

## AS IF AN IDYLL IS POSSIBLE

John Kinsella. *Doppler Effect*. Cambridge: Salt Publishing, 2004.

*Brian Henry*

Introduced by Marjorie Perloff, this hefty volume comprises an essential alternative to the 2003 book (*Peripheral Light: Selected and New Poems*) edited and introduced by Harold Bloom and published by W.W. Norton. Although full of excellent poems, *Peripheral Light* omits much of what makes Kinsella an important poet.<sup>1</sup> Focusing on Kinsella's more overtly experimental side, *Doppler Effect* fills in the gaps. While neither *Peripheral Light* nor *Doppler Effect* accurately conveys Kinsella's full formal and thematic range, *Doppler Effect* provides a worthwhile service by collecting poems—some of them book-length—quite difficult to find, especially outside Cambridge and Australia.

*Doppler Effect* begins with *Syzygy* (1993), a 33-part poem that many see as the arrival (or invasion) of Language Poetry in Australia. The poem is more notable for what it does—yoke the lyric and the anti-lyric, revel in parataxis, eviscerate grammatical, syntactical, and typographical custom—than for what it says. Because the poem is intent on being non-representational, it does not deliver a coherent or consistent message, which is in itself a political statement.<sup>2</sup> Reading *Syzygy* for message yields frustration (even though certain moments—e.g., “Morality / stinks, we keep it in buckets”—are lucid and memorable); reading it for strategies is more fruitful. As the poem progresses, its textual surfaces become increasingly resistant, until we reach the four variations of part 23 (“23 Narrative,” “23 Na(rra)tive / *chapelle ardente*,” “23.5 Pantoum,” “23 Lift”):

Up in the hills / closer: week (end) tours  
not the building you'd think  
[though] they've made  
the right moves in the foyer. The  
predicate fails to leave, we assume  
via adjustin gth efoca llen g th  
that he's always been (t)here! Zeiss  
optics.

Despite the tricks with punctuation and spacing, this is easily parsable. But the style of the passage announces the more committed adventuresomeness that follows. Thus, “23 Na(rra)tive / *chapelle ardente*) opens

Syz-23-key: uh oh  
 fetish or frou-frou  
 aza labels & ers on  
 artifice the case

Elsewhere, “logos / go go / & presuppose a % of / an \*”; and toward the end of the sequence, stanzas, lines, and phrases get boxed off or partially erased.

Perhaps Kinsella’s most controversial book, *Syzygy* seems controversial for the wrong reasons: critics and poets (not only in Australia, obviously) feel much more comfortable debating the place of the “I” in contemporary poetry than they do debating veganism, pacifism, aboriginal land rights, animal cruelty, etc. Yet somehow *Syzygy*, smacking as it does of Language Poetry, has done more to convince leftist experimental poets of Kinsella’s radical bona fides than anything else he has written. Kinsella probably would prefer someone engage the ideas presented in his more overtly political/less overtly experimental poems than the technique.

Yet *Syzygy* is clearly important to Kinsella. The poem appeared as its own edition in Australia in 1993, was reprinted in *The Undertow: New and Selected Poems* in 1996, and then again in *Poems 1980-1994* in 1997 in Australia and in 1998 in England, occurring toward the end of both of those volumes. By opening *Doppler Effect* with *Syzygy*, Kinsella not only follows chronology but refashions the sequence as a beginning—i.e., his first substantial foray into work heavily influenced by Language Poetry—while asking readers of *Doppler Effect* to measure everything in the book after *Syzygy* alongside or against it. *Syzygy*, then, becomes a hinge.

As important as *Syzygy* is to Kinsella’s career, the book seems less genuinely ground-breaking than the three chapbooks at the center of *Doppler Effect: The Radnoti Poems* (1996), *Graphology* (1997), and *The Benefaction* (1999), all published in England by Equipage.<sup>3</sup> *The Radnoti Poems* includes some of Kinsella’s most advanced counter-pastorals. The sublime figures prominently in several poems, such as “Field Glasses”: “I am enlarging in the self / of reflexivity, threatening / self preservation / sublimely.” This notion re-appears throughout “Bluff Knoll Sublimity,” most forcefully at the beginning:

The dash to the peak anaesthetizes  
 you to the danger of slipping as the clouds  
 in their myriad guises wallow about  
 the summit. The rocks & ground-cover  
 footnotes to the sublime.

Against such a backdrop, writing a poem is merely “a matter of embellishment.” The self, too, becomes diminished: “Here the I redefines its place / and splits itself as process.” In “Poems Without Radnoti” Kinsella further examines the lyrical “I.”<sup>4</sup> He acknowledges “this talk of intrusion & the I / as another, as if you see / from inside the poem,” and asks “what am I doing / in the story.” Further on, “I witness to their demise.” This I/eye//I progression culminates in the last of the Radnoti Poems, “Radnoti Quarantine: Razglednicas,” which graphically quarantines the “I” by boxing it in.

*Doppler Effect* presents the ten cantos of *Graphology* and, toward the end of the book where “Recent Poems” are collected, adds three more installments.<sup>5</sup> With handwriting as its primary subject, *Graphology* also examines forgery—and thus authenticity, originality, and value—and how “technology squeezes / out the guts of the twentieth century” and “exactness” allows “ponderous / deliberations / of bureaucracy.” The forger “altruistically / ... considers / the hungry readership,” while “the recovered text” becomes “a dialectic of greed.” At the end of the tenth canto, the poem shifts from type to handwritten text; this change occurs after “The post-script / extends,” and the handwritten material yokes graphology and landscape, “as hypotactic // syn-tax / logically + metrically / contrasting // with the paraphrased / compositional hypo-products / of the New Lyricism // in a field where / dis-engaged ploughs / will not engage // or share / even the tenuous / topsoil— // unable / in times of drought / to free // the left margin / of the field, / to strike out // across / the dusty paddocks / where // the possibility / of moisture / declares itself.” With “the hand chaotic, agitated,” the newer sections of “Graphology” drop the tercets that shaped the first ten, opting for stanzaless free verse and more disjunctive surfaces.

A book-length poem divided into a prologue, three passages, and an epilogue, *The Benefaction* juxtaposes landscape, language, and imperialism. Based in part on a journal of “expeditions of discovery in North-West and Western Australia during the years 1837, 38, and 39, Under the Authority of Her Majesty’s Government, Describing Many Newly Discovered, Important, and Fertile Districts, with Observations on the Moral and Physical Condition of the Aboriginal Inhabitants, &c. &c.”<sup>6</sup>, *The Benefaction* is a *tour de force*—as formally radical as *Syzygy* but with more resonant subject matter and a more convincing structure. Although he uses these materials ironically, he does not allow irony to mar his tone. Consider the opening lines of “Prologue”: “They claim to preserve / the species from extinction.” That first line colors everything that follows.

Fortunately, what follows is enthralling. Kinsella mixes journal language with various modes of the lyric in 14-line sections, producing in effect a

sonnet collage. (Even the prose passages occupy 14 lines each.) His explicit dual focus on language and landscape allows him to confront these two concerns from unusual perspectives. In “Passage One,” bird call finds itself in conflict with poetry: “those trills / of evocation that resist // this prosody, this fringe / of grizzled vegetation.” And a beautiful scene is undercut by the specter of human presence:

Sunrise slices the gorge  
open to the basin,  
  
as the conversation  
of parakeet and cinnamon hawk  
  
soothes the green ants’ sting,  
the opening forest  
  
of pandanus and wild nutmeg  
emphasising the absence  
  
of media speculation

Throughout *The Benefaction*, language becomes as ubiquitous as nature, but remains problematic because it conveys human presence. Kinsella offers “the vernacular isotropic,” riverbeds “dried by parody,” “phonemic rock-paintings,” “navigational parataxis,” and “a magnificent river” that “drives forward like narrative intrusion.”

Language and landscape interact, of course, via imperialism: “It’s a busy morning naming.” To name is to claim, as this passage demonstrates:

In the name of Her Majesty  
and her heirs forever  
  
the flag is hoisted.  
Within the gesture  
  
a signal lurks, a pluralism of the surface,  
the monad fear, the parrot’s feather,  
  
contextualising the midnight revels  
of fairies by fountain and forests-side,  
  
the machine of emancipation. I say  
he says he understands the question:

but what gender is this land?  
Reconnaissance is protection.

Violence also extends, inevitably, to aborigines—these “men crazy with despair” nevertheless “feel confident of defending [themselves] against the natives”—and to animals, as the land becomes “noble grounds for game.” The ending of *The Benefaction* makes especially clear the violence of imperialism:

Though thirsting for an immediate return  
I heed advice to rest, to discuss my aims

and prospects with Governor Stirling,  
to prepare for another expedition

to the rim of the Interior,  
to bless it profitable

in the name of Her Majesty,  
to proclaim the dominions

of Chance and Integrity,  
to carry the scales of justice

over the grotesque body of savagery  
to enact its becoming

to donate its skeleton  
to the Royal College of Surgeons

The European sense of superiority and entitlement eventually ends with the autopsy of mass murder, “the grotesque body of savagery” itself dead and laid out on a table.

Poems such as *The Benefaction*, and others in *Doppler Effect*, call into question the supposed division between Kinsella’s ‘traditional’ and ‘experimental’ work. As Perloff notes, “the division between ‘mainstream’ and ‘experimental’ is, in Kinsella’s case, largely arbitrary.” “Emending context flash-floods,” for example, pursues a free verse built on mostly normative syntax, especially the present participle; a set of brackets and a few em dashes are the extent of its typographical distraction. The ending of the poem seems resolutely lyrical in its push toward epiphany:

The backbone rests  
... singing  
whiplash against the painted rocks,

the fossils of its failures,  
 detractors from its triumph  
 on a continent of infinite variety  
 where civilisation is a dead bird that flies  
 against an inland ocean.

Several poems in *Doppler Effect* (“Skeleton weed/generative grammar,” “Bluff Knoll Sublimity,” and “Of Writing at Wheatlands”) also appear in *Peripheral Light*, further complicating the traditional/experimental divide.

Almost all of Kinsella’s poems arise from a sense of urgency, and their different modes and styles and forms seem geared toward bringing his views to the widest possible audience. If he can write well-wrought lyric poems that Bloom admires as well as anti-lyrics that Perloff, Charles Bernstein, and Lyn Hejinian respond positively to, then why not do so? Kinsella’s work with an enormous range of verse forms (and non-forms) casts into doubt the convenient and conventional poetical/political alignment—i.e., formalists are politically conservative, experimentalists are liberal. What connects Kinsella’s various modes is content—and commitment.

Because this commitment is so prevalent in his poems, the frequently expressed view (by American critics, at least) that he is an ‘impersonal’ poet seems curious.<sup>7</sup> Can a poet so passionate about so many things really write impersonal poems? Does a poet need to write about oneself directly to be considered a personal poet? Is this impersonality/personality consideration simply post-Romantic detritus? What is an impersonal poet, anyway, and how much personality, autobiographical detail, and displays of emotion must a poet exhibit to end up on the personal side of the personal/impersonal scale?

Kinsella’s poetry is rife with autobiographical information and political views: his readers know where he grew up, what he did as a child and as an adult, where he has traveled, and what his political and ethical beliefs are. What, then, leads some readers to consider his work impersonal? Kinsella’s poems do not offer a comforting presence, and the poems lack the manifestation of a consistent personality.<sup>8</sup> Kinsella’s poetry seems reminiscent of Gerard Manley Hopkins’ work, which offers a set of viewpoints—personal and spiritual, mainly—but not much personality. Unless one can equate intensity with personality, Hopkins must be considered an impersonal poet (and if one does equate intensity with personality, then Kinsella would qualify). Hopkins’ masterpieces—“The Wreck of the Deutschland,” “Spelt from Sibyl’s Leaves,” “God’s Grandeur,” “The Windhover,” “Pied Beauty,” “That Nature Is a Heraclitean Fire and of the Comfort of the Resurrection”—offer little in terms of personal details or presence. One reason is that

Hopkins is far more concerned with God than with himself; Kinsella, too, focuses outward—on language and the natural world, mainly—rather than on himself. In this post-confessional era, when so many poets trawl their psyches and personal lives for poetic fodder, a poet less concerned about his inner world than about the world at large should be welcomed, not frowned upon.

One of Hopkins's primary editors, W.H Gardner, speaks of the poet as "one of the most powerful and profound of our religious poets" as well as "one of the most satisfying of the so-called 'nature poets' in English." He also refers to Hopkins as "one of the few strikingly successful innovators in poetic language and rhythm," a poet who "succeeded in breaking up, by a kind of creative violence, an outworn convention." Gardner does not discuss Hopkins's (im)personality in the poems. Yet his assessments of Hopkins, sweeping as they are, point to some of the most essential aspects of the poetry—its depth of religious feeling, its profound attention to nature, its stylistic innovations. Minus the religious element, these characteristics also apply to Kinsella. The two also share a fascination with—simultaneous attraction to and repulsion from—violence, particularly the relationships between physical, psychological, and linguistic violence. Kinsella and Hopkins both acknowledge the violence of the natural world, but Kinsella is determined not to celebrate the relationship between humans and nature; instead, he insists on highlighting not only the violence in the natural world itself, but the often gratuitous violence inflicted by humans upon the natural world. Where Hopkins sees grandeur, Kinsella sees wasteful death. Where Hopkins praises (in "Pied Beauty") "landscape plotted and pieced," Kinsella rails against human encroachment on nature. If the nature poem is "an outworn convention" exploded by Hopkins, it has been re-exploded by Kinsella in his counter-pastorals.

A passion shared by Kinsella and Hopkins, the bird serves as a totemic animal for both poets—usually as an emblem of Christ or of "Man's mounting spirit" ("The Caged Skylark") for Hopkins and as something ineffably spiritual, yet nonreligious, for Kinsella. In "The Sea and the Skylark," Hopkins writes:

Left hand, off land, I hear the lark ascend,  
His rash-fresh, re-winded new-skeinèd score  
In crisps of curl off wild winch whirl, and pour  
And pelt music, till none's to spill nor spend.

To Hopkins, the bird and the sea "shame this shallow and frail town" and "ring right out our sordid turbid time, / Being pure." Kinsella shares Hop-

kins' reverence for birds, but his tone is almost always more mournful than celebratory, perhaps because he has seen the negligible effect of sanguine attitudes toward nature in preserving nature as well as an additional century's worth of devastation. Still, Hopkins eulogizes his "aspens dear ... / All felled, felled" in "Binsley Poplars," exclaiming "O if we but knew what we do / when we delve or hew— / Hack and rack the growing green!" Yet faith remains to solace the Jesuit, whereas Kinsella is more inclined to see such violence as final and irredeemable.

At 400+ pages, *Doppler Effect* will appeal less to the casual reader than a shorter volume like *Peripheral Light* would. The book seems designed as a major marker along the trajectory of Kinsella's career<sup>9</sup> as well as a way to bring some hard-to-find material to a wider audience. Released shortly after his Norton book, *Doppler Effect* seems intended, in part, to reassure Kinsella's readers that he has not gone over to the dark side or signed up with "the School of Quietude." To that end, there is little in *Doppler Effect* that would appeal to readers who favor Norton over New Directions, Mary Oliver over J.H. Prynne. *Doppler Effect's* primary service, as a book, is bringing together chapbooks in an accessible format; the idea of a volume of "selected experimental poems," or a "selected poems" that shadows the Bloom book, seems secondary (and perhaps unnecessarily divisive). Kinsella has published so much—well over 1500 pages of poetry—that two specific kinds of books are now needed: a John Kinsella Reader that samples his poetry, fiction, drama, and nonfiction, and a truly representative and selective Selected Poems that integrates the editorial visions of *Peripheral Light* and *Doppler Effect*.

## Notes

1. See "Bloom's Kinsella: The Politics of Selection in *Peripheral Light*" in *Jacket 27* (2005).
2. The poem begins ironically: "And how did you feel."
3. *Doppler Effect* also includes the relatively long poems "Sheep Dip" and "Annotations," *Erratum/Frame(d)*, poems from *The Echidna Project*, the chapbook-length poem "The Cars That Ate Paris: A Romance," Kinsella's half of a collaborative project with Tom Raworth ("Alterity"), five 'Ern Malley' poems, and more than a dozen other recent poems.
4. As well as "the lyrical eye," which "is blind with this light."
5. A much-expanded version of *Graphology* will appear in 2007.
6. This document, written by George Grey, Esq., the Governor of South Australia, is available online through Project Gutenberg at [www.gutenberg.org](http://www.gutenberg.org).
7. Critics who have discussed Kinsella's impersonal style include Perloff in her introduction, Emily Apter in *Boston Review*, Stephen Cushman in *Versé*, and Jordan Davis on his

blog.

8. In this regard, Kinsella resembles Hayden Carruth. And in this regard, they both avoid the pigeon-hole, the market branding, the trap of the signature style.

9. The others are *The Undertow*, *Poems 1980-1994*, and *Peripheral Light*.