

Extracts from Interviews with Two Irish Poets:

An Interview with Brendan Kennelly and An Interview with Paula Meehan

Rina Kikuchi

Introduction

These interviews were held during the year I was a student at Trinity College, Dublin. I was in Ireland for the first time, in order to do my Ph.D. research on the living poets in Dublin. I remember when I first saw Brendan Kennelly at his poetry reading held at Trinity College with the introduction by Declan Kiberd¹, soon after I arrived at Dublin, in September 1999. It was so exiting for me to see the poet I only knew on the printed pages, in front of me, talking and smiling. It was the first poetry reading I attended in Dublin, which enchanted me to the world of "living voices". He is not only a poet for me, but also a teacher, who passionately taught me about Irish poetry, literature and Irish culture.

Meeting with Paula Meehan was another fascinating experience for me. When in Japan, I did not know her works, for the information about the contemporary Irish poetry was, and still is, limited in this country. Prof. Kennelly introduced me a poet, Theo Dorgan at Michael Longley's poetry reading², and being the president of Poetry Ireland at the time, Mr. Dorgan kindly helped my research. He gave me over twenty issues of and over fifteen years of *Poetry Irish Review*, and proposed me to organize an interview with the poet I choose for my doctoral thesis. This was how the interview with Paula Meehan became possible for me. Without his offer and help, it would not be possible, and I would not even dream of this interview coming true.

Both interviews run more than one hour and half, but because of the spacing problem I publish only the extracts from the interviews. I have selected and edited them, hoping that any reader who is interested in poetry can enjoy even without knowing their poems. I apologize omitting the parts the poets talked about their specific poems, which may be the most interesting parts for the readers who are familiar with their works. However, the whole interviews will be available in the appendix of my

doctoral thesis.

Before the interviews were held, I had sent the sheets of questions to both poets, and the interviews, more or less, followed them. I have omitted my questions and whatever the part I spoke as much as possible to save space here. In this paper, I have selected two big issues from these interviews. One is the Irishness and Irish identity in poetry and what a poet thinks of her or his own Irish identity as a poet. Relating to this question, I have asked if there are any poets they may be influenced by. The other issue is the literary criticism and labels in Dublin. The compact literary circle in Dublin seemed both encouraging and problematic to me, who was a complete stranger in that society.

Dublin is a place that has a strange attractiveness for an outsider like me but also for many native writers. As Meehan comments, it is an intensively literary city. It is, not too big (you will be able to walk all through Dublin. It is a wonder why the city is filled by cars and the traffic so heavy. Meehan commented that "the cars are sent by devil", and she never wants a car³ and it is certainly understandable once you see the traffic situation in Dublin), and not too clean (there are full of rubbish floating all over, as one can read in Kennelly's Dublin poems), yet it is "terribly beautiful in its own way" (Kennelly, "Bubbles, or Janey Mary's Defense of Poetry", *Poetry My Arse*). I hope that one will be able to understand the complex attraction, reading both interviews.

My research has taken place on "living voices from Dublin", because I came to notice the studies on contemporary Irish poetry tend to focus on poetry from the Northern Ireland. I wondered if the voices from the Republic of Ireland did not exist or largely neglected. However, even my short stay in Dublin made me realize it is an exciting literary city, where you can meet a poet on the street, where poetry readings and poetry workshops are

held regularly, and where new poetry books appear monthly. One of the reasons why I did not know about many active poets in Dublin before going there, is that my studies were largely depended on the books and periodicals from English or American publishers. Many of the poets' works I came to know in Dublin were published from smaller Irish publishers, which were less likely to reach as far as Japan. Many of the critical essays, articles and reviews in literary journals and in newspapers, which I could get in Dublin easily, were also unfamiliar in Japan.

While focusing on "Dublin poets", I do not concern their similarities or do not mean to indicate them as a group called "Dublin poets". My intention is not to make another label for the poets, for I often find that the labels given to the Irish poets, such as "Northern poets" or "women poets" quite problematic. The "Dublin poets" I came to know are all so different, and their individual voice is what I am interested in.

I have chosen Kennelly, Meehan and Eavan Boland for my main focuses in the doctoral thesis⁴, because I became interested in the poets who write about Dublin. To my question asking why they write about lives in Ireland and in Dublin, both Kennelly and Meehan answered quite simply it is because they were born in Ireland and they live in Dublin. I presume it is natural, as both poets indicated simply, to be interested in the lives and landscapes one is in. For the same reason, I suspect that my stay in Dublin made me more interested in the poems flourishing in Dublin.

As Meehan recalled that her childhood in Dublin was literary mapped, it was exciting for me to listen to the Irish writers in the room where Oscar Wilde was born⁵, to watch the film about the Civil War in the theatre where you see the gunshot holes from the Civil War on the wall⁶, and to walk by the house of Austin Clark everyday to school⁷. Dublin seems to be a space where the history and present coexist, and that must be a part of strange attractive atmosphere of Dublin I was attracted to.

I was, more than anything, fascinated, excited, surprised and touched by these poet's gentle, understanding, helpful and kind attitude to me, an immature student who had just started the research and was almost lost in the literary Dublin full of "new" poetic experience and information. I would like to acknowledge them all here for their unlimited kindness. The apology I have to make is that it took such a long time to make these interviews come in print. I also hope to apologize for omitting many of the interesting parts of their interviews for this publication. Finally, I hope this publication may encourage the wider readings and studies on Irish poetry in Japan, and may be helpful and useful source for the students of Irish poetry.

Brendan Kennelly (1936-)



He was born in a village, Ballylongford, County 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, critic, playwright and professor at Trinity College, Dublin. His smiling face is a trademark, being on TV shows and doing a TV commercial for the Toyota cars. His first book, *Cast a Cold Eye*, appeared in 1959, and since then, he has published more than forty poetry books. Other than poetry books, he has published two novels, some dramas, edited anthologies, and has written articles for the newspapers and journals. Most of his early poems are collected in *A Time for Voices: Selected Poems 1960-1990* (1990) and *Breathing Spaces: Early Poems* (1992).

While the lyrical tones, clarity, and simplicity are often mentioned as the characteristics of his poems, he has written the long sequenced poems, *Cromwell* (1983), *The Book of Judas* (1992) and *Poetry My Arse* (1995). *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. The main character in *Poetry My Arse* is Ace de Horner, who is a wandering poet in Dublin. There are many satires, parodies, and poems on violence and sex, which create the talkative, energetic and gossipy Dublin in which Ace lives. These books have given a new aspect of Dublin and of Ireland. His latest book is a collection of very short poems, *Glimpses* (2001). The critical studies on his works are collected in *Dark Fathers into Light* (1994).

An Interview with Brendan Kennelly
Held at Trinity College, Dublin, on 22 May 2000

Brendan Kennelly (BK): I try to answer them [your questions] as clearly and as honestly as possible. [Reading the first question] "Do you consider yourself as an 'Irish' poet? If you do, is it important to recognize yourself as an 'Irish' poet?" It's not a thing that strikes me very often to consider myself as an Irish poet. I live in Ireland; I work in Dublin; I write about the world around me, and the world within me. And I try to make connection between them. And that is the very important word for me: connection. And the fact that [I write about] Irish life is because I was born here. I feel like I could have easily been born in Sweden or Göteborg or Morocco or whatever, and I think I would have done the same thing. You write about the life you know. And to that extent, since it is in Ireland, people will call you an Irish poet. But I think that poetry should be, our poetry should be without an adjective: that he is or she is the poet. You speak for the humanity in yourself, and try to reach the humanity. So poetry is between human beings. It's a way of connecting human beings.

Rina Kikuchi (RK): Irish poets are often grouped and labeled by critics. What do you think of the criticism and labeling in Ireland?

BK: I've written about the Irish tendency to label in the introduction to *The Book of Judas*⁸. I think the critics like to do that. And they've always done it. But the labeling in Ireland, you know, a "Kerry man" or an "Irish man", or "Republican" or "Catholic", or whatever, again these adjectives. On one hand, yes, I see the commodity of the labels, from the critical convenient of the view. But on the other hand, I do not think they should be considered absolutely truthful.

RK: Do criticism and labels, which are given to you and to your works, bother you, or do they influence what you write?

BK: I do not think so. You know, when you write poems, you go on writing, writing, writing... And sometimes, you do not quite know what, not consciously, because lots of writing poems are uncurious, like a dream. To that extent, it [writing a poem] is an unconscious [act]. It's an act of faith in language. And 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. And all through the darkness. And [I] explore with the word. And I enjoy that.

It [writing a poem] is an exploration, an adventure. I would hope my poetry is an adventure in language, with language, with words. And sometimes, I think the words play with me. It is just a feeling that [the words are] dancing around you like children, or mocking you. "Can you catch me?" or that kind of feeling. The words are just beyond your reach. And the purpose of the poem is to define the right word. You look at the word over and over and over again. And this fills me often during the day: "No, I do not find it... I do not get it... I have lost it..." [laugh] You know, you can lose the word.

So it is an adventure, it is a mystery, and it is also a discipline and the matter of paying attention. You have to look, and pay attention, and really see it. Really see the line, see the connection of one line with another line. And the words echo each other. Echo really interests me, not just verbal echo, but echoes of ideas over the years. So, poetry is an endless act of discovery, and, an adventure.

RK: Reading criticism on your works, have you felt misunderstood?

BK: I do. I have felt nobody, a very few people understood *Poetry My Arse*⁹, for example. That is satirical, but basically it is a celebration. The Buddhist monks at the end, I saw they sent a beautiful cloth into the river¹⁰. He [Ace, the main character in this book] puts the poems in the river and it floated away like to praise the creation, to praise the river. And they [poems] were published by the river, you know what I mean. The poems praise the river. I do not think anybody picked it on that. They [the critics/reviewers] just saw the satire. But I wanted to write both satire and celebration. Because there is a vanity in art. There is a kind of political vanity. And I was writing about that, but that does not matter, not really. What matters is the poem. Somebody, somewhere, will pick it up, and read it, and enjoy it, in some country, at a different time, maybe in fifty years from now, somebody will.

I have even read critics of *The Singing Tree*¹¹. Some of them were very good, seem to understand it as I understand it. But some people just said it is egotistical. It is the opposite. It is an attempt to understand the nature of others and other things, other phenomena, [such as] a bullet, freckle, key. And that is the opposite of egotism. So that sort of attempt, to get inside the reality of others, of other things not just people, but phenomena, objects, feelings, and that really, always, mattered to me. I always wondered what people are like inside. To put that into

words, and not use “you”, not “he”, not “she”, not “it”, but “I”.

In *Cromwell*, I was really trying to get a dialogue going. I mean, when you think the entire political situation in Ireland, it has come to a dialogue. Make the killer and the people, speak to the other people, speak as a human being. [I] used the letters [written by Cromwell], and history at the bottom, try to show his [Cromwell's] humanity. He is a great, he is one of the top ten English men of the millennium. But in Ireland, he is the worst killer ever. So, [I] tried to balance these. Try to see why one people think him a hero, and the other sees him as an unforgivable murderer. So that would be the outcome of getting inside the other life, the other bodies, the other phenomena.

RK: Do you think poetry, in this sense of trying to be others and exploring in something other than yourself, would help you to understand other people's life or a life in general more?

BK: Well, sympathy. And compassion, [and] understanding. You look at somebody sleeping at the doorway. You can walk away. Or you can walk over, and say “how are you?” Or a woman on the street begging with two children. What humanizes you? Poetry makes you more human.

RK: Are there any writers you really like, or anyone who may have made any influence on your works?

BK: I love Blake. I always did. The idea of opposite, for example. Things progress only between things opposite: *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. And bringing opposite together, which in Irish situation very important again.

I love Keats' letters. His letters have beautiful insights into the nature of poetry, and his concerns about his brothers and sister. He is a lovely being.

Patrick Kavanagh is great favorite of mine¹², because he had no formal education, and yet, he became a very pure and clear poet, who looked his society, wrote all about it, went through it, was rejected by it in certain respect, but went on after serious operation to write poems about looking at people, looking at the canal, looking at water, looking at life, and loving it. And he is very lucid. I love clear work.

And of course, Yeats. I love Yeats' poems. He is very different [from Kavanagh]. Sometimes he is hidden. He is very masked. He has a great sense of passion and form. He is a very dedicated poet.

I love Shakespeare, his sonnets. I like mythology, Japanese mythology, Eastern mythology, Noh drama. I like brief poems, not long ones, very short ones like Basho and

haiku. Great and beautiful glances. Just little glances, you know. I have written a hundred and fifty of these, and I think it will become a book¹³. So I read mythology, I read some philosophy, stories, poetry, and proverbs. I love proverbs. You know, old fashioned things, but the proverbs really were born out of a culture, not rich, hard working, before the books were really available, and say in one sentence what took years to experience. So, language serves life. It helps to clarify it.

RK: There is a poem in *Poetry My Arse*: a dialogue between a woman and a man. A woman says she was raped, and a man says “o, that is horrible, horrible... I think I will write a poem about it, a vivid poem that would be widely read”. At the end of the poem, she says, “o, poetry my arse”... you know¹⁴. Have you felt that way as a poet?

BK: Yes, you have a very good point. Art is predatory. You know that line in Yeats? “I sought for a theme and sought for it in vain¹⁵”. Poet is always looking for a theme, something to write about. So, I took that. She told him a human story, and he said, “yeah, that is an interesting theme”. Making the idea of predator, inseparable from the sense of beauty.

You know, poets have to live with themselves. You have to live with your own imagination, with your own gift, with your own love, with your own vanity, and your own power. And to know them all: what is my power, what is my weakness, what is my strength. And you live with them, know them, and make them work... so that a poem can be created, that may entertain the imagination and the heart beat of another person, and reach their life. So, it's complex, but alternatively, it is a celebration of the rain and the wind, the child, the women and the men, even the suffering.

I think poetry has a gift. It's like a sound of rain on a window. You are sitting there alone, and you can listen to the music, how it rains, the sounds of wind. Just relax and take it easy, and let it into your spirit. And it becomes a part of you in a special beautiful way, that you will never forget. It relaxes your soul even, not only your body. It relaxes your spirit, so you will be content to become one with nature, with the universe. You will realize that you are a part of something, that up until now, you have tried to resist, the surrendering to it. It is the art of surrender, of the musical reality.

Paula Meehan (1955-)



She was born in Dublin and grown up in the inner city community. She was educated at the convent, at Trinity College, Dublin, and at Eastern Washington University. She was a writer-in-residence at Trinity College in 1993. Her first collection was *Return and No Blame* (1984), followed by *Reading the Sky* (1986), *The Man who was Marked by Winter* (1991), *The Pillow Talk* (1994) and *Dharmakaya* (2000). Her play, *Cell* was toured in Ireland in 1999, and was published in 2000. She has done poetry readings in Ireland and the United States, and the poetry workshops in prisons. Her poems have been translated into many languages including Japanese. Her latest collection was published from the British publisher, reaching the wider audiences.

Most of her poems are written from a woman's viewpoint, and many of her poems are personal and private dealing with woman's inner-self and the relationships between a woman and a mother, a daughter, a sister, a lover, and a man. While Meehan's woman's world is moving and touching, her poems are not sentimental or conservative, but bold. Her ideas and language use are the ones of the "new generation", opening new areas of Irish women's world for poetry. For further readings, there are "Dry Socks and Gloating Signifiers: Paula Meehan's Poems" by Tracy Brain (*Critical Survey* 1996), "A Pilgrim Soul", a review on *The Man who was Marked by Winter* by Antoinette Quinn (*ILS* fall 1992), and interviews by Theo Dorgan (*Colby* 1992) and by John Hobbs (*Nua* 1997).

An Interview with Paula Meehan Held at Dublin Castle, on 1 June 2000

Paula Meehan (MP): I would say by a way of introduction that poets are not necessarily the most reliable witnesses to their own work. Because the commentary they would give you about the poetry is all commentary in the hindsight. So they are looking back and making sense, about what they actually did in a state of look and care. The poem comes out of circumstances that are unstable, influx and chaotic.

When a poet looks back, you are making sense, you are making a pattern, but you don't have that foreknowledge when you sit down to write a poem. When you sit down to write a poem, you are sitting down, in a way without identity. I don't want to have an identity when I write a poem. I want a poem and a process of writing a poem to reveal to me my identity at a certain point. But that in itself is only stable in a poem. It's not stable in my life.

I suppose that I carry some of the consolation of the common craft women, and of devoting my life to arts, and that provides in my life paths that I follow. But all the things that I say on my poetry are hindsight, [and] they are not totally reliable. Because today is a day within itself, the first day of June, summer light, and rain is out there [pointing the clouds far in the sky], they distort. And I spent this morning with a group of people, mostly young people who are taking a cultural training course, from different background, quite unstable and problematic backgrounds. So I were going to work with them, over the course of, maybe a year, doing a workshop. So that [the things that I did this morning] is going to influence what I am saying [during this interview]. You carry the day into a commentary.

So, I just want to say that as a practice for all I speak in comments. I am speaking with hindsight. I don't want to make my work seem like as if it has come out of something that has already decided that I have an identity and I am this person. When I sit down to write a poem, I don't know who am I going to be in a poem, you know. Or where the poem will take me, or where that part of my life is heading. So I think I work out of chaos, generally.

Rina Kikuchi (RK): So you don't have any idea or any purpose when you start writing a poem? But you go where your poem takes you?

PM: What I am saying is that I don't sit down with any consciousness in my mind: I am an Irish poet, or I am a feminist, or I am a socialist, or I am this, and this is my identity, and what comes out of that. Actually, I don't even want to know who I am, when I sit down and write

a poem. I am trying to do away with the ego. The composite against that you carry around the world. I am trying, actually, to break through that. Because I find that is a block to creativity. If I am fixed, it is hard to open up to chaos. But it is not to say that I mightn't have a fictional idea to write a poem. But that's the idea of a poem, rather than a fixed identity.

RK: But however hard you try, I think you need your own identity. I understand that having labels is dangerous for poetry and, it limits poetic subjects, but still, you need some kind of label in order to identify yourself. You cannot be "no one".

PM: No, the world [has] been what it is, [and] it is impossible to avoid being labeled, because you need to start being published [being] labeled. "Young woman poet", when you start publishing. "Working class", is another label that's given to me. I don't label myself, but I am labeled. I don't have any problems [with it]. In fact, more the label becomes, if you like, "negative", like people now use "feminism" in a negative way, I am proud to be called that. More [it] is considered in a negative term, more proud I am to be called that.

RK: Why? Is there any particular reason for that?

PM: Because I identify very strongly with people in history who have been labeled like "Jews", "homosexuals", "Gypsies". So, more it becomes a term of badness, more I am proud to be called a "feminist".

But for a poet, it is important not to hang up on what people call us, and not to be. Because poetry is about freedom, and it is about finding freedom in language and in the imagination. So, whatever you are labeled, [it is all right] as long as you do not define yourself by them. [It is all right] as long as you do not say that "I cannot say that because I am a feminist", or "I cannot say that because I am a socialist", or "I cannot say that because I am a woman". Once you start improving yourself with the label, then I think now you are in trouble as an artist.

RK: Does criticism, which labels you, influence your poetry or what you write?

PM: Well, some people can write things that open up the door. But most of the critical commentary on my work does not make any sense. I mean lots of them just miss the point completely. Occasionally it is hurtful, but mostly I just laugh. [Both laugh] So I try not to read them, but I am often aware of them, because the publishers would send me. But generally I try not to read too much, be-

cause you are trying to keep your freedom. You try to throw off the critic on your shoulder, and your editor on your shoulder, when you are making a poem. If you are in your creative phase, you just have to get rid of those critics. If critics are too developed, they can block the poetry, you know?

RK: Yes, very easily. Do you sometimes feel that you are misunderstood?

PM: Aaaaaaall the time!!!! [Both laugh] Nobody understands me! I sometimes feel that people got the wrong end of the stick, and people who don't read me often make assumptions, and will make statements about me. I just know from sometimes what people say to me that they misread poems. But you could go mad if you try to control all that. You give a poem to the world in total trust, and it does not belong to you anymore. Once it is published, it is not yours. It belongs to the world, and they can read it anyway they like. They can misrepresent it. They can totally misunderstand it. And it is not really anything to do with you. It's nothing to do with me. So I don't mind that.

And a lot of that is very, very nurturing. Like today, in the meeting with people, one of them said to me that "that character in your poem, I knew that woman. She was an old neighbor of my mother's". And that is an old woman I have in my early poem¹⁶. She is in a shawl, and she's selling wrinkles on the corner, right? This one says, "I know her. That is Teasy Welsh". And I said, "Is she! Gosh, now, isn't it interesting?" But she wasn't her, not Teasy Welsh. She was just a figure of some my childhood neighbor she was. But I have other people come up and say that "I knew that woman! She is Molly O'Realy". [Both laugh]

But I just find that incredibly supportive and nurturing, that people are seeing people that they know. Especially in a community, which is quite an afflicted community, I grew up. So it is very important for me that nurturing thing, that I get that kind of response from ordinary people, who aren't academic or in a professional business. So any one person can [read poems], and you really know that people do read poems for what they need. I am interested in that.

RK: In Dublin, the community of the poets is not too big, and the poets tend to write a review or criticism on each other's works. But I have not come across a book review that you have written. You are not involved in this poetic circle?

PM: I don't think poem belongs to the academic world. I

don't think it belongs to anybody in particular, but it belongs to anybody who can read it and experience it and listen to it. I think poetry can belong to people who cannot read. Because they can hear it. It's something to be heard. People who come to my reading might not be able to read. But they come to hear poetry. I compose, so that it can be heard, and understood on different levels. So I have really tried to push my energy and my work and life into work with people who are not normally associated with poetry.

RK: However, I feel it seems that most of the people who are reading, listening, discussing poetry tend to be people who are working in academic field or literary students?

PM: Sometimes. But I want to talk to people who give me new insights. I can work with poetry, with people whose background is not from academia. A lot of the projects that I am involved push poetry up to right at the heart of it. People write poetry all the time. They might not become professional poets or to become reviewed in certain literary journals, but poetry is vital and alive and important and in some cases saving their lives. That's where I like to put my energy in. I enjoy that. I am fascinated by how poetry is so hospitable to people from all backgrounds.

RK: A lot of writers have written about Dublin. What do you think are the attractions? What is the most attractive thing for you in Dublin? Is it because you were born here?

PM: I think it's because I was born here. It's an intensely literary city. Even for people and community who aren't academics, they are very literary. Where I grew up is very mapped [literary]. I played in a play ground where is in Mountjoy Square, which is where O'Casey had set his plays, and Eccless Street where Joyce had Leopold Bloom had one day of life¹⁷ was at the edge of my childhood territory. Brendan Behan was someone, like my father would say, "there's Brendan Behan!"¹⁸ Because he just lived up the road. You know, we see them in streets.

The seat where you are sitting was what was the seat of a British colonial ruler in the castle. This tower, [which] was a Birmingham tower here, is the tower in which Hugh O'Donnell had escaped twice in winter¹⁹, and headed over to the mountain, escaped into the Wicklow Mountains, when he was a prisoner for being a rebel. He was one of our native chiefs. The city has had to bear all that colonial experience, and I think that puts enormous pressure on language, which is, I think, why it produces [so much writings]. Now, that's simplified version. But I think that's what makes the literary city.

If you look at what happened at the Northern poetry in the last generations, and to some degree, for the present generations. I think part of the reason why there's been so much extraordinary poetry coming from the Northern Ireland is to do, again, with the sense of afflictions. Culture in conflict produces a lot of good arts. And English, the language here [in Dublin] is under so much scrutiny and pressure, that I think it is natural that we produced a lot of writers. Part of the cause why Irish writing has been so prolific and so good is that, we had not had anything else, you know. Like people who have nothing, except songs and stories. People make art out of what they have, and they have nothing but talk! It is a great talking city. Like me, I've been raving on! [Both laugh]

In fact, writers are probably the people who sit down and put it into paper, you know. Probably they are anti-social or something. They should be out talking like the rest of the population. We [poets] are the only ones who don't make it to the pubs. It can cut us from where what's really happening.

RK: You seem to concern the problem of class, such as doing workshops in prisons, considering with the educational situation they are in...?

PM: If you are living in that area, you are more than likely to going to end up on drugs, and if you go to any institutions, it is more likely to be a prison than a university. That's odd. [From] the minute you were born in that community, the chance that you get a secondary education is very slim, and the chance you go to a university is nearly non-existence.

I have been at Trinity College as a student in the 70s, and went back in the early 90s, exactly twenty years since I went in as a student. But the same statistical number of the children from the working class background as twenty years earlier, something like 0.04 per cent [were attending at Trinity College].

RK: So, in this aspect, the society has not changed. Do you think poetry can change something, social situations or the way people think and act in society?

PM: No, I don't actually think I can believe these things. Poetry won't ask, "am I a good person?" Poetry won't say, "do I treat my children well?" Poetry won't ask you to be a good person. It just asks you to live in language.

I don't write poetry trying to change anything. But it changed me. People who are engaged in poetry are transformed. Regularly, constantly, transformed by it. I think it is very powerful. But I often hear people say "what's the point of poetry", "who needs it?", "it's elitist", "it's

useless", you know. I always say that we are not rubbish collectors. Poets would need to go on strike for about three hundred years before you notice. If people, who collect the rubbish, go on strike for a week, the city starts to smell. But poets, because our relationship with the society and the culture is so different, so slow. Our relationship [with the society] is so slow. We don't change. We are always there, every generation. So I sometimes say that we have to be on strike for three hundred years. But then, people would see this big hole at the heart of culture of silence, you know. We don't have a straightforward relationship [with society].

I don't write poem and hope that people would stop polluting the river [for instance], because I know they won't. But you hope that you are there: when people need poetry, you are there. May be when they cannot go anymore to the river, [then] they need poetry, and it's there for them. That's the only work you can do.

(1922), and his house was set on Eccless Street.

18 Brendan Behan (1923-64), a Dublin playwright.

19 Frank Hugh O'Donnell (1848-1916): a politician who was a member of the Young Ireland Society, who also was a journalist and a writer.

Notes

- 1 A critic, a scholar and professor at the University College, Dublin, who was once a student of Prof. Kennelly.
- 2 Theo Dorgan (1953-): a Cork born poet, who has also edited anthologies and critical essays on Irish poetry. Michael Longley (1939-) is one of the most read and well-known poets from the Northern Ireland.
- 3 Not printed here, but will be available in my thesis.
- 4 Boland (1945-) is often considered as a pioneer of Irish women's poetry.
- 5 The Oscar Wilde Centre on the campus of Trinity College.
- 6 Irish Film Centre.
- 7 Austen Clarke (1896-1974): a Dublin born poet.
- 8 Preface, pp.9-12 in *The Book of Judas* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe, 1991).
- 9 Published in 1995 from the Bloodaxe.
- 10 Kennelly told me a story that he saw some Buddhist monks threw a beautiful cloth or tapestry into the River Liffey, and it floated down to the sea slowly. From that experience, Kennelly made Ace to publish his poems by throwing his poems into the Liffey at the end of *Poetry My Arse*.
- 11 The collection of short poems, published in 1998 from the Abbey Press.
- 12 Kavanagh (1904-1967): one of the most influential poets in Irish poetry after Yeats. He was born in Monaghan, and moved to Dublin as a journalist and a poet.
- 13 *Glimpses*: a collection of very short poems, has just published (Northumberland: Bloodaxe, 2001).
- 14 "Adam's Apple" in *Poetry My Arse*, p.24.
- 15 Yeats' "The Circus Animals' Desertion".
- 16 "Buying Winkles" in *The Man who was Marked by Winter* (1991), pp.15-16.
- 17 Leopold Bloom is the main character in Joyce's *Ulysses*