



POETIC BREAK: Kinnell and dog, Willie, share a moment in Kinnell's Vermont home office.

Mortal Words

Galway Kinnell '49 (MA) was a towering figure, both literally and as a poet. Part of a postwar turn away from the modernism of Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot, Kinnell strove to craft accessible poems from the material of everyday life. The centerpiece of his first published collection, a 14-part poem about Manhattan's Avenue C called "The Avenue Bearing the Initial of Christ Into the New World," made his reputation, and inspired frequent comparisons to the lyrical style of Walt Whitman.

Kinnell, who died in October, wrote 10 collections of poetry. His 1982 book, *Selected Poems*, won both the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Award. In 2000, he returned to Rochester for a reading and lecture as part of the Hyam Plutzik Memorial Poetry Series. The University awarded him its highest honor for alumni, the Hutchison Medal, in 2001. In 1982, **Jeffrey Mehr** '78

interviewed Kinnell for *Rochester Review*.

Here are excerpts from that interview, "Writing Poems: The Thrill of Discovery."

The entire interview is online at http://www.rochester.edu/pr/Review/V77N3/0603_kinnell.html.

On Words

"One thing that leads one into poetry is an interest in words. Not words as written things with a referent, but words as sound that the body produces, that fill the mouth and that are therefore in some way psychically identified with the thing they're talking about. And that have a content which can't be reduced to a definition. Like 'spartled.'"

On Music

"For me, music is quite important. It seems the soul of poetry. Poetry has a body as well—the things of the world—so I find it more interesting than music. But often poetry seems to lack a soul. By listening to music, you recover the sense of what poetry must be."

On Writing Well

"When you write well, there is a kind of special mood that comes upon you, different, I suppose, for every person, but for everyone different from just the normal, day-to-day way they feel. And words seem to come on their own. You're understanding them and shaping them, and yet they come out saying things that you didn't know you could say."

On the Importance of Context

"Those people who say, 'Homer was writing about exactly the same thing as a writer today,' are, I think, completely wrong. It seems quite clear that our consciousness evolves, and that we know things differ-

ently.... For example, Homer didn't really know that it was intolerable to die. We do."

On Critical Reception

"I've had lots of nice reviews, and I've had lots of attacks on my poetry.... The only reviews that really can strike dread into your heart are those that actually see what you feel is weakest and then drive the nail right in there."

On What Makes a Good Poem

"Most good poems address themselves to things that we all know about, and the only preparation we need, as readers, is a kind of paying of respect to our inner life, to the feelings we have that are of no practical importance: the sense of strangeness and the hauntedness of existence; the fragility of our position on the globe, and the fragility of the globe itself; this very peculiar situation we're in, self-conscious creatures who know that we're lost in some kind of existence that we don't understand at all." **R**