The Mythmaking Self (or the Myth Making Self):
Fiction and Experience in Galway Kinnell's
The Book of Nightmares

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English Honors Thesis
April 24, 1992
Running from death
throwing his teeth at the ghost
dipping into his belly, staving off death with a throw
tearing his brains out, throwing them at Death
death-baby is being born
scythe clock and banner come
trumpet of bone and drum made of something --
the callous-handed goddess
her kiss is resurrection

-- Muriel Rukeyser, "Breaking Open"

Who goes there! hankering, gross, mystical, nude?

-- Walt Whitman, "Song of Myself"
The Book of Nightmares\textsuperscript{1} is a myth of questioning and renewal, with the self as its subject and the world as its text. The problem, however, is that these two are fundamentally at odds. Kinnell's ideals are fixed on the assertion of the self, as artistic authority and mythic wholeness, but the reality of the present produces a range of conflicts and ambiguities which problematize this striving. The poet fixes himself at the center of a process of mythopoesis, using the notion of myth to give form and meaning to experience. Thus it becomes a demiurgic endeavor -- he is a creator, a mythmaker who seeks to reconcile the ambiguities of contemporary experience with a restorative mythic consciousness. It is grounded in a movement toward eventual wholeness, though the strategies the poet employs engage the destructive as well. One of his tasks involves the balancing of equally vital urges, the mythification and demythification of his selfhood; he works to engender a kind of holistic consciousness by exploring the potential universality of the self, but this also involves stripping away layers of identity, egoic veils which render the self incapable of apprehending experience coherently. The poem itself embodies a site where myth and experience, self and world commingle and depend on each other for persuasiveness. The interaction of these crucial dynamics -- the construction of the poet's selfhood and his development of the mythic consciousness which informs this construct -- constitutes the focus of my analysis. And the mediation of a transformed self and world, in whatever problematized form it finally assumes, represents the central project of The Book of Nightmares.

Kinnell is vitally concerned with the relationship between myth and poetry. The nature of their being is implicitly entangled, he suggests in one interview, as it is "the dream of every poem to be a myth."\textsuperscript{2} The basic
function of myth is to harmonize the relation between humanity and the mysterious cosmos, to bring the unknown closer to the realm of human understanding. Poetry, too, strives toward an apprehension and ordering of the inexplicable. This similitude is understandable -- the two share as their source an imaginative response to the world. The human need for understanding and order gives rise to the play of imagination that generates both poetry and myth.

For Kinnell, poetry becomes an imaginative act of human expression that seeks to reveal some sense of the mystery in experience, whether it emerges from the nonhuman or the deeply human:

The nonhuman is the basic context of human existence. . . When in the presence of wind, or the night sky, or the sea, or less spectacular instances of the nonhuman -- including its revelation through the human -- we are reminded of both the kinship and the separation between ourselves and what is beyond us. If there is one moment from which poetry springs, I would say it's this one.³

If one is to write from deep sources within himself, if he is to bring into his poetry his spiritual life, his poetry has to be an inner revolution, a means of changing himself inwardly.⁴

The sacredness found in the inherent spirituality of the self echoes the mysteriousness of the nonhuman, creating a kind of kinship between them because they both transcend the mind's rationality. It is in those moments in which the human mind confronts evidence of something beyond it that the imagination's efforts at comprehension produce poetry. Poetry becomes an attempt to give order to what lies outside the human or rational realm and which, therefore, cannot be absolutely articulated. However, Kinnell perceives that even in its mystery the nonhuman can to
some extent be grasped by poetry -- it has the capacity to bring a sense of
the mystery or sacredness of the nonhuman to everyday life. In the
mundanity of daily life we lose track of the sacredness of the cosmos, we
distance ourselves from an awareness of "the basic context of human
existence." By reminding us of "the kinship and the separation," the
moments in which we glimpse reflections of the nonhuman alter our
perceptions of daily experience, bestowing new ways of seeing or
understanding our lives. This, it seems to me, is the significance that
poetry ultimately hopes to claim.

Myth shares this poetic function: it serves to "preserve the sense of
the sacred life," to create a narrative that evokes the mystery of the
nonhuman. The "sacred life" encompasses that which is beyond the human
realm as well as the spiritual life that Kinnell imagines deep within the
self, manifest as the mysterious subconscious, the primordial source of
vitality and instinct lost among the pre-history of humankind, something
greater than the flesh which sustains a contact with the numinous urge.

The modern understanding of myth has received such extensive
elaboration in criticism over the last fifty years that it is difficult to fix
upon an absolute and unproblematic interpretation. The specific meaning
of 'myth' is not easily defined, given the proliferation of contexts in which
it may be found, the lack of correlation between reference frames, and the
variables on which these depend -- for example, one might choose to
define a particular myth in terms of its historical function, or consider
its form apart from history, or focus on the nature of the mythic rather
than a particular myth -- but uses of the term range across a broad
spectrum, from primitive narratives attempting to apprehend the chaos of
the universe to linguistic systems of open and infinite meaning. Of
the universe to linguistic systems of open and infinite meaning. Of course, the haziness that surrounds it is absolutely necessary for myth to exist as it does, and enables its appropriation for use within innumerable literary contexts. It is this, in fact -- myth's essential instability -- which provides a point of concurrence for the disparate applications of myth as a critical concept.

The indefiniteness in the nature of myth precludes its precise embodiment in language; it cannot be held fully within the utterable, within the realm of words. There is a veiled significance implied by the fact that the myth stands for something else, that the other original truth cannot be fully grasped through the interpretive capacity of a sign that refracts its meaning. In *Mythical Intentions in Modern Literature*, Eric Gould elaborates on the idea of a gap between myth and the phenomenon that it redefines:

Myths apparently derive their universal significance from the way in which they try to reconstitute an original event or explain some fact about human nature and its worldly or cosmic context. But in doing so, they necessarily refer to some essential meaning which is absent until it appears as a function of interpretation. If there is one persistent belief in this study, it is that there can be no myth without an *ontological gap between event and meaning*. A myth intends to be an adequate symbolic representation by closing that gap, by aiming to be a tautology. The absent origin, the arbitrary meaning of our place in the world, determines the mythic.⁶

He continues to develop the idea when he writes that the meaning of myth "is perpetually open and universal only because once the absence of a final meaning is recognized, the gap itself demands interpretation." William Righter, in *Myth and Literature*, holds that myth cannot be confined by
and uncertain in the nature of its ultimate claims," what remains is "a series of forms, like the objects in a museum, a testimony to inner needs, a language to whose existence we may point, but which in an inner sense we can never read." It is the unsayable resonance of the mythic that Kinnell seeks to generate in his poetry. He tries to manifest some sense of the sacredness that is inherent in myth, to invest his experience with its qualities and make that experience universal through poetry. But this effort is problematized by the gap between event and meaning that Gould points out, which seems to me to be what Kinnell confronts and tries to overcome within *The Book of Nightmares*.

Roland Barthes' object in *Mythologies* is to decipher the contemporary incarnations and contexts for myth. The central principle of this work, that myth is above all a mode of communication ("myth is a type of speech," "a system of communication," "a message," "a mode of signification, a form"), is particularly relevant to my own intentions in reading *The Book of Nightmares* as a mythic work. Kinnell's statement that it is "the dream of every poem to be a myth" is ambiguous, and perhaps a little too neat, but when in a later interview (conducted the same year *The Book of Nightmares* was published) he clarifies its meaning and calls the poem a "paradigm of what the human being wants to say to the cosmos," his intent becomes clearer. *The Book of Nightmares* is fundamentally an expression of existence, an echo of Rilke's voice in "The Ninth Elegy" -- on the one hand a statement of experience to the living, to any reader (most immediately his children):

For when the traveler returns from the mountain slopes into the valley,
he brings, not a handful of earth, unsayable to others, but
instead
some word he has gained, some pure word, the yellow and
blue gentian,\textsuperscript{10}

and on the other a sort of cosmic testament, the voice of an individual
extending into the universe:

Praise this world to the angel, not the unsayable one,
you can't impress \textit{him} with glorious emotion. . .
So show him
something simple which, formed over generations,
lives as our own, near our hand and within our gaze.
Tell him of Things. He will stand astonished.\textsuperscript{11}

Within these two dimensions we find the dream of the poem to become a
myth, for in struggling with essential truths and trying to articulate the
pure forms of their meaning, the poet is moving toward a recognition of
the numinous in mortal experience and directing his voice toward its
expression.

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The construction of Kinnell's poetic myth begins with his awareness,
as a poet in search of a more instinctive, non-human 'reality' than that
known through rational and all-too-human experience, of the gap between
self and world. In an effort to close this gap the poet discards a notion of
linear time that would insist on a continual progression away from a
mythic or primal state of being. He instead imbues the poem with a
circular framework conceived as a cycle of birth, death, and rebirth whose
ephemerality allows for a transfigured return to a mythic condition. It
emphasizes as well the fact of life's transience, a fact which attains such
critical focus in the poem. The structure of the poem manifests a
progression inward, toward the core of the self, through birth and death
and back outward again in a fragile approximation of rebirth. Ultimately,
Kinnell's imagination moves toward the creation of a mythic actuality which resonates through, and is sustained by, the movement back into primality to establish an elemental wholeness.

The mediation of self and world is figured in a variety of seeming dichotomies -- human and nonhuman, conscious and unconscious, interior and exterior reality, flesh and spirit, mundane and sacred, earth and water, civilization and nature. To a certain extent they divide along the same lines. But then, these lines become blurred in the unfolding of the poem, meaning dissipates in their juxtaposition, and precise correspondence gets lost in ambiguity. Conceived as a system of related signs, however, all these dialectics are crucial to the development of the poem. They represent incarnations of elemental struggle which, first, inform the foundations of all myths, and second, are essential to the poet's idea of selfhood. In appealing to these dialectics and establishing a context for his mythmaking, Kinnell does not adhere to the simple distinctions that fix their duality, but rather evokes a sense of divided unity to ground the ambiguity of their confrontation. In fact, it is the interaction and confusion between them that he relies on much more than their division.

The universal dialectics are inherent in the origins of myth. The truth that underlies any mythic treatment of experience is that the world divides itself into what can and cannot be understood. That which is mysterious in the workings of the cosmos, nature, abstractions, even the nature of the human mind, become spiritual, sacred, revered, and because
they are beyond comprehension, nonhuman. The things of the natural world, the facts of everyday existence that are familiar and understandable, these become the realities by whose certainty humankind exists. From this dichotomous foundation, everything separates itself. Myth embodies an effort to unite the two realms by articulating the incomprehensible in a narrative of familiarity, in terms that are accessible to the strivings of the mind.

The presentation of the poet's identity is embedded in various elaborations of these ontological dichotomies. The division of self and world has as its source "the closed ego of modern man, . . . that ego which separates us from the life of the planet, . . . which thwarts our deepest desire, which is to be one with all creation." Kinnell conceives of a great rift that has accompanied the evolution of humankind, an elemental loss of wholeness produced by humanity's movement away from the sacred life. A passage from the first poem of the book, "Under the Maud Moon," establishes the poet's feeling of disunity which impels the motion of the whole poem:

The raindrops trying
to put the fire out
fall into it and are
changed: the oath broken,
the oath sworn between earth and water, flesh and spirit, broken,
to be sworn again,
over and over, in the clouds, and to be broken again,
over and over, on earth. (4)

The speaker's revelation of broken harmony emerges from two visions, the second re-imagining the first, which reflects back on the truth of the revelation. The poem begins with a wanderer, Kinnell, stopping on a wet
path to build a fire in remembrance of a broken embrace, for a woman "whose face / I held in my hands / a few hours, whom I gave back / only to keep holding the space where she was" (3). Within the fire he sees deathwatch beetles dying, "the dead, crossed limbs / longing again for the universe," hears "in the wet wood the snap / and re-snap of the same embrace being torn." This torn embrace echoes the remembered one; in both, the gesture becomes symbolic of the oath continually sworn and broken, and vitalizes the poet's revelation. His arms are the deathwatches', transformed in a fire that simultaneously enacts an elemental change on the raindrops falling into it, which in turn enhance the imagery of the broken oath. The interweaving of this process -- reminiscence feeding metaphor feeding revelation -- characterizes the development of Kinnell's identity throughout the poem.

There is a strange mingling of meaning in the relation between self and world. On the one hand they are severed from each other, dialectical. The self at first seems too human, and the world too nonhuman, for the two to ever achieve oneness. Their essential discord is emphasized by the emptiness and obscurity that experience holds for the individual. The efforts of the self to incorporate the entirety of experience make clear the immensity of the world and the limited nature of the individual ego, and thus their incompatibility. On the other hand, self and world maintain a kind of symbiosis throughout the poem. Kinnell's self is expressive of the poetic world. His gestures interact with the world, shaping and responding to the forms experience takes. Each has the capacity to undergo transfiguration, which is often figured simultaneously. The poet's sensory perceptions link him to the world and, through the world, to imaginative revelation. Further, self and world are each fragmented
internally, and throughout the poem act as signifying mirrors of each other, in that sense almost becoming one. Just as the elemental unity of the cosmos has dissipated, so too has the poet's self become broken, fragmented -- "earth and water, flesh and spirit" (4) -- the immediate juxtaposition of these two dialectics suggests the implication of self and world.

This correspondence serves as a constituting element in the expression of the mythic. The poem records Kinnell's efforts to connect himself to everything that surrounds him, to the physical world as well as the creatures it holds. In striving to bring self and world together, to construct in experience a wholeness, he confers on the poem the intent of myth. As he sits by the fire, he speaks "a few words into its warmth -- / stone saint smooth stone " (4). These words, invoking the physical and the mystical, become a verbal pact between poet and world, a tentative gesture, the first timbers of the bridge. Kinnell wants to emphasize a sense of kinship; and so he addresses the fire, as though in speaking directly to a natural thing he can befriend it or create in it an understanding of their interconnectedness.

With these words the poet experiences a brief moment of vision -- he sees a black bear sitting alone, "Somewhere out ahead of me" in both time and space. This is his first encounter with the creature that later in the poem will come to represent one of his totem-animals, his son Fergus, and a form of complete transfiguration. For the present, however, he drops back to his body's own limited awareness as

The singed grease streams
out of the words, the one
held note
remains -- a love-note
-twisting under my tongue, like the coyote's bark,
curving off, into a
howl. (4)

The song into which Kinnell's words merge changes his voice into
something nonhuman, into a declaration of self that belongs to an animal
rather than a human being. With the birth of his daughter Maud, who "puts
/ her hand / into her father's mouth, to take hold of / his song" (5), the
poet senses a particular kind of unity between mortal things, a similar
fascination with song, or self-declaration, and its potential. Maud
"screams / her first song" (6) at first breath, as though voice heralds life,
or acts as a bridge between the womb and the birth, and her movements --
"the slow, / beating, featherless arms / already clutching at the
emptiness" (7) -- echo back to the deathwatch's "dead, crossed limbs /
longing again for the universe" as well as forward to the flightless wings
of the hen in the second poem.

The great weight placed on the pervasiveness and power of song in
the poem emphasizes its importance to Kinnell's undertaking. It is a mode
of expression, like the poem, a reimagining of the function of poetry
within another medium. It is possible that the song, in its primitive form,
provided a vehicle for the transmission of cultural myths, history and
legends from generation to generation. As such the concept of song, based
on its role in perpetuating the primitive communal memory, embodies the
perfect vehicle for the poet's explorative rediscovery of his age-old and
animalistic spirituality. Song manifests a sacred element of living: not
only does it provide a bridge down through history, connecting modern
humanity with its mythic origins, but it also acts as a link between the
unknown realm of the spirit and the physical realm of everyday existence.
The sacredness of the song perhaps also stems from the mystery of its inception. In "Under the Maud Moon" the poet suggests a nonhuman, otherworldly source and, recalling the occasion of the song-knowledge being conferred on him, emphasizes its total mystery and primordiality:

I had crept down
to riverbanks, their long rustle
of being and perishing, down to marshes
where the earth oozes up
in cold streaks, touching the world
with the underglimmer
of the beginning,
and there learned my only song. (7-8)

The physical surroundings reinforce the cycle of birth and death ("their long rustle / of being and perishing") and rebirth ("touching the world / with the underglimmer / of the beginning") that is established in the poem's unfolding. The imagery suggests that the song wells up from the earth itself, that traditionally mythic and spiritual source of humankind's birth, and so is bound together with the self in its provenance. By discovering the source of song within a sacred, pre-human locality, one which is somehow implicated with the physical presence of the self's derivation, the poet is able both to preserve the song's mythic nature and to acquire it as a power of his own.

Kinnell believes that poetry must express a mystery, must turn away from rationality and approach the inexplicable spirituality of the inner self or the nonhuman, to avoid becoming "the expression of a reality from which all trace of the sacred has been removed." If mystery is absent from a poem, then in it "our connection with ritual and sacred traditions, the things which in humans are elaborations of instincts in animals, may be completely broken."13 The poem itself, in all its manifestations, is
established as the pervasive mystery. It represents the link between the spiritual and the earthly sought by the poet; or, perhaps more precisely, the poem represents the mode through which his powers of self-discovery and self-expression become manifest in the natural world and work toward the establishment of a unity between transcendent spirit and temporal physicality.

From the beginning of the poem Kinnell seems to be immersing himself within an archetypal or mythic state of mind. He sees in its primitiveness a way of experiencing harmony and fulfillment through intimate contact with the natural world. In a 1971 essay entitled "Poetry, Personality, and Death" he quotes from Gary Snyder's Earth House Hold:

> Of all the streams of civilized tradition with roots in the paleolithic, poetry is one of the few that can realistically claim an unchanged function and a relevance which will outlast most of the activities that surround us today. Poets, as few others, must live close to the world that primitive men are in: the world, in its nakedness, which is fundamental for all of us -- birth, love, death; the sheer fact of being alive.\(^\text{14}\)

Kinnell not only situates himself close to that world, but he gathers around himself a host of qualities that point toward his assumption of a shamanistic role: storytelling, singing, shape-changing, divination. In the primordiality of the shaman he finds a closer relationship with the natural world than that accessible to his contemporary, civilization-familiar self. Kinnell, like Snyder, conceives of poetry as a primitive, mythic voice. He wants to bring himself closer to its source in myth, for from there he will be more capable of achieving his aim, the aim that poetry has set for itself: "poetry has taken on itself the task of breaking out of the closed ego."\(^\text{15}\)
The poem is very much concerned with self-transcendence, with the internal and external processes involved in moving deeper than personality into a recognition of collective unity. Kinnell sees complete self-absorption as dangerous and limiting, so that the ego and personality become a restrictive system that limits any kind of universal becoming. The Book of Nightmares may be read as an effort to press against the walls of total self-absorption, to become so immersed in the self that the individual, enclosed personality becomes nonexistent. This notion seems paradoxical, but Kinnell has faith in its potential. In "Poetry, Personality, and Death" he writes that "we must move toward a poetry in which the poet seeks an inner liberation by going so deeply into himself -- into the worst of himself as well as the best -- that he suddenly finds he is everyone." The ideal poem "suffers the self, it does not step around it. It gets beyond personality by going through it." The internal movement, then, encompasses an inner transformation through which the poet transcends the closed subjectivity of his experience and moves toward universality.

The inner transformation is enabled not only by immersion in the self, but also by the self's outward reaching, by a profound empathy with the things of the world and the mystery that they embody: "To touch this mystery requires, I think, love of the creatures and things that surround us: the capacity to go out to them so that they enter us, so that they are transformed within us, and so that our own inner life finds expression through them." This identification signifies liberation from ego and the confines of personal identity. The act of going out to other creatures
brings their experience within the poet's own. He is able to accomplish
the temporary transcendence of individual ego because their experience
becomes assimilated as a kind of self-construction. Following the act of
empathy, the shapes he assumes become signs for alternate identities
within himself, alternate facets of his identity, formations that he
imposes on his personality. Thus animals, such as the hen and the bear,
become a symbolic form, signifying the capacity for change, a tangible
sign of the potency of empathy and transforming identity. The empathetic
tendency away from self-absorption is also embodied in Kinnell's creation
of personae, like the shaman, or the drunk of Poems III and V:

A persona has its uses, and also its dangers. In theory, it
would be a way to get past the self, to dissolve the barrier between poet and reader. Writing in the voice of another, the poet would open himself to that person. All that would be required would be for the reader to make the same act of sympathetic identification, and, in the persona, poet and reader would meet as one. Of course, for the poem to be interesting, the persona would have to represent a central facet of the poet's self.18

In The Book of Nightmares, identity is a system open to change and interpretation, used by the poet as a vehicle for dismantling the walls that have been built up between the individual and apprehension of the world. By continually seeking out other forms, identifying with animals or persons who are not ostensibly part of himself, he permeates the barriers which separate self from other.

In "The Hen Flower" the poet, representing more than just himself with the plural pronoun, "sprawled / on our faces in the spring / nights," and with his face down in the pillow among the hen feathers, reaches into an empathy with the creature that approaches the utter involvement
of transformation. This tangible, physical intimacy of the poet with the world of physical things, perceived through the immediacy of sensory experience, expresses his imaginative sensitivity; his empathy allows him to identify so closely with creatures of the physical world that he actually communes with them, becomes them, if only for a moment, through his imagination. Seemingly frustrated, unsure of how to begin his inward journey, the speaker yearns for the ignorant, fatal reliance of the hen on a higher and unknown authority and wishes that we, humanity, "could let go / like her, throw ourselves / on the mercy of darkness, like the hen." Her song, her self-expression, "the hum / of the wishbone tuning its high D in thin blood," is one laden with the consciousness of death, for even in the contentment of her trance, she "woozes off, head / thrown back / on the chopping-block, longing only / to die" (11). In the poet's communion with the hen he becomes aware of a tangible symbol of the overarching death-cycle: "When the ax- / scented breeze flourishes / about her. . . ready or not / the next egg, bobbling / its globe of golden earth, / skids forth, ridding her even / of the life to come" (12). Now the hen changes into "a hen flower" in Kinnell's imagination (recalling the birth of Maud imaged as an opening flower) and his identity permeates that of the hen,

    wing
    of my wing,
    of my bones and veins,
    of my flesh
    hairs lifting all over me in the first ghostly breeze
    after death. (12)

An awareness of mortality grounds the speaker's sense of identification with the hen, and with the other creatures of the physical world as well.
He perceives in them a kinship of mutual susceptibility to the passage of time and the natural process toward death. His own inward journey — itself a journey toward death — materializes, prefigured, in the image of unborn eggs in the dissected hen, "each getting / tinier and yellower as it reaches back toward / the icy pulp / of what is" (13) — life in the heart of death, reaching back to the core of being, to the innermost self, for sustenance.

Kinnell discovers another means of self-expression in the ancient act of divination. A primitive and sacred ritual, it enables him to gain a kind of nonhuman assistance by orienting himself to the cadence of natural process. Situated at a moment of mystical strangeness recalling one of the "spectacular instances of the nonhuman" ("When the Northern Lights / were opening across the black sky and vanishing, / lighting themselves up / so completely they were vanishing"), this attempt at divination — "I put to my eye the lucent / section of the spealbone of a ram" — endows the poet with a vision of cosmic order: "I thought suddenly / I could read the cosmos spelling itself, / the huge broken letters / shuddering across the black sky and vanishing" (13). However, this vision is broken and temporary, and rooted in the reality of death:

and in a moment,
in the twinkling of an eye, it came to me
the mockingbird would sing all her nights the cry of the rifle,
the tree would hold the bones of the sniper who chose not to climb down,
the rose would bloom no one would see it,
the chameleon longing to be changed would remain the color of blood. (13)

Kinnell's vision prompts him to action — he flings the weasel-murdered hen into the sky to empower her with flight, and through this act her
identity is extended infinitely across the sky and united in spirituality with the expanding identity of the recurrent bear image: "as I flung her high, didn't it happen / the dead / wings creaked open as she soared / across the arms of the Bear?" (14). So the speaker's memory searches out inspiration in his hen-empathy, the hen that was tied to the earth in life now soars across the universe in death, and in imagination-invested communion the poet finally confronts the urge to "let go," to relinquish his hold on living and begin his journey, in spite of the fact that nothing, "even these feathers freed from their wings forever," lives free of the fear of death.

The idea of the embrace is central to the ambiguous conflicts through which Kinnell must engage his mythmaking. The desire to "let go" is indicative of his awareness of one necessity, that he must in some way give up the temporal world if he is to approach the 'death' that is universality, a renunciation of the self. Yet the embrace is figured in another way as well: it signifies the empathetic reaching-out toward things of the physical world, and its fulfillment is necessary for attainment of the universal. In "Poetry, Personality, and Death," in which he outlines the necessity of getting beyond the self-absorbed ego by passing through and transcending personality, Kinnell invokes Whitman as the paragon of a poet truly able to embrace all aspects of the world: "The great thing about Whitman is that he knew all of our being must be loved, if we are to love any of it."19 The poet posits this all-encompassing love as the foundation of empathy and the embrace, both literal and figurative, as its manifestation. Through it Kinnell hopes to bring his self and the world around him closer together:
The death of the self I seek, in poetry and out of poetry, is not a drying up or a withering. It is a death, yes, but a death out of which one might hope to be reborn more giving, more alive, more open, more related to the natural life. . . For myself, I would like a death that would give me more loves, not fewer. And greater desire, not less.²⁰

Myth exists publicly, incorporating 'objective' experience, and consequently renders its meaning accessible to all who share that experience. The poet who uses myth acquires an authority which surpasses that of one whose poetry emerges from intensely private, closed experience. And yet, myth is also "quintessentially intimate material, the stuff of dream life, forbidden desire, inexplicable motivation -- everything in the psyche that to rational consciousness is unreal, crazed, or abominable."²¹ Through the poem, Kinnell is questioning the distinction between the private and the universal in myth, exploring the psychic potential of problematizing these boundaries and constructing self and world as entwining composites.

The poet engages both aspects of myth through the construction of his selfhood, through its simultaneous mythification and demythification. Each of these strategies is in turn enmeshed in two main urges, impersonality and autobiography. Disentangling these various threads from the poem, and from themselves, is neither practical nor desirable; they do not separate readily into distinct parts, and it is their concurrent interaction within the narrative of the poem that imbues it with richness and meaning. Rather, one must understand them as connecting strands, as
poetic devices fixed in the web of mythmaking, and interpret them in the context of the developing poem.

Kinnell's gesture toward impersonality is embodied in the dispersal of ego through its submersion in masks or personae, which at once projects the self toward universality (to become mythic) and destroys the very idea of the self. Impersonality has its own complex tradition, which extends back through Eliot and Pound to certain nineteenth-century romantics, particularly Whitman, but one of its central qualities has always been its multiplicity:

Even in its early days... the doctrine of impersonality was inconsistent and eclectic. It derives from many sources, philosophical, poetic, and political: it can mean anything from the destruction to the apotheosis of the self. It conceals an ideological tension as well as a conceptual instability, and for this reason it continually slips into the ethics of 'personality' it was designed to supervene.22

The problems and ambiguities that adhere to the theory of impersonality immediately become Kinnell's concern once he determines to enter the murky realm of the self and make its exploration germinal to the meaning of his poem. He partakes of its multiplicity by engaging both the destructive and the apotheotic tendencies. However, he significantly alters the expansion of each so that, as will be explained later, destruction is never wholly realized and apotheosis is undercut by irony.

Impersonality destroys self-coherence by obscuring identity under masks, by fracturing the self into a plethora of interrupted and disoriented parts. When the poet empathizes with the hen, a part of him goes out to and actually becomes the hen. In this shape he becomes
blurred to us, and what he knows of himself changes as well. This aspect of impersonality disrupts the "substantial unity of the soul" which Eliot attacks in "Tradition and the Individual Talent," and which Kinnell conceives as a pre- (though no longer) existent state. Eliot writes that "The progress of an artist is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality." Kinnell to some extent subscribes to this view. Yet he also desires the apotheosis of the self that impersonality enables. By investing the poet's identity with the vision of the creatures he touches with his empathy, it makes his individual, private self into a universal and mythic figure, one who can assimilate the experience of other things. It engages the self in a process of other-becoming through which, by assuming the perspective of other selves, vision itself is transformed. Thus, impersonality liberates the poet from the enclosure of his ego and brings him closer to the possibility of unity with outer experience.

For all his involvement with impersonality, Kinnell refuses to be consumed by its dilemmas. Any effort to obscure the self with masks inevitably implies an ego behind all the masks; impersonality thus "slips into the ethics of 'personality' it was designed to supervene." Kinnell does not try to circumvent the "conceptual instability" that produces this slippage, but instead embraces it and moves beyond the circularity of impersonality. The use of autobiography manifests the second tendency in the poet's construction of his selfhood. He seeks out rather than avoids the specifics of his life. He establishes the idiosyncrasies of his own life as a series of touchstones within the poem, the autobiographical details becoming at once subject and inspiration. When he descends into the collective unconscious of his identity, the memories and events of his life
provide a beacon and give him something to return to. They anchor the
outward movement of Kinnell's imagination and prevent the complete
abstraction of his identity.

Autobiography exists as Kinnell's means of securing his identity to
real experience. In one interview he states that a poem often

starts out being about oneself, about one's experiences, a
fragment of autobiography. But then... it goes deeper
than personality. It takes on that strange voice,
impersonal yet common to everyone, in which all rituals
are spoken... The separate egos vanish. The poem
becomes simply the voice of a creature on earth
speaking... When you go deep enough within yourself,
deeper than the level of 'personality,' you are suddenly
outside yourself, everywhere.24

Kinnell's interpretation of the world is particular to his experience,
abnegating other selves in favor of the idiosyncrasies of his own life. The
poem is emerging from emotions that originate in subjective, personal
experience. Yet this fact is set against his universalizing desire which
seeks a vision of shared, empathetic experience on which to build his
myth. So although the poem is based in autobiography, it progresses
beyond the facts of the poet's life and finds that impersonal voice of
common, and universal, experience.

This awareness of the interaction between impersonality and
autobiography informs the third poem of the book, "The Shoes of
Wandering." We find the poet in a specific and mundane situation,
"Squatting at the rack / in the Store of the Salvation / Army, putting on,
one after one, / these shoes strangers have died from" (19). This scene
from his life takes on a greater significance, a strangeness, as he
discovers "the eldershoes of my feet, / that take my feet / as their first
feet, clinging / down to the least knuckle and corn." It acquires that haziness which connotes a mythic experience; he walks out of the store "in dead shoes, in the new light" and realizes that, with every step he takes, he follows in the path of another, "on the steppingstones / of someone else's wandering." The poet's world has changed, and his selfhood is being pervaded by the will of another self, manifest as "a twinge / in this foot or that saying / turn or stay or take / forty-three giant steps / backwards." He hears the voice of the scrying Crone whose words -- "the first step. . . shall be / to lose the way" -- anticipate the confused wandering that dominates the initial stages of his journey.

Kinnell's return to the Xvarna Hotel (which provides the physical setting for Poem V as well) and removal of the shoes leads to a transforming sleep, a "lapse back / into darkness" (20) during which the spirit of the original wearer of the shoes finds release:

And the old footsmells in the shoes, touched back to life by my footsweats, as by a child's kisses, rise, drift up where I lie self-hugged on the bedclothes, slide down the flues of dozed, beating hairs. . . (20)

and suddenly the stifled, terrified voice of the poet becomes not his own; any groan or wheeze he emits "will be / the groan or wheeze of another -- the elderfoot / of these shoes, the drunk / who died in this room." The shoes have led him back to this room. Here, in the similar darkness of sleep and death, poet and drunk are united into one voice, an utterance consisting of "self-mutterings worse / than the farts, grunts, and belches / of an Oklahoma men's room" (21). Their combined voice is a vortex that
draws Kinnell in, and he cannot resist the pull to "shudder down to his nightmare." But we question whether this is truly the drunk's nightmare, or rather a product of the poet's own imagination, transformed by contact with the other-self of the eldershoes:

The witness trees
blaze themselves a last time: the road
trembles as it starts across
swampland streaked with shined water, a lethe-
wind of chill air touches
me all over my body. (21)

He moves back toward the root of myth, treading across the mysterious terrain of the inner self. The road trembling across swampland harks back to the source of the poet's song, its primordiality sustaining his mythmaking potential through the relentless tramping of "the haunted / shoes rising and falling / through the dust, wings of dust / lifting around them, as they flap / down the brainwaves of the temporal road." With each step "a shattering underfoot of mirrors sick of the itch / of our face-bones under their skins," Kinnell seems to be negating self-scrutiny, resisting the reflections of himself through other selves, through their nightmares and memories. It is the poet's own memory which "reaches out / and lays bloody hands on the future." His past, and his recollection of it, will shape the road that he must follow.

The journey of the speaker draws on the archetypal nature of the quest for structure and direction. However, the linearity of this source-model is twisted and disassembled into a fluid form that can accommodate his non-linear self-exploration. The poet's image or map of his expected wandering is created out of his feelings of doubt and loss of
control or self-determination, and his dread anticipation of the horrors to come:

  this road
  on which I do not know how to ask for bread,
on which I do not know how to ask for water,
this path
inventing itself
through jungles of burnt flesh, ground of ground
bones, crossing itself
at the odor of blood, and stumbling on. (22)

Kinnell imbues the track of his journey with its own will so that it can take control and invent itself. He seems paralyzed in the face of the task that lies ahead. However, he is not without the desire to gain some sense of his purpose and direction. To accomplish this, the poet invokes the spirits of the hero-myth in hopes of acquiring their unerring motivation and certitude:

    I long for the mantle
    of the great wanderers, who lighted
their steps by the lamp
of pure hunger and pure thirst,

    and whichever way they lurched was the way. (22)

The great wanderers might not have known exactly where they were going, but they were driven by absolute and unproblematic urges, their path of choice eventually, inevitably, leading to fulfillment of the quest. Kinnell's self-doubt is well-founded; he knows he is not one of the mythic heroes and cannot rely on a manifestation of providence or godhood to guide him safely. He is alone in his undertaking, so everything must come from within himself.

Kinnell's inability to direct himself seems to derive from a fear of the emptiness that surrounds him, pointing back to the broken oath
between spirit and flesh at the book's beginning, because he cannot "let go" (15) his fragile grip on the flesh and allow his spirit to spin away into the unknown and begin the wandering. In fact, the whole notion of the 'shoes of wandering' produces a sense of the poet's helplessness since it indicates the subsuming of his will by the spirit of the eldershoes.

Kinnell again envisions the Crone, who in memory or imagination performs shamanistic divinations, holding his crystal skull up to the moon and passing his shoulder bones across the Aquarian stars. The body of the poet speaks itself -- his self enters into the prophecy that is its future -- but even in doing so it reinforces the sense of the disparity between self and world:

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You live
under the sign
of the Bear, who flounders through chaos
in his starry blubber:
poor fool,
poor forked branch
of applewood, you will feel all your bones
break
over the holy waters you will never drink. (22-23)
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The scrying of the Crone reveals the inevitable dislocation of the poet's selfhood and condemns him to wander, broken and without hope or direction, through a hostile and indecipherable world.

Kinnell employs mythic elements to invest with spirituality a state of living that has become void of sacred meaning. While the complicated interactions of myth in this book create a dense surface for the reader to approach, they also bestow upon it a richness,
a sacredness, and a sense of relevance, serving myth's role "in recovering some sense of the numinous." Following the prophecy of the Crone, the poet feels especially the need to give meaning to his experience. In many of the quotations I have taken from Kinnell there is an implicit faith in the capacity of the poem itself to enact or embody some kind of empowering transformation or recognition. From these statements we may derive an understanding of Kinnell's primary insight, which is explored in the process of mythopoesis: that the poem itself holds an innate power, and by writing he can manipulate that power. This recognition dominates the fourth poem, "Dear Stranger Extant in Memory by the Blue Juniata," in which Kinnell situates the act of writing at the center of the mythmaking process.

The section is structured around two prose pieces, letters written to Kinnell by a woman named Virginia. He identifies her in an interview as "a mystic, a seer... one of those born without the protective filtering device that allows the rest of us to see this humanized, familiar world as if it were all there is. She sees past the world and lives in the cosmos." Perhaps he is drawn to her because of this capacity, since as a poet he too desires to see beyond the world into the cosmos. Her first letter portrays her as a writer, but one controlled by something beyond her:

Dear Galway,

It began late one April night when I couldn't sleep. It was the dark of the moon. My hand felt numb, the pencil went over the page drawn on its way by I don't know what. It drew circles and figure-eights and mandalas. I cried. I had to drop the pencil. I was shaking. I went to bed and tried to pray. At last I relaxed. Then I felt my mouth open. My tongue moved, my breath wasn't my own. The whisper which forced itself through my teeth said, Virginia, your eyes shine back to me from my own world. O God, I thought. My
breath came short, my heart opened. O God I thought, now I have a demon lover.

Yours, faithless to this life,
Virginia

The place from which she writes, the environs of the blue Juniata, becomes a setting that is beyond history, a mythic place, first established as such by, anachronistically, a magazine article: "'a rural America,' the magazine said, / 'now vanished, but extant in memory, / a primal garden lost forever..." (28). It survives only in "the last / coldest room, which is memory" (27). This mythical setting somehow transcends time, escaping the realm ruled by the law of mortality where all things must die. It is a place where "the root-hunters / go out into the woods, pull up / love-roots from the virginal glades" (28). The hunt for the root has multiple meanings: it parallels the poet's own quest for the mythic source of elemental wholeness and at the same time is simply the search for an ingredient crucial to the sleep potion whose written recipe is given here.

Only by following precisely the directions of the written incantation can the poet move past the natural world into a place that escapes mortality, "in the sothic year / made of the raised salvages / of the fragments all unaccomplished / of years past, scraps / and jettisons of time mortality / could not grind down into his meal of blood and laughter" (29). Having slept and then risen in this place, he experiences a revelation: he understands that love and poetry are the same, that both are creative, almost divine forces: "if there is one more love / to be known, one more poem / to be opened into life, / you will find it here / or nowhere" (29). Here is not only the suggestion of commonality between poetry and love, but also a statement of something deeper, of the correspondence between the poem and the loved one. The knowledge of
love parallels the creation of a poem, as though writing is a form of knowing, and brings that love into existence:

a face materializes into your hands,
on the absolute whiteness of pages
a poem writes itself out: its title -- the dream
of all poems and the text
of all loves -- "Tenderness toward Existence." (29)

Kinnell sees that through poetry he can restore the memory of her "whose face / I held in my hands / a few hours, whom I gave back / only to keep holding the space where she was" (3). It sustains him through the dream and the text of "Tenderness toward Existence." Poetry and experience are moving toward a point of concurrence, a common ground. The poet is bringing some of the sacredness of myth and poetry into the realm of mundane living. He perceives that the gap between self and world can be closed through the creative act of the poem, and that by loving the world, the broken embrace can be healed. Kinnell now understands what he is capable of; he realizes where his path lies and what it is in his power to do, though he can only envision the full expression of his creative capacity in a realm outside of time. In the later poems he strives toward the establishment of a myth of wholeness in the physical, mortal world.

Adrienne Rich, in her response to Kinnell's essay "Poetry, Personality, and Death" entitled "Poetry, Personality, and Wholeness," addresses the problems that she believes limit Kinnell's universalizing movement:

The problem for Kinnell, I believe (and if I single him out in this essay it is not because I think his blindness is greater but his potential for vision more) -- the problem for Kinnell is the problem of the masculine writer -- how to break through the veils that his language, his
reading of the handed-down myths (and, I am forced to say, his very convenience), have cast over his sight; and what that will cost him. To become truly universal he will have to confront the closed ego of man in its most private and political mode: his confused relationship to his own femininity, and his fear and guilt towards women.27

To my mind the limitations that Rich points out, rather than precluding the attainment of universality, actually enhance this possibility. Though my reading of his self-constructed identity may differ from hers, I perceive that these two factors -- Kinnell’s unconfonced femininity and his fear and guilt towards women -- do in some ways reinforce the potential for unity with the whole of experience. They indicate within the poet's selfhood a complexity, a greater multiplicity which, though undeniably problematic, diversifies the engagement between self-parts as well as the self's engagement with the world -- simply put, this complexity assists his movement toward the universal.

As an example, Kinnell's capacity to continually sustain himself, to create himself through the poetic articulation of his experience, has some interesting implications concerning his treatment of the feminine in his poetics, since it suggests the apparent displacement of the woman from the birth-role.28 I have no desire to defend his position or confront this criticism. But there is a redeeming element in this idea, one which confirms the potential for universality in the divided self. That Kinnell is in a sense generative and self-generating signifies an inclusive wholeness in his relationship to experience, his embodiment of a traditionally non-masculine function providing a push toward a more balanced, universal apprehension of the world. This is, in fact, a notion which transforms much of his marginalizing into its opposite, the expansion of self into the
world and the corresponding and vitalizing acceptance of 'other'-experience into the individual ego.

In one sense, the fragmenting of Kinnell's ego represents the collapse of masculinity manifest in the 'ideals' of linearity, rationality, and self-dominance; it enables the expression of a more universal self-consciousness in which an 'other-consciousness' penetrates the dominant maleness of his ego and is embodied in the wholeness of a fluid model of selfhood, or in the universality of his fluid motion through the poem as he seeks out and touches all aspects of experience. Kinnell does not ostensibly recognize this mode of liberation, but it becomes part of him; or more precisely, it emerges from a formerly unrealized part of his selfhood to dominate his movement and imagination. As Dennis Brown writes, "part of the selves we all are precisely constitutes other, sometimes contradictory selves."29 One of the characteristics of Kinnell's poetics is that the unconscious holds just as much resonance as the conscious or intentional. There are meanings and implications which slip into the development of his identity, perhaps contrary to his explicit intent, which reveal a more androgynous or feminized selfhood than that which he explicitly presents.

Going back briefly to "Under the Maud Moon," we can see how alternate meanings might enter Kinnell's words and contribute to the complexity of his self-construction. At the end of the section, the speaker describes how he would sit beside his sleeping daughter and sing, "not the songs / of light said to wave / through the bright hair of angels, / but a blacker / rasping flowering on that tongue" (7). He anticipates a time when he will not be around to do this, hoping that another will be there in his place:
And in the days
when you find yourself orphaned,
emptied
of all wind-singing, of light,
the pieces of cursed bread on your tongue,

may there come back to you
a voice,
spectral, calling you
sister!
from everything that dies. (8)

The appellative "sister!" seems to signify the voice of a brother calling from beyond the physical world, a voice imbued with the spirit of Kinnell and yet outside his identity as father. But it could also imply a corresponding feminine identity reaching out to Maud. In appropriating the intent of the father-song, establishing a bridge back through darkness (of sleep or death) into the living world, the voice assumes the identity of the protector-father reaching out to his sleeping daughter. However, it holds much greater strength -- the word "sister!", from this perspective, connotes a security found in the recognition of group identity that is beyond the capacity of the father image. The merging of identities indicates the possibility of a female voice within the speaker that is not explicitly accounted for in the masculine, shamanistic persona Kinnell is establishing in this section.

The prose pieces in the fourth poem, "Dear Stranger Extant in Memory by the Blue Juniata," call attention to the emergence of a feminine voice from within Kinnell's writing consciousness. Explicitly, he severs himself from Virginia's emotions and from the empathetic intimacy she seems to ask of him. His response comes at the end of the section: "Dear stranger / extant in memory by the blue Juniata, / these letters / across
space I guess / will be all we will know of one another" (31). Although he sets up the written text -- the letter, the poem -- as a key to understanding, he restricts the extent of this understanding. Since "So little of what one is threads itself through the eye / of empty space," it is impossible to precisely express the self through this indirect mode. If Kinnell pursues the implications of this statement, then his entire undertaking will be jeopardized. But he backs off: "Never mind. / The self is the least of it. / Let our scars fall in love." While in this moment he understands that individual identity must be sacrificed for a collective one, and that he must cast off the traces of his ego, he also reduces the self to detritus, as though a mass of scars is the sole evidence of inner spirituality that remains to link one person to another. He denies Virginia all but her suffering; her letters are artifacts which counterpoint the development of his imagery and call attention to her pain, set against his poetry as if to balance her anguish with his insight.

There is, however, another side to this. The meaning of the text becomes twisted around in the way Kinnell's poetry echoes fragments of the two letters, re-articulating Virginia's nightmares in forms that relate to his own experience as though the fear and guilt she directs toward herself somehow find their way into his consciousness -- she becomes a part of him. Here we witness a subconscious expression of his empathy. Virginia's intense fear and isolation, her feeling of self-division, stifled voice, loss of identity and self-control, all of these are articulated in Kinnell's own poetic voice. The moment in which he briefly assumes her persona is indicative of this process: "'You see,' I told Mama, 'we just think we're here. . . .'" (28). She refers to the words of the magazine which portray her home, the area around the Juniata river, as "vanished." Kinnell
too, for the moment that his 'I' is Virginia's and he speaks with her voice, is removed from the mortal world. He finds himself joining the root-hunters and drinking along with Virginia the sleep potion which leads to the frightening, liberating revelation that "Your hand will move / on its own / down the curving path, drawn / down by the terror and terrible lure / of vacuum" (29). The shore of the blue Juniata becomes "this bank -- our bank -- / of the blue, vanished water" where "you lie, / crying in your bed" because "I, too, have eaten / the meals of the dark shore" and "lie without sleeping" (30). It is strange that the poet questions the symbiosis he is experiencing: "Can it ever be true -- / all bodies, one body, one light / made of everyone's darkness together?" (30). He seems to imply that the unity of all things attains a purity only through a mingling of collective darkness, yet he is unaware of the way that Virginia's darkness emerges as part of his own voice. The implied meaning in this section substantiates the notion that self-deception and the unspoken are as vital a part of experience, and the poet's identity, as the explicit and intended.

A certain inauthenticity is suggested by the thought that Kinnell is denying the expression of submerged elements of his personality, an inauthenticity which produces conflicts within and represents an inherent self-deception. However, since "selfhood is fragmentary rather than coherent, [then] we are beyond the mere paradoxicality of the lie in the self, and the relationship between self-parts and the possibility of self-acknowledgement becomes acutely problematic."30 Because Kinnell accedes to (and indeed, relies on) the fragmented multiplicity of both his identity and experience, and their disarticulation necessitates some degree of conflict, then self-deception cannot be wholly eluded. It is impossible for the poet to see himself absolutely clearly and so, though he
can acknowledge this awareness, he can never fully and consciously acknowledge all the facets of his identity. In addition, the very process of acknowledgement is problematized by the gap between expression and experience, by the difficulty of rendering the world as words. Thus, the scriptive core itself is at stake; if its meaning is undercut by falsity, then how can it sustain faith in its mythmaking capacity, how can it sustain itself?

Kinnell seems to feel that his mode of expression accommodates a certain degree of truth, even if that truth is expressed below the surface of language. He possesses an implicit (though often questioned) faith in the power of his writing. Although that mode of self-articulation generates conflicts which problematize the relationship between self-parts, it also enables a mythification of the world into some rough semblance of his desires. Even the striving serves in some way to bring self and world closer together.

The poet employs irony as a means of coping with the ambiguities that adhere to the problem of constructing a myth, of unifying self and experience in the modern world. It finds expression as humor and self-mockery. The primary function of Kinnell's irony is to balance the self-absorption necessitated by his mythmaking. Through irony he can mediate the self-aggrandizing gestures of a mythology based on the self and establish it as a sacred, essential, and human truth. But his irony does not confine itself to this mediation, to emphasizing only the precariousness of his experience, because it also
provides a kind of latticework to which his myth-making can cling, the contrast between solemnity and self-consciousness contrapuntally accentuating the particularities of each. Self-conscious irony acts as a means of balancing the mythic proportions of the poet's project, but its existence depends on the seriousness of his intent. Kinnell's sporadic self-mockery refuses to allow us (or him) to interpret the dimensions of his experience with too much solemnity. His utterance is not at all meant to be taken lightly, however; the irony he expresses arises from an understanding of his mortality, of the impermanence of all things, and the presumptuous futility of any effort to create something that will endure. He is trapped within the tautological prison created by the contrariness of realization and desire; that is, while he wants to create a myth that will last, a narrative composed of his experience and revelations, an expression of living directed toward the Rilkean angel and readers of the poem, he knows that nothing can last. The poet's awareness of life's transience and the necessity of accepting that fact and letting go, experienced gradually through a series of revelatory moments, continually adjusts his position in relation to the mythic wholeness toward which he is trying to move. Given the impossibility of sustaining any kind of permanence, how can one unite the disparate shards of self, and establish a fundamental bond with all other living creatures, and discover in the universe a Whitmanesque universality? To achieve any sort of resolution, Kinnell must come to terms with the truth of each possibility and find a way of mediating between them.

The act of transcribing experience manifests the central idea of the fifth poem, "In the Hotel of Lost Light." This act provides a means for the continuation of existence by giving the poet a vehicle for mythmaking --
enabling the eternal sustenance of his imagination -- and a context for irony. So he consistently, self-consciously, focuses the reader's attention on the present fact of his writing. These (not often explicit) moments serve as a way of re-asserting the irony of his persona and his myth.

The poem moves with time and memory toward self-transcendence, from Kinnell's minute awareness of a fly's death-struggles down into the consciousness of the dead drunk. He employs a layer of correspondence between the living and dying to present the death of the drunk in the first part of the section. The poem opens with the speaker transmuting his own selfhood, his physical form collapsing along the curves of an old mattress to fill the indentations left by one who slept there before: "In the left-/hand sag the drunk smelling of autopsies / died in, my body slumped out / into the shape of his" (35). The mattress retains the imprint of the drunk's body as record of a vitality that once existed. The imprint is only space and outline, a nonexistence which can still provide a link and communicate to the poet what he imagines to be the perceptions of the drunk's body. The implied form becomes a signifier of details which the poet's imagination can access and transform into vivid vision. The correspondence is further emphasized by the speaker's imagining of the overlapping similarity of their actions. With the conjectural statement "I watch, as he / must have watched" (35) the poet finds passage into the drunk's identity. The merging of the two depends on a model of juxtaposed time, past-moment inside the fixed locale of the present (the hotel room), a spiralling figure in which past and present merge at a certain point in space. The mutual act of watching a fly trapped in a spider's web binds together the identities of poet and drunk as though they were figures sketched on identical transparent overlays.
The process of the drunk's diminishing will and vitality is metaphorically dramatized in the death of the spider-trapped fly,

tangled in mouth-glue, whining his wings,
concentrated wholly on
*time, time*, losing his way worse
down the downward-winding stairs, his wings
whining for life as he shrivels
in the gaze
from the spider's clasped forebrains, the abstracted stare
in which even the nightmare spatters out its horrors
and dies. (35)

The frenzied actions of the fly attest to the despair of its plight as it at first, desperately, focuses on "*time, time*" in all of the abstraction's no longer meaningful possibilities -- at this moment there is only lost time and time running out -- and then slips down into the recognition of utter hopelessness, when further struggle has no meaning, and the song of existence whined from its wings becomes "the music blooming with failure / of one who gets ready to die" (35). This realization is shared by the prostrate drunk, and by the poet, as he accepts the futility of struggling against death.

Even though the poet has fully entered the drunk's consciousness, there is the sense that he is observing vicariously rather than experiencing firsthand. He maintains a distance from the actuality of the drunk's dying. What killed the drunk can reach Kinnell as well, but psychically rather than physically, by inducing a tortured and potent visualization of the death experience. The poet's proximity to the thoughts of a dying creature force upon him a heightened awareness. He sees the lust for existence in the midst of all the dying, the survival instinct of "the love-sick crab lice" chafing against their desire "for one
last taste of the love-flesh" (36), and experiences a flowering of self-recognition.

The image of flowering is the most dominant expression of the theme of change crucial to this section of the book. Following the cessation of the fly's struggle, its death-song "blooming" with the knowledge that it must release its hold on the world, and imagining the reluctant flight of lice from the fresh corpse, the poet too feels a change. But instead of acceding to a fatal recognition, he experiences an expansive blossoming toward new awareness that is expressed in an altered way of understanding death as well as a clearer self-purpose; it seems to propel him toward the taking of the drunk's final testament.

The task of the poet and his altered perception is not to re-experience (and perish from) the death of the drunk but to translate the experience into myth. Kinnell, articulating the mystery of death as a narrative, is working himself and his imagination into the mythic process. He acts as a scribe, in the process of writing himself by working within the consciousness of the drunk-persona, communicating the language of a self in flux:

Flesh
of his excavated flesh,
fill of his emptiness,
after-amanuensis of his after-life,
I write out
for him in this languished alphabet
of worms, these last words
of himself, post for him
his final postcards to posterity. (36)

Since the dead drunk's life-testament has already been spoken and effaced, Kinnell becomes the "after-amanuensis of his after-life" and must grapple with incarnations of death using the language that is
essential to and emerges from it. The "I" we now experience is the drunk, filtered through Kinnell, though the first-person narration within quotations only attests to his 'privileged' intimacy rather than a shift of identity. The "languished alphabet / of worms" constitutes the death-poem, speaking in colossal terms about the nothingness of existence ("I saw the ferris wheel writing its huge, desolate zeroes in neon on the evening skies"), the fragmentation and uncertainty of self ("I heard my own cries already howled inside bottles the waves washed up on beaches"), the mutability and transience of flesh ("To Live / has a poor cousin, / who calls tonight, who pronounces the family name / To Leave, she / changes each visit the flesh-rags on her bones"), the expectation of death ("I painted my footsoles purple for the day when the beautiful color would show") and its inevitability ("I staggered death-sentences down empty streets, the cobblestones assured me, it shall be so"). Here we also find the recurrent flowering, manifest in the temporary yet death-like extinction of the drunk's consciousness and memory ("I blacked out into oblivion by that crack in the curb where the forget-me blooms"), and resonating again in the "Violet bruises" of the next part that bloom "all over his flesh." It is as though in the midst of death the drunk is experiencing a violent rebirth and, having completed a circle of sorts, is passing through the womb once more:

the whine
of omphalos blood starts up again, the puffed
bellybutton explodes, the carnal
nightmare soars back to the beginning. (37)

Rising out of death-consciousness, the next passage suggests the possibility of a restorative rebirth after the fatal experience of the previous cycle. The remnants of the drunk's old life are organically
transformed into a flowering, fruit-bearing tree, evidence of the seasonal cycle and symbol of the love-bonds possible between human beings. The tossed-away bones "shall re-arise / in the pear tree, in spring, to shine down / on two clasping what they dream is one another" (37). Yet even in this promise there is a note of ambiguity; the last phrase, in questioning the certainty of any true knowing of another, undermines the idea that two people can know each other well enough to experience love. It suggests that selves are so enclosed as to be unaware of the reality of other selves, projecting false images that correspond to their own desires and holding on to these projections, emptied of meaning, in ignorance. In this passage we witness the ambiguities that the poet experiences as he struggles toward his ideal but faces what often seems like a more immediate truth.

Kinnell's ambiguous tone is sustained through the next few lines as he questions the future of his task and the capacity of his words to endure: "As for these words scattered into the future -- / posterity / is one invented too deep in its past / to hear them" (37). Then ambiguity melts into irony as the poet self-consciously, self-mockingly identifies his role and his awareness of it, using a formal rhetoric laden with the knowledge of his insignificance and waning hope:

The foregoing scribed down
in March, of the year Seventy,
on my sixteen-thousandth night of war and madness,
in the Hotel of Lost Light, under the freeway
which roams out into the dark
of the moon, in the absolute spell
of departure, and by the light
from the joined hemispheres of the spider's eyes. (38)
The formality of the style suggests the presence of a scribe at work, but juxtaposed with the despairing tone, the sense of isolation and meaninglessness, this passage becomes more than a scribe's testimony. The self-awareness with which Kinnell records the time and place of his writing reveals a problematic attitude toward his own identity. While before, as amanuensis, he could transcribe the post-mortem words of the drunk without irony, here he must create a tension that implicitly exposes his fears.

Kinnell's consciousness of his role as a storyteller scribing for posterity reveals a kind of coherence in the core of his selfhood despite its consistent dispersal amid various other selves. The shifting persona always revolves around some extension of this element; it is the memory-keeping urge that sustains his movement through the poem. Thus, the process of the death of the self, though crucial to Kinnell's inward journey, is limited by a recognition of his role as poet. He cannot totally dismantle his ego because of the awareness that he is writing, and that much of what he writes defines himself. His scriptive consciousness manifests the core of selfhood to which he clings; in the midst of all his dissolving self-parts, this is the one that remains. The import of Kinnell's awareness of his poet-self is similar to Pound's empowering recognition in one of the Pisan Cantos ("as a lone ant from a broken ant-hill / From the wreckage of Europe, ego scriptor"31) -- ego scriptor, I the writer -- an acknowledgment of the heuristic sustaining power of writing.32 For Pound, the fact of his writing enables the redemption of his identity; Kinnell's writing sustains his identity -- more precisely, the root of his ego -- despite his fragmenting movement through the poem. It balances the destruction of self that occurs as he descends into empathy
by keeping a part of his ego inviolate, whole amid his fragmenting identity, defined by its function and the vision it enables.

However, because he is defined by the very act of writing, the poet cannot evade the reciprocal demands of the medium, which qualify his authority and impose their own structures. Kinnell's 'control' over the poem and its language parallels his self-consciousness. In appropriating the power and limitations of language, and trying to articulate his experience and desires and imagination, he becomes aware of both the potency and weakness of his medium. His self-consciousness increases with this knowledge, and as he realizes the strengths and weaknesses of his mode of expression they become his, are subsumed into his own identity. Thus he adopts a partially ironic stance that can accommodate his knowledge. Much of The Book of Nightmares represents an effort to come to terms with the power and limitations that are part of being a poet and a mythmaker.

We first encounter Kinnell's self-conscious awareness of the undertaking to which he has committed himself at the end of the first section: "And then / you shall open / this book, even if it is the book of nightmares" (8). He is speaking to Maud, but at the same time addresses all the readers of the poem. For Maud, the book contains a didactic element that in some way is meant to sustain and guide her when her father is no longer around, and which we may engage if we choose. While these lines hold a certain optimism, they communicate a strangeness as well. Kinnell's conviction that we "shall open / this book" is contained within the book itself, several pages into it, so that we are already somehow displaced from the experience he presents and get a sense of the disjunction which he too confronts. Further, his recognition that this is
"the book of nightmares" reveals an ambiguous attitude toward the text and its role, prefiguring his later expressions of uncertainty and self-doubt.

And so we find, in "The Hen Flower" for example, the "wing / made only to fly -- unable / to write out the sorrows of being unable / to hold another in one's arms -- and unable / to fly" (12). The flightlessness of the hen parallels the poet's doubt about his capacity to successfully articulate. He perceives as tragic her inability to write about something that disturbs him much more than it would the hen. Yet coming from the context of the poet's empathy with the hen and the merging of their identities, his arm becoming her wing, this projection reveals his own desire to write about the broken embrace. The word "unable" located at the end of three consecutive lines gives us an indication of the way that he is constructing his self-doubt -- through manipulation of the poetic line, through the very medium about which he is having misgivings. Perhaps in articulating his fears about poetry-writing through poetry Kinnell hopes to find some affirmation of ability, or at least of faith. Here, as in Poem V, his self-doubt dissolves into irony as he realizes that both he and the hen must wait "for that sweet, eventual blaze in the genes, / that one day, according to gospel, shall carry it back / into pink skies, where geese / cross at twilight, honking / in tongues" (12-13). There is no such prophecy; the phrase "according to gospel" only mocks evangelical rhetoric. And the idea of geese honking in tongues reduces self-declaration to unintelligible gibberish that one must have faith in if any meaning is to be derived from it, casting even more ambiguity on the task of the poet.
Myth reveals the self-image of its progenitor. Its content reflects back on the desires and perceptions of the mythmaker. In this sense Kinnell's use of myth builds on his identity with the same force as his use of autobiography. Contrary to autobiography, however, myth expresses a condition in which "mankind's spiritual life subsumes the individual's existence."\(^3^3\) It tends away from the personal toward the universal. The experience of the individual becomes immersed in the shared experience of humankind. In discussing the relation between myth and modernist poetry, one critic writes:

> emphasis on universal human behavior led poets to identify readily with experience embodied in the cultural past. Repetition, therefore, defines the relationship of the modernist poem to myth: mythic narratives and legends could be successfully improvised because there was little difference between experience portrayed in them and contemporary experience.\(^3^4\)

Kinnell to some extent works within the modernist tradition; his vision locates the self in constant flux and posits experience as disorienting and grounded in fragmentation. Of course, his treatment of the mythic narratives is quite different than in the modernist poetry discussed above -- he is not dealing ostensibly with a certain myth throughout -- but the effect is the same. The archetypal situation is juxtaposed with the contemporary, the mythic is brought into the present and rendered accessible by its familiarity.

In the sixth poem, "The Dead Shall Be Raised Incorruptible," war and conflict embody the archetypal situation which we are forced to engage -- not only war, but many related aspects of contemporary experience, all of
which are grounded in a fear of empathy and the embrace, and emerge from the division between self and world that characterizes modernity. Kinnell seems to dredge up everything that is meaningless in human experience. The poem represents the depths of the inner self, which he discovers to be almost overwhelmingly brutal and animalistic, the darkest nightmare of existence. The metaphoric death of the self is tangibly rendered as a corpse -- "A piece of flesh gives off / smoke in the field -- // carrion, / caput mortuum, / orts, / pelf, / fenks, / sordes, / gurry dumped from hospital trashcans" (41) -- and in images of the corporeal body as refuse. Death dominates this poem to such an extent that it precludes as a meaningful reality the possibility of empathy for others. The poet records the words of an Air Force gunner during the Vietnam War:

"That you Captain? Sure, sure I remember -- I still hear you lecturing at me on the intercom, Keep your guns up, Burnsie! and then screaming, Stop shooting, for crissake, Burnsie, those are friendlies! But crissake, Captain I'd already started, burst after burst, little black pajamas jumping and falling. . . " (41)

Yet here, in the core of brutality, resides one of the truths that underlies the need for the embrace and provides a fragile connection between self and experience -- the joy and tangibility of sensual experience within the physicality of the moment. As the voice of Burnsie says, "It was only / that I loved the sound / of them, I guess I just loved / the feel of them sparkin' off my hands" (42).

Regarding the poet's strategy of inserting fragments of text or monologue into the poem, one critic contends that Kinnell "deliberately subverts the self-referential perfection of the book's formal
development." It is in this deliberate subversion, this undermining of the carefully constructed linguistic tapestry, that Kinnell chooses to locate one aspect of his irony. Whenever he departs from the dominant 'poetic' rhetoric (blood, bones, stones, emptiness, blooming, song) to include fragments of monologues or letters or incantations, he is disrupting the contrived web of words and images and calling attention to its inability to represent exactly the reality of these experiences. Kinnell thus emphasizes the limitations of the language of the poem and his capacity to create or arrange it. The poet's verbatim record of the emotional particularity of certain critical moments forces these moments out of the closely-tied context of the rest of the poem. When Burnsie tells his story, for example, he uses a language that differs from the poet's diction. His testimony stands out from the rest of the text; like Virginia's letters, it is distinguished from Kinnell's own words in order to enhance their resonance. However, in being deprived of this verbally-interconnected context these passages are also able to transcend its limitations and attach themselves to the reader's experience more directly than if they were filtered through the conscious language of the speaker. It might be misleading to identify the 'limitations' of Kinnell's language, but the associated overlapping of certain recurrent words and images can be interpreted as so repetitive or processed that the emotive capacities of these themes diminish, to some extent, and acquire more of an importance in their relation to the speaker than to the experiences they describe or to the reader's experience. But perhaps this is the point, since through this language he is consciously trying to articulate his ego and his experience. In any case, Kinnell is removed as an intermediary -- we can
decide for ourselves the impact of Burnsie's words, and the extent of their symbiosis with the poet's voice.

The middle of this poem is dominated by the last will and testament of Kinnell who, for the purpose of demonstrating the absurdity and emptiness of contemporary experience, has transformed his voice into a truly ironic symbol of American communality, Christian man:

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, every one of them for his own good,
a whole continent of red men for living in unnatural community and at the same time having relations with the land, one billion species of animals for being sub-human, and ready to take on the bloodthirsty creatures from other planets,
I, Christian man, groan out this testament of my last will. (42)

Here we find the universalizing tendency of the self-fragmentation process made manifest in the dissolution of the poet's symbolic body as it is parcelled out among "the last bomber pilot aloft," "the Secretary of the Dead," "the Indians," "the advertising man, / the anti-prostitute," "the dice maker," "the last surviving man on earth." Confronted by the hypocrisies and horrors that Christian man has perpetrated throughout history, the self is deteriorating into nothingness:

I give the emptiness my hand: the pinkie picks no more noses, slag clings to the black stick of the ring finger, a bit of flame jets from the tip of the fuck-you finger, the first finger accuses the heart, which has vanished, on the thumb stump wisps of smoke ask a ride into the emptiness. (43-44)
The flesh of the self is left a corpse in the aftermath of war: "the belly / opens like a poison nightflower, / the tongue has evaporated, . . . / the five flames at the end / of each hand have gone out" (44). The cry of "Lieutenant! / This corpse will not stop burning!" (41 and 45) portrays the continual, repeated destruction of the self which takes place throughout Poem VI -- these napalm flames seem to disallow, at this moment anyway, the phoenix-like rebirth the poet desired.

Images of emptiness and the cast-off remnants of the flesh end this section: "Membranes, / effigies pressed into grass, / mummy windings, / desquamations, / sags incinerated mattresses gave back to the world, / memories left in mirrors on whorehouse ceilings, / angel's wings / flagged down into the snows of yesteryear" (45). As they "kneel / on the scorched earth / in the shapes of men and animals," all of these empty signs strive toward a reclamation of the flesh. They long to sustain their contact with physical existence, even if that experience is painful and ultimately fatal. They intone collectively: "do not let this last hour pass, / do not remove this last, poison cup from our lips ." The poet's mind interrogates to the fullest extent the ambiguities of flesh and spirit, and life and death. While the potential of the embrace is nearly negated -- "And a wind holding / the cries of love-making from all our nights and days / moves among the stones, hunting / for two twined skeletons to blow its last cry across" -- the transcendence of the spirit, and the immortality of inner voice, is tentatively affirmed:

I ran
my neck broken I ran
holding my head up with both hands I ran
thinking the flames
the flames may burn the oboe
but listen buddy boy they can't touch the notes!  (44)

In this poem, manifesting the depths of The Book of Nightmares, the poet's worst nightmare is that the gap cannot be bridged, that self-parts will diverge even further as flesh peels away into desquamations and the spirit rises above the physical world.

The seventh poem, "Little Sleep's-Head Sproutiing Hair in the Moonlight," brings the speaker back up over the edge of the abyss, mirroring the action of his daughter coming back to awareness: "You scream, waking from a nightmare" (49). In the wake of Poem VI, Kinnell's fears linger and leave us with a sense of the inherent falseness of the embrace. This section, with its reascent opening, offers a little hope. The emptiness of the embrace can be partially reconciled by suspending future-knowledge, by appreciating the intimacy of the present and seeking consolation in its realness, its tangibility (a recognition that was hinted at even in the depths of the nightmare). We find Maud clinging to her father after waking from a nightmare, "as if clinging could save us" (49). She does not understand, as Kinnell does, that all things must end:

I think
you think
I will never die, I think I exude
to you the permanence of smoke or stars,
even as
my broken arms heal themselves around you.

The poet effaces his knowledge -- of both impermanence and his daughter's view of him -- by writing "I think." With this simple inclusion he acknowledges the limitations of his empathy, which cannot transcend
his uncertain imagining, but then renders the moment poignant by evoking his daughter's faith in the "permanence of smoke" as something that empathy can anticipate and appreciate. Still, Kinnell is able to find comfort in his daughter's innocence and his own shortcomings, because there is the capacity for healing in their mutual need, and the physicality of touch and of being together in the present is enough to draw it out. The broken bond between flesh and spirit is partially re-established as "my broken arms heal themselves around you" and Maud fills the emptiness of her father's universe.

Kinnell is constantly struggling with the tension between the desire for love and the knowledge that all things are mortal. Maud too, even at her young age, is aware of this tension. The poet writes that "I have heard you tell / the sun, don't go down, I have stood by / as you told the flower, don't grow old, / don't die." He realizes that the inevitability of the death of the things we love is a fact that everyone must confront, but it is especially terrifying to turn this knowledge on ourselves: "perhaps this is the reason you cry, / this is the nightmare you wake screaming from: / being forever / in the pre-trembling of a house that falls" (50).

The poet expresses his faith in the potency of the word through the voice of Maud. Her plea to the sun and the flower represents a more articulate though not quite as vivid demonstration of its power as this moment:

In a restaurant once, everyone quietly eating, you clambered up on my lap: to all the mouthfuls rising toward all the mouths, at the top of your voice you cried your one word, caca! caca! caca!
and each spoonful
stopped, a moment, in midair, in its withering steam.  (50)

Maud's cry attests to the same vital reality that Kinnell seeks to recognize when he writes that "there should be a book called Shit, telling us that what comes out of the body is no less a part of reality, no less sacred, than what goes into it."36 The word is a way of clinging to what is real. Maud clings because she senses that her father will some day "go down / the path of vanished alphabets." The desire of her clinging arms mirrors the striving of words, they are "like the adjectives in the halting speech / of old men, / which could once call up the lost nouns" (51).

Faith in the power of the word is implicit in Kinnell's mythmaking. I mentioned the particularity of his language earlier, but there is still much that needs to be elaborated. The poet makes the surface of the poem dense with his own poetic diction, a language of both physicality (the organic processes of physical change, words imitating verbal and evoking mental texture) and nothingness (images suggesting silence, decay, emptiness). He establishes a pattern of rhetoric particular to his identity -- tied up in the idiosyncratic nature of his ego -- that is crucial to his mythmaking.

Kinnell's language affects the reader viscerally, evoking the physicality of the natural world and its organic processes, as well as psychically, by hinting at the void that lies near sensual experience. The physicality of his language is one of its most unique characteristics, certainly something that critics have concentrated on -- "The Rank Flavor of Blood" and "Slogging for the Absolute" are essay titles, taken from lines of his poetry, that might communicate a sense of this critical focus on the sensual grounding of his language. It operates as a form of negotiation between self and world, becoming "the tracks that spirit lays down in the
flesh of the word." Significantly, autobiography intrudes on Kinnell's shaping of his poetic diction:

My circumstances are such that I live most of my life rather busily in the midst of the daily and ordinary. . . . Whatever my poetry will be, from now on it will no doubt come out of this involvement in the ordinary.

The particular physicality of his language emerges from his exposure to the ordinary in daily life. The manipulation of physical language within the structuring of this involvement in the ordinary allows him to develop more fully that central element of the poetic myth so succinctly conveyed by Maud: the tension between spirit and flesh, future and present, the inevitability of dying and the desire to be alive, the longing for heaven and the anchoring weight of physicality embodied in the objects of the physical world. With this in mind, Kinnell's attitude toward the functioning of language in poetry becomes clear:

The subject of the poem is the thing which dies. . . . Poetry is the wasted breath. That is why it needs the imperfect music of the human voice, this is why its words have no higher aim than to press themselves to us, to cling to the creatures and things we know and love, to be the ragged garments.

Poetry, as the words the poet employs, is at once the voice of the physical world and the expression of self. The physicality of language mirrors the physicality of the world; the mortality of its objects is reflected in images and words that remind us of the organic processes of change, of living and dying. The poet suits the vehicle of his expression to the necessity of the world. And since nothing but words can elude mortality, the words of the poem strive to articulate the physical world with the intent of sustaining some small part of it. In doing so, they accompany
the task of the poet's self-oriented mythmaking. Thus Kinnell's language becomes a means of mediating between ego and world, and of shaping a myth to his experience.

Even the most fundamental objects of the physical world attach themselves to the meaning in words: "the stones saying / over their one word, ci-git, ci-git, ci-git" -- here lies, the gravestones declaring their knowledge of "vanished alphabets." Like the stones, Kinnell feels the need to convey to his daughter his own knowledge. His didactic voice returns to the poem in this section, speaking to Maud with the wisdom and foresight of one who has travelled far and experienced much:

learn to reach deeper
into the sorrows
to come -- to touch
the almost imaginary bones
under the face, to hear under the laughter
the wind crying across the black stones. Kiss
the mouth
which tells you, here,
here is the world. This mouth. This laughter. These
temple bones. (52)

Not only does he encourage her to take pleasure in the present embrace and the sacredness of the flesh, but he also emphasizes the need to let the future become part of the present, to anticipate the "still undanced cadence of vanishing." Kinnell juxtaposes his identity with Maud's in the overlapping of future and past -- "I can see in your eyes // the hand that waved once / in my father's eyes" -- to indicate the cycle of knowledge passed on to posterity. At the end of the section he returns to the stones, to all the objects of the physical world, where true knowledge of the vanishing embrace may be found:
we will walk out together among
the ten thousand things,
each scratched too late with such knowledge, the wages
of dying is love. (53)

The subject of the eighth poem, "The Call
Across the Valley of Not-Knowing," is the
embrace, in all its ambiguity, the embrace of not
just words or physicality, but of another person.
This poem is a meditation on love and human
desire. The speaker rests in "the red house
sinking down / into ground rot" (57), one of "two mismatched halfnesses
lying side by side in the darkness." In this section he is most acutely
aware of the emptiness in the embrace, of the gap in the expected meaning
that this intimacy should embody.

Throughout the book he has dealt ambivalently with the notion. In
the first poem, the newborn Maud instinctively longs for the reciprocated
embrace, for something to hold onto, even though "the slow, / beating,
featherless arms / already clutching at the emptiness" (7) anticipate the
vacant and unsatisfying reality on which Kinnell meditates later in the
book. While imagining Virginia by the blue Juniata he portrays the torn
embrace of the "love-roots in the virginal glades" (28) as they are forced
to release their hold on the earth. He foresees a nothingness in the
embrace signified by a mattress "where a sag shaped as a body / lies next
to a sag" (30). There are elements of ignorance and self-deception in the
image of "two clasping what they dream is one another" (37), an image
which is brought into the future and corrupted in Poem VI by the doom of
the post-apocalyptic wind, "hunting / for two twined skeletons to blow
its last cry across" (45). And the poet presents, as an impossible condition whose fulfillment would negate his love for Maud, a time when "lovers no longer whisper to the presence beside them in the dark, O corpse to be . . ." (50). In the eighth poem Kinnell explores Aristophanes' nightmare "that each of us / is a torn half / whose lost other we keep seeking across time" (58). His continual returns to the false security and emptiness of the embrace are all echoes of a single moment, the embrace he gave up, which occupies his thoughts at the beginning of the book and is explained here, in the eighth poem. He writes that we will keep seeking for the lost half until we "actually find her":

as I myself, in an Ozark Airlines DC-6 droning over towns made of crossroads, headed down into Waterloo, Iowa, actually found her, held her face a few hours in my hands; and for reasons -- cowardice, loyalties, all which goes by the name "necessity" -- left her. . . (58).

This autobiographical moment suddenly takes on an importance that we could not foresee earlier in the poem. It has been a determining factor in Kinnell's shaping of his selfhood, acting as a source for his many constructions of the embrace.

It is hard to determine precisely what his attitude is, particularly since it changes not just from poem to poem but within the same section. His angry condemnation of Aristophanes seems to reject the idea of a perfect and eternal love, yet his insistence that he found and lost his torn half indicates at least a temporary fulfillment of "the wholeness the drunk Greek / extrapolated from his high / or flagellated out of an empty heart" (58). The notion of "She who lies halved / beside me" suggests the
unity that may be found in the embrace, but precludes an individual
wholeness completely. And his imagining of what did not happen, his
reconstruction of the past ("Suppose I had stayed / with that woman of
Waterloo"), represents a fulfillment of desire that ends on an uncertain
note:

I think I might have closed my eyes, and moved
from then on like the born blind,
their faces
gone into heaven already. (60)

Though Kinnell undoubtedly longs for what could have been, he comes to
understand that giving in to this longing would have been self-deceiving.
To be like the "born blind" is to never see the whole of reality; the two
would have "looked into each other's blindness" and not realized their
blindness. Yet perhaps to go into heaven is fulfillment enough, and Kinnell
in his ignorance and bliss would have been content.

Interestingly, and perhaps appropriately, the poet feels that "it must
be the wound, the wound itself, / which lets us know and love, / which
forces us to reach out to our misfit" (58). It is the space between the torn
halves that produces the longing, just as the poetic urge is generated by
the disjunction between self and world, and the mythmaking urge by the
gap between the unknown and the comprehensible. This is the point at
which all the longings come together, not necessarily to be resolved, but
to make themselves meaningful in their similitude. Though the embrace
can offer only momentary solace, that moment makes all the effort
worthwhile. It is this recognition which propels Kinnell to work toward a
poetic myth of universality.
Kinnell ultimately affirms the desire for love and the need to strive for the embrace, even when confronted by the inevitability of death. So it is that we, "who put / our hand into the hand of whatever we love / as it vanishes, / as we vanish" (61), might still hear

the bear call
from his hillside -- a call, like ours, needing
to be answered -- and the dam-bear
call back across the darkness
of the valley of not-knowing
the only word tongues shape without intercession,

yes...yes...? (61)

This questioning 'yes' becomes an affirmation of the mutual search, of the need to draw knowledge of one another across the wide abyss of not-knowing. Part of what Kinnell accomplishes in acknowledging his love and need for others is the abandonment of a closed, self-sufficient ego and the acceptance of an open selfhood that embraces all facets of experience, even the painful and unspoken (or unspeakable). This is what is important, "to accept that we are many things simultaneously," because all things are part of the self, and the self is shared by all things.

Following his recognition of an absolute need for others, the poet must confront his past; he must reconcile the fragments of his ego with his own broken embrace before he can truly transcend a closed selfhood. In Poem IX, "The Path Among the Stones," Kinnell is back on the mountain, "on the path winding / upward, toward the high valley / of waterfalls and flooded, hoof-shattered / meadows of spring"
(65). As he approaches the myth of wholeness, the physical world becomes more and more like the poem, like the materials with which his mythmaking is expressed. He calls this place a "land / of quills / and inkwells of skulls filled with black water." The objects of the world start to manifest their inherent contradictions, their vitality and simultaneous vanishing-potential. He cannot look at them without juxtaposing all times into the present and seeing the organic cycle they continually enact. Arrowheads scattered across a field become "stones / which shuddered and leapt forth / to give themselves into the broken hearts / of the living, / who gave themselves back, broken, to the stone." The poet closes his eyes and imagines "the luminous / beach dust pounded out of funeral shells," and the "dog-eared immortality shells / in which huge constellations of slime, by the full moon, / writhed one more / coat of invisibility on a speck of sand" (66). These images, in describing the tension fixed in all objects of the physical world, also point toward the unity of physical things, for this intrinsic knowledge of living and dying, the knowledge scratched in each that "the wages of dying is love" (53), is a point of similarity through which one object is connected to another:

and that wafer-stone
which skipped ten times across
the water, suddenly starting to run as it went under,
and the zeroes it left,
that met
and passed into each other, they themselves
smoothing themselves from the water. . . (66)

In Kinnell's imagining of the world, unity, at least among things of the physical world, is grounded in zeroes meeting zeroes, a self-negating emptiness which is itself a sign of existence.
The poet's empowering observation of this truth co-exists with a recognition of his own insignificance: "I can see / them living without me, dying / without me" (65-66). Perhaps this is what allows him to transcend the temporal and spatial restrictions of his physical body and journey out into the now-transparent world, seeking the ultimate unity of his self and the world: "I walk out from myself, / among the stones of the field . . . / the stones holding between pasture and field, / the great, granite nuclei, / glimmering, even they, with ancient inklings of madness and war" (66-67). The nuclei stones are the convergence point for past and present, and so to confront the meaning of his own broken embrace the poet enters the stones themselves: "A way opens / at my feet. I go down / . . . into the unbreathable goaf / of everything I ever craved and lost" (67). There, in the elemental heart of the physical world, he encounters "an old man, a stone / lamp at his forehead," mixing together in a cauldron the many evils that constitute Kinnell's understanding of the moral history of humankind -- murder ("chopped head / of crow") and pride ("opened tail of peacock") and war ("robin breast / dragged through the mud of battlefields") and their seasoning of time ("sand / stolen from the upper bells of hourglasses"). All of these historical elements coalesce into the present as "Nothing. / Always nothing. Ordinary blood / boiling away in the glare of the brow lamp," as though there is no meaning in the past but blood, no trace of sacredness or mystery that may be drawn from events in the human realm.

But then a slight and unexplained redemption occurs -- or perhaps not necessarily 'unexplained,' for one thing we have learned is that even in nothing there is meaning, and in "ordinary blood" the capacity for sacred change. The poet experiences a moment of revelation which is spoken very
undramatically, prosaically: "And yet, no, / perhaps not nothing. Perhaps / not ever nothing" (67). In the apparent disappointing mundanity of "Ordinary blood / boiling away in the glare of the brow lamp," he discovers the inherent mystery of ordinary things. He suddenly witnesses the coalescence of sacred and mundane, which though always occupying the same space had remained unrecognized. Kinnell emerges from the earth to "find myself alive / in the whorled archway of the fingerprint of all things, / skeleton groaning, / blood-strings wailing the wail of all things" (68). His insight paints the smallest imprint of living creatures as a gateway and a bridge to the infinitude of the world. The spirituality of the body and the natural world finds expression in the strains of flesh-music, the voice of all selves caught in both pure and physical expression.

Following this transfiguration of the poet's vision, the world itself experiences a transcendent change as "The witness trees heal / their scars at the flesh fire" and "the flame / rises off the bones." For a moment, even desire is eradicated: "the hunger / to be new lifts off / my soul." Though Kinnell conceives of desire as a sustaining force, its cessation embodies a momentary pause, a stillness in the eternal longing, and in this moment the physical world feels the reverberations of renewal and "an eerie blue light blooms / on all the ridges of the world." The natural order is reversed, the past is set back into the realm of possibility, and the old myths themselves are transformed: "Somewhere / in the legends of blood sacrifice / the fatted calf / takes the bonfire into his arms, and he / burns it" (68). At last, with the revitalization of the mythic past and the transformation of self and world, the unity between "earth and water, flesh and spirit" disrupted at the beginning of the poem is here re-established:
As above: the last scattered stars
kneel down in the star-form of the Aquarian age:
a splash
on the top of the head,
on the grass of this earth even the stars love, splashes of the
sacred waters . . .

So below: in the graveyard
the lamps start lighting up, one for each of us,
in all the windows
of stone. (68)

Inevitably, the moment of unity juxtaposes birth and death. The universe
itself is baptized, the renewal of the natural world sanctified by
elemental unity, even while as the starting point of existing it prepares
for death.

After the apparent climax of the poet-shaman's transfigured and revelatory
emergence from the wellspring-earth, the
tenth poem, "Lastness," acts as an
appropriate closure to the book by pulling
together all the recurrent images and themes
that have wound their serpentine way through
the book's convolutions -- completing the
cycle, in a sense. The poet is back on the hillside where he began the
poem, while "Somewhere behind me / a small fire goes on flaring in the
rain, in the desolate ashes" (71). By comparing his thoughts about this fire
we can understand how his imagining of the world has changed. At the
beginning of the poem the fire was lit for one person, "for her, / whose
face / I held in my hands / a few hours" (3), but the transformation of his
vision has made Kinnell's imagining more wholistic: "No matter, now, whom it was built for, it keeps its flames, it warms everyone who might wander into its radiance, a tree, a lost animal, the stones, because in the dying world it was set burning" (71). Fully accommodating his new awareness, the poet embraces not only the objects of the physical world, but also the fact that it is a "dying world."

In this last poem, the walls of identity have become completely permeable. The identities of Kinnell and the black bear envisioned in "Under the Maud Moon" are merged, or exchanged, and the confrontation of their 'discrete' selves is so thorough that the resulting confusion of pronouns is difficult to untangle:

he understands
a creature, a death-creature
watches from the fringe of the trees,
finally he understands
I am no longer here, he himself
from the fringe of the trees watches
a black bear
get up, eat a few flowers, trudge away,
all his fur glistening
in the rain. (71-72)

The bear's "he" merges with the poet's "I" as "he" watches a black bear from the trees and the "I" disappears ("I am no longer here"). In the wake of the temporary reconciliation of flesh and spirit, self and world, the creatures of the natural world enter directly into the poet's identity. The bear actually becomes Kinnell -- Kinnell does not empathetically extend his identity toward the bear and transform himself into it. This fact indicates an inclusive unity that was not attained in any of the earlier self-transformations.
In the poet's imagination, his son Fergus embodies the bear as well, if only for a moment -- "When he came wholly forth / I took him up in my hands and bent / over and smelled / the black, glistening fur / of his head" (72) -- emphasizing the continuation of the didactic cycle that Maud began, the passing of knowledge and identity from the father to the daughter or son whose birth bears witness to the potential endurance of the myth. The father leans forward and smells his newborn son "as empty space / must have bent / over the newborn planet / and smelled the grasslands and the ferns." It is interesting to note how Kinnell constructs himself through this simile. He achieves a mythic stature, his paternal gesture suddenly expanding his identity to cosmic proportions. This aggrandizing comparison probably reflects his sense of significance and reverence for the moment. Yet it is mediated by an almost ironic awareness of himself as "empty space," as an undefined nonexistence, though it is an emptiness still able to gain definition and meaning through its acceptance of another.

The whole of Kinnell's journey comes down to this final, naked confrontation between self and world -- "Walking toward the cliff overhanging / the river, I call out to the stone, / and the stone / calls back, its voice hunting among the rubble / for my ears" (72) -- and ends with "Stop." The voice of the poet collides with the voice of the stone and he senses "the line / where the voice calling from stone / no longer answers, / turns into stone, and nothing comes back" (72-73). Abruptly, as his mind pierces through the haziness that wells up from the chasm separating self from world, he sees everything with clarity: "Here, between answer / and nothing, I stand." His is the position of humankind confronted by the mystery of the cosmos, striving for an understanding of
what is essentially unknowable; or perhaps the position of someone like Virginia, a seer who suddenly glimpses the reality behind reality and is terrified by what is revealed. He asks, "Is it true / the earth is all there is, and the earth does not last?" and is answered: "On the river the world floats by holding one corpse." And again: "Stop. / Stop here. / Living brings you to death, there is no other road." His journey must stop, his vision must stop, before he completely buries himself in the dark meaning of this discovery.

Now that Kinnell has experienced the unity of the elemental embrace, he must also confront what he now sees to be its inevitable cessation. He writes that "Lastness / is brightness. It is the brightness / gathered up of all that went before" (73-74). This claim echoes back to his questioning of "one light / made of everyone's darkness together" (30), affirming that "It lasts" (74) beyond the present by sustaining itself on the meaning, the brightness of the past. Yet "when it does end," at the moment when the cycle ceases, when the voice touches the stone and no longer answers, "there is nothing, nothing / left." Lastness is the co-existence of meaning and emptiness, of nothing and desire. It is life reaffirmed in death, and the individual experience given collective significance, so that the music of the single violin during "That Bach concert I went to so long ago" finds universal meaning in "a shower of rosin, / the bow-hairs listening down all their length / to the wail, the sexual wail of the back-alleys and blood strings we have lived / still crying, / still singing, from the sliced intestine / of cat."

 Appropriately, Kinnell's coming to terms with the lastness of existence parallels his terminal involvement with the poem itself:
This is the tenth poem
and it is the last. It is right
at the last, that one
and zero
walk off together,
walk off the end of these pages together,
one creature
walking away side by side with the emptiness. (73)

One and zero placed side by side become a single being, their unity
existing only at the end and affirming the end. This image represents the
physical body of the poem reflecting the meaning of the poem. Kinnell
deepens this correspondence by again appealing to a picture of the written
word. One of the final images is the poet's vision of the poem, a self-
reflective imagining of the body of the self and the body of the poem as
one: "This poem / if we shall call it that, / or concert of one / divided
among himself" (75). Just as the poem is divided into ten sections, so too
is the selfhood of the poet fragmented into many parts. The poem is also
the "earthward gesture / of the sky-diver, the worms / on his back still
spinning forth / and already gnawing away / the silks of his loves, who
could have saved him." In generating so many questions the poetic urge,
while generally bringing him closer to experience, also leads him to self-
doubt and jeopardizes his lifeline to others. This is an uncertainty which
has stayed with Kinnell throughout the poem. And yet he still has faith in
the embrace. It is the persistence of this myth-like ambiguity which
enables him to close the poem on an ironic note: "On the body, / on the
blued flesh, when it is / laid out, see if you can find / the one flea which
is laughing."

The last poem encompasses the redemption of Kinnell's identity
from his vision of unity as well as a reinterpretation of the meaning that
is to be found in the desire for unity. The wholeness formed by the
unification of self and world might last, but only for a moment. The poetic mythmaking capacity, which lends Kinnell his constructive power to articulate experience, to create and transcend his selfhood, and finally to merge opposites, must eventually cease its expression as well; yet the mythmaking will begin anew with a different cycle, a new incarnation. It is this knowledge -- the poet's conscious acceptance of the turning of the time-wheel, his recognition of life's ephemerality and the fragility of the tie between flesh and spirit -- that pulls him back from the unity which defined the cosmos at the end of the ninth poem. Here, at the end of the myth that is The Book of Nightmares, lies the promise at the heart of all myths that the gap between self and world is ultimately insurmountable, and that nothing lasts, not even the wholeness which bestows the revelation.

* * *

The movement toward myth describes a process of fiction-making. Kinnell sees fiction as a means of making sense of his world; this idea presupposes a division between self and world which renders experience disorienting to the individual. It is from this gap that he begins to construct his fiction, literally beginning the book with an evocation of radical disjuncture. Working within the void of unstructured meaning the gap supplies, Kinnell is able to evoke a sense of mythic experience and fictionalize reality by manipulating its parameters. He consistently juxtaposes future and past in the present moment, to emphasize not only the cyclical nature of his fiction but also the contrivance and ultimate perviousness of identity as a significant function of reality. That mythopoesis can translate this reality into a coherent form attests, if not to a fundamental order, then at least to the potential for meaning in the
self's apprehension of experience. As one critic states, "there are no strict demarcation lines in myth between past, present, and future; and the spatial world of myth interweaves distinct and interdependent zones which contribute to a sense of order and relation underlying existence." Kinnell's landscapes are not so much realistic renderings of space or actuality as settings symbolically laden with the knowledge of transformation, states in flux. Yet at the same time, the realms of mountain path, barnyard, Salvation Army store, hotel, household, valley, and underworld are treated as discrete and unethereal, apparently sharing a common naturalism. They become "distinct and interdependent zones" which the poet weaves together into a coherent vision of the world as a site for mythic undertakings. Meaning emerges from apprehension, from the process of weaving together and striving toward myth. Thus poetry, as a continual transformation of experience and self-understanding, embodies the fictional act through which the endeavor for myth is enacted.

In stating that Kinnell transforms himself and his world through the mythopoetic process, I am making certain assumptions about not only poetry and myth, but about the nature of reality. I know, as the poet must know, that he cannot substantively transfigure the face of the world through the writing of poetry and the endeavor toward a poetic myth. And yet, inherent in the resolve of the poem is the belief that myth and reality should not be too readily separated, that the power of myth resides in its entanglement with social and cultural circumstances. The definition of myth as "a culturally central form of narrative that generates further narratives within new historical contexts" bestows upon it a social relevance which is crucial to the 'success' of the mythopoetic process.
Alicia Ostriker invokes this possibility for cultural change in her view of poetic mythmaking as a revisionist force:

Whenever a poet employs a figure or story previously accepted and defined by a culture, the poet is using myth, and the potential is always present that the use will be revisionist: that is, the figure or tale will be appropriated for altered ends, the old vessel filled with new wine, initially satisfying the thirst of the individual poet but ultimately making cultural change possible.\textsuperscript{43}

From this perspective, the mythic formations of the feminist literature that Rachel Blau Duplessis seeks -- "To translate ourselves from our disguises... A self-questioning, the writer built into the centre of the work, the questions at the centre of the writer... Exploration not in service of reconciling self to world, but creating a new world for a new self"\textsuperscript{44} -- collaborate with Kinnell's vision for his own contemporary myth. His task is not so much to reconcile self to world as to bring them together in a new shape, each transfigured, to create "a new world for a new self." He constructs the poem around himself and his self through the poem, interrogating his identity and experience through its development. Though they envision the past differently, and their final intents are obviously quite distinct, both writers desire a transforming narrative rooted in the heart of culture and contemporaneity, and both seek to establish a mode of envisioning experience that will continue to generate questioning beyond the present.

The Book of Nightmares, as an ordering articulation of experience, does transform itself into a myth. It draws meaning out of the apparent meaninglessness of contemporary existence. It raises questions that bring us closer to an understanding of ourselves and our world. And it does, briefly, close the gap between self and world -- the poet's grappling
with his experience eventually unites the two, and as readers we too experience that unity. But the sustenance of a wholeness that is essentially foreign to a world governed by mortality is too much to ask of a poem, so that finally, the most it can do is assert its own reality. The enduring myth of the poem is that mythmaking itself will endure, to sustain the turning of the cycle of birth and death, and to affirm the essential human striving for unity between the mysterious self and the mysterious world:

in the rust of old cars,  
in the hole torn open in the body of the Archer,  
in river-mist smelling of the weariness of stones,  
the dead lie,  
empty, filled, at the beginning,

and the first  
voice comes craving again out of their mouths. (74)
ENDNOTES


3. Ibid., 88.


11. Ibid., 201.


15. Ibid., 64.
16. Ibid., 65.
19. Ibid., 70.
20. Ibid., 74.
30. Ibid., 108.
32. Ellmann, 1.


34. Ibid., 2.


37. Goldensohn, 303.


40. Brown, 183.


43. Ostriker, 317.

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