

**The Allegorical Use of the Rituals of Hunting  
in  
Galway Kinnell's "The Bear"**

الاستخدام المجازي لشعائر الصيد في قصيدة "الدب" لكالوي كينل

**Aseel Abdul-Lateef Taha, PhD**

د. أسيل عبد اللطيف طه

Abstract

Galway Kinnell (1927-) is considered as one of the most important contemporary American poets who brought about a drastic change in the American poetry of the nineteen sixties. Kinnell's poetry is characterized by being simple in style and deep in content. Poetry for him is a means through which he perceives the inner levels of consciousness in an attempt to comprehend the depths of the American self. Therefore, he writes narrative poems in which the emphasis is not on the rhetorical effects, but on the inner transformations through which the poet goes.

"The Bear" (1968) is typical of Kinnell's introspective poetry. It takes the form of a journey in which the rituals of hunting are used allegorically to embody the state of the spiritual progress which the hunter achieves through his metaphysical sense of the suffering of his prey. Kinnell makes use of the spiritual connotations of the techniques of the Eskimo hunters to give full expression to the fatal fight in which man has to be involved to fathom the meaning of the unfathomable.

Hunting the polar bear becomes a long process of inward meditations which enable the hunter or the poet to realize the mysteries and the secrets of the universe, and to go through a state of spiritual renewal. The primitive rituals of hunting is a perfect allegorical expression of man's endeavors to purify himself through communicating with the spiritually healing forces of nature.

## I

Galway Kinnell is a contemporary American poet. Kinnell was born in 1927 in Providence, Rhode Island. As an introvert child, he grew up, reading such reclusive American poets as Edgar Allen Poe and Emily Dickinson.<sup>1</sup> He began to study poetry seriously as a teenager at the Wilbraham Academy in Massachusetts, and he continued his studies at Princeton University. He received his MA from the University of Rochester, and embarked on a teaching career.<sup>2</sup>

In 1948, Kinnell spent many years abroad, including extended stays in Europe and the Middle East. He taught poetry and creative writing in many places, including France, Iran, and Australia.<sup>3</sup> Returning to the United States in the 1960s, he joined the radical political movements. In 1963, Kinnell worked as a laborer for the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) in Hammond, Louisiana, and he helped to register Southern black voters with (CORE), because he found it unbearable to live in a segregated society.<sup>4</sup>

In the late nineteen sixties, Kinnell actively opposed the Vietnam War through his poetry readings. In 1982, he organized a protest against nuclear arms, called "Poetry Against the End of the World"; and he was among the

---

poets who participated in a poetry reading, entitled "An Evening to Support Humanitarian Relief for the Children of Lebanon."<sup>5</sup> Jane Cooper says, "I think that Galway feels a poet is not just a private human being, but that a poet has public responsibilities."<sup>6</sup>

Kinnell's experiences—world travel, city life, the harassment he was subjected to as a member of CORE and as an anti-war poet—eventually found expression in his poetry. Kinnell is an award-winning poet. The first edition of his *Selected Poems* (1980) won both the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Award.<sup>7</sup> He is one of the first voices to mark the change in American poetry. Ralph Mills notes that Kinnell's early writings signaled

decisive changes in the mood and character of American poetry as it departed from the witty, pseudo-mythic verse, apparently written to critical prescription, of the 1950s to arrive at the more authentic, liberated work of the 1960s.<sup>8</sup>

Kinnell declared that "There's this thing about political poems—one must learn something from them, learn something about the political event, and if possible in the best poems, about oneself as well."<sup>9</sup> Socio-political issues have remained an important element in Kinnell's poetry, but have always been combined with an underlying sacramental quality. Initially, this was expressed through the traditional Christian sensibility of his first collection, *What a Kingdom It Was* (1960), but later poems have moved away from religious orthodox.<sup>10</sup> The poet has started digging deep into the self.

## II

Kinnell achieved major recognition with the publication of *Body Rags* (1968), a collection that contains some of his best-known animal poems, in which the author explores himself through the subjective experience of a certain animal.<sup>11</sup> The book includes his famous poem, "The Bear," which epitomizes the intensely shamanistic poetry Kinnell wrote during the 1960's. In this poem, Kinnell seeks entrance into a primitive state of identification with the nonhuman.

"The Bear" is a ninety-four line poem. It is divided into seven parts and it is modeled after an Eskimo method of catching bears. The poem depicts an Eskimo hunter, stalking a polar bear. The preparations for hunting the bear are disciplined and reverential. In the second part, the process of hunting the bear begins:

I take a wolf 's rib and whittle  
it sharp at both ends  
and coil it up  
and freeze it in blubber and place it out  
on the fair way of the bears.<sup>12</sup>

The hunter coils a sharpened wolf's rib and freezes it in blubber. If the bear swallows the bait, the fat will melt and the bone will pierce his gut. The verb sequence—"take," "whittle," "coil," "freeze," "place" (Kinnell, NSP, 59-60)—shows that Kinnell emphasizes the techniques of hunting. The hunting technology in "The Bear" may be primitive, but the weapon to kill the bear defines the relationship between the hunter and the prey. A gun would violate their bond, while the device carved from bone and hidden in fat is part of the arctic world they share.<sup>13</sup>

When the bait has vanished, the hunter wanders in circles until he finds the bear's blood staining the snow. He then follows its bloody spoor across the tundra for days. Now he must endure his trial; the dying bear will be his teacher.<sup>14</sup> Where the beast rests, he rests; and where the beast stretches out to drag itself over unsteady ice with its claws, the man too lies down to pull himself forward with knives. He must not only follow the bear's trail, but also duplicate its movements in this silent ritual. The hunter is guided and, in some sense, taught by his prey. Afterwards, the hunter begins to starve, and he must make a choice--to humiliate himself or to die. To live, he must eat the bear's excrement; it is soaked in nourishing blood. After hesitation for some moments, he gnashes down "a turd sopped in blood":

On the third day I begin to starve,  
at nightfall I bend down as I knew I would  
at a turd sopped in blood,  
and hesitate, and pick it up,  
and thrust it in my mouth, and gnash it down,  
and rise  
and go on running (Kinnell, NSP,60).

The verb sequence—"bend down," "hesitate," "pick it up," "thrust," "gnash it down"—extends and slows down the action, showing the balance between disgust and fatalistic acceptance.<sup>15</sup>

On the seventh day, the hunter rests. Upon waking, a new world fills his senses. When his lungs are saturated with its scent, a "chilly, enduring odor" (Kinnell, NSP, 61), he sees the bear's body ahead:

I hack  
a ravine in his thigh, and eat and drink,  
and tear him down his whole length  
and open him and climb in  
and close him up after me, against the wind,

and sleep (Kinnell, NSP,61).

When he finds the bear's carcass, he eats voraciously some of the animal's raw flesh, tears the body open, crawls inside its warm carcass, and falls asleep exhausted. Descending into this tomb, the hunter has a dream of death in which he becomes the wounded bear, shamanistically reliving its ordeal of being hunted, and of dying. He dreams "of lumbering flatfooted / over the tundra", of being "stabbed twice from within" (Kinnell, NSP, 61). Whatever way he lurches, whatever "parabola of bear-transcendence" or "dance of solitude" (Kinnell, NSP, 61) he attempts, his blood splatters a trail behind him.

After the dream, "I awaken I think" (Kinnell, NSP, 62). However, the hunter is not sure he is awake. Changed into a creature, half-bear and half-man, he must suffer for both kinds of being. He both causes and shares the bear's agony as a fellow creature. The experience of identification with the bear, through suffering and death, is total and transforming. He measures time "in seasonal and bodily rhythms."<sup>16</sup> He is granted a vision of spring as "geese / come trailing again up the flyway" (Kinnell, NSP, 62), and a mother bear tends to a litter of newborn cubs.

The hunter has undergone a visionary metamorphosis--a renewal. The transformation of man into animal remains incomplete—"an animal body with a human consciousness."<sup>17</sup> He walks with the bear's feet, "hairy-soled trudge" (partly bear) and spends the rest of his days "wandering: wondering" about what has happened (partly man):

And one hairy-soled trudge stuck out before me,  
the next groaned out,  
the next,  
the next,

the next,  
the rest of my days I spend  
wandering: wondering  
what, anyway,  
was that sticky infusion, that rank flavor of blood, that poetry, by which I  
lived(Kinnell, NSP 62)?

Short lines, emphatic rhythm, and insistent repetitions are used here to generate the sense of the poet as a shaman who becomes one with the transformed hunter, and with the natural world, undergoing the primal experiences of birth and death.<sup>18</sup>

Suffering horrible death leads to visionary moments and to the essence of poetry itself. "Poetry" in the final line of the poem is made synonymous with "that sticky infusion" and "that rank flavor of blood." Kinnell emphasizes the nourishing effect of poetry. Commenting on the last line, he declares, "It occurred to me that that is the 'poetry' in our lives; whatever allows us to flourish, that is the poetry."<sup>19</sup> The poet knows what has happened: he has written a poem. But, he never fully comprehends the mystery, the terrible motion of the poetic experience.

Kinnell interpreted "The Bear" as an allegory of the poet. He says,

The idea that that poem was about the creative process never occurred to me until later, when I heard some people say that it might be. I don't really know what it's about. I guess it was Robert Bly who first suggested it, that the hunter was the mental person and the bear was the body and the unconscious, that when they came together then the poem was possible. He made it very persuasive to me, so that I see that it's one thing the poem must mean. But when I wrote "that poetry, by which I lived," I didn't have in mind at all the poetry which is written down on pages. I was thinking rather of poetry in another sense.<sup>20</sup>

The real setting of "The Bear" is the poet's consciousness. The bear is not a separate being in the outer world; it is "a totemic figure."<sup>21</sup> It operates in the poet's mind, evoking poetry. It becomes a dig into the unexplored self. Regarding his animal poems, Kinnell states,

For me those animals had no specific symbolic correspondences as I wrote the poems about them. I thought of them as animals. But of course I wasn't trying simply to draw zoologically accurate portraits of them. They were animals in whom I felt I could seek my own identity, discover my own beariness . . . , and the animals could have a symbolic resonance after all.<sup>22</sup>

Animals in Kinnell's poetry are part of a larger symbolic quest. Most of Kinnell's poems, like "Westport," "Where the Track Vanishes," and "The Descent," are journeys literally as well as figuratively. So is "The Bear." In reply to Robert Frost's dictum that writing free verse is like playing tennis with the net down, Kinnell writes, "It is an apt analogy, except that the poem is less like a game than like a journey...."<sup>23</sup> Kinnell argued that in much modern poetry, the emphasis on brilliant verbal effects of individual lines and images detracts from the meaning of the poem and the sense of the whole.

Kinnell's poems do not attempt new poetic forms; they are sustained by the conventions of narrative. "The Bear" is a long narrative. Kinnell states that "my poems have depended a lot on narrative. . . . poems, like 'The Bear,' are sheer stories."<sup>24</sup> Narrative poems support the sense of forward motion of the journey. Concerning the length of such poems, Kinnell says,

I think it's one reason I write long poems—that it is possible for them to begin and then wander around, search around for some way out, and to come to a climax and resolution. . . . I want that poem to be an organic thing, to have an inner drama,



an inner rising line.<sup>25</sup>

The allegorical journey involves a descent into the darkness of mortality. "The Bear" is "a meditation on spiritual isolation and corporeal decay, as well as on what ultimately rescues human existence from meaninglessness and despair."<sup>26</sup> The poem is not headed toward a conclusion. The lone creature can only keep on journeying, side by side with the emptiness. But, at the poem's end, the journey reverberates "with cosmic terror and grandeur."<sup>27</sup> Many critics share William Heyen's impression that "on subsequent readings it seemed to me, mysteriously, what the whole poem was about."<sup>28</sup> As David Baker writes,

Kinnell's gift has always been to mediate between the visible, substantial world and the unutterably spiritual or mystical, and his approach in his greatest poems, like "The Bear," . . . requires giving over the body's self to the regions of mystery.<sup>29</sup>

"The Bear" presents a mystical vision; yet, Kinnell declares that it deals with "the sacred character of human life."<sup>30</sup> He believes that a sacred force exists that exemplifies itself in everything, and that this force sometimes shows itself in the physical. He states,

If the things and creatures that live on earth don't possess mystery, then there isn't any. To touch this mystery requires, I think, love of the things and creatures that surround us: the capacity to go out to them so that they enter us.<sup>31</sup>

In "The Bear," the speaker eats bear feces, soaked in blood, and he ultimately becomes the animal. He identifies with a suffering, dying animal. Kinnell's primitive hunter experiences his own death, yet goes beyond it. Kinnell in his essay, "Poetry, Personality, and Death," clarifies his ideas

concerning death:

The death of the self I seek, in poetry and out of poetry, is not a drying up or 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.<sup>32</sup>

Kinnell agrees that the "archaic and primitive ritual dramas, which acknowledged all sides of human nature, including the destructive, demonic, and ambivalent, were liberating and harmonizing."<sup>33</sup> In its inclusion of life and death, hunting is surely one of these "ritual dramas" as Kinnell's hunter enacts it, a ritual of rules and careful preparations. The poem depicts corporeal rites that generate a spiritual transformation.

Kinnell's metaphysical metamorphosis is based on Eskimo realism, depicted in *Top of the World*, a popular adventure novel by Hans Ruesch.<sup>34</sup> Kinnell apparently borrows from the first chapter of Ruesch's novel where two men come upon a polar bear while hunting. To them, "Bear was man's biggest prize. Man was bear's biggest prize. Here it had not yet been decided whether man or bear was the crown of creation."<sup>35</sup>

The novel gives the reader a much stronger sense of the actual bear. When the bear was pierced by the bone, it gave a "long anguished moan . . . turned on his heels and shuffled off yammering . . . Stumbling and wailing" (p. 7). In the poem we do not even see the bear until it dies on the seventh day. Blood is more important to the poem than to the novel. The Eskimos drink the blood for sustenance at the end. In Kinnell's poem, the blood trail is more than being a realistic image, and it is essential to the understanding of the meaning of the whole poem: "that sticky infusion, that rank flavor of blood, that poetry, by which I lived" (Kinnell, NSP, 62). These differences emphasize Kinnell's attempts to go beyond the realistic limits of his persona,

the primitive Eskimo hunter.

### III

The solitary hunt, undertaken at great risk, is a recurrent American motif which allegorically serves as a rite of initiation. Kinnell has taken up the passionate symbolic search of the American. Kinnell's protagonist is prototypically American in his hunger to find images in the wilderness, reflecting his inner, spiritual world. "The Bear" is a poem about American consciousness in search of its true body. It succeeds in describing a bodily consciousness that is instinctive, communal, and at one with the land.

Furthermore, "The Bear" depicts modern man's attempts to heal human nature. Kinnell finds solace in the regenerative power of nature, attempting to fuse the consciousness of a modern man with that of a primitive Eskimo. The poet moves through the technical realism of hunting to its metaphysical implications, as he tries to illustrate man's sacred bond with nature by the simple, brutal hunting of the bear.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>Ian Hamilton, ed., *The Oxford Companion to Twentieth-century Poetry in English* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 274.

<sup>2</sup>A. Poulin and Michael Waters, eds., *Contemporary American Poetry*, 7th ed. (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2001), p. 618.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 619.

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 618.

<sup>5</sup>Madeleine Beckman, "Galway Kinnell Searches for Innocence," in *Saturday Review* (September/October 1983): 15.

<sup>6</sup>Quoted in Beckman, p. 16

<sup>7</sup> Hamilton, p. 274.

<sup>8</sup>Ralph J. Mills, "A Reading of Galway Kinnell: Part 2," in *The Iowa Review*, vol. 1, nos. 1 and 2 (Winter and Spring 1970): 134.

<sup>9</sup>Quoted in Howard Nelson, ed., *On the Poetry of Galway Kinnell: The Wages of Dying* (Michigan: [University of Michigan Press](#), 1987), p. 2.

<sup>10</sup>Hamilton, p. 274

<sup>11</sup>Ibid.

<sup>12</sup>Galway Kinnell, *New Selected Poems* (Boston: A Mariner Book, 2000), p.59.

<sup>13</sup>John Hobbs, "Galway Kinnell's 'The Bear': Dream and Technique," in *Modern Poetry Studies* 5.3 (Winter 1974): 242.

<sup>14</sup>Cary Nelson, *Our Last First Poets: Vision and History in Contemporary American Poetry* (Urbana: The University of Illinois, 1981), p. 74

<sup>15</sup>Hobbs, p. 239

<sup>16</sup>Nelson, p. 74

<sup>17</sup>Hobbs, p. 247.

<sup>18</sup>Hamilton, p. 274.

<sup>19</sup>Quoted in Hobbs, p. 247.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid., p. 248.

<sup>21</sup>Totemic is related to Totemism which is a system of belief in which each human is thought to have a spiritual connection or a kinship with another physical being, such as an animal or plant, often called a "spirit-being" or "totem." The totem is thought to interact with a given kin group or an individual and to serve as their emblem or symbol. Nelson, p.74.

<sup>22</sup>Galway Kinnell, *The Ohio Review*, vol. xiv, no. 1 (Fall 1972): p. 28.

<sup>23</sup>Quoted in Charles Bell, "Kinnell, Galway," in *Contemporary*

---

*Poets*, 3rd Ed. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1980), p. 836.

<sup>24</sup>Kinnell, *The Ohio Review*, p. 38.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid., p. 25.

<sup>26</sup>J. T. Ledbetter "Galway Kinnell: A Voice to Lead Us," in *The Hollins Critic*, vol. xxxii, no. 4 (October 1995): 15.

<sup>27</sup>Bell, p. 837.

<sup>28</sup>Quoted in Lee Zimmerman, *From Intricate and Simple Things: The Poetry of Galway Kinnell* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987), p. 127.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid.

<sup>30</sup>Quoted in Madeleine Beckman, "Galway Kinnell Searches for Innocence," in *Saturday Review* (September/October 1983): 15.

<sup>31</sup>As quoted in Nelson, p. 2.

<sup>32</sup>Quoted in Hobbs, p. 250.

<sup>33</sup>Ibid., p. 249.

<sup>34</sup>Ibid., p. 238.

<sup>35</sup>Hans Ruesch, *Top of the World* (New York: Pocket Books, 1951), p. 7.

#### Bibliography

Beckman, Madeleine. "Galway Kinnell Searches for Innocence." *Saturday Review* (September/October 1983): pp. 14-16.

Bell, Charles. "Kinnell, Galway." *Contemporary Poets*. 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1980.

Hamilton, Ian, ed. *The Oxford Companion to Twentieth-century Poetry in English*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994.

Hobbs, John. "Galway Kinnell's 'The Bear': Dream and Technique." *Modern Poetry Studies* 5.3 (Winter 1974): pp. 237-50.

Kinnell, Galway. *New Selected Poems*. Boston: A Mariner Book, 2000.

\_\_\_\_\_. *The Ohio Review*. Vol. xiv, no. 1 (Fall 1972): pp. 25-38.

Ledbetter, J. T. "Galway Kinnell: A Voice to Lead Us." *The Hollins Critic*. Vol. XXXII, No. 4 (October, 1995): pp. 1-15.

Mills, Ralph J. "A Reading of Galway Kinnell: Part 2," in *The Iowa Review*. Vol. 1, nos. 1 and 2 (Winter and Spring, 1970): pp. 134-91.

Nelson, Cary. *Our Last First Poets: Vision and History in Contemporary American Poetry*. Urbana: The University of Illinois, 1981.

Nelson, Howard, ed. *On the Poetry of Galway Kinnell: The Wages of Dying*. Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1987.

Poulin, A. and Michael Waters, eds. *Contemporary American Poetry*. 7<sup>th</sup> ed. New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2001.

Ruesch, Hans. *Top of the World*. New York: Pocket Books, 1951.

Zimmerman, Lee. *From Intricate and Simple Things: The Poetry of Galway Kinnell*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.

## الاستخدام المجازي لشعائر الصيد في قصيدة "الدب" لكالوي كينل

د. أسيل عبد اللطيف طه

### م ا خ ص

يعد كالوي كينل (1927-) من أهم الشعراء الأمريكيين المعاصرين الذين أحدثوا تغييراً جذرياً في الشعر الأمريكي في ستينيات القرن المنصرم، فقصائده تتميز ببساطة الأسلوب وعمق المضمون. يتخذ كينل من الشعر وسيلة للغوص في أعماق مستويات الوعي والشعور، محاولاً التوصل إلى اكتشاف ملامح الشخصية الأمريكية، لذلك دائماً تكون قصيدة كينل سردية والتأكيد فيها ليس على التأثيرات البلاغية، وإنما على التحولات الوجدانية للشاعر.

وهذا ينطبق تماماً على قصيدته "الدب" (1968) التي تتخذ شكل رحلة تستخدم فيها شعائر الصيد مجازاً للتعبير عن حالة التحول الروحي للصيد الناتج عن إحساسه الميتافيزيقي بمعاناة فريسته. إن قصيدة الدب تعكس وقائع حياة الصيادين الاسكيمو، ولكن كينل استخدم شعائر الصيد ذات الإيحاءات الروحية للتعبير عن الصراع المستميت الذي يخوضه الإنسان في محاولته لسبر أغوار عالم ما وراء الطبيعة.

تجسد عملية صيد الدب القطبي رحلة تأملية مطولة لمكانن الذات، التي تمكن الصياد أو الشاعر من إدراك خفايا وأسرار الكون والإحساس بحالة من التجدد الروحي، فممارسة شعائر الصيد البدائية أصبحت تعبيراً مجازياً متقناً عن محاولة الإنسان لتطهير ذاته من خلال تواصله مع القوى الروحانية في الطبيعة.