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Binary oppositions revisited: Nature and the reconciliation of opposites in Kinnell's *The book of nightmares*

Oposiciones binarias revisadas: la naturaleza y la reconciliación de los opuestos en *El libro de las pesadillas* de Kinnell

Elizabeth Quirós García
Escuela de Lenguas Modernas
Universidad de Costa Rica
elizabeth.quiros@ucr.ac.cr

Abstract
The book of nightmares, by Galway Kinnell, has been provided with a remarkable use of natural imagery that facilitates the understanding of the life-death binary opposition. These two apparently contradictory realms, life and death, are challenging to understand as elements of a unity, since many individuals, especially in Western society, have been taught to appreciate life and disregard death as a real and vital component of this duality. For the purpose of this study the Jungian archetypal approach and Campbell's perspective on myth will be discussed. Unquestionably, in this book-length poem, Kinnell succeeds in revealing their ancestral relationship through natural imagery; hence, the persona makes use of images like the rain, the stones of the path, as well as different kind of animals to craft a poetic world to which individuals can relate.

Keywords: US Literature, poetry, Jung, Campbell, binary opposition

Resumen
El poemario *El libro de las pesadillas* de Galway Kinnell es abundante en imágenes de la naturaleza que facilitan una mejor comprensión de

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la oposición binaria vida y muerte. Aparentemente contradictorios, ambos conceptos pueden ser difíciles de comprender como elementos de una única unidad en tanto que, a muchas personas, especialmente educadas en la sociedad occidental, se les enseña a apreciar la vida y desdeñar la muerte. Sin embargo, esta última es clave en esta relación binaria. Para el propósito de este trabajo de investigación se utilizará el enfoque arquetípico jungiano y el aporte de Campbell con referencia al mito. Indiscutiblemente, en este poemario, Kinnell logra revelar la relación ancestral del ser humano con la realidad vida-muerte por medio de las imágenes de la naturaleza. Consecuentemente, el yo lírico utiliza imágenes como la lluvia, las piedras del camino (entre otras) y diferentes tipos de animales para crear un mundo poético con el que los individuos puedan relacionarse.

Palabras clave: literatura estadounidense, poesía, Jung, Campbell, oposiciones binarias

Introduction

The poetical world of Galway Kinnell is inhabited by nature and the physical world. Keane (Tuten, 1996) declares that his poetry is "an elementary poetry – a poetry of dark woods and snow; of wind and fire and stars; of bone and blood. His subjects are perennial: love illumined and made more precious by the omnipresence of death" (p. 77). As Keane emphasizes, Kinnell's poetry mirrors the simple moments experienced in life and for him, the "moments of epiphany and transcendence occur only by our becoming deeply familiar with the world" (Tuten 1996, p. 86). Undeniably, the "animal world," the primitive, is a subject that is significant in the poetry of Galway Kinnell. Many of his poems deal with the instinctive nature of animals and even when some of his poems do not, they present animal imagery as part of the holistic vision of the poet. In The poetics of the physical world*,* Kinnell (1971b) discusses his position towards the "natural" in contemporary poetry:

> Why does it see, in the modern poem, that the less formal beauty there is, the more possible it is to discover the glory of the ordinary? I think of Donatello's statue in wood of Magdalen: her body ravaged, her face drawn with suffering, her hair running down her body indistinguishable from her rags. She is in ruins. Yet her feet remain beautiful. The reason they are beautiful is that they have touched the earth all their life. In the same way, in the bedraggled poem of the modern, it is the images, those lowly touchers of physical reality with remain shining (p. 116).

It is in the experience with the simple elements of everyday life (feet touching the earth for example) what makes people

experience transcendence. Edelman (1981) sustains that Kinnell approaches language as being part of the "natural" world in the sense that words are used to communicate knowledge, emotions, and feelings (p. 218). Moreover, Nelson (1987) asserts that it is "clear that for him words are alive. He thinks of them, for example, not as becoming obsolete, but extinct: 'When I encounter an old word on the verge of extinction, which seems expressive, I feel excited. I can't help entertaining the possibility of rescuing it…" (p. 5). Kinnell appears to embrace not just objects, concrete and abstract, but their means of communication: language. Even words seem to be alive in his poetical world for he takes words no longer used in contemporary communication or used in different intellectual realms and gives them the opportunity of rebirth and signifying in his work; as a result, words like *carrion, orts, fenks*, and *sordes* can be found in his book-length poem giving the reader the opportunity to experience them as part of the life of the persona when discovering his path.

Methodological framework

This research concentrates on the persona's inner process of exploration and the resulting acquisition of self-knowledge as two opposites, life and death. This theoretical approach will consider the poem's persona as a mirror to trace myth and symbols as recurrent byproducts of humanity's collective imagination. For the purpose of this analysis, the Jungian archetypal approach as well as Campbell's considerations on myth will be utilized. Therefore, the conceptualization of archetypes will be utilized on the literary text, for as scholar Edinger (1972) asserts,

> Jung's most basic and far-reaching discovery is the collective unconscious or archetypal psyche. Through his researches, we know how the individual psyche is not just a product of personal experience. It also has a pre-personal or transpersonal dimension which is manifested in universal patterns and images such as are found in all the world's religions and mythologies (p. 3).

These archetypal images present in Western culture, which many times refer to primitive phenomena, activate features of life, death, birth, and heroes, among others, in all kinds of texts.

Myth and archetypes

For decades, some critics (Aristotle[1], St. Thomas de Aquinas, Locke, Ortega y Gasset, Gould, to mention the most prominent) have believed in the widespread idea that the human mind is a blank slate and that its structure surfaces from the processes of socialization humankind goes through, such as religion, family, and school. In contrast, others (Pinker, Jung) deem true that the human mind is not a blank slate and there are undistinguishable psychic structures (archetypes) that are common to every person inhabiting the world. Carl G. Jung (1903-1955) belongs to the latter group. For him, the symbolic elements of cultures around the world can be very

1 For Aristotle poetry. "is a more philosophical and higher thing than history: for poetry tends to express the universal, history the particular" (in Butcher 1951, p. 35). Moreover, according to Butcher (1951) the object of poetry in Aristotelian thought is "as of all the fine arts, [is] to produce an emotional delight, a pure and elevated pleasure" (p. 221).

alike because they materialized from the archetypes that are shared by humankind. Consequently, the primeval past, shared by all, develops into the foundation of our psyche prompting us to act in accordance to not only to what humanity considers characteristic of a specific time and place but to some knowledge of a disremembered past that echoes the present.

According to Jung (2006) "by exploring our own souls, we come upon the instincts and their world of imagery should throw some light on the powers slumbering in the psyche, of which we are seldom aware so long as all goes well" (p. 107). As he states, there is much more in the psyche than individuals know, and regarding art, poetry being one of its genres, Jung affirms that "great art till now has always derived its fruitfulness from the myth, from the unconscious process of symbolization which continues through the ages and which, as the primordial manifestation of the human spirit, will continue to be the root of all creation in the future" (p. 110).

Additionally, Jung (in Sabini 2001) affirms that "[m]an feels himself isolated in the cosmos. He is no longer involved in nature and has lost his emotional participation in natural events, which hitherto had a symbolic meaning for him" (p. 79). Kinnell's reflection on Jung's statement seems to be at the core of *The book of the nightmares* as its first poem opens with rain drops falling on earth and trying "to put the fire out" (p. 4) but this fire "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" (p. 71). For Calhoun (1992), Kinnell is basically a "nature poet who has written some of the finest contemporary poems about animals – among them a porcupine, a crow, various bears, a sow or two – producing a kind of minor bestiary[2]. Animals are, he makes it clear, important in his poetry for revealing an unsuspected kinship, suggestive, if not proposing, a mythology of the common fate of living things" (p. 18). These images are recurrent throughout the text with the aim of guiding the reader into acknowledging that human beings belong to the realms of life and death simultaneously and even if the latter may be overlooked "la intrascendencia de la muerte no nos lleva a eliminarla de nuestra vida diaria… la muerte es la palabra que jamás se pronuncia porque quema los labios[3]" (Paz 1995, p. 193); nonetheless, death as well as life are intrinsically and extrinsically united in humankind. Intrinsically, as it is a condition of all living beings that as they live, they will die; and extrinsically as many times the memories kept of a person makes him/her subsist through time.

In the XIX century, the scholar J.G. Frazer published *The golden bough,* book in which he studied religious rituals and myth from different cultures around the world. According to Nandi (2016) and based on

2 According to *A dictionary of literary* terms by J.A. Cuddon (1979), a bestiary is a "medieval didactic genre or verse in which the behavior of animals (used as symbolic types) points a moral… The period of greatest popularity for bestiaries in Europe was form the 12th to the 14th c. especially in French. Literary sleuths have surmised that stores like George's Orwell's Animal Farm (1941) and Richard Adam's Watership's Down (1971) are modern developments of the bestiary" (p.77).

3 The irrelevance of death does not make us remove it from our daily life… death is the word that is never spoken because it burns the lips (my translation).

his analysis of archetypal patterns "Frazer argues that the death-rebirth myth is present in almost all cultural mythologies and is acted out in terms of growing seasons and vegetation. The death-rebirth myth is symbolized by the death (i.e. final harvest) and rebirth (i.e. spring) of the god of vegetation (p. 58). Consequently, it can be asserted that Frazer's approach to mythology is based on the concrete elements of the physical world and his central motif is the archetype of resurrection, specifically the myths describing the assassination of the divine sovereign while Jungian criticism on its part aims at understanding the literary work and its connection with the *collective unconscious*[4].

Taking into consideration these common elements, Jung worked and developed the concept of archetypes. According to Maduro & Wheelwright (in Sugg1992), "Jungian theory holds that the mind is not a tabula rasa at birth but that there is an archetypal ground plan built into the structure of the human brain" (p. 182). Hence, humankind shares immaterial content in their psyche and the primeval representations that Jung sees that repeats is what he addresses as archetypes. According to Jung, there are repetitive patterns that stem from structures in the human mind that are considered common to people from all around the world; these patterns are motifs, themes, narrative organization of the text, characters, and images that are found when analyzing a work of literature under the lens of archetypal and mythical criticism. Consequently, much of the aim of this literary analysis will be to look for an understanding of these universal patterns in Kinnell's book-length poem.

Symbols and their context in *The book of nightmares*

As heirs of a given culture, human beings have been bestowed upon former knowledge and wisdom to understand the world not only denotatively but also connotatively, and the access to this information is through symbols. A symbol is commonly defined as using an object to imply something else. To ascribe meaning to an item is a task that positions the individuals in a specific time and space; consequently, the culture of the time and the place where the action materializes will attribute its connotational meaning to the text being analyzed. According to Jung (in Sabini 2001), humankind

> has always lived with a myth and we think we are able to be born today and to live in no myth, without history. That is disease. That's absolutely abnormal, because man is not born every day. He is born once in a specific historical setting, with specific historical qualities, and therefore he is only complete when he has a relation to these things. It is as if you were born without eyes and ears when you are growing up with no connection with the past (p. 98).

4 Gras (1981) cites Jung when defining the collective unconscious: "… to the degree that human brains are uniformly differentiated, the mental functioning thereby made possible is also collective and universal. This explains, for example, the interesting fact that the unconscious processes of the most widely separated peoples and races show a quite remarkable correspondence, which displays itself among other things, in the extraordinary but well-authenticated analogies between the forms and motifs of autochthonous myths. The universal similarity of human brains lead to the universal possibility of a uniform mental functioning. This functioning is the collective psyche" (p. 472).

As Jung affirms, individuals belong to a moment and time that will have an impact on their upbringing and consequently, on their behavior. Moreover, they should not disregard myth as a magic thought for symbols are part of the human psyche. As Jung (1964) acknowledges, "[w]hat we call a symbol is a term, a name, or even a picture that may be familiar in daily life, yet that possesses specific connotations in addition to its conventional and obvious 'meaning'… As the mind explores the symbol, it is led to ideas that lie beyond the grasp of reason" (pp. 3-4). Even when people are not aware of the effect symbols have in their lives, they are part of a collective heritage that should not be overlooked.

According to Jung, there are symbols that may be personal; nevertheless, there are others that tend to be communal, shared by many. Additionally, when discussing a literary work, it can be asserted that there are objects, situations, or actions that besides having a denotative meaning in the text, they suggest and represent other meanings for the text and the reader, as in the case of *The book of nightmares*. There are different items that could be considered symbols in this book-length poem; nevertheless, for the purpose of this study, the symbols that will be analyzed will also be arranged in terms of natural imagery and classical elements of nature. Thus, these images will be comprised in the categories of natural imagery and the resolution of binary oppositions[5]. This discussion will include the stones as a natural image that resembles strength, the trees as symbolic elements of guidance and knowledge and animals and insects that will metaphorically aid into the understanding of the text. In the case of the latter, the four elements to discuss will be fire, water, air, and the earth.

The decision of categorizing these nature metaphors was made so that the most relevant were taken into consideration for the discussion of this study. At this respect, Campbell (2004a) affirms that "The way that mythologies work their magic is through symbols. The symbol works as an automatic button that releases energy and channels it" (p. 47); moreover, he also asserts that mythology represents the "stories about the wisdom of life" (Campbell 1991, p. 11). Accordingly, if myths are learned through symbols to offer humankind the possibility of being more knowledgeable, *The book of nightmares* is a poem that offers this opportunity for the persona and its readers, by means of developing a private "bestiary," a collection of stories of mythical animals within the text as well as discussing in his metaphors, humankind relationship with the classical elements of the world. Moreover, Lévi-Strauss (1978) affirms that "images

5 According to Selden (1989), "'Binary oppositions' (BO's) are fundamental to structuralist thought. They also appear to be fundamental not only to human thought in general but even in some cases to the natural order itself. Forms of binarism are present in human thought from the earliest tunes. Dualisms in philosophy and religion (subject and object, God and man, mind and the external world, organic and mechanical, temporal and eternal, and so on) are the very foundations of entire world-views. The concept of 'privatives' is also important in this context. We can describe the world in terms of the absence of certain qualities. Darkness is the absence of light; the iron is cold when it lacks heat; an object is still when it lacks movement. (…) Structuralists have argued that binary oppositions are fundamental to human language, cognition and communication. We use BO's to mark *differences* in an otherwise apparently random sequence of features, and thus to give shape to our experience of the universe" (pp. 55-56).

borrowed from experience can be put to use. This is the originality of mythical thinking – to play the part of conceptual thinking: an animal which can be used as what I would call a binary operator can have, from a logical point of view, a relationship with a problem which is also a binary problem" (p.8). Thus, through images of the primitive or basic acts of humanity, the poet recognizes individuals' personal struggles in a realm where binaries help to acquire understanding that human beings are one and the other simultaneously.

Natural imagery and the resolution of binary oppositions

As a distinctive characteristic of Kinnell's poetry, nature and its elements are ever present in *The book of nightmares*. All of these earthly components are symbolic in the journey of discovery that the persona undertakes; moreover, they are all meaningful for the quester and his inner desire to learn and grow. To start the analysis of the different natural elements, rocks will guide the way as they represent a solid object that does not change easily and that symbolizes strength. Hence, as the hero moves forward on his journey of self-discovery, the path taken is led by stones. Furthermore, this seemingly "dead" natural element will help him discover how the binary opposition life-death becomes one and as Paz (1995) declares: "Nuestra muerte ilumina nuestra vida[6]" (p. 189).

1. The stones

Frequently, stones are related as objects that symbolize permanence and strength; moreover, as they are typically grounded, somehow, they seem to be connected to the earth. They may teach the quester, in this specific case, lessons on enduring as well as appreciating life's paths. It is essential to recall that symbols are primordial images through which archetypes may be experienced, and most fundamentally, the unconscious is made visible. Jung (1959) asserts, regarding the term archetype, that "it designates only those psychic contents which have not yet been summitted to conscious elaboration and are therefore an immediate datum of psychic experience" (p. 5). Thus, through these symbolic elements, the persona's inner psychic processes will be portrayed. In the case of stones, these are objects present in the route that the persona, as the poem starts, encounters "black stones;" moreover, as his moves forward in his journey, he wears the "eldershoes of [his] feet" he "walk[s] out now, / in dead shoe, in the new light, / on the steppingstones" (Kinnell 1971, p. 19). Rocks have been symbolic since primitive times while Jung (1964) affirms that:

> Rough natural stones were often believed to the dwelling places of spirits or gods, and were used in primitive cultures as tombstones, boundary stones, or objects or religious veneration. Their use may be regarded as a primeval form of sculpture – a first attempt to invest the stone with more expressive power than chance and nature could give it" (p. 258).
>
> In *The book of nightmares*, even when the stones are not present as simple sculptures, they transmute into a ceremonial path on which the quester examines his track and the decisions he has made, not just by him but by all

6 "Our death lights our life" (my translation).

humanity. On the other hand, stones might also be considered elements of cohesion and reconciliation with the self[7]. Their physical characteristics of strength may evoke the antithesis to natural elements that are ruled by the laws of alteration, deterioration and death. But for the quester, the paces taken are not strong but frail as the foot "rubs" the perilous track he needs to cross; and this trail is also occupied by "snakestones", stones that resemble vipers dangerous but knowledgeable. Are these latter stones a reminder of human nature and the desire to know? For

> … the foot,
> which rubs the cobblestones
> and snakestones all its days, this lowliest
> of tongues, whose lick-tracks tell
> our history of errors to the dust behind,
> which is the last trace in us of wings? (pp. 21-22)

And it is in this path where the persona questions and wonders about the "history of errors" of humankind and ponders on the possibility of reaching "higher" from the stones. In this historical account, he refers to the killings, robberies, and grief inflicted on others and on ourselves and those mistakes humankind makes by giving room to envy, greed, pride, and hatred. The quester keeps on with his journey as he "walk[s] out from [himself] / among the stones of the field" (p. 66) to find, later on, that "in the graveyard / the lamps start lighting up, one for each of us / in all the windows / of stone" (p. 68). The mortal end of every person will be death but as part of an expected higher universe in the Judeo-Christian tradition, death will transform into life, fulfilling the infinite cycle of the cosmos. Indeed, death will come for each person, and everybody will have to face it, sooner or later, this fact is reflected in the stones that signal the boundary between what is considered life and death. As the quester moves forward to the last stage of his journey, he keeps:

> 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 (p. 72).

He is suddenly startled, as his own voice resembles the stones'; and this voice he hears fights against the debris of what once was. It is as if the echo, at the cliff, reminds him that all the actions taken will go back to him, exactly as his voice. The endurance and stability that the stones symbolize will make them become witness of this certainty he experiences. And the replica of his voice hounds him for it may be something he would have liked to

7 According to Cirlot (1962) stones may represent the following: "Stone is a symbol of being, of cohesion and harmonious reconciliation with self. The hardness and durability of stone have always impressed men, suggesting to them the antithesis to biological things subject to the laws of change, decay and death, as well as the antithesis to dust, sand and stone splinters, as aspects of disintegration. The stone when whole symbolized unity and strength; when shattered it signified dismemberment, psychic disintegration, infirmity, death and annihilation. Stones fallen from heaven served to explain the origin of life. In volcanic eruptions, air turned to fire, fire became 'water' and 'water' changed to stone; hence stone constitutes the first solid form of the creative rhythm (p. 51)—the sculpture of essential movement, and the petrified music of creation (p. 50). The mythic and religious significance is only one step removed from this basic symbolic sense, a step which was taken by the immense majority of peoples during the animistic era" (pp. 313-314).

acknowledge; however, the findings in his journey have allowed him to grow and understand that all his experiences are part of his life. Besides, as he approaches the precipice, facing both, death and life, another truth is exposed, and it is in this moment when the speaker declares:

> Stop.
> As you approach an echoing
> cliffside, you sense the line
> where the voice calling from stone
> no longer answers,
> turns into stone, and nothing comes back (pp. 72-73).

In this moment, he realizes that life and death walk hand in hand. The symbol of the "cliffside" he encounters is the end of his journey, he is now ready to share with the others the knowledge acquired. Additionally, if it is a cliff, it may be the point of reunion of the sea/river and the earth. The persona undergoes an experience in the cliff with the sea; in fact Cirlot (1962) states that "waters in flux, the transitional and mediating agent between the nonformal (air and gases) and the formal (earth and solids) and, by analogy, between life and death" (p. 281). Likewise, according to Ferber (1999), "the sea has symbolized chaos and the bridge among orderly lands, life and death, time and timelessness, menace and lure, boredom and the sublime" (p. 179). Consequently, there is no error in the persona when experiencing, at this moment, the conjunction of the opposites life and death. Definitely, these binary oppositions in life's continuum could have been experienced by the quester before just as he is facing this moment; for example, when he met the bear in section I or when he morphed into the tramp in section III. Nevertheless, he was not ready to understand the image. Hence, the speaker knows that even when one day there may be no utterance from within but to know that

> Here, between answer
> and nothing, I stand, in the old shoes
> flowed over by rainbows of hen-oil,
> each shoe holding the bones
> which ripple together in the communion
> of the step,
> and which open out
> in front into toes, the whole foot trying
> to dissolve into the future (p. 73).

The persona has gathered enough understanding to appreciate that the new self "stands" in the "old shoes" and that, like the hen, "could let go." Furthermore, his "bones," a reference to a skeleton symbolizing death, become into toes, humankind's necessary members to walk, and that figuratively may represent life; for they have morphed from carcasses to flesh. However, this transition will not last as the "whole foot tr[ies] / to dissolve into the future;" in other words, as time passes, they will also vanish. His life is part of his death as well as his present is part of his past and future. Unexpectedly, the persona comprehends, as Paz (1995) affirms, that "[e]l tiempo deja de ser sucesión y vuelve a ser lo que fue, y es, originariamente: un presente en donde pasado y futuro al fin se reconcilian[8] (p. 183); in other words, for Paz, the division of phases in a person's life (past, present, future) is but a unity that mirrors the life-death binary opposition. Hence, the reconciliation of these two polarities is met through the symbolic

8 "Time stops being a succession and goes back to being what it was, and is, originally: a present in which past and future reconcile" (my translation).

elements of the stones and the encounter with the water, imagery of life and death as Cirlot (1962, p. 281) and Ferber (1999, p. 179) affirm.

2. The trees

Culturally, the collective imagination has ascribed trees properties of immortality, knowledge, strength, and mystic connections, among others[9]. However, the symbolic element of trees may also represent fear of the unknown, especially the one the individual ignores about him/herself. Trees have owned a position in the Christian religious tradition for they are at its heart: the "Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil" and the "Tree of life." Later, these trees remained as the "Tree of life" and the "Tree of death" as the latter caused Adam and Eve to flee Paradise. On its part, in *The book of nightmares,* the trees throughout the journey of the persona, represent, like the stones, a metaphorical image that guides him into understanding the binary opposition life-death. When the persona starts his descend into the unknown, he is confronted with "[t]he witness trees" that "blaze themselves a last time" and "the road / trembles as it starts across / swampland streaked with shined water" (p. 21). His path has been lit by burning shrubs that will ignite his first steps into his deepest fears with the promise of acquiring the knowledge needed to grow. Moreover, the flames of the trees are mirrored into the water as he takes his first steps of pain and grief and confronts "jungles of burnt flesh, ground of ground /bones" (p. 22). He starts his passage witnessing two of what may be considered allegories of a terrifying human calamity the horrors of war and the ultimate stage of humankind: devastation and oblivion. Slowly, while he advances, he finds "the Crone" who reveals to him:

> 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 (p. 23).

According to the seer, the persona belongs to the "sign of the Bear," creature that

9 According to Cirlot (1962) "In its most general sense, the symbolism of the tree denotes the life of the cosmos: its consistence, growth, proliferation, generative and regenerative processes. It stands for inexhaustible life, and is therefore equivalent to a symbol of immortality. According to Eliade, the concept of 'life without death' stands, ontologically speaking, for 'absolute reality' and, consequently, the tree becomes a symbol of this absolute reality, that is, of the centre of the world. Because a tree has a long, vertical shape, the centre-of-the-world symbolism is expressed in terms of a world-axis. The tree, with its roots underground and its branches rising to the sky, symbolizes an upward trend and is therefore related to other symbols, such as the ladder and the mountain, which stand for the general relationship between the 'three worlds' (the lower world: the underworld, hell; the middle world: earth; the upper world: heaven). Christian symbolism— and especially Romanesque art—is fully aware of the primary significance of the tree as an axis linking different worlds ... Within the general significance of the tree as worldaxis and as a symbol of the inexhaustible life-process (growth and development), different mythologies and folklores distinguish three or four different shades of meaning. Some of these are merely aspects of the basic symbolism, but others are of a subtlety which gives further enrichment to the symbol. At the most primitive level, there are the 'Tree of Life' and the 'Tree of Death', rather than, as in later stages, the cosmic tree and the tree of the knowledge of Good and Evil; but the two trees are merely two different representations of the same idea. The *arbor vitae* is found frequently, in a variety of forms" (p. 347).

is symbolically characterized by being strong and confident even when he struggles through turmoil; likewise, the Crone cautions the quester of his immanent painful experience as he "will feel all [his] bones / break" (p. 23). For the former, there seems to be no salvation or redemption, neither in the world nor in the people for the hero represents a divided branch of "applewood," symbol that makes reference to the Christian myth of the "Tree of knowledge" from which, according to this religious tradition, Eve offered Adam an apple, a symbol of "discord" or "dissension." Hence, according to this social convention, humankind is destined to die and suffer, exactly as what the Crone envisages for to the persona.

Indeed, the metaphorical image of the trees is observed in the poetic text again when the persona, as he moves forward in his journey, encounters those skeletons mentioned previously. Furthermore, in this image, the tree embodies characteristics of rebirth and eternity as when the bones are "tossed / into de aceldama back of the potting shop, among / shards and lumps / which caught vertigo and sagged away / into mud, or crawled out of fire / crazed or exploded" (p. 37), they will not remain the same. On the contrary, "they shall re-arise / in the pear tree, in spring, to shine down / on two clasping what they dream is one another" (p. 37). The persona beholds how those pieces of bones that resemble death are put into the aceldama, that portion of land that has, in the Christian tradition, been connected to Judas's bribery and the purchase of a plot. Consequently, he is faced with human remains that are placed in a location that symbolizes the worst acts of dishonesty; however, these bones, after undergoing difficult moments, illustrated by the phrases "caught vertigo," "sagged away into mud," and "crawled out of fire" will regain life "in the pear tree, in spring" (p. 37). The quester realizes that even when there can be difficult moments in life that may lead to death experiences: life is always part of this continuum's equation. An essential element in this section of the poem is the pear tree, a possible version of Christianity's Tree of life as the bone pieces will "re-arise" from their "second" death as the first one is the moment of birth when individuals "die a moment" (p. 6). As Achtemeier (1985) asserts trees in general "had sacred associations in both Israelite and Canaanite religion, serving as memorial objects (Gen. 21:33) and as symbols of the Canaanite fertility goddess Asherah" (p. 1174) who was possibly "the mother goddess of Canaan" (p. 65). Thus, the trees seemed to have offered people fruits that might have ranged from shade to fruits. Regarding the Tree of life, Achtemeier (1985) states that:

> Although the verbal designation "tree of life" has an understandably restricted place in biblical tradition, a plastic representation of the lifetree, in the form of the sacred lampstand *(menorah)* described in the tabernacle texts, played a central role in the repertoire of ritual appurtenances of ancient Israel. Its stylized tree shape and the vocabulary of botanical terms that describe it suggest that the cultic lampstand symbolized the fructifying powers of the eternal, unseen (p. 1173).

The fact that trees symbolized life and the bettering capacities of experiencing the

divine is extrapolated as the quester recalls his communion with his spouse under the pear tree. Considering the fact that the shape of the fruit is evocative of the feminine sphere; its presence could be interpreted as the woman's capacity for reproduction and a promise for birth, development and permanence. Indeed, in the section of the book-length poem, where the couple is depicted enjoying the bounty of nature, the hero's "mismatched halfness lying side by side in the darkness" (p. 57) is expecting their second baby as he affirms that:

> I can feel with my hand
> the foetus rouse himself
> with a huge, fishy thrash, and re-settle
> in his darkness.
> Her hair glowing in the firelight
> her breasts full,
> her belly swollen
> a sunset of firelight
> wavering all down on one side, my wife
> sleeps on
> happy (p. 57).

This final promise of rebirth and eternity is displayed in this intimate moment of the couple as they share into the creation of life. Moreover, the persona recollects having his spouse next to him, in spring, a season of rebirth; likewise, he suggests that after having intercourse and being together, they are aware that they lie next to the earth knowing that one day they will die. Even when this metaphor may be considered "negative," it is positive as they are among "flowers of the flowers" (p. 59) enjoying that moment in which life and death intersect as "the bodies of our hearts / opened / under the knowledge / of tree, on the grass of the knowledge / of graves" (p. 59). This image is reinforced when the bees become part of the image for these insects besides representing hard work and life in community, they pollinate plants; hence, they participate in life-death cycle of florae; thus, permanence is exhibited in the poem as the persona describes that:

> She who lies halved
> beside me – she and I once
> watched the bees, dreamers not yet
> dipped into de acids
> of the craving for anything, not yet burned down into flies, sucking
> the blossom-dust
> from the pear tree in spring (p. 58).

Likewise, at the closing of this book-length poem, the hero finds that the trees that have stood for eternity, have cured the wounds of humanity; and this mending on their bodies comes from fire that "rises off the bones" (p. 68). In this section, Kinnell portrays the premise that life has to be honored no matter what pole of the dichotomy people are facing. The embrace he proclaims is a torn one that in its defectiveness achieves perfection, exactly as his poetry, through language, it holds life; these aforementioned images take form in the following verses:

> The witness trees heal
> their scars at the flesh fire,
> the flame
> rises off the bones,
> the hunger
> to be new lifts off
> my soul, an eerie blue light blooms
> on all the ridges of the world. Somewhere
> in the legends of blood sacrifice
> the fatted calf
> takes the bonfire into his arms, and *he*
> burns it (p. 68).

After encountering these silent observers, "the witness trees," and realizing of this unity of opposites, the persona moves forward with the purpose of finding other elements that have been traditionally considered opposites but that will end up being one unit. The first of these is "Death" as the great devourer who "lifts off" his essence until it blossoms in a "blue light" all around the globe. Ferber (1999) in his *Dictionary of literary symbols* when analyzing the color blue affirms that "[b]ecause it is the color of the sky (and perhaps because the sea is blue only on sunny days), blue is traditionally the color of heaven, of hope, of constancy, of purity, of truth, of the ideal" (p. 31). Consequently, the ideal is matched with the material represented by the "fatted calf" that instead of being consumed by the fire, he exhausts it with an embrace. It is in this moment when the torn embrace encountered at the beginning of the quester's journey takes form and the ideal and the material converge as the calf, "an appropriate sacrifice (Lev. 9:2, 8) as a sin offering" (Achtemeier 1985, p. 164), "takes the bonfire into his arms" to burn it. This oxymoron redeems the calf and consequently, the hero. The latter is no longer part of a line of "blood sacrifices" but lives.

Indeed, this intersection of opposites and their resolution, depicted previously through the symbol of the stones and the trees, is also present in other figurative elements of nature displayed in the poem through other living creatures: animals and insects. Kinnell's poetry has been characterized by the use of these elements and this book-length poem is no exception. There are several creatures that inhabit the reality of the poem; however, for the sake of this analysis, the emphasis will be on some of them due to their recurrence and significance as symbolic images for the quester. Thus, the animals that will be discussed in the following section are the bear and the hen as well as two insects: the fly and the flea.

3. Insects and other animals

Historically, the use of animal figures and insects has accompanied humankind from early ages; in ancient cultures[10], these creatures of nature were considered, in some cases, messengers of the gods, or demigods. In the American continent, as part of their cosmology, indigenous people believed in gods that were part animal or who displayed elements of different beasts. As Malamud (2000) declares "Mesoamerican animal beliefs embody metaphysical representations of human ties to the earth, nature, and fate, as mediated by animals" (p. 3). Hence, for these cultures, the creatures of nature became essential channels for communicating and understanding the life-death cycle all living beings undergo; however, through time and with the advent of colonization and science, their worldview was replaced. This substitution, some may argue, obliterated humankind's capacity of understanding the life-death

10 According to Ferber (1999) beasts "The animal kingdom has been a lavish source of metaphors, similes, and symbols from the earliest literature to the present. Since beasts come in such great variety, their literary uses are usually specific to the species: lions mean certain things, wolves other things, dogs still others. Even where "beast" or "brute" is used as a general term, there is often an implicit distinction between wild (dangerous) and domestic (tame), a beast of prey or beast of burden. If the human being is the rational animal, as Aristotle and other ancients defined it, then beasts are "lacking in reason" (pp. 20-21).

continuum as part of a natural cycle. Considering this fact, Jung (in Sabini 2001), affirms that the contemporary individual

> feels himself isolated in the cosmos. He is no longer involved in nature and has lost his emotional participation in natural events, which hitherto had a symbolic meaning for him… No river contains a spirit, no tree means a man's life, no snake is the embodiment of wisdom, and no mountain still harbors a great demon. Neither do things speak to him nor can he speak to things, like stones, springs, plants and animals. He no longer has a bush-soul identifying him with a wild animal. His immediate communication with nature is gone forever, and the emotional energy it generated has sunk into the unconscious (pp. 79-80).

According to Jung and, as Kinnell displays in his poetic work, individuals have lost their sense of belonging and their communion with nature; consequently, they feel misplaced and lonely for they have detached from the natural elements that gave them life. However, these elements have been considered by many members of contemporary society as elements over which power is exerted and relations should be limited to human exploitation and "scientific purposes." In *The book of nightmares,* Kinnell, going back to this ancient human tradition, understands animals as elements of a wider scheme in nature. Throughout his journey, the hero finds different representation of creatures that inhabit the physical world as well as individuals' collective images as Jung (1964) asserts:

> There are many symbols, however (among them the most important), that are not individual in their nature and origin… they are in fact "collective representations," emanating from primeval dreams and creative fantasies. As such, these images are involuntary spontaneous manifestations and by no means intentional inventions (pp. 41-42).

Hence, this section of the study will discuss the representation of creatures that populate Kinnell's poem. The first creature to be discussed is: the bear. This creature is one of the elements that make the poem achieve a full circle; the persona finds it at the beginning of his journey as well as at the end. These two appearances connect to the birth of Kinnell's two children: Maud and Fergus. Besides this being, the other animal to be discussed is the hen. This animal, that does not fly but that has wings, becomes a metaphor for the life-death cycle as his corpse entails life within in the production of eggs as the quester has

> … glimpsed
> corpse-light, in the opened cadaver
> of hen, the mass of tiny,
> unborn eggs, each getting
> tinier and yellower as it reaches back toward
> the icy pulp
> of what is (p. 13).

Moreover, there are two insects that have continually been related to bothering moments: the fly and the flea; however, these two almost imperceptible insects become also a symbol of experiencing life and death.

4. The bear

Nature and the primitive seem to be some of Kinnell's favored topics to examine in poetry, and *The book of nightmares* is no exception. According to Jung (1959), "The

primitive cannot assert that he thinks; it is rather that 'something thinks in him.' The spontaneity of the act of thinking does not lie, causally, in his conscious mind, but in his unconscious" (p. 153). Hence, the world of nature and the primeval world reigned through the senses and somehow, it is through the senses, that poetry is experienced. By the same token, Lévi-Strauss (1978) argues that today "we use considerably less our sensory perceptions" (p. 6); however, Kinnell uses them to awaken the world of nature. In his poem "The bear," there is a direct identification of the persona and this wild animal starting in the moment that he lives in the beast; definitely, the persona in the poem is reborn in the carcass of the bear, he becomes one with it. For instance, John Logan (Nelson 1987) in "The bear in the poet in the bear*"* asserts that in his poem, there is a direct identification of the persona and this wild animal starting the moment he becomes the beast:

> His bear poem, the identification of the poet and the bear I made extraordinarily close – in the first place, through the starving speakers subsistence on the blood-soaked turds of the bear he hunts, so that that which has passed through the bear passes also through the poet, and in the second place, through the fact that the poet cuts open the warm carcass of the bear and takes shelter there against the vicious wind and cold… He is born out of the body of the bear again, having thought in his dream that he "must rise up and dance" – and he writes his poem (p. 78).

Molesworth (in Nelson 1987) discusses "The bear" in terms of a symbiotic process in which "once the hunter is inside, his empathetic identification with the bear becomes literal, and the poet recapitulates by dreaming the bear's death" (p. 56). For Molesworth, it is only

> By digesting blood that leaked into his stomach, that is, only by destroying himself, could the bear have lived; and such self-transcendence, Kinnell seems to be saying, can only be achieved by someone tracking down and recording the experience. Such evidence as becomes available for this act may only be a carcass, a remnant of what has "just occurred;" but, through empathetic dream-work, through poetry, such exploration and attentiveness can be the source of new life (p. 57).

The persona's first meeting is with a bear that "sits alone/ on the hillside, nodding from side/ to side" (p. 4); as if protecting a new life to come. And this is the same bear that appears in the last poem "[A] black bear sits alone / in the twilight, nodding from side/ to side, turning slowly around and around/ on himself" (p. 71). The bear has stayed with him throughout his journey and he signals the quester that in poem X he has achieved his aim as the bear is "scuffing the four-footed / circle into earth (p. 71). Completeness has been accomplished. The bear that appears in the first poem is the same that goes full circle and is found in the last poem. This bear does move back to the primitive not as a threatening element but as a witness of natural life. The poet juxtaposes this creature to the moment of birth of his children because, for him, both beings belong to the same realm: the concrete world. One characteristic of Kinnell's poetry is that he

discusses concrete experiences and beings to be able to attain deeper understanding of life, and in the case of the poem being discussed in this study of the binary oppositions of life and death. In fact, in his poetry, all living creatures deserve to be acknowledged. Hence, this comparison between what may considered beasty and what is humane can be evidenced when referring to the bear the persona depicts:

> He sniffs the blossom-smells, the rained earth,
> finally he gets up,
> eats a few flowers, trudges away,
> his fur glistening
> in the rain (p. 4).

The creature is alone sitting on a hillside but also turning, there is movement in its stillness, until it decides to march in the rain; meanwhile, the baby, Maud, on her part, is waiting for "the flipping / and overleaping" (p. 5) to finish, as she is still in her mother's womb, living a life that also belongs to the parent. Moreover, as the baby moves inside this protective sphere, she starts experiencing her own life and at the same time her death to the darkness (her only reality known at the moment) and

> … the watery
> somersaulting alone in the oneness
> under the hill, under
> the old, lonely bellybutton
> pushing forth again
> in remembrance,
> the drifting there furled in the dark,
> pressing a knee or elbow
> along a slippery wall, sculpting
> the world with each thrash-the stream
> of omphalos blood humming all about
> you (p. 5).

The baby is not "on" the hill but "under the hill, under / the old, lonely bellybutton" (p. 5). This image is the most primitive to humankind: the birth of a baby, "in the dark," a previous death or previous life that mix to be "alive" in this world. Just like the bear, the baby moves, but it is also expectant to come out until "[T]he black eye / opens, the pupil / droozed with black hairs" (p. 6). The imagery presented in these verses reflect the bear whose hair glistens (p. 4), "who flounders through chaos / in his starry blubber" (p. 23), reflecting the baby's movements as she is being delivered. According to Jung (1959):

The child motif represents not only something that existed in the distant past but also something that exists *now*; that is to say, it is not just a vestige but a system functioning in the present whose purpose is to compensate or correct, in a meaningful manner, the inevitable one-sidedness and extravagances of the conscious mind to concentrate on relatively few contents and to raise them to the highest pitch of clarity (p.162). Thus, in Kinnell's poem, this first child becomes that primeval cornerstone to amend for what he was not able to understand before departing in his journey. Furthermore, when his second son is being delivered, the bear beast "eat[s] a few flowers, trudge[s] away / all his fur glistening / in the rain" (p. 72) while "Sancho Fergus" (p. 72), becomes a metaphor for the future of humankind while "One of the essential features of the child motif is its futurity. The child is potential future… Life is a flux, a flowing into the future and not a stoppage or backwash. It is therefore not surprising that so many of the mythological saviours are child gods"

(Jung 1959, p. 164). As the mother gave birth, the child "came wholly forth" and the "took him up in [his] hands and bent / over and smelled / the black, glistening fur / of his head" (p. 72).

Furthermore, as the bear walks alone with "his fur glistening," the baby is also "glowing / with the astral violet / of the underlife," her hair is black, and she is "alone in the oneness;" both creatures are on their own expecting for life to happen and simultaneously they are also experiencing the face of death. Furthermore, this black bear materializes again with the birth of Fergus and as it moves with "all his fur glistening / in the rain," the baby boy is being born and, in his delivery, the poet cannot refrain from exclaiming

> And what glistening! Sancho Fergus,
> my boychild, had such great shoulders,
> when he was born his head
> came out, the rest of him stuck. And he
> opened
> his eyes: his head out there all alone
> in the room, he squinted with pained,
> barely unglued eyes at the ninth-month's
> blood splashing beneath him
> on the floor. And almost
> smiled, I thought, almost forgave it all
> in advance.

The bear's fur glistens as the baby's hair, both images are depicted as being granted light that comes from a source that is external. Moreover, as the baby is being delivered, the persona sees him as a big and strong baby that has "great shoulders" (p. 72) like the bear, a robust creature. Hence, the comparison of the birth of the babies, Maud's and Fergus's, to the bear is absolute. Like the creature, the babies glistened, "all alone" moving to enter life, the eyes were searching for a not-yet-existing question of being for, in the case of the bear, it lives on his instincts in which life and death are an interwoven duality; humanity, on the contrary, needs to come to this awareness, individually, in a process of learning and unlearning lessons. The primitive (the bear) and the civilized (the babies) are put together to remind the reader that humankind belongs to both realms of life and death: Eros and Thanatos.

5. The hen

Besides the bear, the other fundamental totem animal in the poem is the hen, its feathers, and its produce. The hen and its death become symbolic elements in the poem as reminders that humankind should be aware that all beginnings imply a demise and that as humankind embraces life unquestionably, individuals must also embrace death, for in the latter life is found and vice versa. However, if there is no awareness of this fact, humanity will live in fear and suffering "dying in to the old sway bed, / a layer of crushed feathers all that there is/ between you/ and the long shaft of darkness shaped as you/ let go" (p.14). The hen is a bird, but a bird that does not fly; consequently, it cannot be a messenger of the gods of heaven but of those on earth. In this poem, the hen is an unequivocal indication that as life comes into existence so does death and that is why the persona envisages his face in bed and "our faces in the spring / nights, teeth / biting down on hen feathers, bits of the hen / still stuck in the crevices" (p. 11):

> ... – if only
> we could let go
> like her, throw ourselves
> on the mercy of darkness, like the hen,
> tuck our head
> under a wing, hold ourselves still
> a few moments, as she
> falls out into her little trance in the witchgrass (p.11).

The way to kill the hen is simple and fast as the poet seems to have a death wish for his moment of departure into the "mercy of darkness" (p. 11). Most likely, this animal, as any other living being, "feels" when death approaches; however, it knows that there is nothing to be done; consequently, as the hen, he wants to be humble and accept death when it comes and at that moment "hold ourselves still / a few moments"

> or turn over
> and be stroked with a finger
> down the throat feathers,
> down the throat knuckles,
> down over the hum
> of the wishbone tuning its high D in thin blood,
> down over
> the breastbone risen up
> out of breast flesh, until the fatted thing
> woozes off, head
> thrown back
> on the chopping block, longing only
> to die (p. 11).

And that is, according to Campbell (1991), "the power of the animal master, the willingness of the animals to participate in this game" (p. 94) of being offered as nourishment. In this moment, the persona sees "by corpse-light, in the opened cadaver / of hen, the mass of tiny, / unborn eggs, each getting / tinier and yellower as it reaches back toward /the icy pulp / of what is" (p. 13); at this instant, the persona experiences progression going back to the unknown, to a prenatal moment of lack of awareness when he asserts to "have felt the zero / freeze itself around the finger dipped slowly in" (p. 13). At the end of "living," that is all there is, a "cadaver / of hen" (p. 13) like there is one for each human being because when "la muerte nos venga de la vida, la desnuda de todas sus vanidades y pretensiones y la convierte en lo que es: unos huesos mondos y una mueca espantable[11]" (Paz 1995, p. 194). However, in the carcass lay the "unborn eggs, each getting/ tinier and yellower as it reaches back toward/ the icy pulp/ of what is" (p. 13).

Having the hen in mind, the quester, after carefully considering its behavior when scratching the ground, he wonders if this idea of living perpetually is a nightmare or its opposite, a dream; interestingly enough, both images respond to the unconscious, the possible latent desires of humanity. Thus, he states:

> And is it
> the hen's nightmare, or her secret dream,
> to scratch the ground forever
> eating the minutes out of the grains of sand?

This image of the hen accompanies the persona in his journey and in section IV of the book-length poem its memory haunts him as he "lie[s] without sleeping,

11 Death avenges life, it strips it from all its vanities and makes it become what it is: skinned bones and a terrifying grimace (my translation).

remembering / the ripped body / of hen, the warmth of hen flesh" (p. 30). This vivid image that he recollects, takes him back to an earlier stage; however, it is until this instant when he acknowledges the fear felt towards death as he recollects that the hen's flesh "frighten[ed] [his] hand / all her desires, / all her deathsmells / blooming again in the starlight" (p. 30). Moreover, as the persona wears the shoes of the tramp, he also recognizes that the hen ignites his will through the metaphor of wood flickering as he "sat out by twigfires flaring in grease strewn from the pimpled limbs of the hen" (p. 36). Likewise, these drops of her being fall and become the combustion that keeps him moving forward; and while approaching his aim, the hero asserts:

> Here, between answer
> and nothing, I stand, in the old shoes
> flowed over by rainbows of hen-oil,
> each shoe holding the bones
> which ripple together in the communion
> of the step,
> and which open out
> in front into toes, the whole foot trying
> to dissolve into the future (p. 73).

As the quester encountered his grail, "the eldershoes of [his] feet" (p. 19) emerge as new with the help of the essence of the hen that is not colorless but a rainbow, as the Christian covenant with humanity, full of hope; moreover, life and death become one "in the communion / of the step" as the persona's steps disappear into a timeless moment. This resolution of the life-death binary opposition is also present in the poem through the representation of other living beings as the fly and flea.

6. The fly and the flea

Flies are usually associated with loss of life for these insects are decomposers and they feed on the dead; however, the fly in this book-length poem is in a different position as the speaker watches it "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" (p. 35). Another reminder, for the quester, of how humankind may be trapped in the face of life is depicted when "the fly/ ceases to struggle, his wings/ flutter out the music blooming with failure/ of one who gets ready to die" (p. 30); until the reader meets the flea "[O]n the body/ on the blued flesh, when it is/ laid out, see if you can find/ the one flea which is laughing" (p. 75). This flea mirrors the juxtaposition of existence in which life and death, terror and beauty walk out together.

Indeed, the metaphor of flea in the book-length poem is present in two specific moments; one when the persona is speaking to his daughter, telling her that there is nothing he could do to make her avoid the passing of time for he has heard her "tell / the sun, *don't go down*, I have stood by / as you told the flower, *don't grow old*, / *don't die"* (p. 49). The second time, the flea is found at the end of the book-length poem when the persona realizes that this creature may know more than humans: life and death belong together. Individuals seem to forget that the passage of time is certain, every day will bring a new night, every day individuals will grow older, and as they age, they may be facing the inherited dichotomy inscribed in each person: life is

part of death and vice versa. Nevertheless, this fact is not recognized by the majority of individuals because contemporary society has lost contact with nature and its cycles of regeneration and demise. Thus, life and death are not approached as part of the same continuum and this may be the reason for humankind's unacknowledged despair that Kinnell depicts when the persona states that "[A]nd yet perhaps this is the reason you cry, / this the nightmare you wake screaming from: / being forever / in the pre-trembling of a house that falls (p. 50).

Throughout the book-length poem, Kinnell discusses this animal exclusively in sections VII and X. In the former section, he uses it to depict the precarious situation of humankind when "owning" freedom. For him, individuals "feel free on earth as fleas on the bodies of men" (p. 50), through this ironical metaphor, the persona acknowledges that humankind is not free. Fleas are parasitic insects that present several stages of metamorphosis and they nourish on blood; consequently, they feed on life and so do social conventions. Society may feed on individuals fears, loves and dreams. Paradoxically, Kinnell, in section X, approaches this animal from a different perspective: a juxtaposition of opposites.

The fly, on the other hand, is one insect that is present in sections V and VI. In section V, the fly prepares to die ad it "tangled in mouth-glue, whining his wings, / concentrated wholly on / *time*" (p. 35) because it senses that its end approaches and the fly "ceases to struggle, his wings flutter out of music blooming with failure / of one who gets ready to die" (p. 35). This animal stops resisting the spider's web and accepts its fate; furthermore, its wings make music which the persona compares to the mythical hero Roland[12] who is accompanied by his horn, an instrument that could be heard from afar. The music produced by the fly's wings is not a mourning melody but a triumphant one in which the "victim" is not so but a victor as it follows the life-death cycle. The fly's flapping becomes a ritualistic melody that "bloom[s] with failure" (p. 35) for the time to encounter death has come. Like the fly being trapped in the web, so is humanity which is confined to a life-death duality that needs to be acknowledged in order to live more harmoniously.

In section VI, the persona decides to give the fly his "brain" whose "back the hysterical green color of slime, / that he may suck on it and die" (p. 43). For the quester, there is no purpose in rational thinking as it has produced so much pain in humanity; however, the fly is not to blame for this flaw and before concluding this section "the fly" living "the last nightmare, hatches himself"

12 The song of Roland is a poem, according to García (2010), that "celebrates King Charles of France (appearing old, decrepit, and ghost-like) and his best men (known as the Twelve Peers) in their fight against the people of the Saracen Empire (another name for the Muslim Caliphate). Roland, the group's leader, and his men seek to annihilate the heathen Saracen religion or convert its adherents. Charles and the Franks are also seeking to conquer Spain. As Roland and his soldiers make their way through the Pyrenees, they are attacked by the Saracens… both before and after the disagreement with Oliver. This key dramatic moment – the quarrel centering on Olivier's three requests and Roland's three refusals to blow his horn – even though an ambush looks likely, is a good starting point for performing a cost-benefit analysis of one who sacrifices himself and those in the rear-guard" (pp. 312-314).

(p. 44). In other words, from its own destruction, there comes life again.

Definitely, subversion found in Kinnell's literary piece consists of a journey of discovery for which the acceptance and experience of death through a life cycle, in which living involves death and death living is not only necessary but essential. Most human beings have been taught to consider living as the center of their interests and fear death. Though, for Kinnell the latter starts at the moment of birth; it is a paradox that when individuals start living in the world they also start dying. In other words, "living life" is accepting death as its companion; besides, according to Kinnell's vision of the world, both are part of a necessary cycle to become one with nature. Octavio Paz (1995) in his book *El laberinto de la soledad*, confirms this revelation when he states that

> ¿Quizás nacer sea morir y morir nacer? Nada sabemos, todo nuestro ser aspira a escapar de esos contrarios que nos desgarran, pues si todo (conciencia de sí mismo, tiempo, razón, costumbres, hábitos) tiende a ser de nosotros los expulsados de la vida, todo también nos empuja a volver, a descender al seno creador de donde fuimos arrancados. Y le pedimos al amor – que, siendo deseo es hambre de comunión, hambre de caer y morir tanto como de renacer – que nos dé un pedazo de vida verdadera, de muerte verdadera. No le pedimos la felicidad, ni el reposo, sino un instante, sólo un instante, de vida plena, en la que se fundan los contrarios y vida y muerte, tiempo y eternidad pacten. Oscuramente sabemos que vida y muerte no son sino dos movimientos, antagónicos pero complementarios, de una misma realidad. Creación y destrucción se funden en el acto amoroso; y durante una fracción de segundo el hombre entrevé un estado más perfecto (p. 343)[13].

Like Paz, it seems that Kinnell believes that humanity denies itself the deepest experience of real life: there must be a reconciliation of binary oppositions. As Paz states, people look for an instant to complete life and this can only be achieved when polarities come together and become one in ephemeral flashes.

Conclusion

Unquestionably, in the book-length poem, nature is a central element; indeed, it is unbearable for the persona to detach from it because as a tree or a bird or an insect, he is connected to the elements, fire, water, air, and earth, and with them, to nature. For the speaker there is no more satisfying experience than the one attained through the natural world and its elements. Kinnell succeeds in juxtaposing polarities to recover meaning as he "sits[s] a moment/ by the fire, in the rain, speak/ a few words

13 "Perhaps being born is dying and dying is being born? We know nothing, our whole being longing to escape opposites that tear us apart, if everything (consciousness of ourselves, time, reason, customs) belongs to us, those expelled from life, everything pushes us forward to go back too, to descend to the bosom of the creator from which we were pulled out. And we ask love – that being desire is hunger for communion, longing to fall and die just as to being reborn – to give us a piece of true life, true death. We do not ask for happiness, nor for rest, but for an instant, one single instant of complete life in which the opposites, life and death, and time and eternity, merge and come to an agreement. Obscurely, we know that life and death are but two movements, antagonistic but complementary of the same reality. Creation and destruction merge in the loving act; and during a fraction of a second, man has a glimpse to a more perfect state" (my translation).

into its warmth" (p. 4); the rain falls and it is warm as the fire in the field, oppositions that guide the quester into understanding his duality. Additionally, it is essential to consider that the metaphors on nature discussed belong to the sphere of the poet's psychological journey to a more knowledgeable existence.

Unquestionably, for the persona, individuals soon forget those who die, all their deeds, sorrows, joys, loves, hopes, and fears. Sooner or later everyone meets "… the roadlessness /to the other side of darkness / your arms /like the shoes left behind, / like the adjectives in the halting speech / of old men, / which once could call up the lost nouns" (pp. 50-51). Equivocally, for some, the ultimate end for humankind is oblivion; however, for Kinnell, individuals have to attain pleasure in the experience of living because sooner or later, they will simultaneously encounter their demise, death, and their beginning, like the hen in section III of the poem when after killing the animal, the speaker finds life as "the next egg / bobbling /its globe of golden earth, / skids forth, ridding her even / of the life to come" (p. 12). Indeed, it is through approaching death that life keeps going. As with other poems, Kinnell chooses natural imagery to show, like in the moment of his daughter's delivery, that life leads to death but that in death there is life. Such statement may be read as contradictory; however, it is this fact that makes the persona amaze in the mystery of the universe. This "impermanence" of life has been a subject of abundant works through time, and death has become its undeniable companion

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