

Kinsella contra Dante:

‘Who was ousted so hell could be installed?’

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Taking Dante’s cosmography as its point of departure, John Kinsella’s *Divine Comedy: Journeys Through a Regional Geography* (2008) envisages Mount Purgatory as Walwalinj, or Mount Bakewell; his *Paradiso* and *Inferno* are the wheatbelt district of West Australia; his Florence, Perth, flush with mining money. Kinsella’s *Comedy* comprises what he calls a ‘distraction’ on Dante’s *Commedia* – less a translation or a version, than a ‘rupture’ that both inhabits and subverts its epic model. This paper examines Kinsella’s rupturing of the structural logic of Dante’s epic poem, and its implications for the discourse of nationhood that the epic mode legitimises. Transposing Dante’s *Commedia* into an antipodean key, Kinsella foregrounds the primary discontents of the discourse of Australian nationhood: the dispossession of indigenous Australians and the ecological degradation instantiated by pastoralism. In doing so, it comprises a critical development in what Peter Minter has called Kinsella’s ‘immanently political’ poetics.

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I. Dante’s Antipodes

When Ezra Pound quipped in a letter to R.P. Blackmur in 1924 that ‘one can no longer put Mt Purgatory forty miles high in the midst of Australian sheep land’, he was of course mocking the medieval cosmography of Dante’s *La Divina Commedia*, which locates Mount Purgatory in the Antipodes.¹ As Matthew Boyd Goldie explains in *The Idea of the Antipodes: Place, People and Voices* (2010), while the existence of an antipodal continent had been proposed by the ancients as a logical consequence of the spherical globe, to the medieval European imagination the Antipodes were an otherworldly place, shrouded in mythopoeic speculation and theological debate.² The early Christian author Lactantius, for instance, balked at the apparent geophysical conundrum presented by the prospect ‘that grains and trees grow downwards’ and ‘that there are men whose footprints are higher than their heads’; another tradition, found in the writings of Pliny, Augustine and Isidore of Seville, hypothesised antipodal monsters, humanoid abominations whose feet literally faced backwards.³ A popular Arthurian legend dating to the twelfth century (and current as late as the seventeenth), held that an undead King Arthur had become Lord of the Antipodes, where he was slowly gathering an army while corresponding with Henry II.⁴ As Alfred Hiatt writes in *Terra Incognita: Mapping the Antipodes* (2008), the fabled Antipodes comprised for much of Western history ‘land unknown but not unthought’, and as such functioned as a repository for the projected hopes and fears of myriad European cultures, a kind of mirror for

‘turning the European gaze back on itself’.⁵

Taking Dante’s antipodean *Purgatorio* as its starting point, John Kinsella’s *Divine Comedy: Journeys Through a Regional Geography* (2008) is set in the West Australian wheatbelt, where he grew up, worked in his youth and sometimes lives, and about which he has written extensively – specifically, in the Avon Valley around the town of York, the oldest inland town in West Australia, founded in 1831. Readers of Kinsella’s *The Silo* will be instantly familiar with this topography. Kinsella’s Mount Purgatory – the fulcrum upon which what he calls his ‘provincial cosmology’ hinges – is Walwalinj, or Mount Bakewell, in the wheatbelt district of West Australia, not exactly the 40 mile-high mountain that Pound imagined it to be, but rising a comparatively underwhelming 470 metres above sea level; his Florence, Perth, the state capital, flush with mining money.⁶ Consisting of 225 individual poems – each written in tercets, though not in terza rima – and running to more than four hundred pages, Kinsella’s *Comedy* is perhaps the most comprehensive, sustained literary response to Dante in Australian literature.⁷ It comprises what Kinsella calls a ‘distraction’ on Dante’s *Commedia* – less a *translation* or a *version*, than a ‘rupture’ that both inhabits and subverts its epic model, while transposing its eschatological themes into the keys of ecological and postcolonial trauma. ‘Distraction’ is derived from the Latin, *dis + tractare*, meaning to handle, but also to manipulate, examine, discuss or treat (a subject); whence *distraho, distractum*, not only to draw apart or separate, but also to set at variance, or to *estrangle*. And indeed, Kinsella’s *Comedy* does all these things: it handles Dante’s text, manipulates, examines and discusses it, but also draws apart from it, sets itself at variance to, and estranges itself from the original. As he explains in his preface to ‘Purgatorio’, Kinsella’s *Comedy* is ‘certainly meant to be paralleled with’ but also ‘read *against* Dante’s structure’.⁸

This essay examines Kinsella’s strategic rupturing of the framework of Dante’s epic – what Louis Armand has called the ‘schematic logic’ of Kinsella’s ‘critical poetics’ – by foregrounding several aspects of the literary and historical context of his *Divine Comedy*.⁹ I begin by alluding to a minor aspect of the work’s publication history, before outlining the influence exerted by Dante’s apparently prophetic description in the *Commedia* of the constellation *Crux*, firstly on the discourse of European exploration, then on recent narratives of Australian nationhood, in order to show how Kinsella’s *Comedy* resists the legitimising praxis of the epic mode. Written at a time when the legitimacy of Australian nationhood was increasingly becoming a site of political contestation, Kinsella’s ‘rupturing’ of the *Commedia* can be read as an act of literary and political defiance, against what Michael Bakhtin calls the epic mode’s ‘valorization’ of narratives of nationhood.

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In 2007, as poetry editor for the *Australian Literary Review*, I selected Kinsella's 'Canto of the Beach' for publication, only vaguely aware that this poem was part of a much larger work.¹⁰ 'Canto of the Beach', it transpired, is the second poem in Kinsella's *Divine Comedy*, and as such plays a critical role in establishing the agenda for the work as a whole. The poem opens as follows:

Four cardinal virtues kiss and tell like the stars they are
and we can see them down here all year round
in our virtuous Antipodean bower – land prices

are on the rise and the State looks to secure
its own gas needs, its reputation. An angel
is an advertising dirigible or a banner towed

over the lipid sea, paralleling breakers and coastline,
moonlighting as a spotter plane, early
warning system against great white sharks,

potential killers come out of the deepest,
coldest spaces.

One of the first things that struck me about this poem, from an editorial perspective, was the use of the unusual noun adjunct, 'lipid', to describe the sea (bearing in mind that epithets for the sea, from Homer's 'wine-dark' to Joyce's 'snotgreen', 'scrotumtightening', are an instantly recognisable element of the epic tradition). In biochemistry, a lipid is a type of molecule or organic compound that is insoluble in water, and that comprises, with proteins and carbohydrates, a chief structural component of all living cells. Kinsella's word-choice seemed so unusual to me at the time that I inquired whether it wasn't in fact a typographical error, and that he hadn't intended the more expected 'limpid'. He assured me that 'lipid' was indeed the word he was after, though we eventually settled on the archaic adjectival form, 'lipoid' (fortunately, the poem reverted to its earlier state for the book publication). Such ephemeral, lexical quibbles have a way of lingering in an editor's mind, and when in the years since I came to read the *Comedy* in full, it occurred to me upon reflection that Kinsella's word-choice in this instance speaks to the work more broadly than I had realised at the time. Fats, oils and waxes are all types of lipid. What we

have, then, in these lines, is the image of a sea, on which rests something like a thin film of oil or grease, a layer of molecular compounds that resists absorption, but which is also a store of potential energy. As such, Kinsella's 'lipid sea' doubles as a cipher for the relationship of his *Comedy* to Dante's *Commedia*: for these *distractions* also accrue to form a layer that ultimately resists absorption by the deep Dantean waters on which it rests, and which comprises a store of potential energy required for any would-be poetic metabolism to occur.

Lipids aside, several things can be said about this particular poem by way of highlighting some of the general themes of Kinsella's *Comedy*, as well as some particular textual nodes that will connect with others in later poems. It is evident from the outset that Kinsella's purgatorial landscape is both inherently political, and suffused with the effects of capitalist modes of production (private property, marketing and so on): 'real-estate prices' and the State's 'energy security' (as today's bureaucratic parlance would have it) are the preoccupations of this purgatory, while Dante's angels have metamorphosed into those banal mouthpieces for the free market, advertising dirigibles, or spotter-planes for detecting Great White sharks. The latter, those 'potential killers' that lurk in the 'deepest / coldest spaces', bear the whiff of the monstrous beings that Pliny, St. Augustine and Isidore of Seville postulated as indigenous to the Antipodes. Perhaps more distinctive, however, is the withering sarcasm reserved for 'our virtuous Antipodean bower' in the opening lines. The 'four cardinal virtues' that supposedly confer such virtuousness on the Antipodes refers to the symbolic incarnation of the 'four stars' that Dante the pilgrim observes upon first emerging from hell, into purgatory. It is worth turning to Dante's rendition of these stars in some detail, for his description has not only resonated throughout the European discourse of the Antipodes in the centuries since, but has also played a small, though not insignificant role in the contemporary narrative of Australian nationhood – a narrative that Kinsella's *Comedy* resists in its every molecule.

II. Dante's *quattro stelle* and the Southern Cross

Unlike Pound, of course, Dante could not have known that the antipodal setting on which he superimposed his *Purgatorio* would one day comprise 'Australian sheep land'; but nor should he have known of *Crux*, the constellation in the southern hemisphere known as the Southern Cross, which, in the eyes of numerous commentators, he appears to have described in his *Commedia*. In the opening canto of the *Purgatorio*, arriving in the southern hemisphere for the first time, the pilgrim observes four bright stars, which he surmises had not been seen since *la prima gente*, 'the first people' – presumably Adam and Eve, who occupied the Garden of Paradise atop Mount Purgatory:

e vidi quattro stelle	and I saw four stars
non viste mai fuor ch'a la prima gente.	not seen before except by the first people
Goder pareva 'l ciel di lor fiammelle:	Heaven appeared to revel in their flames:
setentrional vedovo sito,	o northern hemisphere, because you were
poi che privato se' di mirar quelle!	denied that sight, you are a widower! ¹¹

These lines exerted a profound influence on later European explorers of the southern hemisphere, who noted the striking resemblance of Dante's *quattro stelle* to the four first-magnitude stars of the constellation that would be called *Crux*, after Andrea Corsali's depiction in 1516.¹² For these explorers, Dante's description of the southern sky acquired a prophetic tinge, similar to that acquired by his spiritual guide Virgil's apparent prediction of the birth of Christ in his fourth Eclogue. A description of the Southern Cross appears in the Portuguese epic, *Os Lusíadas* (1572), by Camoens, where it would be expected; and in a discarded draft of Tasso's *Gerusalem Liberata* (1581).¹³ It should not, however, have appeared in Dante's writings of the early fourteenth century: *Crux* had not been visible north of 10° latitude in the Northern hemisphere since around 400 AD (when it was included in Greek and Arabic depictions of the constellation Centaurus), due to the precession of the earth's axis, which saw it slip into the southern sky a millennium before Dante was writing.¹⁴ The Southern Cross would not be 'rediscovered' until the great age of Portuguese exploration, almost two hundred years after the *Commedia* was written.¹⁵ The Florentine explorer and cartographer from whom the Americas get their name, Amerigo Vespucci, one of the first Europeans to record an observation of the Southern Cross since the ancients, recalled Dante's lines on sleepless nights during a voyage to South America in 1501, and concluded there is 'no reason to doubt that what he [Dante] says may be true; because I observed four stars in the figure of a cithern, which had little motion'.¹⁶ Giuseppe Baretta, the Italian-born English literary critic and acquaintance of Dr. Johnson's, would return to Dante's 'remarkable' passage two and a half centuries later, on account of its 'Relation [...] to the modern System of Astronomy', and seems to have spoken for many when he concurred with Lorenzo Giacomini, who 'wondered that *Dante*, by mere Force of Enthusiasm, would have thus hit upon a Truth so remote from the Knowledge of his Time'.¹⁷

Voltaire, by contrast, reminded his readers that Dante's *quattro stelle* also have an allegorical function in the *Commedia*, implied by their later reappearance in the *Purgatorio* as the four handmaidens of Beatrice, where they represent the four cardinal virtues: Prudence, Temperance, Justice and Fortitude. In his attempt to account rationally for the prophetic fallacy of Dante's description, Voltaire dismissed as 'mere chance that the south pole and these four stars

are predicted in Dante', stressing instead their allegorical function.¹⁸ Nevertheless, the notion that Dante had indeed described the Southern Cross appears to have remained the standard interpretation. William Blake, for instance, who learned Italian in order to read Dante and worked on illustrations of the *Commedia* to the day of his death, depicted Dante's *quattro stelle* thus in his illustration of the scene.¹⁹

The issue of Dante's 'prophetic spirit' was revived in the nineteenth century, when the German naturalist, Alexander von Humboldt, in his immensely popular *Kosmos* (1845), calculated the effect of the precession of the earth's axis on the latitude at which the Southern Cross has been observable throughout history.²⁰ As a result, Dante's *quattro stelle* and their relation to the Southern Cross became a talking point in North American literary circles in the 1860s.²¹ The debate raged in 1881 in the science journal, *Nature*, for instance, when an anonymous correspondent inquired 'where Dante could have learnt about the Southern Cross, to which there is evident allusion in the first canto of the *Purgatorio*'. Responses were published over several issues, where it was suggested variously that the poet must have learned of the constellation from Arabian celestial globes, hearsay, or Marco Polo.²²

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A world away from Dante's purgatorial Antipodes, the actual inhabitants of the continent that would come to be known as Australia, and of the islands of Aotearoa New Zealand, had their own cosmological interpretations of the Southern Cross. For the aborigines of the central Australian desert, the constellation was figured as the footprint of a wedge-tailed eagle; for the fishing communities of Arnhem Land in northern Australia, it was viewed as a stingray pursued by a shark (comprising the 'pointers', *alpha* and *beta* Centauri).²³ Similarly, some coastal Maori tribes knew the Southern Cross as 'Te Whai-a-Titipa', or 'Titipa's Stingray', while a more widely held Maori tradition, in wonderful contrast to European exploration narratives, held it to represent 'Maahu-tonga', or 'Maahu of the South', a reference to the name of 'a daring South Sea voyager, who though unfurnished with the navigating instruments of modern science, made ocean traverses of thousands of miles in his long sailing canoe centuries before Columbus ventured across the Western Ocean'.²⁴ Perhaps the one thing in common between the Australian aboriginal, Maori and European discourses of the Southern Cross was an understanding of the constellation's circumpolarity, and hence its use as a navigational tool.²⁵

Curiously, however, Dante's *quattro stelle* and their allegorical manifestation as the 'four cardinal virtues' have come to bear an influence on much more recent discussions of Australian nationhood. In 2000, the Australian National Flag Association (ANFA) produced the second

edition of an educational video, *Our National Flag ... Since 1901*, as ‘part of its long term strategy for promoting the current flag among the young’, which was approved for national distribution among schools by then Education Minister, Brendan Nelson.²⁶ As Elizabeth Kwan has noted, both the video and the accompanying teacher’s notes stressed the role played in the design of the flag by Ivor Evans, a fourteen year old schoolboy who, in 1901, following Australia’s federation, became one of six winners of a competition to design the national flag.²⁷ Shortly before his death in 1960, Evans, who had followed his father into the profession of flag making and vexillology, expressed a desire that the four primary stars of the Southern Cross (as depicted on the Australian flag) should represent the four cardinal virtues – justice, prudence, temperance and fortitude – just as they did in Dante. Whilst Evans did not make this statement until the end of his life, ANFA’s educational video and notes imply that he had intended his design to evoke the Dantean allegory all along, despite there being no evidence whatsoever that Dante occupied the thoughts of the schoolboy Evans in 1901.²⁸

The subtle distortion effected by ANFA’s retroactivation of Evans’s Dantean allegory needs to be understood in the context of the fraught political discourse surrounding the issue of Australian national identity in the 1990s and 2000s, which saw the Australian flag become a lightning rod for contested values. In the first half of the nineties, the Labor government under PM Paul Keating (1991-95), in keeping with its official policy of republicanism, had expressed to the House of Representatives a willingness to commence a national discussion concerning the appropriateness of the 1901 ensign.²⁹ On ANZAC day of 1996, the subsequent, newly-elected PM John Howard, a renowned monarchist, reacted by publicly vowing ‘to protect our great national symbol, the Australian flag’ by enshrining in legislation that the flag’s design could not be altered without a referendum or a plebiscite.³⁰ In 2004, the government, then in its third term, made \$31 billion in federal education funding available to schools, on the condition that they participate in a National Values Framework, according to which, among a host of stipulations, schools were to own a ‘functioning flagpole’.³¹ As Judith Brett has written, ‘More than any other Australian peace-time prime minister, perhaps any Australian prime minister since Billy Hughes, Howard wrapped himself in the flag’.³² Martin Flanagan has suggested that Howard ‘made the Australian flag a fashion accessory’, alluding to the resultant increased prominence of the flag in the public arena,³³ while others have noted the relationship between the flag-draped rioters at Cronulla in 2007 and the ‘resurgence of pride in the Australian flag among young people’ that was fostered during Howard’s tenure as Prime Minister.³⁴ It is in this context that we can read ANFA’s attempt to retrospectively superimpose Dante’s *quattro stelle* (as cardinal virtues) onto the historical narrative of the Australian flag.

That Dante’s *Commedia* is literally woven into the recent, and not-so-recent, narrative

fabric of Australian nationhood is perhaps not as odd as it may first seem, if we consider the role that epic poetry generally, and Dante's *Commedia* in particular, has played in engendering narratives of nationhood and empire. From the *Aeneid* to *Os Lusíadas*, *The Odyssey* to Derek Walcott's *Omeros*, it has long been the prerogative of the epic mode to narrativise and legitimise nationhood. As Michael Bakhtin explains in his essay, 'Epic and Novel':

the constitutive feature [of the epic] is the transferral of the world it describes to an absolute past of national beginnings [...] The absolute past is a specifically evaluating (hierarchical) category. In the epic world view, 'beginning', 'first', 'founder', 'ancestor', 'that which occurred earlier' and so forth are not merely temporal categories but *valorized* temporal categories, and valorized to an extreme degree.³⁵

Just as the epic mode valorises the 'absolute past of national beginnings', so too, it can be argued, were ANFA, under the auspices of the government, attempting to valorise a European, Judeo-Christian narrative of the constitutive foundations of Australian national identity, by conscripting the allegorical lines of an epic poem that had turned its European author, according to one Italianist at least, into the 'most sacred totem of legitimacy and nationhood'.³⁶ ANFA's suggestion that Evans' Dantean allegory was somehow constitutively inherent in the text of the Australian flag – precisely at a time when Australia's 'beginning(s)', 'first(s)', 'founder(s)' and 'ancestor(s)' had become a site of political contestation – is a fascinating example of the ways in which the political heft of the epic mode can be conscripted to valorise even contemporary discourses of sovereignty, legitimacy and nationhood.

III. Undoing Dante: Kinsella's *Divine Comedy*

These discourses form the political context in which Kinsella's *Divine Comedy* (envisaged as early as 1997, though commenced in 2003) was written, and it is against this backdrop that both the literary *and* political import of Kinsella's engagement with Dante can be best appreciated.³⁷ It need not be argued that Kinsella's evocation of Dante's *quattro stelle* in the opening of his 'Canto of the Beach' constitutes an explicit engagement with their very different invocation by ANFA, via Ivor Evans and the Howard government. Nevertheless, Kinsella's reference to the four cardinal virtues in 'Canto of the Beach', and their permanent installation above a dubiously 'virtuous Antipodean bower', can be read as a counterpoint to ANFA's deployment of the same Dantean lines in the spirit of Howard's nationalism. This is especially the case, given that Kinsella is a self-proclaimed 'anti-nationalist'³⁸ and has himself written on the cultural politics of

the Australian flag in the context of the ‘virulent and renewing nationalism’ of the early to mid 2000s, in a collection of essays that appeared in the same year as the *Divine Comedy*.³⁹

Before examining the political dimension of Kinsella’s *Comedy* in depth, it is important to outline the ways in which the work undermines the structure of Dante’s epic, for it is, I argue, through the rupturing of Dante’s schematic logic that the political implications of the work are most forcefully felt. Kinsella broadly adheres to the tripartite structure of the *Commedia*, though he embellishes the titles of his cantiche: *Purgatorio: Up Close*, *Paradiso: Rupture* and *Inferno: Leisure Centre*. From the outset, however, we encounter our first ‘distraction’, or act of estrangement from the original: for Kinsella has tampered with the order of Dante’s journey. His *Comedy* begins not with Inferno, but with Purgatory; it then moves to Paradise, and concludes in Inferno, where Dante’s *Commedia* begins. By subverting Dante’s hierarchical structure thus, Kinsella is explicitly rejecting the teleological assumption, the linear projection, the progressive trajectory upward from the depths of hell, over the terraces of purgatory, to the ultimate goal of paradise and spiritual salvation that underpins the original. As he explains, his three cantiche ‘are not linear progressions’ but instead ‘feed each other and require each other. They co-exist’, and in doing so comprise ‘an entirely new geography that departs out of anxieties over the intactness’ of Dante’s *Commedia*.⁴⁰ The ‘intactness’ of Dante’s comedy, which is reinforced by its teleology, is precisely that which instantiates the ‘evaluat[ive]’, ‘hierarchical’ narrative of ‘national beginnings’ that Bakhtin claims is constitutive of the epic mode. That Kinsella doesn’t simply reverse the order is therefore just as significant, for such an inversion would simply retain the linear progression (and perhaps invoke instead the Christian narrative of *the fall*, of which the best known poetic account is Milton’s *Paradise Lost*). As he writes in his Preface to *Inferno: Leisure Centre*:

Dante’s *Divine Comedy* sets things in their place. Vengeance, punishment, suffering, reward and bliss are all placed in a grand scheme of things. Not so in my comedy, *where the lines blur* [...] Rather than places to which souls are sent or find themselves, hell, purgatory and paradise are *different systems of interpreting the same values*, the same events, the same raw materials [emphasis added].⁴¹

Where Dante’s poem moves upward toward ultimate rapture, Kinsella’s is everywhere a *rupture*, with multiple ‘digress[ions] and sidesteps’, and in which ‘major categories blend, cross-talk, chat and [enter into] dialogue’.⁴² Kinsella’s ‘anxieties over the intactness’ of the *Commedia* leads to a fundamental rejection of the Dantean telos, which essentially collapses the distance between the present and the ‘absolute past of national beginnings’, thereby undermining the structural

integrity not only of the Dantean epic mode *per se*, but of the legitimising narratives of nationhood that the epic props up.

As a clue to his architectural principle, Kinsella evokes on several occasions the figure of the Möbius Strip – the single, non-orientable surface that gives us the symbol for infinity. In the preface to ‘Inferno’, we read that the work is envisaged as ‘a Möbius strip with no beginning and no end but a compulsion to movement, a phantom narrative [such that] movement across all layers is possible’.⁴³ The Möbius Strip becomes a leitmotif throughout the *Comedy*, and its appearance is often accompanied by the poet’s reflections on the southern sky. ‘Clockwise Canto of the Möbius Strip: Mid-Life’, for instance, which appears in *Inferno*, concludes with the middle-aged poet bearing ‘buckets / of water’ across ‘the block’, before ‘glancing up at the sky / searching for a reflection’, only to be left ‘stranded, disconnected, / unoriginal’.⁴⁴ This litany of adjectives is reminiscent of Stephen Dedalus’s kitbag of ‘silence, exile and cunning’, his tools for becoming an artist; like Joyce, Kinsella feels profoundly disconnected from the dominant, legitimising narratives of nationhood (though in this case, it is the transposition of those narratives onto the southern hemisphere from the northern, rather than from Rome and England to Ireland).⁴⁵ A few pages later, in ‘Counter-clockwise Canto of the Möbius Strip: Agoraphobia’, we find that

Even when those I love

Pass by and say ‘Hi, John, aren’t you heading out into
The block today, it’s busy with dragonflies and blue butterflies
About the mistletoe...?’ I reply: ‘I think I will go out tonight,

And walk with the stars at my feet, the ground above me,
Walled in by dark trees’.⁴⁶

Here the poet, unable to ‘sustain the anguish of images come unstuck / and realigned’ – overwhelmed, it seems, by the disconnection between the landscape and the words he can only impose upon it, with all their historical freight – becomes crippled by ‘acute agoraphobia’, and would rather wait until nightfall to leave the house, when he will ‘walk with the stars at [his] feet’, as though willingly assuming the role of the Antipodean ‘whose footprints are higher than their heads’, as envisaged by the incredulous Lactantius. In ‘Clockwise Canto of the Möbius Strip: the other side of the mountain’, the poet’s daughter inquires whether the stars shine on the other side of the mountain, to which the poet replies:

I have never been out there on a clear night
in all these years, and I can't answer

with conviction that what we see looking
from this side of the mountain is the same
as what is seen from over there.⁴⁷

What at first glance might seem a case of the poet coming to grief on the reef of solipsism becomes, in the context of the work as a whole, a refusal to participate in the naming-from-a-distance that characterises not only Dante's project, but by extension, the imperial prerogative of the epic mode *per se*. The stress placed on the word 'same' by virtue of its placement at the end of the poem's penultimate line evokes a sense of deep responsibility, in the Levinasian sense, toward that which is fundamentally other than ourselves, to avoid the type of injustice that is perpetrated by speaking for that which is 'over there'. It is appropriate that, in evoking the Möbius strip as an alternative structural principle to the Dantean telos, Kinsella should turn time and again to the stars in search of constancy; and yet, as we have seen, even the stars of the southern sky are not immune to narratives imposed on them from beyond the horizon.

IV. 'Immanently Political': from *Content* to *Framework*

The political dimension of Kinsella's rupturing of the Dantean teleology is a continuation of, and a development on, the poet's oeuvre. Kinsella is a prolific author, having published somewhere in the vicinity of 30 collections of poetry, along with numerous critical works, plays, novels and so forth. For the first time reader, his body of poetic works appears, on the surface at least, to be bifurcated, with some works written in the so-called 'lyric-pastoral' tradition – of which *The Silo: A Pastoral Symphony* (1995), his fifth book, is perhaps the best known – while others are deemed to be 'experimental', of which *Syzygy* (1993), a work influenced by the 'language' poets, is representative. But this distinction (lyric-pastoral / experimental) is by now a discredited one, and in the case of Kinsella – or rather, *especially* in the case of Kinsella – to maintain it is to preclude discussion of what is most interesting about the work. Astute readers and critics, therefore, have underscored the myriad ways in which Kinsella's work undermines these, and other, unhelpful binary categories (rural / metropolitan, national / cosmopolitan etc). Those works in the pastoral tradition, for instance, have long been recognised as also subverting that tradition in its reflexive refusal to idyllicise the rural landscape, by instead confronting the ecological trauma and colonial footprint of his native West Australian wheatbelt for what they are. As Anne Vickery has argued,

Kinsella rejects the ‘Georgic undercurrent [of the pastoral mode] which is didactic and seeks to control its subject’ and his work in this tradition is ‘best viewed as post-pastoral or meta-pastoral, in that it critiques pastoral from within [...] Kinsella’s poetry presents the pastoral subject under crisis, negotiating cultural identity while fearing the loss or hold of such position’.⁴⁸ In his introduction to *The Silo*, Rod Mengham detects a similar tension when he writes:

All of Kinsella’s writing is deeply antipodean in every sense, since it tugs in opposite directions at one and the same time, but *The Silo* is especially paradoxical – apparently passing itself off as his most accessible text, it might actually be the most complex. Most of the poems are composed in a style that is limpid and incisive, and yet the movement of thought remains elusive. The enjoyment of circumstantial detail that sustains [the collection] often culminates in a feeling of intensified abstraction. It is as if this series of commemorations of the rural economy is circling around something fiercely repressed [...] It suggests that the more habituated and inured to inherited practices, customs and natural contours the poet has become, the more *estranging* he has found them (emphasis added).⁴⁹

Mengham’s reading of the ‘estrangement’ of Kinsella’s poetry in the face of habituation to ‘inherited practices and customs’ recalls the Latin *distraho, distractum*, the etymological basis for Kinsella’s ‘distractions’.

Kinsella himself has expounded the tensions between modes within his work, most famously in his brief statement of his poetics in a 1997 article, where he discusses the concept of ‘hybridity’:

A hybrid is not a possible next stage in a developmental sense, nor is it a ‘dilution’ of the original. Nor is it a fusion of traditions. It is in fact a conscious undoing of the codes that constitute all possible readings of a text. It is a debasement of the lyrical I. *It is a rejection not of frameworks but of contents*. It recognises frames for what they are: *empty shells*. Charles Bernstein recently called this my Trojan Horse theory – get inside and dismantle [...] To utilise a traditional structure is to emphasise the undoing. The result is a denial that is *cultural* as well as linguistic, a refusal to accept that the component parts are relevant to the discourse (emphasis added).⁵⁰

At the risk of mixing epic metaphors, we might say that Kinsella is performing a classic Trojan horse job on Dante's *Commedia*. But if we recall Kinsella's 'undoing' of Dante's tripartite, linear architectonic, and its retying as Möbius strip, it seems that the *Comedy* comprises a new development on these poetics of 1997, in its rejection *not merely* of the *contents* of the epic, as it were, but of Dante's epic *framework* itself. For Dante's framework is no mere 'empty shell', but an hierarchical structure integral to the epic. We might say that Kinsella is undoing not only the teleological mode of the epic, but he is also rejecting the epic mode of the *telos per se*.

As Peter Minter has argued, Kinsella's 'poetics of Hybridity' is at its core 'immanently political'. At the level of content Kinsella's political concerns are clear enough, given that what Glenn Phillips refers to as 'the deeper ironies of his country's colonial appropriations', namely, 'its racial exploitation and the cataclysmic future ecological consequences of the white settlement of this wheat-belt region of Western Australia', pervade these poems. But I would suggest, following Minter, that Kinsella's poetics are *immanently* political, beyond the level of content; that Kinsella's undoing or rupturing of the Dantean telos itself comprises a political act. Minter's analysis of Kinsella's brief poetics serves well here:

Via the Trojan Horse theory, Kinsella's 'undoing' of the linguistic and rhetorical properties of a range of poetic genres might therefore represent an attempt to dynamically break with, and internalise, a body of poetic 'forms' or 'empty shells' by simultaneously absorbing them as artifice, then remapping and reconstituting their codifying structures through a microscopic, *ethical attention to poesis*, the generation of epistemological and ethical divergences, refusals and eruptions which, together, constitute traces of linguistic and temporal meaning. Kinsella implies therefore, and by stating that hybridisation has cultural as well as linguistic effects, that this process is *immanently political*' (emphasis added).⁵¹

What Minter calls Kinsella's 'ethical attention to poesis' brings us back full circle to Bakhtin; for by undoing the Dantean telos, Kinsella is rupturing what Bakhtin called the epic mode's 'constitutive feature' – the 'specifically evaluating (hierarchical) category' which is the 'absolute past of national beginnings'. There is little that can be called 'absolute' about the pseudo-'national beginning' confected by ANFA's appropriation of an elderly flag-designer's poetics of nationhood. By contrast, Kinsella would rather expose the anxieties of legitimacy that comprise the cracks in the Dantean looking glass – from the violent dispossession of his nations' original inhabitants, to the ecological disregard of its latter-day pastoralists – than retain the schematic logic that would gloss over these features to bolster national identity. Given the 'immanently

political' nature of Kinsella's critical poetics, his *Comedy's* 'estrangement' from the Dantean original, at a structural level, is not merely consistent with the ethos of his oeuvre, but in fact necessitated by it.

V. 'Canto of the Moths': A Close Reading

Let us now take a look at some of the ways in which Kinsella's strategic rupturing of the *Commedia* is brought to bear in a lexical sense on the work, by examining the slippages between the texts that render Kinsella's works *distractions* rather than *translations*. 'Canto of the Moths', the third poem in Kinsella's *Purgatorio: Up Close*, comprises a 'distraction' on Canto II of Dante's *Purgatorio*. There, after arriving on the 'lonely shore' (*lito deserto*, 130) at the base of Mount Purgatory, the pilgrim and his guide are astonished by the sight of an approaching ship, carrying more than a hundred souls, borne not by the wind but on a bright angel's (*l'uccel divino*, 38) wings.⁵² The canto describes the pair's encounter with these souls – the souls of the Redeemed – who are equally astonished to find that Dante is in fact *alive* and breathing – before the souls depart for the mountain. Here is Kinsella's 'distraction' in full:

*Canto of the Moths*⁵³

The rains have come and winter
is not as far away as it was looking,
though beneath shadecloth 3

and over the glistening white sand
of Timmy's sandpit, hundreds
of moths are staggering 6

through the air, falling to sand
to fly up confused again. In dull
green light they are tiny angels 9

without entries or exits,
and following them with our eyes
we grow giddy and confused. 12

Their wings heavy with rain,

dust is running off like sludge.
 The terrace of sand a desert 15

of the drowning and drowned.
 Plastic buckets and shovels,
 rakes and rubber balls, 18

compact earth-movers and bulldozers,
 starfish and castles, all tombstones
 where there should be no markers 21

of the real. In a place where shadows
 filter through shadecloth onto sand,
 late rains have altered the rules: 24

angels, like spent nuclear fuel,
 toxify in their different forms,
 boomerang back into sacred lands. 27

The poem is set, if not on a shore, then in the speaker's son Timmy's sandpit, covered with shadecloth; the more than a hundred souls of 'the Redeemed' in Dante (*più di cento spiriti*, 45), have metamorphosed into 'hundreds / of moths [...] staggering / through the air', which fall to the sand then 'fly up confused again' (5-6). These moths are 'confused' in much the same way that in Dante, the souls of the Redeemed, disembarking from the ship, are also confused, and stand 'gazing about / as though encountering new things' (*rimirando intorno / come colui che nove cose assaggia*, 53-54). Kinsella's use of the word 'staggering' to describe the moths' flight is particularly apt as a description of both the labour of the moths in the rain, and of the newly landed souls that are their analogue. That the moths 'fly up' again immediately after 'falling to [the] sand' likewise recalls the souls' 'sudden flight' (*la subitana fuga*) at the end of Dante's canto, a flight reiterated at the outset of Canto III (1-2).

The speaker's emphasis on the first person plural when explaining that *both* he and his companion become 'confused' and 'giddy' at the sight of the staggering moths ('we grow giddy and confused'), echoes Virgil who, when asked by the souls if he knows the way up the mountain, remarks that he and the Pilgrim are equally disoriented by their new surrounds:

E Virgilio respuose: ‘Voi credete
forse che siamo esperti d’esto loco;
ma noi siam peregrin come voi siete.

And Virgil answered: ‘You may be convinced
that we are quite familiar with this shore;
but we are strangers here, just as you are’.

(II. 61-63)

While Virgil and Dante are ‘strangers’ in *Purgatory*, the speaker of Kinsella’s *Comedy* foregrounds his estrangement from the landscape, by rendering it uncanny, as the syntactical and semantic tension familiar to readers of Kinsella increases in the second half of the poem. The suggestion that in Kinsella’s purgatorial shore ‘there should be no markers / of the real’ reminds us of the ontological conundrum posed by the living pilgrim’s presence in the spiritual realm of Purgatory, evidenced by both the puzzlement of the souls at the improbable presence among them of the living, breathing pilgrim; and by the recurrent amazement of the pilgrim himself, at the verisimilitude of the immaterial souls to their earthly counterpart, who exclaims: ‘O empty shades, whose human forms seem real!’ (79). The penultimate tercet reinforces this connection. Kinsella’s reiteration of the ‘shadows’ that ‘filter through the shadecloth onto sand’ recalls the famous moment in Canto III, when Dante notices his shadow on the ground (16-18) – which strikes fear in the souls of the Excommunicates (88-93) – and of Virgil’s subsequent explanation of the diaphanous bodies of the dead (28ff). This Dantean echo is compounded in the line: ‘late rain changes the rules’, which evokes Cato’s wonderment, in Canto I, at whether the rules of Purgatory and Hell have been broken to allow Virgil’s presence in Purgatory, when he belongs in Limbo, far below: ‘*son le leggi d’abisso così rotte?*’ (‘The laws of the abyss – have they been broken?’), 46).

So far, Kinsella has variously ‘estranged’ the canto he is responding to by transposing Dante and Virgil’s arrival on the shore of Purgatory into a (‘classically’ Australian) beach scene tinged with foreboding, where moths are stuttering angels and toys are tombstones. But there is a sting in the tail of this poem. For in the final stanza we realise that these angelic moths are intoxicated, or rather, toxified, ‘like spent nuclear fuel’. By what, Kinsella doesn’t explicitly say; but you can take your pick from any number of potential candidates mentioned throughout the book – cyanide, asbestos, spray drift, even mosquito repellent. We now know why the moths are staggering: they are confused by toxic fallout, either by heavy metals, or some other waterborne pollutant. So the late rains that have ‘changed the rules’ have in fact done so by ferrying pesticides into the soil, perverting natural precipitation to the detriment of the natural environment (and its inhabitants). The word ‘filter’ in line 24 becomes suddenly important: Timmy’s sandpit is a protected space in more ways than one, its shadecloth not only blocking out

the dangerous sun, but also seemingly able to shield him from exposure to the fate of the blighted moths. As these toxic moths – the supposed souls of the Redeemed – ‘boomerang back into sacred lands’, in the final line, the twin issues of Aboriginal dispossession and ecological trauma are yoked in a final, devastating image. As a symbol of the circular, or economic motif that characterises the (Homeric) Odyssean narrative, the boomerang, that marvelous weapon that when thrown correctly can return to its thrower, might provide an alternative to Dantean linearity; but for Kinsella it becomes a double-edged metaphoric vehicle for the devastating degradation of a land that awaits to be returned to its traditional inhabitants.

Two further occasions of Kinsella’s estrangement from his Dantean model in this poem are worth noting. Firstly, that the moths appear to be counted among the ‘drowning and the drowned’ of course undermines their analogical status as redeemed souls; these ‘angels’ are anything but ‘Redeemed’, and their description, with its overtones of Primo Levi, would be more expected in the setting of the Inferno. Secondly, the innocuous description of the moths appearing as ‘tiny angels / *without entries or exits*’ is likewise ill-conducive to the conventional idea of Purgatory (my emphasis). That the moths are seen as ‘angels’ is obvious enough; but that they are described as being without ‘entries or exits’ runs counter to Dante, who clearly marks both the entries and exits of the redeemed souls in Purgatory. In fact, the entire point of Purgatory is based on the fact that one *enters* it, only with a view ultimately to exiting it (to salvation). By explicitly denying the moths ‘entries or exits’ Kinsella, ruptures the fundamental idea of Purgatory – that it is a half-way house, a temporary locale on the way to salvation – and suggests instead that it is hermetic and omnipresent. Kinsella admits as much in his preface, when he says: “‘My’ purgatory doesn’t allow [...] attainment of grace’; and, when in the preface to *Paradiso* he writes of the speaker in the poem: ‘Rather than travel upwards, he travels sideways, and maybe gets closer to home in doing so’. Indeed, what is a Möbius strip, if not that which is ‘without entries or exits’.

VI. *La Prima Gente*: Last Words on the First People

That Dante’s *quattro stelle* are described as not having been ‘seen before except by the first people’ (*la prima gente*) can now be seen to bear an additional resonance in the context of Kinsella’s debunking of the epic mode’s ‘absolute past of national beginnings’. For while ‘*la prima gente*’ refers to ‘our first parents’ in the Christian tradition, Adam and Eve, in the context of the *Commedia*, the English phrase ‘first people’ is more familiar to Australian ears as a description of the continent’s original inhabitants. And this retroactive textual irony is not lost on Kinsella, for whom the legacy of indigenous dispossession, the enduring plight of Australia’s ‘*prima gente*’, comprises a central concern, not merely in this poem but throughout his oeuvre.

As he notes in the preface to *Inferno: Leisure Centre*: ‘First and foremost, my point of departure across all the geo-states (the three canticles), is whose land is being made use of in the first place. Who was ousted so hell could be installed?’⁵⁴ In his preface to *Purgatorio: Up Close*, he explains that the land in and around York was, prior to European settlement, inhabited by the Ballardong Nyungar people of south Western Australia, for whom Walwinj represented ‘the hill that cries’; according to the Ballardong Nyungar dreaming, the hills, Walwinj and Wongboral, were lovers from opposing tribes, thwarted by their respective warring families on either side of the Avon River, or Waugal, the Rainbow Serpent, who banished the lovers to their respective mountains.

The twin themes of ecological and aboriginal trauma are imbricated throughout Kinsella’s *Comedy*. ‘Sub-Paradiso: Chapman Valley’ (16), in *Paradiso: Rupture*, one of the work’s ‘Sub’ Cantos (‘sub’ because Chapman Valley, which lies 500 km north west of York, is a departure from the immediate vicinity of Walwinj)⁵⁵ comprises a ‘distraction’ on Dante’s Canto XVI, in which the Pilgrim’s great, great grandfather, Cacciaguida gives an account of his family history, and reflects at length on the changing fortunes of many of the old families of Florence: how some families of low status in Dante’s day, such as the della Pera family, once had city gates named after them, for instance. Dante wrestles with feelings of pride in his lineage, because pride is not possible in paradise; he opens the canto by remarking: ‘Ah, trivial thing, our pride in noble blood!’ (*O poca nostra nobiltà di sangue*, 1), before reflecting that nobility is a ‘mantle quick to shrink’ (7). Kinsella too contemplates matters of genealogy, lineage and inheritance in his response; but he departs from Dante by framing these matters in the by now familiar, associated contexts of ecological degradation and aboriginal dispossession. We begin much where ‘Canto of the Moths’ leaves off, with water:

Water rises up out of hilltops, the weight
of rock on aquifer, the logical miracle.

Wildflowers bloom early to avoid

3

being stranded when rains don’t come:
driving their seed out fast.

Kinsella subtly introduces the theme of genealogy in the guise of the germinal wildflowers, ‘driving their seed out fast’ in order ‘to avoid / being stranded when rains don’t come’ (3-5). We notice in the following lines that the aquifer, the underground layer of water-bearing permeable rock notoriously susceptible to pollution, is ‘thinning, and the hilltop / splurge dwindling to a trickle’; this leads to the contemplation of geological time, and how

In this fertile valley the flat-top hills
were once the bottom of an ocean, 9

the fossil records another part
of the algorithm.

Whereas in the *Commedia*, Cacciaguida is effusive about the vicissitudes of Florentine family fortunes over the centuries, in Kinsella, the speaker reflects on how the landscape has been degraded by cyanide-coated lead-tailings, the mining waste of the region, that like the moths of Purgatory boomerang back into sacred earth.

[...] The locals gathered
at Mills Lookout to watch the red moon 12

eclipsed in a valley where lead tailings
with their cyanide coatings sit in piles
and slashes, weedless as hell: 15

but it's their heaven, and a nankeen kestrel
nests in a casuarina looking over a wetland
formed by clearing. 18

In describing the toxic valley as 'weedless as hell', the speaker deftly couches the image in a colloquial register; yet while the poisoned, bare valley is the image of hell for the speaker, who elsewhere admits he 'relish[es] / the overgrown'; a weedless landscape is of course, 'heaven' for those whose impulse is toward enlightened cultivation. Importantly, Kinsella ruptures his Paradise by invoking hell, whose appearance enacts once again what he calls 'a bleeding across the categories', so crucial to the project of his *distractions*.⁵⁶

In lines 24 to 33, Kinsella turns to face the Dantean theme of inheritance explicitly, and wonders if the great problem-solving Persian mathematician, after whose name we get the word 'algorithm' (of line 11), could solve the problem of the legacy of Aboriginal dispossession, and the brutal, institutional injustices against those 'old "original families"'.⁵⁷

[...] Surveying 24

the low crops and thinned flocks
of sheep, I wonder if Mohammed ibn-Musa
al-Khwarizmi might have solved 27

the problem: ‘old families’, ‘new families’,
old ‘original families’ and the character
-isations of local history: ‘everyone 30

knew Warrandy ... the *King of Geraldton*,
an elder who inherits deaths in custody
generation after generation. 33

Where Cacciaguida rattles off his litany of pure-blooded Florentine noblemen, Kinsella’s reflections on his genealogy are haunted by the despondency of the indigenous plight, the legacy of aboriginal dispossession evoked by the solemn figure of ‘Warrandy [...] the *King of Geraldton*’. As the poem moves into its final section, the speaker ‘marvels’

at carpets of ‘four o’clocks’ – 36

everlastings that will close
their pink and white smiles
before evening shuts up shop, 39

seeps down past the geology
of breakaways, the biology
of broadacre, scraps 42

of scrub, doggedness of river;
abandoned lead mines’ poison
still half-awake. 45

The pink and white ‘everlastings’, flowers that ‘sleep’ most of the day and wake in the afternoon – hence ‘four o’clocks’ – for which the Chapman Valley and the surrounding region is renowned, evoke the last line of Dante’s canto, in which Cacciaguida reminisces about the days before the Florentine standard changed from a white lily on red background, to that of a red lily on a white

background. Again, however, we have the sting in the tail, an allusion to the cyanide-coated tailings ‘still half-awake’ in the earth: Kinsella’s paradise is undercut by an infernal chemical spirit. This is a very different type of genealogy to that instantiated by the noble Cacciaguida; the enduring legacy of colonialism literally rendered toxic. For Kinsella, flagrant environmental degradation is of a piece with indigenous dispossession and cultural dislocation. In place of Cacciaguida’s generations, we are left with what he elsewhere calls the ‘staggering lineations of unmemorable / and immemorial memoranda’: a landscape scarred by the twin enduring traumas of Aboriginal dispossession and ecological damage.⁵⁷ In this way, Kinsella again ruptures the all-too-intact Dantean fabric by rejecting the narrative of noble beginnings, and estranging his *Comedy* from the Dantean model in the most fundamental of ways.

In its sheer resistance to the legitimising praxis of the epic mode, Kinsella’s *Comedy* comprises a kind of antipodean counter-epic that ruptures the ‘intact’ narratives of (European) genealogical inheritance, progress and nationhood, that the epic typically instantiates. Paradoxically, we might say that the project sets itself up in order to fail; that is, it *must* fail, as an ‘epic poem’, in order to succeed as an immanent critique of the form. Inherently antithetical to the valorisation of ‘national beginnings’ evinced by Dante’s *Commedia*, it is instead staged across the fault-lines of the discourse of (Australian) nationhood, specifically foregrounding indigenous dispossession and ecological degradation. Its schematic logic is thus necessarily predicated on a rejection of the *Commedia*’s architectonic, the hierarchy and teleology of which facilitate the dominant narrative of ‘national beginnings’. In doing so, the *Comedy* signals a further development of Kinsella’s ‘immanently political’ poetics. If, as Alfred Hiatt suggests, the idea of the Antipodes functioned historically as a looking-glass that turned ‘the European gaze back on itself’, Kinsella’s *Comedy* reiterates Dante’s medieval cosmography only to reflect the deep and distorting flaws in the glass.

¹ Ezra Pound, *Selected Letters*, No. 200, p. 190. The quote also appears as an epigraph in Laurie Duggan, *The Great Divide: Poems 1973-83* (Sydney, 1985).

² Matthew Boyd Goldie, *The Idea of the Antipodes: Place, People and Voices* (New York, 2010). Alfred Hiatt detects ‘a critical breach between classical and Christian responses to the antipodes [...] The existence of the antipodes became a *quaestio* for scholastic debate in the thirteenth century, and it was in this guise that it appears to have first attracted the interest of Dante’. Hiatt, *Terra Incognita: Mapping the Antipodes* (Chicago, 2008), p. 6.

³ Goldie cites Lactantius in his introduction: ‘is there anyone so foolish as to believe that there are men whose footprints are higher than their heads? Or that things which lie straight out with us hang upside down there; that grains and trees grow downwards; that rain and snow and hail fall upwards upon the earth’. p. 2. Hiatt cites Pliny, Augustine and Isidore as proponents of the idea that ‘monstrous men’ inhabited the antipodes. pp. 81-82.

⁴ For the Arthurian legend, see Roger Sherman Loomis, ‘King Arthur and the Antipodes’, *Modern Philology*, Vol. 38, No. 3 (1941), pp. 289-304. This legend was ‘known as late as Milton’s time but recorded as early as 1167-69 (the period of Chretien’s *Erec*) in the *Draco Normannicus* of Etienne de Rouen, which represents the British hero as lord of the Antipodes and furnishes us with a correspondence between Roland of Dinan, King Arthur, and Henry II of England’. Loomis, p. 289.

⁵ Hiatt, *Terra Incognita*, pp. 11, 244. He argues that it was not until the translation into Latin of Ptolemy’s *Geographia*, in 1406-07, that the antipodes were accepted as being geographically contiguous with the known world; and that, as a ‘trope of reversal [...] and as a means of mirroring the absurdities and pretensions’ of European society and culture, the idea of the antipodes ‘found its ultimate resolution in Dante’s *Commedia*, where purgatory and earthly paradise are located in the southern hemisphere diametrically opposite Jerusalem’. p. 6.

⁶ John Kinsella, *Divine Comedy: Journeys Through a Regional Geography* (St Lucia, Queensland, 2008), p. 272.

⁷ Dante’s influence is felt in Australian art and culture in much the same way that it is universally. One of the better-known encounters in Australian visual art is that of Sidney Nolan’s illustrated series, *Inferno* (1967). Nolan only completed nine of these illustrations – ending where the poets descend through the gates of Dis into the regions of Lower Hell – but once suggested ‘that Dante’s influence was underlying all his work and helped form a larger structure’. Eileen Slarke, ‘Dante in Australian Cultural History’, in Hannu Salmi (ed.), *History in Words and Images* (Turku, 2005), p. 104. Other examples of Dante’s influence on Australian art and culture include David Malouf’s choice to name the hero of his first novel, *Johnno*, Dante; and, more recently, Chris Wallace-Crabbe’s 2005 translation of Canto XXVIII for a stand-alone, illustration art book, and the work in recent years of a new generation of poets, Simon West, Elizabeth Campbell and Sarah Holland-Batt, who have variously engaged the Dantean corpus.

⁸ Kinsella, *Divine Comedy*, p. 6.

⁹ Louis Armand, ‘John Kinsella’s Poetics of Distraction’, *Cordite*, No. 33, 1 Aug 2010, <http://www.cordite.org.au/features/essays/louis-armand-john-kinsellas-poetics-of-distraction-2>, accessed 12 Mar 2011.

¹⁰ Kinsella, ‘Canto of the Beach’, *Australian Literary Review*, Vol. 2, No. 3 (2007). Compare Kinsella, *Divine Comedy* (St Lucia, Queensland, 2008), p. 8.

¹¹ Dante Alighieri, *Purgatorio*, trans. Allen Mandelbaum (New York, 1984), pp. 23-27. All subsequent references are taken from the Mandelbaum translation.

¹² Andrea Corsali, a supernumerary on the 1515 Portuguese voyage to Goa, is usually considered the first to have depicted the stars as a ‘(marvellous) cross’ (*croce maravigliosa*) in an illustration, in his letter to Giuliano de Medici.

Lettera di Andrea Corsali allo illustrissimo Principe Duca Giuliano de Medici, venuta Dellindia del mese di Ottobre nel XDXVI in 'Letter of Andrea Corsali 1516-1989', [electronic resource]: with additional material, National Library of Australia, MS 7860-1-s3, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.ms-ms7860-1-s3>, accessed 12 March 2011.

¹³ The Southern Cross is observed by da Gama, the protagonist of *Os Lusíadas*, rounding the Cape of Good Hope in Book V. Interestingly, the English translator William Jules Mickle alludes to the Dantean resonance in a footnote to *The Lusíad, or Discovery of India* (Oxford, 2007 [1776]), and notes Voltaire's discussion in his *Dissertation on the Lusíad, and Observations on Epic Poetry* (1810) in Paget Jackson Toynbee, *Dante in English Literature from Chaucer to Cary (1380-1844)*, Vol. 1 (London, 1909), pp. 607-09. For Tasso's drafts on the theme of the 'new world', see Theodore J. Cachey, Jr.'s 'Tasso's Navigazione del Mondo Nuovo and the Origins of the Columbus Encomium (GL, XV, 31-32)', *Italica*, Vol. 69, No. 3 (1992), pp. 326-44, which provides an overview of the early travel literature collected in Ramusio's *Navigazioni et Viaggi* (1550). Cachey argues that Oviedo's account is most consistent with Dante's.

¹⁴ Alexander von Humboldt, *Cosmos: Sketch of a Physical Description of the Universe*, Vol. 2, trans. Edward Sabine (London, 1849), pp. 291-93; and Vol. 3, trans. E. C. Otté (London, 1851), pp. 185-88.

¹⁵ See for instance, Elly Dekker, 'Early Explorations of the Southern Celestial Sky', *Annals of Science*, Vol. 44, No. 5 (1987), pp. 439-70.

¹⁶ Vespucci's word is 'mandorla', which is often translated as 'almond'. Amerigo Vespucci, *Lettere di viaggio*. A cura di Luciano Formisano. Milano: Mondadori, 1985, p. 6. The translation as 'cithern', which retains the figurative element of this shape, is from F. J. Pohl, *Amerigo Vespucci Pilot Major* (New York, 1945), p. 79. See also Elly Dekker, 'The Light and the Dark: A Reassessment of the Discovery of the Coalsack Nebula, the Magellanic Clouds and the Southern Cross', *Annals of Science*, Vol. 47, No. 6 (1990), pp. 529-60, esp. pp. 535-36.

¹⁷ Giuseppe Baretti, *A Dissertation upon the Italian Poetry* (London, 1753), in Paget Jackson Toynbee, *Dante in English Literature from Chaucer to Cary (1380-1844)*, Vol. 1 (London, 1909) pp. 264-65.

¹⁸ Voltaire, *An Essay on Universal History, The Manners and Spirit of Nations from the Reign of Charlemaign to the Age of Lewus XIV*, trans. Thomas Nugent, Vol. 3 (London, 1758), p. 166. For a discussion of the allegorical nature of Dante's *quattro stelle*, see Charles S. Singleton, *Dante Studies 2: Journey to Beatrice* (Cambridge MA, 1958), pp. 159-83.

¹⁹ That Blake died with '[h]is eyes Brighten'd and [...] Singing of the things he saw in Heaven' adds extra poignancy to his simple sketch of Dante's stars *qua crux*. Peter Ackroyd, *Blake* (London, 2007), p. 367. For Blake's depiction of Dante's "quattro stelle" see 'Dante with Virgil and Cato' (1824-27) in *Illustrations to Dante's 'Divine Comedy'*, object 73 (Butlin 812.71), National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne. Reproduced in *Illustrations to Dante's 'Divine Comedy': Electronic Edition*, William Blake Archive (Charlottesville, 2005), <http://www.blakearchive.org/exist/blake/archive/object.xq?objectid=but812.1.wc.73&java=>, accessed 12 Mar 2011.

²⁰ See note 14.

²¹ For discussion of von Humboldt in a North American context, see T. W. Parsons, in Zoltan Haraszti (ed.), *Letters by T. W. Parsons* (Boston, MA, 1940), pp. 54-56.

²² *Nature*, Vol. 25, 15 Dec, 1881, p. 152. Samuel Wilks alludes to von Humboldt's discussion in 'Dante and the Southern Cross', *Nature*, Vol. 25, 22 Dec 1881, p. 173. J. J. Walker chimes in twice in *Nature*, Vol. 25, 22 Dec 1881, p. 173, and in *Nature*, Vol. 25, 5 January 1882, p. 217. N. Perini alludes to the Marco Polo hypothesis in *Nature*, Vol. 25, 29 Dec 1881, pp. 197-198. The Marco Polo hypothesis is also found in William Stuart Rose, 'Letters from the North of Italy', in Toynbee, *Dante in English*, p. 294.

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- ²³ Charles P. Mountford, *Nomads of the Australian Desert* (Rigby, South Australia, 1976), p. 45; Mountford, *Art, Myth and Symbolism, Vol. 1, Records of the American–Australian Scientific Expedition to Arnhem Land* (Melbourne, 1956), p. 487. See also Ragbir Bhathal, ‘Astronomy in Aboriginal Culture’, *Astronomy and Geophysics*, Vol. 47, No. 5 (2006), pp. 27-30.
- ²⁴ James Cowan, *The Maori: Yesterday and To-Day* (Christchurch, 1930), pp. 87-88.
- ²⁵ Ragbir Bhathal, ‘Astronomy in Aboriginal Culture’, *Astronomy and Geophysics*, Vol. 47, No. 5 (2006), p. 27.
- ²⁶ Elizabeth Kwan, *Flag and Nation: Australians and their National Flags since 1901* (Sydney, 1996), p. 142. See *Our National Flag ... since 1901, Teachers’ Notes*, Curriculum Corporation, Commonwealth of Australia, Melbourne, 2002, p. 4.
- ²⁷ Kwan, p. 143.
- ²⁸ Kwan notes the discrepancy between Evans’s *The History of the Australian Flag* (1918), Melbourne, n.d., and his statement of 23 January 1959, *History of the Australian Flag*, Mitchell Library, citing also Vaughan and Morris to Assistant Director, Languages and Civics Education Section (LCES), DEST, 18 June 2002, ES02/11141. p. 167.
- ²⁹ Carol A. Foley, ‘The Australian Flag: Colonial Relic or Contemporary Icon’ (Sydney, 1996), p. 110.
- ³⁰ Gabrielle Chan and Dennis Shanahan, ‘Howard to Protect the Australian Flag’, *The Australian*, 25 Apr 1996, p. 1.
- ³¹ Qtd. in Anna Clark, ‘Flying the Flag for Mainstream Australia’, *Griffith Review: Getting Smart: The Battle for Ideas in Education*, Vol. 11, 2006, www.griffithreview.com/edition-11-getting-smart/flying-the-flag-for-mainstream-australia#_edn1, accessed 12 Mar 2011.
- ³² Judith Brett, ‘Exit Right: the Unravelling of John Howard’, *Quarterly Essay*, No. 28 (2007), p. 32.
- ³³ Martin Flanagan, *The Age*, opinion, 29 Jan 2011.
- ³⁴ ‘Rising Nationalism is a Natural Response’, editorial, *The Australian*, 7 Feb 2007. Several recent works discuss the resurgence of Australian nationalism under the Howard government’s tenure, and its symbolic engagement with the Australian flag. See for instance, James Curran and Stuart Ward, *The Unknown Nation: Australia After Empire* (Melbourne, 2010), p. 257; Greg Noble (ed.), *Lines in the Sand: the Cronulla Riots, Multiculturalism and National Belonging* (Sydney, 2009).
- ³⁵ Mikhail M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, Michael Holquist (ed.), trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin and London, 1983), p. 15.
- ³⁶ John Dickie, *Darkest Italy: the Nation and Stereotypes of the Mezzogiorno, 1860-1900* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, 1999), p. 40.
- ³⁷ Kinsella discusses the composition history of the work in Ali Alizadeh, ‘Ali Alizadeh Interviews John Kinsella’, *Cordite*, 1 Dec 2009, <http://www.cordite.org.au/features/ali-alizadeh-interviews-john-kinsella>, accessed 12 Mar 2011.
- ³⁸ Kinsella, ‘Introduction’, *The Penguin Anthology of Australian Poetry* (Melbourne, 2008), p. 1.
- ³⁹ Kinsella, *Contrary Rhetoric: Lectures on Landscape and Language* (Fremantle, 2008), p. 247.
- ⁴⁰ Kinsella, *Divine Comedy*, pp. 267, 266.
- ⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 266.
- ⁴² *Ibid.*, pp. 162, 266.
- ⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 272.
- ⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 276-77.
- ⁴⁵ James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (Oxford, 2008 [1916]), p. 208.
- ⁴⁶ Kinsella, *Divine Comedy*, p. 280.
- ⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 400.

⁴⁸ Ann Vickery, 'Shifting Homeland: Viewing the Post-Pastoral Subject in John Kinsella's *The Radnoti Poems*', in Rod Mengham and Glen Phillips (eds.), *Fairly Obsessive: Essays on the Work of John Kinsella* (Fremantle, 2000), p. 178.

⁴⁹ Mengham, 'Introduction', in Kinsella, *The Silo* (Todmorden, 1997), p. 8. Likewise, Kinsella's *Syzygy* – deemed by most readers as a radical departure from his landscape poems – has been seen by Phillips to 'bear myriad points of contact with the raw landscapes of his West Australian 'wheatlands' [... which are] secondary (if not incidental) [...] Yet they are there'. Phillips, in Mengham and Phillips, *Fairly Obsessive*, p. 22.

⁵⁰ Kinsella, 'A Brief Poetics', *Artes*, Vol. 4 (1997), pp. 105-07.

⁵¹ Peter Minter, 'John Kinsella's Poetics of Hybridity', in Mengham and Phillips, *Fairly Obsessive*, pp. 145-146.

⁵² Line numbers are henceforth cited from Dante Alighieri, *Purgatorio*, trans. Allen Mandelbaum (New York, 1984).

⁵³ Kinsella, *Divine Comedy*, p. 9.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 267.

⁵⁵ Interestingly, one of the four small towns in Chapman Valley, Nabawa, was once called 'Paradise Gully'.

⁵⁶ Kinsella, *Divine Comedy*, pp. 279, 161.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 88.