace and the spiritual embrace made physical become by the end of Mortal Acts the physical/spiritual embrace that offers promise of fulfillment. It is only through poetry that these embraces can become
one; thus it is only poetry that can save us, can return us to the
wholeness of our natural beings, one creature embracing his physical
being through the body of language. Kinnell sings our mortal lives,
filling the emptinesses and silences between creatures with the human
sounds. Through these songs he hopes to help men and women re-discover
the lost sense of living with and belonging to the natural life of the
planet. The lesson of Mortal Acts is that ordinary life offers
consolation for the pain of living in moments of physical and spiritual
union with the physical world.

In these poems Kinnell uses materials so close at hand, so
universally and obviously accessible, that one might suppose any
dedicated poet could exhaust their potential in only a few poems. Yet
Kinnell repeatedly makes these common observations, feelings, and
experiences new again—opening our eyes to the possibility of change—by
virtue of the depth and precision of his feeling. One becomes aware in
Mortal Acts, perhaps more so than in any previous book by Kinnell, that
to him poetry is a way of living, his way of meeting and making peace
with the day.

Mortal Acts, then, dramatizes what life is like, from the point of
view of a man who has experienced 50 mostly painful years of it and who
concludes that mortal existence is still worth living and loving. The
book also teaches us how to discover spiritual fulfillment, despite the
unavoidably painful conditions of existence, by facing life honestly and
squarely, and in fact, by embracing that life lovingly. Only through
that embrace, with its accumulated meanings of physical, emotional,
imaginative, and spiritual embrace, can healing take place. Even if
Kinnell cannot heal his incompleteness through the embrace, however, he
can discover, in these loving unions, sources of consolation, ways to alleviate the pain and grief that constitute the greater part of everyone's life.
NOTES, CHAPTER 4

1 At least five of the eleven interviews contained in Walking Down the Stairs took place while Kinnell was writing the poems in Mortal Acts. These interviews, numbers VII through XI, provide clues to Kinnell's religious belief, world view, and poetics during the time he was writing the poems that embody and express them.

2 In Selected Poems, these lines have been amended: "there is time, still time, / for one who can groan / to sing, / for one who can sing to be healed" (SP 140).


4 The continuing influence of Whitman and Rilke on Kinnell's thought and poetry may be seen in Kinnell's essays, "The Poetics of the Physical World" (1969), "Poetry, Personality and Death" (1971), and "Whitman's Indicative Words" (1973); in Walking Down the Stairs and other interviews; and quite clearly in the poetry of Mortal Words, Mortal Acts. The poems of Part IV especially reveal the influence of Rilke's poetic forms as well as his religious beliefs. The influence of Whitman's forms may be seen in Mortal Acts, also, though to a lesser extent than Rilke's. Kinnell learned from Whitman, with whom he shares an earthiness and sensuality, the desire to attain psychic health through his poetry. Whitman's desire to teach his countrymen, to reach out to the common man and woman, also deeply influenced Kinnell's
In Part I, for example, only 2 of 9 poems have more than two stanzas: "Fergus Falling" (5 stanzas, but a single sentence) and "Brother of my Heart" (3 stanzas; 3 sentences). In Part II, only one of the nine poems consists of more than 2 stanzas: "Les Invalides" (3 stanzas; 3 sentences). In Part III, three of the five poems are part poems: "The Sadness of Brothers," "Goodbye," and "The Last Hiding Places of Snow." The other two poems in this section consist of a single stanza: "Looking at Your Face" and "52 Oswald Street." In Part IV, three of the nine poems are part poems: "The Apple," "There Are Things I Tell to No One," and "Flying Home." Three of the poems consist of a single stanza: "The Rainbow," "Pont Neuf at Nightfall," and "The Milk Bottle." Of the remaining three poems in this part, two consist of five stanzas ("Memory of Wilmington" and "The Still Time") and one consists of six ("The Apple Tree").

"The Milk Bottle" (MW 67), though not a part-poem, modifies the progression of consciousness Kinnell employed in poems of Body Rags and Nightmares. Just as in "Another Night in the Ruins," "How Many Nights," "The Porcupine," and "The Bear," for instance, Kinnell's identification with (embrace of) the non-human leads to transformation (enlarging) of the self, though in "The Milk Bottle," the imaginative merging with the consciousness of the sea's creatures, the hermit crab and the sea anemone, occurs at the beginning of the poem and the memory evoked by this identification is recalled at the poem's center. The ending of the poem, which celebrates the ability of human memory and imagination to change the self as one remembers the past, recalls Rilke rather than Yeats, as did the earlier poems. Despite these differences, the basic
structural pattern remains the same. Sympathetic identification with another creature leads to an altered or expanded self.


8Kinnell's angels here are probably more like Rilke's angels of the Duino Elegies and the Sonnets to Orpheus than the angels of Christian belief. See Rilke's explanation of his "angels" as well as his explanations of "the transformations of love" and of death as a flowing away into the invisible in a letter to his Polish translator (November 13, 1925), quoted in the Notes to the M. D. Herter Norton translation of Sonnets to Orpheus. Norton Library Edition, 1970. 131-6.

9Al Poulin's translation of these lines captures the effort that living requires of those who wish to discover, explore, and express their spiritual natures:

. . . And so, the pain; above all, the hard work of living; the long experience of love—those purely unspeakable things.


10Kinnell enjoys writing poems on airplanes. Since he travels frequently by plane, and hasn't much unstructured time for writing other than when aboard a plane, a 5- or 8-hour flight can give him a convenient chunk of uninterrupted writing time. My thanks to John Unterecker for this information.

11The key word "ground," expressive of the mortal earth as well as of the basis or foundation of an argument or belief, appears in four
other poems in Mortal Acts. In "After Making Love We Hear Footsteps," Fergus comes into his parents' bedroom as "habit of memory propels [him] to the ground of his making" (MW 5, SP 125). At the end of "On the Tennis Court at Night," the players, one of whom is Kinnell, "hold their ground, / as winter comes on, all the winters to come" (MW 29). In "Les Invalides," companion poem to "On the Tennis Court at Night," the old men play at boules, and one of their activities is "studying the ground" (MW 27). In "The Last Hiding Places of Snow," Kinnell refers to death as "holy ground" and to life as "ground of almost all its holiness gone" (MW 44).

Other poems also echo the emphasis on physical reality as the basic context of mortal life. In "Fergus Falling," of course, Fergus receives a harsh lesson in physics. One who falls from a tree lands on the hard earth and begins to know the ground. In "Angling, A Day," men "keep faith / with earth by that little string / which ties each man to the river at twilight..." (MW 7). In "Saint Francis and the Sow," Saint Francis tells the sow "in words and in touch / blessings of earth on the sow" (MW 9, SP 126). In "Brother of My Heart," as in "Fergus Falling," Kinnell alludes to the Icarus story, this time likening Etheridge Knight to Icarus, when he asks him, "Brother of my heart, / don't you know there's only one, / walking into the light... before this bravest knight / crashes his black bones into the earth?" (MW 12). A final example of the meanings gathered to the words "ground" and "earth" occurs in "The Sadness of Brothers" (MW 33). Among photographs of "all the aircraft in the sky," which his brother had collected and "hoarded up," Kinnell found one of "a tractor ploughing a field--the ploughman / twisted in his iron seat / looking behind him at the turned-up earth..." Though human kind may dream of the sky (of heaven) and
the earth may flatten away "into nowhere," the earth is the poet's, and our, only reality. Since we are creatures of the earth, it is our true home and the closest we will come to heaven. This is the reality that Kinnell embraces in Mortal Acts.

When the reader reaches "Flying Home," last poem in the book, then, he, like Kinnell, knows the "home ground": the basic context of our commonly shared life on the actual earth. The struggle toward the ultimate goal of human existence begins with this basic, though hard-earned, knowledge.
CONCLUSION

This chapter, like the others in this study, consists of two interrelated parts. The first part summarizes the evolution of the major quest that this essay has traced, while raising a few of the many remaining questions suggested by Kinnell's career. The second part briefly discusses the present form of Kinnell's major theme, the theme of spiritual renewal and growth, in poems written after the publication of Mortal Acts, Mortal Words and collected in Kinnell's most recent book, The Past (1985).

Throughout this essay I have chosen to discuss Kinnell's poetry without criticizing his choice of themes, the shapes of his poems, or the validity of his work as a theoretician. All along, the primary purpose of this essay has been to discuss the poetry with interested respect for Kinnell's artistry as well as for the beliefs and theories that made the poems possible, in order to give the poems and the books shaped by them a reasonably careful reading. While writing the essay, I kept in mind Whitman's admonition, "No one will get at my verses who insists on viewing them as literary performance." Of the many ways of attempting to understand a poem or a body of poetry (for example, as a pattern of sound or images, as an exercise in control of tone, as a personal performance, as a type of autobiography), I found most satisfying for my purposes here an examination of Kinnell's books of poetry as portions or fragments of the incomplete spiritual autobiography of a created persona, who is in most respects an idealized version of Kinnell himself.

The essay has thus traced the spiritual odyssey of Kinnell's
persons by examining individual poems and books as parts or sections of a larger, possibly life-long, polymorphous poem. That such a work exists may be inferred from the following: Kinnell continuously reworks and makes reference to parts of this larger poem, or life-myth, within individual poems as well as through the attention he pays to the structuring of his books of poetry. As part of this process of reworking materials, Kinnell readily revises previously published works, whether poems, prose, translations, or interviews. For instance, he has little reluctance to revising published poems when preparing a periodical version for book publication (cf. "The Mystic River" in Poetry and "The Last River" in BR), and he will revise the book version of a poem for collection in a subsequent book (cf. "The Still Time" in MW and in SP). Compare poems collected in Selected Poems with the versions first published by Kinnell in the books represented in that volume as well as with earlier versions as published in periodicals. His novel, Black Light, has appeared in two versions, as has The Poems of Francois Villon. In addition, Kinnell admits making major changes to the interviews he edited for collection in Walking Down the Stairs. At least one of them, in fact, is a fictional interview, into which Kinnell placed questions and responses originally part of several separate interviews.

Although many other examples could be supplied, the pattern is clear. It is possible that Kinnell views each of his works, published or not, as a work in progress, just one more version of a part of his spiritual autobiography. This attitude toward an art that he defines as the means of a quest for spiritual growth suggests an inherent belief that the goal of the quest, salvation, is less a state than a mode of action. Since we vanish back into nature at death and since salvation
occurs only in the experienced world, if it occurs at all, then the process by which one searches for spiritual growth is all. Those who are growing toward spiritual perfection are those in constant process of spiritual renewal. Such a vision might easily accept the idea of a poem as a fragment or portion of a much larger, incomplete, and never-to-be-completed, master poem. It also explains the themes as well as the structures of much of Kinnell’s poetry, as this essay has pointed out.

Throughout his career, as this study has shown, Kinnell has sought this renewal, or spiritual growth, through imaginative reworking of his own experiences, so as to soothe or heal his own alienated condition. A major stumbling block to the achievement of this goal is Kinnell’s inability to discover in decay and death manifestations of a sacred force. To simplify the conflict, Kinnell’s religious belief, which values the perceived world because it contains the totality of human existence, cannot wholly accept death as part of natural process, and thus a good, since death takes away man’s consciousness of himself and existence. However, Kinnell seems on the verge of accepting the idea of death as a good in the later poems of Mortal Acts, where he attempts to embrace and bless the difficulties of life and death because they are a natural part of human existence. In "The Apple," for example, the apple of the knowledge of death "only needs to be tasted without fear / to be the philosophers’ stone and golden fruit of the risen world" (MW 54). Occasionally, but not often, Kinnell says, one is able to accept the possibility of one’s own death. This suggests that learning to face and accept one’s own disappearance is an ongoing process. At certain moments in one’s life, Kinnell says, one sees that "any time / would be OK / to go, to vanish back into all things—as when / lovers wake up at
night and see / they are both crying and think, Yes, / but it doesn’t matter, already / we will have lived forever” (“The Milk Bottle,” MW 67).

Despite Kinnell’s wishes, however, the process of acceptance cannot be completed. In poems since Mortal Acts, Kinnell must repeat this process of attempted embrace and acceptance because, just as the conditions of his life have changed, so have the terms of his effort at renewal. In The Fast Kinnell rebuilds his fragmented world with the aid of the poem. He searches in imagination and memory for ways “to keep the world from turning / into dead matter” (“On the Oregon Coast,” TP 36), so as to learn to open himself fully to all aspects of life. He prays to be able to accept what is, as it is, without wishing to change it: “Whatever happens. Whatever / what is is what / I want. Only that. But that” (“Prayer,” TP 19).

In the 1970s, as we saw in the last chapter, Kinnell discovered sources of consolation and regeneration in the imaginative and physical embrace of “actual known people” and the “actual earth.” As in his earlier volumes, especially The Book of Nightmares and Body Rags, Kinnell appeared intent on experiencing and recording honestly the truths of a commonly shared human existence. Unlike in the earlier volumes, however, he appeared much more accepting of an imperfect world and self, and he apparently found both easier than ever before to assimilate into his poetry. In poems like “The Milk Bottle” and “Flying Home,” he discovers the possibilities of integration in and through renewed devotion to all facets of a difficult life. At the end of that volume, we feel confident that Kinnell knows with more certainty than at the end of any previous volume the way to fulfill his quest for a sense of completeness or wholeness.
Kinnell's poetry, however, must adapt to ever changing conditions. His imagination feeds on the circumstances of his own life, and his poetics is grounded in a psychologically realistic portrayal of that life (see Hilgers and Molloy 110). The forms and substance of his poetry thus necessarily follow the contours of his own experiences, a characteristic of Kinnell's poetry that James Dickey noted as early as 1960, at the beginning of Kinnell's career. What a Kingdom It Was (1960), as we discovered in chapter two, represents Kinnell's 10-year struggle to cast off the influences and forms of traditional religious belief as well as those of literary modernism, which were leading him away from the sense of psychic wholeness he intuitively desired. In the later poems of that book, Kinnell makes direct use of the materials of his own life in order to dramatize the plight of his alienated spirit.

The anxieties and turmoil of life in the 1960s, as chapters two and three noted, produced the poetry of Flower Herding on Mount Monadnock, Body Rags, and The Book of Nightmares. The poems of Flower Herding (1964) accurately and convincingly embody Kinnell's dissociation from his fellow man, from traditional sources of religious comfort, from the promise of the American dream, from nature as place and as reflection of the eternal, and, ultimately, from inner self. In these poems Kinnell, apparently content to write a poetry whose chief purpose was to reflect his alienation, made no attempt to seek psychic integration by means of the creative act. In the poems of Body Rags (1968), however, Kinnell turned to a poetics of empathetic immersion. The purpose of these poems, as Kinnell's essays of the time suggested, was to plunge into the self in order to explore the alienated condition and to discover ways to resolve or understand it. In many of these poems, Kinnell sought his
identity through a reworking of autobiographical materials, but more often than not, seems to have ended by constructing, or creating, a self (and thus no doubt obscuring the actual self) rather than discovering one (for example, see "The Last River"). Nightmares (1971) is a more direct and sustained employment of autobiography than Body Rags, and a more successful fulfillment of Kinnell's poetics, as well. The book probably does reveal, to readers if not to Kinnell himself, many truths about his psychic and physical existence. In addition, Nightmares apparently exorcised many of Kinnell's demons and allowed him, in the 1970s, to achieve a calmer, more accepting view of himself and of earthly life.

The sorrows and joys of his domestic life in the 1970s evoked the genial, expansive, meditative poems of Mortal Acts. This book contains many easygoing, basically humorous poems. Other poems, however, attempt to explore difficult experiences, such as the deaths of Kinnell's parents and the relationships to his brother and wife. Mortal Acts, like his other works, does not attempt to exacerbate the harshness of life, but does attempt, as Kinnell said in 1982, "to come to terms with difficult things" (Hilgers and Molloy 112). One becomes aware in Mortal Acts, perhaps more so than in any previous book, that poetry is Kinnell's way of meeting and making peace with the day.

What has been said thus far about Kinnell's poetry emerges from a view, as Albert Camus once stated it, that "The idea of an art detached from its creator is not only outmoded; it is false." In this view all art is to some extent autobiography, and each artist continually seeks the forms and modes that will enable him to overcome inhibitions and express the truths of his feelings and experiences. However, because each artist is also a product of his place and time, great art is also
the personalized history of a culture and its times; that is, it is also the spiritual biography of a particular people. Kinnell's poetry, rooted in a recognizable and shared human reality, is the spiritual autobiography of a particular man, both individual and representative, who suffers from a spiritual, emotional, and psychological ailment common in our rapidly changing, secular society, and who searches for ways to change or re-create the self.

It may be important someday to attempt to discover where in Kinnell's poetry the true self is revealed or uncovered (perhaps nowhere, or perhaps, for example, in what some readers might call the excessively sentimental poems of The Past, Part I?), but for the purposes of this study the created self must suffice. At this point in Kinnell's life and in the study of his poetry, it is less important that we differentiate the "actual" Kinnell from the main speaker of his poems than that we understand and appreciate the poems themselves, as part of a still ongoing larger process of creation. In his poetry of Mortal Acts and The Past, especially, Kinnell creates a persona close to his ideal conception of himself as husband, father, mystical seeker, poet, and so on. He wishes to become that ideal person (thus the poems are "wishful phrases"), but he can do so only if the persona shares his weaknesses and his sickness, as well as his strengths. That is, Kinnell's attempt to perfect himself must be an honest attempt of the man through the medium of the persona.

This view of poetry as vehicle of spiritual growth places Kinnell squarely in the tradition of Emerson and aligns him with a continuing tradition of mystical or religious poetry that includes, for different reasons and in varying degrees, Walt Whitman, Robert Frost, Hart Crane,
William Carlos Williams, Wallace Stevens, Robert Lowell, and Theodore Roethke. Like Whitman and Roethke, Kinnell is a poet of the transcendent self conceived as representative and defined by its capacity for growth. In his poetry, the man who suffers and the artist who creates are the same man, and this man's sufferings, unlike the exalted sufferings of confessional poets like Lowell, are the difficulties of life shared by all humanity. At the center of Kinnell's poetry is a tension perhaps engendered by a culture that has abandoned God and embraced materialism, but not given up its need to believe in an absolute. Like Frost, he documents the situation of a man not content with the secular. Like Wallace Stevens, Kinnell gave up his childhood faith early but has never forgotten it, and like the Stevens of Opus Posthumous, he believes that after one has abandoned faith in God, poetry takes on the task of soothing and healing the spirit. But Kinnell is both realist and idealist; his poetry is at once naturalistic in its ideas and religious in its feelings. As in Whitman and William Carlos Williams, there is tension in his poems between romantic yearning and a determination to confront reality, and as in Whitman and Roethke, this confrontation entails continual "dying to the self" in order for psychic, moral, and spiritual growth to occur. In Kinnell poetry and vision, as in Emerson and Hart Crane, are nearly the same and both are connected with love, in which, as in Roethke, the self discovers its deeper identity. As this brief and incomplete list of Kinnell's influences signifies, the roots of his poetry, tangled as they are, drink deeply of the main current of great American poetry.

II. The Past: Renewal Through Art

Kinnell's commitment to a poetics of empathetic immersion was
severely tested again in the time between Mortal Acts (published spring, 1980) and The Past (published fall, 1985). In 1980 his close friend, the poet James Wright died. Wright's death was followed in 1982 by the death of another friend, the poet Richard Hugo. Dissolution and separation followed in 1984, as Kinnell's marriage of 18 years broke up; in that same year, his daughter, Maud, left home to attend college and his son, Fergus, to attend a boarding school. These painful losses in Kinnell's personal life may explain the complication in The Past of Kinnell's theme of embrace: "The man ... will think of smallest children / grown up and of true love broken. . . ("The Frog Pond," TP 14). His marriage, representative of the loving embrace itself in "Flying Home," dissolved; his need to see human death as a natural, and thus good, facet of life necessitated the acceptance of the deaths of fellow poets close to his own age (Wright, like Kinnell, was born in 1927; Hugo was born in 1923). The deaths of James Wright and Richard Hugo are deaths of particular friends (individual, unrepeatable shapes into which the dust was once swirled), and the separation from wife and children broke the connections holding him most firmly to the loving embrace.

A goal of The Past, as of Mortal Acts, is to discover within "the ordinary day the ordinary world / providentially provides" ("The Waking," TP 51) the "light that lives inside the eclipse" ("That Silent Evening," TP 53); that is, to learn to discover ways of seeing within even painful memories and occurrences "the sparkling that heavens the earth" ("That Silent Evening," TP 53). Because of Kinnell's losses, however, The Past is much darker in tone than Mortal Acts, and is concerned in large part with imaginative reconstruction of a happy past
through the corrective lenses of the poem.

One of the main purposes of the book is to recover the past. Following broken attachments, Kinnell attempts to reconnect with the past in order to find traces of a higher and sacred order in it. In *Mortal Acts*, Kinnell renewed his commitment to love and to life through actual and imaginative embraces. In *The Past*, however, the physical embrace being torn, Kinnell must seek renewal through poetry alone. He must accept as parts of natural, and thus sacred, processes the ultimately inexplicable loss of family and friends, the very relationships whose power to sustain him he had celebrated in *Mortal Acts*, and he must do so relying only on the power of poetry to ease his loneliness and heal his divided spirit. It is not unusual, then, that the poems of *The Past* should be principally concerned with forms of renewal, especially with renewal through art (six of the last eleven poems in the book, for example, may be seen as commenting on some aspect of this theme). The possibility of renewal through art, for Kinnell, seems to imply proof of salvation through art, or at the very least provides the opportunity for fuller participation in experience through the creative act.

In *What a Kingdom It Was*, as we discovered (see pages 48-49), only a few poems explored this theme. In that book (in poems such as "Freedom, New Hampshire," "First Song," "Alvewives Pool," "The Schoolhouse," and "Avenue C") Kinnell expressed the belief that the poem occasionally offers relief from a sense of incompleteness. Music made of the plain, ordinary, disparate or perhaps even ugly materials of life intensely examined and vividly imagined brings momentary peace of mind, consolation, even joy to the poet. As in the early poem, "Duck Chasing" (see pages 72-73), imaginative union with the natural through the body
of the poem renews the poet's sense of wonder at the beauties of life. In *Flower Herding on Mount Monadnock*, however, Kinnell modified this belief in the power of poetry to renew the poet (see pages 66-68). In poems like "The Homecoming of Emma Lazarus," "To a Child in Calcutta," "For Denise Levertov," "For Robert Frost," and "Tree from Andalusia," Kinnell defined the poem as a record of the poet's sufferings, which provides not renewal, but rather only temporary relief from thoughts of the deaths of friends and loved ones ("But at last in the thousand elegies / The dead rise in our hearts, / On the brink of our happiness we stop" [AB 175, SP 63]).

In *Body Rags* and *Nightmares* the poem is an exploration into unknown recesses of the poet's psyche, whose purpose is the discovery of the unvarnished truth (though, in the end, it is probably not possible to tell how much truth was discovered and how much created). By the end of *Nightmares*, writing poems is a way of easing existential loneliness (a "concert of one / divided among himself" [BN 75, SP 119]), which might provide relief or consolation for the reader, but came too late to help the poet. In *Mortal Acts*, as in *Body Rags* and *Nightmares*, the poem is a quest for psychic integration. The poems of *Body Rags* and *Nightmares* embrace the emptiness—the dark aspects of Kinnell's unconscious; the poems of *Mortal Acts*, however, embrace Kinnell's subjectives. In *Mortal Acts*, Kinnell believes the imaginative as well as an actual embrace of existence leads to the unity of the self and to the discovery and acceptance of the sacred in life. As we saw in the last chapter, Kinnell gradually came to believe during the 1970s that only poetry (that is, art) can save the human race (see, for example, Wheeler 122). Poetry can do this by helping the human race understand its alienation
from its sacred, biological past, so that it can eventually bring itself back "into harmony with [nature's] rhythms" (Cronk 40). Poetry can thus remake the poet and his readers through its power to teach and to heal; poetry reattaches man and woman to the sacred force that unifies all life on earth.

Kinnell believes in a sacred unifying force exemplified in every natural thing and process (Beckman 15). In previous poems, as this study as shown, Kinnell searched for signs of this force in natural processes, such as the rebirth of seemingly dead plants and hibernating animals in spring, or the imaginative transformation of one life form into another, as in "The Bear" (BR 60, SP 92) and "The Gray Heron" (MW 20, SP 129). The spiritual principle revealed in these signs assures Kinnell of a kind of resurrection after death, though not one man can necessarily understand. This same force, he says, can also reveal itself in destruction, by which he means destruction for the sake of renewal: "When one animal eats another, that definitely has to do with the interchange of life, the dependency of one living creature on another," he said in 1982. The principle of renewal in nature is the central metaphor of The Past. In this book it appears in its literal, or natural, sense as well as in Kinnell's efforts to create lasting poems by gathering, reusing, and also improving upon memories of better and happier times. As literal embrace prefigures the embrace with the imagination (the poem itself) in Mortal Acts, so literal images of renewal through natural processes prefigure the renewal of the spirit in The Past through a conscious reworking of the contents of human memory. Kinnell may be less hopeful that the song can heal the singer (cf. the endings of "The Still Time" [MW 57] and "Fire in Luna Park" [TP 27]), but he still trusts his belief that acts and processes in the
experienced world have counterparts on the spiritual plane.

There is a force in nature, say several of the poems in The Past, that renews the world through death. This theme is announced in the playful "The Angel" (TP 5), second poem in the book. The dog as angel alludes to Rilke's definition of angels as well as to his attitude toward dogs, to which he apparently felt such a strong spiritual attachment that he was distracted from his work whenever a dog was around (see note on sonnet 16, first series, in Poulin's translation of the Duino Elegies and the Sonnets to Orpheus, Houghton, 1977: 203-4). Kinnell, however, sees his dog as angel, as he tells us in the first two lines, because she "mediates" between humans and "the world underneath us" (that is, the natural world, including the natural process of death and decomposition). The dog is literally closer to that world, being shorter than humans, but also she is naturally more accepting of the unity of the two worlds, both of which are holy to Kinnell. The angel renews the bone she unearths ("bone of a dog, / if possible") by extracting nourishment from it, just as the man renews the logs he burns by extracting their heat, both man and dog, "making logs and bone together / cry through the room."

Wood is a natural symbol for this process of renewal, since man "renews" wood products in so many diverse ways, and has done so ever since he clutched his first club or built his first fire (see, for example, "The Man Splitting Wood in the Daybreak," "Break of Day," and "The Past"). In The Past Kinnell employs this long history of man's association with wood for several reasons. To name a few, wood as a symbol, in contrast to a flower, suggests human experience extending beyond a single human lifespan, and thus represents a sense of the human
past in the continuum of geologic time (see especially "Driftwood from a Ship" and "The Seekonk Woods"). The association of wood and the gods—the sacred force manifested in the experienced world—extends to the beginnings of man, of course, and wood, specifically the willow or poplar, is associated with Orpheus, god of poetry, to whom Kinnell alludes in several poems (see "The Road Between Here and There," "Middle of the Night," "The Man Splitting Wood in the Daybreak," and "The Seekonk Woods"). In addition, burning wood can represent one manifestation of the fires of life—the pains and sorrows of living in the flux—to which Kinnell's poetry continuously makes reference. In "Olive Wood Fire" (TP 9), for instance, ancient wood, perhaps representing a time span encompassing a thousand years of human history and knowledge, provides little light (that is, solace) for a father concerned about his son's future in a world in which "a flier [cries] out in horror / as he [drops] fire on he [doesn't] know what or whom, / or else a child thus set aflame."

Many of these uses may be found in "The Seekonk Woods," last and longest poem in The Past. Wood makes music (in the violin), provides homes for dryads, sometimes—like humans—begs for death, represents the past (the persona goes to the Seekonk Woods to "stand in the past and just look at it," TP 55), and in the form of railroad ties, is resting place of sleeping gods (whose snores, "singing up from former times" may represent reminders of Kinnell's poet "gods," like Whitman, Rilke, and so on: "The once-/ poplars creosoted asleep under the tracks"). No other Kinnell book makes extensive use of wood as image and symbol. Although wood makes appearances in Nightmares and Mortal Acts, in neither book is renewal following death seen in terms of a possibly new and radically different function in the natural, as the analogy of the
destinies of wood and human kind suggests.

At the center of The Past, Kinnell connects the theme of natural renewal to the theme of renewal in terms of human life and death. The spruce log in "Driftwood from a Ship," personified throughout the poem, shares with all existence its ultimate end: "Its destiny is to disappear" (TP 26). By the end of the poem, Kinnell is referring to everything in nature when he says, "This could be accomplished when a beachcomber extracts its heat and resolves the rest into smoke and ashes; or in the normal way, through combined action of irritation and evanescence."

The facing poem, "Fire in Luna Park" (TP 27), concerning the deaths of seven people in a fire in an amusement park haunted-house ride, emphasizes the horror and grief associated with this "natural process" when human lives are involved. Nevertheless, after death the human shares its destiny with the spruce log that became the piece of driftwood. In the natural world, "all are born, all suffer, and many scream, / and no one is healed but gathered and used again" (TP 27).

These two poems are followed in the book by two more that together summarize Kinnell's belief in an invisible force uniting all life ("the invisible / continuously perforating the visible," "The Geese," TP 28), a force manifested, in part, in decay and death. Contemplating the motions through the air of a milkweed seed, "chalking / in outline the rhythm / that waits in air all along," and a spinus tristis, "who spends his days turning gold back into sod," Kinnell is moved to ask two questions:

What sheet or shroud large enough
to hold the whole earth
are these seamstresses' chalks

and golden needles

stitching at so restlessly?

When will it ever be finished?" ("The Shroud," TP 29)

One of the common threads in all life on earth is death, represented here by the spider's acts of de-composing, actually ingesting, other insects. Another common thread, interwoven with the thread of *spinus tristis*, is birth, or re-birth, "the rhythm / that waits in the air all along" of the milkweed seed, "Lifted by its tuft / of angel hairs." In birth, in re-birth, even in destruction for the sake of renewal, Kinnell finds evidence of a sacred force, whose grand design (the resemblance to Frost's poem is surely not accidental) may be invisible to human consciousness, but nevertheless exists. Kinnell also implies, here and elsewhere in *The Past*, that it exists for some greater good.

In part III of *The Past*, renewal is seen in terms of human death ("Cemetery Angels," "December Day in Honolulu," "On the Oregon Coast," "Last Holy Fragrance," "The Fundamental Project of Technology," and "The Seekonk Woods"). In "December Day in Honolulu," for example, three memories of now-dead fellow poets, occurring coincidentally on the same December day in Honolulu, are set beside thoughts occasioned by the "wail of a cat in heat" (TP 35). As in previous poems, notably "Lastness" from *Nightmares*, the cat is linked to "propagation itself" and to the singing (poetry) that arises out of the drive to love and create. In this poem the love-sick cat represents the now-dead poets about whom Kinnell is thinking. The individual poet may die, but not the force that reveals itself in his or her poems: "This one or that one dies but never the singer." Consolation for the deaths of poet-friends.
may be found in this idea. As one poet dies, "the next steps into the empty place and sings." But each poet, like each of his or her poems, is individual, and in the end he or she is not replaceable. Like "the very old cat, clanking its last appearance on the magic circle of its trash can lid," the poet speaks for a force that "must haul its voice all the way up from the beginning." He is "an earlier, perhaps the first, life's first, irreplaceable lover." The reminder of Whitman's statement ("The poet is the earth's best lover.") is intentional. Kinnell agrees with Whitman, of course, and Whitman himself is a perfect example of the unique, irreplaceable singer. "December Day in Honolulu," like the other poems listed above, discovers renewal in human death, but also, in these same deaths, the irretrievable loss of individual human consciousnesses and creative gifts.

In most of these poems, also, as well as in the other poems of this part, Kinnell renews or restores his faith in life and in the sacred force by gathering and using memories of his past life in order to discover in his imaginative reconstruction of these memories (that is, his poems) a new life made of the best moments of the old one (Most of the poems in the book embody this process, but see especially "The Past," "The Waking," "That Silent Evening," and "The Seekonk Woods"). In "The Seekonk Woods," for example, Kinnell returns to woods he played in as a young boy in order to "stand in the past and just look at it" (TP 55). The poem itself, however, restructures memories of the past and views them through adult consciousness and knowledge. The result of this process of recycling memories is increased self-knowledge and awareness. It enables Kinnell at the end of this last poem in The Past to accept death and dissolution as part of natural process. Moreover,
each poem, he concludes, is a new beginning—a renewal of the poet’s deep commitment to learning to accept life as it is:

So what if we groan?
That’s our noise. Laughter is our stuttering
in a language we can’t speak yet. Behind,
the world made of wishes goes dark. Ahead,
if not tomorrow then never, shines only what is. (TP 57)

In a 1981 essay on the Hawaiian islands, Kinnell wrote the following passage about the rain forests of Maui and Kauai, as seen from a small airplane flying over them:

The birds will be speaking to each other down there, weaving a protective layer of song over the forest. Just as in human voices the remaining Hawaiians still try to weave their ancient chants over a shattered culture. An old Polynesian saying has it, “The stones rot, only the chants remain.” (“Hawaii— A View from Above” C1)

Kinnell’s article describes a Hawaiian land and culture eroded by time and devastated by the technologized spirit. Yet forces of renewal also work here. The island-building volcanos bring forth new land out of the womb of the earth, and the Hawaiian chant-makers minister to the spirit of a disinfiranchised people through healing songs, which remain to console long after their makers have returned to the dust. Inherent in Kinnell’s article, then, is a belief that permeates his poetry: everything in nature, including human life and consciousness, erodes, dissolves, decays, and dies. Only the poems remain to soothe, console, heal, and tell, finally, of man’s love for this precious, vanishing life. In the poems of Kinnell’s 1985 book, The Past, as in the books
preceding it, he reaffirms his faith in the sanctity of life, despite
disappointment and painful losses. More so than in any book since
*Flower Herding*, the poems in *The Past* provide a protective layer over
the remnants of a shattered life. Through these poems, or affirmative
chants, however, Kinnell touches forces that renew his faith in the
power of human imagination and memory to create out of decay and death a
poetry whose voice and spirit sing the praises of life lived in loving
acceptance of what is.
ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY
BIBLIOGRAPHY OF PRIMARY SOURCES

I. Poems in Periodicals

(arranged chronologically)


"Easter." Epoch 5.3 (Fall 1953): 172-3.


"Where the Bodies Break." Ladies' Home Journal 73.9 (Sep. 1956): 43.


"Spicatto." ["Leaping Falls" in What a Kingdom It Was.] Modern Age 1.1 (Summer 1957): 85.

"Indian Bread." Beloit Poetry Chapbook 5 (Summer 1957): 27.
"Ballade." Trans. by Kinnell of Francois Villon. Modern Age 1.2 (Fall 1957): 115.

"Seven Streams of Nevis." Poetry 90.6 (Sep. 1957): 346-49.


"Reply to the Provinces." New Yorker 34.37 (1 Nov. 1958): 44.


"Where the Track Vanishes." Poetry 94.3 (June 1959): 170-73.

"In a Parlor Containing a Table." Nation 189.5 (29 Aug. 1959): 98.


"At the Reading of a Poet's Will." Nation 190.17 (23 Apr. 1960): 356.


"Testament of the Thief." Choice.

"Getting the Mail." Colorado State Review.


"Going Home by Last Light" and "The Bear." The Sixties.


"Lastness." [Sections 4-7 of Part X of The Book of Nightmares] New American Review.


"Wait." New Yorker 51.22 (21 July 1975): 32.


"Brother of my Heart." New Letters 42.4 (Summer 1976): 82.


"Fergus Falling." New Yorker 54.28 (28 Aug. 1978): 34.


"After Making Love We Hear Footsteps." Choice.

"52 Oswald Street." Mississippi Review.

"In the Bamboo Hut." New England Review.


"Cemetery Angels" and "Farm Picture." Apparitions.

"The Road Between Here and There." Mother Jones.

"Prayer." The Nation.


"The Ferry Stopping at MacMahon's Point." Scripsi.


"Middle of the Night" *The New Yorker* 61 (30 Sep. 1985): 34.


II. Books and Essays

(arranged chronologically)


"Seeing and Being." *Poetry*, 100.6 (Sep. 1962): 400-403. Review of *On my Eyes*, poems by Larry Eigner. Kinnell admires Eigner's poetry "for its closeness to things, its sense of their mystery and realness... His best lines are less invented descriptions than the acts themselves of his contact." It is a rare gift: "Many poets, of course, write of common, despised objects, but Eigner comes close to making these things the personages of a sacred poetry."


---. *The Poetics of the Physical World*. Fort Collins, Colorado: Colorado State U, 1969. Also published in *Iowa Review* 2 and 3 (Summer 1971): 113-26. Delivered as the fifth annual Writer in Residence Lecture on 1 September 1968. In Kinnell's view the source of the poem, and all its worth, "lie in what one knows and feels." He traces the abandonment of outward form in the modern poem, stating that the poem is not a game, "but more resembles a battle or a journey." The modern poem discards the inner conventions of poetry, as well as the outward forms, in order to feel more deeply all the realities of life, beautiful as well as painful. For poetry, to Kinnell, is not consolation, but insight. "The poetics of heaven agrees to the denigration of pain and death," Kinnell states. "The poetics of the physical world builds on these stones." The poem entails a struggle with one's own nature, arising partially out of our hunger to be changed, our desire for union with what is loved. It is a desire for more, not less, life. The subject of the poem, says Kinnell, is "the thing which dies." This is why "it clings to the imperfect music of a human voice." This knowledge of death, linked with man's dreams of paradise,
provides the "thrilling element in every creature, every relationship, every moment."


---. "Poetry, Personality, and Death." Field 4 (Spring 1971); 56-75. Also published in Claims for Poetry. Ed. Donald Hall. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1982. 219-237. Kinnell desires a poetry in which one can transcend personality and express the pain of everyone so as to provide sources of transfiguration. The closed ego of modern man, Kinnell feels, thwarts his deepest desire, "which is to be one with all creation." Modern poetry has taken on the task of breaking out of the closed ego. This cannot be accomplished through the use of a persona, however. Instead, the poet must seek an inner liberation "by going so deeply into himself . . . that he suddenly finds he is everyone." He must give himself to the natural life. This "death of the self" is not "a drying up or withering." Out of this death, Kinnell hopes to be reborn (regenerated) "more alive, more open, more related to the natural life."


Kinnell, Galway. "Last of the Big-Time Amateurs." Sports Illustrated 38 (25 June 1973): 30+. Kinnell's first journalistic venture, an article on the tennis player Virginia Wade. Kinnell, a tennis player himself, is drawn to Wade because she is guided by esthetic principle, the desire to play beautifully.

---. "Whitman's Indicative Words." Walt Whitman's Autograph Revision of the Analysis of Leaves of Grass. Introductory essay by Quentin Anderson, Text notes by Stephen Railton. New York: New York U P, 1974: 53-63. First published in American Poetry Review 2.2 (1973): 9-11. See also American Literary Scholarship, 1973. In this essay Kinnell describes some of the attraction Walt Whitman holds for him, particularly "the mystic music," of Whitman's voice: "His voice is unmistakably personal, and it is universal. It is outgoing and attaches itself to the things and creatures of the world; yet it speaks at the same time of a life far within. In this it resembles prayer. Its music is that which speech naturally seeks when given entirely to expressing inner burdens of feeling." Whitman's primary subject was "the original music of the human voice, how it rescues words and makes them fresh." Leaves of Grass "set out not only to
rescue the things and creatures of the world; it also tried, more seriously from Whitman's viewpoint, to redeem in the flesh this nineteenth-century American puritan: to transform him from one who felt ill toward himself into one who exuberantly loved himself, to make him into 'one of the roughs, a kosmos, disorderly, fleshy and sensual.'" Kinnell concludes that Whitman not only saved himself, "not only resurrected himself in his body, but, being, as Neruda says, also a teacher, he bravely undertook that most difficult role, of being a model for others to do the same for themselves." Whitman indicated to poets to come—and in fact to everyone—"that one's poetry, and also one's life, is not to be a timid, well-made, presentable, outward construction. It is to be the consuming enterprise, leading if possible to intensified life, even to self-transfiguration."


poetics during the writing of the poems in *Body Rags* and *The Book of Nightmares*.


---. *Angling, a Day*.


---. "Hawaii--A View from Above." *Star-Bulletin* (Honolulu) 10 May 1982: C1. Reprinted from *Prime Time* magazine. Description of an air tour of the main Hawaiian islands. Impressions of island-building volcanoes, of the disappearance of the islands by erosion, of the Hawaiian language ("The stones rot, only the chants remain.") of the history of the Hawaiian peoples, of the regrettable collision of Western and Hawaiian cultures: "the technologized spirit sweeps before it everyone it touches." But the Hawaiians continue to weave their chants: "May their chants prosper."


exploration of feelings. See American Literary Scholarship, 1979.


Nelson, Cary. "Ecclesiastical Whitman: Galway Kinnell's *The Book of Nightmares.*" *Our Last First Poets: Vision and History in Contemporary American Poetry*. Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1981. 63-96. In Kinnell, especially in *The Book of Nightmares*, is seen a traumatic version of the conflict between poetic vision and historical reality. Kinnell's primary object has been to achieve a "poetics of death that is at once graphic, mystical, and sensual" and therefore sets itself over against Whitman's "attempt to make death culturally specific" through "communality."


Peters, Robert. "On Climbing the Matterhorn: Monadnock." *The Great*
21+. Peters doesn't like The Book of Nightmares. He finds that
Kinnell's work has become repetitious and flawed. "Momentosity"
is the word Peters invents for this writing. He concludes that
Kinnell's book contains self-pity, stale romantic writing,
and stifling Existentialism. See American Literary Scholarship, 1979.


Swann, Brian. "The Year's Work in American Poetry." Dictionary of

Thurley, Geoffrey. "Devices Among Words: Kinnell, Bly, Simic." The
Kingdom It Was and Flower Herding on Mount Monadnock,
especially "The Avenue Bearing the Initial of Christ into the New
World," "Flower Herding on the Mountain [sic]," and "The Supper
After the Last." At this stage, Kinnell "has no real voice
or creative personality." Kinnell is eclectic and he can "show
the physical turning into the immaterial as few modern poets
have." What is best about Kinnell is "his often subtle Platonist
sense of mutation and transmutation." This has its roots in a
"long-mulled-over rural experience, and has no chance to
show itself when the poet is on tour in the city." Thurley
believes Kinnell's poetry is typical of much American poetry of
its time: "It is superficially impressive and occasionally it
is impressive without being superficial," but it lacks any
"real creative personality," any "deeper spiritual orientation."


Williamson, Alan. "Language Against Itself: The Middle Generation of Contemporary Poets." American Poetry Since 1960: Some Critical Perspectives. Ed. Robert B. Shaw. New York: Dufour, 1974. 55-68. In this discussion of The Book of Nightmares, Williamson says Kinnell's poetry has a very narrow range of purely personal experiences: passionate love, being with the dying and the newly born, and political imprisonment in the South. "Under the Maud Moon" is "about as good a poem about the first year of life as I have read." Williamson's grouping of Bly, Wright, Kinnell, and Snyder provides a new location for the "middle generation" label (previously used for Lowell, Berryman, Schwartz, etc.). Williamson finds parallels among these poets in these areas: (1) language as "at least as much the enemy as the facilitator of essential creativity"; (2) a concern with the literally primitive as a means of new information; (3) a search for simplicity in language and structure, both sentence and poem; (4) presentation of a vision that is both philosophically and aesthetically whole, pure. Williamson finds these writers in a group by themselves, for various reasons not influencing the younger writers to any great extent. See American Literary Scholarship, 1974.
II. Articles in Periodicals

Adams, Phoebe. "Potpourri." *Atlantic Monthly* 217 (May 1966): 132. Contains review of *Black Light*. Kinnell's writing is "condensed, austere, and effective." His hero's journeying is moral as well as physical; the real story is in the stripping away of "Jamshid's fragile self-righteous little virtues."

---. "Short Reviews: Books." *Atlantic Monthly* 228 (July 1971): 103. Contains review of *The Book of Nightmares*. Kinnell's undeniably powerful and often beautiful poems are based upon "an odd blend of pantheism and necrophilia." They offer "lament for the past, one fierce diatribe against the present, and no future at all since, by the terms of his vision, [Kinnell] perceives the future as inevitably more of the same."

Alexander, Floyce M. "Map of the Innards." Rev. of *Body Rags*. *Kayak* 17 (1969): 68-71. Poems of the first section are the weakest in the book because in them Kinnell refuses "to run the risk that is met so gracefully and with such stunning results in the longer poems." "The Last River" is a poem that questions "American values with compassion yet without flinching." But it is the poems of the last part of *Body Rags* that most reflect Kinnell's achievement: "Testament of the Thief," "The Porcupine," and "The Bear." They are "resonant examples of how Kinnell's poetry has grown since his first two collections." "The Bear" may be one of the great poems written these last years. It is a poem which seems completely earned, marked with the odor and scars of a severe experience, evoking the pain which must be lived.
through to reach a place where it can be transformed into an art of rich spiritual substance. Kinnell's poem goes so deeply it shows its own terror, and finally the pain it suffers from the need to love."


Rev. of *The Avenue Bearing the Initial of Christ into the New World: Poems 1946-1964.* *Choice* 11 (Nov. 1974): 1308. The review praises Kinnell's later "organic" style and calls the title poem "one of the finest achievements of the postwar period: a long poem of narrative and lyric power."


Beckman, Madeleine. "Galway Kinnell Searches for Innocence." *Saturday


Bell, Charles. "Galway Kinnell, Poems--Early and Late." New Mexico Review 2, nos. 6 and 7 (June-July 1970): 3-5. Article on Kinnell's lyrical power; quotes early poems, including "Maple," "Dream," "How Many Nights," "Meditation Among the Tombs." "Galway Kinnell is the prevailing American poet of his generation." Article seen in manuscript among the Bell papers in Special Collections at Dimond Library, University of New Hampshire.


from Baudelaire and The Waste Land in a rigorous sort of way. Although Kinnell should "slough off the excess" and "aim for a poetry of essences," he generally uses "a surface realism that is effective and spare, never gaudy, to express the classical imagination" (478).

Berger, Charles. "Poetic Spirits of the Modern Age." Rev. of Mortal Acts, Mortal Words. Book World 10 (6 July 1980): 3. Kinnell is using the lyric now to heal and to soothe. Although in many poems the "sharp edges of people and things are sacrificed in an effort to bind the world together," the shapes and rhythms of Kinnell's poems are in perfect accord with his desire for connections. To reach a wider audience, Kinnell is willing to risk sentimentality and simplicity in the service of an ambitious undertaking: to cure his countrymen of their spiritual ills.


Rev. of Black Light. Kirkus Reviews 34 (15 Jan. 1966): 70-71. Kinnell is "merciless in his evocation of the stark, surreal desert with its Zoroastrian death middens and haunted ruins, noncommittal toward the pitiful men making their way across it. His Black Light casts no shadows; it burns with a hard flame that masks compassion." The novel has limited appeal.


Rev. of Black Light. New Age 7 (Fall 1982): 60.


Rev. of Body Rags. Kirkus Service 35.18 (15 Sep. 1967): 1176-7. "These fine, spare poems weave unerringly among images and illusions to create a glittering world of unexpected new relationships and ideas."


Rev. of Body Rags. Virginia Quarterly Review 44.3 (Summer 1968): ci ii. Mixed review.


Boening, J. Rev. of Walking Down the Stairs: Selections from Interviews. World Literature Today 53.3 (Summer 1979): 512. Boening believes Kinnell should not have edited the interviews.

Bogan, Louise. "Verse." New Yorker 37 (1 Apr. 1961): 129-31. Contains a review of What a Kingdom It Was. Kinnell's chief concern is "the enigmatic significance, more than the open appearance, of nature and man" (130). The long poem, "The Avenue Bearing the Initial of Christ into the New World," is sustained by
"sympathy, identification, and insight . . . and Kinnell chooses his details with startling exactness" (130).


Bornhauser, Fred. "Poetry by the Poem." Virginia Quarterly Review 41.1 (Winter 1965): 146-52. Contains a review of Flower Herding on Mount Monadnock. "Kinnells new poems are poignant and emotive, with feeling that breaks near the surface and only occasionally flirts with banality" (150).


Breslin, Paul. "How to Read the New Contemporary Poem." American Scholar Summer 1978: 357-70. Kinnell is one of the "new surrealists," writing a poetry of mystery, or "mystification." They are influenced by Jung's idea of the collective unconscious. Breslin believes they have reached a dead end; the unconscious is not a "god," but only part of ourselves and can ultimately be known only indirectly.

Brinnin claims that the "charm and force of many of Kinnell's poems lies in his ability to watch himself do what he does with a wise, untroubled stare."

Brinnin likes Kinnell's city poems, especially "The River That is East."


Brown, Merle. "Two American Poets." _Stand_ 11.2 (1970): 57-62. Review of Kinnell's _Body Rags_ and of James Wright's _Shall We Gather at the River_. In Kinnell and Wright the retreat to nature is a metaphor for a descent into the depths of their selves, "into the woods of their own darker passions" (58). Kinnell's poems full of emotional violence, of shocks and strains "hammered into a poetic shape" of excellence (60). The poems of _Body Rags_ are full of clashing opposites, and even moral prophecy is seen as a "synthetic paste used desperately in an effort to hold oneself together against the disintegrative grief of the present" (61). In "The Last River" the presence of echoes of other poets, the way in which Kinnell's voice is "sucked down into the voices of others," contributes to the
"violent, distraught quality" of the poem, and its fragmentation is "an essential part of its disruptive integrity." In the poems of Part I, Kinnell "crushes together an experience of modern man and some primitive, elemental, pre-human experience, evoking a sense of the vastness of time along with the violent identification of the near and the remote, the civilized and the bestial grunt, the 'coiled/ribs of a finger-print' and the imprint of fossils in stone" (61). In "The Porcupine" and "The Bear," "the most vivid realizations of Kinnell's genius," violently clashing opposites are identified in the simplest syntax possible: "Harshness transmutes into shrillness, and shrillness into a hymn of love to the earth" (62).

Brownjohn, Alan. "Dark Forces." Rev. of Body Rags. New Statesman 78 (12 Sep. 1969): 346-7. Kinnell has a precise, "Roethke-ish" sense of the natural processes, and a disquieting feeling for the relation of these things to a thinking human being who feels parts of them. He is best in poems such as "Night in the Forest," where these perceptions stay clear and unmelodramatic.


---. Rev. of The Book of Nightmares. Library Journal 96.11 (1 June 1971): 1986. This long poem is written in an idiom and a varied line of raw but beautiful anger.

influence on the delicate shorter poems, the Spanish influence on "The Porcupine" and "The Bear." Kinnell has a kind of "earthy spirituality nobody else can match" (334). Burns dislikes "The Last River," but believes Kinnell may write the great American long poem.

Carruth, Hayden. "Making It New." Hudson Review 21.2 (Summer 1968): 399-412. Contains a review of Body Rags. In Kinnell's first two books, he worked out a personal style of great promise: "a clean, spare line that was never merely taut or hard, leading through small disparate statements of experience to the crowning statement, the poem itself, recapitulating and unifying the disparities" (403). Body Rags brings this style to "a kind of perfection," especially in "The Porcupine," "The Bear," and "The Last River" (the strongest piece of writing the Civil Rights Movement has produced so far).


Comito, Terry. "Slogging Toward the Absolute." Rev. of The Avenue Bearing the Initial of Christ into the New World: Poems 1946-1964. Modern Poetry Studies 6.2 (Autumn 1975): 189-92. Kinnell seeks the "unplundered 'heart' of things," but he begins with a recognition of the "dense and stubborn particularity of the world he wishes to transcend." His quest is "ballasted--as in Frost and Dickinson--by the colloquial tone that represents... a commitment to waking consciousness" (192).
Cooke, John and Jeannie Thompson. "Three Poets on the Teaching of Poetry." *College English* 42.2 (Oct. 1980): 133-41. "Poetry," Kinnell says, "is made of the words we speak; its subject is our feelings." When Kinnell teaches poetry, he stresses the poem as a physical event and language as sound.


Cronk, Steve. "Indianapolis Interviews Galway Kinnell." *Inprint* 3.1 (Summer 1981): 35-41. Responses to questions from the audience following a reading given March 13, 1981, at the Free University Writers' Center, Indianapolis, Indiana. Questions on Kinnell's experience in Iran in '59 and '60; on the fire imagery in *The Book of Nightmares* ("That fire . . . has become symbolic of . . . not just human consciousness, but of human consciousness as it affects those with whom one has relationships"); poets in his generation whom he respects and likes (James Wright, Anne Sexton, W. S. Merwin, Allen Ginsberg, Gary Snyder, Denise Levertov); his technique (that kind of "scraggy free verse, that droopy free verse that's so characteristic of our contemporary poetry"); the substance of his poetry ("I think I have found I like my poems to be more dense now than they used to be, and that's the only sense of stylistic development I have."); what he thinks of creative writing classes, writing schools, and the current group of writing teachers; the unification of language and things ("I'm aware that language and
things are separate realms, but when I'm writing I want to write in a language which unifies them, so the things are there in the words.""); the function of poetry at the present time ("It is to nourish that part of us which is left empty in a modern technological society like ours--like that which is becoming the society of the whole world... The fate of poetry is tied to the fate of human consciousness and very likely in the course of the evolution of human consciousness there will come a time when poetry ceases to exist. By poetry in that sense, I mean music and all the arts which bring us into harmony with the rhythms of nature.") The very material of poetry is human consciousness: "Painting has paint as its material, music has sound, but poetry is words and words are nothing but symbols of consciousness so that it's the most direct way that we perceive what's happening to the species.").


Davie, Donald. "Slogging for the Absolute." Parnassus 3.1 (Fall/Winter 1974): 9-22. An essay occasioned by the publication of The Avenue Bearing the Initial of Christ into the New World: Poems 1946-64, which selects poems from Kinnell's first three books of poetry. Davie believes Flower Herding on Mount Monadnock to be
Kinnell's best work to date. In reviewing Kinnell's poetic career through *Body Rags*, Davie criticizes Kinnell primarily on spiritual and ethical grounds, claiming that Kinnell, in a work like "Spindrift," from *Flower Herding on Mount Monadnock* is attempting to "bash his way by main force into the absolute." Unable to "leap above his humanity into the divine," In "The Bear" from *Body Rags*, for instance, Kinnell transcends instead into the bestial. But Davie's harshest criticism attacks Kinnell's language, stating that a poet who "thrashes about in a manifest self-contradiction" (Kinnell, Davie claims "still wants to experience the transcendent without paying the entrance fee") necessarily damages the language he "bends to his purposes." In a word like "mystic" or "mystical," Kinnell deliberately blurs language, "like any adman or politician." On several points Davie anticipates the form and content of Kinnell's poetry of the 70s and 80s. See also *American Literary Scholarship, 1974*.


Davison, P. "Three Visionary Poets." *Atlantic Monthly* 229. 2 (Feb. 1972): 104-107. Contains a review of *The Book of Nightmares*. Visions as radiant and rhapsodic as Kinnell's "have difficulty in confining themselves within the bounds of language." There is an intricately managed structure to the poem, though Kinnell's hortatory style is "better suited to rising incantation than to the dying fall." An impressive piece of work; any serious
A student of contemporary poetry should be acquainted with it.


Demos, John. Rev. of *Body Rags*. *Library Journal* 92.17 (1 Oct. 1967): 3427. Some earlier themes of Kinnell’s poetry—alienation, death, the skull beneath the skin, the violence of 20th century America—are more fully explored from their dark side. Disturbing poetry.


Dickstein, Morris. "Intact and Triumphant." Rev. of *Selected Poems*. *New York Times Book Review* 87 (19 Sep. 1982): 12+. This book is "more than a good introduction to Galway Kinnell’s work; it is a full-scale dossier for those who consider him, at 55, one of the true master poets of his generation and a writer whose career exemplifies some of what is best in contemporary poetry."

What is strongest in the language of the mature Kinnell is "a telescopic foreshortening of time into a single descriptive flash." *Mortal Acts*, *Mortal Words* is Kinnell’s best book to date.

Kinnell discusses his influences, method, working habits, poetics, and intention during the composition of *The Book of Nightmares.* Poetry, to him, must be an "inner revolution," a means of changing oneself inwardly. "I would rather write a poem than a novel--a large poem--and try to open, or increase, the weight that a poem can carry." See also *Walking Down the Stairs,* pp. 41-57.

Donoghue, Denis. "The Good Old Complex Fate." *Hudson Review* 17.2 (Summer 1964): 267-77. Contains a review of *Flower Herding on Mount Monadnock.* Kinnell is "on the right side" and "tries harder than most poets to rid himself of the notion that things become important when they happen to him, the poet, *ipse*" (269). But he doesn't try hard enough. There is more Big Talk in this little book than any little book should be asked to support; "this is a pity because when Mr. Kinnell takes his complex fate less glumly he can be a pretty fair poet." Kinnell's "New Imagism is only the Old Imagism scored for 'cello." His problem is genuine; he wants things to mean. The result is that everything is a doppleganger.


unconscious and because in his poems he fully embraces—consents to the power of the wounds—the dark as well as the bright side of life. In *Mortal Acts, Mortal Words* Kinnell consents to the burden on his soul, and by consenting has transformed it.


---. "At Home in the Seventies." Rev. of *Walking Down the Stairs* and *Mortal Acts, Mortal Words*. *Parnassus* 8.2 (Spring, Summer, Fall,
Winter 1980): 51-62. Mortal Acts, Mortal Words is a "respectably solid, if restful, book," more interesting than Flower Herding on Mount Monadnock. Flint responds best to the "domesticated poems," like "Fergus Falling," "After Making Love We Hear Footsteps," and so on. He cannot praise the six "semi-oracular" poems that close the book, because he cares little for the "grand public style" that has been one facet of Kinnell's public personality since "Easter" and "Freedom, New Hampshire" of Kinnell's first published volume, What a Kingdom It Was.


collection." It refines Kinnell's prior empathy with material and animal subjects, while treating one new subject, domestic life. Kinnell, like Rilke, uses personal life for content, but is not confessional. He uses the personal to discover the roots of a sense of the whole.


Gardner, Thomas. "An Interview with Galway Kinnell." Contemporary Literature 20 (Autumn 1979): 423-33. Kinnell discusses The Book of Nightmares. He calls it the exploration of an alienated condition and, to some extent, a resolution or understanding of it. The task of the poem was to find happiness, though in the end it cannot. See American Literary Scholarship, 1979.


Gibson, Margaret. Rev. of Mortal Acts, Mortal Words. Library Journal 105.13 (July 1980): 1521. The poems of this book are haunted by emptiness, ruin and death, but "from the stark premonitions and deep suffering, a deep joy and gratitude for life grow strong and full."

Gioia, Dana. "Poetry and the Fine Presses." Hudson Review 35.3 (Autumn

Goldbarth, Albert. "An Interview with Galway Kinnell." Crazy Horse 6 (March 1971): 30-38. Kinnell discusses his isolation from other poets; the autobiographical element in his poetry ("they have very little autobiographical narrative in them"); the form of his earlier poems (they are more formal, conventional, and "made-up"--more art goes into them); the voice and concerns of his later poems ("I think the voice has changed as I became aware of what the concerns of the poems really were": "It's a matter of what is precious--what is to be loved--and discovering the conditions of that love."); the love of mortal things as the source of his poetry ("I think you write about whatever obsesses you. Your obsessions remain about the same ones as you go along; and so poems keep returning again and again to the same subject. It would be sad if each return were more evasive than the previous one, instead of more penetrating."); Dickey's criticism that even the best of Kinnell's poems "keep blurring into one another" (". . . if he means they all sort of flow one into the other and all deal with similar things, that seems all right to me."); the vocabulary of his poems ("Every word is virginal, completely new, when it's used in a poem. . . . But I do think the music of the poem has to reside in the language and can't be put on it from without."); the poets who have influenced him (Hart Crane and Whitman); the diversity and talent of his generation of poets (In our explosive times "everybody is searching, and nobody has a guide--a state that
has not existed in English poetry since the Renaissance." But no one has yet broken into real greatness); what he is writing now (The Book of Nightmares?); his novel ("a very small fable"); his early trouble getting published; his opinion of the workshop experience for young poets.


Goldman, Michael. "Joyful in the Dark." New York Times Book Review 73 (18 Feb. 1968): 10+. Includes a review of Body Rags. Kinnell's attention focuses on our "painful attachment to the minimal shreds of our mortality, our 'body rags'," while he "leads us toward the emotional mysteries that rise out of our deepest apprehensions of mortality" (12).

Hall, Jay L. "Second Skins." The Southern Review ns 4.1 (January 1968): 236-47. Contains a review of Black Light. Does degradation, so long as love is present, lead to regeneration as well as to humility and a new awareness of life? Kinnell points in this direction but stops short of conclusiveness (240).

and Catholic—for lack of a word which would specify the saturated untheological church of Kinnell's reception of the other" (378).


Hass, Robert. Rev. of Selected Poems. Bookworld 12.36 (5 Sep. 1982): 6-7. Kinnell's writing is hard and clear, full of odd, original and palpable phrasings, and it is musical. "Kinnell's ambition all along has been to hold death up to life ... and keep it there until he has exacted a blessing from it" (6). His poetry is accessible and should be read by everyone, for his art brings people closer to their lives.


---. "Galway Kinnell: Moments of Transcendence." Princeton University Library Chronicle 25.1 (Autumn 1963): 56-65. This issue of PULC contains an essay, the checklist noted above, and a poem by Kinnell: "Nightfall of the Real." In the essay Hawkins discusses Kinnell's poetry through What a Kingdom It Was and the influence
on Kinnell of Frost, Yeats, and Whitman, including the shift in Kinnell's attitude to poetry itself from the mimetic to the visionary. The tension between these two impulses and their constantly shifting relationship affects "the form and style of individual poems, the line of Kinnell's development, even his deepest intuitions of meaning" (59). Hawkins traces this interplay in representative poems from First Poems and What a Kingdom It Was.

Hazo, Samuel. "Leopards in the Temple, Body Rags, and Goodbye, But Listen." Commonweal 89.6 (8 Nov. 1968): 226-8. Contains review of Body Rags. Hazo doesn't care for some lines, calling them unpoetic; he also doesn't like Kinnell's use of unusual or uncommon words; but he does like many of the poems in Kinnell's "new testament," especially "The Last River" and "The Correspondence School Instructor Says Goodbye to His Students."


Sources of poetry for Kinnell have been earthly creatures, his children, and also "any aspect of life which seems to have a tradition to it--whether a continuing tradition . . . or broken traditions. . . ." On Mortal Acts, Mortal Words, Kinnell says, "It's not exactly a peaceful book, but there is no attempt to exacerbate the harshness of life, and there is an attempt to come to terms with the difficult things" (112). The subject of the book is Kinnell's own life, place, time, and the people he was living with.


Hopes, David B. "Review of Mortal Acts, Mortal Words." The Hiram Poetry Review 29 (Fall/Winter 1981): 44-5. Kinnell not at his best, but the book is still better than most. Kinnell's durable themes are here: love, his children, the mystery that surrounds the meeting of human and unhuman, whether bear or porcupine, or, in this book, quite often fish and trees.
Kinnell dares a moral stance in the book, which might be described as "the recognition of our absolute need to love ourselves for what we are, to dwell, despite contrary evidence, in the not-quite-futile hope that at last 'one might die mostly of happiness'" (44). Kinnell remembers that there is a world out there to be known and a soul in here by which to know it. The mystery is in creation and not merely in our apprehension of creation. In Kinnell's poetry "by the nature of our intellect we are made to know the interior by analogy with the exterior" (45).

Hornback, G. W. Rev. of The Book of Nightmares. Sumac Fall 1971: 130.
Rev. of How the Alligator Missed Breakfast. Kirkus Reviews 50 (15 July 1982): 795. A Plus (+) rating for this picture book: "It's all off the wall and dippy-whimsical, but it's freer and funnier than the title and the obvious pictures would suggest." Mr. Prickle, the porcupine, is the "shaggy dog" of the story. The alligator's name is Elp.
Howard, Richard. "Changes." Partisan Review 38.4 (Winter 1971/1972): 484-90. Contains a review of The Book of Nightmares. Kinnell is concerned with changing to, not with changing from. He does not give much heed to the past, for is there not the future? He is "forever opening up, and so what is left behind, untended, tends
to assume a charred and neglected aspect as Kinnell greets the new life, the life of his children, of the earth, of his own transfigured body" (487).


Hurt, James R. "Kinnell's 'First Song'." Explicator 20 (Sep. 1961), item 23. Hurt suggests that the source of the poem is a passage from the autobiography of Burl Ives, Wayfaring Stranger. The passage expresses Ives' "first inkling of being alive."

Ireland, G. W. Rev. of The Poems of Francois Villon. Queen's Quarterly Summer 1979: 347.


Kitching, Jesse B. Rev. of *Body Rags*. *Publishers Weekly* 192.20 (13

Koretz, Gene H. "Kinnell's 'First Song'." *Explicator* 15 (Apr. 1957),
item 43. The poem is not amenable to Freudian interpretation,
as given by LaFollette (in *Explicator* 14 (1956), item 48). The
poem is about a boy's first experience with genuine self-
expression. Its subject is not sexual growth but spiritual
growth.

LaFollette, Melvin Walker. "Kinnell's 'First Song.'" *Explicator* 14

Langbaum, Robert. "Galway Kinnell's *The Book of Nightmares.*" *American
by section analysis of Kinnell's book-length poem, called by
Langbaum one of the best long poems in recent years. Kinnell
seeks to extend "the range of man's connections . . . far into
biological and cosmic process." Also published in *Contemporary
Literary Criticism*, vol. 13.

Lask, Thomas. Rev. of *The Book of Nightmares*. *New York Times* 120
(September 1, 1971): 35. This is Kinnell's most integrated book,
a work of one mood, one subject: "a tormented cry of what the
poet is and feels at this moment."

Lattimore, Richard. "Poetry Chronicle." Rev. of *The Book of
Lattimore finds Kinnell's ear good and says that at times the
revolting can be almost beautiful, he "came out occasionally
impressed, but never moved."

Ledbetter, J. T. "Kinnell's 'The Bear.'" *Explicator* 33 (Apr. 1975),
item 63. The poem could be about a hunter tracking and eating
the totemic animal, about a shaman whose job it is to infuse himself with the sacred animal, or about the writing of poetry. Ledbetter provides a section-by-section interpretation of the poem as a poem about the writing of poetry.


Lieberman, Laurence. "New Poetry in Review." Rev. of Body Rags. Yale Review 58 (Autumn 1968): 137-49. Lieberman doesn't like the "scraps of poems" (the nineteen short poems comprising part I), but does like "The Porcupine" and "The Bear." "Kinnell's poetry achieves focus and intensity of vision when, as in 'The Bear,' he becomes thoroughly drenched in his subject."


Logan finds Kinnell "one of the few consummate masters of poetry" in America today. Though repelled by the aura of violence--the idea of poet as masochist--Logan especially likes the last three poems: "Testament of the Thief," "The Porcupine," and "The Bear." The last, especially, is a remarkable poem in its re-enactment of the existential loneliness, the sense of abandonment before the elements and the dual role of hunter and hunted under which we all live our lives."


condition, the poems of Mortal Acts, Mortal Words act not as temporary stays so much as distractions from the struggle. Despite the technical feats and a sense that Kinnell feels widely in words, the volume does not seem as fitted as Kinnell's earlier books to address the problems of the world and the great changes that need to be made. Able to elicit neither a social vision nor a concept of form more permanent or larger than its author, lessons fall repeatedly on moments too fragile or transient to bear weight" (459).

McCann, Jerome. "Points of Departure in Recent Poetry." Chicago Review 27.1 (Summer 1975): 161-76. Contains a review of The Avenue Bearing the Initial of Christ into the New World. This collection "describes with terrible accuracy the career of a great poetic extremist, a self-confessed (or proclaimed?) 'Damned nightmarer'" (163). Kinnell's is a world of horrors, "a world of city and country landscapes in which lonely and scattered individuals are encountered, but never met" (164).


McDonnell, Jane Taylor. Rev. of The Book of Nightmares. Carleton Miscellany 12 (Spring/Summer 1972): 153-56. "This book is different from his others not only in its greater density and continuity of imagery, in its emphasis on horror rather than wonder, but also in its convincing personal assumption of our common nightmare."

interview.


Meiners, R. K. "The Necessary and Permanent Revolution." The Southern Review na 1.4 (Oct. 1965): 926-44. Contains a review of Flower Herding on Mount Monadnock. Kinnell is representative of one of the most observable tendencies in the newer poetic manner. The grasping after the major vision (or at least its fragments) is one of his most attractive features. In the second part of the book, Kinnell is reaching after a new manner. In poems like "Ruins Under the Stars," "Middle of the Way," and "Flower Herding on Mount Monadnock," Kinnell achieves "a real mystical depth in images which still grow out of the physical scene, and... he demonstrates the way language can reach deeply into traditional associations, deeper yet into the enigmas of
mortality, and still strike a tone only now emerging in American poetry" (933).


---. "Donald Hall's Poetry." Iowa Review 2.1 (Winter 1971): 82-123. Hall's poems in the open genre associated in some things with Kinnell's: "As we have seen so often in Hall's poems, however, and can observe equally in the work, say, of James Wright, Louis Simpson, W. S. Merwin, William Stafford, or Galway Kinnell, natural details, objects, or gestures accumulate a significance beyond themselves, become expressive or symbolic in terms of their poetic context, that is, but do so unobtrusively" (108). See American Literary Scholarship, 1971.


letter is on p. 291.


Moffet, Penelope. "A Poet with a Sense of Discovery." Los Angeles Times 27 Sep. 1981, sec. 7 (Calendar): 1. Profile of Kinnell and interview. "Every poem that interests me that I write is for my own edification. For me most of my poems do begin in a state of befuddlement and occasionally do come out to a certain degree of clarity."


its place came at least three other metaphoric images for the poem: (1) the poem as a "force-field"; (2) the poem as a "leaping" or "associatively linked cluster of nondiscursive images"; (2) the poem as "commentary on some unspoken myth--what Galway Kinnell has called a 'palimpsest'."

Holesworth discusses each of these metaphors at length. No one of them now dominates contemporary poetry; "in fact, their overlapping and mutual interaction often accounts for the strength of individual poets, and it certainly adds to the pluralism of styles available today."

---. "An Almost Unshakable Hold." Commonweal 110 (11 Mar. 1983): 157-59. Contains a review of Selected Poems. Kinnell's career develops as a paradigm of one of the major shifts in postwar poetry: a movement toward a language of empathy and celebration. Drawing on sources such as Rilke, Whitman, Lawrence, and Frost, Kinnell's poetry gained prominence because of its Romantic scale and yearning. Even when "Kinnell's asceticism veers towards masochism, and his religious temper mingles with secular celebration, we have work that must be attended to if we are to measure our poetry at its fullest" (157). The darkness of Kinnell's best poems is made bearable only by their music.

Horamarco, Fred. "A Gathering of Poets." Western Humanities Review 26.2 (Spring 1972): 189-96. Contains a review of The Book of Nightmares. It may be the strongest long poem published since Paterson, a "stunning work, rich in its imagery, haunting in its rhythms, evocative and terrifyingly accurate in its
insights." The poem "insists on a vision of life not only as dream (illusion) but as nightmare (terrifying illusion)" (189).

Like Strand and Simic, Kinnell is a poet of the "shadow life," who sees the shadows in Plato's cave and is not comforted by them. Despite the underlying terror of the realization that "living brings you to death, there is no other road," indeed, because of it, there is in Kinnell's work "an absolutely awesome respect for the living, the organic, the act of creation" (190). See American Literary Scholarship, 1972.


Rev. of Mortal Acts, Mortal Words. Kirkus Reviews 48 (1 May 1980): 637. The reviewer does not like Kinnell's "typically blank, dense, narrative style." He likes the longer poems, especially "Angling, A Day," "The Sadness of Brothers," "The Last Hiding Places of Snow," and "Flying Home." He dislikes the shorter poems. In them he finds "the words aren't sharp enough, the image is too unfocused, for the conclusion."


Rev. of Mortal Acts, Mortal Words. Virginia Quarterly Review 56.4 (Autumn 1980): 146. Kinnell's "search for a world of perpetual renewal now and then falters, but at his best, Kinnell reminds us of the pleasure and danger of being merely mortal."


"Notes on Current Books." Rev. of Black Light. Virginia Quarterly Review 42.3 (Summer 1966): xc. Kinnell reveals both skill and uncertainty in his technical approach. The treatment is both romantic and naturalistic, ethereal and earthy.

Nuwer, Hank. "Brushfire Interview: Galway Kinnell." Brushfire 25 (1975/1976): 43-45. Interview took place August 29, 1975, at Squaw Valley Writers' Conference. Kinnell discusses the future of poetry at this time ("Sometimes I think that poetry belongs to a world where there was a sense of the sacred, and as that world disappears, poetry will too. . . . But on other days, I believe that poetry will save us: poetry in a broad sense, poetry as an art which represents that effort made in so many ways to re-attach oneself to the natural world.); the influence of the university atmosphere on the poetry of the teaching poet; the importance of the little magazines, like Brushfire, Beloit Poetry Journal, etc.; the trouble Kinnell had getting published (first book published in 1960, when he was 33 years old, 14 years after he had begun to write); reaction to Molesworth's statement in an article in Western Humanities Review that Kinnell's poetry is a "virtual rediscovery of how to view objects intensely" ("I don't know that I regard it as a full description of my poetry, but it is one thing I like to think my poems do."); the long poem (A long poem "necessarily evolves into time, and that's the
glory of a long poem—that time can pass, that things can change
and you can be different at the end of it than at the beginning.
You can learn something in the course of the poem, or at
least get some intimation of how you might change your
life.

Oberg, Arthur. "The One Flea Which Is Laughing." Shenandoah 25 (Fall
the poem "major poetry," inspired by some terrible "inner
generosity." If it is "a violent, dark dreams book, it is
also a gentle book." See American Literary Scholarship, 1974.

Ochester, Ed. "The Shape of the Fire." Rev. of The Book of Nightmares.
poem of recent years. The book is a spiritual autobiography
which suggests a man cast dying into the "always burning," yet
"furiously at work understanding or somehow dealing with the
major images which obsess [him]" (235). The conflict which
dominates the book is between the will to die and to renounce and
the impossible desire to possess and to hold.

Oliver, Raymond. "Verse Translation and Richard Wilbur." Southern
translations of Francois Villon's poetry.

Ollier, Jacqueline. "Un Jeune Poete Americain: Galway Kinnell." Etudes
Anglaises 19: 239-52.

1964): 60-3. Includes a review of Flower Herding on Mount
Monadnock. Mixed review. The theme of the book is pain. But
Pack finds "something strangely soothing in [Kinnell's] easy
rhetoric, his natural cadences," and he wonders if Kinnell's
gentleness comes "too close to softness, to sentimentality."
"Does Kinnell assume that the mystery of things is in some way
benevolent?" Or is Kinnell simply "less afraid of old age
and death than I am." Harkening back to Kinnell's poem "The
Avenue Bearing the Initial of Christ into the New World," Pack
says "This poem, I believe, can stand comparison with the more
famous 'The Waste Land' in coherence, verbal richness,
controlled evocation through images and mythic reference--in every
way, in fact, but one: it is not an attempt to break from a
particular tradition." Pack hopes Kinnell will go on to render
the mystery he believes in more palpably to others' senses,
or perhaps to show what it is within himself that bestows
benevolence on what he beholds of human anguish.

an Oriental pastiche with the knack of an accomplished storyteller.


Parris, Peggy. "Rags of His Body: Thoreau in Galway Kinnell's 'The Last

Perlis, Alan D. "Science, Mysticism, and Contemporary Poetry." Western
Humanities Review 29 (Summer 1975): 209-18. Kinnell is very much
a scientist-poet, who observes the behavior of things. In
The Book of Nightmares, he "probes beneath the surface forms of
our behavior to the universal norms within."

Literature 14.1 (Winter 1973): 97-131. Includes a review of The Book of Nightmares. "Kinnell is one of the best poets writing today; because his risks are so great, his very lapses seem preferable to the limited success of many other poets" (125).

Pettingell, Phoebe. "Sane and Sacred Death." Rev. of Selected Poems. New Leader 65.17 (20 Sep. 1982): 16-17. All along Kinnell has been striving toward an affirmative poetry that celebrates mortality and the pleasures of the flesh. Despite his dark outlook in "The Avenue Bearing the Initial of Christ into the New World" and in the poems of Body Rags, "jubilation often trumpeted through in an exuberant recognition of the will to survive" (17). "The Porcupine" and "The Bear" demonstrate this. With these transitional poems, Kinnell became more than another author of lamentations. His subsequent poetry has gone "beyond passivity in suffering to wrest joy out of misery" (17). In Mortal Acts, Mortal Words, Kinnell extended his expression of feeling beyond his children to speak poignantly of his love for former students, a hobo he once knew, friends, and especially his wife. Kinnell glories in mortality--"the only condition we know well enough to truly desire" (17).


Pollitt, Katha. Rev. of Mortal Acts, Mortal Words. Nation 231 (5 July

Porter, Peter. "Warriors and Worriers." *London Magazine* 9.10 (Jan. 1970): 95-101. Includes a review of *Body Rags*. Kinnell's earlier work was "too rhapsodic and prophesying," but now his "natural ear and eye have blessed him with the right instances to go with a new maturity of style" (100). The beauty of the world is still Kinnell's theme and human pain is only one of its contours. His best poems bring the extremities of life together.


Ransom, W. M. "The Book of Nightmares." Rev. of *The Book of Nightmares*. *Chicago Review* 25.1 (1973): 189-93. With "The Porcupine" and "The Bear" in mind as examples of Kinnell's skill, background in tradition, and development of unique mythology, Ransom concludes that *Nightmares* is "the finest next-to-final draft of a long poem that I have ever read" (190). The problems in the book, consisting mainly of overwriting and unneeded transitions, are inherent in Kinnell's "superstitious or otherwise arbitrary" imposed structure. "I envy Kinnell; but still, for his sake, he should go over it one more time" (193).


Rodman, Selden. "A Quartet of Young Singers." New York Times Book Review 18 Sep. 1960: 50. Includes a review of What a Kingdom It Was. Kinnell in the tradition of Whitman is a "rhapsodist of the open road." "The Avenue Bearing the Initial of Christ into the New World" is the "freshest, most exciting, and by far the most readable poem of a bleak decade."


Rowland, Stanley J., Jr. "Recent Poetry." Christian Century 78.8 (22 Feb. 1961): 248-9. Contains a review of What a Kingdom It Was. Kinnell has a feeling for the "meaningfulness of human experience that many of his contemporaries share, and which is
replacing the themes of despair in poetry and reasserting its capacity for wonder" (248). His poems don't generally show the "subtlety and structural tightness found in the work of a very good contemporary such as W. D. Snodgrass, but his potential seems broader" (248).

---. "Octet." Christian Century 81.30 (22 July 1964): 939. Contains a review of Flower Herding on Mount Monadnock. In this his second volume Kinnell seems "less daring and more uncertain but also more various and exploratory than in What a Kingdom It Was. In one way of another Kinnell is dealing with the problem of nature and grace.


Sow," and "Blackberry Eating" are fine. The longer pieces, by contrast, are "flaccid and sprawling." "Sentences ramble on for twenty lines or more in search of a full stop while the poet indulges in extended bouts of sentimentality. . . . The quickness of his eye for nature's beauties is not matched by a sense equally precise of realities that transcend the visible" (477).


Stitt, Peter. "Dimensions of Reality." The Georgia Review 34.4 (Winter 1980): 887-94. Includes a review of Mortal Acts, Mortal Words. The book is "permeated by an expressed love for the created world" (892). Towards the end of the book Kinnell seems to give over much of the "wonderful physical specificity" of the earlier poems for a series of "relatively abstract, relatively theoretical poems." The later poems are more ambitious, but less successful than the earlier ones. However, the book is a new departure for Kinnell, mostly successful.

on forms, content, themes of Kinnell's major poems. "All of Kinnell's work is marked by thematic cohesion and rhetorical dignity; his Selected Poems is a powerful and memorable volume that ought to solidify his reputation as one of the major voices of our age" (208).

Stocking, Marion Kingston. "Books in Brief." Beloit Poetry Journal 22, nos. 1 & 2 (Fall/Winter 1971-72): 67-71. Includes a review of The Book of Nightmares. Stocking dislikes "The Dead Shall Be Raised Incorruptible." Only when Kinnell's "vision of the 'holy waters' raises straight up from the fire in the flesh does Kinnell give us the poetry that transforms our experience as it illuminates his" (71).

Stuart, Dabney. Rev. of The Avenue Bearing the Initial of Christ into the New World. Library Journal 99 (1 May 1974): 1307. "Kinnell's rejection of rhyme and meter seems an attempt to repudiate the Romantic stance popularly associated with them; tone and imagery are asked, with partial success, to bear the burden left formally unshored. As the world breaks up and its details proliferate, Kinnell's sense that a poem can neatly contain and conclude weakens. The poet becomes aware that in writing about nature he is writing about himself; as awareness grows the distance between it and its objects grows, and the yearning across that spacelessness... intensifies so as to defy measurement.... It is still a Romantic predicament despite the disguises."


Thompson, John. "An Alphabet of Poets." *New York Review of Books* 11.2 (1 Aug. 1968): 33-36. Contains a review of *Body Rags*. Not an enthusiastic review. "The phrases are easy, in the good sense, as the experiences are admirable; but the poems are often easy in the other sense, too, and the phrases dissolve in the subjects" (36).

Thompson, William E. "Synergy in the Poetry of Galway Kinnell." *Gypsy Scholar* 1.2 (1974): 52-70. Thompson attempts to discuss the complete Kinnell in this essay. He is concerned with the imagery, diverse yet compatible, and the effect of transcendence that Kinnell's poems produce. He reads the major poems of the late 1960s and early 1970s and concludes that *Body Rags* is primarily a quest; "The Bear" is the culmination of the quest; *The Book of Nightmares* is a song for the poet's daughter; a story of mistakes made, searches undertaken . . . and a message
from the present to the future . . . a meditation." See *American Literary Scholarship*, 1974.


"A UH Professor Views the Iran Crisis." *Honolulu Star-Bulletin* 5 Dec. 1979: D3. Interview with Kinnell, who then held the Citizens Chair of English at the University of Hawaii, on the subject of the hostage crisis in Iran.


"The Weight that a Poem Can Carry." The Ohio Review 14.1 (Fall 1972): 25-38. See also *Walking Down the Stairs*, pp. 41-57, where this interview is published under the title, "With Wayne Dodd and Stanley Plumly." Kinnell discusses his influences, method, working habits, poetics, and intention during the composition of *The Book of Nightmares*. Poetry, to him, must be an "inner revolution," a means of changing the self. "I would rather write a poem than a novel--a large poem--and try to open, or increase, the weight that a poem can carry."

Weston, Susan B. Rev. of *Walking Down the Stairs*. The Iowa Review 10.1 (Winter 1979): 95-98. Kinnell's "commitment to relation--between poetry and everything else, between poet and everyone else--makes this collection of interviews crucial reading for anyone interested in the survival of healthy literature" (95).

Rev. of *What a Kingdom It Was*. Booklist 56 (15 June 1960): 622.

Wheeler, Susan. "An Interview with Galway Kinnell." New England Review 3.1 (1980): 115-22. Kinnell's main concerns when he writes are understanding his subject as far as he is able and making the poem sound right. He speaks of form as "the innermost music of a particular poem" (119). Certain poems and poets he reads over and over: "Song of Myself," "When Lilacs Last in Dooryard Bloomed," sections of "Jubilate Agno," parts of the "Duino
Elegies," the sonnets of Tuckerman, poems of Emily Dickinson, John Clare, and Keats. Kinnell's "Ideal Reader" would be "just anybody . . . of normal intelligence and experience" (120). Poetry is an art that doesn't progress. "Most interesting movements in poetry have tried not to lead poetry into new ways, but to bring it back" (121). Whatever poetry is, "it has to matter, to be a matter of life and death" (121). Poetry plays a crucial role in our culture. "We are all products of a profane, technological culture, but poetry is a religious or spiritual activity." Thus when one writes poetry, he writes against some force within himself. "I think most poets are aware of this conflict and want to overcome, pass through, those walls that keep us from the sacred ground. We have a long way to go" (122).


Williams, B. J. "Kinnell and the Clean Bundle." Consumption 1.3 (Spring 1968): 31-37. Review/analysis of Body Rags. An interesting book for many reasons, but particularly for its contribution to the writing of the long lyric poem. In Kinnell's long poem "The Last River," the basic allusion to the "Inferno" not only gives depth to the poem but serves as a simple, economical structural device. The language of the poem borrows freely from the contemporary idiom, but for the most part he does not alter the modern lyric syntax to accommodate it to the long poem. The dominant unit of the poem, as of all poems in the book, is the stanza. In this book Kinnell is moving
toward the rejection of the poetic line as a structural element. "Many modern poets have de-emphasized the line as a prosodic unit only to retain it tenaciously as a visual unit. Kinnell avoids this anachronism. More important, the "simple," abrupt line enhances the massive, rough-hewn quality of a poem such as "The Last River." Of the experiments Kinnell makes with the long poem, none is more interesting than the construction of the volume as a unit, in which the individual poems contribute to the total effect of the volume. The volume is unified by verse forms that seem to flow from one poem to another, by theme, by image, and by metaphor. What Kinnell's poetry at present lacks is exuberance or energy. The writing in Body Rags is expansive but never threatens to overflow its bounds. But if the book is only a partial admission of the demands his work can make upon him, it is nonetheless a considerable one.


Yenser, Stephen. "Recent Poetry: Five Poets." Yale Review 70.1 (Autumn 1980): 123-28. Contains a review of Mortal Acts, Mortal Words. While suffering and song are tied up for any poet, "Kinnell more than most has made that relationship an explicit subject" (124). At times song remedies suffering; at other, more distinctive moments, sorrow and music seem one. Yet true song
also entails laughing. "Suffering, happiness, song: it sometimes seems that all life might be summed up in a single utterance" (125). Kinnell must find himself on easier terms with mortality because he finds it easier to see the universe as a whole. Yenser feels this view of things has permitted some of Kinnell's finest poems, like "The Milk Bottle," "The Still Time," "There Are Things I Tell to No One," "Fergus Falling," "On the Tennis Court at Night," "The Apple," and "The Grey Heron." This book is a sure indication that "all is well in American poetry" (128).

Yim, Susan. "Galway Kinnell: Viewing the Past Through Poetry." Honolulu Star-Bulletin 6 Sep. 1985, sec B: 1-2. Profile of Kinnell and interview on the occasion of a visit to Honolulu en route to Australia and New Zealand. On poetry: "Maybe poetry is the only art in our society in which one's most intimate thoughts and feelings are articulated. So if what we might call imagination is important, then poetry is important." On teaching: "I love teaching. Because of the thrill of seeing people do better." The primary difficulty is inhibition: "to overcome the inhibition and give direct expression and words to . . . [one's] most intimate feelings." On the state of poetry in the U. S.: "I believe in cycles as I believe there are periods of fallow and great blooming. . . . We're a bit fallow right now."

Young, Vernon. "Poetry Chronicle: Sappho to Smith." The Hudson Review 27.4 (Winter 1974-75): 597-614. Contains a review of The Avenue Bearing the Initial of Christ into the New World. "By turn and with level facility, Kinnell is a poet of the landscape, a poet of soliloquy, a poet of the city's underside and a poet who
speaks for thieves, pushcart vendors and lumberjacks with an unforced simulation of their vernacular" (599). Kinnell's geography is global, and it reveals a perennial dialogue of death and resurrection.


III. Pamphlet

Galway Kinnell: A Bibliography and Index of his Published Works and Criticism of Them. Potsdam, New York: State University College, 1968. This checklist is strong on works by Kinnell, less complete on criticism of Kinnell's works.

IV. Dissertations


Aeschbacher, Jegneil Kelsey. "Reading Strategies for Contemporary Poetry." DAI 40 (1980): 3997A. U of Southern California. A rhetorical investigation of reading. Demonstrates strategies for adaptive four-stage reading process by providing a close reading of The Book of Nightmares. Kinnell's aesthetic and early work are discussed. Author contends Kinnell is interested in redefining form, in creating the open possibilities of the present moment, in attending to the personal voice, and in uniting art and
experience.

Behm, Richard H. "A Study of the Function of Myth in the Work of Four Contemporary Poets: Charles Simic, Galway Kinnell, Gary Snyder, and Robert Duncan." DAI 37/08A (1976): 5118. Bowling Green State U. Behm defines "myth" as "the _arational_ process of knowing an 'inexpressible' truth and the embodiment of the revelation of that truth in a form." Kinnell's work is viewed in relation to his recurrent use of the _cross_ as a symbol for darkness and destruction in the world. In the poetry of all four poets, the "leaping" described by Robert Bly and characteristic of neo-surrealism was discovered to be integral to the mythic process of the poems.

Buechler, Scott Howard. "Tracking Over Empty Ground: Primitivism in the Poetry of Galway Kinnell and W. S. Merwin." DAI 40/06A (1979): 3286. U of Utah. Primitivism is, according to James Baird, an existential phenomenon by means of which artists find symbols to express a sacredness which they can no longer express by means of the reigning system of symbols associated with their culture. Intellectual traits most often associated with primitive cultures include mythical thought, natural piety, and ritual. Chapter 3 of this dissertation discusses Kinnell's works, in four sections: (1) section one traces the evolution of Kinnell from nature poet to primitivist; (2) section two examines two relatively minor primitivist habits in Kinnell's poetry: the technique of naming and the use of supra-rational thought to evoke the awesomeness of the natural world and the _cosmos_; (3) section three discusses "The Bear" and "Under the Maud
Moon" as examples of Kinnell's primitivist poetry; (4) section four discusses Kinnell's romanticism, focusing on how speaker, imagery, and form combine in Kinnell's works to create a modern romantic poetry.

Elliott, David Lindsey. "The Deep Image: Radical Subjectivity in the Poetry of Robert Bly, James Wright, Galway Kinnell, James Dickey, and W.S. Merwin." DAI 39/06A (1978): 3577. Syracuse U. Deep image poetry is a new and distinct assimilation of elements from symbolism, Imagism, and surrealism. It is a-rational, transpersonal, radically subjective, consciously crafted, centered on imagery, non-realistic, and related to the archetype and the collective unconscious. The use of deep imagery represents these five poets' rejection of an over-emphasis on rationality and their acceptance of more intuitive and sometimes almost primitive and animalistic modes of perception that often give their poems the feeling of mythology. Ultimately their poetry points toward the possible reintegration of the psyche and the rediscovery of mythological thinking. Kinnell's commitment to deep imagery is less extensive or less long lasting than Bly's or Merwin's.

Gardner, Thomas Michael. "A Created I: The Contemporary American Long Poem." DAI 43/08-A (1982): 2666. U of Wisconsin--Madison. An examination of five major contemporary long poems, which places them within the developing American tradition begun by Whitman's "Song of Myself." The five poems are Roethke's "North American Sequence"; Berryman's Dream Songs; Kinnell's The Book of Nightmares; Duncan's Passages; and Ashbery's "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror." In Nightmares Kinnell identifies with the other in
the context of loss, at the end of which he is encouraged to continue his attempts to make contact with the emptiness.

Gianoli, Paul Louis. ""The Dissolving Woods': The Poetry of Galway Kinnell." DAI 40/01A (1978): 247. U of Missouri--Columbia. Gianoli discusses changes in forms and images in Kinnell's poetry as part of a greater continuity and unity. Gianoli traces the "progress" of (1) Kinnell's attitude toward his central theme: mortality; (2) Kinnell's rejection of Christian orthodoxy, his secularization of the figure and meaning of Christ, and his commitment to a vision that finds blessedness in earthly existence; and (3) the loosening of Kinnell's poetic forms. The three stages in the progress of Kinnell's poetic forms are (1) a stage of traditional poetic forms with consistent rhyme and meter; (2) a stage of the loosening of set forms and an experimenting with open or free verse; (3) a stage of the mastery of open forms, during which Kinnell contributes much to the new emphasis on longer poems.


stances in First Poems 1946–1954, What a Kingdom It Was (1960), Flower Herding on Mount Monadnock (1964), Body Rags (1968), and The Book of Nightmares (1971). In The Book of Nightmares, Kinnell's Adamic persona comes to the realization that transcendance through his own consciousness is the best way to accept the fact of death.

Meeker, Michael William. "The Influence of the Personal Element on Language, Form, and Theme in the Poetry of James Dickey and Galway Kinnell." DAI 37/01A (1975): 312. U of Wisconsin—Madison. For Kinnell poetry is a way of seeing, of expanding the horizons of everyday reality. In his interpretive or emblematic imagination, he seeks to affirm the present by illustrating its connections to a more sacred reality.

Reiter, Lora Kay. "The Poetry of Galway Kinnell." DAI 36/07A (1975): 4497. U of Kansas. This study examines Kinnell's particular vision (in poems from First Poems to The Book of Nightmares) within the tradition he claims and "discusses the means by which he achieves his tenderness without transcendance." Tracing his "soul voyage," this study examines Kinnell's poetics as it reveals both his conception of poetry and his epistemology. Kinnell says his poetics "reattaches itself to the tradition of transcendental and religious meditation." This organicist tradition has been dominant in American poetry since Emerson.

strangeness and of "terrible kinship" in Kinnell's writing and explores how Kinnell's poetry is kept alive by continually reformulating the terms of the opposition. Kinnell's double vision sees kinship and separation between ourselves and what is beyond us. "Kinnell's poems dramatize a struggle to participate in the whole, variously figured by him as the unity of life and death (as in Rilke), the erotic connection to the things and creatures of the world (as in Whitman), or the fire that is all Being (as in Heraclitus). This struggle must be continually renewed."
APPENDIX 1

CHRONOLOGICAL LISTING OF KINNELL'S PUBLICATIONS
AND SELECTED INTERVIEWS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year of pub</th>
<th>Works by Kinnell (poems, essays, and books)</th>
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<tr>
<td>'47</td>
<td>The Gallowed Heart</td>
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<td>Conversation at Tea at Twenty</td>
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<td>'48</td>
<td>Summer</td>
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<td>Winter</td>
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<td>A Prayer at Year's End</td>
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<td>Lilacs</td>
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<td>A Day's Walk on the Dunes</td>
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<td>Primer for the Last Judgment</td>
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<td>The Wolves</td>
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<td>Death of a Sister</td>
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<td>First Communion</td>
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<td>In the Glade at Dusk</td>
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<td>After the Death of a Nephew</td>
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<td>Geometry Lesson</td>
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<td>Island of Night</td>
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<td>Passion</td>
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<td>To William Carlos Williams</td>
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<td>Chicago</td>
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<td>Only Meaning Is Truly Interesting. . . . (essay)</td>
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<td>Spring Beauty</td>
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<td>The Old Moon</td>
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<td>Return of a Brother, 1865</td>
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<td>Canada Warbler</td>
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<td>Ah Moon</td>
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<td>Tillamook Journal</td>
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<td>The Blind Horse</td>
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<td>Where the Bodies Break</td>
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<td>trans of Rene Hardy's <em>Bitter Victory</em>, a novel</td>
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<td>Alewives Pool</td>
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<td>The Schoolhouse</td>
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<td>Spicatto [<em>&quot;Leaping Falls&quot; in WK</em>]</td>
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<td>Indian Bread</td>
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<td>Seven Streams of Nevis</td>
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<td>Full Moon</td>
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<td>Near Barbizon</td>
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<td>Told by Seafarers</td>
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<td>Spring Oak</td>
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<td>The Descent</td>
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<td>Reply to the Provinces</td>
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<td>Earth-Sparrow</td>
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<td>Rain Over a Continent</td>
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<td>The Permanence of Love (short story)</td>
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<td>Works by Kinnell (poems, essays, and books)</td>
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<td>'59</td>
<td>Where the Track Vanishes&lt;br&gt;In a Parlor Containing a Table&lt;br&gt;The Avenue Bearing the Initial of Christ&lt;br&gt;into the New World&lt;br&gt;Geometry Lesson&lt;br&gt;Reply&lt;br&gt;Duck Chasing&lt;br&gt;Thoughts Occasioned by the Most Insignificant of All Human Events (essay)</td>
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<td>At the Reading of a Poet's Will&lt;br&gt;For Ruth&lt;br&gt;The Supper After the Last&lt;br&gt;Freedom, New Hampshire&lt;br&gt;Guillaume de Lorris&lt;br&gt;Old Arrivals&lt;br&gt;What a Kingdom It Was</td>
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<td>'61</td>
<td>For Denise Levertov&lt;br&gt;The Homecoming of Emma Lazarus&lt;br&gt;The River That Is East&lt;br&gt;Flowerherding Pictures on Mount Monadnock&lt;br&gt;[&quot;Flower Herding on Mount Monadnock&quot; in FH]&lt;br&gt;To a Child in Calcutta&lt;br&gt;Calcutta Visits&lt;br&gt;Koisimi Buddhist of Altitudes</td>
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<td>'62</td>
<td>Calcutta&lt;br&gt;trans of Henri Lehmann's Pre-Columbian Ceramics</td>
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<td>'63</td>
<td>Lunch Hour&lt;br&gt;Tillamook Journal&lt;br&gt;Nightfall of the Real&lt;br&gt;Cells Breathe in the Emptiness&lt;br&gt;Room of Return&lt;br&gt;Poem of Night&lt;br&gt;Hardscrabble Mountain&lt;br&gt;Bird Comes Back&lt;br&gt;Harbor Darkness&lt;br&gt;Rain Over a Continent&lt;br&gt;Promontory Moon</td>
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<td>'64</td>
<td>Spindrift&lt;br&gt;Ruins Under the Stars&lt;br&gt;Flower Herding on Mount Monadnock</td>
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<td>'65</td>
<td>The Mystic River [&quot;The Last River&quot; in BR]&lt;br&gt;The Fossils&lt;br&gt;Last Spring&lt;br&gt;On the Frozen Field&lt;br&gt;trans of The Poems of Francois Villon</td>
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</table>
Works by Kinnell (poems, essays, and books)

Year of pub

'66
The Porcupine
Another Night in the Ruins
Vapor Trail Reflected in the Frog Pond
Last Songs
Norway
The Poem
The Correspondence-School Instructor Says Goodbye to his Poetry Students
On This Hill Crossed
The Poetry Shelf
Poem of the Negro Boys I Swam with in the Mississippi Seven Years Ago
La Bagarede
Night in the Forest
Black Light, a novel (Houghton Mifflin)

'67
In the Anse Galet Valley
In the Farmhouse
How Many Nights
Testament of the Thief
Getting the Mail
The Falls
Going Home by Last Light
The Bear

'68
Body Rags
The Poetics of the Physical World (essay)
trans of Yves Bonnefoy's On the Motion and Immobility of Douve (poems)

'69
The Shoes ["The Shoes of Wandering" in BN]
Hen Flower

'70
Under the Maud Moon
Night Song
Dear Stranger by the Blue Juniata
trans of Yvan Goll's Lackawanna Elegy, (poems)

'71
In the Hotel of Lost Light
The Dead Shall Be Raised Incorruptible
The Path Toward the High Valley
Lastness
The Book of Nightmares
Poetry, Personality, and Death (essay)
First Poems, 1946-1954

Interviews

'67, "Galway Kinnell: A Conversation," Salted Feathers

10/69, Gerber and Gemmett
10/69, WS 1 (Heyen)

11/70, Goldbarth
11/70, WS 7 (Goldbarth and Gilbert)

Spr 71, WS 12 (Fortunato)
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<td>Before Dark, Golden Dust, The Last Note, The Mind</td>
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<td>Saint Francis and the Sow The Apple Tree Brother of my Heart The Hen Brooding Looking at Your Face</td>
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<td>'78</td>
<td>Walking Down the Stairs: Selections from Interviews Fergus Falling Goodbye (&quot;Tonight the dark-rumped 'ua'u&quot;)</td>
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<td>The Choir There Are Things I Tell To No One As [&quot;Lava&quot; in MW] Goodbye Fisherman</td>
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| '80        | Daybreak
The Grey Heron
Les Invalides
The Last Hiding Places of Snow
The Sadness of Brothers
Angling, A Day
On the Tennis Court at Night
Cemetery Angels
Flying Home
The Apple
After Making Love We Hear Footsteps
52 Oswald Street
In the Bamboo Hut
Blackberry Eating
Mortal Acts, Mortal Words
Black Light (North Point Press) | 80, Wheeler |
| '81        | The Milk Bottle
Memory of Wilmington | Sum 81, Cronk
Sep 81, Moffet |
| '82        | Crying
Blackberry Eating
A Walk in Highland Park
Luna Park Ghost Train
Coinaliste
Selected Poems
How the Alligator Missed Breakfast
(fiction for children)
Hawaii--A View from Above (essay) | 82, Hilgers |
| '84        | The Seekonk Woods
Conception
December Day in Honolulu
Driftwood from a Ship
The Man Splitting Wood in the Daybreak Farm Picture
The Road Between Here and There
Prayer
The Olive Wood Fire
The Ferry Stopping at MacMahon's Point
The Angel
The Sow Piglet's Escapes
The First Day of the Future
Chamberlain's Porch
The Frog Pond
The Geese
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<td>1985</td>
<td>Fire in Luna Park</td>
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APPENDIX 2

NOTES ON CHARLES G. BELL COLLECTION, DIMOND LIBRARY

UNIVERSITY OF NEW HAMPSHIRE

The Charles C. Bell Collection consists of letters and copies of poems that Galway Kinnell sent to Bell over a 33-year period. Dimond Library at the University of New Hampshire acquired the collection in 1982. It is housed in Special Collections, Dimond Library, University of New Hampshire, Durham, NH 03824.

The collection contains about 300 letters, 350 drafts, and 19 book manuscripts. Part of the collection contains multiple drafts of Kinnell's work. For instance, there are nine manuscript versions of The Book of Nightmares. Details of selected portions of the collection are contained in the notes on the following pages.
NOTES ON SELECTIONS FROM
THE CHARLES G. BELL COLLECTION
SPECIAL COLLECTIONS, DIMOND LIBRARY
UNIVERSITY OF NEW HAMPSHIRE

I. Drafts from 1947 to 1960
   A. Versions of poems eventually collected in *First Poems*
   B. Versions of many unpublished poems

II. Translations by Kinnell: Villon translations and letters on them to Bell--1956

III. Prose by Kinnell: a short story, "At the Bottom of the Sea," set in Japan, about a WW II vet who has lost his hands--12 pages

IV. *First Song*, a collection in six parts
   A. Complete draft, typewritten ms.
   B. Some poems went to *What a Kingdom*, some to *First Poems*

V. Letter dated 9/30/60 -- describes landscape of eastern Iran which was used in *Black Light*

VI. *What a Kingdom It Was* (Pub. 1960)
   A. *Seven Streams* -- the poems in parts I and II
   B. On "The Supper After the Last": "I think it my best--at least the kind of poem I should like to write." (5/20/60)

VII. Various drafts of early 60s
   A. *As for Love*
      last three lines: And formed on bereft lips
                     Over the graves of the things we love
                     The laughter which is the poem.
   B. "Song of Lower Mannahatta" in 15 sections (trans of Yvan Goll)
   C. "Tillamook Journal," 2nd version (3 pages, single-spaced; short lines, 7-line stanzas; no part divisions)
   D. "Night on Gouldy Mountain" (3/27/63)--later "Middle of the Way"
   E. "I Lie in Fields of Summer" ("In Fields of Summer" in FH)
F. "Shell of the Light," 3/63 (Later "Spindrift" in FH)

G. "The Cells Breathe and Click in the Emptiness"
   ("Cells Breathe in the Emptiness" in FH)

H. "When the Bird Came Back" ("A Bird Comes Back" in FH)

I. "Figure Out of Time"; Kinnell wrote of this poem,
   "The fullness of physical reality came out in different
   ways—relatively free of imagery and of direct statement both."

J. "Poor Dogs"

K. "Driftwood under Wind," dated 3/27/63 [later "Tree from
   Andalusia"]; originally a part of "Spindrift," but dropped
   from it to be used as a companion piece.

VIII. Flower Herding (Pub. 1964)

A draft, containing an entirely different "For William Carlos
Williams" than in the published volume

IX. Draft of The Visible Shore

A. Comment: "A draft of a new piece, pretty much of a jumble,
I'm afraid. The same themes touched on but without a
suitable progression. But how to have one, with so many
bits and scraps?"

B. Examples from four of the sections:

1. Section 10: "How Many Nights"

   How many nights
   Have I lain in terror, faithless,
   O Creator Spirit . . .

   Only,
   The next day,
   To walk out
   Into the strange dazzled world

   And hear underneath my feet
   That creaked in the snow slow
   Breaths in the sleep of trust . . . slept by cold
   lives . . .

   Lizards . . . snakes . . . frogs . . .
   Bats

2. Section 11, last stanza:

   Did not Nebbuccharnezzar
Who lived seven years on all fours
When made a man again praise God
And just die?

3. in Section 14:

A girl
Lies dreaming
On rocks of ancient volcanoes, baking in the sun
Her deathward flesh.

4. in Section 19:

Bits of cork
Gull feathers,
Carapace of crab,
Seaweed, balls of tar . . .

X. Draft of "To Live is Glorious," a short poem in 4 parts

Last two lines:

Let the hand,
That goes up in flames, be flames

XI. Group of poems on trees: The Trees, c. 1965

A. First lines:

"Under the blue"
"I climb"
"Fig Tree"
"Sitting on the maple limb"
"I am full of joy"
"As I climb"
"In the backyard"
"Hanging now"
"I used to climb elms"
"I'm leaning"
"Silvery tree"
"Holm oak"
"I don't know"
"I loved God" ("a poet has to write straight up into the blue")
"I love"
"One's on the bottom"
"Yes"
"Tree you must know"
"Every time"
"To climb those trees":
   To climb those trees
   in summer
   to feel the right light
   the flesh of leaves
   the green light-flesh,
to hear a wild crow
  calling 'yaw, yaw, yaw,'
  far back in my life
  on a branch nothing,
  not a leaf even, ever perched on before.

"I came to the rowan tree"
"As I clamber up"
"This little tree"
"Funny"
"The skeleton":
  The skeleton
  of the opened hand
  on the hill
  burns on the empty sky
  And why
  did not one teach my own hand
  to open
  and itself be the flames.

"Now a gust" (a part poem)

XII. Body Rags (Pub. 1968), uncorrected proof, including Bell's comments and a letter

A. Bell's comments

1. in "The Bear"--Bell doesn't like "and hesitate"
2. in "Porcupine"--Bell likes "need-fire"
3. in "The Last River," next-to-last page--Bell doesn't like "Here"
4. in "Last Songs"--Bell finds touch of bathos in "could we only"

B. in letter to Bell, working titles for Body Rags:

"[Waiting] By the Grief Tree," "Another Night in the Ruins," "Departure and Burnt Stone," "Stabbed Twice from Within," "To Be the Flames," "The Last River," "The Mystic River"

C. Versions of "The Last River":

Spring 1964-- "The Bank of the Mystic River"
9/64 -- "The Black Stations"
12/64 -- "The Human Face"
Jan. 65 -- "The River" & "One More River"
Jan. 1965 -- "The Mystic River"

1/13/65 -- "Mystic River" (in letter to Bell)

5/65 -- "The Mystic River," published in Poetry, Apr/May 1965

In letter to Bell (2/17/65), Kinnell says he views the Poetry version of "Mystic River" as just one more draft; in the same letter, Kinnell asks Bell to suggest titles of "lost poems" for a catalog in his "The Poem"

D. Original form of Creator Spirit poem ("How Many Nights"), "The Tree," written down for a reading at St. John's, Fall 1962


F. Kinnell's description of having to shoot and kill a porcupine

G. Galway Kinnell, "Recent" (?) c '63-81' by Bell

"The Falls" is "your most remarkable transition into pure musical sound" (7/14/81?). "From the start your poems have polarized toward clarified lyrics and huge passionate involvements."

H. Draft of "The Porcupine" in 15 lines

13th line: "jingling, shuffle-gaited / poem-eater"

I. Drafts of "The Poem":

- an early draft in 4 sections;
- a draft dated 2/3/64; part 3 is porcupine poem;
- a draft in 7 sections, dated 3/9/64

J. Draft of "The Tree of Paradise," Persian poem in 11 sections, 7 pages, single-spaced

XIII. First Poems, 1946-1954 (1970 revisions)

A. 20 poems

B. "Meditations Among the Tombs"; letters from "Casey" in late 40s and 50s on the poem, "I have learned to write with my hand and not my will" (Oct. 3, 1949). "If I cannot be great I will be honest."

C. revisions dated 2/11/70, for Avenue C collection

D. unpublished article by Bell, entitled "C. G. Bell on Galway
Kinnell (c. 1970)

XIV. The Book of Nightmares (Pub. 1971), notes, letters, drafts

A. originally to be called The Shoes (?)--emptied--the empty space a metaphor for the Platonic idea

B. Versions of The Book of Nightmares from Aug '67 to July '70

C. Letter from Bell, 2/28/70:

"You are shaping a poetic language of tremendous weight and instinctive form, completely your own, which carries even in overreaching and lapses a stamp of power."

D. letter to Bell, end of March 1970: Kinnell has "some sort of spiritual narrative" in mind:

(1) birth and discussion of this poem
(2) finding myself empty, wishing to "let go"
(3) setting out in the shoes of others into their nightmares and my own
(4) the death of the drunk
(5) the misery of the virgin and the waste of life
(6) war and America
(7) the desire to be stone; to die, which is a resurrection
(8) the return to the world through child-love
(9) the embracing of imperfect love
(10) a kind of core [calm?] of birth and death together

E. Titles (Bell's or Kinnell's?):

one: "Maud Moon"
two: "The Hen"
threes: "The Shoes"
four: "Death of the Drunk" (Hotel Under the Freeway)
five: "Ginsing [sic?] and Demon Lover"
six: "Vietnam, America"
sevens: "Stone"
eights: "Little Sleep's Head"
nine: "Lost love poem"
ten: "Lastness"

F. In letter of April 25, 1970, Kinnell says, "I just made this order up today:

1) Maud
2) Hen
3) Shoes
4) Drunk
5) War
6) Love
7) Children
8) Virginia
9) Stones
10) As originally (excepting the fire-building, but including the Bear and Fergus' birth)

G. By May 1970, the final (?) version sent to Bell by editor at Houghton Mifflin, Jacques de Spoelberch

XIV. Drafts of Mortal Acts, Mortal Words (Pub. 1980), sent to Bell

A. Typed copy sent to Bell, summer 1979

1. Bell's 2-page, single-spaced, typed letter, comments
   a. The book is characterized by "a kind of Faulknerian stretching of syntax."
   b. on "Angling": "comic 3 page sentence tour de force"
   c. on "Sadness of Brothers": You use a Faulknerian trick—using a repetition to point out grammar.
   d. in "Milk Bottle": "Since you are asserting so much out of negation, it is as in Faulkner, the stretched syntax that holds it."

2. Bell suggested the line "Sleeper the mortal sounds only can sing awake" in "After Making Love We Hear Footsteps."

3. Several more poems than in the final, published book:
   a. short, imagistic, haiku-like poems:
   b. others: "Coinaliste", "Fire in Luna Park, June 9, 1979" (page-length)
      "Fire," last 3 lines:
      into the natural world where all are born, where all suffer, where many scream, where no one is healed so much as gathered and used again.

B. Kinnell had difficulty with the order of the poems in Mortal Acts, Mortal Words; in undated note to Bell, he says, "Personally I don't like the new arrangement; if you pay attention to it, it certainly distracts from the poems, and if you don't, it's useless, except that it obliges you to keep in poems you probably would drop strictly on their merits."

C. Bell comments on the playfulness, the game-playing theme
and strategy of many of the poems in the book.

D. Of 12 Xerox copies, no. 1 sent to Bell (postmarked 1/14/80, Honolulu)

1. "Dear Charles--A rare edition--Galway"

2. Blanks left for insertions within the typed draft (additions and corrections then typed onto the proof sheets before the sheets are photocopied)

3. "Pont Neuf At Nightfall"--2 versions

E. On Galway Kinnell's Selected Poems, January 6, 1982, for Houghton Mifflin: "the symphonic pathos and whimsy of Mortal Acts, Mortal Words"

XVI. Kinnell "trivia"

A. Kinnell's nickname "Casey." He gradually began signing his letters to Bell "Galway":

5/10/60: "Casey"
5/20/60: "Galway"
8/25/60: "Casey"
9/30/60: "Casey"
12/8/60: "Casey"
12/19/60: "Casey"
2/61: "Galway"

B. In Life magazine, March 26, 1965,

1. Large photo of Kinnell in blood-stained shirt, supported by an attractive Black woman

2. Caption: "Among the 14 injured [at demonstration in Montgomery, Alabama, day after the President's speech, 21 Mar. 1965] was Galway Kinnell (below), poet-in-residence at Juniata College, Huntington [sic], PA.

C. Included in packet, a standard-sized photo, of Maude, 1 day old, "Still bathed in the bliss of womb-life" (Ltr to Bell of Aug. 1966).

D. Kinnell sold his papers to Lilly Library, Indiana University in 1981.
XVII. Some of Kinnell's comments on Bell's poetry

A. On revising poems of Bell's book *The Wood Carver*:
   1. Cut rhymes—kills the poem for Kinnell
   2. Cut "literary sounding" lines
   3. Cut, shorten

B. Kinnell's comments on Bell's book *Delta Return*

C. In a letter to Bell: "I like the poem but would like it better if more fragmentary."