

## Galway Kinnell: A Sense of the Sacred

*Following his poetry reading at the Squaw Valley (California) Writers Conference, Galway Kinnell dodged an offensive line made up of verse groupies to chat in a ski resort lounge. Kinnell resembles an aging boxer, albeit an unmarked one. He is an intense man with unkempt hair and an old-fashioned Irish paunch. When he speaks at the podium he tends to lean forward practically to nuzzle the bosom of a rapt admirer in the sixteenth row.*

*Kinnell is the author of such well-received books as *Body Rags*, *The Book of Nightmares*, *Flower Herding on Mount Monadnock* and *Mortal Acts*, *Mortal Words*. Most recently he has headed the writing program at New York University. Many of his poems explore the mortality of man and the pain, suffering, and fear we all must experience before Death punches the tickets to our final destination.*

\* \* \*

**NUWER:** It seems a favorite question of interviewers when they are with novelists to ask them a question about the future of the novel. My question is how do you, as a twentieth century poet, feel about the future of poetry at this time?

**KINNELL:** Well, some days I think that the modern man is evolving in such a way that poetry will mean nothing to him any more in a few generations. Sometimes I think that poetry belongs to a world where there was a sense of the sacred, and as that world disappears, poetry will too. It is possible that poetry will simply adapt itself to the profane world and become a new kind of thing that I probably wouldn't call poetry any more. But on other days, I believe that poetry is what will save us: poetry in a broad sense, poetry as an art which represents that effort made in so many ways to reattach oneself to the natural world.

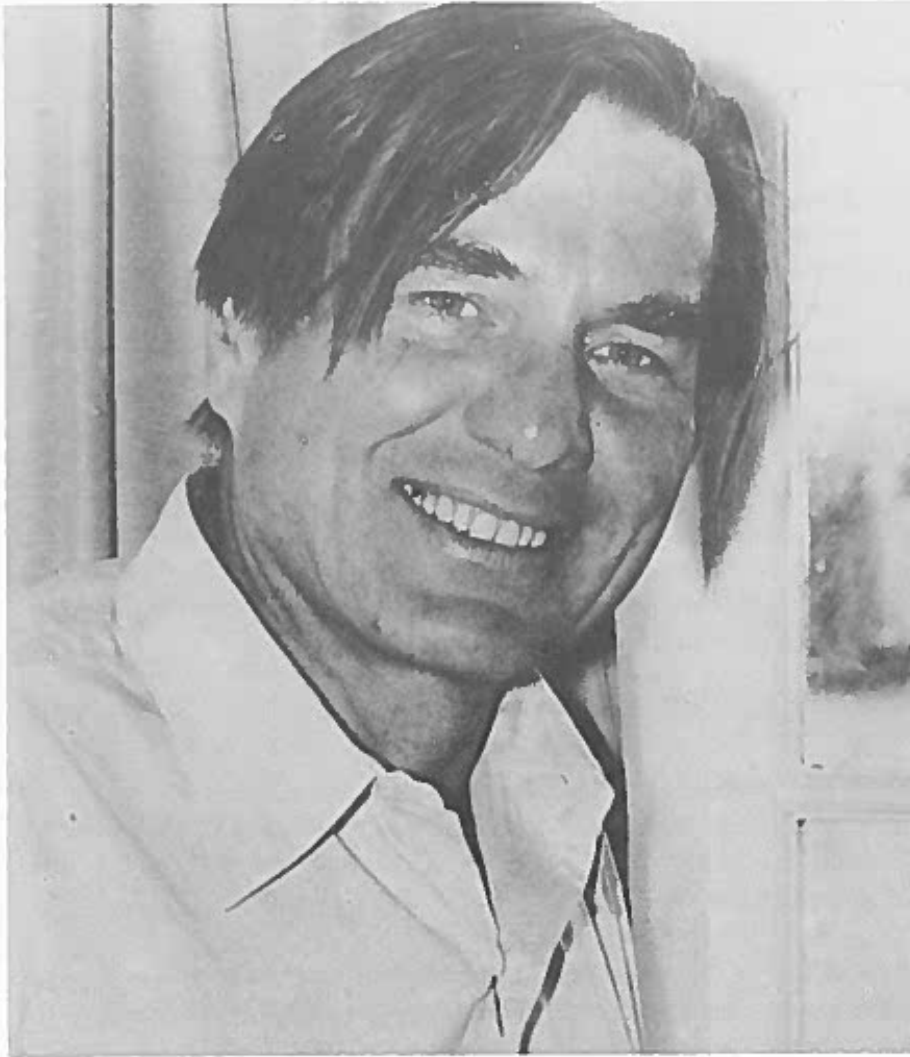
**NUWER:** Does it help or hinder someone who is interested in poetry to start writing critical reviews and articles on poetry?

**KINNELL:** You mean to write literary criticism—

**NUWER:** —while still writing poetry at the same time.

**KINNELL:** I think they are both compatible.

**NUWER:** Do you write criticism?



**KINNELL:** I'm trying to write about poetry. It's not really criticism; it's more what I think human life should be like, using poems as examples. So I don't really find it incompatible. In fact, I would prefer to write articles about poetry than to teach. I would feel there's a greater connection in writing about poetry to writing poetry than there is teaching it.

**NUWER:** Does teaching drain you of creative energy?

**KINNELL:** Yes, it does drain you, and it leaves you the way an actor must feel at the end of a season. He's put out all his energy on the stage, and then the season is over and what has he got! Somehow he's kind of alone and everybody's gone home. I feel a bit that way at the end of a year teaching.

**NUWER:** Why do you teach then?

**KINNELL:** I teach to earn my living. I have two children and a wife, and I live in New York, which is very expensive. My wife likes it, however.

NUWER: No way for you to exist on your writing alone?

KINNELL: No. I could exist on my books and readings, but that would mean going off on the road doing grueling reading trips for three or four months. Having a family, you just can't leave them that long, and also I'm not sure it's good for one's self to just read and read one's own poems.

NUWER: Was there a time when Galway Kinnell collected nothing but rejection slips?

KINNELL: Yes, I didn't like them. I sort of—and I suppose most people do—despised the editors who rejected them, even though later on I could see there might have been perfectly good reasons for rejecting a particular poem. But I didn't like that feeling of hating those editors and wanting to get published, so I tried to train myself really not to think about it one way or another. I did send off poems, but mostly to magazines that I knew would publish them. It was a long time too before I had a book published; I think I was thirty-three years old. That was 1960, and so it was some fourteen years since the time I'd first begun to write. I had tried at various points to publish a book, and I didn't like the feeling of wanting to get ahead and wanting to be known, and hating editors who refused me. So I did develop a kind of indifference to it. At the same time I always had a sort of absolute faith that eventually my poems would be published. So the indifference was actually an easy thing to cultivate, and I felt a lot better and didn't worry about it. Eventually a publisher asked me to show them a manuscript and published it.

I publish in little magazines quite a lot. The reason I do is that I have friends who are involved in magazines. They write me for a poem and I send them one if I have one. So in that sense I'm involved in little magazines, but I think the main reason for their existence is for young poets' benefit. Small magazines—especially regional magazines—are marvelous things for young poets, because otherwise there's just so much wasted energy sending off poetry to *The Atlantic Monthly*, *New Yorker*, or some such national magazines, and getting hundreds of rejection slips. It's much better publishing in little easy magazines even if they're not widely read. I know when I started writing I was living in Chicago and there was a magazine called the *Beloit Poetry Journal* in Wisconsin, which still exists. Well, they liked my poems, and so when I wrote a poem, I sent it to them. Not many people read them, but you have a certain faith that eventually if you write well, somebody will publish your work on a wider scale.

NUWER: Are you a competitive person—in life or as a writer?

KINNELL: No, I'm not a very competitive person. People who see me playing tennis think I'm very competitive because I absolutely throw myself into the game. I play with an abandon that you don't often see. But it's only because I love the game. I lost to Blair Fuller today in an absolutely marvelous match, and I was happy to lose to him in the end. I

don't have to win a game. I just loved it when he played well, and I played well, though I guess I didn't really like it that he played better. But at the end I was really high from the match. When I'd lost I was happy. And poetry is the same way for me. When I write well, I'm happy, and I don't care if I'm better or worse than anybody since there's absolutely no way you can compare yourself to somebody else. You see your poems from the inside, you see their poems from the outside, and you have no basis for comparing them. It's an entirely different world—your world and their world.

NUWER: I'd like to throw out a quotation in which a critic named Charles Molesworth, in an article for *Western Humanities Review*, said that your poetry is a "virtual rediscovery of how to view objects intensely." Your reaction?

KINNELL: Well, I like that idea. I don't know that I regard it as a full description of my poetry, but it is one thing I like to think my poems do. The English language is one of the few languages that really can sort of poke around physical things, feel them, and touch them, and smell them and make them come alive on the page. I think of Rilke's recommendation in the *Duino Elegies* when he says: "Don't tell the angels about the glory of your emotions, how magnificent your feelings are, for they know all about such things. Tell them about ordinary objects on earth because that amazes them; that they don't know about, so you must tell them."

NUWER: One other question I had for you concerns a remark you made in another interview once when you said: "A long poem exists in time, and a short poem exists out of time." Do you still defend that definition?

KINNELL: I guess so. I don't know as a definition, though, for it's just something that had occurred to me. Yeah, I think it's probably true that a short poem tends to open a moment and pass through the moment into some kind of timeless realm and holds you suspended out of time. But a long poem necessarily evolves into time, and that's the glory of a long poem—that time can pass, that things can change and you can be different at the end of it than at the beginning. You can learn something in the course of the poem, or at least get some intimation of how you might change your life.

NUWER: Have there been poems that have changed your life?

KINNELL: Yeah. The *Duino Elegies*, [Whitman's] *Song of Myself*, and possibly *Jubilate Agno* by Christopher Smart.

\* \* \*