

**Sheer Blue Milken Dreaminess:
Galway Kinnell's Answer to *Logopoeia* in
"The Fly," "Saint Francis and the Sow," and "Blackberry Eating"**

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The bud
stands for all things,
even for those things that don't flower,
for everything flowers, from within, of self-blessing;
though sometimes it is necessary
to reattach a thing its loveliness. ("Saint Francis and the
Sow," lines 1-6)

These opening lines from American poet Galway Kinnell's 1980 poem "Saint Francis and the Sow" reveal one of Kinnell's keenest desires: to reattach the aching contemporary world its own loveliness. To do so, the poet understands that in context of the Western tradition, there are great obstacles to overcome: the Christian notion of the split between flesh and spirit and the values often assigned to that split, as well as the frustrating alienation to which the Modernist period relegated humanity.

In addressing these obstacles, Kinnell employs his own transformed brand of what Ezra Pound called "logopoeia." In his consideration of the poetry of Mina Loy and Jules Laforgue, Pound coined this term to capture a particular use of language in conveying multiple levels of meaning. Beyond the musical and/or visual qualities of language, *logopoeia* recognizes also a word's power to *mean* in reference to other

words and to retain a certain level of “textual indeterminacy” (Hoogestraat 259). Pound himself defined *logopoeia* this way: “[It is] ‘the dance of the intellect among words,’ that is to say, it employs words not only for their direct meaning, but it takes count in a special way of habits of usage, of the context we expect to find with the word, its usual concomitants, of its known acceptances, and of ironical play” (Qtd. in Hoogestraat 260-61).

Pound applied the term to poetry that was, unlike Kinnell’s, primarily satirical, the voices of the poems he examined (like those of Loy and Laforgue) “extremely self-conscious, overintellectualized . . . [, and] directed toward relentless social satire” (Hoogestraat 263). Jane Hoogestraat explains that the ethos of this approach specifically rejects “the Romantic view of the poetic self, especially . . . the unqualified or sentimental expression of emotion in a poem” (263). Hoogestraat emphasizes that in such poetry, there is either an absence of emotion or the suppression of it (which greatly intensifies it)--for Pound, “the shift from a ‘heart cry’ to a ‘mind cry’” (Hoogestraat 263). Peter Nicholls clarifies the definition of the term *logopoeia* in a study that accounts for its several phases: Pound’s original intention in employing it in relation to Mina Loy’s poetry, his illustrations of the concept in Laforgue’s satirical writing, and a somewhat modified use of it later in Pound’s own poetry. Nicholls explains that it was “the ‘logopoeic’ handling of abstract vocabulary that [for Pound] made Loy’s satirical style so distinctive” (55). Nicholls illustrates this vocabulary with examples from Loy’s poetry, words like “incipience,” “mollescent” (55), “changeant” and “stoppled” (63). These *logopoeic* words exemplify what Hoogestraat describes as externally referential, their meanings derived from what Nicholls describes as being “rooted in a traditional if abstract lexicon,” and as moving between the “recondite and the archaic” (63). Pound’s term “arid clarity,” associated with *logopoeia*, reflects his insistence upon, according to Nicholls, a “coldly ‘aesthetic’ presentation” (56), emphasizing his protest against “the ‘emotional slither’ he identified in late Victorian poetry” (Molesworth 45). Further

clarifying this point, in a review of Loy's "Effectual Marriage," Pound states, "It has none of the stupidity beloved of the 'lyric' enthusiast and the writer and reader who take refuge in scenery description of nature because they are unable to cope with the human" (Qtd. in Nicholls 56).

In clear opposition to the poetic stance of mind over heart, Kinnell embraces the Romantic sensibility. In fact, he holds that "in much modern poetry, the emphasis on brilliant verbal effects of individual lines and images detracts from the meaning of the poem and the essence of the whole" (Hawkins 143). Kinnell's attitude toward the poet's role unapologetically echoes Romantic ideology, as through the poet, "ordinary and average things are seen in a sacred light" (Hawkins 142). Sherman Hawkins argues that the tradition with which Kinnell's "best poetry" is most closely associated "is that of transcendental and religious meditation" (142).

Kinnell is, of course, a product of the 20th century, reflecting the legacy of Modernists such as Pound, Wallace Stevens, and William Carlos Williams. The objectivity Pound called for is certainly reflected in Kinnell's work. While Kinnell intentionally takes up the visionary role of the Romantic poet, Charles Molesworth notes that for Kinnell, "Pound's concern with objective 'vision' on the physiological level corrects rather than replaces the concern with the visionary" (47). As a poet of the postmodern era, Kinnell was faced with the challenge of transforming 18th and 19th century British Romantic sentiments into an ethos meaningful to a late 20th century world. Examination of his work shows that he maintains the elements of both Romantic and Modernist poetry that are most valuable to his aesthetic. He eradicates both the sentimental and the satirically ironic, finding a position that is not only transcendental and meditative but also unsentimental and intellectual. Pound valorizes poetry that can simultaneously employ *melopoeia* and *phanopoeia* along with *logopoeia*—this combination is, for Pound, the "masterly use of words" (Qtd. in Hoogestraat 266), and Kinnell achieves an organic combination of these. Kinnell's tendencies toward *melopoeia* (lyricism/sound) and *phanopoeia*

(images/visual) along with his regard for key aspects of *logopoeia* enable him to marry the intellectual 20th century attitude toward poetic language to the Romantic sensibility, yielding poetry that both exploits and celebrates language and its multiple levels of meaning as well as addressing the painful wounds of the contemporary psyche. An examination of his poems “The Fly,” “Saint Francis and the Sow,” and “Blackberry Eating” illuminates his position and its effects.

With the vision of the Romantic, Kinnell reveals in “The Fly” the sacred in the ordinary, even in the despised. In its seeming ever-presence, the fly is recognized as an important constant. Though it is an irritant and a threat, the fly is acknowledged here as the companion who sees us all the way to death and beyond. The *melopoeia* in this poem brings the fly physically into the room, “buzzing” and “mizzling” in its “sporadic stroll over the eyelid or cheek” (line 8). The speaker lyrically contrasts the fly’s “burnt song” (line 10) with that of the bee, who “sings of fulfillment only” (line 14). The *phanopoeia* of the poem further emphasizes our inevitable loathing of our life-long companion, portraying in grotesque terms this “flesh- / eater / starved for the soul” (lines 4-6), “the flesh-fly” (line 20), “the naked dirty reality of him” (line 22). In opposition, again, to the lovely bee, described by the speaker as “the fleur-de-lys in the flesh . . . / . . . everything she touches / . . . opening, opening” (line 11), the final lines of the poem’s *melopoeia* and *phanopoeia* organically yield their effect, presenting the fly as enduring and terrible:

. . . we say our last goodbye
to the fly last,
the flesh-fly last,
the absolute last,
the naked dirty reality of him last. (lines 18-22)

The use here of epistrophe, repeating the thematically significant “last,” as well as the poem’s visceral imagery, draw us, perhaps unwillingly, into a physical and spiritual respect for our guardian and devourer, the fly.

It is, however, the poem's *logopoeia* that completes Kinnell's truly "masterly use of words." Kinnell employs the words "mizzling," "burnt," "flesh" (in various forms: "flesh-eater," "in the flesh," and "flesh-fly"), and "last" in a way that reflects to a significant extent Pound's notion of *logopoeia*. Although Kinnell is true to his Romantic aims, carefully avoiding satirical irony, he uses these words unsentimentally to encompass not only the internal workings of the poem's scene, but also to refer the reader beyond the poem, relentlessly reminding us of the organic world's movement toward death. Exemplifying here "the dance of the intellect among words," Kinnell objectively hammers the fact of inevitable death, with the fly's unstoppable "mizzling"; the "burnt" song of the bee, which will end in ashes; and the unspoken fate of the "flesh": decomposition. The flesh and soul are, by Western tradition, usually defined as opposites—one destined to rot and the other to transcend. Even the "flesh-eater fly," Kinnell notes, is "starved for the soul." To heal this split, Kinnell does not offer an escape from the flesh but instead, accompanies us lovingly to our end, the knowledge of which drives his aesthetic; "the wages of dying is love,' after all ("Little Sleep's-Head Sprouting Hair in the Moonlight," part 7, lines 11-12). The speaker in "The Fly" suggests that "one day I may learn to suffer / his mizzling" (lines 7-8), implying that the fly can teach us to "be" in a different way. The possibility of transcendence raised by the speaker in introducing the bee keeps us tied to the physical: the bee is the "fleur-de-lys"--much more aesthetically pleasing than the fly--but functioning only "in the flesh." The fulfillment of which the bee sings promises only "sexual love to the narcissus flower" (line 13). Although "everything she touches / is opening, opening," she "stings and dies" (line 15).

The structure of the third stanza (7 lines, introducing the bee in the first line and ending, in the last line, with "is opening, opening") emphasizes the *becoming* of the world that the bee enables, yet this *becoming* cannot happen without the *dying*, a stage which the fly inevitably dominates. And so, the fourth and final stanza drives

this point home, the word *last* repeated five times, four times ending the line. It refers not only to death, but also to death's inevitability, and ironically to the fly's ability to *last* beyond us with our rotting bodies as its sustenance, our matter transferred to the seemingly eternally buzzing fly. In a "dance of the intellect," Kinnell reminds us that the words themselves will not even transcend the fly, as the fly will not read them and further will devour the poet, the reader, and the paper upon which the words are printed. Yet, in spite of, or perhaps *because* of, Kinnell's *logopoetic* confrontation with words and their referential meanings, the emphasis of the poem is still on the sacred, the "heart cry," rather than the "mind cry." Through the fly, we can see the eternal *in* the physical.

In "Saint Francis and the Sow," through his development of *melopoeia*, *phanopoeia*, and *logopoeia*, Kinnell discovers on our behalf another lowly being of nature—the pig. While we might be resigned to accepting the fly's innate perfection as a teacher of mortality, "Saint Francis and the Sow" leads us to love and embrace that mortality, even as Saint Francis embraces the pig. Of course, it is easier to touch the sow—we do not feel pity for the fly, but we do pity the pig in her harmless and lowly state. And yet, Kinnell insists, the sow is not pitiable but lovely. Here Kinnell might seem to abandon his objectivity in so fully honoring a figure of nature. Yet, in this "ode," he does not commit the sin of taking "refuge in scenery description of nature because [he is] unable to cope with the human" (Nicholls 56). Rather he achieves what Pound lauds in this "transformation wrought by art upon the real" (Qtd. in Nicholls 61) and does so in fearless *pursuit* of the human. With his use of alliteration and repetition of key words, Kinnell generates a lyrical momentum in the poem, the *melopoeia* of which brings us gliding into his last line, willingly celebrating "the long, perfect loveliness of sow" (line 23). Beginning with the shortest line of the poem, "The bud," Kinnell builds one line upon another--in sound, theme and line-length--crescendoing in the long 22nd line: "from the fourteen teats into the fourteen mouths sucking and blowing beneath them," before concluding with "the long,

perfect loveliness of sow.” This momentum is achieved in part by the poem’s being structured as one long sentence, linked by semicolons and coordinating conjunctions, protean in effect. Kinnell’s *phanopoeia*, drawing the reader to the sow, even to her “spininess” (line 19), are integrated with the poem’s powerful *melopoeia*. In addition to the momentum effected by the poem’s fluid structure, Kinnell emphasizes the sow’s sensual beauty with alliteration of the *th* and *s* sounds, glides rather than fricatives, flowing much like the sow’s milk itself. Also expressed primarily via glide-sounds, the bud, a beginning, starts its motion of growth, even as it “stands for all things, / even for those things that don’t flower, / for everything flowers, / from within” (lines 2-4). The *f*’s and *th*’s invite us graciously into the poem’s blossoming world. Similarly, the sow’s unique loveliness, manifest even in her “spininess,” is amplified in the *s*’s of the lines, “through the fodder and slops to the spiritual curl of the tail, / from the hard spininess spiked out from the spine / down the great broken heart / to the sheer blue milken dreaminess spurting and shuddering” (lines 18-21). The combination in line 19 of *s* sounds with the fricative *p* generates the sensation of the sharp spikes, slowing only slightly the momentum begun by the glides employed previously, and productively balanced by them. The temporary abandonment of the *s* sound which follows, to respect the sow’s “great broken heart,” gives the desired effect as well. Neither her spininess nor her broken heart mitigates her grace; rather they are the sources of it.

With this idea, the *logopoeia* of the poem is evident. The sow’s having lived hard (“her creased forehead,” line 13) and the wounds of her heart make up the “long perfect loveliness of sow,” which Saint Francis is not *giving* but “reteaching” the creature “in words and in touch” (line 14). Significantly, as the poet has insisted in lines 9 and 14, one’s loveliness must be told both “in words *and* in touch” (my emphasis). Why in both? The words are no more useful to the sow than they are to the fly. In this poem, though, rather than coming to understand our relationship to the sow, as we did the fly, we *become* the sow, broken-hearted, yet lovely even in our

“spininess” and our “dreaminess spurting and shuddering.” In both the poet’s words and in Saint Francis’s touch, *we*—the mortal and broken-hearted denizens of the presumably tainted world-- relearn *our* loveliness. Kinnell’s compromise of intellectual objectivity, effecting our complete and necessary sympathy with the sow, is balanced back toward the logopoeic through his use of terms such as “reteach,” “self-blessing,” “spiritual curl of the tail” (juxtaposed with “hard spininess”), and “sheer blue milken dreaminess.” Each of these terms pressures the reader intellectually to accept the inextricable relationship of the empirical world with its transcendent quality. And in creating words like “milken,” Kinnell engages in a kind of play not unlike Loy’s with words like “stopple.” “Milken” is, admittedly, not abstract at its root, but because it is a recognized term in a newly created form, it provokes an intellectual leap toward a consideration of this quality of “dreaminess” possible in the physical world. Here, Kinnell has achieved a provocative point: it is by *way* of his word play, through diction in no way traditionally sentimental, that we are touched and that we begin to regard the sow, and ultimately ourselves, with a simple love.

“Blackberry Eating” is, perhaps, the most intensely *logopoeic* of the three poems. “I love to go out in late September / among the fat, overripe, icy, black blackberries / to eat blackberries for breakfast” (lines 1-3), says the poet. This poem is, of course, about both blackberries *and* poetry, and ultimately, those things are part of both a concrete/abstract duality as well as a merger of the two. Howard Nelson describes “Blackberry Eating” as “a playful poem about the savor that is in the physical world and in language, which itself can become a live, nearly physical thing, as it does in this poem” (104). Metaphorically speaking, as delightful as is the moment when we “squeeze, squinch open, and splurge well” (line 12) a fat, succulent blackberry, the same is the moment when certain words, ripe with meaning and sound, “fall almost unbidden to [the] . . . tongue” (line 8). Just as a blackberry picker must suffer the consequences of his art, “the stalks very prickly” (line 4), poets must

suffer “a penalty, / they earn for knowing the black art” (lines 4-5) of poetry making, the words delicious with potential, both sweet and painful.

The sounds and images conjured by the words of this poem become inextricably intertwined with its *logopoeic* effects. The alliteration of the *s*'s in words like “squeeze,” “squinch,” and “splurge” is bound with the poet's Romantic self-indulgence in articulating them and with his gift of them to us to taste in our own mouths. Ironically (with a different brand of irony different than Pound's), the black art is both self-indulgent and self-sacrificing. Our willingness to give in to the black art brings the wounds of the full human experience along with the reward of that experience. We feel both delight and pain as we glean the plump and prickly words and, in doing so, we find the ecstasy of our physical/transcendent existence.

Besides the *logopoeic* sense of play in words like “squinched,” referring simultaneously to the sensation of a blackberry's juice emanating onto the tongue and to the pleasure derived from speaking a word “overripe” with meaning, Kinnell's use of the word “penalty” as well as the terms “startled” and “black language” functions to merge the concrete with the abstract. Kinnell pushes the reader's experience of the abstract in this case to a point of joyous fear—of a sense that seeking language's power beyond the safety zone (the zone where thorns do not thrive) brings real risk as well as the exhilaration that can only come with that risk.

Kinnell is not, as Pound felt Laforgue was, “nine-tenths . . . critic—dealing for the most part with literary poses and cliches, taking them as his subject matter” (Qtd. in Hoogestraat 270). But Kinnell does convey his Romantic message by “moving between sincere ethos and sharp irony” (Hoogestraat 271), as Laforgue did. Kinnell adeptly employs *logopoeia* to effect a word play that avoids extreme intellectualism but, on the contrary, appeals to the contemporary reader's need for an unsentimental rendering of his/her relationship to the world. This evocation of the Romantic vision, in the midst of Kinnell's sharp intellectual word play, produces

poetry that, in the Romantic tradition, brings light to the lovely and sacred aspects of the ordinary physical, and often alien, world.

Works Cited

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