Entering into the Lives of Things: the Voice of "I" in Brendan Kennelly's Poetry

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I. Introduction

Brendan Kennelly was born in 1936 in Ballylongford, Co. Kerry, but has been living in Dublin long enough to adopt Dublin as his home. He is well known all through Ireland as a poet, a critic, an editor, a playwright and a professor at the Trinity College, Dublin. His first book, *Cast a Cold Eye*, appeared in 1959 when he was in his early twenties, and since then, he has published more than forty poetry books.[1] He was awarded prizes including AE Memorial Prize as early as in 1967. Most of his early poems are collected in *A Time for Voices: Selected Poems 1960-1990* (1990) and *Breathing Spaces: Early Poems* (1992).[2]

His best known books are *Cromwell* (1983), *The Book of Judas* (1992) and *Poetry My Arse* (1995). All of them are long sequenced poems, which consist of more than three hundreds short poems, and Kennelly presents an anti-heroic protagonist in each book: Cromwell, Judas and Ace de Horner. Cromwell and Judas are the crucial and unpopular figures in Irish culture. In other words, it could be said that in both books, Kennelly explores the inherited hatreds from historical and religious perspectives and challenges the Irish cultural legacy. Cromwell and Judas have been oversimplified as "evil" in Ireland, but Kennelly succeeds in revealing their human faces by giving them voices. Kennelly's Cromwell is no longer the "brutal bastard", but he is presented as a caring father, a loving

husband, an ambitious man and a faithful man with a great mission.

Also, Kennelly's Judas is not characterized as a traditional simplified image of a betrayer. Judas in *The Book of Judas* is different from the biblical image of a traitor, but he has his own voice as a human being with a faithful heart. A good example can be seen in Judas' confession:

> And I too accepted something
> Of which I find it difficult to speak.
> For a moment, I accepted God's blessing
> On my own calling as a traitor.
> I knew the meaning of happiness then
> But it slipped away like a never-again-heard song
> Beautiful to remember, beyond all right and wrong.[3]

What is notable here is that Kennelly does not describe Judas objectively, but instead, he tries to make Judas speak for himself. Kennelly uses "I" in order to present Judas' voice. As a result, Kennelly's Judas is not what other people think of Judas but what Judas thinks of himself. In Kennelly's book, Judas is not a born-to-be a traitor figure, but he is a man who accepted to play his role just like all other people who are blessed to be what they are. If Christ accepted his role as a savior as God's blessing, so did Judas. The difference was that Judas' role was not a savior but a traitor, and thus, his happiness was only for a moment. When he accepted his role as a traitor, he felt God's blessing and felt happiness, but his happiness "slipped away like a never-again-heard song" as we all know how his reputation has been all these thousands of years.

Kennelly is a poet who challenges to present the most hated figures like Cromwell and Judas as a man. He keeps revealing unpleasant realities of Irish society (and it is notable that realities are often unpleasant), the darkness of its past and history by giving voices to silenced and marginalized people and things. Thus, his Judas can speak for himself, and he gives us different and new aspects of Judas. Kennelly uses "I" to become others, and once they are given voices, they form themselves in his poetry so freely. Once he explained that he does not try to master others, but by surrendering, he can enter into other people and things.[4] For Kennelly, poetry is "entering into the lives of things and people, dreams and events, and images and mindtides".[5] Therefore, it is not surprising that he gives voices to a bread, key, wall, homeless, saint and what we never think of becoming a poem. In this essay, I would like to examine how Kennelly explores and presents the world of the unexpected in his poems by giving voices to various phenomena.

II. Entering into the Lives of Things

The effective usage of "I" is one of the most notable poetic techniques and characteristics in Kennelly's poetry. It has been continuously used from his early poems to the most recent poems. "Bread" is one of the earlier examples that we can observe this poetic technique.[6] This poem is written from the perspective of the bread. Through the voice of the bread, a reader learns how the bread is going to be baked.

... I am nothing till

She runs her fingers through me
And shapes me with her skill.

The form I shall bear
Grows round and white.
It seems I comfort her

Even as she slits my face
And stabs my chest.
Her feeling for perfection is

Absolute.
So I am glad to go through fire
And come out

Shaped like her dream. (ll.13-25)

"She" kneads the dough and bakes bread. These common actions here are used to imply the relationship between the creator and the creation. "She" is presented as a creator and "I" becomes her creature. "I" accepts its fate to become bread and to be eaten, as if Kennelly's Judas accepts his role as a traitor from God. "I" feels happiness "to go through fire" even if it is so hot that "I" had to be burnt all over, because "I" knows that "I" can make her happy for what "I" becomes through this hardship. Interestingly, "I" is aware that "I" will be eaten by "she", but "I" accepts its fate:

In my way
I am all that can happen to men.
I came to life at her finger-ends.
I will go back into her again. (ll.26-29)

The parallel between "I" (bread) and human beings becomes clearer at the end. This bread

came from her and it is going back to where it came from, and the poet indicates that this is not only the story of "bread" but this is "all that can happen to men."

Not only into the bread, but Kennelly enters into different kinds of things in order to explore various "selves" in his poetry. In each poem, he enters into "otherness" by using the voice of "I". Personification is one of Kennelly's favorite poetic techniques, and by using it, he presents how the world can be different if it is seen from different perspectives. For instance, Kennelly makes a "wall" tell the history from its perspective in the poem, "Wall".[7] The wall stands by the River Shannon and tells what it has seen over the years:

> I saw the Civil War, I was there
> the day Eddie Carmody was shot.
> A quiet man, Eddie. He whispered a prayer.
>
> Other shouted curses. They swore
> they were doing a favour to those
> they chose to murder.
>
> One said it was the Civil War
> made the Irish grow up, made
> men of them. I stood there, undismayed.
>
> Killers will justify whatever they do.
> A man must face himself, know the world.
> Killing one neighbor can be hard. It's easier to kill two. (ll.7-18)

Here are the wall's warm affection towards Eddie and the wall's quiet anger towards the war. One can notice that the wall's rage is shown in a very quiet way, but because it is expressed quietly, the poem evokes stronger effects on the conflicts and helplessness that the wall feels

in this poem.

The wall is not able to do anything against the war. He is just a bystander. It never takes a part in the history, but what it can do is just to watch whatever happens beside the wall. Whatever tragic happens, it keeps standing still. It is, indeed, not too easy to accept its role.

> I saw Angela Raine drown herself.
> I might have saved her. If she'd turned her head
> she might have climbed over me instead
>
> of stepping naked into the Shannon.
> She went down in no time at all.
> The Shannon swallowed her, grateful. (ll.25-30)

Though the wall was watching the girl drown herself in the Shannon, all it could do was to watch her drowned. The wall is powerless, but it finds its strength in the fact it cannot act or move. All it could do was just to stand all these times, but it can note the history. Its history is "the history / of what's never been told" (ll.47-48). People never know how Eddie or Angela has died, but the wall knows. The wall can tell the story no one else knows.

The wall accepts its roll as a bystander, and concludes:

> What happens, happens. ...
> ...
> What's known is a tiny part of what is.
> Night and day, year after year, sleepless, I stand
> and listen to the river's heart.
>
> Not a word has ever passed between us.
> No need for truth or lies.
> We are what we are, do what we do. (ll.47-54)

The wall accepts everything as it is. "What happens, happens", however hard the wall wishes to change or help. As the wall accepts its role, the river, which "rejects nothing" and has "pure appetite", also accepts its role (l.31 & l.33). They never complain, but do what they do. It may seem easy, but it is not. This poem indicates the difficulties to accept "what we are", even for the wall or for the river.

There are things that silently protect us and devote their life for us, even though we never notice what they do for us. "Key" is a poem, which focuses on the life of a key. Everyday, wherever you go, whatever you do, the key is "in your pocket all this time" (l.22). The "you" used in this poem obviously could be anyone. It may be addressed to you, a reader, or it can mean anyone in general. Because the key stays in your pocket when "you" go out, the key actually travels with "you" and knows what "you" do and say outside. It silently watches "you" buy a lobster in the morning. Moreover, it even knows that "you" wondered "what's it like to die in boiling water" on the way home with the lobster "in the black-and white bag" (l.6 & 5). The key comes home with you and with the lobster:

> you turn right, down for home,
> stop at the brown door,
> turn me in the lock, place the bag
>
> on the kitchen floor.
> Time for fire.
> Time for boiling water. (ll.25-30)

Is the key feeling sorry for the lobster that is going to die in the boiling water and will be

eaten by its master? Or does the key feel that its master is a barbaric being who eats another life? The key in this poem is not so pathetic. The key is aware of the fact that people must kill and eat, even though the key itself does not need to kill or to eat anything.

> Who eats must kill, or agree with killing.
> For the most part, anyway. I know
> the savage darkness in the sweet light of skill. (ll.31-33)

The key understands its master. It understands what it is like to be another being. However, its master does not seem to understand the key at all.

> Whenever I enter the lock, open the door,
> you take me for granted. Why not?
> That's what I'm for. (ll.34-36)

Like "you" in this poem, people take a key's role for granted. We think it is always there to open the door for us. We never thank it, or we never dream what a key feels about how we treat it. Kennelly focuses on the ordinary scene of the everyday life, but he shows it from a different perspective by entering into the live of the key in this poem.

In our daily life, there are many things that are taken for granted and nearly forgotten how useful they are like the key in the earlier poem. Moreover, there are things that are neglected, unwelcomed or abhorred. Kennelly often focuses on these abandoned things in his poems in the same way that he focuses on the hated figures like Cromwell and Judas and gives a new life to them in his poetry.

Here is the lonesome voice of "Loneliness".[8] We may think that loneliness is what we

feel, and "loneliness" itself cannot have any feelings. However, we can hear what "loneliness" thinks and feels in this poem through the voice of "I". It starts as if the poem is a riddle:

> I have my friends though they
> may see me as their enemy.
> ...
> roaming forever
> from heart to heart.
> Some evict me but others
>
> let me stay, set up house,
> live at the core of their being.
> ...
> The deeper I am
> the harder it is to see me. (ll.1-2, 4-8 & 11-12)

First, a reader needs to identify what "I" is, when she or he reads Kennelly's poems that deal with the personification of phenomena. Since "I [loneliness] live under / everything", it can never be too lonely. However, it knows its friends "see me as their enemy" and it is always unwelcomed by its friends (ll.23-24 & l.2).

However unwelcomed and disfavored, loneliness always stays in all of us.

> I never vanish completely,
> I wait in the shadows, taking it easy
>
> knowing my turn will come again.
> When I'm not hovering, I live under
> everything.
>
> Under skin, under grass, under love,
> under breathing, under all the words. (ll.20-26)

We may forget about "loneliness", but it is always with us and waits for the chance and the time in our unconsciousness.

Kennelly examines the inner-selves of two other unwelcomed things and their relationships with a woman in "Scar" and "Freckle".[9] These two poems deal with women's appearance and highlight a woman's attitude toward her body and face. Both poems are not told from a woman's perspective but from the scar's and freckle's. Both scar and freckle are very much hated by women, and both poems become more effective and painful since they are placed on a woman's face and not on a man's face. As analized below, Kennelly uses a woman's attitude toward her face effectively, because appearance is generally much more important for women not only physically but also psychologically. Furthermore, 'Scar' implies violence, which has been Kennelly's life long theme. Violence in his poetry is often a domestic type, and the victims are usually females.

In this poem, "Scar", the scar on a woman's face is huge 'from the side / of her left eye / to the corner / of her mouth' (ll.2-5). So, the scar has become "a public part of her life" over the years (l.7). It is no wonder people look at the scar at the first sight, since it is so distinctive.

> They look straight at me
> trying to look as if they're not. (ll.8-9)

The scar knows what people think when they see it.

They wonder what caused me to be:
fist
plate
glass
bottle
knife? (ll.10-16)

The scar must be unwanted by this woman. However, it stays there as it is. It lives with this woman on her face. The scar may be causing her unhappiness or uneasiness, but the poet questions whether the scar itself is causing all the pain the woman has to endure. Is not it the curious public eyes that make the woman uncomfortable?

However curiously the scar is looked at, it does not answer what caused it to be on the woman's face.

I make no reply
to wondering eyes.
When she laughs
I am her midnight cries. (ll.17-20)

"I" stays silent, and stays silently with her. It cannot help her, but it shares her feelings, her cries and pains. People, who look at the scar, never try to listen to the silenced voice of the scar, and never realize the silenced cry of the woman's heart. It demonstrates how cruel and careless people can be without listening to the silenced and unheard voices and cries. We may think that the scar is causing her unhappiness, but in this poem, we learn that the only the scar knows her pain. We learn through a confessional voice of "I" that the scar is always with her, beside her and being on her side.

"Freckle" explores a similar subject matter, but the freckle's voice is more affectionate and emotional than that of the scar. "I" (the freckle) stays under a woman's eye. It is fairly understandable that the freckle is not wanted by this woman, most women dislike freckles on her face. However, the freckle tells us a different story:

> Her skin is my privilege.
> ...
> I reflect her in the whole of her health.
> I measure her when she's sick.
>
> I thrive at the edge of her daring.
> I share the names in her dreams.
> I ripple and skip in her singing. (l.5 & 8-12)

The freckle is doing its best for its mistress. It wants to stay with her, to live with her and to do good for her. The freckle's voice is so affectionate, when it tells us that it wishes to spend its life on her face, always being with her. The freckle devotes and commits its life entirely to her.

> I'll witness her aging,
> be with her when she's not
>
> here anymore.
> That's how I see it anyway.
> Maybe I'm wrong.
>
> Maybe I'll wither like a bit of skin,
> Drift off into a freckleheaven
> Purged of my original sin,
>
> transfigured into that state of grace
> I spend each moment of my tiny life

loving in her face. (ll.14-24)

The poem shows how the world could be different, when looked from freckle's perspective. Women may never imagine how their freckles, that they are trying to "kill", wish to live with them. The freckle may not be able to spend the rest of its life on her face, but the freckle hopes that it will stay with her as long as she lives and even to go to heaven with her after she dies. Or, it wonders if it is not possible to go to heaven with her, but it has to go to its own heaven, freckleheaven, separated from the woman. The word, freckleheaven, indicates how Kennelly thinks of the things, which are usually thought to have no feelings, no thinking and no soul. Freckles must have their own life, and thus, they may go to heaven with us or they may have their own heaven. Kennelly tries to explore the life and the world of the hated things by entering into their lives. This poem shows that the hated things do have affections, love and wishes. They are not "things" but they are just like us. Kennelly succeeds in giving not only a voice but also a life to the freckle in this little poem.

Some things love us and some challenge us. In the poem, "Rumour", the rumour challenges and tempts us.[10] In the same way that the "bread" was born in the poem, "Bread", the rumour is born out of human beings. "I" in this poem is:

a whisper so confidential you'd swear
only two chosen souls would
ever know (ll.4-6)

However, "I" is never kept as a secret, and "I" "spark from mouth to mouth / with a kind of

electricity" (ll.8-9). The rumour travels from mouth to mouth:

> Mouth me on to Priscilla Joy
>
> who'll mouth me on to Clotilda Lynch-Hunt
> who'll confide in Sebastian Brownhead
> who'll whisper me in bed
>
> to Imelda Black who'll open her thighs
> and eyes wide in disbelief
> and pass me on to
>
> pass me on to pass me on to ---
> you'd think I might be weary with all
> the travelling. No. Poison
>
> is always young, gets younger
> the more it swallows
> brands of itself. (ll.33-45)

The rumour is aware that it is the "poison" which sounds sweet to many people's ear, even to "you". Moreover, it knows that people do not know how to end the rumour. In other words, it will never die, but it is passed on from people to people no matter how they disbelieve it.

What is notable is that "I" addresses "you" and talks to a reader through the poem. The "rumour" alludes "you" to take a part in it:

> May I tempt you to make a contribution
> to my being? ... (ll.16-17)

It is renewed every time it is passed on, and it tries to seduce "you":

> Inject me anew with your spirit.
> A few words will do. I'm on my way. (ll.52-53)

Kennelly attempts to present an imaginative dialogue between a phenomenon (the "rumour" in this case) and a reader ("you") in this poem. It is only possible when Kennelly enters into the life of the "rumour" in this poem. Usually, we do not think a rumour itself talks. We think we speak the rumour. If the rumour does not have a voice, a dialogue between a rumour and a human is just impossible. We may think that we control the rumour, but Kennelly presents it in the opposite way. This poem suggests a possibility that the "rumour" allures us and controls us. This echoes with what Kennelly mentions about the power of the language:

> ... people talk about controlling language, whereas I think the language controls people. Certainly [the language] controls me. It leads me. I have to put my hand in its [language's] hand, and go with it, almost like a walk.[11]

A dialogue between a phenomenon and a human being can be often observed in Kennelly's poetry. By using the personification of phenomena, Kennelly makes the imaginative dialogue possible in his poems. In "Walk", he presents a dialogue between an "image" and a fictive poet, Ace.[12] The poem starts rather strangely: "Ace took an image for a walk" (l.1). However, as they, a man and an "image", pass the massive housing estate, the oldest university and the handsome street in town, the personification of the "image" gradually becomes successful. By seeing all these things, the "image" becomes fascinated and thanks Ace for taking it for a walk:

> When they got home the image said

'Thank you for showing me these strange places,
I shall go to my own place now,
set in a spot of acid starlight,
and dream of what I have seen. I'll return later
and slip into your head. It may be
I'll change you in ways you don't expect.
Or maybe you'll change me!' (ll.12-19)

Here, the relationship between an image and a man is interestingly presented. An image is not only the thing a man imagines, as "I" predicts that it will return to a person's head. An image is not the thing, which is imagined, created or changed by people, but it may "change people" instead. Kennelly seems to suggest that there are always two ways. When we look at the relationship between an image and a man, it is not always the case that a man is a creator and can control all images she or he has. If the world is seen from the perspective of an image, not of us, we may realize something new and different. Then, we may realize what we believe the "truth" may be not the only truth, but there are many "truths" in this world.

There is another poem, in which the voice of the personified "I", makes a reader realize different perspectives and different truths in this world. In "O'connell Street encounter", "Original Sin" looks sad and confesses its troubles.[13] It may be difficult to imagine that the "sin" is feeling sad and is having troubles, though we often feel sorry and have troubles because of the sin we committed. However, "Original Sin" is now facing the identity crisis.

'... I can't find the words
for the way I think I feel I am.
This world is a pit of shame

where I live with a burning sense of being a fraud,
failing to live down to my name

which has a paradisal splendour when you think of it.
Original! Original Sin!
...
... now I feel robbed of my primalwit
and wisdom, I'm a joke, a cod, a fake, a nit, a hasbeen.
In short, a bit of a shit.
Everyone's committing me now, without a second thought.
I might as well be dead, I've lost
all my originality'... (ll.6-19)

The poem demonstrates a difficulty of defining one's identity. Trying to find the right words to express "the way I think I feel I am" is difficult not only for "Original Sin" but for anyone (and for anything, in Kennelly's sense).

It is certainly ironic that "Original Sin" loses its originality, but it is more ironic that the world is seen so sinful from the perspective of the original sin. What is the most ironic is that the world, in which "Original Sin" gives up to live, is full of sins. "Original Sin" is nearly disappearing, not because there is no sin committed, but because everyone is committing a sin so frequently that it became too common to be acknowledged "original". "Original Sin" feels that it is nearly "dead" in this world, because it is full of sins. It may sound paradoxical, but "Original Sin" was in a way honored as the original sin at the time the world recognized it as original. However, its glory was what "has been" once. Thus, it sadly recognizes itself as a thing of a past, "a hasbeen". If the "Original Sin" becomes a joke and a fake, then, we may think that the world must be purified. The poem suggests that the

world does not go that way.

The personification of a phenomenon Kennelly uses in his poetry is a poetic technique that brings both seriousness and comicality into poetry. For instance, "O'connell Street encounter" brings up very serious, religious and moral issues in this modern society. After listening to what "Original Sin" feels about this world, a reader may ponder over her or his own daily life. A reader may question if she or he is included in "everyone" who is "committing me [original sin] without a second thought". However, Kennelly does not seem to aim to reproach a reader by his poem. This technique enables Kennelly to show a different world that may make readers repent their own acts, but this is not his intention. His poems are never preachy. Indeed, he seems to enjoy looking at the world differently, entering into the lives of otherness, and showing the world differently from the perspectives of unexpected. He is certainly enjoying being others in his poetry. This must be the reason why his poems on the serious themes can be hilariously funny. It is funny to imagine the dough declares to go though fire willingly for it wants to become delicious bread. It is both funny and sad to imagine the wall regretting the fact it could not save a girl who was drowned in the river, because it must be very funny if the wall could move and save the girl from the river. How fun if we could listen to what a freckle, a scar, loneliness or a key talks to us. Indeed, we may never feel "loneliness" then. Kennelly's poems make us think of the world around us and encourage us to look at the world differently and more closely, but at the same time, his poems never forget to bring us smiles and joy of this world.

III. Conclusion

By using the voice of "I", Kennelly explores how one (thing) can express one's "truth" with words. He claims that "'truth' is a word that is made to tell a lot of lies",[14] and points out that "truth" and lies always intermingle. Kennelly tries to reach "truth" by exploring arena of voices of phenomena. It seems to me that the "truth" he founds in his poetry is the fact that there are "truths" in this world. One's truth may be another's lie. The "truth" has multi dimensions, and it looks completely different when looked from different dimension.

By exploring the life of other people and things, Kennelly keeps surprising his readers and even himself. As in the poem, "Walk", an image seems to return to Kennelly and change him in ways he does not expect. As a result, his poems are full of surprises. He is aware that it is the words, the language, the images and the phenomena, which control him in his poetry:

> Some who play with words may never know
> how words may play with them. ("Play", ll.1-2)[15]

"Truth is what no poet publishes". Once Kennelly wrote in his poem, "Like history".[16] It is one "truth" about poetry. However, who knows that there are many other "truths" in poetry, which may tell us the "truth"? Kennelly's arena of voices invites us to a journey into "truths" in the world of poetry.

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[1] Other than poetry books, he has published two novels, some dramas, edited many anthologies as a distinguished critic, and has written many articles for the newspapers and journals.

[2] Most of his books are published from the English publisher, the Bloodaxe Books.

[3] 'It Slipped Away' in *The Book of Judas*, p.76.

[4] Kikuchi, "An Interview with Brendan Kennelly" in appendix 2 in *Living Voices from Dublin: Poetry of Brendan Kennelly, Eavan Boland and Paula Meehan*, p.282.

[5] 'Introduction' in *Breathing Spaces*, p.10.

[6] I quote it from *A Time for Voices* (p.73), but this poem has some earlier versions. Persson's "Brendan Kennelly: A Bibliography 1959-1994." traces most of Kennelly's poems and indicates the first date of publication of each poem.

[7] *The Singing Tree*, pp.19-21.

[8] *The Singing Tree*, pp.16-18.

[9] "Scar" in *The Singing Tree*, p.28, and "Freckle" in the same book, p.38.

[10] *The Singing Tree*, pp.30-31.

[11] Kikuchi, "An Interview with Brendan Kennelly" in appendix 2 in *Living Voices from Dublin: Poetry of Brendan Kennelly, Eavan Boland and Paula Meehan*, p.278.

[12] *Poetry My Arse*, p.199.

[13] *Poetry My Arse*, p.162.

[14] "Acenote" in *Poetry My Arse*, p.19.

[15] *Poetry My Arse*, p.142.

[16] *Poetry My Arse*, p.328.