

Poetry as “an immersion in the actual”: An Interview with Pat Boran

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PVA: Even though you are generally known as a poet, you have also written fiction, such as the collection of short stories Strange Bedfellows (1991), the children’s book All the Way from China (1998), and your memoir The Invisible Prison: Scenes from an Irish Childhood (2009). In the latter decades, however, you seem to dedicate exclusively to poetry. What makes poetry special? Do you prefer poetry to other literary genres, and if so, why?

PB: Poetry is very close to the first creative impulse I have ever had, which was making music. I don’t do it anymore; just occasionally in the privacy of my own room. But I’ve always loved making music, and poetry has something of that buzz. At the same time, I have never stopped writing bigger things. When I wrote the memoir *The Invisible Prison*, the origin was 3- or 4-page prose scenes, small vignettes which were stealing from the techniques of the world of fiction-making, allowing a certain amount of narrative and dialogue. But I keep going back to poetry because it’s always waiting for me. For the last couple of years, I have been involved in the writing of a novel; I am not superstitious so I can say it! It may never happen or finish itself, of course – in my 20s I wrote three novels and never sent them to anybody. They were terrible; the writing in them, the construction of them was very traditional and very prosaic. By contrast, in this one, there is much less distance between its descriptive muscle and the nature of a good poem. It happens that I spent a lot of time making lyric poems, poems of a certain size, very few bigger. At this stage in my life, I am inclined to go to extremes. I have ended up making a lot of haikus and simultaneously writing longer, rambling texts. The worst thing that can happen to anybody who wants to be creative is to keep writing the same kind of text. I think it is good to jump to something new that puzzles you, that troubles you, a little bit. Maybe things have to be unfamiliar in order to provoke novel (i.e. fresh) solutions.

PVA: You were just talking about writing a “good” poem? Is there any particular formula for that?

PB: The poet and novelist Dermot Healy who was a friend of mine – he died four years ago – said to me once a very interesting thing: “if you are writing a poem, always get to the end of the first draft, the first sketch”. At the time, I thought that was some kind of protective magic for him; but in fact, I realized afterwards what it was. As a writer, you need to have a unit to return to, otherwise what happens is that you lose your direction half way and then you try to cut and paste something else, something that is “from the outside”. It becomes a job then, a task, and the writing loses its unitary energy. So I think that idea – getting from the beginning to the end and then stopping – is really important, because even if it’s imperfect, it allows you to return the next day and recommence the journey from a known point. It is a process of reading and re-reading, writing and re-writing, clearing the path between the beginning and the end, by taking out the obstacles.

In this respect, some of my poems are like little videos or movies. I wrote “Fetch” (Boran 2017, 100), for instance, shortly after moving to the suburbs. I was recently married and we had no kids. We shared a green patch with the neighbours and in the house opposite ours, there was a lovely dog. Whenever this dog spotted me, he would come straight across. If I moved the curtain, he would move; he would always be waiting for something. This poem is like a little movie, and the movie is that the dog comes and the dog goes. Once you have the geography of that clear in your head, you can turn out the lights, the moon may come up, and you can still get from A to B. Once the geography is right, a certain freedom enters and the poem, or the poet, can afford to take a risk and enter the world of metaphor, the world of dreams, and even the surreal world. But it is really important that all the physical parts are in place; that you can go and you can come back through the landscape, the furniture of the poem. In this sense, the poem is like a little transporter. It is like the movie *The Fly*, the reader is Jeff Goldblum: you close the door and you press the bottom and off you go! Well, it’s a little bit like that.

PVA: You were just mentioning your poem “Fetch” and how this was inspired by a personal anecdote in your life. How important is autobiography in your poetry?

PB: For me, poems are very often derived from autobiography: something happens, a note ends up in a notebook, and afterwards that gets processed, revised or simplified and it becomes a poem. That’s not the only way of making poems, of course; it is just my habit. And I think it is really important to say – and to say for myself as a defense – that my autobiography is ultimately irrelevant. It is no more interesting than yours, and it is not as

interesting as my mother's, I can guarantee you that. My life is not that interesting. I don't dress up as Superman and swing out of the building in the morning wearing red underpants over my trousers to save damsels in distress. The fact is that the writing life is pretty boring from the outside. I think that if an artist makes poems, or literature, or art, out of autobiography, paradoxically the one thing he or she must resist loving is the autobiography itself. That is only something to get you going, an injection of fuel, a kick-start on a frosty morning.

So yes, I tend to make poems out of biographical impulse. But writing is like going on an adventure: it is only when I finish that I have any chance of guessing what really are the raw ingredients, not to mention the ultimate destination. And of course, that can become a kind of a morbid fascination in itself. The American poet Wallace Stevens once said "ignorance is one of the sources of poetry" (Stevens 1997, 911). The more I think about it, the more I believe it, the more I love it. If you organize yourself and you are entirely clear about your intentions before the poem, you are doomed, because you are only going to encounter things you already knew. The making of the poem has to be a process of discovery.

PVA: And in this process of discovery, you tend to revisit your childhood quite frequently. Why are you so interested in the theme of childhood?

PB: A lot of poets are interested in childhood; I think for very obvious reasons. You have got a lot of time to think about it. It accumulates and, as you move away from it, you start to see other things in it, things you didn't notice or understand the first time around. It is a natural process. But I think one needs to be careful not to get stuck in it. As Julian Barnes (in *Flaubert's Parrot*, I think) says, "the old times were good because then we were young and ignorant of how ignorant the young can be". I wrote the prose book about my childhood, *The Invisible Prison*, to get it out of my system, but then when my kids were born I started seeing the idea of childhood yet again. Everything that happens to you changes, not just the future but the past as well. My poem "Let's Die" is the result of this (Boran 2017, 124). So you keep going back to things; that's the process. I am like the dog in "Fetch", running back and forth; I have a stick and I want somebody to play with me! In a way, writing poems about the past is like going to the therapist, but the therapist never turns up, and then, after a long period in a chilly room, you end up noticing things you never noticed before, if you can face going back, that is.

*PVA: Childhood memories in your work are usually affectionate and tender. However, I find surprising the title of your humorous memoir *The Invisible Prison: Scenes from an Irish Childhood*, published in 2009. I know this is a reference to the fact that your local town Portlaoise hosts the country's maximum security*

political prison; but in the title you seem to define your childhood as a prison in some way. Why do you identify your "Irish Childhood" as an "invisible prison"?

PB: Years ago there was something of a boom in the world of "the Irish memoir", particularly of "the miserable Irish memoir" (no doubt a result of the fantastic success of Frank McCourt's *Angela's Ashes*, published in 1996, with its grim depiction of a Limerick childhood in, apparently, incessant rain). These memoirs seemed to be a way of showing off our misery to each other, of outdoing each other in a kind of "rap battle" of deprivation and religious oppression. The memoirs that were the most miserable got the most attention, and seemed to beget even more miserable memoirs in turn. That's not to say that terrible things didn't happen in Irish society and shouldn't be told; they most certainly did, and memoir is a valid way to explore the mechanics of a society from a close-up, detailed perspective. And yet, despite the fact that we were then living in a kind of misery pond, so little of the dark truth of recent Irish history that subsequently emerged (the scandals of the Magdalene laundries, of the Mothers and Baby homes, etc) was really laid bare or sufficiently examined in those books, as if the narrative of "the author who survived a difficult childhood" was the only story worth telling any more.

In *The Invisible Prison*, I suppose I wanted to look at childhood as a subject without imposing that distorting narrative device, and, in a sense, without the "frame" an adult narrator might feel was necessary to put on the story. Instead I determined to see childhood as a sequence of standalone "scenes", much as in a short story, and to leave to the reader the opinions, overviews and conclusions that I felt spoiled many of the memoirs I had forced myself to read. The truth is, of course, that none of us has an idyllic childhood; there is no such a thing. In every childhood there are points when the dark reality of life must be faced – when loss, and cruelty, and death, etc, are encountered and turn the fable of the idyllic childhood on its head. Without such encounters we remain children, our growth into adulthood stunted, our transition to the next stage of understanding and responsibility deferred or kept at arms' length. In approaching the subject of childhood, a writer has a choice of what to focus on, of what to tell and how, of where to start and how to proceed. (Do I start "at the very beginning", as the song has it: I was born, etc etc. Or do I start at some specific event and then jump forward and backwards, as one might in the unfolding of a novel?) For me, the standalone scene, which has a good deal in common with the family memory, the anecdote, was as good a place as any to begin.

When you go back to retell a scene or story, it comes alive again, or should. In writing the book, I found myself gathering individual pieces that I had written for radio, for short talks and putting them together, and on one level I recognized my own childhood, but crucially I also began to recognize somebody else's. If the work is to succeed and have a potential readership

outside of yourself, there is always an element of fiction; you have to make things up, you have to trust in your vision, your flawed memory, your faulty circuitry. I did a lot of research, through local newspapers etc, but, ultimately, once you put it down it doesn't matter what the impulse was, and it doesn't even matter what the facts were, the more minor facts certainly (though it's good to get them as clear as you can, if only to earth your doubting heart!). In writing it, the story becomes something else; and that illuminates or illustrates something for you, which is why so many of us do it. So, for whatever reason, the impulse to make something starts, for me, very often out of autobiography. But I follow it only because I am relatively confident now, in my 50s (I wasn't so confident before) that it will end up meaning something different afterwards, when I consider it again. Hopefully it will end up meaning something more.

As for the title, *The Invisible Prison*, in many ways the prison (the largest and most important building in our town back then) was almost invisible most of the time, certainly to most of us children. And that idea that the most important things can go unseen, for being right out in the open, is very interesting to me. We think of childhood as a time of great freedom, and for many of us it is. But it's odd to think that such great freedom (in my case, lived almost within sight of a maximum security political prison) could itself be a partial, even an occluded view of the world.

PVA: In which sense would you say your poetry is Irish? Is there anything particularly "Irish" about your poetry? Would you consider yourself an Irish poet?

PB: It is an interesting question. I suppose I am an Irish poet, through no fault of my own. But, as a writer, I start on an even smaller stage. So, rather than thinking "I get up in the morning, I am an Irish poet and I have all of these responsibilities", I am thinking much more of the four walls around me, the locals, and the street outside. That's the scale. It's the microcosm that leads to the macrocosm and not the other way around. Otherwise, poetry is the wrong place to start. If I wanted to convince, or to change, or to have a real immediate effect in my culture, I don't think I would go to poetry. Poetry tends to take a long time to persuade its audience of its power, of its worth. If you come from a place where poetry is as visible as it is sometimes in Ireland, then you cannot avoid that sense of being part of a group of people who are working together, no matter that you are sitting alone somewhere and working on a very solitary craft. I suppose another way to escape the responsibility as a practitioner is to recognize that the definition of Irish poetry is always going to be short of the mark, because for a long period the term "Irish poetry" seemed to suggest a poetry of rural life, of pre-industrial simplicity, of a certain romantic interaction with nature. The urban experience featured almost not at all, and it was like nothing had happened since the beginning

of the 19th century. That leaves great space to maneuver. Then in the middle of the 20th century, the urban landscape started to appear more overtly, and that led to two Irish poetries: the urban and the rural.

PVA: Where would you locate your work then? As urban or rural? Portlaoise, the local town of your birth, features prominently in your work, particularly in your initial collection. Why is it so important for you to write about your local town?

PB: The truth is that for the majority of people living – then and possibly still – on the island, the environment they lived in was neither strictly rural nor urban. They lived in small towns like Portlaoise. Dublin has now a population of 1 and half million people, or close to it. The rest of the country is approximately 3 and a half or 4 million. Most of those are located in small towns, because we don't have a lot of large cities, as you know. That small town experience is distinctively different from the rural experience and the urban experience. In my first book *The Unwound Clock* (1990), I recall living on the main street of a one-horse town; the country people came into town (the farmers, mothers, wives, daughters of the farmers) to buy supplies, and we saw them as an alien species. We were not a step up, but a step away from that rootedness, although that was the world my father had come out of. Yet, if we had gone to Dublin, we would have been the “culchies”; we were the people of the earth to them. The people in the city, who were just one generation removed, saw themselves as being the more central and typical of a more progressive Ireland. So it seemed to me that there was a gap there, in retrospect. I did not see it at the time. The poems in *The Unwound Clock* were little observations; they were not even intended to be poems, really; they were just notes, sketches, doodles. In time they have become a record of that small town world that is pretty much gone now. If you go to Ireland at the moment you see many of these small towns closed down; they are ghost towns, and in one generation, they have just collapsed. The people who were in them have moved to the cities. So it was a passing momento, though I didn't know it at the time; that world is gone. I don't regret it has gone, or at least that is not the motivation behind the writing, to somehow wish myself back into the past where all will be well again. But it is good to have some record of it because it has things in common with other worlds that are coming down the road and that these people live in and that you live in. And, however different it at first appears, there are always things that can be learned from it, about the world, about the workings of the human heart and the human imagination. So, for me, poetry is about an immersion in the actual and then you have to leave it alone; let the wind blow over it and cover it in sand for someone else to come and clear it away if they are bothered to in the future. There is a cut-off point. The writer must enter the world of the subject but then remember to leave. That is the “alternative history”

idea, echoing the name of another early poem (Boran 2013, 49); that very often what is not recorded – except in the oral histories – is that intimacy.

The danger of what I do (I am very aware of it, and this is one of the reasons why I pull in the other direction often) is that if you keep going back to things, you can end up in a nostalgic quicksand. I am utterly not nostalgic. When I am back in the moment of making a poem or piece of writing I am absolutely feeling it, but when it's over, that's it. You can only take a strong dose over a short period. The point of going back is not to stay. The point is to understand something now that is still evolving, something that still has effects on and repercussions in the now. My creative freedom involves getting it all wrong sometimes, and involves going around the facts to get to the emotion. My job is to feel it, not just to get it right.

So, going back to one of your previous questions: it is important for me to trust in the impulse of autobiography, as it can often end up leading to something more than my initial family connections and concerns. It can often turn out to be a kind of time capsule that describes something that was there before and won't be there again: the disappearing Irish small town with the families living over their shops and the small schools at the end of the streets, etc. For me, that allows a certain amount of maneuvering. I do not worry too much about whether I am an Irish poet or not. Instead, I do try to read outside of the small world of Ireland, and steal from other approaches. Apart from that, I just do my best to commit to whatever I'm currently writing, whether I know what it's really about or (as is more usual) not!

PVA: One of the poems I like most is “The Island” (2017, 108); I am particularly drawn to how you revisit the notion of Ireland as an insular country, debunking essentialist notions of identity and nationalism...

PB: I am glad you mentioned this poem... The poem is dedicated to Bob Quinn, an Irish writer and filmmaker who wrote a very interesting book, *Atlantean*. It was first published in the late 1980s, and then updated in 2006. It is a controversial book in certain circles, not least academic circles, because not all of the author's sources and conclusions will satisfy everyone. But his argument is really interesting. In essence, Quinn claimed that one misunderstands Irish culture if one keeps looking at Ireland as an island. Ireland is part of an archipelago, the other islands of which are Spain, Portugal, France, the Nordic countries, as well as Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, etc. As a result, the history of Ireland is a sea-board history and all our meaningful cultural exchanges until recent times have all been by sea. Although this is obvious, we tend to forget this, bizarrely. In Ireland we tend to imagine that the myth of our Celtic forbears entirely explains who we are and our complex relationship with the world. We tend to forget all our sea-board connections, and that is what the book *Atlantean* is about. The North African influence,

as much as the Viking influence, is seen in the round towers, the spires, and all sorts of things.

The poem “The Island” is inspired by this reading and by a childhood memory. When we were kids, at the back of the house where we grew up, my parents built up a kitchen extension, and before the bricks were to come, the sand to make the cement arrived, and a small truck brought the sand and dumped it in our backyard. No builder showed up for an unspecified period of time, and myself and my younger brother – in a pre-Lego world – went out and played for days in this pile of sand. We made a map of Ireland out of it, and we put in it what we knew from school maps, rivers, mountain ranges, etc. After having built it, I didn’t want to leave it, because I thought someone was going to drive right across it to deliver the bricks, so it became a thing that I was responsible for. As you can see, the main starting point is always autobiography, but then something extra happens as you move away from it. I sense it has an importance in itself, it has an aesthetic importance; and then these images grow and transform into something else.

PVA: In interviews, you have often talked about the importance of sound in poetry, and you have referred, for instance, to the dominant role that musicality plays in a modernist poem by Wallace Stevens, “The Emperor of the Ice Cream”. In which way is your poetry shaped around sound, rhythm and music?

PB: For me, it is really important to connect what the poem says with the sound of it saying it. The sound is absolutely important. When the poet gets to a place where he or she is comfortable, language changes. The sound becomes a truth-telling machine: the word choice, the structure, the grammar, the nuance, the inflections...; everything changes. No matter how ambitious, or lacking in ambition an individual poem is, I want to feel that sense that it is telling as much as it can tell. It is as open as it can be.

A poem can also step beyond naturalism and still have a lot to say without being a game or irrelevant, so long as the sound holds the interest of the senses. If you listen to a poem and you get lost somewhat as the listener, it is not a criticism of you or of the poem: it may well be that the poem is making a transition between one known and another. And to bridge this kind of gap, the sound may well be the only tool the poet has to turn to. Imagine I am listening to my favourite piece of music; I often “zone out”, or “spaceoff” or disappear somewhere for a while. I am not always present to the meaning of the lyrics, or the structure of the piece. And equally, something doesn’t become my favourite piece of music in one sitting, in a single listen. It is often that I have heard it on the radio, for instance, or I have heard someone singing it in the street, or I was listening to it somewhere else along the way. Then one day I find myself singing it in the shower. But how did I learn it? In fact I never learned it. At least I never *set out* to learn it. But by a process

of osmosis, I suddenly seem to possess it for a period. I have absorbed parts of it in various places and times along the way, trusting, somehow that they will all come together in time, allowing the mystery, the opacity to persist, so long as the music (the sound, the melody, the rhythm) creates a sufficient sense of connection. I think poems –perhaps more than any other form – work like that; so if the listener, or the reader – and even the writer! – of the poem does not understand everything, that’s ok.

PVA: In recent years, there seems to be an explosion of haikus in Irish poetry, what has led some critics to even talk about a “distinctively Irish” haiku tradition. Your anthology Waveforms: Bull Island Haiku (2015), is remarkable in this respect. Why this attraction for the Japanese form? And in which way are your haikus different to traditional haikus?

PB: If Wordsworth and Basho, the Haiku poet, go for a walk together, Wordsworth would start by saying “I wandered lonely as a cloud / that floats on high...” and then he will notice the daffodils. He starts invariably with the first person singular “I”; the poet is always at the centre of his poem. The western poet tends to say “Here I am; come with me, I am going to show you things...”; whereas the Haiku poet would go straight to the daffodils, to the frog, the pond or the moon. That’s it. It’s the art of editing in some way. This is why it attracted me; as a poet, I could nearly disappear from the poem; I could nearly get out of the way. This is similar to what happens when one takes photographs. It is a kind of an antidote to the big build-up, the big introduction. By stripping back like that there is a kind of ecological parallel in it. How much of all the things that I bring with me every day (i.e. this stanza form, these lines, the things that I like doing, my “darlings”), how much of this is actually necessary? What can I strip back? What I found was that I could strip back a lot. Very often, at least in English, I find haikus flat: they lack some colour, that moment of transition from visible to invisible or vice versa, from dark to light. I need this moment of transition. That’s what I am interested in. I wanted to see what happened if I introduced rhyme for instance. The rhyme, which is not an intrinsic part of the tradition, allowed me to make a connection between east and west. I have never pretended to be a Japanese poet!

PVA: The haikus in this collection are juxtaposed with actual photographs you took of the biosphere reserve of Bull Island. Why were you so interested in this particular geographical location?

PB: Bull Island is a little island very near to where I live. As you know, this land mass came about by an accident when almost 200 years ago, a new harbour was built which changed the tides of Dublin bay. It was not there

before; it is not in the old maps. It is incredible that something as beautiful as this place (my favourite place in the city) came about by an accident, because somebody didn't consider the implications of building this wall out into the sea. And that's so poetic as well. When this accident happened, migrating birds started coming every year, and now there are whole colonies of birds which are unique. You also find plants growing there you find almost nowhere else in Ireland, because the birds bring in seeds in their droppings. It is a unique space. How could a poet walk past it?

When a very close friend of mine died, I started going there every day to clear my head; I was very upset. Some days when I went out, there was a mist hanging down, and at the beginning I didn't even notice the horizon. After going there every day, I started seeing things, and that's where the ecological concern in the poems started to take shape. Because my field of vision was simplified, it started to become more acute; I started to notice things more. It got me into a place I had never been, much closer to that idea of the "nature poet". I am a "society poet": I am always talking about people, and there are very few poems where I don't have exchanges or "stuff" going on. But Bull Island offered me a place "to be" as well. That was the attraction.

I was also attracted to the idea of bringing images down to 3 lines, 17 syllables and 2 rhymes. This whole set of obstacles forced me to take other things out of the way. Of course, lots of the haikus didn't work. Most of them didn't go into the anthology, but the ones which were included in the end had this kind of extra charge for me. It is like taking a photograph, with not a great camera, and in black and white. By reducing it, you make it stronger. And that's a principle that is always refreshing for any artist: to reduce. The Baroque period produced some incredible things, but it also produced some of the linear, ugly simplicities that followed it as a reaction against it. Somewhere between those two things. As artists we are always negotiating stuff like that.

PVA: You have been an active broadcaster, participating in numerous TV and radio programs on poetry. In your view, what are the characteristics and the place occupied by poetry in the era of the transmedia?

PB: It is interesting because when you make poems you are narrow casting; you are taking things out of the way, aiming to make something which is certainly smaller than a novel. So it is a process of clearing space more than accumulating things. Then, afterwards, the impulse is to let it out into the world. For me, that has always involved speaking to people, reading to people, going into schools. When I had the opportunity to broadcast on radio, that was ideal because the poems were tested. They might be written on paper, but they only work – at least for me – if I like the sound of them; if they sound right. I live with them for a long time even if I don't understand them. It is a bit like moving the parts around: I might never under-

stand what it is about, I may never publish it, but the original impulse is to make things sound good, and this is the attraction of radio. It allows poetry to be brought into people's lives without any great fuss or fanfare, and, usually, without warning them that this is Poetry, with a capital P, that they must react to it in some predetermined way, that they cannot respond to it as to any other form of communication or music, prepared to stick with the parts they don't entirely follow because there is enough there (in the sound) for them to trust, at least in the shorter term.

PVA: How do you think the internet has affected the literary world and in particular, the publishing industry? Do you think it has positive or rather detrimental effects?

PB: The Internet is a similar thing. There are a lot of people in publishing who thought the internet was the end and that all the bookshops were going to close down, because the Amazon Kindle and eBooks were going to kill real physical books. The truth is that the physical book and the digital book are the same. They are not enemies of each other at all. Certainly, the new generations are familiar with accessing texts through their phones. What kind of perversion would it be to say that this is not as valid a way to encounter a poem as on a printed page? The reason why my latest *Pocket Selected Poems* (2017) is of that small size is because I tried to get close to the size of a mobile phone. I wanted to bridge the gap to an audience who might not be as comfortable as I am with a "traditional" poetry book. I have published bigger books but I know people can't carry them. Why not make them smaller?

The other thing that the internet allows is for the sound to travel with the text, which is fabulous. In 2011, I edited *The Bee-Loud Glade*, which has a CD of a rock band setting some of the poems to music; but even that is old technology now. Nobody wants the hassle of taking out the CD and putting it in a CD player. It has to be all downloadable; it has to be immediate. That's great. I don't fear it at all. The only place that becomes difficult is when it comes to figuring out how to reward the people who make the work. That is the only question. But there will be solutions to it. So I don't see the Internet as a threat. What I love about it is that I think it has provoked a new interest in the sound, in the performative, communicative qualities of the poetry. In Dublin, for instance, there is now a whole new generation of performance poets who read, with or without musicians, at gigs. Some of them are fantastic; some others are really good in print. Their inspirations are various but they are all interested in the bigger subject of poetry, whatever medium it piggybacks on to travel through the world.

So, going back to your question, these two worlds – the Internet and poetry – are not in opposition to each other. When we go to the ecology of

publishing and all of that, why make lots of books and then have the problem of how to distribute them? When this thing is already there and is a way of communicating to groups which may not be physically joined with each other? The Internet also allows the reader to establish all sorts of literary connections. When the work of, let's say, an Irish poet turns up on the net and possibly when it is in translation, does the reader always know the culture which is producing this poem? Is it always on the surface? Is it always immediate? Not really, you know. It can certainly add a new colour; it can bring new depths. But in some ways the poem has a chance of being read outside of the immediate culture that spawned it. And, whatever else that does, it can sometimes allow the writer (and the reader) to see new things in the poem, to encounter it without the "frame" of cultural expectation.

Of course the big difficulty as a publisher is getting things *seen* online, but that is just a problem, and problems are what keep you young, in the sense that it keeps you thinking. You should never avoid problems. It is a very difficult time to be a publisher, a poet publisher, because it is changing every minute, but that's why I am a poet-publisher. I wouldn't do it if it were easy, because if it were easy it would be boring.

PVA: In a 2011 interview (Dempsey 2011), you claimed on the good state of affairs of Irish poetry at a difficult moment of economic recession and political corruption. In which way can poetry (or the arts) illuminate political life? Do poets have the credibility which politicians at time seem to be missing?

PB: It's not so much that I agree with Shelley's assertion that "poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world" – in fact it seems to me that there's a real danger in imagining that a group as diverse and uncoordinated as a group of poets (an infestation of poets, perhaps!) should be capable of providing any kind of coherent direction to a society, at least in group form. Rather I think at least some part of the authority of poetry comes from the lack of rewards due to those who make it. The world of poetry may be as ego-infested as any other area of human activity (perhaps more so), but that lack of rewards at least drives away those who are focused on material gains and the usual benefits of power. As a foil to the self-importance of many of the political class, as a reminder of the fundamental importance of imagination, expression, communication, as a caution against the excesses and distortions of so much of public speech, I think poetry has a real role in speaking to power and acting as a check against political ambition. It's no coincidence that Plato's *Republic* saw no place for poets, which is, in its own way, an acknowledgement of its potential to speak a more profound kind of truth that we encounter in most political dialogue.

PVA: How can you combine writing poetry with such an incessant activity as broadcaster, editor and publisher?

PB: I'm inclined to think that editing and publishing, and the other various activities I've been involved in over the years (festival programmer, interviewer, workshop coordinator) all in some way feed the same conscience and experience as writes the poems. Of course, as one grows older, and as one has children, there is never enough free time and it's a temptation to think that all of these "external" activities are getting in the way of the more creative work. But the truth is that in sweeping the floor, or washing the dishes or in whatever other way putting bread on the table, some of the niggling concerns and technical problems of making a poem tend to unravel and solve themselves. Sometimes it is useful, even necessary, to be doing something else in order to give the poem time enough to work itself out. A poet simply cannot be writing poems all day (and, I would argue, should not). Poems have to make their way in the world and, in one way or another, reflect aspects of that world. The hermetic life will produce only hermetic poems and that frankly doesn't interest me. And it's also the case that every time someone who does other things in the world commits to the making of a poem, there's a real potential for expanding, if only slightly, the range of poetry itself, of taking it out of the drawing rooms and libraries and performance spaces where it enjoys a small but appreciate audience and exposing it to other energies and opportunities. For my part, I've mostly made my living in recent decades by working in poetry-related areas such as publishing and broadcasting, and, of course, that's not for everybody. But it has suited me fine, up to now at least. I have that sort of personality; when I'm involved in something I want to immerse myself in it. So having to edit someone else's book when I've spent the day working on my own has not, up to now, been a problem. But, as I say, things change as one grows older. And certainly if I continue to spend time on longer forms of writing (short or long fiction, for instance) I think I'll have to get more selfish with my time or to at least spend what energy I have for writing more exclusively on my own.

PVA: As editor, you have carefully considered, over the years, the work of Irish women poets, granting space to already consolidated voices, such as Paula Meehan, and other innovative, young voices such as Catherine Ann Cullen, Enda Coyle-Greene or Katherine Duffy. Would you say there is something distinctive in Irish women's poetry? In which way does poetry by women in Ireland differ from poetry by male writers?

PB: This is a big question and one I'm not sure I'm really qualified to answer. But if I had to come up with some kind of answer, I might say that, even looked at from a purely autobiographical perspective, the lack of rep-

resentation of women's poetry in 20th century Irish publishing represents a closing of one eye when it comes to a representation of the evolving independent Irish state and a vision for its future. Simplistic as that response clearly is, even so it is a damning indictment of how state support for the arts, and much else besides, has been misused, of how the experiences of one half of the population were demoted or dismissed as less important than that of the other. But these were not, we have to remember, "market forces" at work. Since I became a publisher, some 12 years ago, and before that as a literary festival programmer, and before that again as a creative writing workshop coordinator, the vast majority of those new writers I came into contact with were women: often women who had raised their families and now wanted to return to the early passion of writing; women who were inspired by a "new wave" of female poets then publishing and being anthologized in the UK, etc. It was never something I questioned. I held two residencies in libraries in the late '80s/early '90s (one in Dublin in the south, one in Fermanagh in the north) and I saw, as did everybody, that most of the library staff, most of their readers' groups and their writers' groups, very many if not most of their borrowers, were women. When I edited small literary magazines from time to time or attended "open mic" poetry sessions, there was no shortage of submissions from women. And when, in due course, I took over the running of the Dedalus Press, it certainly didn't strike me as odd to find I was receiving large numbers of submissions from women poets. In fact the only thing that did surprise me was how under-represented those poets were on the lists of many Irish poetry publishers at the time (with the glowing exception of Jessie Lendennie's Salmon Publishing, long since a champion of women poets in Ireland).

When it comes to writing about things outside of one's immediate experience, I think many writers will ask themselves something like, "Do I have the right to explore this particular topic?" (For instance, poets from the south certainly encountered a similar inner voice when it came to writing about The Troubles in the north, for instance). To imagine that any all-male group of writers (however talented) might represent more than a part of the experiences of our population seems absurd now, and yet, apparently that is what many publishers and their funders believed. At Dedalus, when deciding whether or not to publish a particular manuscript, the truth is I don't have to make any particular effort to reach a rough gender balance: once might say that the gods in their wisdom provide that balance for me. There is no shortage of very fine women writers, younger as well as "mid-career". So it is not so much that Dedalus is a particularly enlightened publisher as that some other publishers might be accused of living in the Stone Age.

PVA: You have previously recognized the influence of the Eastern European poet Miroslav Holub in your work, and this is indeed observed in the scientific ob-

jectivity of your poetry, and your ability to adopt a detached perspective from the lyrical voice. Which other writers have influenced you and why? Are you influenced in any way by your literary predecessors in Ireland? (One moving poem included in your latest collection, The Next Life, "The Princess of Sorrows" (115-116) is written in memoriam of Michael Hartnett, whom you describe as a "homeless poet" in every language known" and you have recently written a beautiful tribute in the Irish Times in honour of the poet Philip Casey, who has recently died...)

PB: One of the big attractions of the work of poets like Miroslav Holub and the Romanian Marin Sorescu, among others, was their ability to approach their subject matter at an angle rather than "head-on". Under Romania's Ceaușescu regime, for instance, poets were risking their lives if they addressed issues directly, so instead they had to trust in metaphor, analogy, the power of the reflecting image to make their poems. Under oppressive governments, this kind of indirect saying is one of the only ways poetry can survive (certainly in a public sphere). And there are many more such regimes today where poets have to be very careful of what they say and how they say it. And though my own work is made in a much more tolerant society, and my ambitions move therefore in very different directions, I think there is a great deal to be learned from this poetry that is born under pressure, that learns, from necessity, the art of compression, clarity, suggestion and inference. It is never enough for a poem or poet to have "good intentions": in the worst part of Ireland's economic downturn there seemed a good deal of pressure on especially the young generation of poets to perform as "national poets", to voice the national disquiet and frustration that so many felt. However, from what I saw, few of the poems that came out of this laudable effort had any power or relevance beyond the moment that prompted them into being. It was as if, injured and angry, the poems were mere paraphrases of that anger, that sense of injury. It was as if the poets had never read the Eastern European poets, the Turkish poets, the Russian poets who each in their turn had to find a way to concentrate their feelings, to hone their skills, to trust their language and their images. For me, the most interesting Irish poets of recent decades have almost all read and borrowed from other approaches to and "schools" of poetry, refreshing the national pool, as it were, expanding the range and techniques of Irish verse.

Michael Hartnett is a great example in point, steeped in Lorca, dazzled by the Tao Te Ching, wrestling with the two languages of his childhood (English and Irish), and making out of all this clamour of riches something distinct and new but, at the same time, as firmly rooted in the Irish experience as anything that had come before him. Philip Casey, similarly, was distinctly Irish because, paradoxically, he looked outward rather than inward at the Irish experience, borrowing from his time in Spain, his connections in Germany, his rich and varied reading that had him spend years, imaginatively, on famine boats and slave plantations for a work that may never now see the light of day. The poets

I admire are perhaps those who trust in the longer term view, who invest in the process of making poems but are in no desperate hurry for acknowledgement or reward, knowing that the journey is its own reward.