John Kinsella and the Western Poetic Tradition.

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If you are looking for "nice nature poems neatly packaged" John Kinsella's *Shades of the Sublime and Beautiful* is not for you. If you are hoping to write a review of Kinsella's poetry that will go unnoticed by the poet himself, don't write it. However, if you are searching for the future of Australian poetry, Kinsella is there, at the heart of it. Even Harold Bloom will tell you that. He has long been a supporter of Kinsella's poetry. In fact, Bloom edited and wrote the introduction to Kinsella's *Peripheral Light: Selected and New Poems*. Brian Henry's acerbic attack on the gatekeeper of the western canon, focuses on Bloom omitting Kinsella's "reconsiderations of Australian history, myth, and legend", which he sees as Bloom's "lack of concern for Kinsella's Australia." He is also quick to argue that, "It is clear that Bloom is slotting Kinsella into his canon as the first and only Australian poet to deserve inclusion — an odd gesture considering his enthusiasm for Kevin Hart's poetry."

But this is an even odder argument given that Bloom laid bare his choices for the Australian canon in 1999 with his *Western Canon*, (and his list does, indeed, include Kevin Hart.) So Bloom doesn't need to "go to the library to research his topic," as Henry jibes, he has already discovered Australian poets, it is just that he only writes about those he sees as significant. Bloom substantiated his choices when I interviewed him in 2007 at his house in New Haven: "[Australia has had ] Judith Wright, Alec Hope and Les Murray [although he] can be a very difficult personality. We have had our moments but still he is a very powerful poet. John Kinsella, I think, is potentially a great poet." And he has endorsed Kinsella's *Shades* with the testimonial: "John Kinsella is an Orphic fountain, a prodigy of the imagination . . . he frequently makes me think of John Ashbery: improbable fecundity, eclecticism, and a stand that fuses populism and elitism in poetic audience."

What is refreshing about Kinsella is that he is an Australian poet who can take his place in the Bloomian canon, a construct that seems to put so many reviewers on edge. Perhaps it is the tall poppy syndrome that influences such critics to argue that Kinsella should be contained, defined by and confined to Australia, when, in fact, he lives between Australia, America and England. His is currently Professor of English at Kenyon College, Ohio; a Fellow of Churchill College, Cambridge University and an Adjunct Professor to Edith Cowan University, Western Australia.

Kinsella doesn't confine himself to the Australian landscape; the native flora and fauna, and he doesn't forcefully or shamelessly promote Australia in his poetry. He is an Australian poet who doesn't need to prove it with heavy-handed references to Eucalypts or koalas; because on some level, he is always writing about Australia. In fact, Kinsella is able to juxtapose Australia and his experiences of Australia with Europe and America. Do Australian writers and poets have to write very obviously about their homeland? Are we threatened by an Australian who doesn't write about Australia, or worse still, a poet who doesn't write solely about Australia? Certainly, if you look at some of the Australian literary awards, we are behind the times in our requirements for Australian content to win these prizes. For example, the Miles Franklin award doesn't just go the most talented Australian writer, it is only awarded to a "published novel or play portraying Australian life in any of its phases" and yet Miles Franklin spent the majority of her life in the US and England; a transcontinental author, as Kinsella is a transcontinental poet. Surely, that is what Bloom is
The road-widening of Vision’, Kinsella attacks, ‘Ugliness exposes and the physical pollution wreaking havoc upon the land’.

Bloom and Kinsella are alike. Among other similarities, both are insomniacs. Kinsella has written about his insomnia, and has stated, “i went twenty five years on two hours or less a night. i would also go for days with no sleep at all - once it was eight days straight, though i was somewhat insane at the end of this.” Similarly, Bloom told me, “I don’t sleep. I’ve always been a bad sleeper”, and this was supported by Kinsella’s knowledge that, “when he [Bloom] did that intro. for my selected poems he worked on it at 4 in the mornings (ie when he got up). i could relate to that! i love his drive!! brilliant literature mind.” Perhaps that is part of the reason why Kinsella has managed, in his reasonably short life, to publish more than thirty books, win numerous literary awards, edit the incredibly prestigious literary journal Salt, and be consultant editor to journals such as Westerly, Overland, The Kenyon Review and special editions of Poetry and TriQuarterly.

Kinsella is an enigmatic and charismatic figure, returning emails deep in the insomniac night; they can be best described as e.e cummings-like emails from ‘jk’. He has a wonderful way of drawing you in; of inviting camaraderie. In these emails he reminded me that poetry, as a form of anti-sleep, has long been his passionate distraction. When an ‘over-enthusastic’ psychiatrist wanted to ‘wire him up’ to ‘see what made him tick’, he politely declined. Because Kinsella is the creator, not the Prometheus. He is a kind of Dr Frankenstein of poetry, stitching together meaning from a range of different sources and bringing them to life with his electric poetry. In Shades, Kinsella draws on Edmund Burke’s A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of The Sublime and Beautiful With Several Other Additions to meditate on the ‘deliciousness’ and ‘terror’ of contemporary existence. He even references Mary Shelley in the Divinyls-esque entitled poem, ‘Nyctalopia: pain and positive pleasure’. Shelley takes her place beside Strinberg, ‘the homeless from New Orleans’, ‘refugees, evacuees’ and even Paterson’s Curse, illuminating Kinsella’s cosmopolitanism, but more importantly, demonstrating that he is anything but ‘blind’ to the enduring relationship between joy and pain in a post-Romantic context. He salutes Milton’s sonnet, ‘On His Blindness’, but with ‘chemiluminescence’ directed towards, among other things, the affects of modernity on the landscape, in the form of a ‘curse’.

The eye, vision and blindness all feature in Kinsella’s Shades, encouraging us to open our eyes to ‘the broader implications...of continental subjectivity’: as Emily Apter defines it, “negotiating Eurocentric theories of the subject across nations in the wake of post-colonial theory”. Kinsella dedicates Shades to Apter, confirming that we are “not seeing” the destruction of, among other things, the “life forms [that] are vanishing, landmasses are eroding, holes are widening in the ozone, and nations subsist[ing] in a state of increasing mineral depletion.”

Therefore, to see Shades as responding solely to Burke’s Sublime and Beautiful, would be to miss the many different sources, that Kinsella is indeed referencing in his poetry. In this way, Shades becomes a kind of ‘Waste Land’, where Kinsella exposes the pollution and the physical harm wreaking havoc upon the land. In ‘Ugliness – A Vision’, Kinsella attacks,

The terror of road-widening
to lessen the death toll, tricks
of the developer popping up like the exquisite
sense of losing control as you round the corner.

And then in 'Deluge (cant)/The Eye', he questions,

    What gaze owned by fixation
    on gauze covering,
through a black veil the white moons shifting
as caught out, makes apprehension?

These poems redefine the terror of ignorance. In them, Kinsella uses images such as “sodden fleece/trailing out ribcage, resolved internal organs” and “macarised blood on teeth as ugly as.../and souveniring a rabbit’s foot”, to point to a very different kind of experience involving the sublime. Shelley’s awe and the experience of the sublime initiated by Mont Blanc in his ‘lines written in the Vale of Chamouni), are redefined in a sublime that is now experienced as pollution, destruction and unnatural scars in the earth that cannot heal.

By invoking the name of Burke in the title of his book, Kinsella, by extension, references the Romantic poets and classic moments of the sublime experienced by Shelley in ‘Mont Blanc’ and Wordsworth in ‘Tintern Abbey’. In particular, Kinsella’s Shades responds and recreates Keats’ oeuvre, (specifically ‘Ode on Melancholy’) for a contemporary audience, demonstrating the ways in which joy and grief are irrevocably linked. Kinsella’s poem, ‘Joy and Grief’ most obviously updates Keats’ ode. This poem begins with an epigraph taken from a Sydney Morning Herald travel excerpt and alerts readers to a dog cemetery in a “little wheatbelt town” of Corrigin. It states, “Thus very human looking gravestones are dedicated to ‘Dusty’, ‘Rover’, and ‘Spot’.” And the cemetery is described as “both fascinating and bizarre”. Joy and grief are experienced in this place where man’s best friend finds his eternal rest, a reminder of both the connection between human and animal, and of mortality:

    Stephen’s
old working dog Shep
    never make it as a worker
    because of a crippled back leg.
the original owner
    wanting to shoot it
    straight after the accident ...
in dog years,
he's 105 years and counting,
and his loss one day will be a loss
equivalent to the loss
of almost one of us, almost...
It is a Byronesque moment, reminiscent of Byron's "Epitaph to a Dog". There is a memorial to the famous Newfoundland dog, Boatswain, whom Byron nursed through rabies:

Near this spot
Arc deposited the Remains of one
Who possessed Beauty without Vanity,
Strength without Insolence,
Courage without Ferocity,
And all the Virtues of Man without his Vices.
This Praise, which would be unmeaning Flattery
If inscribed over human ashes,
Is but a just tribute to the Memory of
BOATSWAIN, a DOG
Who was born at Newfoundland, May, 1803,
And died at Newstead, Nov 18th, 1808.

The dog cemetery at Corrigan is similarly moving. Kinsella uses the 'red neck' both literally as the sun burns his neck, and metaphorically as we have come to associate the redneck with utes and working dogs. Kinsella also states:

(Australia Rules is big there as here, as in Corrigin,
and if the term 'redneck' finds its origin
with Scottish lowland Presbyterians
making their blood-writ red-rag around the neck rejection
of the Church of England, dashing to Ulster and the North Americas,
so the Irish have something to do with it here,
despite the English-sounding names of the landowners
and many of the workers...)

Therefore, "out of the bizarre,/the redneckery of the dog cemetery" Kinsella finds a way to ask forgiveness as his "neck grows malignly red clearing the firebreaks,/where Shep hangs out/keeping his eye on the action: his joy". Again, the image of the 'eye' and 'keeping [an] eye on the action' is significant. This time, it is Shep's eye, it is the dog's joy, but it is mixed up with the idea that cemeteries and grieving are caught up with the human experience. Kinsella points out the importance of animals and the joy they give us is perhaps worth the intense grieving that comes close to the mourning of a human family member.

Kinsella redefines the sublime for the contemporary reader. His Mont Blanc is the Western Australian wheatbelt, and Kinsella is intent on demonstrating in *Shades* how awe is irrevocably linked to viewing something that has been ravaged and polluted. In this way the Romantic underbelly is exposed and tradition is redefined as a contemporary nightmare.

Editorial quips that Brian Head's book on Australian intellectuals would be "very slim", at the time of publication, reinforced the concept of Australia as anti-intellectual. In light of this, it is refreshing that Kinsella has not bent to Australia's apparent disdain for intellectualism. He uses a full and rich vocabulary in *Shades* and his scientific and mathematical knowledge are celebrated alongside his obvious proficiency with literary theory. However, let the reviewer beware, Kinsella is not averse to responding to published reviews of his books: "My *Shades* book has absolutely no connection with the Language school, and anyone who has any knowledge of that would find the reviewer's comments laughable." Although his poetry has entered the public domain, Kinsella's obiter dicta dominates interpretations of his work. Perhaps, in light of this, Kinsella should be read not only as a poet, but as a public intellectual.

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iii Brian Henry, 'Bloom's Kinsella'.

iv Brian Henry, 'Bloom's Kinsella'.


vi Panmacmillan website:

vii Australian Government, culture and recreation portal:

<last accessed 14/4/09>.
viii John Kinsella in an email to Cassandra Atherton at the time of the University of Melbourne 'Refashioning Myth' conference, October 19, 2008.

ix Cassandra Atherton, 'Deep Subjectivity: Harold Bloom'.

x John Kinsella, email to Cassandra Atherton.

xi Kinsella to Atherton, email.


xiii Apter, 'The Aesthetics of Critical Habitats'.