

Launch Speech: John Kinsella, *Graphology Poems*

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David McCooley

Nationally, internationally, and transnationally, John Kinsella is a literary giant. Poet, fiction writer, playwright, librettist, critic, academic, collaborator, editor, publisher, activist; his activities and accomplishments are manifold and multiplex. He is best known as a poet, and his recent collections include *Sack* (2014) and *Drowning in Wheat: Selected Poems* (2016). John's generosity is as extraordinary as his career. John (and Tracy Ryan, his partner) has supported scores of writers in countless material ways. I can't think of anyone who has given as much to poetry as John Kinsella. As co-founder of, and then commissioning editor at, Salt Publishing, he helped shape a whole generation of poets, nationally and internationally.

I am one of the many recipients of John's generosity. In 2003, John invited me to give a lecture at Kenyon College, Ohio, where he was then on faculty. While visiting John and Tracy, John began the process that led to the publication of my first two full-length collections of poems (by Salt), just one of his many acts of support.

During my visit to Kenyon, John and I took a nocturnal walk in the college grounds. It was a mild, but misty evening, and the landscape had an uncanny feeling to it; half wilderness, half movie set. The invasion of Iraq by the 'coalition of the willing' had only just happened, and John and I talked politics, poetry, family, everything. It's impossible now not to think of that experience as quintessentially Kinsella-esque: mobile, dialogic, engaged, and singular. So, with that memory in mind, let me introduce John's extraordinary *Graphology Poems*.

Graphology is the study of handwriting, especially as a tool to analyse character, attribute authorship, or determine an author's state of mind. It is a pseudoscience, not to be confused with graphanalysis, a branch of forensic document analysis. Graphology is a

beautifully ambiguous master trope for John's sequence of poems, collected now as a three-volume work.

'Graphology' puts in train any number of Kinsella-esque concerns: identity, authenticity, memory, place, representation, power, and textuality itself. Facsimiles of handwriting, doodles, and even scribble, can be found in these pages, but even more notable, more 'telling', are the poetic images of the vast material history of writing found here. The book is replete with typewriters, pens, paper, computers, dictionaries, IOUs, visitors' books, prize books, errata, bibliographies, notaries, documents in triplicate, surveys and reports, printer's sheets, proofs, 'mirror writing', and—of course—lines of poetry, sequences of words.

Sometimes these words are literal place names: 'Brookton, Beverley, York, / Northam, Goomalling, Toodyay / the six towns of Avon Valley'. Sometimes they evoke stasis or movement; sometimes they are powerful denunciations of modernity. Sometimes they are evocative lists, such as the family history in 'Graphology 9':

a ballerina, an opera singer,
a poorly paid landscape artist,
a military man who was lost in India,
a number of petty bureaucrats,
a cigar manufacturer,
a preacher from a dissenting church,
a swag of colonists and teachers,
a suicide, a seamstress,
and a piano teacher.

Sometimes they form a poem that is wholly singular in John's vast oeuvre, such as Graphology 3834, which I quote in full:

I've decided to become fantastical.
I've decided to give up on the facts,

the points of repair, the markers
on horizons. *All* swirls, digresses.
I will call back the dragons.
The facts will be reinstated;
then, and only then.

It goes without saying that this project to bring together twenty years of poems on place and identity is a vast undertaking, and one heroically realised by Five Islands Press. But what is perhaps most extraordinary about this work is the equal relationship between the whole and its parts. As the American scholar Nicholas Birns writes in his long essay on *Graphology Poems*, ‘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.’

This is worth thinking about for a moment longer. In popular mythology, John’s politics sometimes gets more attention than his poetics. Of course one cannot separate the two. But it can be worthwhile doing so briefly if only for heuristic reasons (to evoke a late section of the *Graphology Poems*). The volume and intensity of John’s poetry, its sense of immediacy and speed, should not stop us from giving these poems the careful readings they deserve. The inventiveness and playfulness of John’s poems, on full display here, are central to his poetics. (In this respect he reminds me of Les Murray, however different the two poets might be politically.) There are puns and wordplay of all kinds here; extended metaphors; rhyme, half-rhyme, and assonance; rhetorical figures such as anaphora, personification, and chiasmus; refrains; the strategic confusion of poetic and non-poetic registers; jokes; an attention to prosody (often, as Birns points out, through syllabic patterning); and an encyclopedic referentiality. In other words, however political John’s poems may be, and they are political, they are always utterly poetic, engaged in the *techne* and history of poetry.

Graphology Poems are capacious in their postmodern referentiality. The poems take in Andy Warhol, racist graffiti in a Kelmscott bus stop, Middle English, *Middlemarch*, the Dead Sea Scrolls, Thomas Lovell Beddoes, an AC/DC cover band, and so on. But this isn't 'merely', should one want to use that modifier, postmodern plenitude, or specificity, or irony, or whatever. The specific details of the *Graphology Poems* unite subjective and material places, in particular South Western Australia, Ohio, and Cambridge. As anyone with even a passing acquaintance with John's poetry will know, places—usually landscapes—are the points at which the human and the non-human collide. Sometimes they do so benignly and creatively, as John's poems so marvellously embody, but often the collision is destructive, a source of elegy, polemic, or satire. But John's poetry, however harsh it can be, is never free of optimism, as his entire project suggests. At its most fundamental level, John's poetry is not only a poetry of critique, but also one of optimism, a poetry that sees no discontinuity between poetic and political activism.

It is perhaps appropriate that neither John nor I are locals here tonight. We have both crossed some space to share this 'common ground' tonight. (John much more than me, of course.) It is appropriate in part because, with respect to the esteemed space of Readings, this common ground is never entirely 'ours', but rather ground appropriated from its Indigenous caretakers. John's graphology is always a system aware of its own out-of-placeness, even as it makes a home with words. But it is also appropriate that we, all of us, meet here in this space tonight, because we materialise the way in which *Graphology Poems* produces a shared virtual space for the writer and his readers to engage in that beautiful pseudoscience called poetry.

Graphology Poems is a major publishing event. In what is surely John's magnum opus, we find the dragons and the facts miraculously together on common ground. What a gift John and Five Islands Press have given us.