

Lubelskie Materialy Neofilologiczne — 1987

Joanna Durczak

Galway Kinnell's Didacticism with a Difference

The critical disfavor into which didactic poetry fell around the beginning of this century was a consequence of several factors: a rejection of late Romantic didactic excesses, the universal scepticism of the times, and the adoption of the modernist poetics that insisted on the absolute autonomy of poetry. Stigmatized and branded, open didacticism was then temporarily rooted out of poetry. Only poets of the strongest personalities and opinions, such as Pound or Jeffers, continued unabashedly to preach, using their poems as vehicles for furthering their ideology. Others either altogether suppressed in themselves the temptation to teach, or devised tricks and disguises with which to camouflage their didactic intentions, and make their lessons more palatable — if not to the reader who, it seems, never altogether refused the poet the right to be "cider than other human beings" — than certainly to themselves and to the critics.¹

In the second half of the century, some poets of the younger generation assumed a more relaxed attitude towards the "pitfalls of didacticism". One might mention the political poetry of Robert Bly and Hayden Carruth, the ecumintant poems of Gary Snyder and Wendell Berry, the prophetic chants of Allen Ginsberg. Many more poets, however, continue to confront the temptation to be didactic in the Frostian manner, that is, by yielding to it though behind a protective mask of one sort or another, such as the wry smile or the unsaying of what he has just said were to Robert Frost. And thus, for example, A.R. Ammons in his early poems relied on the help of a wisdom-imparting Mountain. Allen Ginsberg's

protection has always been his heavy auto-irony. David Wagoner, who has written scores of poems that are manual-like in their tone and subject, subverts in them both his instructor-speaker and the very idea of instruction.

An interesting example of how a contemporary poet can in his poetry handle a didactic impulse is Galway Kinnell's 1971 poetic sequence The Book of Nightmares.² The book was for Kinnell a considerable success, perhaps his greatest success so far, almost unanimously praised for its artistic power, emotional intensity and the richness of its language. Only a few critics marginally noted its "didacticism close to evangelical" as somewhat detrimental to Kinnell's otherwise admirable work; none however, dwelt on the subject? But to ignore or play down the didacticism of The Book of Nightmares is in fact to do scant justice to one of its achievements. The sequence is didactic yet in a critical and self-conscious way. Its didacticism is not a writer of preconceived beliefs superimposed upon the poem, but rather of beliefs discovered and made known as the poem studies its subject. Finally, neither the message of the book nor the way it is communicated conform to the more conventional ideas of the method and matter of didactic poetry.

The Book of Nightmares is conceived as a father's testament of understanding for his children. Speaking about the poem in an interview, Kinnell named clearly the didactic intention which motivated him. "From one point of view", he said, "the book is nothing but an effort to face death and live with death (...). I wanted that book, while it introduces those things, to suggest a way of dealing with them."⁴ More specifically, the testament is for Maud and Fergus, the poet's infant children, and is written in hope that it will help them one day to confront that inevitable bleakest moment when the realization overcomes them of the omnipresence and inevitability of death.

in the days
when you find yourself orphaned,
emptied
of all wind-singing, of light,
the pieces of cursed bread on your tongue, (...)
then
you shall open
this book, even if it is the book of nightmares.
BM 8

The poet's expectations about what exactly the book should mean

to Maud and to anybody else who might want to listen are defined at the close of the sequence when, upon leaving the woods where the testament was formulated, he leaves behind

a small fire (...)
no matter how, whom it was built for,
it keeps its flames,
it warms
everyone that might wander into its radiance,
a tree, a lost animal, a stone. BM 71

The situation is a classic didactic one: a person of authority and experience, conceives of circumstances in which his guidance may save somebody in his charge and therefore offers instruction as to how to confront and overcome a specific problem. The instructor is well-intentioned, and his guidance, like the warmth of the fire, is meant to be life-sustaining. Around this skeletal structure, Kinnell builds a body of his own creation that now faithfully follows and now defies the structure's demands.

The message of The Book of Nightmares, inevitably truncated and simplified in paraphrase, is this: if the terror of death can be mitigated at all, this may be done only through acknowledging all that we know and can guess about dying. The terror, like death, is universal, and like death is a signature in us of our brotherhood with all living things. Death itself is inseparable from life, not its reverse but an alter ego or "a poor cousin" of life (...). Who pronounces the family name to Leave" (BM 37). It is life's pre-condition and at all times its companion, claiming the living every instant from their births on, and itself surrendering back to life at the dreadful last moment when upon the fresh corpse, "the fly/the last nightmare, hatches himself." (BM 45) The metaphorphoses thus made possible, (however tragically disappointing) are the only transcendence available to us. Yet it is precisely death as a destroyer of recognizable particular incarnations that endears them to us, that breeds love and tenderness for all existence. The poem puts this with a startling clarity: "the wages/of dying is love" (BM 54) So the answer to the terror of dying is in accepting the bitter knowledge and letting go. Embracing the moment granted us, we should - the poet concludes - imitate "this free floating of one/opening his arms into the attitude/of flight, as he obeys the necessity and falls." (BM 75)

The conventional provides characteristic of the parent-to-child didactic frame that Kinnell has adopted are notably absent here. The consolations are thin. There are no promises of a well-earned rest, of after-life, not even of the obscure elemental presence Kinnell sometimes allows the dead in his elapses. There is no effort to placate the fear. Saying "I too am afraid" or "everything is afraid" brings little relief. The being offered is to understand death better as a part of the universal process, and the only encouragement is to cherish life in spite of or rather because of this understanding. For all the speaker's parental generosity - and some sections of the Book of Nightmares are among the most moving testimonies to parental love - he never sweetens his tragic knowledge. Evidently nothing more comforting could have been said without a sense of self-betrayal and of betraying the children.

Such a paraphrase of Kinnell's message leaves out something very characteristic of this book - its grimness and repulsiveness. It is not without reason that the sequence bears the title it does. Though its nominal subject is the nightmares of death, it is also steeped in nightmares of living, and even its scenes of familial serenity are not free of intimations of violence. The message Kinnell conveys emerges from revolting scenes of killing, burning, rotting; his progs are split cadavers, sliced intestines, decapitated corpses, and the book almost exudes the smell of rot, sweat, sickness, dirt, and decay. The negative power emanating from it, some suggest almost - and others say altogether-overwhelms Kinnell's affirmative message. The poet himself insists that the book is affirmative in the way of Shakespearean or Greek tragedy, where "much of what is actually said is destructive yet the total effect is the contrary". (PDS 45) Nevertheless, this is not an automatic response to the book, and that fact may be viewed as Kinnell's failure to achieve a more unequivocal effect. But possibly, too, the near balance between the affirmative and negative energies in the book is not quite unintentional and could be seen as a part of its didactic intent. Just as when, against his fatherly instincts, Kinnell the teacher refuses to offer any more consolation than he honestly can, here too, he rejects the chance to tip the balance and add forcefulness to his conclusions. Having amassed the evidence, devastating, repulsive, unwanted,

that has, nevertheless, allowed him to affirm something, and having forced us to confront it, he permits us our own emotional choice. The book ends on a very tentative note, addressing in the final words of the last poem his son Fergus, Kinnell says: "Sancho Fergus! Don't cry!", but then immediately adds:

Or else, cry.
On the body, when it is
laid out, see if you can find
the one flea that is laughing. EW75

The emphatic end position of "laughing" may be subtly re-endorsing the speaker's affirmative position, but its weight is counterbalanced by the tentativeness of the sentence's grammar - "see if you can", and thus an offer is made not, at the same time, the possibility of refusal granted.

The hesitancy of these final words is symptomatic of Kinnell's treatment in the entire book of the question of authority. Nowadays, to convincingly claim authority, as a didactic poem must, requires considerable imagination and skill. The father-to-child frame of The Book of Nightmares may suggest an obvious but rather vulnerable choice wherein the parent's age and expertise are unselfconsciously accepted as the source of his power. This possibility Kinnell has rejected. The father figure in the volume is the opposite of authoritarian: he confesses fear, claims helplessness, admits defeat. "Little Sand", he cries out in the anguished litany of a loser to death,

I would suck the rot from your fingernail,
I would brush your sprouting hair of the dying light,
I would scrape the rust off your ivory bones,
I would help death escape through the little ribs of your body,
I would alchemize the ashes of your cradle back to wood,
I would let nothing of you go, ever, EW 49

Yet not only is he not a healer, but is himself in need of healing, and the child's trustful embrace only reminds him of that.

When I sleepwalk into your room
and pick you up,
and hold you in the moonlight, you cling to me
hard, clinging could save us. I think
you think
I will never die, I think I exude
in you the permanence of smoke or stars,
even as
my broken arms heal themselves around you. EW49
In this moment of tenderness and pain, Kinnell-as-father

acknowledges all his powerlessness and renounces his paternal authority as an illusion in which only an infant can place trust.

Simultaneously, he Erants authority to the child. It is Mand whose embrace permits her father's broken arms to heal themselves. In Kinnell's intricately constructed web of significances in the poem, the image conveys a promise of acceptance of and reconciliation to the dark, the emptiness which the human and non-human arms in the poem repeatedly clutch at in helplessness and frustration. Here, as on several other occasions in The Book of Nightmares, Mand the instructed becomes Mand the instructor. Her role is more than that of the poem's Muse whose birth released in the poet the compulsion to fathom death's mysteries. She is the one, paradoxically, approached for knowledge, a source from whom the father-teacher hopes to learn more than he knows himself. Her "knowing" is the memory of death that she appears to Kinnell to still be very close to -- the death of her pre-existence and the death actually experienced upon her transition from one realm into another when she emerged from the womb and her umbilical cord was cut. He guesses that such knowledge is present in her unprotesting abandonment to what to him are rehearsals of death when, trustingly, she falls into sleep or yields to fatigue. "They seem to understand death surprisingly clearly", Kinnell remarked of children.

They live with death almost as animals do. This natural trust in life's rhythms, infantile as it is, provides the model for the trust they may struggle to learn later on. The Book of Nightmares is my own effort to find the trust again.

And so instead of a master-student relationship, the poem exploits a dance-like encounter of two who, alternately in need of guidance, rely on each other to temporarily take the lead in their progress towards understanding.

In the chronology of The Book of Nightmares, declarations of parental helplessness are preceded by scenes in which the father is cast or casts himself in a role that at least partly compensates for his later renunciation of authority, and that definitively redefines its source. Initially, his other capacity is only obscurely suggested; but as the sequence unravels, it becomes insistently apparent. Through scraps of statement, through imagery, incidents involving the speaker and his relationships

to other characters appearing in the poems, the father's other dimension is articulated. He assumes a role that is indefinitely priestly, that admits him into more knowledge than he could individually claim, and that makes him a participant in various human and non-human encounters with death, as well as in ceremonies and rituals that challenge it.

When he first appears in the poem, he is starting a small fire in the woods in celebration of his daughter. By "the wet site of old fires", on "black ashes, black stones", in the rain that is trying to put the fire out, in the scenery of a smoking wet hillside smelling of flowers, wet earth and bear fur, he sits by the fire mumbling mysterious oaths, "stone saint smooth stone", and sings a song he used to sing to his daughter during her nightmares. (BN 4) These are all carefully selected elements alluding to some basic primitive ritual that involves all elemental powers -- earth, water, fire, and air, employs symbolic representations of growth, decay, and permanence, (ashes, flowers, stones), and is activated by mystical formulas that affect a transformation upon the participant till he loses control of his mind and senses and drifts off into a trance, his song reduced to "one love note / twisting under (his) tongue like the coyote's bark / curving off into a howl." (BN 4)

Before the father-priest leaves the fire in the last poem of the sequence, he participates in several more or less obscurely evoked rituals that collectively shape his final testimony, and corroborate to establish his authority. His most explicitly drawn involvement is in shamanistic ventures into the realm of spirits, wherein he enters the bodies and minds of the dead to bring back to the living their knowledge of the end. The extremes of pain, misery, and frustration that he is made to fly to as he relives the nightmares of a soldier burnt alive on a battlefield, or of a deserted, lingsore wino, or of a hen - its wings "made only to fly (...), and unable to fly" - not only become the foundation of the father-priest's final vision but also, because he relives them, invest him with an authority of a superior kind. This is the peculiar authority of a sufferer, that renders as petty and callous any resistance to his version of the truth.

Shamanism is only one of the many systems evoked by the

poet that human cultures have created for the mastering of death and emptiness. In a medley of hushed voices and barely identifiable scraps of rituals, Kinnell echoes in The Book of Nightmares also magic, witchcraft, clairvoyance, sorcery, superstition, spells and charms, prophecy, augury, alchemy, astrology, and technology - "the latest of the methods we use to overcome the fear of death". (WDS 99) As the poet quotes, travelers, or alights of an array of mystic formulas, oaths, prayers, and fragments of holy texts - some of them easily recognizable, like "do not let this last hour pass/do not remove this last poison cup from our lips" (SN 44), other only darkly evocative as "You will feel all your bones break/over the holy waters you will never drink" (SN 23) - he transfers the authority they carry into his speaker's testimony, orchestrating his voice and the quoted voices into an authoritative oracular whole.

Once again, however, Kinnell elaborately grants in one gesture what he denies in the other. Just as the speaker's paternal authority is undermined by his own recognition of its ill-insubstantiality so is the authority of the priest mitigated by the shabbiness of the temples in which he officiates. The world of The Book of Nightmares is revolting, "a scorched ground of almost all its holiness gone"⁷ and its shrines where men strive for understanding and transcendence are appropriately diminished. The woods where the father lights his fire are not majestic "God's first temples" but a refuge for tramps "gnawing on stream water" and "unhouseling themselves on cursed bread" (SN 3), a place of loneliness, hunger and pain. His Shamanistic trances take place in a henhouse or in a smelly, dingy hotel under a freeway where he lies upon bedclothes "gone stiff/from love-acid, night sweat, grass-dust." (SN 20) His sacrificial altar is a chopping block, his trance-inducing incense foot-smells rising from hand-me-down shoes bought at a Salvation Army store. The religiously evocative language of the sequence and the atmosphere of ritual that permeates it are constantly threatened by the poet's preoccupation with the seamstress, though on the other hand, the seamy is inevitably elevated by the proximity of the sacred. In effect, The Book of Nightmares offers to the reader no sense of that emotional security so characteristic of didactic poetry in general. He is denied the comfort

of facing the self-confident authority of an undivided mind, and is left torn between respect and disgust.

The Book of Nightmares must, finally, be considered within the context of the accusations most commonly leveled against didactic literature - that in the fervor of propagandizing its authors are likely to sacrifice their artistic fidelities. However accurate the observation may be in general, in the case of Kinnell's volume it is untenable. For all his declared didactic intent, the poet appears no less interested in the poem's artistic wholeness than in its being of use. This means that he makes no obvious artistic concessions even if such might facilitate the communicating of his message, nor does he permit his poetry to degenerate into a grossy presentation of belief, even though he does acknowledge the possibility of an almost complete failure in communication. Commenting upon the poem's instruction for Mand, Kinnell allowed for its more than modest success in conveying his meaning. "She will open the book", he said, "for what help it may be. At least it will tell her how much her father loved her." (WDS 90, emphasis added) And the same doubt is expressed in the poem itself:

As for these words scattered into the future
posteriorly
is one invented too deep in the past
to hear them. SN 37

The poem's loyalty, then, is to itself in the first place. Its progression is controlled not by the logic of argument but by the logic of nightmares and visions that it records, their significance irreducible to a simple statement of belief but transmitting itself through a collective impact of images, language, and events. These in turn, as Cary Nelson has demonstrated in his study of The Book of Nightmares, are artistically controlled by Kinnell as he defines each word's meaning and each image's significance through its various combinations in the text, weaving them into an intricate tapestry of mutually sustaining patterns that, for instance, permits him to speak of death and birth in almost identical sets of words, and thus to argue, also on the verbal level, the book's larger theme of the inseparability of the two.⁸

Only once, and then only briefly, does Kinnell permit the teacher in himself to take the upper hand over the artist. In

the middle of the sixth section of the poem, "The Dead Shall Be Raised Incorruptible", in a radical departure from the tone method, and imagery of the entire sequence, he bursts out in a straightforward jeremiad against Christian civilization. Some effort to control this outburst can be discerned in the speaker's recognition of his own complicity in the evil he denounces. But the language of the fragment is pedantic, the irony crude, the argument simplistic, and the whole sounds dangerously close to a speech by a student activist.

In the Twentieth Century of my trespass on earth,
 having exterminated one billion heathens,
 heretics, Jews, Moslems, witches, mystical seekers,
 black men, Asians, and Christian brothers,
 everyone of them for his own good,
 a whole continent of red men for lying in community,
 one billion species of animals for being subhuman,
 and ready and eager to take on
 the bloodthirsty creatures from the other planets,
 I, Christian man, groan out this testament of my last
 will. BK43

Not incidentally, this section of The Book of Nightmares is sometimes anthologized separately, abstracted from the broader context of the whole volume, and it does not make the impression of being harmed by such treatment. It is a whole in itself, a political poem of the kind Kinnell had written earlier to protest against American involvement in Asia; and it demonstrates by contrast what didactic traps he has managed to steer clear of in the other sections of the sequence. In "The Dead Shall Be Raised Incorruptible" Kinnell is embattled, partisan, unhesitant; there is an unforgiving fierceness in his tone that is alien to The Book of Nightmares as a whole.

Whereas "The Dead Shall Be Raised Incorruptible" is didactic in the traditional manner, the entire volume might be pointed to as exemplary of the kind of didacticism that appears to be more acceptable nowadays both to poets and readers. In a time of almost universal scepticism about truths and values, the artist who chooses to instruct via his art must do so far more self-consciously than was possible before. This means not only exercising stricter control over one's passion for the furthering of an ideology; it also means taking more care in claiming authority and therefore entailing devising strategies that, while acknowledging the relativity of viewpoints, nevertheless permit the poet to stand by his own version of the truth. In his

famous essay on morality in literature, John Gardner insists that art does have the right - if not the obligation - to instruct, yet only insofar as it makes the strongest, artistically consummate case possible and then, mindful of its own frailties and of the reader's privileges, moves on.⁹ This seems to be Galway Kinnell's way as a modern didactic poet.

Notes

1. The expression is Eliot's. See "The Use of Poetry, and the Use of Criticism" in Selected Prose of T.S. Eliot (New York: Harcourt, Brace Jovanovich, 1975), p.95.
2. Galway Kinnell, The Book of Nightmares (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1971), all future references to the book will be to this edition and will be included in the text.
3. Charles Molesworth, The Fierce Embrace (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1979), p.110.
4. Galway Kinnell, Walking Down the Stairs: Selections from Interviews (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1973), all references to the book will be to this edition and will be included in the text.
5. Compare, for instance, Kinnell's elegy for his mother in Mortal Acts, Mortal Words (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1980), pp. 41-45.
6. The question is discussed in A. Foulin's and W. Dodd's interview with Kinnell included in Walking Down the Stairs, pp. 26-29 and p. 45.
7. Mortal Acts, Mortal Words, p.44.
8. See Cary Nelson, Our Last First Poets: Vision and History in Contemporary American Poetry (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1981), pp.81-91.
9. John Gardner, On Moral Fiction (New York: Basic Books, 1978) p. 101.

Artykuł sygnalizuje wzrost zainteresowania poetów amerykańskich poezją dydaktyczną uważaną od początku XX wieku za mało ambitną i pośledniejszą próbę. Na podstawie wydanego w 1971 roku cyklu Galweya Kimmella The Book of Mifflins autorka przedstawia modyfikacje takim współczesny poeta poddaje tradycyjną formułę poezji dydaktycznej, czytając ją kwintesencją do zaakceptowania dla dwudziestowiecznego czytelnika. Modyfikacje te dotyczą zarówno treści jak i metody pouczania. Cykl Kimmella jest nie tylko wolny od dydaktycznego optywizmu ale wręcz dopuszcza możliwość odrzucenia przesłania przez pouczanego. Zacytowanie niejednoznacznie potraktowana jest kwestia autorstwa, tak istotnego dla poezji dydaktycznej; z jednej strony autorzytet ten jest świadomie pomniejszany przez samego pouczającego, z drugiej, ważkość wypowiedzianych przez niego sądów i zaleceń jest dowartościowywana przez poetę za pomocą obracowania i języka o charakterze quasi-religijnym i rytualistycznym. Chciał cykl w intencji swojej jest dydaktyczny - ma być przekazem dla dzieci poety jak rozumieć śmierć i jak ze śmiercią żyć - to intencji tej Kimmell nie podporządkowuje artystycznych ambicji twórcy, co uwalnia go od głównego zarzutów kierowanego pod adresem poezji dydaktycznej.

Lubelskie Materiały Neofilologiczne — 1987

Marek Dziuba

Aus Achtung vor den Opfern; Manfred Frankes "Wortverlünfte. Ein Protokoll von der Angst, von Mißhandlung und Tod, vom Auffinden der Spuren und deren Wiederentdeckung".

Manfred Franke, 1930 in der Rheinischen Kleinstadt Hilden geboren, ist durch die Erzählung Ein Leben auf Probe /1987/ und den Roman Bis der Feind kommt /1970/ sowie durch seine Herausgeberfähigkeit und Essays bekannt geworden. Sein Buch Mordverlünfte, 1973 bei Luchterhand erschienen, ist vom Verlag als Roman definiert, zugleich jedoch als "Ein Protokoll von der Angst, von Mißhandlung und Tod, vom Auffinden der Spuren und deren Wiederentdeckung" ausgewiesen. In seinem Buch behandelte Franke die Ereignisse der Nacht vom 9. zum 10. November 1938, der sog. "Reichskristallnacht" in seiner Heimatstadt:

Am 7. November 1938 hatte der jüdische Attentäter, Herschel Reibel Grynspan, den Legationssekretär der deutschen Botschaft in Paris, von Reib, erschossen. Das nahm der Propagandaminister Goebbels zum Anlaß, in ganz Deutschland eine Reaktion gegen die jüdischen Mißbürger in Gang zu setzen. Es sollte aussehen, wie eine spontane Reaktion der empörten deutschen Bevölkerung, aber es waren organisierte Kommandos der SA und der SS, die Synagogen, Läden und Wohnungen überfielen. Manfred Franke erlebte die Ereignisse der "Reichskristallnacht" als achtjähriger Junge in seiner Heimatstadt mit. Das Vorhaben, den Juaschpogrom in Hilden aus der Perspektive eines Minderjährigen in Form von Erinnerungen zu beschreiben, schlug infolge der Aufindung einer Fülle von Dokumenten aus dem 1945 gegen die Beteiligten durchgeführten Prozeß in eine Dokumentation um. Aus dem ursprünglich biographisch angelegten Buch entstand eine Semidokumentation, vorwiegend bestehend aus einer Zusammensetzung von Textprotokollen, gerichtlichen Gutachten, Bildberichten der Rechtsanwalte, aus Teilen des Tagebuches Speers, Zeitungsanschnitten und Auszügen aus dem Buch F.K.Kauts über Goebbels und Grynspan. Diese Mischung ist mit Erinnerungsakzenten des Verfassers und mit Bezügen zur Gegenwart durchsetzt. Manfred Franke legte seinen Roman wie einen Prozeß an, in dem er dem Leser