

## Landscape Eaten By Foliage: John Kinsella's *Graphology* Poems

by Nicholas Birns

In the *Australian Book Review* of July 1997, Ivor Indyk commented that John Kinsella's work had generated an energy that "few poets have been able to achieve from this country, a vast network of poetic contacts on an international scale." This could be seen as merely an achievement of entrepreneurship on Kinsella's part, an ingenious promoting strategy. But it is something more. In the mid-1990s, just as communications between Australia and the world were vastly accelerated by the Internet, the Australian literary establishment's international cultural relations were particularly staid and conservative. There seemed no awareness of what Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht has called "materialities of communication" had changed the very premise of what world literature was. I remember reading the now-defunct, Rupert Murdoch -financed *Australian's Review of Books* in that period and encountering review after review of American or British novels. These novels were reviewed, five months later after their publication date in the metropolises, in the same fashion as they had been previously reviewed in prominent American and British periodicals. There was no sense of an Australian difference, an Australian inflection, or, alternatively, a non-nationally inflected response able to register worldwide literary developments instantaneously, instead of, in metaphorical terms, waiting for the latest shipment of British or American books to round, respectively, the Cape or the Horn. This sense of gravid, ponderous gentility lay like a pall over the entire cultural transaction between the US or Britain and Australia. Kinsella brought Australia-international literary relations into the Information Age when, for most Australian writers, they were barely in the Jet Age. Kinsella achieved a rhizomatic, networked set of interconnections with people worldwide who had an appetite for literary discourse. He showed how communication among those interests in literature in the twenty-first century might be possible.

Kinsella, though, does not just celebrate the "winners" of globalization. This can be seen in one of his most recent *Graphology* poems, written in the spring of 2006 in response to the plagiarism scandal involving Kaavya Viswanathan, a young American writer of Indian descent who admitted to plagiarizing passages from another book.

Graphology 590: Peak

Language having reached peak, the slide  
into plagiarism, blackmarketeering of syntax,  
electrolysis of grammar, inevitable. Became,  
lifted like cascade, warbled in magpie tune-ups;  
to flex shades, shadows, pleasures, comforts,  
shopping reflex; caravaners fringing countries;  
sourcing alternative energies, green as ground-down,  
pillaging three mine policies and upper antes dug over,  
extrapolated, wood-chipped,  
wearing overalls and safety goggles: I found  
the pair we lost cutting wild oats before summer,  
clear as a bell on a rocky outcrop, mini-  
breakaway, the maker or publisher  
guarding reputation, owning orders,  
licenses to drill-core, Google, Wikipedia,  
edit as you go purchase-power,

reading habits, ingénues,  
loan-sharking.

The sarcasm about contemporary hype, the reserve distance from postmodern-euphonic assertions of language having reached its 'peak' as would the stock market, are bound up with the exploitation of the landscape in a provocative way; contemporary hype is exploiting language the same way we have long exploited the landscape. The finding of the goggles on a rocky landscape signifies the poet's perception, his ability to stand out against the hype and the ravage; but this consciousness knows (viz. the goggle/Google pun) that it is not totally separable from the hype, that it is also an epigenous product, even as it calls out for moral clarity to burst the bubble of the feverish information society. It is not the individual act of plagiarism that is the problem, Kinsella suggests, but the way reading has become a fiscal transaction, and the publishing of well-received books a form of loan-sharking. The poet is at once in the fray, no the sidelines, and 'above it all' in a way that captures the complexities of the writer's negotiation with a cultural milieu that, whatever its complexities, the reader is supposed to find. *prima facie*. rebarbative.

What astonishes about Kinsella is that this vast, dilating rhizome, this meme of global poeticizing, coexists with an intense dedication to craftsmanship on the level of the individual poem. One does not know whether to admire Kinsella more as the author of poems in the traditional sense, or, to use redeploy as concept of Kinsella's compatriot Les Murray, a "poeme". In the 1990s, it was popular to speak of Kinsella's poetry as inhabiting two modes, the 'dark pastoral' or 'ruined pastoral' of volumes like *The Hunt* and *The Silo* and the more experimental, language poetry.-influenced mode of *Syzygy*. This influential scheme seems less adequate to describe Kinsella's poetry in the 2000s. Kinsella himself says the *Graphology* series, "encapsulates many of the concerns of *The Hunt* and *The Silo*, in the same way that *Syzygy* does. It is landscape poetry as well as wordscape or linguistic poetry." The *Graphology* series represents, not the synthesis between Kinsella's alleged two modes, but the rupture of any sort of solid membrane separating them.

Rob Wilson is generally insightful when he describes Kinsella's pastoral mode as one in which "the land remains rooted in a harsh Western Australian landscape of denuding and dispossessing. But "rooted" is slightly too "organic" and insufficiently "ecological" or "ecopolitical" for Kinsella's vision. "Rooted" also implies a secure, dialectical relationship with the past both of the land and writing about the land, which Kinsella's preoccupation with overlays and reshuffling precludes. Kinsella wants his reader to be conscious of pastoral precedent. But it is a mistake to say that the landscape poems inhere in the pastoral as a genre, or that they can be used to secure, as a kind of final, bitter redoubt, the continuity of the European pastoral tradition. First of all, Kinsella, as he has said numerous times, is too aware of the dispossession of Australia's indigenous people and the consequent moral queasiness that must surround any celebration of place in the traditional pastoral mode.

On a more abstract level, Kinsella though fascinated with the constraints of genre and the historicity of the practices of genre, does not treat genre as a container that will constrain the radicalism of his verse within genteel, conservative givens, will keep his vision, as it were, safely between the covers of the *Norton Anthology*. As unblinkered and harsh as Kinsella's views of life on the land is, his practice of landscape poetry entails an optimism that the terms for writing about landscape have not all been set by Europeans of the past, that it is possible to innovate without a crabbed, elitist inhibition that proceeds from the establishment of an immutable bar of past generic precedent.

The inadequacy of the pastoral/experimental distinction with respect to Kinsella's poetry became even more apparent once Kinsella began practicing his "international regionalism" in Ohio and Cambridgeshire and Western Australia. The precise notation of the geography is important here; unlike other postcolonial writers, Kinsella did not migrate to the metropolis, but to enclaves that were neither capital nor heartland, enclaves which he networked in his existing unfolding poetic practice. Kenyon College and Cambridge University are academic institutions of tremendous prestige. But the reader of Kinsella's poems about their surrounding regions did not get the intellectual aspect of these places as much as the 'place' aspect of them. When I visited Cambridge for the first time in twenty-six years in the summer of 2005, the response occasioned by the landscape, with its distinctive fenland aura, occasioned was not derived from anything

written by the six centuries' work of distinguished English poets who had been associated with the university (including Jeremy Prynne, much admired by Kinsella), but by Kinsella's poetry of the region's green effluences and brackish backwater, with its great empathy and interest in the 'ordinary people' of the region. I had not just visited the University of Cambridge, but Cambridgeshire, and this was attributable to a globally mobile West Australian. The greatest tribute Kinsella has offered, in a sense, to his 'home' region is to splay his reaction to it in his depiction of counterpart regions which are at once distinct from the original, yet exists in a relationship of transposability with respect to it.

As Kinsella has said, the *Graphology* series is also "a work in which the landscapes of South-West Australia merge, interact, and work against the landscapes of England, particularly the fens...This is something that links strongly with my belief in what I call 'international regionalism' - a respect for regional integrity but in an environment of global communication." It is important that Kinsella lived in England *before* he came to the US. So many Australians come to the US and either hunker down on one of the coasts or try for a too-easy apprehension of the pith of the American heartland. By refining his practice of international regionalism in a country larger (in population, not size, the former by far allotting heft in postmodernity's socioeconomic environment) than Australia but smaller than the US, Kinsella readied himself to depict the human landscape of the US in a way that enabled him to keep his perceptual independence from the American maw. Kinsella, for instance, recognizes that there are 'enclaves of liberty, equality, and fraternity' (e-mail to the author, 7 May 2006) even in areas of the US thought to be conservative and intolerant; this is an insight possible for someone who has not only lived for an extended time in section of the US other than the two coasts, but whose palimpsestic sense of place is so sophisticated and responsive that it can recognize aspects that other people's blinkered prejudices would lead them to ignore.

A similar case, going the other way, might be the early T. S. Eliot, whose use of the fragments of the classical and European pasts in "The Waste Land" might have been far less ramified, far more indiscriminate if he had reached to the European past directly from St. Louis or Boston rather than through the scrim of England. This is not privileging the metropole over the margins. Rather, it is suggesting that a too-marginal rendition of the metropole will only accede to the metropole's myths. Conversely, the critical perch that Kinsella and at least the early Eliot secured in metropolitan society helped them probe its fissures all the more. In Kinsella's 2005 poem *America*, which features much overt political commentary on the US, is, as Kinsella has commented, part of the *Graphology* series in spirit, deriving its displaced observation

asked what country you live in,  
the foreigner can't say: stuck on the vagaries  
of a supposedly homogeneous Knox county  
alone, which it's not, the rumble and rip  
of pickups after 6 am down East High Street  
in an All-American town... (*America* 19)

Here it is—Australian Ohio!

Yet Kinsella resists an easy postmodern specificity. Often, postmodern renditions of place are seeing in a light of a synthetic revolution, a *discordia concors* between Romantic adhesiveness to place and modernist skepticism of place. This is a particularly important point to make in light of the young age at which Kinsella attained global recognition. Often when a young poet bursts upon the scene, she or he is seen as a reconciler. Yet, if Kinsella is a reconciler of traditions, it is not in the overly neat, pat way that is so often used by literary historians as a way to 'conclude' literary history. This logic applies to the place of the *Graphology* series *s within* Kinsella's oeuvre as well, which unsettles any *discordia concors* between landscape and experimentation.

Kinsella, in other words, does not show a pleasing reflection to our own time; he does not reassure us that everything is all right, and this disruptiveness also operates on the formal level, especially in his capacity for abstraction. Whereas other contemporary experimental poets use linguistic polysemy to celebrate plenitude, Kinsella, even as he delights in detail, also cuts away from it. In this way, he is less like someone *born* in 1963 than writers and artists who were *practicing* circa 1963—writers like Beckett, Borges, Sarraute, and Nabokov; painters like Yves Klein

or Lucio Fontana; composers like John Cage, Pierre Boulez, and Edgard Varese; choreographers like Merce Cunningham. All of these combined subversion of conventional modes with a strong element of abstraction, of nonreferentiality. Two names of this era particularly salient as forebears of Kinsella are W. H. Auden and Hugh MacDiarmid. Auden's Horatian ease may seem a far cry from MacDiarmid's cerebral boisterousness, but Kinsella, perhaps in the deepest sense of the Australian term "Anglo-Celtic" brings them together. MacDiarmid, after all, had his colloquial moments, especially in his language, and Auden has poems which in their impurity of diction could as well be "language poems". Kinsella's casualness, the way he is a poet of the moment, capable of rapid response to shifting situations, has some of the facility of Auden in this regard. The Auden influence also explains why Kinsella can function as a public, even a political poet and yet retain a street-level voice that does not degenerate into propaganda.

Of all the major forms of creative art, literature's reaction to the experimentalism of the past hundred years has been the most conservative. It has been difficult for literature to capture pure avant-garde of music or art; there is no literary equivalent of Cage or Mondrian. This is partially formal, attributable to long-established cultural predispositions to the denotative semiotic of language; partially due to the happenstance that markets and funding mechanisms have been for abstraction in art and even music the way they have not been in literature; this is particularly true in Australian literature whose global reception has been more commercial, less experimental and artistic, than most world literatures.

Kinsella has said that "*Graphology* is about the process of writing itself, as well as the language of observation." This process is never able to be finalized, which is why the selection of *Graphology* poems in this book is necessarily incomplete. Like a Mallarméan "unwritten book," any selection, even the most comprehensive and authoritative, of the *Graphology* poems would be necessarily incomplete, because the Platonic concept of the *Graphology* series is inherently unable to be determinately instanced in defined form. (There *are* individual sequences, such as the Faith or Icon sequences, within the series that *do* have defined beginnings and ends, but those are kept deliberately manageable in size). It is like a mathematical series, verging asymptotically into the ether (where one sees Mallarmé's Australian correspondent and peer, Christopher Brennan, admiring Kinsella's work as he scrutinizes the empyrean "towards the source"), never able or willing to be resolved into cardinal form. The numbers missing in this selection, the way the sequence goes from 87 to 100 to 107 to 112, the sudden leap from 119 to 265, are a secondary product of a selection made on aesthetic grounds; but the numerological pattern they constitute, not one with any mathematical sense but which is intended to teasingly prompt the reader to canvass for any possible mathematical sense, figures the unbreakable code of the numerical iteration of a possible series whose full Platonic original can never be sounded or enumerated. Again, Kinsella's idea of the series is reminiscent of series of numbered paintings by abstract painters. With such, we are *not* so much concerned with how and if the series will end, or even with a sense of progress or development through a series, as we are with the total effect of a set of instances that we know will never add up neatly. There is a sense of a background generativity that produces endless possibilities, not limited by the exemplification in the 'actual'. Amid all the proliferation of the *Graphology* series, there are still interstices kept in reserve. Kinsella has the courage, and the prudence, to keep his unwritten book unwritten. He does not try to leverage the unwritten book into a more incarnate form, one more determinate and marketable.

Syllable count is important for Kinsella, and within the poems themselves the number of syllables often fall into patterns—such as all being of prime numbers—that present another mathematical/notational systems that both mimics and counterpoints the main spiral. Prime numbers, Fibonacci sequences, and simply sequences that are aesthetically or conceptually interesting all help structure the *Graphology* series internally and externally, giving it a far more rigorous and even, in its own exuberant way, ordered quality than would seem apparent at first.

Graphology 5, an early example of the series, both sets out a credo and puts that credo in question:

B-text they uttered in the stalls  
as if authority need not be intoned,  
as divinity falls by the wayside  
and the poet becomes a demi-devil

in the restoration of Valdes and Cornelius  
who had long back lost their Narcissism,  
despite appearances;

the Scholars and Wagner

chewing the fat, refusing to conjure  
textus as godspell,  
authenticating through vademecum,  
inscribing endpapers with likely  
outcomes while Caius drank deeply  
milk straight from the breast  
the medical text as in raising  
Mephostophilis Faustus is incredulous  
that Meph misses the green fields  
of heaven, the world endlessly  
revolving with wealth and expanse;  
on the membrane indenture  
knifed severally as authentic,  
a hooded bird recalls flying  
into a plate glass window,  
confronting English glass  
in a Danish frame,  
Zounds, boy in your face  
gurgles Robin, the clown, Zounds  
architecture whose quiddity  
is the integrity of the sails  
on Sydney harbour, O splendid  
Opera House, in which the parallels  
of Said might be drawn at an honorary dinner,  
but probably won't, while in Melbourne  
they'll have none of it, protecting best  
what the centre cannot hold,  
pathetic remnant of empire

Marlowe's sense of an unstable cosmos no longer at ease in fixed mediaeval cosmologies is troped by the international/local hybrid of the Sydney Opera House, designed by a Danish modernist and becoming an Australian postmodern icon. The "parallels of Said" line is intriguing; the reference is to the late Edward Said's theory of Orientalism, but does this mean the Sydney Opera House is a kind of "Australianism," a fetish of an Australian identity to be consumed by the metropole. Or is the Opera House itself a kind of Saidian critique of fetishized identity, in which words like "integrity" and "quiddity" are not used ironically but in a way unharnessed from the conventional referents they might have in a more fixed cosmology?

This mixture of argumentation and speculation is a response the *Graphology* series seem to elicit, and their usual mode is in this manner: rhetorical, intellectual, full of references, obliquely possession a characteristic versification (the lines go no shorter than five beats, no longer than thirteen, and there seems a kind of anapestic template behind the flow of the words, e.g. "Of SAID might be DRAWN at an HON-o-ra-ry DIN-ner," where the stress seems to be deferred to the latest syllable possible,

Yet all graphology poems are not like this not just in content but even in manner. Graphology 270, the second of the Faith sequence, goes like this:

It warms enough

the day longer  
with curtain-fading  
to drag foliage  
out of formulation

indigo bunting  
entering nesting box

cardinal red  
contrasting

titmouse  
and turkey vulture

depth above ground  
enfolded.

The poem's immediate predecessor, Graphology 269, is a tribute to Robert Creeley, and even in 270 there may be some spillover of the previous poem's pastiche of Creeley's chiselled, colloquial, austere lines. But one can think of no diction less Creeleyesque than 'indigo bunting' or 'cardinal red', phrases which instance a kind of primary, Romantic sensuality the older American poet tended to deny himself. A couplet like "to drag foliage/out of formulation" not only has the characteristic Kinsella's usage of 'foliage' as a rogue element within nature but exhibits a spare contradictoriness: foliage is dragged out of formulation, liberating nature from constituted categories, but that very liberation, as a mode of rhetoric, is also a constituted category. (Graphology 343. "Mandylion", and Graphology 344, "St. George and the Dragon", play the same bracing role with respect to the Icon Sequence). Kinsella's ability to rein in his verbal exuberance is an important element in the Graphology series not only because it varies the pace but because it focuses the reader's attention, much as a stand of trees in an otherwise bare landscape causes us to 'see' more of the tree than in a lush, verdant forests. A. D Hope's line, "From the deserts prophets come," in this respect has a syntactic as well as moral valence with respect to Kinsella's work.

The ascetic Kinsella can also be seen in the beginning of the next poem:

271 anadiplosis

No descriptors of character;  
more than less adjectives

more than a corner, more than home,  
more than propane and cheap

storage, rough paths cut through white ash  
and pines, immaculate

trailers no grim qualifiers  
of hymns, of cigarettes

regaling assemblages; no  
less praise for the nation,

more than is owing on the rig,  
crisp white houses near town,

feature windows and car bodies,  
judgement days linked by prayer.

The "More" at the beginning of several lines is not anadiplosis but anaphora. Anadiplosis (the

repetition of an element at the end of the previous line in the beginning of the next one) is achieved not through words but through the shared aesthetic of the two poems, exemplified affectively in 270 but lexically in 271 with the explicit injunction against “descriptors of character”.

The Faith Sequence (actually the second of two Faith Sequences, the former of which is not included in this selection) as well as the Icon Sequence later on in the series raise the question of spirituality in Kinsella’s poetry. Kinsella is not a Christian believer in an ‘assenting’ way, Kinsella has a deep sensitivity to the Christian tradition as well as to other world religions and to the spirituality of Australia’s indigenous peoples. Yet one would place him, with respect to Christianity in Australian poetry, more in the tradition of Les Murray and Kevin Hart, who are overtly religious (indeed both are Roman Catholics) than to determined secularists like A. D. Hope. Kinsella has not been a churchgoer since the age of 15, when he ceased his previously regular attendance at Anglican services. But he says (e-mail to author of 7 May 2006) “I do ‘believe’ in spirituality and a variable faith - or, maybe, faith as ‘variable’. I believe in the right to believe as one will, or won’t...I think I am a ‘religious’ poet who doesn’t believe in ‘religion’.” In an introduction to an expanded edition of the icon poems, Kinsella says that he is neither a believer or a nonbeliever, or even an agnostic: “I am a respector of the rights of all systems of belief that engender respect for the rights of others to believe what they will.” Religion has, of course, throughout history, been plagued by the abuse of its spiritual strengths for purposes of social control, and religion in poetry has not been exempt by this: witness the use by critics, if not the actual spirituality in either case, of the ‘religious’ phases of Eliot’s and Auden’s careers for purposes, fundamentally, of social control. There is a cultural pressure for the religious poet to urge religion as a *vinculum societatis*, a mode of social coherence and constraint. Kinsella is too libertarian and anarchist for this, but his most important difference from the traditional mode of ‘the religious poet’ in society is his respect for privacy. Kinsella is interested in the privacy of spirituality; honoring that privacy, he can, in the icon poems, celebrate with deep insight a practice of spirituality very different from his own. Kinsella can be searing about the postmodern right’s appropriation of God as a kind of ultimate charismatic political candidate, as he says in this scalding excerpt from “America”:

God is expandable, minaturised  
out on X-box, digitalized and in stereo.  
Or hand-made as solid as a rock, God  
is pro-life, pro-strength, pro-family,  
pro-space and pro-martial arts

Kinsella’s vivid evocation of Russian Orthodox icons in the Icon sequence shows that, though his poems are not religiously affirmative in a narrow sense, they are capable not only of performing the discourse of religious affirmation but of doing so sympathetically. The important point, though, is that, in our era, Kinsella needs to disclaim right-wing political religion, as he does in the excerpt from America quoted above, before the reader can understand what he is doing with the icon sequence. Furthermore, the Icon Sequence, dedicated to the icon painter Alexander Deriev, starts out with Jacob’s Ladders and angels rising to God, but ends with a blue-tongued lizard as a sign of the uncanny and preternatural. Both indicate a religious meaning, but the signs take a different indicative route toward that meaning.

We have discussed how the splaying of the pastoral-experimental dichotomy has given us a Kinsella who seems different in 2006 and from how he was seen he was seen earlier in his career. Another difference is that the Kinsella of the new millennium is a much more political poet. Kinsella has spoken of his “vegan anarchist” politics, and has been active for many years in anti-logging and anti-nuclear protests. But many commentators on him have not seen this aspect, or have restricted it to an environmental awareness and not seen its more generally political connotations. This is particularly true of American commentators for whom Australian political concerns apparently unavoidably end up seeming small beer. Kinsella’s political assertiveness began before September 11, 2001. He wrote a particularly eloquent manifesto concerning the *Tampa* refugees left stranded by the Australian government some days before the terrorist attacks on New York and Washington occurred). But after 9/11, Kinsella has spoken up loudly against

John Howard's participation in the coalition that invaded Iraq and against Howard's refugee and detainee policies. Two points need to be made here. Firstly, though the vast majority of Australian intellectuals share Kinsella's views, and thus he is not particularly courting any animadversions within the literary community by his stance, relatively few Australian poets have devoted as much of their recent work to commenting on the current political situation. (Jennifer Maiden is one who has). That Kinsella is a left-libertarian who is not "committed" in the past normative sense also imparts an aspect of difference to his position. Secondly, what it means for an Australian poet to be political has changed since 9/11, and this change is not just in reaction to current political developments but a consequence of Australia's greater sense of connection with the world. I recall a colleague, a political scientist studying Australia, remark to me in 2004 that, when he had started his graduate work, he had thought Australia was on the periphery; now, after 9/11, the Bali bombings, the Iraq War, and terrorist incidents such as the Lindt chocolate shop incident in December 2014, he sees that, it was now at the center—the 'cultural cringe' and 'the tyranny of distance' finally vanishing, although Kinsella is certainly not entirely sanguine about this.

The *Graphology* poems are also lyrics. In fact, to speak of them as lyrics is possibly to get close to their pivotal aspect, as long as we keep in mind the postulate mooted above with respect to pastoral: that this does not mean the *Graphology* poems necessarily *constrained* by a tradition of Anglophone poetry going back, say, to Wyatt and Surrey. It is unproductive, in analyzing the *Graphology* poems, to concentrate on one poem, or even on a group of lines within a poem, the way we are used to doing with lyric; searching for 'touchstones' may not prove fruitful with respect to Kinsella's work. . But "Graphology 503, Orphic Interiority" raises many recurrent questions Kinsella's poems raise, and thus is worthy of more extended examination.

#### Graphology 503: Orphic Interiority

In conversing with animals, plants, rocks, sand, and the weather,  
 I have catechised the redemptive nature of poems,  
 of the minuscule observatory in the bush  
 of Talbot Reserve, the rolling hills  
 and poison drums arranged  
 friendly-like  
 by the hall, site of the old school.  
 A bird place, where hollowed-limb wandoos  
 make resounding statements  
 against farmland: birds megaphone,  
 taunting real estate developers. How much  
 horizon would be eaten by foliage —  
 the small eye of the telescope  
 peeking out of the black-out '60s white brick,  
 municipal architecture in reservation?

The poem begins with an interpretive romanticism, the poet catechizing nature, seeing tongues in trees. But even this interchange with nature is also a kind of interference, and even though the idea of a minuscule observatory in the bush does not have the automatic sense of the extranatural that the poison drums two lines later do, the reader realizes that the illusion possibly generated of an unmediated or conventionally mediated nature was never really there. The line "friendly-like" is, in its concision and irony, and its visual position, the nodal hinge of the poem. Yet instead of denoting a friendly, 'humanistic' nature it indicates the repellent presence of poison, as a kind of sickening, unavoidable given, in the land, with a presence in the tableau the eye would like to ignore, but mirrored by the short line, "friendly-like" which draws the reader's eye to the word 'poison' directly above it) cannot.

The reader's conventional expectations are shaken when we see the birds, "hollowed-limb wandoos" making "resounding statements *against* farmhand (emphases mine)" Is not farmland agricultural, natural, like birds, do not both have common enemies in industrialism, capitalism,



transnationalism, ‘Empire’ in the ‘Hardt and Negri’ sense? But no farmland is human, it is partitioned, it is a product, if not of the Industrial Revolution, than at least of the Neolithic Revolution, although agribusiness and multinational combines are pushing agriculture further toward the later convulsion. Kinsella does not envision a Hopkins-style “sweet especial rural scene” where nature and human rural dwellings achieve a sort of perceptual coherence; no matter how pastoral the farmland, it is never going to be the element of the wild birds.

This awareness explains why a poet so identified by his readers with ecological and environmental views can write the following poem, here excerpted:

### Graphology 300: Against Nature Writing

Nature writing equals the new racketeering.

Nature writers make good use of plane travel and restaurants serving up nature.

Nature writing equals recognition as gratification.

Nature writers wear tough boots and mark their trail out hiking. They need to get back. They drive cars.

Nature writing equals the house in good order for the property owner. The sub-textual paths past the native garden beds are called ecology.

Nature writers grow at least a little of their own food. Or would if they could.

Nature writing equals the woods sans Macbeth. Possibly sans witches.

Nature writers get as close as they can to the birds, soaking up their natures.

Superficially, we might think nature writers who try to get close to birds are to be congratulated; but (to use the analogy of Edward Said’s work mooted earlier) perhaps that is too much like a Western orientalist claiming they know the ‘real’ India. Nature writing is reviled as touristic, as consumerist, as profiting from the very exploitation it nominally excoriates, as sentimental and as exculpatory of man’s predatory stance toward the ecosystem. Nature-writing and ‘shallow ecologies’ are, for the poet, false comforts, anodynes which serve as a kind of sluicing mechanism for the ecological equivalent of liberal guilt.

The fact that the birds in Graphology 503 taunt real estate developers as well as farmland indicates the alignment of the two. We think the ‘Orphic Interiority’ proclaimed by the title of the poem is going to be that of the poet in alliance with nature. But this interiority is either manifested by the poetic stance in a way never fully incarnated in any discernable object, or inherent, as a thing-in-itself, in the birds, but never able to be transmitted outwards toward the human landscape. And Kinsella reminds us that landscapes are human, that they are the shaping of land.

The real estate developers want to keep the horizon clear, give their customers good views. But if the foliage proliferated freely, the views would not be clear, they would be hindered interfered with, interrupted. ‘Foliage’ is a word deeply embodying nature, yet totally ‘un-pastoral’. How many pastoral poets have used the word foliage’ to depict the omnipresent lyric-poetry figure of leaves? Without looking at concordances, one that occurs Shelley’s “The sapless foliage of the ocean,” in “Ode To The West Wind” and Shelley is hardly a pastoral poet, though a modest Internet search does reveal that a twentieth-century pastoral poet such as Edward Thomas does use the word: The tall forest towers; Its cloudy foliage lowers; Ahead, shelf above shelf.” Foliage is not a “nature-writing” word because of its sense of physical description, of the way that it is without afflatus and almost technical (the Auden-MacDiarmid influence can be traced here as well). The reader plays also with different, non-referential aspects of foliage—what if the word were French and could be divided into *folie* and *age*, what is foliage were a proliferation of folly, a multiplicity of play, a *differend*, in the Lyotardian sense, something unable to be assimilated to the economy, or even the ecology, of the landscape developers or even farmers would dream up.

The speculations about the encroachment of foliage onto the ‘dream’ of the landscape are made by telescope from inside a building, described as architecturally retro-shabby;

the black-out '60s white brick,  
municipal architecture in reservation?

This is just the kind of architecture it is now fashionable to despise, a West Australian miniature version of the Pruitt-Igoe development. And Kinsella means to oppose it to the fecundity of the outside foliage. But the municipal white-brick building, now forty years on the landscape, is now as much a part of the scene as the farm, and by poem's end we realize that the banal architecture has carved out its own character on the land and is "in reservation,"—in other words, is partially exempt from the rationalizing scene, that it has bracketed away its identity. That seemingly the most anti-natural element in the poem ends up being as much as a reserve against categorization as does Orphic interiority can possibly be shows how rampant the intellectual possibilities of this poem are, how tantalizing its multiple vectors.

What is a series? What fits in? When does a series end? How does one define a series? The *Graphology* poems, with their combination of incisiveness and sprawl, iteration and deconstruction, asks: where do we stop? Or can we stop? Kinsella tests this out on things he loves: the towns of the Avon valley that more or less constitute the Wheatbelt he has made his own imaginative territory:

Brookton, Beverley, York,  
Northam, Goomalling, Toodyay  
the six towns of the Avon Valley,  
though some add new Norcia  
as a seventh, out of spiritual  
superstition or promotional  
ploy, which might be  
one and the same thing.

New Norcia was founded by Benedictine monks, named after Nursia where the original benedict was from, so adding this western periphery of the Avon Valley is both a nod to spirituality and a ploy, as Kinsella says, to add a spiritual *baleine* to the valley's itinerary; spirituality is both real and fake, and the idea of something extra in Kinsella's work, the next term in the series which may or may not be determinative, has the potential to thus be both revelatory and extraneous.

In his polemical mode, Kinsella verges on being a satirist, a Juvenalian excoriate of a flaccid consensus; if this were not so, he would not need to tell us, in the introit to *Graphology* 3890, "I am not a misanthrope": one only says something like that if one is suspected of being one. What qualifies Kinsella for any consideration of being a misanthrope is not any sense of grievance or disdain, but his passionate hatred of sham, foolishness, and injustice, Here he seeks to reassure us that this does not mean he has jettisoned, in A Freudian sense, the reality-principle;

I can be wary even suspicious and still love my neighbor

The speaker stresses his pliability, adaptability, and pragmatism. But this willingness to compromise and negotiate does not mean a surrender of principles.

I can adapt but sometimes feel it's best to hold ground —  
not my ground, not yours, barely ours

This statement of extermination of not backing down, is accompanied by a quantification: the speaker stands (his) ground, but there has to be an indivisible minus sign appended to "ground", as the speaker is unwilling to claim that it is his. Nor it is the reader's. Here we come upon

Kinsella's awareness of the indigenous issue, that no white person can call any ground, literal or metaphorical, in Australia their own. The speaker's adamant conviction would love to posit a ground it can stand on, And yet in a way we do have the ground: it may be just barely ours, but it is ours. Is this 'ours' meaning all humanity, whites, aborigines and others? Who is "us"? The poem is entitled 'Finishing' as if to suggest it would like to finish, but cannot to do either rhetorically or substantively. The poem's uncertainty about it is communicated honestly, and that makes the honesty of the ground standing it truly wants to perform seem admirable rather than merely stentorian.

The 3890 series is the apogee of the later graphology poems. They give the definitive treatment of a theme central to Kinsella's entire project but rarely explicitly analyzed: the way he is at once a spokesperson for a landscape he knows intimately but on the other hand is always out to reveal what the landscape lacks, not just in his relation to it but in its relation to Western standards of beauty:

No bells ring metal tunes here,  
though metal tunes ring, and metal  
striking rock is a cataclysm in summers  
of extinction

The fundamental tone here is of acknowledgement that Australia lacks landscape that frequently reaches European ideals of beauty; much the same confession, or inverted boast, as A. D. Hope's calling Australia, in his renowned poem of that name "the last of lands." But whereas Hope looks for a gaunt redoubt to challenge fashionable truths, Kinsella notes that just because, in a recognizable, Eurocentric fashion, Truth is not enacted in the landscape does not mean truths are: bells do not ring metal tunes but metal tunes nonetheless stubbornly ring, propelled by a sort of *autopoiesis*. Even after withdrawal and renunciation, there is still power, still a sort of insensate 'go', a kind of representational *prognosis* a practice that adamantly endures even after theory is abjured or seen as out of reach:

set your clock  
by diminishment: winding down to long days  
still far away, solstice get-away  
to thrill the traveller.

Even after diminishment, there is still thrill. Thrill does not need the crescendo of the sublime; or perhaps the poem conjures a different sort of thrill that does not aspire to this, that is at once more local, more ready-to-hand, and yet more subversive, an element of rogue data not a puzzle-piece in a conventional vista of awe. This is the second of *two* poems called graphology 3893, as if to say no poem can ever occupy not just this position on the numeric continuum but any such integral position; the egoism are atoms jostling for indeterminate space, The "egoistical sublime" of the first 3893 poem is juxtaposed to 'the same and same again of the second;'. The first poem speaks of "historical spreads" and the "glib sentence": the raucous generalities of a false cultural consensus. The second, with its wry epigraph from Thomas Chatterton, "marvelous Boy' and hoaxer, pours out and annihilated the faux sublimity paraded in the first 3893. One wonders why 3893 is the number chosen for this two-facedness; Kinsella's birth year, 1963, ends in 3; or perhaps, like Roberto Bolaño's "2666" it is there to tantalize with either being a future year, mathematical conundrum, or unknown determinate reference. Every time these poems make any authority claims, a proportionate gesture is made by the poet to counter them.

Similarly in "Graphology 3896," the speaker sees a leonine creature, but one that is pointedly not really a lion. This ersatz-lion nonetheless is a palpable presence in land and consciousness:

it wasn't a lion — there are no lions here,  
not even escaped lions: if there were we'd hear,  
and see (terrifying) evidence of

We are never sure whether the creature is really there or 'just' in the poets imagination, but whether substantive or not, it figures an autonomy, a resistance to the poets own verbal imaginings that can also operate as resistance to the culture's far more menacing and depredatory dreams of annexation:

I admire/d its art of concealment: being decisive  
as presence but not picked up  
for exactly what it is was  
the broken dead grass  
and snapped twigs  
its wake  
I couldn't follow,  
or wouldn't.

The poet cannot, or will nor, follow the creature because that would constitute strength and here Kinsella wants as much as a strong writer ever can want to be weak. One of the reasons Kinsella attracted the notice of Harold Bloom is that, for all his postmodern experimentation and sense of randomness and linguistic rupture, Kinsella pretty obviously stands at the end—the bitter end—of romanticism, But his posture with respect tot his predecessors I, if it is Bloomian strength, does so in the guise of weakness; of Bloom's six revisionary rations, Kinsella is most readable under the aegis of the two most undertreated , the fourth and fifth of Bloom's six ratios, *daemonization* and *askesis*. (The first Graphology 3893 speaks of "tool little contraction"). Particularly in relationship to the landscape, as opposed to poets lauded by Bloom just one generation older such as A. R. or Geoffrey Hill, both of whose early poems posit a man against a landscape trying for a last, desperate summoning of powers, Kinsella has from the beginning abdicated that position, abrogated any determinate act of resistance against meaninglessness only to find that resistance is happening anyway, and that it looks to him, if not for leadership in the sense that the voices of Ammons or Hill would contend for such, at the very least for coordinating energy and suasion.

Graphology 3897 makes clear this emphasis on limitation and understatement:

I enjoy forgetting sources.  
It's more than letting go  
or complete disregard,  
which is not the other  
end of the scale.

Conventional postmodernism, with its rhetoric of re-dating the past might enjoy citing sources overtly; Kinsella; does not offer as counterpoint a mere ignorance of the past a Henry Ford-like "history is bunk" attitude, nor does he assume an aesthetic disinterest. Three sources are there have contributed to his work; but he has forgotten them, has not kept them as part of his arsenal to show off or to impress the reader. In an era where intelligence is often equated with sheer extent of knowledge, Kinsella's willingness to be porous is both rare and remarkable.

This book ends with three series off the main spiral of the *Graphology* poems. Kinsella seems to not to have wanted the numbers to get too high, not to go above 5000, although of course many numbers in the main sequence are skipped, whether because he wrote and rejected these poems or just decided to skip the numbers. (There may be a mathematical pattern in the numbers he choses; I cannot discern such, but the impression of patterned randomness does give a sense of some sort of stochastics, or the suggestions of a mathematical pattern even if actually absent). There is a kind of Pythagorean mysticism to all this, also a delight in mathematics as an alternative signifying system to literature, The thought of Alain Badiou has made the intellectual world much more willing to see mathematics as an intellectual field that can help our understanding of cognitive phenomena in the humanities; Kinsella' s delight in numbers

and in their myriad ramifications is infectious, But it is good not all the Graphology poems are in the main-numbered sequence and that the numbers do not go impossibly high. The Graphology Heuristics poems are shorter, stubbier, grainer, like whorled curios compared to the longer more discursive main sequence

Ghosts cannot breathe.

They are gasping.

As we incinerate and smother  
the biosphere they bump  
against smoked glass  
of atmosphere.

Heuristic means to gain insight into, to edify: as if these poems are supplementary directives, putting the political substance of the main sequence in plainer and more direct, but also more austere and disciplined terms. Sometimes they even verge on aphorisms or apothegms as Graphology Heuristics 83: death by identification

Night parrots worked hard not to be found  
by the invasive, the protective and the exploitative.  
'Found', they know for certain they are extinct.

The only way the parrots can evade exploitation is not to be defined. Of course, they are defined in the poem, so to avoid their own extinction they have to avoid the poem. Kinsella's very enunciation struggles against being pinned down, in a sense offering, ohm the page, a rhetorical substitute so the parrots can be home free.

The briefer Forgery series almost seem to go into another direction from the heuristics series, the trope of forgery onto s much being the poet's own self-laceration about his authenticity—although hoaxes have long had an ambiguous interrelationship with an Australian sense of being *unheimlich*—than an indication of the poet's willingness to venture into the sordid prefabrications of neoliberalism:

All this polyphony,  
this stress of leaf & grass,  
this scramble to overtake  
to boost prospects.

Free-market capitalism, in its struggle to “boost prospects” stresses leaf and grass, erodes nature: but the poet is not denouncing artificiality per se but the way an ethics of dishonesty and s self-aggrandizement is allowed to usurp normative experience. The town is now “for pilferers to then insert last boost”; there is no recourse against greed elevated to credo. Kinsella does not mean that politics is futile.

Yet, despite the strong elements of ferocious satire and robust political protest in the *Graphology* series, the servility of the poem expands beyond even discursive assertions in which they passionately believe. Just as landscape is eaten, not adorned, by foliage, so is Kinsella's language refracted by his own self-consuming verbal energies. That he gives up so much, such ground at the core, to language makes us admire even more his staunch sociopolitical engagement. In the inscription to the series, Kinsella remarks that:

Democratizing suggests an excursion  
to East Saint Louis  
across the jealous river

East Saint Louis, on the Illinois side of the Mississippi, is historically 'African-American; Kinsella's 'jealous river' is closer to Langston Hughes than T. S. Eliot's “strong brown god.” In 2014, a year that for people in the US has been dominated by the tragic killings in Ferguson, Missouri, and Staten Island, Kinsella's willingness to engage racial difference in the US, always as

a self-marked outsider, is striking. Yet he will not simply be a poster-boy for political causes: the word 'excursion' suggests tourism, suggests the poet is an inauthentic outsider, suggests that his words alone will not do the trick, however much they ardently and appropriately aspire to do so.

The *Graphology* series converges on a meaning never fully graspable. A complete summation, or even an orderly account, is beyond the horizon; yet its iteration, its performance has been rendered with great bravura and with admirable integrity.