Introducton to John Kinsella, *The Doppler Effect* (Cambridge: Salt Books, 2004): xv-xxii.

Introduction:
A Mythology Reflects Its Region

John Kinsella, everyone seems to agree, is a phenomenon. Born in 1963 in remote South Perth in Western Australia, Kinsella has already published more than a dozen collections of poems, including the 1998 Bloodaxe collection Poems 1980-1994, which runs to almost 400 pages. He is the founding editor of the important Australian journal Salt (which has now branches out so as to publish books as well), was one of the editors of the multicultural journal Kunapipi, has edited little magazines, poetry features, and anthologies, and has participated in collaborations with artists, photographers, and fellow poets. A By-Fellow of Churchill College, Cambridge as well as a professor at Kenyon College in Ohio, Kinsella shuttles back and forth between the UK and U.S., with stints in Australia in between. By his own account, he doesn't sleep more than two or three hours a night because there are so many important things to do during one's waking hours. Indeed, Kinsella is perhaps the first poet to dwell mentally in cyberspace: wherever he happens to be in actual time and space, he is emailing around the world, sending poems to friends and editors, receiving the work of others, and participating in dialogue about poetics, linguistics, ecology, and politics. And the irony of this cyber-existence is that Kinsella is first and foremost a regionalist-- the celebrant of a very particular landscape most of us have never seen. Like Yeats's Sligo or Hardy's Wessex, Kinsella's south-west Australian wheatbelt has already taken its place in the imagination of the young twenty-first century.

Now Kinsella has put together a volume of his "experimental" poems that runs to some 250 (?) pages [Ed: please insert correct number]. In Kinsella's case, it's hard to tell which of his poems are and which aren't "experimental." Syzygy, to my mind the most innovative in the group selected here, also appeared in the Bloodaxe Poems 1980-1994; other sequences like The Benefaction, Alterity, and Graphology, dating from the later nineties, have appeared as small-press chapbooks, as opposed to the more mainstream collections of "counter-pastorals" (Kinsella's own term) found in The Silo (Arc 1997) and Visitants (Bloodaxe, 1999). But the division between "mainstream" and "experimental" is, in Kinsella's case, largely arbitrary, the main value of The Doppler Effect being that we now

have before us an exciting body of work culled from chapbooks and uncollected manuscripts many readers will not yet know.

"Experimental" is a word I have come to dislike, given its overuse today, when every new artwork or piece of writing or musical composition is quickly hailed as "experimental" and then just as quickly forgotten as even newer "innovative" works arrive on the scene in what sometimes looks like an orgy of commodification and replacement. But John Kinsella's poems, whether small press or in the Bloodaxe collections, really are experimental. Not so much in their form: on the page, Kinsella's free verse is not markedly different from that of other Australian or, for that matter, British poets of his generation. Sometimes he uses stanzas, ranging from the couplet to the sonnet, sometimes he writes prose poems and sometimes, as in Tarot, each of the ten poems is a fourteen-line square, made of capital letters. But primarily Kinsella's poems are organized into long, loose free-verse columns, whose words and phrases are collaged together, avoiding normal syntactic markers.

"Experimental," in Kinsella's case, is not to be confused with language poetry. True, he has obviously learned from Lyn Hejinian (to whom this book is dedicated), from Susan Howe (see Graphology), from Steve McCaffery, whose paragrams have echoes in some of the minimalist poems in Syzygy, like "peine dur et forte" (#18) and "gloat" (#19), and from the complex language games and poetics of Charles Bernstein. But unlike these and other Language poets, Kinsella is not quite willing to suspend disbelief, to allow for uncertainty and indeterminacy. For someone as ecologically aware as is Kinsella, someone who has strong feelings about the despoliation of Australian lands and the killing of the indigenous peoples, negative capability, Charles Bernstein or even John Ashbery-style, just won't cut it. Thus, when Kinsella experiments, as he sometimes does, with the paragram and the pun, producing lines like

> By re-active blood/y
> Mis-fortune
> Assigned Con tra Dik shuns ("Gloats")

the cut-ups and new spellings (as in "Con tra Dik shuns") don't create double or triple meanings as they would, say, in Steve McCaffery's work, and thus these particular experiments may be construed as somewhat gimmicky.

No, the real experimentalism of Kinsella's poems, especially the more recent sequences like Sheep Dip originally printed as a 3 x 5 inch mini-book with a sheep on its cover (Wild Honey Press, 1998), that looks as if it should belong in the childrens' section until one reads the fine print of its 21 pages of four-line stanzas, has to do with tone and vocabulary. Kinsella's are true post-Romantic and post-Modern poems in their strange

impersonality. Even when this poet uses the first-person—and he generally does—his lyrics lack inwardness; their momentum is summed up in Wallace Stevens's phrase "Not Ideas About the Thing but the Thing Itself." At the same time, these counter-pastorals or anti-lyric lyrics are hardly Imagist or Objectivist, their vocabulary being so arcane, so scientific, and specialized that they remind us that "nature imagery," that staple of English verse from the Romantics to the Georgians and beyond, has now been replaced by the X-Ray, the MRI, by echocardiography (a prime example of the workings of the Doppler Effect), and hypertext.

Thus, in the first few pages of Syzygy [from the Greek suzygos, meaning yoked or paired, whether in conjunction or opposition], we meet words like kraken, bathysphere, paperbarks, pellagra, tragacanth, and cacology, and inquiline. A reader, especially a non-Australian reader like myself who doesn't know that a tragacanth is "a gum used in the manufacture of pills and adhesives, in textile printing, and as a stabilizer in thickening sauces" or "a plant from which tragacanth gum is obtained, especially a spiny Asian plant with white, yellow, or purple flowers," must read Kinsella with the dictionary close at hand. And yet, Kinsella's knowledge of the zoology, botany, and geology of his native Western Australia is so profound, that his introduction of tragacanth or paperbark ("an Australian species of tree with pale thin papery bark that peels off in large sheets") is never merely willful or exhibitionist. 'Writing the pastoral now, here," he says in his recent on-line "Essay on Pastoral," "one must be ironic and (consequently) political. The ecologic conversations between shepherds have become those between motorbikes and tractors, helicopters and light planes. Even the climates are changing. Greenhouse Effect, ozone layer, etcetera. Nothing is consistent and consistency is what the pastoral has always been about."

In this context, the anatomy of lake and swamp plants, rocks, asteroids, and chemical waste that we find in Kinsella's poetry may be understood as a twenty-first century version of Wordsworth's declaration that "To me, the meanest flower that blows can give/ Thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears." What Kinsella understands, perhaps more powerfully than any other poet currently writing, is that the urban/rural dichotomy most poets subscribe to is a false one. True, most of us now dwell in urban or suburban environments and the city, via strip malls and shopping centers, keeps encroaching on the landscape around it. But "nature" is just as important and just as "real" as it ever was for the English Romantics, only now the "natural" world, even in the furthest backwater of the Australian continent, bears the imprint of a century or more of human invention and contamination. This may be a common enough thematic motif of Green or eco-poetics, but Kinsella really makes it new.

Consider the opening of #5of Zyzygy called “The Cane Cutter”

Reflex take a breath.   ( )   A snake
operates amongst rough cane-cutter’s crystalline sweat.
A particle overload.
Heavy rain bearing down
Palpitating trifoliate with sun and cane.
No rainbow
Makes an appearance.
Earthy very earthy. Miasma
Camouflaged mud takes all takers
And throws back a marsh of fences.
They beg for tariffs. They like restrictions
In the highlands water is lightning
Gaping press-down and half bas-relief.
Turbine churn-out comes down
From highlife where the air is heady.
No fireflies there. Dowsed and riddled
Deep deep south roots dry the bone-black
subterranean streams, raddled shapes forking azurine
On meeting archeological light, spent swarming
the traps, for this is Ground Zero Warholing
in cyclone territory, zoning the sirens
equivocating hot dogs and pies mushrooms
pushed to the side of the plate: cadillacs
racketing Monroe hubcaps
currency cut like love.
on a breezy day, hot air concentrating
in the sewers.

In physics, the Doppler Effect is defined as “an increase (or decrease) in the frequency of sound, light, or other waves as the source and observer move toward (or away from) each other.   The effect causes the sudden change in pitch noticeable in a passing siren, as well as the redshift seen by astronomers. This definition applies neatly, not only to such thematic “Doppler Effect” sequences as red shift / blue shift, which follows Syzygy in the

new volume, but in poems like "The Cane Cutter." The poem begins as a description of cane cutting in the remote swamps, the "reflex tak[ing] a breath," as a snake is spied in the grass. It is evidently rough work, given the bursts of heavy rain alternating with sun, the latter obscured by the cane itself creating a "trifoliate" pattern that blocks out the possibility of seeing a rainbow.

So far, the poem is descriptive—a nature scene. But with line 8, the Doppler Effect begins to occur. For where is the reader positioned vis-à-vis the cane cutters? W here is this "miasma"—this poisonous emanation caused by decaying organic matter that looks like "camouflaged mud"—coming from? Evidently there are industrial works close by so that this seemingly "rough" landscape is one of fences, tariffs, restrictions—of "Turbine churn-out" that "comes down / from highlife." Having to cut cane in this world seems like pure hell. "No fireflies there." On the contrary, a lot of hideous waste matter, coming down from "bone-black / subterranean streams, raddled shapes forking azurine / on meeting archaeological light." What horrible pollution has taken place in this once pristine landscape? We only know that it is "Ground Zero," the term originally referring to "the point on the surface of land or water that is the precise site of nuclear detonation. But "Warholing" suggests that here "ground zero" is a serial act, a repetition with slight variation as in Warhol's silkscreens of Campbell Soup Cans or serial images of Jackie.

And now the scene turns surreal. Is the problem natural (cyclone) or man-made (sirens)? The scene has shifted imperceptibly from the cane forests to the contemporary world of hot dogs and meat pies, "mushrooms pushed to the side" of dirty paper plates and "cadillacs/ racketing Monroe hubcaps." How did the reader come from the cane world to this disgusting scene where hubcaps are bounced back and forth in the asphalt jungle? Here it is not cane that is being cut but "currency"—the money paid for the "products" imposed on the landscape. And the "hot air" that caused the "cane-cutter's crystalline sweat" is now "hot air concentrating / in the sewers."

Kinsella details all this without direct commentary: the poet seemingly stands outside the scene, a mere recorder of "events." But each verb and adjective is charged with meaning, so that the image of rot, decay, stagnation, and false progress" explodes in the reader's mind. Alliteration, as in "cane cutter's crystalline sweat," and internal rhyme as in "Zero Warhol-" define the scene. But what is most important—and this is consistently the case in Kinsella's work--is the absence of people, even as the human is inserted into the life of things by means of prosopopeia and transferred epithet. Take those "raddled" shapes of line 18, pointing back to "Dowsed and riddled" two lines earlier. "Raddled" means "worn out from a life of indulgence." By calling the stuff that floats up to the surface of those polluted

streams "raddled," Kinsella gives us a powerful image of a world where the very geology speaks of human corruption. No "love" in this fallen world, only "racketing Monroe hubcaps" and "currency." Farming—with its cane-cutting activity—has become the victim of the "turbine churn out" that has turned earth, grass, plants, and trees into a sewer.

I write here as someone who is by no means an environmental activist and who must plead ignorance about the daily life Kinsella describes in these graphic, surreal, and painful anti-pastorals. Painful but also exhilarating in that the poetry brings the fallen world of Perth --and its analogues wherever they may be—squarely into the reader's own discourse radius. Here is a section of Canto 5 in the aptly named sequence <u>Graphology:</u>

> the tooled vinyl
> evokes the odour
> of a Chevrolet flat-top
>
> in the Avon valley,
> South Western Australia,
> the post-Mabo lysis
>
> strung up in the courts,
> the racist graffiti
> on the Kelmscott bus stops
>
> the diminishing exteriorization,
> as dimensions decrease in the hastily
> applied scrawl; moving inland
>
> substantial horizontal
> movements of air
> morph sand paintings
>
> while snakes twitch
> on the hot, fluid fields
> of silica.

There are those snakes again, right in the path of whoever is “moving inland” in that Chevrolet flat-top. The picture falls into place and we’re all in it.

Marjorie Perloff