The Vision of Error: A Sextet of Activist Poems
John Kinsella
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The prolific Australian poet, John Kinsella, further develops his ecological poetics in *The Vision of Error*, unfurling a broad landscape tapestry of wordplay and music composed over 8 years. Tracing territory familiar from several previous collections, this anti-pastoral of the Western Australian 'Wheatbelt' ('Tens of thousands of acres of GM canola / […] / feeding frenzy') now substantially relies/builds on his readers' fore-knowledge.

Many will require dictionaries and search engines to navigate what Kinsella refers to (in a YouTube clip about his book) as 'verse-paths'. Here there's a confluence of a Joycean/Beckettian stream-of-consciousness with language poetry, its cerebral appeal, its linguistic displacement. However, this is a hybrid text, where the experimental is interwoven with the lyrical, producing a multi-textured effect, a visually suggestive fabric humming with echoes and returns, with intertextual stitches—Latin phrases jostling philosophical subtexts, anarchist thinkers, lines from punk songs. And all this set into the warp of dominant culture, the weft of exquisitely observed and an increasingly damaged nature/ecosystem in which the poet dwells.

A section of the title poem is called 'Mischief', and despite the furious lamentations characterising the mood of the entire sextet (akin to Blake, and to whose mythology *The Vision of Error* points), I overwhelmingly experience it as the creation of a postmodern Trickster: turning established norms on their head, relishing détournement, deploying disruption as a form of resistance and as mask.

> Please place on my grave, 'he resisted',
> and wasn't hoodwinked by the lyric
> or its digressions, remouthings
> or retextings. Nor by epics,
> nor damned elegies.

From his opening poem, 'Harsh Hakea', these lines introduce Kinsella's poetics as an expression of his politics. He resists what he terms 'the fetishised application of technology', where technology is an extension of capitalist culture that promotes 'perpetual colonisation', 'killing' and the 'endgame of paradise'. In the face of this systematic onslaught, the poet cannot embrace 'the hero's restless urge to shake responsibility and bathe'. Instead 'Resignation is not an option'.

And so Kinsella turns to the medium over which he has most control. Using his cherished tactic of détournement, taking canonical texts and parodying them to reveal the erosion of the values and world they depict. In the title poem a scene from the second part of *Faust* is reworked, echoing the names of Goethe's characters; but instead of the Arcadian idyll they once described, Kinsella's Flower Maidens promote rural violence:

> Whose favour would they win – daddy's
> for providing a victim: gun always loaded
> and ready to make rural to cleanse
> and make paddocks out of scrub…

'Gold Grain Crown' references the industrial Wheatbelt, and in various sections of the title poem, repetition of the words 'gold' and 'golden' infers the vast areas over which this monoculture extends: 'In golden light of golden day of golden dialects / and golden speech I wrote what I saw in gold leaf'. Gold also points up the profits of agribusiness, but the cost to ecosystem and planet are steadily implied:

> … guns with tricky triggers as mercy to food production
> and coming of age exhibitions, remissions, emissions
> passed as heritage as primogeniture into the golden warp
> of harvests and the histories we force on golden trees.

Uncertainty and the interrogation of normative thinking are important to Kinsella, because they seem to counter the logical positivism and scientific materialism underpinning capitalism and the state's violence, as well as the reductive effect of language as a system through which we relate to a far more complex world. (Irigaray's 'To speak is never neutral' is quoted.) His systematic questioning extends to the poet as (Whitmanesque) heroic authority figure—this from 'Hero':

> take a leaf out of I.A. Richards'
> *Poetries and Sciences:* 'the business
> of the poet
>   is to give order
> and coherence…'
>   annihilate
> for the sake of the Beloved.

Here the 'Beloved' encapsulates the natural world with which we interdepend. Evoking Blake's compassion for and grief at the suffering caused by a world subject to 'Error'—'The wild things weep'; 'The Wild Winds Weep'—Kinsella's resistance to the violence of industrial growth society is at times asserted more directly, through lyrical passages such as in ‘Requiem’, which concludes with this passionate expression of inter-species solidarity:

> I will lay myself down before the bulldozers
> I will believe my resistance the resistance of all animals and plants
> I will not let the wealthy and their shire-stooges make hay,
>   their horses performing for investors
> I will continue watering tree seedlings, drinking less myself
> I will die with abuse pouring from my lips
>
> And this troubles me.

The poem’s final equivocation may reveal the personal cost of resistance. We’re shown the physical exertions of tree-planting as an act of ecological restoration; the poet’s incessant typing on a manual typewriter, which Kinsella’s self-professed neo-luddism prefers (‘stress on finger joints, / a violent arthritis of the heavens’); and ongoing feelings of futility and despair (‘requiem pain’):

> Driving through loss, deletions
> every week more, though satellites incorrectly
> routed over, or images
> in a mass of data;
>
>   behind every veneer of trees
> a suburb, a road widening
>   cessation
> of privateering transport
> and down loss ambience,
> anxiety passed with sleep
>
> but who wants to hear that?
> Who wants to be reminded….

If, as this suggests, no one does want to listen, why write these poems? Clearly Kinsella has no choice; these are ‘poems of witness’, of conscionable rage:

>   The trees on the hill are dying.
>   Years of drought. The watertable drops
>   beyond the stretch of their roots. Neighbouring
> *properties* are drinking the last drops dry, running
>   their bores like addiction, making rainbows
> in fifty-degree heat over their lawns. You crazy fucking bastards!
>   I am not writing poetry for entertainment: it’s dying
>   here, dying!

(From 'Harvest Ban'—note, 'properties' is italicised in ironic reference to the anarchist view on property ownership.)

In *Redstart: An Ecological Poetics,* a collaboration with Forrest Gander, the two poets discuss the agency of poetry still tormented by Auden's thorn ('poetry makes nothing happen.') They claim: '[…] poems don't articulate emotional experience or frame concepts in ways that have made any discernable difference to the world—our whiffled clod of suffering and greed same as it ever was….' In this context we find pathos in his son's hero-worship, the desire that his father's poetry act directly in achieving an aim: "'Dad, write a poem/to make them stop'". Are these activist poems thus limited to 'symbolic action' (where action in the 'real' world is practically difficult, but conceivable in language)? In discussing agency in *American Political Poetry into the Twenty-first Century,* Michael Dowdy elaborates on the differences between what he calls 'authoritative agency' (which is 'often confrontational and demanding, often didactic, frequently grounded in their speakers' experiences') and 'equivocal agency', which problematizes 'notions of direct experience and foregrounds equivocation, paradox, strangeness, irony and parodic voices.'

Kinsella's work is clearly in the latter mode, and reflects his challenge to what he calls 'the isness of the I declaimed through ontology / and a singular perfection manifest as core / of Western self-narrative, as Baby Tuckoo / or the resplendent self-damnations of Rousseau'. For the poet, this 'disease of Western subjectivity' defends 'the natural world because it has so much to give us' and upholds 'the super validated self as "authority", as "reliable" configurer of experience' (*Redstart*). Unreliability is accentuated by the poet's perception of himself as complicit in the problem. In 'Harsh Hakea', he describes the effect of drought on his vegetable patch, which has brought his broadbeans to the surface: 'a turning out like a wound / ejecting a foreign body: moi.' (Neatly the use of French emphasises the position of white settler in relation to Australian soil and its indigenous cultures.) Self-deprecation and limitations of the self are evident. 'The Vision of Error' opens with the felt irony that this poetry is: 'Artificial life created on a typewriter? / A poetics of abomination.' The stance of anti-hero reinforces disruption within Kinsella's tapestry, and *Redstart* reveals the extent to which the Trickster is at work:

> the best poems are simply forms of intellectual, aesthetic, or emotional (or any combination of the three) Soduku. Poems, no matter how haphazard on the page or in casting distance between associations, ultimately demand a mathematical solution. Evasiveness, the reader filling in the blanks, the torment of allusiveness, all in the end beg for attention, for social and personal affirmation.

In [re]reading *The Vision of Error*, I admit to frequently suffering torment in my search for 'meaning's press and screw'. The creation of meaning seems to be central to human experience across cultures; and, relishing neither Soduku nor cryptic crosswords, for me the degree of code-switching and allusion produces an over-emphasis on cerebral (urizenic?) activity—and even an ebb tide of obscurantism, which risks alienating readers. But could there be another motivation in keeping us guessing?

In Kinsella's recent oeuvre, I detect a move towards the personal, which in *The Vision of Error* coincides with this most intense deployment of disruption. We see the poet(-persona) reading Saint Augustine's *Confessions,* glimpse his domestic life, inner world and 'soul'. Yet even here there's occlusion—the Trickster donning his mask, which might be as much emotional defence as activist's concealment.

In 'Harvest Ban', Kinsella sketches a visit with his family to his father's childhood home: 'Tracy locates the vanquished house's ache / by the fruit tree stubs, introduced like water towers'. Brevity could reflect his being part of 'a pollarded family tree'; however, like all the poems' confessional moments, this isn't developed, and instead comes this admission: 'In realtime, I paper over / the cracks, run riot / in the sensations of immediacy.'

> 'Forsan et haec olim meminisee juvabit.'
>
> ('Hero')

Throughout the sextet fog and mist abound, and in the title poem, he references artistic techniques that distort vision: 'Trompe l'oeil' and 'sfumato'. The allusion to the former is a rejection of one-dimensionality, while the latter is 'blurring around those lines / which retain their facts but enliven / my seeing….' Later this 'enlivened' sight paradoxically rejects poetic 'vision': 'There is no space for visionary anything / and the politics of dissolution is new comfort, / new pleasure, a new plan.'

Despite this assertion of renewal, I find no redemption of the general Vision of Error, no Blakean apocatastasis, and the mood of fury and despair continues unabated. Significantly, any refuge found in Milton lies solely within the sphere of 'Paradise Lost': 'I have only ever read *Paradise Lost,* that's true, / not a single word of anything else—or, rather, / Paradise Lost is all that's lodged, / all that's taken root.' 'Requiem pain' produces compulsive praying, and yet there's no apparent faith in any transcendent or immanent divinity: 'Conversion. Why not God / in the afterglow of a life still wanted? That other self / not recognised.'

How does anyone deal with environmental despair without seeking to numb it out? Here the motif of the poet's fingers painfully typing seems to hold the key, because even taking a walk 'is as much requiem / as anything else.' Furthermore, the lyrical 'I' is presented as a solitary figure, communing with the natural world, but relying on his partner for reports about the local community; and surprisingly disconnected from the 'mutual aid' and organising of the anarchist milieu.

In *Radical Ecopsychology: Psychology in the Service of Life,* Andy Fisher concludes his book with a chapter entitled 'On Bearing Pain and Suffering'. Having discussed what he calls the 'revolt of nature', he urges that we too 'join with the life-force in rebelling against the repressive and exploitative aspects of modern society.' But how, he asks, can we make the pain that we experience in doing so endurable? For this, Fisher perceives a need for 'cultural frameworks'; these include meditation, prayer, groupwork and 'cultivating mature relationships with more-than-human reality.' But might these cultural frameworks also include the 'visionary anything' that this book rejects?

In her essay 'The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House' (1984), Audre Lorde affirms the power of collective agency: 'Within the interdependence of mutual (nondominant) differences lies the security which enables us to descend into the chaos of knowledge and return with true visions of our future, along with the concomitant power to effect those changes which can bring that future into being. […] Without community there is no liberation, only the most vulnerable and temporary armistice between an individual and her oppression.'

For Blake, error represents not only that oppression but also the Dark Night of the Soul—the soul descended into Ulro, the lowest point in material existence. Do Kinsella's disruptive poetics and prolific production thus partially mask his own error—activity displacing sustained engagement with despair—and thus the possibility of its transmutation? And does his use of equivocal agency reduce his capacity to engage his readers, and thus to build collective agency? As Gary Snyder says in 'The Real Work' (an interview in 1976):

> We all know that the power of a great poem is not that we felt that the person expressed himself well. We don't think that. What we think is: 'How deeply I am touched.' That's our level of response. And so a great poet does not express his or her self, he expresses *all* our selves. Like Dögen, the Zen master said, 'We study the self to forget the self. And when you forget the self, you become one with all things.'

Snyder overstates things here—we do admire Kinsella's vibrant and inventive writing. And perhaps for Kinsella, the idea of a poem expressing '*all* our selves' belongs to the heroic mode he rightly questions. Surely, however, the radical uncertainty we currently face—will humanity and Earth's 'paradise' survive the ravages of capitalism?—requires poetry that can give voice to our profound pain and inspire revolutionary ecological consciousness?

By jettisoning the ego's doubts about what poetry can or cannot do, it's possible to trust in poetry's potential to inspire visions that point away from capitalist apocalypse and reveal the extraordinary social and ecological transformation currently manifesting on a global scale (beyond the lenses of corporate media). This movement—which has no leaders, no overarching ideology—is what David Korten refers to as The Great Turning. By setting our sights on this, we may yet redeem our Vision of Error.

Helen Moore